Love, the Power of Peace
By Louise Diamond, Ph.D.

At a time when we are engaged in an ongoing and seemingly endless war against the shadowy ‘enemy’ called terrorism, it is essential that we stop and pay attention to the resources we have for breaking the cycle of violence and finding our way to peace.

Stepping off the war path onto the peace path is, I believe, the evolutionary challenge facing the human family in these times. I think of it as our next frontier. We know how to live in a national and global culture of violence. We also know that eventually we will destroy ourselves if we continue in this way. What we must learn, and quickly, is how to live a better way – how to make peace the central organizing principle of our individual and collective lives.

There is much talk these days about a paradigm shift, from a reductionist to a holistic worldview. Some call it a critical mass transformation of consciousness. I hold that this change is the very basis for peace, for it means moving from an approach to life that sees us all as separate entities to one where we acknowledge we are all interconnected.

A separation mindset leads inexorably to domination – one group sees itself as better than, more worthy than, more powerful than, or more entitled than another, and ultimately must use force and coercion to maintain that dominance. This is the basis for the ‘isms’ that have wrought such havoc in our world – racism, colonialism, sexism, imperialism, etc. It is also the basis for violence at every level of society, and, ultimately, for war.

A unity mindset leads inexorably to peace – we understand that we are all in this together, and that what hurts one hurts us all. We put aside personal greed and gain in order to work together for the common good, because we understand that the common good is good for us! This is the basis for partnership, for joint creative problem solving, and, ultimately, for peace.

This shift from one worldview to another is not an intellectual game for me; it is a human survival strategy. We no longer need to prove the truth of our interdependence; we now need to actualize it in our personal and global relationships. This is a job that each individual must undertake in his or her own way – no sense in waiting for the government or someone else to do it. One by one, then many by many, we can make this change, and build a culture of peace as our story and legacy for the future.

The Power of the Human Heart
Fortunately, we have a powerful tool at hand to assist us in our peace journey. I could even say we have the most powerful tool that exists – the human heart. The human heart is both a receptacle and a pump, receiving and sending, contracting and expanding. At the physical level, the heart circulates our vital lifeblood; at the emotional level it
connects us deeply with one another; at the spiritual level, the heart is the doorway to the Divine, receiving and transmitting that which we experience as love.

Love is the attractive force of the universe. We are one; we share the same sacred spark of life; we come from and return to the same source, by whatever name we give it. What binds us in that web of life is the power of love. Love is the glue that holds us together, and also the glue that can mend what is broken.

For even as our human relationships are capable of carrying us to the heights of sublime love, they can also plunge us to the depths of broken-heartedness and trauma. We have the capacity to nourish and cherish one another, and also to do unspeakable harm to each other. What strange creatures we humans are!

Let’s go back to the metaphor of the heart as a pump. When it contracts and doesn’t expand fully, or when the life force that comes into and goes from the heart to all the rest of the body is in any way constricted, the heart hardens. We know from the Book of Exodus in the bible that ‘Pharoah’s heart was hardened’ against liberating the Hebrews from slavery. Our hearts are hardened too, by every slight and hurt, every unresolved conflict, every grudge, every betrayal, every harsh word or act against us. Like Pharoah, we refuse to let ourselves or others go, we refuse to liberate ourselves and others from the bondage of suffering, to release each other into the next stage of life’s journey.

Unless we consciously keep the heart expanding, and love’s healing balm washing through, we risk the equivalent in the spiritual realm of a physical heart attack – our love function stops working effectively, and we become grievously ill. That is, our peace is destroyed.

This is exactly what happens in conflict at every level – from interpersonal dispute to outright war – we stop the flow of love and harden our hearts. This is a natural and often automatic and unconscious response. We retreat into ourselves and nurse our wounds. We distance ourselves from the other person(s), and de-humanize them to a greater or lesser extent. Our pain becomes the center of the universe. Any pain they may be experiencing from our interactions is off our radar screen.

When this phenomenon concerns a broken romance or friendship, an argument with a loved one, or a power struggle at work, the suffering can be acute. When we are talking about violent conflict – from spousal battering to war or acts of terrorism – we move into a whole other dimension of trauma.

No matter what the level of hurt, the antidote is the same. It is to do the very thing that feels the least possible under the circumstances, which is to re-open the heart and start again to give and receive love. This is the journey of healing and reconciliation.

**The Healing Journey**

To choose the healing journey, rather than the path of revenge, requires an act of will and determination. In some ways, it may seem easier to hold on to hurt and hate; to see
oneself as the victim; to allow the brokenness in the relationship to deepen and grow; even to wish to get back at our ‘enemy’ or ‘perpetrator.’ In actuality, this path quickly becomes a vicious cycle of hurt and revenge, where the heart gets increasingly harder and smaller. The longer it goes on, the wider the chasm that grows between the parties, and the more difficult it is to rebuild the bridges of connection. While the healing process may seem more difficult at the outset, it is, in fact, the only way that can bring us back to peace. The outcome is worth the effort.

There are various stages to the healing process. Some we do inside ourselves; some can occur between the various parties in the relationship. Our task, remember, is to open the heart again, and come back to the free flow of love that is our natural birthright.

The journey can be long or short, depending on our will, our maturity, and the degree of suffering we have endured. Healing from the trauma of outright violence, for instance, can be more difficult than healing from a break-up with a boyfriend or girlfriend. But the stages are similar, whatever the circumstances. They are different if we are the one who has caused the pain or the one who has suffered it. Usually, we are both.

The stages we go through if we have hurt another I call the ‘Apology Spectrum.’ If we have hurt another, first we must acknowledge that fact and take responsibility for it. This is sometimes very difficult, as people generally want to defend themselves against any sense of blame or shame. Paradoxically, acknowledging that our actions have hurt another is the very thing that will take us beyond blame and shame, for it leads us to the next step, which is contrition or remorse.

Remorse is an active state of sadness that we have caused harm. We wish we hadn’t done it, or we wish to make it better, or we wish to alleviate the pain. Remorse cannot be faked. It’s a feeling, not an opinion. If we acknowledge we have hurt another but feel no remorse, then we need to examine what is blocking our sense of empathy with the one we have hurt. We often stop ourselves from feeling remorse by excusing our behavior and accusing another: “Yes, but s/he did this to me first!” While it may be true that our hurtful actions are a reaction to someone’s hurting us, that does not mean we aren’t responsible. Each party to a relationship is 100% responsible for their part in it!

If we feel genuine remorse, than an apology naturally follows. Saying ‘I’m sorry’ and meaning it can go a very long way toward healing the heart – of both parties! The apology often opens the floodgates of love, and allows for a rebuilding of trust and connection.

Sometimes, though, saying ‘sorry’ is not enough. Sometimes we also need to make amends. If we have taken something from someone (tangible or intangible), we need to give it back. To rob someone of their money and then say “I’m sorry” does not re-establish justice. We need to give back the money. To rob someone of their dignity through humiliation and then say “I’m sorry” does not re-establish respect. We need to take some action, even symbolically, to make restitution and demonstrate how we honor them.
The stages we go through if we have been hurt I call the ‘Forgiveness Spectrum.’ When someone has hurt us, we may or may not be on the receiving end of acknowledgement, remorse, apology, and amends. We cannot force another to apologize to us. Perhaps the one who hurt us is no longer around, or not available for us to engage with for any number of reasons. Whichever the case, our choice is the same: to carry the hurt indefinitely, and close our hearts, or to find a way to come back to the open heart, and love again.

If we choose the path of healing, we too must first go through a process of acknowledgement. In this case, we are acknowledging that the pain is real. In other words, we step out of denial. We let ourselves feel the feelings – of hurt, sorrow, anger, loss, fear, or whatever else we may experience. Holding our feelings at a distance does not heal them. We must face into them, let them rise and crest, knowing that they will pass away like the waves upon the beach.

Stepping out of denial also means we shift from the finger pointing at the other (blame) to examine if the finger can point back to ourselves – did we in any way contribute to the painful situation? This is not to blame the victim; sometimes there is truly one perpetrator and one blameless victim. However, in most of our human relationships, we hurt each other through our interactions, so each one carries responsibility for their part of the interaction. We acknowledge and take responsibility for what we have done to feed the conflict.

With acknowledgement and taking responsibility, we make the shift from victim to healer; from self-absorption to an orientation to rebuilding the relationship; from carrying grudges and wanting revenge to wanting to learn and grow from this experience, and move on. In letting go of the victim role, we begin to see the one who hurt us in another light. We re-humanize them, for they have feelings too. We may even get curious – what is behind their actions?

At this stage, if we can speak with the other party, we might be able to reach a healing point together. If we cannot meet with them, we will need to take the next step internally. That step we call forgiveness. To forgive is not to excuse or deny or condone what happened, or even to forget it. To forgive is to release – to give over – the anger and the pain, and to re-open the heart toward the one who has hurt you. Forgiveness doesn’t mean the pain is completely gone, or the trust is magically re-established. It means, simply, that you ‘lay down your sword (anger, desire for revenge) and shield’ (your woundedness, victimhood), and allow that space to be filled with ease and the possibility for love.

Sometimes we can will ourselves to a true state of forgiveness – we remind ourselves it is the moral thing, the right thing to do. Sometimes we get to forgiveness by an act of grace; it ‘just happens.’ Usually, though, we need to take some step toward letting go. Keeping the heart closed requires effort, tension, clenching. When we can relax that tight hold, stop re-circulating the same stories we tell ourselves about ‘see what they did to
me,’ and open to another way of understanding the situation, we let go of the past and stand fully present in the moment. This is the moment when reconciliation can truly occur; to reconcile – to come together again.

The Apology Spectrum and the Forgiveness Spectrum, taken together, I call the healing and reconciliation process. Love is both the power driving this process and the result of it. This is so because love is our natural state. When we are closed to love, it is like damming up a stream. The water doesn’t stop running because of the dam. Rather, the reservoir grows, the pressure builds. Our souls cry to return to love when love is denied. So it is that each step along the way of healing and reconciliation, whether one is the hurter or the hurtee (or both), requires a step in love. And when we have truly reconciled in our hearts with one another, our bond of love is deeper and fuller than ever. Even if we are broken-hearted, the shattering of the heart actually opens it further, to be capable of ever-greater streams of love. The dam dissolves, and the river runs clear and strong.

Our tools throughout this entire process are those things which help us soften our hardened hearts, and open to more love. These tools are empathy, compassion, letting go, surrender, and clearing.

**Tools for Healing**

Empathy means feeling the feelings of another. As long as we are absorbed only with ourselves, we have cut the cord that binds us to the other. When we start to see them as real human beings with feelings we can understand, identify with, and feel a resonance with; or when we stand in their shoes and see through their eyes, an understanding blooms that allows us to re-build the bridge from heart to heart.

Compassion is empathy plus. It means wishing for the suffering of others to cease. We feel sorrow for their pain. This is not pity or sympathy, which have some measure still of separateness in them, some degree of condescension, a ‘poor you’ attitude. Rather, compassion is a state of full presence with the other. We feel with and for them, and we pour the balm of love into the wound, offering our good will to the healing process.

Letting go is what enables us to move from closed to open. It is a releasing, a freeing up, a loosening of that which blocks us from reaching out, from receiving, from loving and being loved. Letting go is the act of self-liberation, by which we put down the burdens that keep us tied to the past and risk the next step into the present and the future.

Surrender is letting go plus. It is a releasing of ourselves into something higher, something bigger than our personal ego. Surrender is giving ourselves over to love, to God, to faith, to unseen possibility. Surrender is what allows for true transformation, turning our pain into something positive – into learning, joy, or the power for positive action. Surrender is saying ‘yes’ where we have previously held tight to ‘no.’ It is an activation of our soulforce, where love originates and resides.

Clearing is the very practical choice we make, as soon as we realize our hearts have closed, to clear away the obstacles and return to love. Clearing is the commitment to the
relationship that keeps us actively engaged in monitoring the state of our heart, and in doing whatever needs to be done to insure that the love is moving freely and unrestrainedly. We determine that this relationship is important to us; that we choose the highest quality of relationship we can imagine; and that any deviation from that goal is a clarion call to action, learning, and growth.

For we are here on earth as spiritual beings having a human experience. As spiritual beings, our task in ‘earth school’ is not only to love and be loved, but to be Love itself. To radiate love, to remember love as our true and natural state is our assignment, for love is the expression of unity, of sacred union, where we know with the fullness of wisdom that we are one, inseparable from the ineffable source of all that is. To learn about love, to grow in love, to access the boundless and unconditional love that is inherent in our divine nature – this is our ongoing life lesson. Our relationships, at individual and collective levels, are all about testing ourselves in love and advancing ourselves along this set of lessons.

Let us come back, now, to where we started, which was a discussion of the evolutionary shift facing humanity, as we step from the war path to the peace path. We have seen that love is both our walking stick and the path itself on this journey. We have seen that through clearing, empathy, compassion, letting go and surrender – and by taking the various steps on both the Apology and the Forgiveness spectra – we have both the map and the vehicles we need to carry us to victory. The clear light of peace awaits us beyond the valleys of fear and despair, the mountains of revenge and hatred, and the chasms of violence and war. We have only to say ‘yes’ to the power of love, and we are there.

To choose love is to choose life. To choose life is to choose peace. For me, this is the only choice worth making, and the only trip worth taking. I close with a poem that arose while I was working in Bosnia, shortly after the end of the war there. It is a testament to all whose hardened hearts have found a way to soften once again:

We are broken.
And we will not be mended
Until we remember
That we are unbreakable.

Love is what makes us unbreakable. It is the source and power of our wholeness and our holiness. It is the living presence of peace within us. We can build a world of peace around us when we remember ourselves as seeds of love, holding the potential of blossom and fruit to feed humanity’s hungry heart. How fortunate we are to have this gift to give ourselves and one another, in boundless measure, in these troubled times.

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