

Six

Values: Living by a Love Ethic

We must live for the day, and work for the day, when human society realigns itself with the radical love of God. In a truly democratic paradigm, there is no love of power for power's sake.

—MARIANNE WILLIAMSON

AWAKENING TO LOVE can happen only as we let go of our obsession with power and domination. Culturally, all spheres of American life—politics, religion, the workplace, domestic households, intimate relations—should and could have as their foundation a love ethic. The underlying values of a culture and its ethics shape and inform the way we speak and act. A love ethic presupposes that everyone has the right to be free, to live fully and well. To bring a love ethic to every dimension of our lives, our society would need to embrace change. At the end of *The Art of Loving*, Erich Fromm affirms that “important and radical changes are necessary, if love is to become a social and not a highly individualistic, marginal phenomenon.” Individuals who choose to love can and do alter our lives in ways that honor the primacy of a love ethic. We do this by choosing to work with individuals we admire and respect; by committing to

give our all to relationships; by embracing a global vision wherein we see our lives and our fate as intimately connected to those of everyone else on the planet.

Commitment to a love ethic transforms our lives by offering us a different set of values to live by. In large and small ways, we make choices based on a belief that honesty, openness, and personal integrity need to be expressed in public and private decisions. I chose to move to a small city so I could live in the same area as family even though it was not as culturally desirable as the place I left. Friends of mine live at home with aging parents, caring for them even though they have enough money to go elsewhere. Living by a love ethic we learn to value loyalty and a commitment to sustained bonds over material advancement. While careers and making money remain important agendas, they never take precedence over valuing and nurturing human life and well-being.

I know no one who has embraced a love ethic whose life has not become joyous and more fulfilling. The widespread assumption that ethical behavior takes the fun out of life is false. In actuality, living ethically ensures that relationships in our lives, including encounters with strangers, nurture our spiritual growth. Behaving unethically, with no thought to the consequences of our actions, is a bit like eating tons of junk food. While it may taste good, in the end the body is never really adequately nourished and remains in a constant state of lack and longing. Our souls feel this lack when we act unethically, behaving in ways that diminish our spirits and dehumanize others.

TESTIMONY IN NEW AGE writing affirms the way in which embracing a love ethic transforms life for the good. Yet a lot of this information only reaches those of us who have class privilege. And often, individuals whose lives are rich in spiritual and material well-being, who have diverse friends

from all walks of life who nurture their personal integrity, tell the rest of the world these things are impossible to come by. I am talking here about the many prophets of doom who tell us that racism will never end, sexism is here to stay, the rich will never share their resources. We would all be surprised if we could enter their lives for a day. Much of what they are telling us cannot be had, they have. But in keeping with a capitalist-based notion of well-being, they really believe there is not enough to go around, that the good life can be had only by a few.

Talking to a university audience recently I expressed my faith in the power of white people to speak out against racism, challenging and changing prejudice—emphatically stating that I definitely believe we can all change our minds and our actions. I stressed that this faith was not rooted in a utopian longing but, rather, that I believed this because of our nation's history of the many individuals who have offered their lives in the service of justice and freedom. When challenged by folks who claimed that these individuals were exceptions, I agreed. But I then talked about the necessity of changing our thinking so that we see ourselves as being like the one who does change rather than among the among who refuse to change. What made these individuals exceptional was not that they were any smarter or kinder than their neighbors but that they were willing to live the truth of their values.

Here is another example. If you go door to door in our nation and talk to citizens about domestic violence, almost everyone will insist that they do not support male violence against women, that they believe it to be morally and ethically wrong. However, if you then explain that we can only end male violence against women by challenging patriarchy, and that means no longer accepting the notion that men should have more rights and privileges than women because of biological difference or that men should have the power to rule over women, that is when the

agreement stops. There is a gap between the values they claim to hold and their willingness to do the work of connecting thought and action, theory and practice to realize these values and thus create a more just society.

Sadly, many of our nation's citizens are proud to live in one of the most democratic countries in the world even as they are afraid to stand up for individuals who live under repressive and fascist governments. They are afraid to act on what they believe because it would mean challenging the conservative status quo. Refusal to stand up for what you believe in weakens individual morality and ethics as well as those of the culture. No wonder then that we are a nation of people, the majority of whom, across race, class, and gender, claim to be religious, claim to believe in the divine power of love, and yet collectively remain unable to embrace a love ethic and allow it to guide behavior, especially if doing so would mean supporting radical change.

Fear of radical changes leads many citizens of our nation to betray their minds and hearts. Yet we are all subjected to radical changes every day. We face them by moving through fear. These changes are usually imposed by the status quo. For example, revolutionary new technologies have led us all to accept computers. Our willingness to embrace this "unknown" shows that we are all capable of confronting fears of radical change, that we can cope. Obviously, it is not in the interest of the conservative status quo to encourage us to confront our collective fear of love. An overall cultural embrace of a love ethic would mean that we would all oppose much of the public policy conservatives condone and support.

Society's collective fear of love must be faced if we are to lay claim to a love ethic that can inspire us and give us the courage to make necessary changes. Writing about the changes that must be made, Fromm explains: "Society must be organized in such a way that man's social, loving nature

is not separated from his social existence, but becomes one with it. If it is true as I have tried to show that love is the only sane and satisfactory response to the problem of human existence, then any society which excludes, relatively, the development of love, must in the long run perish of its own contradiction with the basic necessities of human nature. Indeed, to speak of love is not 'preaching,' for the simple reason that it means to speak of the ultimate and real need in every human being. . . . To have faith in the possibility of love as a social and not only exceptional-individual phenomenon, is a rational faith based on the insight into the very nature of man." Faith enables us to move past fear. We can collectively regain our faith in the transformative power of love by cultivating courage, the strength to stand up for what we believe in, to be accountable both in word and deed.

I am especially fond of the biblical passage in the first epistle of John, which tells us: "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love." From childhood on this passage of scripture has enchanted me. I was fascinated by the repeated use of the word "perfect." For some time I thought of this word only in relation to being without fault or defect. Taught to believe that this understanding of what it means to be perfect was always out of human reach, that we were, of necessity, essentially human because we were not perfect but were always bound by the mystery of the body, by our limitations, this call to know a perfect love disturbed me. It seemed a worthy calling, but impossible. That is, until I looked for a deeper, more complex understanding of the word "perfect" and found a definition emphasizing the will "to refine."

Suddenly my passage was illuminated. Love as a process that has been refined, alchemically altered as it moves from state to state, is that "perfect love" that can cast out fear. As we love, fear necessarily leaves. Contrary to the notion

that one must work to attain perfection, this outcome does not have to be struggled for—it just happens. It is the gift perfect love offers. To receive the gift, we must first understand that “there is no fear in love.” But we do fear and fear keeps us from trusting in love.

Cultures of domination rely on the cultivation of fear as a way to ensure obedience. In our society we make much of love and say little about fear. Yet we are all terribly afraid most of the time. As a culture we are obsessed with the notion of safety. Yet we do not question why we live in states of extreme anxiety and dread. Fear is the primary force upholding structures of domination. It promotes the desire for separation, the desire not to be known. When we are taught that safety lies always with sameness, then difference, of any kind, will appear as a threat. 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.

Since so many of us are imprisoned by fear, we can move toward a love ethic only by the process of conversion. Philosopher Cornel West states that “a politics of conversion” restores our sense of hope. Calling attention to the pervasive nihilism in our society he reminds us: “Nihilism is not overcome by arguments or analyses, it is tamed by love and care. Any disease of the soul must be conquered by a turning of one’s soul. This turning is done through one’s own affirmation of one’s worth—an affirmation fueled by the concern of others.” In an attempt to ward off life-threatening despair, more and more individuals are turning toward a love ethic. Signs that this conversion is taking place abound in our culture. It’s reassuring when masses of people read literature like Thomas Moore’s *Care of the Soul*, a work that invites us to reevaluate the values that undergird our lives and make choices that affirm our interconnectedness with others.

Embracing a love ethic means that we utilize all the dimensions of love—"care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge"—in our everyday lives. We can successfully do this only by cultivating awareness. Being aware enables us to critically examine our actions to see what is needed so that we can give care, be responsible, show respect, and indicate a willingness to learn. Understanding knowledge as an essential element of love is vital because we are daily bombarded with messages that tell us love is about mystery, about that which cannot be known. We see movies in which people are represented as being in love who never talk with one another, who fall into bed without ever discussing their bodies, their sexual needs, their likes and dislikes. Indeed, the message received from the mass media is that knowledge makes love less compelling; that it is ignorance that gives love its erotic and transgressive edge. These messages are often brought to us by profiteering producers who have no clue about the art of loving, who substitute their mystified visions because they do not really know how to genuinely portray loving interaction.

Were we, collectively, to demand that our mass media portray images that reflect love's reality, it would happen. This change would radically alter our culture. The mass media dwells on and perpetuates an ethic of domination and violence because our image makers have more intimate knowledge of these realities than they have with the realities of love. We all know what violence looks like. All scholarship in the field of cultural studies focusing on a critical analysis of the mass media, whether pro or con, indicates that images of violence, particularly those that involve action and gore, capture the attention of viewers more than still, peaceful images. The small groups of people who produce most of the images we see in this culture have heretofore shown no interest in learning how to represent

images of love in ways that will capture and stir our cultural imagination and hold our attention.

If the work they did was informed by a love ethic, they would consider it important to think critically about the images they create. And that would mean thinking about the impact of these images, the ways they shape culture and inform how we think and act in everyday life. If unfamiliar with love's terrain, they would hire consultants who would provide the necessary insight. Even though some individual scholars try to tell us there is no direct connection between images of violence and the violence confronting us in our lives, the commonsense truth remains—we are all affected by the images we consume and by the state of mind we are in when watching them. If consumers want to be entertained, and the images shown us as entertaining are images of violent dehumanization, it makes sense that these acts become more acceptable in our daily lives and that we become less likely to respond to them with moral outrage or concern. Were we all seeing more images of loving human interaction, it would undoubtedly have a positive impact on our lives.

We cannot talk about changing the types of images offered us in the mass media without acknowledging the extent to which the vast majority of the images we see are created from a patriarchal standpoint. These images will not change until patriarchal thinking and perspectives change. Individual women and men who do not see themselves as victims of patriarchal power find it difficult to take seriously the need to challenge and change patriarchal thinking. But reeducation is always possible. Masses of people are negatively affected by patriarchal institutions and, most specifically, by male domination. Since individuals committed to advancing patriarchy are producing most of the images we see, they have an investment in providing us with representations that reflect their values and the social institutions they wish to uphold. Patriarchy, like any system

of domination (for example, racism), relies on socializing everyone to believe that in all human relations there is an inferior and a superior party, one person is strong, the other weak, and that it is therefore natural for the powerful to rule over the powerless. To those who support patriarchal thinking, maintaining power and control is acceptable by whatever means. Naturally, anyone socialized to think this way would be more interested in and stimulated by scenes of domination and violence rather than by scenes of love and care. Yet they need a consumer audience to whom they can sell their product. Therein lies our power to demand change.

While the contemporary feminist movement has done much to intervene with this kind of thinking, challenging and changing it, and by so doing offering women and men a chance to lead more fulfilling lives, patriarchal thinking is still the norm for those in power. This does not mean we do not have the right to demand change. We have power as consumers. We can exercise that power all the time by not choosing to invest time, energy, or funds to support the production and dissemination of mass media images that do not reflect life-enhancing values, that undermine a love ethic. This is not meant to be an argument for censorship. Most of the evils in our world are not created by the mass media. For example, clearly, the mass media does not create violence in the home. Domestic violence was widespread even when there was no television. But everyone knows that all forms of violence are glamorized and made to appear interesting and seductive by the mass media. The producers of these images could just as easily use the mass media to challenge and change violence. When images we see condone violence, whether they lead any of us to be “more” violent or not, they do affirm the notion that violence is an acceptable means of social control, that it is fine for one individual or group to dominate another individual or group.

Domination cannot exist in any social situation where a love ethic prevails. Jung's insight, that if the will to power is paramount love will be lacking, is important to remember. When love is present the desire to dominate and exercise power cannot rule the day. All the great social movements for freedom and justice in our society have promoted a love ethic. Concern for the collective good of our nation, city, or neighbor rooted in the values of love makes us all seek to nurture and protect that good. If all public policy was created in the spirit of love, we would not have to worry about unemployment, homelessness, schools failing to teach children, or addiction.

Were a love ethic informing all public policy in cities and towns, individuals would come together and map out programs that would affect the good of everyone. Melody Chavis's wonderful book *Altars in the Street: A Neighborhood Fights to Survive* tells a story of real people coming together across differences of race and class to improve their living environment. She speaks from the perspective of a white woman who moves with her family into a predominately black community. As someone who embraces a love ethic, Melody joins her neighbors to create peace and love in their environment. Their work succeeds but is undermined by the failure of support from public policy and city government. Concurrently, she also works to help prisoners on death row. Loving community in all its diversity, Melody states: "Sometimes I think that I've been trying, on death row and in my neighborhood, to gain some control over the violence in my life. As a child I was completely helpless in the face of violence." Her book shows the changes a love ethic can make even in the most troubled community. It also documents the tragic consequences to human life when terror and violence become the accepted norm.

When small communities organize their lives around a love ethic, every aspect of daily life can be affirming for

everyone. In all his prose work Kentucky poet Wendell Berry writes eloquently about the positive values that exist in rural communities that embrace an ethic of communalism and the sharing of resources. In *Another Turn of the Crank*, Berry exposes the extent to which the interests of big business lead to the destruction of rural communities, reminding us that destruction is fast becoming the norm in all types of communities. He encourages us to learn from the lives of folks who live in communities governed by a spirit of love and communalism. Sharing some of the values held by citizens of these communities he writes: “They are people who take and hold a generous and neighborly view of self-preservation; they do not believe that they can survive and flourish by the rule of dog eat dog; they do not believe that they can succeed by defeating or destroying or selling or using up everything but themselves. They doubt that good solutions can be produced by violence. They want to preserve the precious things of nature of human culture and pass them on to their children. . . . They see that no commonwealth or community of interest can be defined by greed. . . . They know that work ought to be necessary; it ought to be good; it ought to be satisfying and dignifying to the people who do it; and genuinely useful and pleasing to the people for whom it is done.”

I like living in small towns precisely because they are most often the places in our nation where basic principles underlying a love ethic exist and are the standards by which most people try to live their lives. In the small town where I live (now only some of the time) there is a spirit of neighborliness—of fellowship, care, and respect. These same values existed in the neighborhoods of the town in which I grew up. Even though I spend most of my time in New York City, I live in a cooperative apartment building where we all know each other. We protect and nurture our collective well-being. We strive to make our home place a positive environment for everyone. We all agree that

integrity and care enhance all our lives. We try to live by the principles of a love ethic.

To live our lives based on the principles of a love ethic (showing care, respect, knowledge, integrity, and the will to cooperate), we have to be courageous. Learning how to face our fears is one way we embrace love. Our fear may not go away, but it will not stand in the way. Those of us who have already chosen to embrace a love ethic, allowing it to govern and inform how we think and act, know that when we let our light shine, we draw to us and are drawn to other bearers of light. We are not alone.