

Love as Social Justice

Regina Smith
Deb Bopsie¹

The heart is like a garden. It can grow compassion or fear, resentment or love. What seeds will you plant? (Kornfield, 1994, p.11)

Love is an often-neglected aspect of social justice work. In this chapter, we reflect upon the role of love in social justice. Social justice must be embodied, not just talked about, so we draw from our personal lived experience. Any details about clients we discuss have been altered to protect their identities.

Opening Reflections on Relationship

As co-authors of this chapter, we begin with reflections on our relationship, which serves as a foundation for the way we approach love as social justice. Our relationships and life events have informed our understanding of social justice and the role that love plays in it. Therefore, we believe being transparent about our relationship informs and illuminates central themes addressed in this chapter.

RS: Over the ten years I've been friends with Deb, I've learned extraordinary lessons about love. Parker Palmer might say Deb's love has coaxed my shy and tender soul out of hiding (Palmer, 2008). Our friendship is the epitome of love in part because of our shared training in recognizing a person's inherent goodness, and also because conversations about race and justice are central to how we love each other, and how we have learned to love the world.

DB: It feels like I've known Regina my whole life, and as I write this I'm aware of the many lives we've had together before this one; for to feel as I do about Regina—to have created a relationship that encompasses blackness and whiteness, jewishness and Christianness and all kinds of queerness, to travel hand in hand, is to know that we are standing on love's foundation of deep respect, uncompromising dedication, and devotion to justice in all forms.

¹ Equal co-authors; names are listed randomly.

Love

In United States culture, many people are socialized to think of love as a happy accident, rather than as a choice we make. If lucky, we are loved as children, and when we get older we are either lucky or unlucky in love. We are taught that love is beyond our control, and it is only useful as a feel-good drug that waxes and wanes depending on the day.

When we are made privy to the possibility that love is both a decision and a powerful force for social change, we are taught that it is reserved for the divinely appointed: Mother Teresa, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr., to name the most renowned. To hope to embody their special ability to love seems akin to hoping to be struck by lightning. We are not encouraged to scratch beneath the surface of their stories and discover the sacrifices made and the struggles endured to practice love on a daily basis.

In *All About Love: New Visions*, bell hooks (2000) quotes M. Scott Peck on the need to shift our view of love from passive to active, "Love is as love does. Love is an act of will—namely, both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love" (as cited in hooks, p. 4–5). hooks goes on to argue that:

without love, our efforts to liberate ourselves and our world community from oppression and exploitation are doomed. As long as we refuse to address...the place of love in struggles for liberation we will not be able to create a culture...where there is a mass turning away from an ethic of domination. (hooks, 1994, p 289)

hooks explains that a love-centric movement is necessary because only love is capable of carrying us beyond our habitual focus on ourselves. This is consistent with what Mother Teresa has said, "The problem with the world is that we draw our family circle too small" (as quoted in Kornfield, 2008, p. 354)

Many people have experienced love's power to raise our gaze beyond the small circle of our self-interest. Our first experience of this may be when a parent forks over their last bite of a delicious treat for us. Then a little later, we have our first childhood crush and are willing to give up half of a lunchbox treat because we know there is more where that came from. If all goes well, those early experiences of affection in abundance provide a secure base (Tatkin, 2011) from which we can continue to widen our "circle of concern" (Covey & Covey, 2018, p. 40) as we grow and mature. Unfortunately for some of us, affection is not available in abundance, and there is an underlying sense of lack, either in the home or in the wider culture, and this growing deprivation stops the widening of our circle of care and concern (Tatkin, 2011).

Even more tragic than our circle remaining small is the collective placement of entire groups of people beyond our circles of care and concern. In institutional and overtly violent ways such as police brutality and the mass incarceration of black

people, and in subtle but still deeply felt ways such as who we choose to smile at and who we turn away from, we place the "other" beyond love's reach. Many people do not learn that our ability to love can grow far beyond the circles of our families and neighborhoods. Love is expansive. Our "capacity to care" can grow beyond merely wanting "an end to what we feel is hurting us" to encompass a desire for an end to what we recognize is hurting others (hooks, 2006, p. 290). We must choose to cultivate love if we want to create a world where everyone has what they need to reach their full potential. Moreover, if we center our circle of concern on our own interests, we are eventually "seduced...into continued allegiance to systems of domination" (hooks, 1994, p. 243). We default into complicity with systems of oppression because we remain ignorant to how they are "interlocking" and "interdependent"; we fail to comprehend that none of us is free until we are all free.

Reflected in South African cultures as ubuntu and in the Buddhist concept of interdependence, our survival as a species is directly tied to our ability to recognize that each person's humanity "is caught up, is inextricably bound" (Tutu, 2009, p. 31) to everyone else's. Ubuntu is a way of living. It highlights the importance of loving presence toward ourselves, others, and our environment, inviting us to examine our thoughts and actions with clarity and an open heart, realizing and acknowledging that we are all interdependent. Can we take responsibility for our impact in a way that honors where we are on the path to healing and connection? Ubuntu recognizes the "infinite worth" (Tutu, 2020, p. 92) of every person and encourages us to be of service to those in our life as well as those afar.

In *World as Lover, World as Self*, Buddhist scholar and eco-philosopher Joanna Macy (2007) describes interdependence as the understanding that the world is "a dynamic self-sustaining web of relations" (p. 30-31). Kornfield (2008) emphasizes this point:

With each breath, we interbreathe carbon dioxide and oxygen with the maple and the oak, the dogwood and redwood trees... Our daily nourishment joins us with the rhythms of bees, caterpillars, and rhizomes; it connects our body with the collaborative dance of myriad species of plants and animals. Nothing is separate. (p. 356)

From this view, our existence is a dance of reciprocity between us and the natural world. However, many of us do not experience the world in this way. Macy (2007) elaborates:

All aspects of our world and all factors of our lives subsist...in a vast web of interdependence. But those currents of relationships are not visible. To the physical eye, we look like separate projects walking around in separate bodies. And, as such, we...compete with each other for resources to meet our own private needs and desires. (p. 32)

It is evident that our fundamental confusion about our relatedness has led to a false dichotomy in that we think we either care for ourselves, or care for each other and the world (Kornfield, 2008). In fact, they are one and the same. When we begin to live from this acknowledgement, we can open to love for each other and for the world.

Learning to live in accordance with this ultimate truth is essential to collective liberation in the relative world. In "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King Jr. (1963) wrote:

In a real sense all life is inter-related. All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.

When we are truly living from this realization, or at least attempting to, we choose to love those we share this planet with. When we choose to love, it becomes difficult to "other." Love creates the desire to understand one another, and through connection our differences can be acknowledged, respected, admired, and empowered. As hooks says, "when we choose to love we choose to move against fear—against alienation and separation. The choice to love is a choice to connect—to find ourselves in the other" (hooks, 2000, p. 93).

Once we choose to love, we can train our hearts to open. One example of this is through the Buddhist practice of metta or loving-kindness. Below is an example of a loving-kindness practice:

1. As you begin, reflect upon these questions: What is it we most desire for those we love? What is it we most desire for ourselves? To be safe, to be happy, to be at home in our bodies, to be free from any kind of suffering. Think of what you most wish so you can use it in the following loving-kindness practice. Notice how you feel during and after.
2. Now, take a moment and find a space where you can easily relax without going to sleep. If it feels comfortable, you can close your eyes or you can look softly ahead. Take a few deep inhales, sending the breath all the way down to your toes and exhaling the breath all the way back up.
3. Now think of someone you love and bring them into your consciousness. Offer them love and care by sending them the wishes that resonate with you: May you be safe, may you be happy, may you be at home in your body, may you be free from suffering. Do this for a minute, energetically sending your wishes to them from the deepest part of your heart-being.
4. Then take a few deep breaths and think of someone neutral that you do not know very well, such as a store cashier or a person at the bus stop and send them the same wishes by repeating the same phrases.

5. Next, send those wishes to a person who is hard for you to love and do the same practice.
6. Last, think of yourself and continue the practice of loving-kindness by repeating these wishes for yourself.

As you conclude this exercise, it can be helpful to reflect upon what you noticed. For example, did you notice a shift in your attitude? Did you feel more openness? Whatever you noticed, even if it was a sense of being closed, is welcome, and with continued practice, changes will undoubtedly occur. This practice can be offered to clients in therapy as a way of slowing down, witnessing the feelings and thoughts that are present, and expanding our circle of care and concern.

Love and Forgiveness

True Love is unconquerable and irresistible and it goes on gathering power and spreading itself until eventually it transforms everyone whom it touches. (Meher Baba, as quoted in Ram-Dass, 2004, p. 165)

Because "choos[ing] love is [going] against the prevailing values of the culture" (hooks, 1994, p. 290), embodying love is an act of courage, bravery and risk. A story may help illustrate this point.

DB: I lived for many years in Kennebunkport, Maine, where George W. Bush had a summer compound on the ocean. Each summer I and a group of friends would march down to his compound protesting for various causes and seeking justice. Along the way, we were met by people who were angry in disagreement with the march. The marchers would respond, in turn, with even more anger and contempt. Over time, I noticed the feeling of incongruence, how I wanted others to listen to me with an open heart and yet when they didn't, I immediately closed my heart in aggression, meeting hate with hate and passing pain back and forth. I wondered, "Am I committed to connecting to others even in conflict?" One summer, we decided on a different way—to respond to angry people with well wishes in a short chant. That year's march was very powerful because I gained an awareness that through a foundation of love I could maintain connection with myself and develop a path to connecting with others different from me. To engage love as a social justice practice, we must be willing to radically un-other and commit to an open heart in our interactions.

While shifts such as this are powerful, it is important to attune to clients and be aware of when windows of possibility for forgiveness are available, and when it is more skillful to allow for the expression of anger and aggression. For example, when working with clients who have been traumatized by racism and are working to transform their pain into activism, it can be valuable to encourage clients to bring love and acceptance to their experiences of hurt, grief, and anger. The Fourth Noble Truth of Buddhism stresses the path aspects of healing and growth. Along the journey, all feelings are welcomed as good news to be felt, understood, and

eventually used constructively (Williams et al., 2016). Through loving and accepting one's painful experience, the person may heal more deeply than if they try to spiritually bypass and deny what is happening in themselves and the world around them. Our work can center on supporting clients in their journey.

RS: In my work with a second-generation South Asian woman, Priya, she struggled to forgive her parents for the impossible expectations that had been placed on her. Caught between two cultures, she felt forced to assimilate United States culture in order to survive economically and psychologically, while also expected to adhere to traditional cultural values. Shamed by her family for the ways that she adapted to the United States, she also felt enormous pressure to achieve in her academics and career, and simultaneously to play the traditional roles of being a wife, mother, and family member.

As a result, Priya felt a deep resentment toward her parents, which she carried like a heavy weight. Not only did it make it difficult for her to feel close to them, but she also felt the need to prove herself in both of the cultural worlds that she inhabited. She worked compulsively and never felt she had done enough to give herself any credit or relaxation.

Our work focused on slowing down and shifting from doing into being. As she did, she was able to tap into the anger she felt toward her parents. She desired to forgive them, but first we had to explore her feelings of hurt, rejection, and abandonment, and the strategies she'd developed to avoid those feelings. We also looked at the causes and conditions that led her parents to make the decisions they made. We looked for expressions of love in their behaviors, however misattuned they might be. Over time, this exploration allowed Priya's heart to soften, to let more love in from her parents, and let go of needing the past to have been different for her to be whole. When she was able to relax in this way, she was able to have more moments of "enoughness," freedom, and enjoyment in her daily life.

Love is an open heart. It is a willingness to come into direct contact with the world, to experience our own feelings, and it is a willingness to be impacted by the experience of others. When we are openhearted, we are vulnerable to pain but we're also open to the ways we can be transformed through connection. Kornfield (2008) offers that an open heart is inclined toward peace and is non-contentious. I imagine this heart as an open-door welcoming life to come in. Love is the practice of opening the door. Sometimes like a fierce wind, life slams the door shut; love is the practice of re-opening the door.

DB: In 1978, my friend was murdered on the Appalachian trail. During the next few years, I watched as his parents went through both the emotional torture and healing only those who have lost a child can understand. After a few years, the parents wanted to meet the man that took their son's life. He was the last person who had been with their son when he was alive, and they also recognized that this man was someone else's son. Somehow, amidst the unfathomable pain of their deepest loss, they were able to open their hearts—open to their own heartbreak and the heartbreak of all involved. They were able to recognize that each one of us is someone's child. Martin Luther King Jr. exhorted us, 'Never succumb to the

temptation of becoming bitter. As you press for justice, be sure to move with dignity and discipline, using only the instruments of love" (Kornfield, 2008, p.31). This is the path of forgiveness. It is a way to release the pain and suffering and lessen the weight that we carry forward into our lives.

To step on the path of forgiveness, we first recognize that we ourselves have hurt others and will likely cause harm in the future despite our good intentions. We also discover that forgiveness is about our own freedom. Kornfield (2008) offers the story of two ex-prisoners of war who meet after many years. When the first one asks, "Have you forgiven your captors yet?" The second man answers, "No, never." "Well then," the first man replies, "they still have you in prison" (p.346). The first prisoner's attitude stands in stark contrast to the story of how world leader Nelson Mandela behaved toward his prison guards and how he never thought of his captors as enemies but rather befriended them (Deneberg, 2014). His freedom lived in his open heart, and no experience could take that from him.

Lama Rod Owens highlights the danger of spiritually bypassing racism and other injustices, as well as the importance of working through trauma, anger, and rage with the hope of less suffering (Matas, 2019). He explains, "Many people rely on rage to do the work. But that rage is actually extremely depleting. I show up out of love and compassion." As therapists, it is important that we recognize that forgiveness takes time so that we do not, with good intentions, rush clients to prematurely forgive, which often is not authentic and can leave one still bound to the past.

Another story can help illustrate forgiveness.

DB: As a second-generation Jewish womyn, I was brought up with traumatic memories of the Holocaust and in the shadow of centuries of Jewish persecution. When I was in my 30s, I decided to go to Auschwitz in Poland where my great uncles, aunts, and cousins had been gassed to death. My primary motive for visiting such an intense and emotionally difficult place was to honor my ancestors. I also secretly hoped to meet someone German—someone that was the direct descendant of people connected to my family at Auschwitz. In my group, I met a therapist from Germany whose grandfather was an SS guard at Auschwitz. Talking with her, I felt our pain join in the same melody of hatred, confusion, and delusion. Our pain was our connection, and as we shared about our ancestors we chose to hold one another in love and care. There was no separation between us; we belonged to each other.

RS: As a black womyn activist-healer in Colorado, my daily life demands continual forgiveness. This includes forgiveness when someone unfamiliar addresses me with "hey, girl!" or some other version of slang, as if that is all I speak; forgiveness when my ideas and contributions at work are either dismissed or appropriated; forgiveness when a white person uses their "wokeness" as a tool for egoic gain. And most important, it includes forgiving myself for the ways in which I am complicit with white supremacist patriarchy. To cultivate forgiveness, I rely on my spiritual training in both Buddhism and Christianity. I think of the innumerable causes and conditions that have happened for me to develop an

understanding of race and social injustice, knowing that under different circumstances I might not have been so fortunate. I consider that had I been born white, I might behave similarly to those who have caused harm. I have learned that responding to others in a way that is hurtful is not a path to liberation. So instead, I choose self-love through setting fierce boundaries around what I dedicate myself to, and I choose love for others by seeing their basic goodness waiting to be discovered, even when they are most confused.

One of the most profound examples of a commitment to love is the Buddhist concept of the Bodhisattva. When practitioners take the bodhisattva vow, they commit to being reincarnated into the human realm of inevitable suffering and to work, lifetime after lifetime, to liberate all sentient beings. Chögyam Trungpa (2017) says taking the bodhisattva vow implies that instead of holding our own individual territory and defending it tooth and nail, we become open to the world that we are living in. It means we are willing to take on greater responsibility, immense responsibility. The bodhisattva is one who chooses to love knowing that it makes a difference in the world. When we choose to love, we create a ripple effect. People that know they are loved willingly support others, whereas those that imagine or believe they are not loved withdraw from relationship or look for ways to discredit and disempower others. Choosing to walk the Bodhisattva path is choosing to believe that everyone in the world can awaken and become liberated if shown the path out of suffering. The path is love—fierce, warm, benevolent, action-oriented love.

Loving our clients has been at the backbone of our work as clinicians. Many clients arrive feeling anxious, angry, and sad. The therapeutic relationship holds them in love as they journey through memories of hardship, abuse, and neglect. Criticism and disconnection emerge in all areas of life—from the intra-personal to the systemic. Clients feel like they are not enough, their relationships are not what they hoped, their families are in conflict, and the systems have betrayed them. In therapy they find hope through many aspects of love. All their experiences are welcome, all their defenses are welcome, all of who they are, who they've been; and in the welcoming there is unconditional love for all that is. Because of this, the potential of who they will become emerges. Love leads to acceptance and acceptance leads to clarity, which leads to transformation.

DB: I remember as a new therapist my supervisor encouraged me, even when I disliked my clients, to “wait until the love comes.” This has stayed with me because my practice includes clients I struggle with and whom I could not love at first. I remember one particular client whom I felt repelled by, and I dreaded our sessions. His political values were different from mine, and he would lecture me about women in ways that I found insulting and sexist, as if I didn't know what it was like to be female (I am a cis-gender female-identified person). As our time together lengthened, I grew more space for his opinions and my understanding of his wounds, and places of hurt and the harm he'd experienced deepened. As we traveled through these delicate places, my heart expanded around him and the love for him emerged. There was room for his opinions as well as for me to

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challenge him lovingly. This in turn led him to new insights about himself and the world and how he could live easier with less struggle.

As I think about this client, I notice my tender heart, my deep breaths, and my teary eyes, for our therapeutic relationship of mutual love was profound. Walter grew up with a white father and a black mother who left the family when Walter was young. His father, struggling with mental health, worked hard to make sure Walter had a roof over his head and food to eat, but couldn't offer him the love and warmth he needed. Instead, Walter became the scapegoat for his father and siblings, and they blamed him for all that wasn't right. Our work together was about him being able to feel my love and care for him in a myriad of ways and expressions. I remember hearing that Walter's father had never told him he loved him, and so whenever I felt love for Walter I said, "I love you." Through our tears, breathing, and deep bonding, Walter began to feel the earth beneath his feet and the possibilities for him in the world. Yes, there were other interventions and particular therapeutic approaches that happened in therapy, but it was undoubtedly the love that shifted Walter's sense of self from thinking he had nothing to live for to believing his life was just beginning.

Reflections on Relationship

RS: Perhaps we open our hearts to people because they reflect back to us a version of ourselves that we want to believe. I don't remember everything about meeting Deb at our first weekend in February 2009, but I can still feel across time and space how my life changed by her presence. Deb was warm, open, and kind—deeply welcoming, in a soul kind of way. I remember months later when she arrived at my new apartment earlier than anyone else to help my roommate move in. I think she wore overalls, and I know she called me sweet. No one had ever recognized sweetness in me or, if they had, they had never let me in on it. Before that moment, I was not aware of how true it was that I was sweet and how much I needed someone to experience me, a black woman, as sweet. Saying it was an acknowledgment and also permission. I could relax and be sweet if I wanted to. After that, I was determined to stay as close as I could to this person, and it was one of the wisest decisions I've ever made. Over the past decade, she has continued to reflect all the best parts of me, no matter what opinion I'm holding about myself at the moment.

Our relationship is characterized by choice. As a black woman, the freedom of having choice cannot be overemphasized. Historically, my choices around how I can behave felt limited: *Be strong, be smart, be small in the ways that matter, don't bother anybody. Don't trust, don't be truly open, be the bigger person, be grateful when you are included, be grateful no matter what is given. Work hard, work harder, it should be hard, that is how you know you are worthy, that is what life is. This is who you have to be to be loved.* However with Deb, there are always a thousand choices. I can stay or go. I can want what I want and not want what I don't want. I can show up for a 5:00 a.m. gym class cranky or in tears or dreamy or determined.

All of my parts are always welcome and joined. I am never asked to show up differently to accommodate her desires or to enable a particular experience. These are simple things on the surface, but for me, this is an unusual experience in a relationship with a white person and is why Deb became family.

DB: Regina is "home" for me; she is family and someone I rely on who witnesses all parts of who I am. She is of soft heart and strong mind, of wise spirit and earthly love. Regina embodies the person I aspire to be—loving with direct focus, an easy stride that creates love and connection wherever she goes whether it is easeful or full of despair. Her spirit soars beyond the sky up to the heavens where she is known as an angel. She witnesses my whiteness, my Jewishness, and all my identities, and she holds them all with fierce love, forgiveness, and warriorship. Regina, somehow, is able to know and give space to my basic brilliance as well as how my ignorance shows up. She is a mirror to my soul and demands integrity, with loving care asking me to be no one else than who I am at any given moment.

I'm not sure how Regina survives the racist violence she lives with every day, and I am here to let her know she is not alone and that I will forever be joined with her in the fight for freedom and equity for all beings. I am dedicated to Regina as I am dedicated to myself. It is through her love and faith that I stand here today a better person for having felt her fierce love and her invitation for me to fiercely love her.

In the work of social justice, we learn that the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and systemic are not separate and need to be brought into therapy practices. Our ability to bring love to our innermost places that we have considered loveless allows us to transform our interpersonal relationships and to radically un-other people by bringing love into our daily interactions. Through intentional practice, strangers can become family. Cultivating connection with one another then provides the foundation for social activism on the collective level and gives us the motivation and sustenance to work toward dismantling systems of oppression. As clinicians we can guide our clients into engaging with these practices and joining us on the path of love as activism.

In closing, we encourage everyone to ask themselves this vital question from Jack Kornfield: "To what *have* we dedicated our life? How deeply do we carry this dedication? Is it time to rededicate our life?" (Kornfield, 2008, p. 261).

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