

Borne Forward Ceaselessly Into Love: A Theory of the Hermeneutics of Love Exemplified by Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Abstract

In this article, I develop a theory of a *hermeneutics of love*, defined as the act of interpreting *with love, through love, and for love*, including the intention to take action on behalf of love. Declaring love as my gospel, I begin with the “genesis” of this theory, with how I came to develop it, and I end with the “revelations” that came as I applied this theory in my life and teaching. In between, I utilize a case study of Martin Luther King, Jr. during the Civil Rights Movement, showing how King was a practitioner *par excellence* of a hermeneutics of love. King elevated *agape*, defined as unconditional love for all of humanity, even one’s enemies, into the sociocultural and political realm with the intention of effecting integration and engendering *the beloved community*. The article concludes with some reflections on agape, wondering if it is an impossible dream for those who are not Kings, and where that leaves those of us who are committed to the principle and practice of love.

Keywords

hermeneutics of love, Martin Luther King, Jr., agape, the beloved community, the Civil Rights Movement

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“I’m going to love because it’s just lovely to love.”

—Martin Luther King, Jr. (1968b).

Genesis

In the fall of 2006, I introduced the term “hermeneutics of love”¹ for the first time during a course I taught to doctoral students in depth psychology at Pacifica Graduate Institute. The students had just returned from summer fieldwork, where they had chosen a site to either witness or to practice depth psychology in action. The students presented their fieldwork to their classmates, offering many good depth psychological interpretations of their experiences.

After their presentations, I shared Paul Ricoeur’s (1977) description of a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” which he famously coined to describe the interpretive styles of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche. We could see a hermeneutics of suspicion as foundational for the practice of depth psychology itself, I told them. The basic ontological assertion of the reality of the unconscious makes necessary an interpretation through suspicion, since what is manifest often serves to mask what is latent.

This is what you performed today, I said—you presented your analysis through a hermeneutics of suspicion. But let us try another form of hermeneutics. Let us look at your fieldwork through a hermeneutics of love instead. Some students raised their eyebrows, some cocked their heads, and some leaned forward in anticipation.

I defined a hermeneutics of love as a way of interpreting experiences and people (“texts,” in Ricoeur’s expanded definition) *with love, through love, and for love*. Though this is far too simplistic of a definition, I admitted, let us think about your fieldwork through the maxim in *The Course in Miracles* (Schucman, 1976) that everything is either love or a call for love. Looking through the eyes of love (interpreting *with love*), I asked them, where is love in your fieldwork, and where are there calls for love (interpreting *through love*)? And where might there have been opportunities to create more love at your fieldwork site (interpreting *for love*)?

It did not go well.

The Wellsprings

Though I got my PhD in the field of depth psychology, I came into this world with an inclination toward humanistic psychology, though I had no language for it at the time. As a child, I was preoccupied by humanistic values, or

rather, the dearth of them in the world around me. Kindness, compassion, fairness, equality, the dignity of all people—before I knew what the word axiology meant, I had constructed my own value system—and my highest value, or to use the opposite spatial metaphor, my foundational value, was always love.

When people asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up, I just wanted to love, though I was too embarrassed to answer the question this way. In my late teens, I found the work of educator Leo Buscaglia—*Living, Loving, Learning* (1985) and *Loving Each Other* (1986)—and not only did I admire him, I wanted to *be* him. I wanted to teach Love 1A and speak about love publically; I wanted to love people and inspire people and hug people, and encourage them to love and hug each other more (Short, 2003).

Love was my religion; books on love were my gospel. In my 20s, I read the humanistic classics on love, including Erich Fromm's *Art of Loving* (1956/1989), Rollo May's *Love and Will* (1969), and Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946/2006). I went to college, and while I still kept my career aspirations quiet, seeing no direct path to being "Dr. Love," I considered which career would afford the best opportunity to love and express love. I went into high school teaching, where I had 150 students a day who were calling for love, who had so much love to give.

Why as a child was I embarrassed to say I just wanted to love? Why as a young adult did I squelch my desires and search for a career where I could love in stealth?

One answer can be found in Diane Ackerman's treatise on the subject, *A Natural History of Love* (1995), where she asserted:

As a society we are embarrassed by love. We treat it as if it were an obscenity. We reluctantly admit to it. Even saying the word makes us stumble and blush. Why should we be ashamed of an emotion so beautiful and natural? (p. xix)

Why indeed?

And so I taught and loved and loved and taught for 16 years. In 1998, I decided near the end of those years to pursue a PhD in depth psychology at Pacifica Graduate Institute. I was drawn to the program at that time because it was spearheaded by Mary Watkins and Helene Shulman, two Jungian analysts who had left aside the analytic encounter with individual patients, taking on the world itself as their patient. Watkins and Shulman practiced then, and now, a form of liberation psychology which asserts the fundamental dignity and worth of all human beings, and seeks through action with others to ameliorate the conditions that cause them both physiological and psychological suffering (see *Toward Psychologies of Liberation*, 2010). While I was

never drawn to become an analyst or therapist myself, I was interested in what I would come to call “cultural therapy” (Selig, 2004, 2012), which I considered a way of putting love into action for the healing and transformation of the culture.

I came to the topic of cultural therapy during my last year of coursework at Pacifica while attempting to narrow down a dissertation topic on some aspect of love. On Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday, I followed my usual ritual of reading an essay in King’s collection titled *Strength to Love* (1963/1981b). Suddenly, all the pieces fell together. Love, cultural therapy, liberation psychology—here was another “Dr. Love,” a man with the strength to love and the audacity to love, a man not embarrassed to love even his so-called enemies. I would drink at the wellsprings of this man’s wisdom for the next 14 years.

I am still drinking, and I am not done yet.

What can this King of Love teach us about a hermeneutics of love, in the same way Freud, Nietzsche, and Marx taught Ricoeur about a hermeneutics of suspicion?

The King of Love

Martin Luther King, Jr.’s highest value and most foundational value was love; he agreed with the apostle Paul that love is “the greatest of all virtues” (1956/1998d, p. 36). He lavished praises on love, calling it “the most durable power in the world” and “the highest good” and “the *summum bonum* of life” (p. 34); he called it “the way” and “the only absolute” (1965/1998b, p. 97); he called it “the supreme unifying principle of life” and “the key that unlocks the door which leads to ultimate reality” (1967/1986h, p. 242); he called it “the only creative, redemptive, transforming power in the universe” (1957/1998c, p. 59). He not only wanted to move “the ethics of love to the center of our lives” (1957/1986f, p. 8), he wanted to put love at the center of the Civil Rights Movement itself, stating definitively, “Love *must* be at the forefront of our movement if it is to be a successful movement” (1956/1986i, p. 82). And he was not afraid nor embarrassed to declare his love for all of humanity. In one sermon, he said:

As I look into your eyes, and into the eyes of all of my brothers in Alabama and all over America and all over the world, I say to you, “I love you. I would rather die than hate you.” (1957/1998c, p. 59)

Given his emphatic call for love, no wonder the author bell hooks crowned King “a prophet of love” (2000, p. 75).

Not only did King talk about the value of love and verbally declare his love but he also embodied love in his actions. As Gandhi is oft-quoted as saying, “A coward is incapable of exhibiting love; it is the prerogative of the brave” (as quoted in Hollis, 1998, p. 57). It takes courage to love because it can be dangerous to love, frightening to love. Jungian analyst James Hollis wrote:

The power of love is found most in its triumph over fear. Where fear prevails, love is not. Given the ubiquity of fear, the move to love is a considerable challenge. Only those who can face their fears, live with ambiguity and ambivalence, can find that personal empowerment which then makes possible love of the other. (1998, p. 73)

King faced that challenge, faced his fears and made “the move to love.” He moved others as well: poet and author Maya Angelou, on hearing King speak before a crowd one evening, was immediately inspired to join the movement. She noted of King, “All that heart and passion and courage; especially courage. Love and courage . . . ” (1981, p. 168).

King made it clear that love fueled his bravery, that everyone should interpret his courageous actions as a result of his love. During one difficult moment in the movement, he spoke these words at a rally:

You hear it said some of us are agitators. I am here because there are twenty million Negroes in the United States and I love every one of them. I am concerned about every one of them. What happens to any one of them concerns all directly. I am here because I love the white man. Until the Negro gets free, white men will not be free. I am here because I love America. (as quoted in Wexler, 1993, p. 151)

In a very radical way, King did not divorce social activism and politics from love; he insisted instead that love should inform *all* social activism and politics. He preached to America:

But even more, Americans, you may give your goods to feed the poor. You may give great gifts to charity. You may tower high in philanthropy. But if you have not love it means nothing. You may even give your body to be burned, and die the death of a martyr. Your spilt blood may be a symbol of honor for generations yet unborn, and thousands may praise you as history’s supreme hero. But even so, if you have not love your blood was spilt in vain. (1956/1998d, p. 35)

He called for leaders “not in love with money, but in love with justice. Not leaders in love with publicity, but in love with humanity” (1956/1997,

p. 477). He called for *everyone* to fall in love with humanity: “a world-wide fellowship that lifts neighborly concern beyond one’s tribe, race, class and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all men” (1967/1986h, p. 242).

King was clearly not, in Ackerman’s term, “embarrassed by love.” In one public session before his organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, he declared:

I have also decided to stick with love, for I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind’s problems. And I’m going to talk about it everywhere I go. I know it isn’t popular to talk about it in some circles today. And I’m not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love; I’m talking about a strong, demanding love. (1967/1986a, p. 43)

“Emotional bosh” was a term he used often as a way of acknowledging the limitations and connotations of the word “love.” Ackerman acknowledged this as well:

Love is the most important thing in our lives, a passion for which we would fight or die, and yet we’re reluctant to linger over its names. Without a supple vocabulary, we can’t even talk or think about it directly. (1995, p. xix)

King was very aware of the lack of “supple vocabulary” when speaking about love; thus, he was always careful to delineate different types of love and make clear which type he was advocating. In calling for the value of love to be raised into the social and political domain, he did not mean “this oft misunderstood and misinterpreted concept—so readily dismissed by the Nietzsches of the world as a weak and cowardly force” nor “some sentimental and weak response” (1967/1986h, p. 242). To conjure up a stronger form of love, “a creative, a redemptive sort of love” (p. 242), he turned his vocabulary toward Greece, and distinguished between three of its terms for love: *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*. This particular passage from his sermon “Loving Your Enemies” (1957/1998c) is representative of many dozens of similar sermons and speeches on the topic; I quote it here at length because it is so foundational to King’s teaching and preaching on love.

The Greek language, as I’ve said so often before, is very powerful at this point. It comes to our aid beautifully in giving us the real meaning and depth of the whole philosophy of love. And I think it is quite apropos at this point, for you see the Greek language has three words for love, interestingly enough. It talks about love as *eros*. That’s one word for love. *Eros* is a sort of aesthetic love. Plato talks about it a great deal in his dialogues, a sort of yearning of the soul

for the realm of the gods. And it's come to us to be a sort of romantic love, though it's a beautiful love. Everybody has experienced *eros* in all of its beauty when you find some individual that is attractive to you and that you pour out all of your like and your love on that individual. That is *eros*, you see, and it's a powerful, beautiful love that is given to us through all of the beauty of literature; we read about it.

Then the Greek language talks about *philia*, and that's another type of love that's also beautiful. It is a sort of intimate affection between personal friends. And this is the type of love that you have for those persons that you're friendly with, your intimate friends, or people that you call on the telephone and you go by to have dinner with, and your roommate in college and that type of thing. It's a sort of reciprocal love. On this level, you like a person because that person likes you. You love on this level, because you are loved. You love on this level, because there's something about the person you love that is likeable to you. This too is a beautiful love. You can communicate with a person; you have certain things in common; you like to do things together. This is *philia*.

The Greek language comes out with another word for love. It is the word *agape*. And *agape* is more than *eros*; *agape* is more than *philia*; *agape* is something of the understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill for all men. It is a love that seeks nothing in return. It is an overflowing love; it's what theologians would call the love of God working in the lives of men. And when you rise to love on this level, you begin to love men, not because they are likeable, but because God loves them. You look at every man, and you love him because you know God loves him. And he might be the worst person you've ever seen. (1957/1998c, pp. 47-49)

So, it was *agape* that King preached to the country, *agape* as the most effective type of love for bringing about personal and social transformation. He focused on three important qualities of *agape*: first, it is an imitation of the love God has for humanity; second, it is the only realistic love for one's enemies; and third, it is redemptive.

First, King was drawn to *agape* because of its unconditional nature; *agape* is not earned, but is given through grace. Thus, he saw it as an imitation of the love of God and Christ for humanity. He wrote:

The divine love, in short, is sacrificial in its nature. This truth was symbolized . . . by the death of Christ, who, because of his unique relation to God and his moral perfection, made this truth more efficacious than any other martyr. . . . Some of life is an earned reward, a commercial transaction, *quid pro quo*, so much for so much, but that is not the major element. The major element arrives when we feel some beauty, goodness, love, truth poured out on us by the sacrifices of others beyond our merit and deserving. It is at this point that we find the unique meaning of the cross. It is a symbol of one of the most towering

facts in life, the realm of grace, the sacrificial gifts bought and paid for by one who did what we had no right to ask. (1949-1950/1992, p. 267)

He saw agape as precisely so powerful a form of love for just those reasons: it is a love we have no right to ask for, a love beyond our deserving, and a love freely given. God modeled love, particularly the sacrificial nature of agape, through offering the crucifixion of his son, and as a result, King believed you were imitating God when “you love every man because God loves him” (1962/2007, p. 442). We should also love all people because everyone is made in the image of God; loving someone then becomes a way of loving God.

And when you come to the point that you look in the face of every man and see deep down within him what religion calls “the image of God,” you begin to love him in spite of—no matter what he does, you see God’s image there. (1957/1998c, p. 46)

Agape becomes both a way of loving God, and a way of loving each other through an imitation of the love of God.

King’s second argument in favor of embracing agape was that it afforded the only way to follow Jesus’ commandment to love one’s enemies, a commandment King viewed as “an absolute necessity for the survival of our civilization” (1957/1998c, p. 42). King offered two very important reasons why we need to love our enemy.

I think the first reason that we should love our enemies, and I think this was at the very center of Jesus’ thinking, is this: that hate for hate only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe. If I hit you and you hit me and I hit you back and you hit me back and go on, you see, that goes on ad infinitum. It just never ends. Somewhere somebody must have a little sense, and that’s the strong person. The strong person is the person who can cut off the chain of hate, the chain of evil. And that is the tragedy of hate, that it doesn’t cut it off. It only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe. Somebody must have religion enough and morality enough to cut it off and inject within the very structure of the universe that strong and powerful element of love. (1957/1998c, p. 49-50)

While his first reason explains the negative effects of hate in the universe, his second moves into the negative effects of hate in the individual. In his words, “hate distorts the personality of the hater” (1957/1998c, p. 51). He explained:

We usually think of what hate does for the individual hated or the individuals hated or the groups hated. But it is even more tragic, it is even more ruinous and injurious to the individual who hates. You just begin hating somebody, and you will begin to do irrational things. You can't see straight when you hate. You can't stand upright. Your vision is distorted. There is nothing more tragic than to see an individual whose heart is filled with hate. (p. 51)

If the hatred does not cease, King warned, an individual “becomes a pathological case” and the hate will destroy “the very structure of the personality of the hater” (pp. 52-53). Turning to even stronger psychological language, he continued:

Never hate, because it ends up in tragic, neurotic responses. Psychologists and psychiatrists are telling us today that the more we hate, the more we develop guilt feelings and we begin to subconsciously repress or consciously suppress certain emotions, and they all stack up in our subconscious selves and make for tragic, neurotic responses. And may this not be the neuroses of many individuals as they confront life that there is an element of hate there. And modern psychology is calling on us now to love. (p. 52)

Even before modern psychologists began calling on us to love, King noted, “the world’s greatest psychologist” (p. 52)—Jesus—taught the same thing in his commandment to love our enemies.

King also acknowledged the obvious: loving one’s enemies is extremely difficult for most people, and “many would go so far as to say it just isn’t possible to move out into the practice of this glorious command” (1957/1998c, p. 41). Agape was crucial in resolving this conundrum through its distinction between liking and loving.

And it’s significant that he [Jesus] does not say, “Like your enemy.” Like is a sentimental something, an affectionate something. There are a lot of people that I find it difficult to like. I don’t like what they do to me. I don’t like what they say about me and other people. I don’t like their attitudes. I don’t like some of the things they’re doing. I don’t like them. But Jesus says love them. And love is greater than like. Love is understanding, redemptive goodwill for all men, so that you love everybody, because God loves them. You refuse to do anything that will defeat an individual, because you have *agape* in your soul. (1957/1998c, p. 49)

King also found agape useful in making another distinction: that of hating the sin while loving the sinner. With agape in your heart, he taught, “you come to the point that you love the individual who does the evil deed, while

hating the deed that the person does" (1957/1998c, p. 49). In this way, agape allowed black people to dislike *certain* white people, to hate their acts of segregation and discrimination, yet still hold love for *all* white people. Indeed, loving all white people through agape was the critical move necessary to redeem white people, to transform them so they would discontinue their hate-filled ways. This was King's third reason for loving your enemies, because "there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals . . . if you love your enemies, you will discover that at the very root of love is the power of redemption" (p. 53).

King did not make much of a distinction between transformation and redemption, for in his mind, transformation was redemptive, and redemption was transformative, and both transformation and redemption were made possible by the catalytic effects of love. He said, "I'm foolish enough to believe that through the power of this love somewhere, men of the most recalcitrant bent will be transformed. And then we will be in God's kingdom" (1957/1998c, p. 59). Here love is at its most powerful and King is at his most visionary: love can not only transform the individual who loves and the individual who is loved, but also an entire community.

He spoke unequivocally about this power:

Along the way of life, someone must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate and evil. The greatest way to do that is through love. I believe firmly that love is a transforming power that can lift a whole community to new horizons of fair play, good will and justice. (1956/1986i, p. 83)

Because of its power, he wanted love at the center of the Civil Rights Movement.

And so at the center of our movement stood the philosophy of love. The attitude that the only way to ultimately change humanity and make for the society that we all long for is to keep love at the center of our lives. (1958/1986g, p. 13)

The beloved community was his term for "the society we all long for"; he used it synonymously with the Christian conception of "God's Kingdom on earth" (Smith & Zepp, 1998, p. 141).

King never let go of his belief "that [love] will save our world and our civilization, love even for enemies" (1957/1998c, p. 42). He urged, "We must discover the power of love, the power, the redemptive power of love. And when we discover that, we will be able to make of this old world a new world" (p. 57). The world was changing, was "in a transition now. Our whole world is facing a revolution" (p. 56). In the midst of such a revolution, he

taught, the oppressed can respond to their oppression in three ways: to rise up with violence and hatred, to acquiesce and give in, or to “organize mass non-violent resistance based on the principle of love” (p. 56).

For King, agape was the cure for individual and social pathology; the key to individual and social redemption and transformation; and the necessary power and principle to enact the coming cultural and worldwide revolution—agape coupled with nonviolent resistance. In his essay “Pilgrimage to Nonviolence” (1963/1981a), King chronicled how he came to embrace the doctrine of nonviolence. During his years in theological seminary, he discovered and was “deeply fascinated” with the ideas of Gandhi (p. 150). “I came to see for the first time that the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom” (p. 150).

One reason King was drawn to nonviolence was its internal logic. During the movement, he answered the question “Does the end justify the means?” with a resounding *no*. He could never accept the logic of using war to bring about peace, and he was fond of quoting the words of Jesus—“He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword”—to support his point. For him, the real question was “Will the method bring about the goal?” He was aware that “most people feel that the behavior of people involved in a social movement should reflect the goals they are seeking to universalize” (Smith & Zepp, 1998, p. 146). Therefore, if the goal was a reconciled community marked by peace and based on love, then likewise the behavior of the community protesting in the Civil Rights Movement had to be marked by peace and based on love to effect such reconciliation.

He taught that while violence may achieve short-term goals, its long-term aftereffects are never positive.

Violence as a way of achieving racial justice is both impractical and immoral. It is impractical because it is a descending spiral ending in destruction for all. The old law of an eye for an eye leaves everyone blind. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his understanding; it seeks to annihilate rather than to convert. Violence is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. It leaves society in monologue rather than dialogue. Violence ends by defeating itself. It creates bitterness in the survivors and brutality in the destroyers. (1958, p. 189)

Summarized simply, violence could never bring about the beloved community.

Ten years into the Civil Rights Movement, King remained on message as he preached:

I'm more convinced than ever before that violence is impractical as well as immoral. If we are to build right here a better America, we have a method as old as the insights of Jesus of Nazareth and as modern as the techniques of Mohandas K. Gandhi. We need not hate; we need not use violence. We can stand up before our most violent opponent and say: We will match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we will still love you. (1965/1998b, p. 97)

With this deeper understanding of the importance of love to King, especially coupled with the power of nonviolence, we return to the (now rather obvious) question: What can King teach us about a hermeneutics of love?

“A Servant of a Hermeneutics of Love”

I opened this article defining a hermeneutics of love as one that seeks to interpret *with love, through love, and for love*. Taking each move in turn, we begin with how King taught people to interpret *with love*. No matter how much hate and vitriol his critics flung his way, no matter how much abuse and misunderstanding his detractors heaped on him, publically King always modeled a loving response—he never stopped interpreting their hateful actions with anything but love. He taught, “We must have compassion and understanding for those who hate us” (as quoted in Phillips, 1956/1997, p. 136).

A very early and remarkable example of this loving response came in 1956, 2 months after the beginning of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. King was merely 27 years old, a new husband and father whose life was now burdened with death threats due to his leadership of the boycott. Some days, he reported receiving 30 to 40 threatening phone calls (1998a, p. 76). One such caller said to King, “We’re tired of your mess. And if you aren’t out of this town in three days, we’re going to blow up your house and blow your brains out” (as quoted in Chandler, 2013, p. 4).

Three evenings later, King was informed during a mass meeting at his church that his house had been bombed. He immediately went home, rushing indoors to make sure his wife and baby girl were safe. They were. Then, he returned to the porch where the bomb struck, standing there to address an upset and angry crowd who had gathered in support, many of whom brandished guns and were eager to use them. King calmed that rattled crowd, urging them to put down their weapons. He said, “We are not advocating violence. We want to love our enemies. I want you to love our enemies. Be good to them. Love them and let them know you love them” (as quoted in Azbell, 1956/1997, p. 115).

This is an early example of King interpreting with love, and he would never waver from this type of interpretation during the next 12 years of his tragically short life. He called love a privilege, and no matter how difficult the battle, “We shall not in the process relinquish our privilege to love” (1967/1986a, p. 256). He taught people that interpreting with love was for the strong, and in doing so, they had God on their side, a God who modeled interpreting humanity’s sinful acts and evil ways with unconditional love.

This interpretation with love would not have been possible without agape as the “supple vocabulary” that made love for one’s enemies possible. Agape allowed him to say to violent racists:

Do what you will [physically] and we will still love you . . . throw us in jail and we will still love you . . . bomb our homes and threaten our children, and, as difficult as it is, we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at the midnight hour and drag us out on some wayside road and leave us half-dead as you beat us, and we will still love you. Send your propaganda agents around the country, and make it appear that we are not fit, culturally and otherwise, for integration, and we will still love you. (1967a/1986, pp. 256-257)

We might consider this sensational statement a radical enactment of Rogers’s (1961) unconditional positive regard applied to the sociopolitical realm.

Second, King taught people how to interpret *through love*. Interpreting through love is a way of viewing events and the actions of people as either an expression of love, or a need for love. He particularly performed this hermeneutic move around the relationship of white violence and black nonviolence.

King interpreted white racism and violence as a call for love, a desperate expression of a need for love. In his 1967 address to the American Psychological Association, he stated that “white America needs to understand that it is poisoned to its soul by racism” (1968a, p. 1). Instead of hating white people for this, he believed:

Since the white man’s personality is greatly distorted by segregation, and his soul is greatly scarred, he needs the love of the Negro. The Negro must love the white man, because the white man needs his love to remove his tensions, insecurities, and fears. (1958/1986b, p. 19)

Because of his ontological belief that we are all the beloved children of a loving God, he saw everyone as brothers and sisters, partaking of the same substance as God. He propounded, “All humanity is involved in a single process, and all men are brothers. To the degree that I harm my brother, no matter what he is doing to me, to that extent I am harming myself” (p. 20). He continued,

"If you harm me, you harm yourself" (p. 20). Because violence against any of our brothers and sisters is violence against ourselves, he interpreted violence *through love*, arguing that at the moment of violence, we are "at the point of our greatest need for love" (p. 19).

May performed a similar hermeneutic that interprets through love in his book *Love and Will*, where he wrote, "Violence is the ultimate destructive substitute which surges in to fill the vacuum where there is no relatedness" (1969, p. 30). He continued:

When one cannot affect or even genuinely *touch* another person, violence flares up as a daimonic necessity for contact, a mad drive forcing touch in the most direct way possible. . . . To inflict pain and torture at least proves that one can affect somebody. (pp. 30-31)

This was evidenced during the Civil Rights Movement when the nonviolent responses of the protestors often made white racists even angrier, even more violent. We see this in image after image of mostly black and sometimes white protestors tucked into a protective posture, clearly posing no threat but evoking a daimonic, mad response of a white crowd possessed and determined to affect a response by inordinately kicking, whipping, and beating their crouched victims. But to accept that pain and torture *with love* means that the violent persons may *affect* but cannot *infect* their victims, cannot inject their hatred into their victims, because that hatred is interpreted as the need for love, as a call for love. This is a radical interpretation of violence *through love*.

King also interpreted nonviolence through love. He was often criticized for advocating nonviolence; one of his most vocal critics was Malcolm X, who called nonviolence "unmanning" (as quoted in Cone, 1991, p. 78). Malcolm X leveled harsh words at King during one television interview:

Just as Uncle Tom back during slavery used to keep the Negroes from resisting the bloodhound or resisting the Ku Klux Klan by teaching them to love their enemy or pray for those who use them despitefully. Today, Martin Luther King is just a 20th century or modern Uncle Tom or a religious Uncle Tom who is doing the same thing today to keep Negroes defenseless in the face of attack that Uncle Tom did on the plantation to keep *those* Negroes defenseless in the face of the attack of the Klan in that day. (as quoted in Lomax, 1963, p. 34)

Many people during the movement days joined with Malcolm X in interpreting King's nonviolence as *a cowardice to fight*.

In contrast, King interpreted nonviolence as *the strength to love*. King assured his followers that there is a "strength in nonviolence" and that "only

the strong and courageous person could be nonviolent" (1958/1986g, p. 12). Instead of meeting hate with hate, in effect increasing animosity between the two groups, he preached that a nonviolent response had the capacity to "transform enemies into friends" (1956/1997, p. 478). He stated:

The nonviolent resister does not seek to humiliate or defeat the opponent but to win his friendship and understanding. . . . The end of violence or the aftermath of violence is bitterness. The aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation and the creation of a beloved community. (1958/1986g, p. 12)

In this statement, King performs a double hermeneutic. He interprets non-violence *through love*, and he interprets nonviolence *for love*. Interpreting for love is a commitment that one's interpretive acts and actions increase love in the world. When we interpret for love, we interpret *with love* and *through love* in order to *make love*, so to speak. In King's language, we interpret for love to hasten the coming of the beloved community.

The authors of *Search for the Beloved Community* (Smith & Zepp, 1998) state that "the vision of the Beloved Community was the organizing principle of all of King's thought and activity" (p. 129). They defined King's vision of the beloved community as "a transformed and regenerated human society" where "unity would be an actuality in every aspect of social life" (p. 130), involving "personal and social relationships that are created by love" (p. 131). King called the beloved community "a new nation where men will live together as brothers; a nation where all men will respect the dignity and worth of the human personality" (1957, p. 85).

To say what this society will be like in exact detail is quite hard for us to picture, for it runs so counter to the practices of our present social life. But we can rest assured that it will be a society governed by the law of love. (King, 1949-1950/1992, pp. 272-273)

While the Civil Rights Movement had many goals, an early and always primary goal was the end of segregation. King had his eyes on a loftier prize; desegregation was not enough, but rather, the goal was integration. He wrote, "Desegregation is only a partial, though necessary, step toward the final goal which we seek to realize, genuine intergroup and interpersonal living" (1967b, p. 118).

King had undergone what he called "a serious study of the works of Paul Tillich" during his university days (1958/1986b, p. 16), writing a doctoral dissertation titled "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman" (Smith & Zepp, 1998,

pp. 115-116). Tillich no doubt influenced King's ontological understanding of love and its connection with integration. Tillich (1954) wrote:

Life is being in actuality and love is the moving power of life. In these two sentences the ontological nature of love is expressed. They say that being is not actual without the love which drives everything that is toward everything that is. In man's experience of love the nature of life becomes manifest. Love is the drive towards the unity of the separated. Reunion presupposes separation of that which belongs essentially together. It would, however, be wrong to give to separation the same ontological ultimacy as to reunion. For separation presupposes an original unity. Unity embraces itself and separation, just as being comprises itself and non-being. It is impossible to unite that which is *essentially* separated. (p. 25)

Though Tillich gave ontological status to "being" itself, King gave it to God. King stated, "I am convinced that the universe is under the control of a loving purpose, and that in the struggle for righteousness man has cosmic companionship" (1963, p. 153). He attributed that cosmic companionship to a personal God, following the philosophy of Personalism (Smith & Zepp, 1998). His God was loving and just. Since King saw every man and woman as a child of this loving and just God, made in the image of that God, he believed every man and woman was capable of love and justice.

King quoted Tillich as stating "sin is separation" (1963/1986d, p. 294). For King, sin was separation from God *and* separation from our brothers and sisters. We are not "*essentially separated*" from each other, as Tillich wrote. For King, our "*original unity*" was as a world family in cosmic companionship with a loving God—in other words, we came from a beloved community, and to a beloved community we should return, not later in heaven but now, on this earth. The return would be made possible by interpreting for love, our primordial state of being.

In King's eyes, therefore, the Civil Rights Movement was about much more than legal integration and equality. Essentially it was a movement done *with love, through love, and for love*. Not love as "emotional bosh . . . [or] merely a sentimental outpouring" (King, 1961/1986e, p. 46), but love more aligned with philosopher Irving Singer's definition.

I think of love as a pervasive attitude and not as merely a feeling. The loving response will certainly include feelings, the most obvious of which is the feeling of tenderness or warm-hearted affection. But love cannot be reduced to any particular feeling, even if there are feelings that count as a *sine qua non* for love. In being an attitude, love involves a disposition to act in diverse ways that ultimately conduce to another's benefit, and, ideally, to one's own. (1987, pp. xii-xiii)

We might see the hermeneutics of love as an attitude that increases the will to action in the present on behalf of a better future. Indeed, as May wrote, “Will and intentionality are intimately bound up with the future,” a future which “is the tense in which we promise ourselves, we give a promissory note, we put ourselves on the line” (1969, p. 243). The future is what King promised his followers if they would put themselves on the line with him, or even without him, if he should die. In the last few sentences of his last speech the night before his death, he expounded so emotionally, “I’ve seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land” (1968/1986c, p. 286). King moved toward love with May’s concept of intentionality, defined as:

an imaginative attention which underlies our intentions and informs our actions. It is the capacity to participate in knowing or performing the art proleptically—that is, trying it on for size, performing it in imagination. Each of these emphases points toward a deeper dimension in human beings. Each requires a participation from us, an openness, a capacity to give of ourselves and receive into ourselves. And each is an inseparable part of the basis of love and will. (1969, p. 308)

So a hermeneutics of love is a pervasive attitude, an intentionality, a performance, and a participation which moves toward the future with love, through love, and for love.

It is also a decision. According to May,

Decision, in our sense, creates out of the two previous dimensions a pattern of acting and living which is empowered and enriched by wishes, asserted by will, and is responsive to and responsible for the significant other-persons who are important to one’s self in the realizing of the long-term goals. (1969, p. 267)

May asserted, “We *will* the world, create it by our decision, our fiat, our choice; and we *love* it, give it affect, energy, power to love and change us as we mold and change it” (p. 324). To interpret with, through, and for love was a decision King made—“I have also decided to stick with love” (1967, p. 43)—and in turn *that decision made him*, so that hooks would call him “a prophet of love” (2000, p. 75) and humanistic psychologist Brent Dean Robbins could call him “a Servant of a hermeneutics of love” (2013, p. 2). This King willed *our* world, molded and changed and loved our world into a higher form of consciousness. Not yet the beloved community, but closer, closer.

Revelations

Let us return to the classroom where I sat 8 years ago, attempting to teach a hermeneutics of love. Taken as a way of being in the world, I told them, a

devotee to a hermeneutics of love would always choose to love despite the presenting circumstances (to interpret *with love*), to seek the most loving interpretation of people and events (to interpret *through love*), and to perform the most loving acts with the intentionality of increasing love in the world (to interpret *for love*).

Let us test this theory with an example, I suggested. Let us say you are walking toward a homeless man in front of a grocery store. The man asks you for spare change. If you are practicing a hermeneutics of love, what do you think? What do you do?

Some of my students could interpret the homeless man *with love*, at least in theory, and some could interpret *through love*, seeing the essential dignity of a human being in hardship. Others could not. You cannot assume the man is good, they said. Maybe he has done terrible acts in the world. Maybe he is a criminal. Maybe you will be the victim of his next crime. Interpreting through love is naive, even dangerous, they asserted. Love is something you have to deserve, and how do we know this man is deserving? The former students sat with their mouths agape in disbelief; the latter students sat with their arms crossed in defense.

The argument became more heated when we moved to interpreting *for love*. What is the most loving act we could do in this case, I asked? If our intention is to increase love in the world, what would we do?

I am sure you can imagine the debate. Giving him your spare change is loving—giving him your spare change is not loving because it may enable him to buy drugs or alcohol and harm himself. Giving him all the money in your wallet is loving—giving him all your money is not loving because you are taking it away from the people in your life who you have the obligation to love and provide for, people who actually deserve your love. Just looking him in the eye and giving him a warm smile is loving—making eye contact and smiling are patronizing if that is all you are going to do. Taking him into the store and buying him a meal is loving—buying him a meal is not loving enough because he is just going to wake up the next morning and be hungry again. On and on.

We ran out of time to turn toward their fieldwork and apply such a hermeneutics of love, and frankly, given the seething feeling of antipathy in the room (of course, the exact opposite of my intention), that was probably just fine.

The students exited the classroom, but I sat frozen in my chair. How had I gone so wrong? How had I, an aspiring Dr. Love, failed my task so completely, dashed my own hopes of participating in quickening the coming of the beloved community? What revelations could I take away from this microcosmic experience to then apply to the macrocosm?

My conclusions, I fear, will seem rather obvious, starting with this: we can, perhaps we should, call agape itself into question. Despite love being the

center and the commandment of so many religions, we still are not well-equipped for agape. Singer asserted that while most people can make the transition from love of family to love of country, to transition again to “love of humanity . . . involves a very big leap” (1995, pp. 130-131). In fact, even though we have received the word agape from the ancient Greeks, it would have made “little or no sense to the ancient world,” where Aristotle thought “the ideal polis must be a city state that one could traverse by foot without much difficulty” (p. 103)—not exactly King’s “world-wide neighborhood” (1967, p. 196). Singer discussed St. Augustine’s concern over the “dubious consequences that might result from distributing one’s love without discretion”; instead, Augustine argued, we should have a hierarchy of those we love, starting closest to home first (1995, p. 103). Singer himself (who notably wrote a trilogy titled *The Nature of Love*) concluded:

Nature would be greatly distorted if the values they entail were swallowed up by an indiscriminate love of mankind. As with every other form of social love, and indeed love in general, devotion to creatures who are merely fellow humans must justify itself afresh on each occasion. (1995, p. 105)

Sigmund Freud’s position on agape was similar. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud (1929/1961) argued that loving all humanity is a violation of the original nature of man. Of the commandment to “love thy neighbor as thyself,” Freud summarily dismissed it, stating, “What is the point of a precept enunciated with such solemnity if its fulfillment cannot be recommended as reasonable?” (pp. 66-67). More emphatically, he disdained the commandment to “love thine enemies,” stating that it “arouses still stronger opposition in me,” and calling it “even more incomprehensible” (p. 67).

Given these arguments, how did we come to the concept of agape and its elevation as the highest form of love? Historically, Singer noted:

The idea of love for humanity, and consequently each man or woman within it, takes on importance only among the Stoics and the Jews or Christians of the first century A.D. If one thinks that a single God created everything, and that each human being is fashioned in his spiritual likeness, one may very well conclude that people are all essentially the same. As children of God and members of the same biological species, they constitute a large family of resemblance. At least *in principle* one could therefore feel toward them the type of love that idea siblings might experience. (1987, p. 103)

As we have seen, this was King’s ontological perspective and justification for agape.

The key word in this quote, I believe, is “principle.” This is my second conclusion—my experience in the classroom reminded me that while love

may be a principle we easily espouse, it is not so easy in practice. In fact, it is nearly impossible in the discipline of depth psychology, where I found myself sitting that day, given its embrace of a hermeneutics of suspicion, and especially its suspicions about love. As we have seen above, Freud was derisive of agape, but he was also suspicious of other forms of love such as parental love and friendship, discounting them as fortresses built by the ego and superego to keep the forces of id-driven lust for the erotic sexual encounter at bay. C. G. Jung mostly failed to touch on love at all, unless he was sniffing out an anima or animus projection or evidence of the transference/counter-transference relationship. In the discipline of depth psychology, then, there is suspicion of *both* the principle and the practice of love.²

In contrast, the literature in the discipline of humanistic psychology leans toward a hermeneutics of love “as a distinguishing and central theme” (Robbins, 2013). This discipline offers the best furnished academic home where we “disciples” may gather around the hearth, with open hearts free of suspicion, to discuss how to embody a hermeneutics of love. I believe we all *want* to see ourselves as loving, maybe even *need* to see ourselves as loving. Yet between the principle and the practice of love, there often exists a gulf so large that we cannot traverse it. In a state of cognitive dissonance and filled with anxiety, we (even the disciples) can become defensive against our own thoughts or of interpretations by others that we are not loving and/or not doing the loving thing. When interpreting our own actions, we can make very facile arguments that justify them as loving, or at least undergirded by loving intentions. We fail so often at loving in our personal relationships with our most intimate others and most especially with our own families; how much harder then to succeed at loving when *everyone* becomes the other, becomes our family.

My experience in the classroom around the question of how best to love the homeless man verified something I already knew from personal experience: interpreting *for love*, for taking the most loving action, is incredibly difficult and complicated. It raises more questions than answers sometimes, potentially leaving us in the “paralysis of analysis,” where we do not, or cannot, take any action at all for fear our love will fall short, that *we* will fall short. We could take those bracelets Christians wear that say WWJD? (what would Jesus do?) and we could wrap our wrists with the question WWLD? (what would Love do?), and still, the answer would not always be clear. Here is where humanistic psychology, in full embrace of a hermeneutics of love, could make a difference; depth psychology with its emphasis on a hermeneutics of suspicion may be condemned to failure.

In wrestling with the questions myself, I have come to believe that the answers are not as important as the willingness and desire and yes, the courage

to ask the questions themselves, to claim the intention to love, though its fulfillment may be an impossible dream for those of us who are not Kings. Like May, “I speak of the relating of love and will not as a state given us automatically, but as a task, and to the extent it is gained, it is an achievement” (1969, p. 286).

I believe Martin Luther King, Jr. achieved that state, as much as we can stake that claim on any fallible human being. For the rest of us, loving remains the task of our lifetimes. As Rilke so famously wrote:

To love is good, too: love being difficult. For one human being to love another: that is perhaps the most difficult task of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation. (1934/1993, pp. 53-54)

And yet for those of us desiring to be servants of love, disciples of love, hermeneuts of love—and thank you Fitzgerald (1925)—we beat on, boats against the current, borne forward ceaselessly into love—with love, through love, and for love.

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Notes

1. Chela Sandoval uses this term in her book, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, which was published in 2000. I did not come across the book and her use of the term until Dr. Sandoval came to teach at Pacifica Graduate Institute in the spring of 2007, though I cannot be sure I had not heard the term before.
2. Two notable exceptions in the field include Thomas Moore in his book *Soul Mates: Honoring the Mystery of Love and Relationship* (1994) and Robert Sardello in his books *Love and the World: A Guide to Conscious Soul Practice* (2001) and *Love and the Soul: Creating a Future for Earth* (2011).

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