

thoughts on unconditional love

abridged from my service on 11 July

First thoughts about love – the types of love

Today we will be thinking about love, and in particular about unconditional love. I would however like to start by thinking about the various types of love.

Unlike the Inuits, who inhabit a landscape dominated by snow and whose language has more than thirty different words for snow, we users of the English language appear to have been largely content to use modifying words to cover the range of different types of love. Thus we have romantic love, true love, parental love, brotherly love, platonic love, and sexual love. We also have hard love, conditional love, and unconditional love. I'm sure we could find more if we tried.

But we do also have different words for love. I think we are describing forms of love when we use words such as compassionate, caring, supportive, and helpful.

With this in mind, perhaps Richard Curtis really did have it right when at the start of his blockbuster film "Love Actually" he used a Hugh Grant voiceover accompanying a montage of people greeting each other warmly at London Heathrow airport to suggest to us that love actually **is** all around.

You, like me, may well find this a very comforting thought. You may even feel it appropriate to thank God for this, whatever your own concept of God may be.

Second thoughts about love – is love all we need?

The Beatles certainly claimed so, but is it true?

I don't think so. I think that we also need our reason, our empathy, our sexual drive, our instincts (including our survival instinct), our ambition, and much else which are basic parts of being human.

But I do think that love for one another, particularly unconditional love, is essential and is the key to saving us from the worst of ourselves. In this I am in good

company, since there is scarcely a religion or spiritual movement anywhere in the world which does not place love for one another in a central role.

Without love I am pretty certain that we would tear ourselves and our world to pieces in very short order indeed. Surely then it follows that the more love we can collectively give the more we can overcome the negative aspects of what we human beings also are?

To send a clear message of the importance **we** place on love we could do a lot worse than follow the lead of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community. Their central message is an injunction to love which they use both in their paperwork and as a web address, and which they place centrally in foot-high letters on the wall of the main worship space. The words they use are -

LOVE FOR ALL HATRED FOR NONE

The importance of unconditional love

We are probably all in agreement about the importance of love. But where does unconditional love fit in?

I would suggest that unconditional love is **love given without expectation of anything in return**, and further suggest that it can be given by anyone to anyone.

We generally regard it as the most difficult kind of love, linking it with difficult concepts such as “love your enemy” and “turn the other cheek”, and associating it with levels of virtue and humility which we may neither feel able to attain nor even aspire to. We also find it a difficult subject to talk about, perhaps fearing that we will sound unreasonably righteous when we try.

I would like to bring a different, and hopefully enabling, perspective to you today. I would ask you to think for a moment about the relative advantages and disadvantages of giving unconditional love compared to giving conditional love, and to consider the following questions.

Is it possible that giving our love conditionally – expecting something in return – may lie at the root of the deepest hurts we experience, the hurts where a loved one does not give back what is expected?

Could it also lie behind lesser hurts, such as where the loved one is simply a friend whom we have tried to help? Or even an enemy?

These hurts are very real, and so are the sometimes permanent schisms they can lead to. Allow me to suggest a remedy.

By loving unconditionally we would be saved from this hurt. We would also enhance our life by making and retaining more, and perhaps better, relationships.

This would almost certainly increase the love we receive from others, which would increase our love of self, which would let us give more love – a virtuous circle which, almost as a by-product, will increase our own happiness.

I think these are pretty good reasons to try to love unconditionally – but then I have no problem with being happy and enjoying life as long as it is not at another's expense. At the very least, these benefits should help us feel a lot less self-conscious and pious about trying to love unconditionally, and much more willing to recommend it to others.

This has been mainly about what we get from giving love unconditionally. It is now time to move on to what others get from receiving unconditional love.

The most common example of unconditional love which we see is the love of a parent for a child (which may shed some light on why so many are happy to channel their spirituality through faith in a father-figure God).

Of course, the child gets benefits from receiving love of any kind – feeling loved, feeling looked after, feeling valued, feeling encouraged, feeling supported, being encouraged to love self, and being encouraged to love others.

What is special when love is given unconditionally is that there is no risk of the discouragement and hurt which obtain when love is found to have been given conditionally.

What is special when love is both given unconditionally and experienced as such by the recipient is their sense that this love will always be there. This is priceless.

There is much more to be said about the benefits of unconditional love, but that is for another day, and, perhaps, another service.

Today I will settle for simply encouraging you to consider the effect an increase in the general giving of love would make to the world, and the effect an increase in your personal giving of unconditional love might make, both to yourself and others.