

The Key to Living a Spiritually Productive Life

“When the evening of this life comes,” says John of the Cross, “you will be judged on love.”

The only question asked about the soul’s use of its house and the gifts that were made to it will be: “Have you loved well?” All else will be resumed in this—all thoughts, beliefs, desires, struggles and achievements, all complex activities, for faith is nothing unless it is the obscure vision of a loved Reality, and hope is nothing unless it is the confidence of perfect love.

So, too, with all the persons, events, opportunities, conflicts and choices proposed for the soul’s purification and growth. Was everything that was done, done for love’s sake? Were all the doors opened that the warmth of love might fill the whole house; the windows cleaned that they might more and more radiate from within its mysterious divine light?

For this is love: the immense expansion of personality effected by the love of God, weaving together the natural and the supernatural powers of the soul and filling them with its abundant life. Overflowing the barriers of preference, passing through all contrary appearance, it mediates the divine pity and generosity to every mesh and corner of creation and rests at last in God, who is the life and love of every soul.

What Is Love?

Love: that overworked and ill-used word, often confused on the one hand with passion and on the other with amiability. If we ask those who have known and taught the life of the Spirit, they say that love is a passionate tendency, an inward vital urge of the soul toward its Source, which impels every living thing to pursue the most profound trend of its being, reaches

consciousness in the form of self-giving and of desire, and has its only satisfying goal in God.

Pure love or charity—utter self-giving which is our reply to the love of God—is the same as sanctity. It is that which gives and gives and never demands.

To remain constant, we try to respond to the love of God by seeking and serving Christ in our fellow men. If we do that faithfully, giving ourselves to God's purposes, we will develop a depth of peaceful, devoted love that passes beyond the need of being fed by feeling or the consolations of religion.

The Will Transformed

To love God, without demand or measure, in and for Himself—this is charity, and charity is the spiritual life. Only this most gently powerful of all attractions and all pressures can capture and purify the will of man and subordinate it to the great purpose of God; for as His love and will are one, so the love and will of man must become one.

Therefore all other purifications, disciplines and practices have meaning because they prepare and contribute to the invasion and transformation of the heart by the uncreated charity of God. "Thou art the Love wherewith the heart loves Thee."

For it is only when the secret thrust of our whole being is thus reordered by God and set toward God that peace is established in the house of life. Then the disorderly energies of emotion and will are rectified and harmonized, and all the various and wide-spreading love that we pour out toward other souls and things is deepened, unselfed and made safe; because that which is now sought and loved in them is the immanent divine thought and love.

Thus the will transformed in charity everywhere discovers God.

It sees behind and within even the most unpleasing creatures the all-pleasing Creator, and loves and cherishes in and for Him, that which in itself, never could be loved. It discerns and adores His mysterious action within the most homely activities and most disconcerting frustrations of the common life. And by this glad recognition of that secret Presence, all the apprehensions of the senses, all the conceivings of the mind, all the hoarded treasures and experiences of the past, are cleansed and sanctified.

Love as the First Fruit

“The fruit of the Spirit,” says the apostle Paul, “is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, temperance”—all the things the world most needs. I do not think Paul arranged his list of the fruits of the Spirit in a casual order. They represent a progressive series from one point, and that point is love, the living, eternal seed from which all grow.

We all know that Christians are baptized “into a life summed up in love,” even though we have to spend the rest of our own lives learning how to do it. Love, therefore, is the budding-point from which all the rest come: that tender, cherishing attitude; that unlimited self-forgetfulness, generosity and kindness which is the attitude of God to all His creatures; and so must be the attitude toward them that His Spirit brings forth in us.

To be unloving is to be out of touch with God. So the generous, cherishing divine love, the indiscriminate delight in others, just or unjust, must be our model too. To come down to brass tacks, God loves the horrid man at the fish shop and the tiresome woman in the next flat and the disappointing Vicar and the contractor who has cut down the row of trees we loved to build a row of revolting bungalows.

God loves, not tolerates, these wayward, half-grown, self-

centered spirits and seeks without ceasing to draw them into His love. And the first-fruit of His indwelling presence, the first sign that we are on His side and He on ours, must be at least a tiny bud of this love breaking the hard and rigid outline of our lives.

Read a companion devotional.

Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941) *was one of the greatest mystical and devotional writers of the Anglican Church.*