

## LOVE AND FORGIVENESS IN THE WORK OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

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What do human rights have to do with love and the work of Women’s Learning Partnership (WLP)? At first glance, this link may not be obvious, as the word “love” is not common in WLP manuals and trainings, nor is it found in the many human rights treaties and declarations established by the United Nations and the international community. In many ways, however, love is the silent, unspoken motivation behind each and every principle associated with respect for human rights. It is therefore the underlying principle of *all* WLP manuals, which seek to improve the lives of citizens, especially women, in the countries in which we work.

But how does love function in the context of our work if it is never mentioned? Can something as invisible and “unscientific” as love really be measured and used as an effective tool in our work? One might argue that it functions best when it is left unspoken, since the word itself has no meaning without action. WLP instead focuses on a new mode of behavior that cannot be understood or integrated without being put into practice in our trainings and workshops themselves. The sole purpose, in fact, of our workshops and trainings is to provide a safe space and forum in which we can live out these new principles rather than just read about them in books.

WLP’s manuals state our methodology, driven by our mission: “WLP promotes and sustains leadership that is horizontal, participatory, and inclusive throughout all our programs.” Each WLP workshop is considered a “microcosm of a culture of democracy in action,” guided by six practices: communication, listening, compromise, building consensus, creating shared meaning, and developing learning partnerships. In order to fully engage these practices, WLP participants and facilitators must constantly open themselves to something new—to another person’s way of thinking—in order

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to better understand and value the views of another. For example, WLP’s introduction to *Leading to a Culture of Democracy* states that to listen is to “be receptive to the ideas of others” and that “listening is not confined to hearing what a colleague or competitor says; it also includes valuing, respecting, and giving credit to their suggestions and opinions...”

To be receptive to another person is to “receive” them. To compromise on one’s own personal needs and to build consensus for a greater good, to be willing to join with another’s purpose and vision to create shared meaning, and to offer one’s positive energy and enthusiasm to develop learning partnerships is to put into action the principles in the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights. WLP trainees must consider what human rights documents actually require of us in our daily lives. In the care, consideration, and process of understanding others, that indefinable elusive flowing force, which cannot be coerced, spontaneously emerges—often while a group is unaware—and much to the delight of our participants and facilitators.

Further, to want to do more for one’s community is, by its very nature, a form of love; the love is in the effort we put into our struggle for human rights—often at the cost of our own lives. Love is the internal impetus that motivates us to move beyond our fear and to risk everything to create a better world for all.

But what about those who participate in our trainings for “selfish” purposes? That is, those who seek to improve their own lot by undergoing training in leadership and democracy? Even in activities that are not “selfless,” love may play a role—in the desire to achieve self-respect and to empower oneself to make positive life changes, one automatically benefits their greater community. It is a well-known principle in psychology that one must be secure in one’s own self before being able to truly love another. It is impossible to respect another when one’s own self-confidence has been damaged—impossible to listen to others when one feels one has not been adequately heard. This, too, is part of WLP’s mission—to empower individuals to take their lives into their own hands and to reach their fullest potential.

In *Leading to a Culture of Democracy*, President and CEO of WLP Mahnaz Afkhami cited Attar’s *Conference of the Birds*, a tale that is rooted in the principle of the “path of return.” This reference to a “returning” suggests that these higher principles are latent in the heart of every human being—they are not actually new—and yet have not yet been fully recognized and consciously acted on. WLP’s work involves an inward quest in which we discover our full potential, and in doing so as individuals, we can collectively benefit our communities and move towards a more democratic society. Afkhami wrote:

*Our work for democracy resembles a never-ending dream, perhaps because democracy is only an idea that provides the impetus to move us forward. Or that its reality is the process, the motion, and the reaching, a way for us to learn to understand others, to communicate with others, to learn from them, and be open so others learn from us. Or as implied in the Persian poet Attar’s Conference of the Birds, where the quest of the birds for the ideal ends with the birds looking inwardly to themselves, our search, we hope will bring us the same wisdom.<sup>3</sup>*

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3. Introduction, *Leading to a Culture of Democracy*, p. 4.

## WOMEN'S ABILITY TO LOVE

WLP focuses on amplifying and enabling the contributions of women in particular to achieving democracy and peace. As Former Prime Minister of Canada the Rt. Honorable Kim Campbell reminded us in her opening remarks for WLP at the 2015 World Movement for Democracy, there is a wide body of literature supporting the fact that women have a unique ability to collaborate. This skill makes their presence in any leadership team achieve better results than if men only had been present and makes their outcomes more successful than those of the “smartest individual in the room.” Collaboration, by its very nature, requires a loss of self-interested motivations in favor of the success of the whole; it is to move beyond one's individual interests and to aspire to help others by linking with them in a shared vision. This, too, may be considered a form of love, and it is especially abundant when women are included.

## FORGIVENESS

What role does forgiveness play in the work of human rights defenders, and what is its relationship to love? If respecting human rights is a form of love for one's fellow being, this process requires forgiveness and compassion for the faults of individuals, especially those who have wronged us. Forgiveness also allows victims of abuse to heal, as it is widely held by psychologists to be the final stage of grief. In many cases, it is only through forgiveness of oneself that one can begin to forgive others, and to heal. In its case study on prostitution, WLP's manual *Victories over Violence* highlights love as a central reason why women are able to forgive their abusers:

*Living without supervision, residents personify Steven's motto 'Love heals.' Cultivating a community is vital to success. She asserts that love empowers the women to 'forgive' their abusers, support one another and 'live differently.'*<sup>4</sup>

In reviewing the approach of our most effective leaders, including Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, and Mahatma Gandhi, we discover yet another phenomenon associated with forgiveness—its power. Many of these leaders have deemed forgiveness as the most effective way to disarm their opposition. There is, in fact, no power stronger. But forgiveness is not a deliberate action imposed on someone who has suffered an unforgivable injury—it is the natural reflex of a new kind of consciousness—one that allows the injured party to “see” their opponent in themselves. It is a rare quality and likely what distinguishes these leaders from the rest of the pack, and therefore it is worth considering in this manual.

In many ways, the core principle underlying WLP's human rights manual, *Beyond Equality*, embodies this state of mind as it encourages our workshop participants to strive for something better than mere “equality.” We need to be free of the relativity and comparison that only leads to more competition, conflict, and tension. Instead of seeing *difference*, we are to see the fundamental humanity of all,

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4. *Victories over Violence*, p. 95, Session 12, Case Study.

knowing that *all* deserve better—the best. It is possible to rise above comparisons and to raise the bar for all humankind by allowing all to reach their full potential.

While one may claim forgiveness to be unique to the Christian tradition, its uncanny power is paid tribute in every faith and also in modern and post-modern philosophy and literature. In the Jewish tradition, for example, it is called *selichá* and is defined as an act of the heart. This is, perhaps, because the mind cannot attain forgiveness on its own—it is too limited by the world of binary oppositions—good/bad, ugly/beautiful, happy/sad. *Selichá*, according to Emory University Professor of Judaic Studies Rabbi David Blumenthal, involves “reaching a deeper understanding of the sinner—an empathy for the ‘troubledness’ of the other.” Blumenthal explains: “*Selichá*, too, is not a reconciliation or an embracing of the offender; it is simply reaching the conclusion that the offender is human, frail, and deserving of sympathy. It is closer to an act of mercy than to an act of grace. A woman abused by a man may never reach this level of forgiveness; she is not obliged, nor is it morally necessary for her, to do so.”<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, this consciousness of the “troubledness of the other” is not a matter of morals and does not imply that one actively “forgives.” In a sense, the woman cited above forgives without forgiving. To forgive is therefore a natural response that comes only over time. It is by no means to diminish a crime or assume oneself is better than another. If anything, it is to shine the light on the crime in a way that takes the utmost courage by both the injured and the injurer. For the wronged and wrongdoer, it is the acknowledgment of irreversible damage and the internal knowing that this damage cannot be personalized. It has been inflicted on one’s fellow human being and therefore becomes part of the fabric of her or his own being.

As Walt Whitman perceived in “Of the visages of things,” one person is “good” and the other is “bad,” one is “ugly” another is “beautiful.” But after “piercing” through the “hells beneath,” we are no worse and no better than the entirety of our race.<sup>6</sup>

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5. <http://www.crosscurrents.org/blumenthal.htm>.

6. “[Of the Visage of Things]” Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1993, pp. 480-481.

Of the visages of things – And of piercing through to the accepted hells beneath;

Of ugliness – To me there is just as much in it as there is in beauty – And now the ugliness of human beings is acceptable to me;

Of detected persons – To me, detected persons are not, in any respect, worse than undetected persons – and are not in any respect worse than I am myself;

Of criminals – To me, any judge, or any juror, is equally criminal – and any reputable person is also – and the President is also.