



Conversations About
LOVE

“The heart that
gives, gathers.”
—English Proverb

PARTICIPANT GUIDE

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What would a communal heart be like? What would have to happen to bring such a thing into being around one conference table or in a single committee meeting—or in a single church? What would have to be left outside the door? —Gail Godwin

We welcome authentic voices to this conversation and remain committed to an ongoing dialogue of ideas. As this work unfolds, we responsibly note that the interpretations and conclusions contained in this publication represent the views of the author or authors and not necessarily those of the John E. Fetzer Institute, its trustees, or officers.

The Campaign for Love & Forgiveness (www.loveandforgive.org), a project of The Fetzer Institute (www.fetzer.org), is a community engagement initiative that encourages people to bring love and forgiveness into the heart of individual and community life. Through facilitated conversations in six cities, and a robust Web site that offers activities, reflections, and a thoughtful curriculum, the campaign has touched thousands of people since its launch in 2006. The resources at loveandforgive.org are available for anyone to use.

The Fetzer Institute's mission, to foster awareness of the power of love and forgiveness in the emerging global community, reflects its belief that individual transformation is central to societal change and founder John Fetzer's belief that "love is the one ingredient that holds us all together."

The campaign begins with a focus on love itself. This will lead eventually to an exploration of forgiveness, which is born of love, and becomes a loving act for all concerned. Through public television programming, targeted local activities and thoughtful conversations in communities across the country, we explore the mystery and meaning of love—how it's expressed and felt, and how it manifests differently for different people—and we'll consider the potential power of love to transform and heal our personal lives, our professional lives and our communities. In campaign conversations, we seek to explore the many forms love takes—from friendship and family bonds, to marriage, to carrying love into the larger community through altruism and volunteerism.

A dictionary definition of love describes it as a deep, tender, ineffable feeling of affection and solicitude, such as that arising from kinship, recognition of attractive qualities, or a sense of underlying oneness. This multifaceted view of love is one we hope will remind us all of its power to bring meaningful transformation to our lives and our communities.

*The subject tonight is Love
And for tomorrow night as well,
As a matter of fact
I know of no better topic
For us to discuss
Until we all
Die!*

—Hafiz

INTRODUCING THE CONVERSATIONS

Ideally, each participating group will host at least four conversations about love. We suggest that they take place over a period of four to 12 weeks, and last about two hours each. Materials for conversation facilitators and participants provide resources, information, ideas and a suggested structure for the conversations. Because participants will bring diverse experiences and views of love, the handbooks lay out topics specifically designed to focus and deepen the discussions over time.

In these four conversations, we'll acknowledge the diversity of love, and share how we've individually experienced and expressed it in our lives. We'll also look at what inhibits us from being able to give and receive love. Finally, we'll explore how we can more consciously use the power of love to transform our lives and our communities, and identify actions that we can take toward those goals. Each conversation features a suggested film clip from *The Mystery of Love*, a PBS documentary that received major funding from the Fetzer Institute.

PARTICIPANT'S ROLE

Your willingness to join these conversations indicates that you have an interest in exploring the power of love in your own life. Offering your time, voice and ears to this unique project can be seen as an act of love toward yourself, the other participants and your community at large. We include in this handbook a suggested list of shared agreements for your group, which can help keep the conversations respectful and orderly. We hope that you will feel comfortable sharing about this very personal subject in a way that honors your own need for privacy and discretion, while at the same time offering insights and stories that will inspire others.

Also included in this handbook are four essays about love and related practices that you can try at home, to keep the conversations alive for you between meetings. In considering the suggested home practices, you might try picking the ones that most appeal to you and at least one that feels challenging. It is likely that those around you will feel the effects of this project, even if you do not discuss it with them, and that this project will awaken you to sources and objects of love all around you.

Shared agreements among group members can help to keep conversations orderly, respectful and conducive to honest sharing. Your group may amend or customize this list, or you might choose instead to brainstorm your own set of agreements.

Agree on and commit to your shared agreements at the first conversation, and refer to them as needed throughout the remaining conversations.

1. We agree to hold confidential what is shared in this room. If we encounter a conversation partner outside this room, we will respect his or her privacy.
2. We intend to balance sharing and listening, in order to allow everyone to participate, and we'll pass whenever we do not wish to share or read aloud.
3. When someone is speaking, we'll allow them to speak uninterrupted, and refrain from giving unsolicited feedback, advice or commentary.
4. We commit to using "I" statements as often as possible when we share.
5. We will assume good intentions on everyone's part, agree that we may disagree at times, and learn together about respecting differences.
6. If an exercise makes us uncomfortable, we can skip it or ask the facilitator about an alternative.
7. We intend to arrive on time, attend all four conversations, and strive to begin and end our conversations on time.
8. (Another agreement unique to our group?)

When I speak of love, I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life.

—The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

LISTENING AS AN ACT OF LOVE

“Simply put, there is nothing, nothing in the world, that can take the place of one person intentionally listening or speaking to another. The act of conscious attending to another person—when one once discovers the taste of it and its significance—can become the center of gravity of the work of love. It is very difficult. Almost nothing in our world supports it or even knows about it.” —Jacob Needleman, *A Little Book on Love*

These words describe how focused listening—taking the time to give someone your complete attention in order to more fully receive what they are saying and feeling—can be an act of love in itself. As a group, you might take a few minutes to discuss the value of listening, and share about experiences in which you truly felt heard or really tuned in to someone who needed to be heard.

A discussion about good listening skills might cover

- Listening with an open heart and mind
- Allowing the speaker to finish his/her thoughts and sentences, even when we feel impatient to speak
- Accepting that the speaker feels what he/she feels, no matter what we think, and refraining from “correcting” the speaker’s feelings
- Listening with no agenda other than to be a sounding board for someone who needs to speak
- Imagining that we are speaking and listening to ourselves
- Listening without trying to solve/fix a problem, unless feedback or advice is sought
- (Other skills, as suggested by our group)

We are members of one great body, planted by nature in a mutual love and fitted for a social life. We must consider that we were born for the good of the whole. —Seneca

Emotion, Energy, Practice, Force: What Is Love?

Experiences of love leave indelible marks on our lives. We may experience love through our family members and pets, our friends and mentors, our romantic partners, and in professional, religious, volunteer or other communities where we are linked to others through shared beliefs, causes, activities or goals.

Love is also a compelling and timeless theme for poets, writers, musicians and artists who have sought to capture its essence in words and images. Moral exemplars like Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, the Dalai Lama, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Aung San Suu Kyi, Nelson Mandela and Rigoberta Menchú Tum, to name just a few, have modeled an expansive, powerful form of love that encompasses forgiveness and deep compassion.

Scientists, too, have recently turned their attention to love, and one researcher is investigating the biological roots of love and compassion in humans. At the University of Wisconsin, psychologist Jack Nitschke found that new mothers, when looking at pictures of their babies, demonstrated unique activity in a part of their brains associated with positive emotions.¹ This suggests that this region of the brain may be attuned to the most primal objects of our love and compassion—our children. Other studies have indicated that, when subjects contemplated harm being done to others, a similar network of regions in the brain—regions associated with love and compassion—were stimulated. A team of developmental psychologists also reported a study of newborn babies who did not cry when they heard taped recordings of their own crying, but did get upset when they heard a recording of another baby crying.²

In these studies, very different stimuli caused similar neurological reactions that suggest that love and compassion may be biologically innate to humans. In fact, there is growing scientific evidence indicating that love, both given and received, is often associated with better health and well-being. It also promotes caring and altruistic behaviors.

Still, in so many ways, love remains a mystery. Where does it reside? Is it an emotion, an energy, a practice or a force? Can it be cultivated or taught? What propels us to express or receive love, and what holds us back from loving or letting ourselves be loved?

Most of us can name love when we experience it. It may feel like warmth, support, care, closeness or safety. It may feel like the unconditional acceptance of someone who allows us to share all facets of ourselves, including our fears, imperfections and misdeeds. We may feel familial love and a sense of belonging with our parents, siblings and very close friends. We may feel romantic love with a partner, and we may feel love in the unexpected kindness of a stranger. We may also experience love in nature and among living creatures in the natural world.

We've also witnessed love through small and monumental acts of generosity, selflessness and compassion in others, the loving care of someone attending to a sick or needy friend, the self-sacrifice of organ donors, and the efforts of volunteers responding to a need in their community. After the tragic events of September 11, 2001, the tsunami in Southeast Asia, and hurricanes Katrina and Rita, we saw countless acts of generosity and loving-kindness as people opened their hearts, homes and wallets in response to human suffering.

Many speak of the heart as the seat of love and speak about maintaining an open heart to keep love flowing in our lives. Listening to our hearts can be a way of tapping our inner wisdom and finding compassion for ourselves and others. But in our fast-paced culture, being still enough to listen to our hearts is a challenge. It doesn't often top our "to-do" lists.

1. Nitschke, J.B., et al, "Orbitofrontal Cortex Tracks Positive Mood in Mothers Viewing Pictures of their Newborn Infants," *NeuroImage*, 21 (2004): 583-592.

2. Dondi, M., Simion, F., & Caltran, G., "Can Newborns Discriminate Between Their Own Cry and the Cry of Another Newborn Infant?" *Developmental Psychology*, 35 (1999) 418-426.

Still, when some of us listen to our hearts, we hear the echoes of past pains. Fear of having our feelings hurt (yet again) can sometimes keep us from giving or receiving love. Yet as author and educator Parker Palmer explains, “There are at least two ways to understand what it means to have our hearts broken. One is to imagine the heart broken into shards and scattered about. . . . The other is to imagine the heart broken open into new capacity—a process that is not without pain, but one that many of us would welcome.”³

Clearly, giving and receiving love require a vulnerability and openness that may seem risky in a world filled with violence, injustice, pain, fear and intolerance. It takes great courage to love in the face of hostility, but that is often where love is most needed and effective. This is why many spiritual leaders throughout time have advised humankind to cultivate and tap the collective power of loving hearts (what some call the communal heart) to transform our world when economic and political solutions fall short.

Whether romantic, platonic or altruistic, we all know love when we feel it—an expansive openness, an unconditional acceptance and the acknowledgment of a greater good in all of us. We each have our own stories of love to tell, and, in telling and hearing these stories, we can broaden our ideas about where love exists in our lives and where it may be missing. We can learn to see love in new ways and places, to use it as a resource for problem-solving, and, perhaps, to begin viewing the people and events in our lives through a lens of love.

3. Palmer, Parker. *A Hidden Wholeness, The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 178.

A Tapestry of Love: Aung San Suu Kyi

If we were to try to capture the experiences and expressions of love throughout our lives, we might discover a tapestry in progress—the vertical threads marking our early foundational experiences of love, and the horizontal threads adding the color, depth and dimension of a lifetime of love.

An example of this is found in the life of Nobel Peace Prize recipient Aung San Suu Kyi. Her story illustrates how giving and receiving love take many forms—and sometimes great sacrifice if one has to choose between objects of deep love and passion.

Suu Kyi, daughter of the founder of the Burmese democratic movement, has endured extreme hardships in leading a nonviolent struggle for democracy in Burma (Myanmar). Married to Michael Aris, an English academic, her life took an unexpected turn when she returned to Burma to care for her ailing mother in 1988. While there, Suu Kyi was propelled to act when mass uprisings against the military government were brutally suppressed.

As a result, Suu Kyi, leader of the National League of Democracy, has endured years in detention away from her family. When her husband was dying of prostate cancer, she made the difficult decision to stay in Burma, for fear that she would not be allowed to return.

Revealing a deep love and understanding of Suu Kyi’s devotion to the well-being of her homeland and fellow Burmese, Michael Aris once stated that “before we were married I promised my wife that I would never stand between her and her country.”

Suggested Home Practices

1. Using ideas from the exercise at the end of the first conversation session (about love and friendship), write a letter to someone or something you love. Then, imagine you were the letter's recipient and write a letter in response, as you'd like to receive it. You do not have to do anything with these letters besides write and read them as a learning experience, but you may wish to send the letter to someone you love, if that feels right to you. (See "Tips for Writing Loving and Beautiful Letters" later in this handbook for additional ideas.)
2. Start to pay attention to expressions of love and experiences of receiving love all around you—in your life, in films, on TV, in books and in society. You can jot down these "love notes" in this handbook, and share the most memorable ones with the group at the next conversation.
3. Find a photo, draw a picture, make a collage or write a poem about something or someone you love—something you might share with the group at the next conversation.
4. Find a place to sit or lie quietly, and silently repeat the word "love" to yourself for a few minutes. Notice any responses in your body or your mind as you repeat the word or experience the thing you love, and see if any images or sounds or memories arise for you. Notice how you feel at the end of the exercise, how it might influence your next action or interaction, and how long the exercise stays with you. You might also journal about the experience.
5. Fill in these blanks:

I often express my love for someone by _____

I like people to express their love for me by _____

The most loving thing someone did for me as a child was _____

The most loving thing someone has done for me as an adult was _____

I would like to do something loving for _____

I plan to _____

Questions to ponder or write about (you may wish to invite friends and family to discuss them, too):

- Where do you already feel love in your life? Where would you like to feel more of it?
- Do you feel that love has power? Have you experienced it? If so, how?
- Where do you already give your love, and where could you give more of it?
- Are you aware of the words you say about yourself and others? Are they loving and/or compassionate?

Nature and Nurture: The Power of Love

Before we had any cognitive understanding or language to describe it, most of us experienced love from a parent, caretaker, sibling or pet. As revealed in the Nitschke study of new mothers, it would seem that love is biologically innate to humans. The following story illustrates how early we can demonstrate and benefit from that love. You may have seen a picture in the newspaper or on the Internet, dubbed “The Rescuing Hug,” that came to prominence a decade ago. It’s from a 1995 news story about the healing power of loving touch between twin sisters, Brielle and Kyrie Jackson, who were born 12 weeks prematurely in Worcester, Mass.

Before the famous photo was snapped, baby Brielle weighed only two pounds and had difficulty breathing. She was also struggling to maintain good blood oxygen levels and a stable heart rate. One particularly bad day, she was inconsolable, and her condition worsened. Gayle Kasparian, her neonatal intensive care nurse, decided to depart from the usual protocol and place the stronger sister, Kyrie, in the same incubator as Brielle. This was a common practice in English hospitals at the time, but it was considered unorthodox in the U.S. Brielle snuggled up to Kyrie, who wrapped her arm around her ailing sister. Brielle’s condition improved so rapidly that the nurse thought her monitors could not possibly be accurate. Within moments, the struggling infant’s blood oxygen levels and heart rate began to improve.

The story of Brielle and Kyrie shows that we develop connections with others from birth (or even before), and that these connections may be essential to our well-being. This connection does not seem to disappear at death, either. When we lose someone close to us, the essence, lessons, memories and imprint of that relationship remain in our hearts and minds. It would seem, therefore, that love—whether it can be called a force, energy, power or instinct—does not seem to end when the object of our love is not around to receive it.

Still, some of us experience love as finite. The news headlines certainly make it appear to be in short supply. And we may sometimes feel that love is conditional, or that we or certain others are unworthy of it. We may want to be generous with our love, but it can feel risky to be that vulnerable and open to possible betrayal or rejection.

At a young age, we learn whom and how to love by observing the people around us—how they behave and how they treat us. In fact, a number of studies have shown that caregiver behaviors can influence children’s empathic and pro-social behaviors. For example, researchers at the University of Utah’s Fogel Infant Labs found that “interaction between a mother and her infant is directly connected to how kind and caring the child becomes.”⁴ Moreover, in a study on altruism during the Nazi Holocaust, Samuel and Pearl Oliner found that among the strongest predictors of heroic behavior displayed by Germans who assisted Jews were memories of growing up in a family that prioritized compassion and altruism.⁵ Not surprisingly, other research has shown that physically abusive parents have less empathic children.

Thus it is likely that we will be more generous with our love if we have felt loved and prized love, and we may find it difficult to open our hearts to ourselves and others if we’ve been abused. Yet if we close our hearts in fear, we ironically cut ourselves off from sources of love that could heal us and keep us from feeling lonely and disconnected. In fact, researchers at Yale found that love protects our hearts, according to Dr. Dean Ornish, who wrote about the

Love depends upon the capacity to reach beneath the surface of persons, to feel and touch the seed of life that is hidden there. And love becomes a power when it is capable of evoking that seed and drawing it forth from its hiding place.—Ira Progoff

4. Ciras, Heather J., “Research: Early Bond Equals Caring Kids,” *Science & Theology News*, April 25, 2005, <http://www.stnews.org/Altruism-393.htm>.

5. Oliner, Samuel. *Do Unto Others: Extraordinary Acts of Ordinary People* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2003).

subject for MSNBC. “Men and women who felt most loved and supported had substantially less blockage in their coronary arteries,” writes Ornish. “Similarly, researchers from Case Western Reserve University studied almost 10,000 married men and found that those who answered ‘yes’ to this simple question—‘Does your wife show you her love?’—had significantly less angina (chest pain). And when researchers at Duke surveyed men and women with heart disease, those who were single and lacked confidants were three times as likely to have died after five years.”⁶

Friendships and loving relationships seem to be good for more than just our hearts. Loneliness and social isolation weaken our immune systems, while research shows that love can help us to heal.⁷ Thus, harnessing the power of our hearts seems to be a health regimen worth considering.

According to Rachel Naomi Remen, MD, founder and director of the Institute for the Study of Health and Illness and Commonweal’s Cancer Help Program, “the experience of the heart is what makes us feel safe in this world. When we experience not only our own heart, but the hearts of other people, we feel safe.... And we can’t recognize that other people have hearts until we have an experience of the heart ourselves.”⁸

If, as Dr. Remen says, the capacity to connect with others starts with experiencing our own hearts, then it makes sense to look at how we treat ourselves. Do we take care of our bodies? Do we seek out people who support us and opportunities to pursue our passions? Do we make time for rest and relaxation, fun and adventure? Do we find things to appreciate about ourselves? Do we treat ourselves with compassion, kindness and forgiveness? If so, we are more likely to extend this compassion and forgiveness to others, and accept their perceived faults because we have accepted our own. “If you truly loved yourself, you would never harm another,” is a quote attributed to the Buddha.

Love in the form of kindness is something we can give to ourselves and others. When it comes our way, it can inspire us to share the wealth. In a 2003 pilot study with undergraduates at Case Western University, researcher Julie Exline, PhD, found that acts of kindness “promoted gratitude and desires to ‘pass it on.’” Exline went on to say that expected acts of kindness from people close to the participants led to a greater sense of security and safety, while “...unexpected kindnesses [from distant or hostile relationships] led to a greater desire to pass on kindness to strangers or enemies.”⁹ Perhaps there really is power in performing “random acts of kindness!”

Sometimes, all that’s needed is our presence. Anastasia Higginbotham learned this through a unique relationship with her elderly neighbor in Brooklyn. In *The Sun* magazine’s “Readers Write” feature, Higginbotham wrote about her neighbor James, an 89-year-old Irishman who would often call out for help or come by her apartment with an “urgent” request. After some of these incidents, his nurse would apologize, and say that James was acting from a fear that he would die alone. The last time James called for help, Higginbotham says she found him on the floor. His breathing was labored, and he said he was dying. Higginbotham was with him when he lost consciousness. “I realized this was it,” she wrote, “the moment he had feared... I grabbed his hand, put my lips to his ear, and said, ‘You are not alone and you are loved.’”¹⁰ Higginbotham says was glad she was there when it really mattered. “He called, and I came, and he died, but not alone.”¹¹

Love, connection, companionship are real human needs. Loving ourselves enough to ask for what we need, meeting our own needs when we can, and opening our hearts to the love around us can make us more generous with our love. This, in turn, can lead to a chain of loving acts—a sort of contagious kindness. Coming together to share and build upon our stories of love is part of that process—a reminder of what is possible when love lives on through us.

6. Ornish, Dean, “Love is Real Medicine,” *Newsweek/MSNBC*, October 3, 2005, www.msnbc.msn.com/id/9466931/site/newsweek/.

7. “Stress Substantially Slows Human Body’s Ability to Heal,” *Ohio State Research News*, December 5, 2005, <http://researchnews.osu.edu/archive/wounheal.htm>.

8. Ornish, Dean. *Love & Survival: The Scientific Basis for the Healing Power of Intimacy* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 198), 203.

9. Exline, Julie, “The Self as a Conduit of Love,” *Compassionate Love Research Conference Proceedings* (Fetzer Institute, 2004), 23.

10. Higginbotham, Anastasia, “Readers Write: Neighbors,” *The Sun*, June 2006, 41.

11. *Ibid.*

Suggested Home Practices

1. Recall the exercise in the last conversation in which you identified one nice thing that you would do for yourself before the next conversation. Have you done it? Can you write about it here? What else could you do for yourself? Can you build upon that idea and do something nice for yourself each day? If so, keep track of those things. If not, write about what might prevent you from doing them.

2. Start to notice your thoughts about yourself and the things you say to yourself. Are they kind? Loving? If they are, would you write them down for yourself as reminders? If they are not, how might you rephrase them to be more positive and supportive? (“I really want to try dancing/acting/sports, but I’m so lazy and I have no talent” becomes “I’m pretty nervous about trying something new, and that’s to be expected. I may or may not be great at it, but I can have fun exploring, and let myself make mistakes until I find what I’m good at.”) How does it feel to speak compassionately to yourself?

3. Try to practice an act of kindness each day—whether for someone you know, or someone you don’t know. Ideas include smiling at strangers, wishing someone a good day, appreciating something about someone out loud, holding open a door, giving someone your place in line if they appear to be in need, helping around the house, etc. Consider doing something anonymously, if you like. You might list these acts here:

4. Pay attention to acts of kindness all around you—in your life, in films, on TV, in books and in society. You can jot down these “love notes” in this handbook, if you like, and share the most memorable ones with the group at the next conversation.

5. Find a photo, draw a picture, make a collage, or write a poem about your strengths, talents, skills and loveable qualities. Feel free to share this with the group at the next conversation or keep it for yourself.

If you cannot find peace within yourself, you will never find it anywhere else. —Marvin Gaye

6. Fill in these blanks:

If I could do anything to take really good care of myself, I would _____

If I can't do that, at least I can _____

Growing up, I was told that doing things for myself was _____

I believe that doing things for myself is _____

The most loving thing I have done for myself is _____

What often stops me from being good to myself is _____

Questions to ponder or write about (you may wish to invite friends and family to discuss them, too):

- Is love (giving and receiving) something humans are born knowing or something they must learn?
- How has someone's love or kindness affected you? How has your love or kindness affected someone else?
- What might stop you from expressing love or acting kindly toward yourself?
- What is the benefit of loving ourselves?
- Are we more likely to love and accept others if we love and accept ourselves?
- Can we love others if we do not love and accept ourselves?

Grandfather, Look at our brokenness. We know that in all creation, only the human family has strayed from the sacred way... teach us love, compassion, honor that we may heal the earth, and heal each other. —Ojibway Prayer

When It's Hard to Love

Most little children can express love easily and often. Their eyes light up when they see a friendly face. Their smiles are wide open and welcoming, and their hands and arms reach out for connection. Children have the ability to embrace the moment—to dive into life's experiences wholeheartedly and let laughter, tears, joy and anger erupt in uncensored bursts. And so, as children, most of us loved without reservation or restraint, until...the first sense of rejection, betrayal or abandonment. From there, the heartbreaks may keep coming—small and large, manageable and catastrophic.

Like those who live on a fault line, we may learn to brace ourselves time and again for the next shattering quake. People may disappoint us, criticize us, leave us or worse. We become selective and protective about sharing and expressing our love, and we develop behaviors and attitudes to try to keep our hearts “safe” from breaks. Over time, we may integrate and heal painful experiences, but we often retain a lingering fear of being vulnerable—of opening our hearts and risking another wound. We may also hold resentments and an unforgiving attitude toward those who have hurt us. For people who've experienced violence, torture, war or injustice, trying to love those who inflicted, or are even associated with, such devastation and pain may seem impossible, even absurd.

Fear and love are deep-seated primal feelings, and crucial to our survival. Fear triggers an instinctual self-protective response that can help us to avoid real danger. But when fear is overwhelming or irrational, it can compel us to hate, control, attack or even kill.

*What you done to
me was wrong, but
I still forgive [you].*

—5-year-old Kai Leigh Harriott, at the sentencing of the Boston man whose stray bullet paralyzed her from the chest down

On a less dramatic level, some fears (of failing, missing out, being criticized or rejected, looking “foolish” or having our feelings hurt) can be limiting at best, crippling at worst. Sometimes we can stare down or rise above those fears, and sometimes we let them stop us before we even start. When it comes to love, fear may hold us back from connecting with others and reaching out for support when we (and they) may need it most.

Love, on the other hand, nurtures our spirit, connects us to others, allows us to experience compassion and forgiveness, and to support family and friends and ourselves through trying times. Love allows us to survive and even thrive. And forgiveness, born of love for ourselves and compassion for those who have hurt us, frees our hearts and minds. It can be hard work to forgive, and it does not always mean that we will stay in relationship with those who have hurt us. But the act of forgiving and making peace with the situation, if only in our own hearts and minds, can lead to great liberation and healing. And sometimes, seemingly miraculous transformations occur between people who have been forgiven and those who forgive them, such as when accused criminals, upon receiving love and forgiveness

from their victim's family, become part of that family. Such stories may be rarely reported, but they are powerful reminders of the power of love and forgiveness to heal broken lives.

It may be difficult to fathom that the greatest obstacles to giving and receiving love lie within our own minds and hearts. Excavating our darkest thoughts and feelings, and bringing them to the light of awareness, is a painful but necessary process in seeking to create and maintain an open heart. Jean Vanier is an author, and founder of L'Arche communities, which were formed in 1964 to unite people with mental disabilities and those who share life with them. L'Arche, French for “the ark,” now has more than 100 communities in 30 countries. According to Vanier, “the secret of L'Arche is relationship: meeting people, not through the filters of certitudes, ideologies, idealism or judgments, but heart to heart; listening to people with their pain, their joy, their hope, their history, listening to their heart beats.” In 1988, Vanier spoke before a Harvard audience, revealing that his own journey to tolerance included an examination of the intolerance that lay within him.

“I discovered something which I had never confronted before, that there were immense forces of darkness and hatred within my own heart. At particular moments of fatigue or stress, I saw forces of hate rising up inside me, and the capacity to hurt someone who was weak and was provoking me! That, I think, was what caused me the most pain: to discover who I really am, and to realize that maybe I did not want to know who I really was! ... And then I had to decide whether I would just continue to pretend that I was okay and throw myself into hyperactivity, projects where I could forget all the garbage and prove to others how good I was. Elitism is the sickness of us all. We all want to be on the winning team. That is the heart of apartheid and every form of racism. The important thing is to become conscious of those forces in us and to work at being liberated from them and to discover that the worst enemy is inside our own hearts, not outside!”¹²

Through his honesty, Vanier provides an opening for the rest of us to acknowledge, own, and even accept our own negative thoughts and attitudes as part of our complex and sometimes messy humanity. But finding the courage and compassion to reveal ourselves—imperfections and all—is not easy. That may be our greatest fear—that if we are honest about who we are, we'll be unlovable. Yet, if we do not own these parts of ourselves, we may project them onto others, and make them wrong or different or even dangerous in our minds. Again, fear is at the root of feeling threatened by another—fear of losing what we have or of not having enough, fear of losing status or community, fear of the unknown, and the ultimate fear of death. This is not to say that we shouldn't protect ourselves from those who would abuse, violate, dishonor or physically harm us, but we need to distinguish between real threats and those manufactured by our egos.

If the police can't solve the problem of our killing each other, programs and jobs won't solve it either. The solution has to come from the heart. —Boston Councilor Chuck Turner after the city experienced a rash of deadly shootings

12. Vanier, Jean. *From Brokenness to Community* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1992), 19.

Ironically, being honest about ourselves, warts and all, can often bring us closer to others and open the door to intimacy. We may think that others will reject us for revealing less-than-flattering information about ourselves, when, in fact, our honesty may inspire them to recognize and accept something they once rejected in themselves. We tend to make up negative stories about what others think of us, what their actions mean, and what judgments they must have about us, when those judgments are often coming from within us. Revealing our imperfections and vulnerabilities may actually bring us closer to those we love, once we are accepting of those things in ourselves.

Forgiveness, too, is an important step in overcoming obstacles to love. Being hurt as a result of engaging in relationships with others is part of being human. Learning to forgive ourselves and others is a necessary, though difficult, step that can lead to healing and accepting the past, releasing anger and resentment, and opening ourselves again to love.¹³

Obstacles to love may begin in our own minds and hearts, but they are complicated by the challenges that life throws at us. Navigating those challenges with the people closest to us is a lifelong practice that requires patience and skill. Despite a nearly 50 percent divorce rate,¹⁴ we live in a culture that idealizes marriage or other romantic partnerships. In fact, many of us are unprepared for the day-to-day challenges of lifelong relationships, and unable to compromise or see and embrace another's perspective for the sake of harmony and understanding. Love must stand the tests of time, stress and hardship.

Serious illness was ultimately an opportunity for deep connection between Shasti O'Leary-Soudant and her husband, Jethro Soudant. In a National Public Radio StoryCorps booth, Shasti recounted how Jethro transformed the lowest point in her life into a turning point, during one of her final chemotherapy treatments for lymphoma. She recalled that as soon as the IV needle punctured her skin, she vomited, lost control of her bodily functions, and began crying hysterically. At that moment, Jethro said something funny to Shasti about how she looked, and it made her laugh.

"You were radiating love," she said to her husband in the radio story. "I felt like I was looking into the sun.... It was the most incredible moment of my life because I had no doubt—I knew you loved me." Shasti said that she knew that if she died their love would continue and that "whatever happened, everything would be fine..."¹⁵

Physical and mental illness, great loss, and other life stressors can weaken even the best relationships. Making a commitment to any relationship—be it a life partner, family member, friend or co-worker—means learning to deal with different opinions, communication styles, preferences, behaviors or cultural influences. Navigating these differences while honoring our own needs is the dance of all relationships.

But sometimes we let these differences obscure the fact that we all have the same basic need to be loved—unconditionally. Unconditional love provides a soft, ever-present place to land, regardless of how wretched or unlovable we may feel. According to author Stephen Covey, founder of FranklinCovey, "when we truly love others without condition, without strings, we help them feel secure and safe and validated and affirmed in their essential worth, identity and integrity." Can we imagine a world full of people who feel safe, worthy, validated and loved in all their uniqueness? Perhaps we could each start with ourselves, treat others in kind, and watch what happens.

13. The Campaign for Love & Forgiveness will include two PBS programs and an accompanying outreach initiative that will focus on the topic of forgiveness beginning in 2007.

14. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *National Center for Health Statistics*, "Births, Marriages, Divorces, and Deaths: Provisional Data for 2004, table A," *National Vital Statistics Reports*, Vol. 53, No 21, June 28, 2005, 1, http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr53/nvsr53_21.pdf.

15. "When a Low Point Becomes a Turning Point," NPR, February 17, 2006, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5220402>.

Suggested Home Practices

1. On a separate page, write out an imaginary dialogue between yourself and someone you find hard to love or forgive. State what both of you need and desire, object to and wish for. See if you can have compassion for both yourself and this person as you “speak” to and for them, and describe the best-case scenario for resolving your conflicts with or about this person.
2. Pay attention to conflicts around you—conflicts that don’t involve you—at home, work, school, the community, in films, on TV, in books, etc. See if you can understand both sides of the argument. Do the two sides have anything in common?
3. Recall the kind or loving act you wrote down at the end of the last conversation. Have you carried it out? If not, what is in the way? If so, can you identify more opportunities to practice?

4. The next time someone annoys you in a minor way, try to pause and give them the benefit of the doubt. Can you imagine the reason for their behavior and accept, forgive or even identify with it? (For example, instead of honking at another driver for cutting into your lane, imagine that he/she must be very distressed, and send him/her understanding, your patience or good wishes.)
5. Look for an example of a story like that of Ples and Azim, where a greater good or common cause brought potential opponents together and led to something positive. Bring it to the next conversation.
6. Recalling the “love” meditation exercise from Conversation One, try to practice that meditation with someone or something you love in mind, feeling the effects of loving thoughts as you did in that meditation. Then see if you can bring a hard-to-love or hard-to-forgive person or situation into that loving space. What happens?

Questions to ponder or write about (you may wish to invite friends and family to discuss them, too):

- What would it take for you to accept, forgive or even love someone you find hard to love?
- What do you think the impact of this acceptance, forgiveness or love would be on this person? On you?
- How does it feel to not love—or even hate—someone? How does it affect your state of mind or well-being?

There is only one happiness in life, to love and be loved. —George Sand

For the Benefit of Others: Kindness, Altruism and Volunteering

The term altruism was coined in 1851 by the French philosopher Auguste Comte, who said that it is our moral and political obligation to serve others and place their interests above our own. Other definitions of the word refer to unselfishness and sacrifice on the part of those who perform altruistic deeds, and the absence of any external reward for altruism. So what is the motivation behind serving our fellows on this planet? Filmmaker and actor Richard Attenborough offered his own theory:

“There is a light in this world: a healing spirit more powerful than any darkness we may encounter. We sometimes lose sight of this force when there is suffering, too much pain. Then suddenly, the spirit will emerge through the lives of ordinary people, who hear a call and answer in extraordinary ways.”¹⁶

The impact of these “ordinary” people has been considerable in recent history. During World War II, residents of Le Chambon, a small French farming village, risked their lives to shelter Jews. During the Rwandan genocide of 1994, acting hotel manager Paul Rusesabagina jeopardized his entire family and livelihood to save over a thousand Tutsi refugees and moderate Hutus from the Hutu militia. And each year in the U.S., approximately 7,000 living organ donors literally offer up a part of themselves to save another.¹⁷

But altruism doesn’t require dramatic deeds of this scale. Most altruistic acts are done quietly by people who simply want to help others—from hospice volunteers, to Big Brothers Big Sisters, and those who care for community gardens or check in on elderly neighbors and the infirm. Almost 30 percent of the U.S. population—65.4 million people—volunteered their time through or for an organization between September 2004 and September 2005.¹⁸

For some people, selfless love is a given. During Hurricane Katrina, a nurse at the Lindy Boggs Medical Center in New Orleans chose to stay with eight dying patients in the hospice unit where she worked. Ruby Jones ignored her daughters’ protestations and waited for aid to arrive at the medical center before leaving to seek shelter at the New Orleans airport. Even there, she looked for her patients, and “found two . . . lying listlessly among the luggage carousels and began caring for them with what little food and cleaning supplies she could scrounge up.”¹⁹ Explaining her devotion to her patients, Jones said, “We are like family at the end. You don’t just abandon them.”²⁰

While altruism is most often about helping others without the expectation of an external reward, it clearly benefits those who practice it. Studies have shown that helping others contributes to longevity, better mental health, boosting the immune system, reducing stress and diminishing the effects of physical maladies. Sometimes called the “helper’s high,” these feelings of love and empathy seem to contribute to our overall well-being, including our happiness.

In addition, there may be a biological basis for helping others. An Emory University study found that helping others triggered activity in the same portions of the brain that are activated when people receive rewards or experience pleasure.²¹ Moreover, in a study by Martin Seligman, PhD, author and Fox Leadership Professor of Psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, students who were asked to engage in either a pleasurable or altruistic act reported that the altruistic act caused them to feel happier longer than did the pleasurable one.²² Additionally, Dacher Keltner of UC Berkeley notes that, “In some recent studies I’ve conducted, we have found that when people perform behaviors

16. Altruistic Personality and Pro-social Behavior Institute home page, www.humboldt.edu/~altruism/home.html.

17. The Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network, Donors Recovered in the US by Donor Type, <http://www.optn.org/about/donation/livingDonation.asp#aspects>.

18. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Volunteering in the United States, 2005,” December 9, 2005, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/volun.nr0.htm>.

19. Skipp, Catharine and Arian Campo-Flores, “Beyond the Call,” *Newsweek*, July 3/July 10, 2006, 71.

20. Ibid.

21. Emory Health Sciences, “Emory Brain Imaging Studies Reveal Biological Basis for Human Cooperation,” July 19, 2002, http://www.whsc.emory.edu/_releases/2002july/altruism.html

22. Baker, Dan and Cameron Stauth. *What Happy People Know: How the New Science of Happiness Can Change Your Life for the Better*, (Pennsylvania: Rodale, 2003) 65.

associated with compassionate love—warm smiles, friendly gestures, affirmative forward leans—their bodies produce more oxytocin [a hormone involved in social recognition and bonding]. This suggests that compassion may be self-perpetuating: being compassionate causes a chemical reaction in the body that motivates us to be even more compassionate.”²³

And in a country where loneliness appears to be on the rise, it seems that reaching out to others can benefit that condition, too. A recent *New York Times* article reported the results of a Duke and University of Arizona study in which most American adults were found to have, on average, only two close confidantes with whom to share important life events. Twenty-five percent of those surveyed claimed to have none. The Internet, the researchers said, may help to bridge some of these gaps, but the ties created online are not as strong as those created with people who are physically near.²⁴

The irony is that while many may feel isolated, air travel, commerce and communication technologies have made the world a “smaller” place in the span of one century. Images, voices and words from people half a world away spill out of televisions, computers and cell phones from San Diego to Lima, Athens to Cape Town. And, at this point in human history, the spirit of connectedness that underlies altruism may not only help others, it may save the planet. We are more conscious than ever that climate, pollution, disease, poverty and war have no clear boundaries. What happens to the rain forests in Brazil, the cows in England, the AIDS-ravaged villages in Africa, the economy in Mexico, and the nuclear weapons arsenals in the Middle East, the United States and Asia can affect the well-being and security of us all.

In his 1964 acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of a worldwide fellowship that “lifts neighborly concern beyond one’s tribe, race, class, and nation.” Dr. King went on to warn those who would dismiss such a force, saying, “This oft misunderstood and misinterpreted concept so readily dismissed by the Nietzsches of the world as a weak and cowardly force, has now become an absolute necessity for the survival of man.”

Whether motivated by this necessity, a concern for others, or something else, everyday people of varying means and celebrities and business leaders of greater means—from Bono to Oprah Winfrey to Bill Gates—are using their status and resources to bring attention and aid to the world’s most pressing issues. In the process, many are spurring philanthropy and activism among others. While most of us do not have millions to give, we can offer our time, skills and talents to the causes most dear and important to us. The care and efforts of ordinary people can meet community needs when governments cannot or will not.

In Iraq, a 35-year-old woman named Saiedi, who was unable to find work during the war, founded a charity group that provides blankets, slippers, towels and clothing for displaced children in Baghdad. “There are families of children where fathers were killed in explosions,” she explained. “Now the state is busy. If I don’t care for them, who will?”²⁵ Her selfless act, during a period of war and her own suffering, exemplifies the spirit of altruism. Her question echoes in the chambers of our hearts—the same place where the answer lies.

You must be the change you wish to see in the world.—Mahatma Gandhi

23. Dacher Keltner, “The Compassionate Instinct,” *Greater Good*, Spring 2004, www.peacecenter.berkeley.edu/keltner_spring04.pdf.

24. Fountain, Henry. “The Lonely American Just Got a Bit Lonelier,” *New York Times*, July 2, 2006, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/02/weekinreview/02fountain.html?_r=1&ei=5087%0A&en=a91f48fe0a58f905&ex=1151985600&pagewanted=print&oref=slogin.

25. Tavernise, Sabrina. “In Iraq, Small Acts of Altruism,” *World Volunteer Web*, May 24, 2006, <http://www.worldvolunteerweb.org/news-views/news/doc/in-iraq-small-acts/print.html>.

Suggested Home Practices

1. Revisit the list of issues and community needs that you identified in the group during Conversation Four. Do they still ring true for you? Your altruistic behavior and activities will have more impact if they are born of your true passions. For example, some people may devote themselves to helping disadvantaged children, while others feel more drawn to helping the elderly, and others may care more about cleaning up the environment or promoting racial harmony. Identify your most cherished cause and a small step you can take toward addressing it.
2. How is the plan of action coming along? Have you taken a first step toward seeing it through? If not, what is holding you back?
3. Thinking back to the “ideal community” exercise in the conversation, what is something that you can do this week to bring some of those elements to your community? Write down the necessary next step.

4. Pay attention to altruism around you, and notice which altruistic acts seem to be the most effective and bring participants and recipients the most joy and/or benefits. You might jot down these observations here.

Questions to ponder or write about (you may wish to invite friends and family to discuss them, too):

- Is altruism natural? Is it necessary?
- Has someone’s altruism affected you? Have you benefited from altruism?
- How does it feel to be altruistic and to witness altruism?
- What might hold you back from acting altruistically?

*You are an important part of the campaign for Love & Forgiveness.
Thank you for joining us and sharing your stories of love.*

Additional Resources

We are grateful for the many organizations and resources that promote love, forgiveness, and compassion. We invite you to explore the list below and to add your own to the pages that follow.

Conversation Resources

Conversation Cards

www.fetzer.org/resources

Each of the 52 cards provides a quote to ponder, questions to discuss, and a suggested action for incorporating more love, forgiveness, and compassion in your life.

The deck can be used for personal inspiration; to spark conversations among family, friends, or colleagues; for book discussion or support groups; and/or to challenge you to be more loving, forgiving, and compassionate. Free from the link above while supplies last.

Conversation Facilitators Share Tips via Podcast

www.fetzer.org/resources

Two seasoned conversation facilitators share tips on how to lead conversations on love and forgiveness, including how to manage group dynamics, creating a safe space for sharing, using the conversation cards mentioned above, and how young people respond to the conversations.

Forgiveness Experts via Podcast

www.fetzer.org/resources

In separate podcasts, forgiveness experts share research, experience, and thoughts on the power of forgiveness. The podcasts feature Frederic Luskin, PhD, author of *Forgive for Good* and director of the Stanford Forgiveness Projects, and Everett Worthington, Jr., PhD, author of *Five Steps to Forgiveness: The Art and Science of Forgiving*. Dr. Worthington is a licensed clinical psychologist and professor of psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Let's Talk About It: Love and Forgiveness

www.programminglibrarian.org/ltai/discussion-themes.html

This program from the American Library Association examines contemporary life and culture through literature, offering selections from our culture's most outstanding

works. Be sure to check out the full list of themes and corresponding resources, including these three that were developed with the Fetzer Institute in support of conversations about love, compassion, and forgiveness.

- Love and Forgiveness in the Light of Death
- Love and Forgiveness in the Presence of the Enemy
- Love, Forgiveness, and Wisdom

Love, Forgiveness, and Compassion Conversation Guides

www.fetzer.org/resources

These guides are designed to help group facilitators and individuals explore the power of love, forgiveness, and compassion. Each resource includes suggested questions, essays, videos, home practices, and resources for further exploration.

Media

Forgiveness: A Time to Love and a Time to Hate

www.helenwhitney.com

Scheduled to air on PBS in 2011, this documentary's dramatic and moving stories introduce real people who have faced a horrific tragedy and have struggled in their hearts to forgive. Produced by Paul Dietrich and award-winning producer, director, and writer Helen Whitney, with major funding provided by the Fetzer Institute.

Krista Tippett On Being (previously *Speaking of Faith with Krista Tippett*)

www.onbeing.org

On Being is a new kind of conversation about religion, spirituality, and large questions of meaning in every aspect of life. Hosted by Krista Tippett on public radio, this weekly show is also available by podcast.

The Mystery of Love

www.themysteryoflove.org

A documentary exploring love in marriage, family, community, science, forgiveness, the search for the divine, friendship, even war. Actor, playwright, and author Anna Deavere Smith hosts this two-hour special produced by the Independent Production Fund, with major funding provided by the Fetzer Institute.

The Power of Forgiveness

www.journeyfilms.com

This documentary examines the power of forgiveness in alleviating anger and grief caused by the most dramatic transgressions imaginable and those that are more commonplace. Among its subjects the film features families of victims from the tragedy of 9/11 and forgiveness education in Northern Ireland, where forgiveness has been a way of life for generations. Produced by Journey Films, with major funding provided by the Fetzer Institute.

Websites

Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education

www.ccare.stanford.edu

This center, housed at Stanford University, undertakes rigorous scientific study of the neural, mental, and social bases of compassion and altruistic behavior. It draws from a wide spectrum of disciplines, especially neuroscience, psychology, economics, and contemplative traditions.

Center for Investigating Healthy Minds

www.investigatinghealthyminds.org

Located at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, the center conducts rigorous interdisciplinary research on healthy qualities of mind such as kindness, compassion, forgiveness, and mindfulness. The CIHM engages in research and outreach with the goal of cultivating healthy qualities of the mind at the individual, community, and global levels.

Charter for Compassion

www.charterforcompassion.org

Using her TED Prize, author Karen Armstrong is making her wish to help create, launch, and propagate a Charter for Compassion come true. This website is one of the tools that is bringing that wish to fruition.

Fetzer Institute

www.fetzer.org

The Fetzer Institute engages with people and projects around the world to help bring the power of love, forgiveness, and compassion to the center of individual and community life. Find project information, resources, videos, news, and upcoming events on this site.

Forgive for Good

www.learningtoforgive.com

The website of Dr. Fred Luskin, director of Stanford's Forgiveness Projects, provides information and resources on the benefits of forgiveness.

Greater Good Science Center

www.greatergood.berkeley.edu

Based at the University of California, Berkeley, the center studies the psychology, sociology, and neuroscience of well-being and teaches skills that foster a thriving, resilient, and compassionate society. This site highlights groundbreaking scientific research on compassion and altruism.

The Institute for Research on Unlimited Love

www.unlimitedloveinstitute.org

The Institute focuses on the science and spirituality of the unselfish love that shapes the lives of people who find energy and joy in the compassionate service of others. Information about the institute's activities, publications, and funding is available on this site.

Self-Compassion: A Healthier Way of Relating to Yourself

www.self-compassion.org

This site, developed by Dr. Kristin Neff, associate professor of human development and culture at the University of Texas, Austin, provides information and resources on self-compassion, including exercises, meditations, and research.

Spirituality & Practice

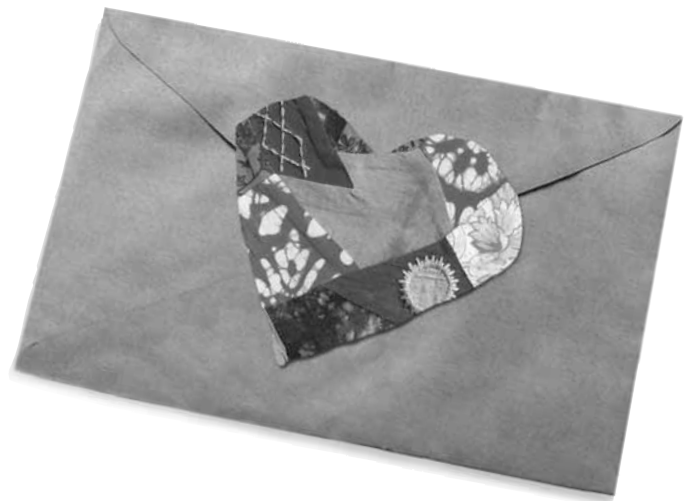
www.spiritualityandpractice.com

This site shares ways to practice spirituality in everyday life and includes book, audio, and film reviews; ideas and links for 37 essential practices; and e-courses for spiritual growth and self-improvement. Spiritualityandpractice.com offers resources from multiple faiths and belief systems.

We encourage you to take a pause from e-mails, voice mails and phone calls to write a note to someone you care about. Express your thanks for a kindness, share how you miss them, or recall a memory or story. A handwritten note, no matter the length, may deepen, renew or mend relationships...and maybe even make someone's day! A letter written from the heart can become a thoughtful practice that helps you stay connected—or reconnects you—with cherished friends and family.

When writing your letter, consider these tips from Lilia Fallgatter, author of *The Most Important Letter You Will Ever Write*, and the people at Paper Source:

- Before you even pick up a pen, create surroundings that will evoke the inspiration to write.
- Make a deliberate effort to clear and quiet your mind, and focus on the person to whom you are writing.
- Create a list of words or phrases that describe the person to whom you are writing.
- Create a list of memories or significant occasions and events you have shared with this person.
- Using the lists you've created, write the first draft of the letter. Review and edit the first draft, then re-write the letter with the changes you made.
- Write from the heart, tell a story, remind them of your history together, a favorite time. Share one thing about that person that you admire—everyone loves a compliment.
- Handwrite your letters. Your penmanship, no matter how eccentric, is a piece of you. Handwriting your letters and notes gives the recipient something special.
- E-mail has made it easy to jot down a few words, spell check and hit send. But when handwriting a special note, use a scratch pad and draft your letter first. Check spelling and grammar. Save your good stationery or handmade card until you have a clean draft to copy.
- Choose beautiful paper to write on and a pen you enjoy writing with. Embellish with ribbons, snaps, brads, glitter or hole punches—the possibilities are endless. Coordinate your postage stamp with your envelope color or the theme of your letter. If you can draw, sketch or doodle, add something from yourself.
- Enhance your letters and notes by including a favorite poem, a beautiful prayer, song lyrics, personal mementos or keepsakes. Consider sharing a photo your recipient might have forgotten about or never seen, a ticket stub from the play you saw together (special original material can be photocopied, rather than sending the original) or a leaf you picked up while walking together. Line your envelope with giftwrap from the present you are thanking them for.
- Encourage a response by sending a pre-stamped card.
- Don't let any of the above frighten you—the most important thing of all is to just do it.



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