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YOU
MATTER
TO ME

The Unvarnished Truth about Love

Preface

When I was in college psychology classes studying child development, the women's movement was in full swing. Many women wanted to be freed from the cultural assumption that it was their job to raise the children. Much was being written about whether men could or would do a good job nurturing very young children. Much was also being written about what was driving women to want to pursue careers outside the realm of homemaking and child-rearing. The 1970s and '80s were a time of culture wars between women who wanted no children at all, those who wanted to combine motherhood with other careers, and women who held motherhood and homemaking as their sacred calling.

That was the climate in which I began to think intentionally about love, asking myself "what kind of love do children really need?" By the time I finished graduate school and started practicing as a psychotherapist, I had married and was the mother of two small boys. What I had learned about love by growing up surrounded by it, and then studying what the experts said was now guiding me in my home and in my work with clients. I was crystallizing a framework for understanding what I had been learning. I no longer focused exclusively on what children need from their parents. I could see more and more clearly that the same types of issues and challenges come around repeatedly throughout life and while the style of delivery must change as

we get older, the need for love to be concretely expressed in a variety of ways does not disappear. It doesn't even fade, really, even though many people teach themselves to pretend otherwise.

Throughout life, human beings need two very different kinds of love. We need to be accepted and cared for just as we are, often called “unconditional love.” And we also need to be encouraged, helped, and even prodded to grow and change. Initially, I saw these as maternal and paternal approaches to parenting, but a wise mentor gently but firmly showed me that women and men are capable of both ways of loving even though one way may come more readily than the other, leading them to lean toward one more than the other. She helped me see that naming these two categories for their primary characteristics would be far more helpful in the larger picture, allowing men and women to acknowledge their default mode and become more conscious of times their loved one would be better served if they “leaned the other direction.” “Nurture Love” and “Challenge Love” have therefore become the names I use for these two encompassing categories of love, each manifested by certain types of actions that directly affect the loved one.

When I began teaching a college class on love in 2008, I introduced students to my framework for what love looks like in action. In particular, I had them recall specific instances of receiving the various kinds of love and identify how those had fostered in them any of the core ego strengths identified more than half a century ago by psychologist Erik Erikson. Time and again, their papers have shown how Nurture Love and Challenge Love in action foster the ego strengths that create a more resilient self—a core of personal identity that feels authentic and integrated—in the loved one.

If you or someone you know missed out on the basics about love for whatever reason, I think you'll find this book helpful.

Introduction: Some New Glasses

“I don’t really know what love is, or what it looks like.” For many years now, clients have told me and shown me this sad truth at the center of their lives. They talk about a feeling, attraction, and attachments they wish they could get into or out of. Many of them go through one relationship after another with people who don’t know any more about real love than they do. Love worthy of the name wasn’t modeled in their homes growing up, and usually what they now call by the name of *love* is a counterfeit, one of many forms of unhealthy attachment that was the best their parents, caregivers, or relationship partners could do.

I’ve looked for resources to give these clients some clues, but most of the books I’ve found are too long or too complicated. People who don’t have many clues need to start with the basics. They need a primer about love. So here’s what I’m offering: a simple, fairly fast read filled with lively examples and illustrations to make it all accessible for the uninitiated. That way, if you find it helpful and want to ask someone you know to read it, there’s half a chance they’ll give it a try.

If you were fortunate enough to grow up in a home with people who loved you well, you probably picked up a lot of the art of loving without even realizing it. So maybe you do have a clue about love and you picked this book up because you know you’re not on solid ground yet. Or maybe the person with whom

you're in a relationship doesn't "get it" at all and you wish you could explain to them what's missing for you.

It's no secret that learning how to love well comes most easily by being loved well. But where does that leave the rest of the population, the ones who weren't loved well? One young man told me the only clues he had were from reruns of *The Cosby Show* on TV, and it was obvious that trying to put those faint images and snippets into practice in his marriage wasn't going very well. He knew the Huxtables' treatment of each other had felt right and good, but he couldn't articulate the values embedded in it and hadn't been able to make them his own. He didn't know how to.

If you missed out on "good enough" parenting¹ and haven't been able to apprentice to someone who loves others well, you probably need a teacher to give you guidance about how to do it. That's where I come in. Even if you did internalize a decent working model for how to treat one another in life-giving ways, it can be hard to put into words what you know intuitively, and it's especially hard to describe what's missing to someone who didn't grow up receiving it. Sometimes we feel embarrassed asking for things that are so very basic. It makes us feel childish. But these outward evidences of love are the warp and woof of a tapestry we weave together in relationships that have staying power and if they are missing, we need a way to find them and add them into the pictures we are creating.

In this book, I'm going to provide you with three pairs of glasses, three sets of corrective lenses to help you learn to love the people who matter to you. Each pair of glasses brings into focus some important clues about love. As you'll see, conveying "You matter to me—*you*, for your own sake, not just because you meet my needs"—is the essence of loving well.



After some preliminaries in part one, we'll look at glasses created by Erik Erikson. In part two, I'll use this developmental psychologist's lenses to show you that a relationship worthy of the name of *love* has certain predictable outcomes. Love brings about the well-being of the loved one. Erikson describes how certain core "ego strengths" develop in a child when there is good enough parenting, strengths he uses word pairs to describe: basic trust and hope, autonomy and willpower, initiative and a sense of purpose; industry (diligence) and competencies; all of which become ingredients in crystallizing a sense of identity and selfhood to which you can be loyal. In this book I will be using the term *self* as if it were an entity or agent and I will speak of *components* that make up that entity. In truth it's probably more accurate to think of self as an ongoing activity of being in the moment and integrating what's taking place. But in order to *do* that well, a person needs to have the faith, willpower, purpose, sense of competencies, and crystallizing sense of personhood Erikson helps us understand.²

That sense of identity continues to develop and strengthen when trust makes it possible to know and be known in intimate relationships with peers, a capacity Erikson calls *mutuality*. Forming a committed, loving relationship in marriage is the garden in which such intimacy flourishes most fully, although deep platonic friendships with either male or female friends are also abundantly rich environments for mutuality to grow. The more available all of these resources are to an adult self, the more likely that person is to care well for the next generation and the world around them (generativity). When people look back on

their lives, those who have had the benefit of these components of a resilient self tend to feel their lives had integrity, by and large, and they seem to have gained wisdom that puts things in perspective.

Some critics have argued Erikson's developmental theory isn't *universal*, that these particular traits are valued primarily in the Western world. While that may be true³, they are most certainly the building blocks of a sense of self-worth among the clients, family, and friends I encounter in my practice and life. When a child begins to develop them early in relationship with parents and other caregivers, they⁴ have a more than decent chance of becoming a relatively well-functioning adult, capable of appropriately taking other people's needs and wants into account. Not only do they become capable of intimacy and care later in life (the terms Erikson uses for adult ego strengths which are actually forms of loving)⁵, but they are more free to love another person well because they are not preoccupied with anxieties created by shaky or missing building blocks within the self.

I'll show you how the cultivation and support of these ego strengths is at the heart of in the following:

- parenting young children
- parenting teenagers
- helping romantic love mature into life-giving married love
- devoted friendships
- loving our aging parents as their ability to sustain themselves diminishes.

It's my premise that if you really love someone—whether it's a child, teenager, or an adult—you want to help them develop and use these ego strengths so they can experience self-worth and go on to make a positive difference in the world around them.



The second pair of glasses comes from a current researcher and relationship therapist named John Gottman. In part three, we'll use his lenses to look far more closely at how attunement is at the core of *trust* in important relationships throughout life, not only in childhood. It's well-established that less than 10 percent of communication resides in the actual words a person speaks. In order to fully understand another person, we rely on interpreting their facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language. This is why emoticons were rapidly created when e-mails (and then texts) came along—to provide some of the visual or auditory information the recipient would notice if the message were delivered in person. People on the autism spectrum have trouble picking up and accurately interpreting these nonverbal social messages.

Attunement is learned from experiences of having someone tune in to you. It is a process that helps you discover what you're experiencing within yourself and then, by practicing feedback loops with other people, you discover whether you are reading their nonverbals accurately or not.

As you will see in chapter 5, attunement is a skill that can be taught and learned, but as with other languages, it is most easily learned in childhood. I include it in this book because our culture's increasing reliance on electronic snippets of communication is rapidly stripping away the sustained interpersonal in-person experiences within which attunement is learned. When parents of young children are paying attention to smartphones, laptops, iPads, etc., they are not attuning to their children, so those children are not part of a mutual feedback loop of learning about

each other's inner world. Even when two people are together in the same place these days, their attention is often, if not usually, divided rather than focused on receiving the fullness of what that other person is communicating. As my twenty-six-year-old son pointed out in a recent conversation, "loving another person is complicated" and it remains to be seen whether a generation adept at carrying on multiple electronic conversations at once will be attuned enough to carry on the kind of face-to-face, in-depth conversations required for intimacy to grow. Although attunement *can* be used for harmful purposes by a person with a selfish hidden agenda, in the service of someone whose goal is loving another person well, it is an essential skill for picking up all the little clues that can guide us.

Unlike so many relationship gurus who create counseling models from their idealistic beliefs about what *should* work to make relationships strong, Gottman's approach has come from more than thirty years of observing couples closely, noticing their interactions, and discovering over time how those ways of taking each other into account—or not taking each other into account—are correlated with stability or breakups. He uses a different language than mine, but he's essentially established that subtle and blatant messages of "you matter to me" or "you don't matter to me" identifiable early in a relationship are excellent predictors of a long and basically satisfying marriage... or of a divorce.

Gottman's insights apply to adults who are trying to create intimacy and mutuality and demonstrate care, whether they realize those are their goals or not. In parts one and two, I will have explained in depth how the seed of a child's selfhood grows and strengthens within the garden of trustworthy, supportive relationships. You will arrive at part three understanding that when people arrive at chronological adulthood with weak or missing ego strengths, they are likely to be preoccupied with hiding "their flat sides," or compensating for them in whatever usually problematic ways they managed to come up with. Under

these conditions, it is practically impossible to be attuned to a partner's well-being to the degree necessary to have a truly mature adult love relationship.

Mutuality as Erikson defines it is the ability to love in such a way that the partner's well-being matters just as much as one's own. It is quite an accomplishment, really, and it seems increasingly scarce these days. Contemporary culture's revolving-door approach to relationships makes it challenging to figure out what *commitment* actually means in today's relational world. Judging from how quickly hook-ups and move-ins take place in the world my clients and students describe, trust doesn't appear to be particularly important in these decisions.

Then, too, many of my clients bring a mishmash of hopes and expectations to even the idea of committed relationship. Often, their standards were shaped by parents who never married or who divorced, and then by watching throughout their childhood and teen years as those parents related to a series of new live-in partners. Occasionally, I hear positive stories about one of these adults who passed through a client's or student's life, but far more often, the impact was a further undermining of ego strengths, particularly of basic trust.

Increasingly, I see evidence that people bring to their relationships the same mentality they bring to the following:

- fast food (it satisfies the appetite quickly, so what if there's no nutritional value?);
- disposable razors (use it once or twice and throw it away);
- planned obsolescence (nothing lasts; just plan on replacing it in six months or a few years at most); and
- constantly and rapidly updatable technology (as soon as a new and better one is available, I'll dump this one and get it).

Even in this culture, I see in my clients of all ages an awareness that the presence of trust remains at the very heart of any relationship that has value. They sense this to be true even if they don't have such a relationship anywhere in their lives. They may be cynical about other people and even about their own capacity to be trustworthy, but they recognize that *if they could have it* at the heart of a relationship, it would be worth more than gold.

Gottman's findings about trust are thoroughly relevant to every person trying to sort out whether to stay in a particular relationship or not. Couples deciding whether to extend a hook-up into something more may look primarily at whether the sex was satisfying, whether they had fun hanging out together, whether the other person's friends were tolerable to be around. But if and when a person does start thinking about long-term commitment—even pseudocommitment—they start asking themselves, "Is this relationship good for me? Do they really take my well-being into account, or are they mostly selfish?" As you may have realized, at this point the person has crossed over into actively wondering about trust. To use my language, they're asking "Do I trust that I really matter to him/her?"

Gottman's research shows some very simple, but powerful findings about what builds and erodes trust in a relationship.⁵ He has worked closely with his wife, Julie, to create an approach to couples therapy based on his research findings about what makes a relationship solid. My primary focus in this book will be on his discovery and insight that *attunement*—which comes naturally to some, but is a skill that can be taught and learned—is the heart of establishing and maintaining interpersonal trust. Day in and day out, adults and children alike are making what Gottman calls "bids" for connection with the important people around them—subtle or open requests for a connection of some kind. How those important people respond to those bids communicates spoken and unspoken volumes about love and about what I call *mattering*. And it turns out that many of the findings about how

children form secure or ambivalent attachments to their parents are relevant to adult relationships as well.⁶

Gottman's observational research also identified four toxic attitudes/behaviors that both signal and contribute to the disappearance of love: contempt, criticism, defensiveness, and stonewalling. Because they are so clearly associated with "the end" of a loving relationship, he calls them "the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse⁸." In essence, they are manifestations of an excessively self-centered point of view, evidence that the other person's well-being doesn't matter like it used to. Thankfully, people who want to swim against the current of their own selfish tendencies can and will resist these toxic behaviors.



Finally, in part four, I'll explain my own set of lenses for bringing love into focus. In a sense, they are trifocals or progressive lenses that allow us to see the interplay of the following:

- tenderhearted emotion denoted by the word *love*;
- an attitude of devotion to the loved one's well-being, which I maintain is love's essence; and
- actions by which the loved one knows devotion resides in the heart and mind of the "lover"—by which I mean "the one who loves". It's unfortunate that the term has been co-opted by the sex-and-romance dimension of love.⁹

Think about your interactions with any other person and ask yourself, "For what reason, to what extent, and in what way does this other person matter to me?" Many philosophies and religions advocate treating other people well based on everything

from reason, practicality, and enlightened self-interest; to the assertion that we are all family (children of the same Father God); to the belief that we are commanded by God/Jesus to “love our neighbors,” making it a matter of obedience or duty. When I think of the attitude that motivates us to take another person into account, I picture a motivation gradient running from head to heart.

I call that heart-based end *treasuring* and I use the verb *treasure* to capture the experience of having a place for another person in your heart.

Somehow, inexplicably, your sense of self has opened up to include that person and though you may be embarrassed to admit it in these rather poetic terms, they are part of your treasure in life.

When this first happens, there are often physical sensations of a “tug on the heartstrings” or a swelling or aching in the chest, sensations we tend to equate with the emotion of love.¹⁰ It literally feels like the organ in your chest is getting larger or opening its sliding door. The emotion and sensations can be delightful, painful, or both at the same time. Many people let these physical attachment sensations be their primary guide in relationships without crediting the importance of the other two strands of the braid. They enter relationships or exit them based entirely on these sensations. As we’ll see later, you can experience the tenderheartedness without ever expressing it in such a way that the loved one knows you feel it. On the receiving side, you can know you are important to another person for any number of reasons, but there is an incomparable security in the knowledge that their heart has opened to let you in. I use the verb *cherish* for the actions that physically communicate this subjective treasuring reality to the loved one.

I use the verb *sustain* for those behaviors that meet the loved one’s survival needs for food, clothing, shelter, protection, comfort, etc. Cherishing and sustaining are two kinds of behaviors that *nurture* the loved one’s well-being just as they are. The person

does nothing to earn them or deserve them. These gifts of grace come just because the person exists. They are forms of what I call *Nurture Love*.

There is a second overarching category of love I call *Challenge Love*. Challenge Love is motivated by the desire to help the loved one grow, learn, overcome obstacles, and develop their potential. You can think of Nurture Love as treasuring and sustaining the loved one's "being" (i.e., existence), while in contrast, the Challenge Loves help the loved one "become."

Challenge Love includes behaviors that *support* the loved one, providing encouragement and assistance of various types as they develop in self-initiated and self-chosen ways. Typically, these types of support are welcomed when they are offered in ways that fit the developmental needs of the loved one. If the one who loves has pertinent skills or knowledge, they may choose to give their time and energy to actively *coach or teach* the loved one. There's a third type of Challenge Love I call *pollinating* because the love giver brings insight about the loved one or inspiration that is a necessary catalyst for something new to happen. These three manifestations of love are usually fairly well-received since they more or less come alongside and move in the same direction the loved one is choosing to move. Or, in the case of pollinating, the loved one may be stalled out and the pollen helps them get moving again.

The other two types of Challenge Love behavior are invariably experienced as interference, making them the most difficult to carry out well. Our first experiences in life of being confronted by those who love us come in the form of discipline from our parents and other caregivers or teachers. Authority figures telling us to stop doing something, start doing something, or change the way we're doing something pervade our experience of life throughout childhood and adolescence. Because of this background, it can be very difficult later in life to effectively receive corrective/negative feedback from peers even if they respectfully ask for or suggest

change. And when the delivery of that message is clumsy or overly critical, it often brings out the willfully resistant two-year-old or fourteen-year-old in us.

Obviously, some people criticize just because they enjoy finding fault or gaining advantage in a power struggle and that isn't love. But all of us do need the benefit of honest feedback and input from people who care about us as we go through life. Real love requires us to speak up when we experience a loved one as hurting themselves, getting off course, undermining their own goals, or as damaging their relationship with us through their behaviors. In those situations, we recognize an obstacle in the loved one's path and the manner in which we confront the loved one with our perspective can make all the difference in the world. Doing it effectively takes a lot of self-control and carefulness if it's going to be effective, and of all the things I try to teach clients, it's probably the most difficult. I'll share with you some of the tools I've found most helpful personally and professionally, including some skills recommended by the Gottmans.

If confronting and asking for change carefully and respectfully doesn't work, the only loving option that remains may be to *take a stand* against a loved one's damaging behaviors. Tough love has been described well in the recovery movement associated with addiction treatment. Within my framework, what's important to understand is that sometimes treasuring itself requires that the actions of Nurture Love be withheld in a last-ditch effort to save the loved one from self-destruction or to prevent a relationship from remaining abusive. These two forms of Challenge Love are essential parts of discipline in parent-child relationships, and they are also important elements of solid adult friendships, respectful work relationships, and strong marriages.

Cherishing, by its very definition, is the only action that requires the emotion known as love to be subjectively felt in the moment of action. The other Nurture Loves and Challenge Loves that contribute to the loved one's well-being can be and

often are carried out regardless of whether we feel tenderness at that moment or not. In fact, the hallmark of treasuring someone is that we carry out the actions of love even when we don't feel like it at the moment.

As you may be realizing, I actually have a pretty broad and encompassing definition of love. While I'm primarily writing to help you more effectively love the people you personally treasure, if you take this approach with the people you work with, or even with whom you have casual acquaintance, you're likely to see some pretty fulfilling results.

Using examples from the lives of my students, I will help you see that ego strengths can and should be facilitated throughout life by the loving behaviors of people who care. It's never too late.

HOW DOES IT ALL FIT TOGETHER?



These seven core actions—cherishing, sustaining, supporting, coaching/teaching, pollinating, confronting in a respectful manner, and taking a stand—are the behaviors by which you can foster ego strengths in a loved one whether you treasure them personally or just recognize that all human beings are worthy of your help. Keeping the ego strengths in mind can help you fit your manner of sustaining, supporting, confronting, etc. to the particular situation. It can be difficult to discern which ego strength(s) are most in need of enhancement right now at this particular moment. For instance, there may be times when teaching a competency may be at odds with encouraging autonomy. Attunement is important in discerning what combination of Nurture Love or Challenge Love might fit the person's age and circumstances as you encourage the needed ego strength(s). Think about it: what's needed to foster autonomy in a forty-year-old who's been fired from their job looks very different from what's

needed to foster it in a seventeen-year-old who prefers video games to hard work. It's also different from what's needed with a seventeen-year-old who is depressed because of low self-esteem. By coupling attunement skills with the big picture provided by Erikson, we can make better decisions in these situations.

I'm offering you three new sets of corrective lenses to help you do a better job of loving just about anyone who really matters to you. Here is your opportunity to change your whole approach to relationships, one that will ultimately change your life—for the better.

Do you ever look around at other people in relationships and wonder, *What do they know that I don't know? Exactly what is it I'm not doing right?* Or maybe you're in a relationship with someone whose heart is in the right place, but they're pretty inept at what love really looks like in daily life, and you've been stumped for "How do I explain to them what's missing?"

Many people arrive at adulthood after growing up in homes where love wasn't modeled very well. Some of them are pretty much in the dark about what love looks like in action, or they're following clues that have pointed them in wrong directions. In *You Matter to Me: The Unvarnished Truth about Love*, author Carol J. Sherman takes us back to the very basics about love, showing us that tender-hearted feelings only have staying power when coupled with an attitude of devotion and ongoing actions that help the loved one thrive. Grounded in Erik Erikson's insights into the components of a resilient self, she asserts that genuine love helps a loved one thrive in very identifiable ways. Then, using real-life examples from the lives of her students and clients, she gives us a simple and easy-to-remember framework of actions to guide us in helping it happen.



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