

Love Begins With Me

Children are naturally loving. I know as a child I was. I also know that as I grew up I was taught by example to view the world with less than loving eyes. Like no doubt many of their generation my parents were extremely critical both of me and of everyone else. I often heard them speak harshly about people they knew as well as of their friends and other family members. As I grew older I also encountered critical teachers and mentors. Rather than encourage me for what I had done correctly they emphasized whatever mistakes I had made.

Even as an adult I suffered from my parents attempts to urge me on through criticism. I remember the day I proudly played for my mother the first songs I had learned on my guitar. I had taught myself to play a few simple chords and I felt thrilled to share my beginning efforts with her. "That's very nice dear," she said as I finished. "Now when are you going to write your own songs?" At the time I felt sad and disheartened. I now realize that in her own way she was showing her love by encouraging me to go further. I am fully aware that she loved me very much. So did my father. Yet the slightest mistake I made would be greeted by him with ridicule at the very least as well as taunting and perhaps even laughter. My parents raised me the way they had been brought up. It was all they knew. That their way was uncomfortable or difficult for me was unimportant. They were firm believers in the "school of hard knocks" and the theory that to "spare the rod" was to "spoil the child." This was their definition of love. It was a reflection of what they had learned and the standard they lived by.

Then it did not occur to me that this was not a loving way to raise a child; I believed this was the way things were supposed to be. I encountered worse from my fellow students in grade school. In those days teachers were not sympathetic to those who were bullied and did nothing to intervene. Often when I responded to the maddening taunts of my classmates by finally lashing out I was blamed for having started a fight. While as a result of this treatment I learned to be strong and courageous, my experiences also made me very unhappy. My grade school years held little love or joy except for the opportunities I had to be alone in nature.

I found solace in trees and in my own imaginary games. I would sit for hours in the branches of a large beech tree gazing over the landscape, writing poetry or reading. I played by myself in the lilac bushes or the field behind my house, creating my own world where no one was ever unkind or unloving. I even had a homemade church where I prayed to the kind God I had always felt somehow connected with and buried baby chicks and other small animals that

had died in a little plot behind it. My God never scolded me or told me I was wicked or sinful because I got angry or told a lie. My God loved me and comforted me when I was sad and no one else would listen.

Except for my relationship with God I grew up feeling somewhat alone in the world. It seemed to me that no matter how hard I tried most people were critical and difficult to please. Yet somehow I knew in my heart that it was important to love people regardless how they acted, and so once I got old enough to understand this fully I set about trying to learn to do that better than I was able to at the time. Various teachers were sent to me. Many of them came disguised as friends, several actually were teachers with whom I studied yoga or learned various other skills. I tried to follow the example of those I admired. I sought out books that would enlighten me. I collected quotations I thought might help. What I didn't yet know was how to practice unconditional loving.

It seemed to me that if only I loved someone enough he or she would change, and that I would be rewarded for the love I had to share. Then perhaps my father would approve of the way I looked, my mother would tell me I was raising my children well or keeping a tidy house, and my husband would appreciate me for who I was and not keep wishing I were different.

I began by becoming better aware of the thoughts that crossed my mind every day. When I noticed critical thoughts arising I would counter them with thoughts of praise. When I was tempted to be annoyed because someone was in error or lacking in some way, I looked for opportunities to praise her or him, no matter how small their efforts were. The first step was noticing my inner response; the next one was correcting it. This went on for some years. Then one day a minor miracle occurred.

A young clerk was helping load my groceries when he slipped and fell. To my surprise I realized that my first thought was oh I hope he did not hurt himself. To my great surprise I realized I hadn't cared about the groceries or worried that the eggs might have broken. I felt so absolutely happy that my first inclination had been concern for the young clerk that I almost cried. This was the goal I had been seeking for so long. I knew I still had a long way to go yet a beginning was evident and that made my heart very happy. In the many years since I have grown considerably, still I continue to make an effort to be mindful as well as to change any incipient critical thoughts.

For instance, because my mother was so nasty about anyone who was "fat," whenever I noticed a person who was overweight I used to feel critical of him or her. Now my first thought is that that person has many difficulties as a result of overweight and instead I feel compassionate. When I pass a person who is in some way disabled I say a small prayer for her or for him. When I see an automobile with a crumpled fender I send mental condolences to the driver. I've had my share of fender benders and they are no fun. My feelings of compassion come from my experience with my own struggles to accomplish certain tasks or overcome certain inabilities. When I have walked in the shoes of another it is much easier to feel sympathetic.

Unpleasant as they may have been, many of these life experiences were my path to learning to love and to cherish. They could have created or reinforced critical tendencies yet instead they functioned as opportunities for me to learn and grow. I feel most fortunate to have had life as my primary teacher and The golden rule, the law of reciprocity as my guide. Because as a mother I never wanted my children grow up with criticism as I had, I took a positive approach to whatever they did. Later I applied this to my students in my various classes. Finally, I have tried to incorporate this attitude into my every day life by greeting everyone with whom I interact with compassion and unconditional love. Love begins with me and I work hard to take care that it always will.