

The Seekers Forum Transcript

# When Love Becomes Impossible: The Practice of Faithful Abiding

April 8, 2018



Welcome everyone to the call. It's great to speak to you today. I hope that everybody's spring is getting off to a good start. In deference to the season of love, we're going to be talking about love today, but not love in the way you may be used to thinking about it. We're going to be looking at the limitations of love, the limitations of our own hearts and what to do in those moments when the heart won't open, when we just can't reach out.

We all know those times when we just can't seem to connect, when fear or pain or misanthropy, sometimes just the aversion to other human beings, stops us from being able to show our love. In moments like that, we feel barren, we feel isolated, and we may sometimes find ourselves looking at people as if from behind an invisible screen, unable to reach through and connect.

At moments like that, we may even doubt our ability to love and judge ourselves for being cold or faithless or simply selfish. What we don't realize is that it's at these precise moments when we hit the limits of our own wounded hearts that we come to know the truth of ourselves, which is always a good thing in spiritual life, because we can pay attention to where we need to practice and where we need to grow.

Without testing times like this, we can't increase our power to love or know the capacity of our own hearts. As Thomas Merton put it, prayer and love are learned in the hour when prayer becomes impossible and the heart has turned to stone.

Now as contradictory as that may sound, it contains an essential piece of wisdom, that without these sticking places that require us to go beyond our ego and tap into something larger than ourselves, love would remain a self-centered affair and we'd never be forced to expand beyond our own smothering limitations.

As seekers, we come to recognize the importance of impasses like this, even though they may be hellish to live through. When we come to see the dead zones inside ourselves and how often we withdraw, sometimes secretly and sometimes overtly, it can be painful to realize that you've stopped caring, that you've closed up shop, and that you can't feel empathy for another person.

But until we admit the value of these moments, we tend to carry grief inside ourselves that's quite hard to live with. It's like being in a house half of which is bricked up and we can't enter. The French novelist, Gustave Flaubert wrote, "Each one of us has in his heart a royal chamber. I have bricked mine up, but it is still there." That was the great torment of Flaubert's life.

How many of us do the same thing? Brick up our royal chambers in an effort not to be hurt or look ridiculous, or fear desertion, or be forced to actually engage at that depth with another human being. We may hide behind those bricks hoping that someday somebody will come along and smash down the wall and set us free.

But the fact is that it's we who must escape our own prisons. Nobody's going to come along and do it for us. In fact, especially when it comes to romantic love, "save me" is the common mantra among couples who are struggling to connect while avoiding their own pain. Save me from myself. Save me from knowing that I'm alone. Save me from feeling worthless or invisible or undesirable. Save me, in other words, from the truth, which is that no lover, no matter how

devoted, can replace the need for self-respect and self-worth, and the ability to stand on our own two feet.

This is the reason that so many lovers get caught in rescue fantasies, which lead to relationships that become arrangements. In such arrangements there tends to be a designated savior and a designated victim, even though these roles may overlap and move back and forth between partners. This creates a transactional way of relating, with all the limitations that that implies. Such relationships depend on each party playing their part to the other's satisfaction and when one or the other stops doing this or needing it or wanting it, the relationship generally fades away, because in breaking the terms of the agreement, the partner who changes is seen as a traitor and treated as the enemy, while the purported love just goes by the wayside.

In fact, transactional love is an oxymoron, even though healthy relationships need to be reciprocal, of course. When transaction becomes the bottom line, love tends to shrink away in disgust. When relationships become essentially commercial, which is what we're talking about, where emotional goods are exchanged for a price, this very commerciality kills the innocence of love, because love and commerce speak different languages.

I was watching a movie the other night that showed this very graphically. It was a story of an American woman who was swept off her feet by this dreamy Frenchman and for months they sort of glide together through this gauzy phase of insatiable desire. But eventually the Frenchman proposes marriage and at first this only amps up the romantic feelings, until he turns around and hands her a prenup to sign before he will marry her.

It's in that moment everything changes. The viewer sees this Frenchman for who he actually is, which is a player, someone who is a premeditative seducer and to whom generosity and trust are not natural. In that moment the pink balloon of their love pops. When this illusion of love is punctured between them, there's nothing for them to do but separate and leave each other with a lot of bitterness and grief.

But what about the other kind of love, the love that Merton is describing, the love that reveals itself in the hour when the heart has turned to stone. That's the love that interests us as seekers because it is the love that sets us free. Love like that doesn't have much to do with pleasure very often and frequently offers no reward but the loving itself.

Love like this doesn't demand a thing in return and may be extremely difficult to show, especially when your mind is shouting go away. And yet, the love that we show others in the face of resistance is much stronger than the kind that comes to us easily.

Most of us know that this is true from experience, that it's when we practice against the grain, as Buddha's teaching describes it, and respond counter to our selfish impulses, that we move beyond cravings and expectations toward our own original nature. That's a nature that isn't constricted by pain or by lack of desire, but takes its fuel from a much deeper source, what you could call the god within us. We come to see that love truly is stronger than fear and to realize that in its essence, love is not personal, because personalities cannot love. Personalities, our ego

selves, are always blocked by self-regard, and when they believe they're not, they're often the most deluded.

Take the supposedly selfless souls who claim to want nothing for themselves, while secretly craving applause or acceptance for being so incredibly good. Very often, their outsized generosity isn't true generosity at all but, in fact, is a mask for self-denial and low self-esteem. Their selflessness may be a stand in for shame, the shame of wanting love in return. Or, it may be some twisted idea of what Jesus or some other enlightened being would do in their shoes, even though these people may be very far from enlightened.

These ideals may be admirable, but the emotional fakery actually damages love by fostering insincerity. It's much, much wiser to be humble and honest about our needs and limitations than pretend to be plaster saints, hiding the truth of our hungry hearts.

Paradoxically, when we admit to our challenges and our limitations, we're actually empowered to move beyond them. A student of mine learned this the hard way and I'd like to tell you a little bit about her story. Laura was a single woman in her forties who longed to be much more highly evolved than she was. In her relationships, she tended to pretend, to give without expectation, and would present herself as somebody immune to the kind of small mindedness that most of us are prey to. In fact, she seemed to find what she called "messy complicated humanness" anathema to her life as a seeker of truth.

From this perch of spiritual aspiration, Laura dispensed pity masquerading as love toward other people who seemed to be in pain and was careful to keep herself just out of reach, safe from the prying eyes of people who wanted to get too close. As she put it, "I'm only interested in divine love," as if love exists that isn't divine.

The more Laura protested against so-called ordinary love, the more I sensed a kind of a cover up in her, a kind of internal need for avoidance that prompted her to split the world in two, between divine and human, between sacred and profane.

Then something happened that smashed Laura's self-image. She was called home to the southern town where she'd grown up to take care of her widowed father at the end of a long illness. At first Laura took the news in stride. She was strangely absent of emotion as if she were sort of hearing about a stranger in need from a world she herself barely inhabited.

Laura flew home to take over her father's nursing. At first she behaved like Mother Teresa, offering her service up to god, while ignoring the painful emotions that began to blow up inside her, because her father had been an abusive, arrogant, narcissistic man and his mortal illness had not improved his character. Instead of feeling grateful, he showed Laura his coldness, which she did her best to overlook, in the way that Jesus on the cross overlooked the sins of those around him: forgive them father for they know not what they do.

But this act only lasted a week or so. Then one day, her father insulted her. He compared her to her mother whom he had divorced for a younger woman. In that moment, Laura described how she felt her heart just close down tight against this man who had never truly loved her. She

described how her mood went in seconds from lofty detachment to rage and disgust and sadness, a sadness that ached inside her and reminded her of the painful moments in her own youth.

The truth was that she hated this man she pretended to be loving. She hated how he treated her and idolized her lazy brother. She hated how she felt in his presence. She hated him retrospectively for abandoning the family and failing to visit her mother when she was dying. And she hated him for never once blessing her for her loyalty and kindness. She was trapped behind her own wall of resentments, cut off from her spiritual wisdom.

Laura found herself unable finally to hide her grief or her pain. But although she couldn't hide her emotions, neither could she just pack up and leave because there was no one else to take care of her dad. So after a lifetime of running from her own darkness, Laura found herself sequestered with her own shadow and forced to confront her own dishonesties.

That threw her into a crisis of faith, you could say. Laura was asking herself now who was she if she wasn't this superior being? Were her shows of goodness just hollow? If she could still hate this way, Laura was asking herself, what did that say about what she called love? Was it all a fraud? Was it all an impersonation?

Day after day she nursed her father without even trying to show him warmth. She was just going through the motions. She felt cold and empty. And the gratifying feelings of self-satisfaction, the fantasy that others would admire her goodness were gone, were irrelevant. Now it was just Laura and this unhappy father. Her fantasies of enlightenment were completely replaced by bedpans and spoon feeding and brushing his teeth, while her father ignored her.

When she was alone, she raged, she sobbed, she blamed her father, she blamed herself. And Laura struggled with this truth that nothing had actually changed and that they would never bond in this lifetime. She realized that this sadness of hers would never redeem her nor would she be able to transcend it by jumping into the light.

The only thing Laura could do was sit with it and let it be and surrender to things as they were. This was very, very painful, but it was also surprisingly liberating because slowly as the weeks went by, something began to shift in Laura, a kind of bittersweet surrender, as she described it.

This surrender brought with it a subtle sense of release. As she wrote, "I felt my heart open just a tiny bit and a trickle of love and warmth came through." This trickle came to mean more to Laura than all the floods of heroic, self-protective service that she had paraded in previous times.

In the weeks before her father died, Laura began to allow this love to show more and more, even though her father never acknowledged it. When he finally died, Laura emerged as someone who finally knew her own heart, which included the limitations in love. This shift allowed her to see how much bigger she was than these obstacles, her true nature, not her personality. It allowed her to connect in a way with other people that was far more honest and much more vulnerable.

It's the same thing for all of us when we manage to love in spite of ourselves. In light of our own conflicts, we come to surprise ourselves in these shutdown times, with a new kind of generosity,

a generosity that doesn't depend on the trappings of closeness. We don't come to this generous place through denial, but by refusing to look at what's needy or broken or human in us.

It's exactly the opposite. We learn to love in spite of our limits, because it's our nature to do so. We're born aspiring to truth and love and beauty. We're hardwired for these things. The Greeks had a word for this kind of aspiration, *arête*, which meant excellence or virtue or goodness, particularly of the functional kind. The *arête* of a knife is to cut well. The *arête* of an eye is to see well. And the *arête* of a human being is goodness and love.

The question is how do we put this wisdom into action? How do we continue to care for others even when we are dry as a bone? How do we practice faithful abiding, staying when we want to run, having patience for what hasn't yet been revealed?

I'd just like to offer a few suggestions that have helped me in my life. This is not a comprehensive list. It's just a handful of pointers to keep in mind in those moments when the heart has turned to stone and love becomes impossible.

The first is to stop trying to be good. This is the cross we bear in a puritanical, moralistic culture based on the idea of original sin. The idea that when we come into bodies, we inherit a kind of evil, that it's our duty then to spend our lives trying to live down. Our lives become an effort to prove what is eternally true, but it's proving it against this idea of feeling bad, feeling evil, feeling tainted in some way by our own humanity.

To push back that self-doubt, that self-mortification, we're constantly trying to be better than we are, constantly trying to prove that we're worthy. This is the kiss of death in love because it leads to insincerity, it leads to self-protection, and it leads to a lack of self-knowledge, which is never helpful in life in relationship or in terms of our own existence.

Stop trying to be good and see what happens. Notice how you relax. Notice how much less fear you have around intimacy by allowing yourself to simply be what you are.

The second is to be truthful about your pain, your rage, your conflict, and your wounds. It's through our vulnerability that we connect with others. We don't want to base relationships on pain, obviously, but without allowing pain to be acknowledged between us, there's no bridge for compassion. Compassion is to feel with. Empathy is to feel for. And if we don't allow others to see our pain, then how can we let them in? How can they love us when we're pretending to be better than we are? We're pretending to be somehow invulnerable. We have to drop the armor to hold another person close in our lives.

Be truthful about your pain, your rage, your conflict without it being the primary feature of the relationship. We're not talking about leading with your grief, leading with your anger. We're talking about allowing these things to be and not working overtime to hide them, because when we do that, we do shut our hearts and we do distance ourselves from the other, even when we want just the opposite.

The next thing is to not expect love to be perfect or pretty. Anyone who's been around the block, anyone who's had their heart broken, anyone who knows what it's like to be unfaithful or to have to forgive, to apologize for something, or make amends for something recognizes that love beyond a certain point always has very obvious imperfections.

Don't disqualify your own love because it doesn't meet some lofty standard of flawlessness. Love is messy. Love is contradictory. Love is inconstant, inconsistent, imperfect. When we allow that to be, we can have some humor about it. Big surprise, we're jealous. Big surprise, we forgot the birthday. Big surprise, we can't in that moment open to what the other person needs.

So, don't expect love to be perfect or pretty. That makes a lot more space for the variations of your unique relationship. Every relationship has its own angles, its own edges, its own walls, its own pitfalls. They're there. They're not pretty, they're not perfect, but they're real. And when two people, regardless of the nature of the relationship, acknowledge that, they can come into a new kind of intimacy.

The next thing is to remember that it's not about you and that you're not in control. This is a hard one. But, when we can remember that love is coming through us, and that it doesn't need to be forced or brought out through shame or guilt, but simply allowed to be; when we make space for love, it becomes less personal and we touch more readily into the source in us that goes beyond the selfish egoic personality. It goes into the heart of our true nature, which is to love, which is to connect, which is to care and embrace.

So, remember that love isn't about you and that you're not in control. We can certainly affect our responses. We can certainly sometimes modulate our feelings. There are things that we can control, but most of it we can't and we certainly can't control the affinity between ourselves and another person. You don't create love any more than you create talent. Talent is there like love is there. We come in with particular tastes and qualities and potentials that are beyond our power to create.

When we get that, it gives us a kind of reverence for what can't be controlled. It gives us a kind of reverence for the mystery that we are endowed with these qualities that we have not ourselves engineered. That comes as a great relief. Stepping aside, remembering that it's not about us, that we're not in control, isn't easy, but it goes a long way toward maturing us emotionally and deepening our relationships.

The next thing is that love is not a feeling. Love isn't a feeling. Pleasure is a feeling. Infatuation is a feeling. Love isn't a feeling. Love is an action. Love is a verb, as someone once said. Love is a verb, not a feeling. Don't expect, in the same way that you don't expect love to be perfect or pretty, don't expect it necessarily to feel fantastic. Sometimes the most intense love, some of the most memorable loves, the most valued and beautiful love, sometimes happen in very unexpected moments, moments when there's distraught, moments when there's distance, or this inability we're talking about to open the heart.

It's in those moments when we don't feel love but can demonstrate love, move aside and let it come through us, that it proves its real value. Don't wait for that *frisson* of love or of affection or

of attraction and think that when it's not there, love is not there. The two have nothing to do with each other. Love isn't a feeling.

Next, remember that love doesn't come from the personality. The personality is always tossed back and forth between what it likes and what it doesn't like. But the eternal part of us that's never abandoned, that's never alone, is the part that brings love into our lives. It doesn't come from the personality in the same way that's connected to what I was just saying about not being able to force ourselves to love. We can't. We can allow it. We can't create it. So, it doesn't come from the personality.

One more thing and that's just that in my experience, there's no love without patience or staying when the going gets rough. Patience is critical to being able to remain in relationship, because up close everybody has ugliness. Everybody has flaws. Everybody has things to fear, etc. And unless we learn to abide with those things and be patient with ourselves and the other, nothing can take root, nothing can grow.

That's what I wanted to say to you today about those moments when the heart closes down and we want to stay anyway.