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Subject: Teaching Toolbox: It Hurts to Love Right Now

Date: Thursday, November 5, 2020 9:13 AM

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## It Hurts to Love Right Now

by Daisy L. Breneman

Love has always been a guiding principle of my life—well before I was old enough to articulate that. My grandfather was the first person to teach me the value of love. He was a large man (he seemed even more so at that time), with a booming voice and a contagious laugh; he was the gentlest person I've ever known. This man captured and released groundhogs to keep them out of his garden; a maintenance man in a poultry plant, and a fixer at heart, his rough hands would play tea party with me, guide me in making the most lopsided three-legged stool you've ever seen, and wipe away any tears that came—though it was hard to cry around him, as he made me feel so loved and happy. Whenever he saw me, his face lit up with absolute delight and love. I remember sitting in his lap as a little kid, feeling happy, safe, protected, surrounded with love, during a childhood in which those feelings were scarce and fleeting.

On [John Prine's](#) last album, there's a song called "[Boundless Love](#)"—*that's* what I experienced with granddaddy and since, with my partner of almost thirty years, and with my (now adult) kids, and with my marvelous, generous friends, including my dear one whose ringtone on my phone is that very song.

What I learned early and live daily is that love fuels us, empowers us, protects us, heals us, provides respite, and saves us.

If you're like me, you're probably weary of hearing what you feel in your bones: we are in troubled, tumultuous, painful times—when it feels like we are drowning in deep injustice and cruelty, in toxic leadership, political polarization and social division, with this frickin' virus that has taken so much from all of us. With so much [uncertainty](#) ahead, the world and the future feels tenuous. As we witness this all unfold, and experience the loss and grief and anger of it all, we need to find ways to not just survive, but to discover the best parts of ourselves, and to summon and nurture them. And to build communities in which we support others in this terrible, urgent work.

During a [CFI Contemplative Practices for Pandemic Self Care](#) session over the summer, my [co-conspirator](#), Ed Brantmeier and I were talking about how much there is to be angry about, to despair about. I made the comment that I'm trying to approach these crises with love. And, I said, it hurts to love right now.

Right now, love requires vulnerability, energy, fortitude, and a willingness to get hurt. It requires extending love to people who seem unoriented to love. It requires extending love to people who harm other people. It requires trust we have absolutely no reason to give. It requires an impossible resilience in this moment when so many of us feel and are fragile, when we are so isolated and divided.

In [“Argument as Emergence, Rhetoric as Love.”](#) Rhetorician Jim Corder writes that, when we encounter contending narratives that are antithetical to and challenge our own, when we feel “flushed, feverish, quaky, shaky, angry, scared, hurt, shocked, disappointed, alarmed, outraged, even terrified,” we can make the choice to emerge into each other, to embrace the other, to love.

Right now, love is definitely taking a beating. We are being pushed into situations that are painful, that evoke righteous anger, and even situations that could make us wish ill upon others, or at least not mind [if ill happens](#).

*The Atlantic* writer George Packer argues we are in [“a plastic hour.”](#) a time when “an ossified social order suddenly turns pliable, prolonged stasis gives way to motion, and people dare to hope.” Yet, as Packer notes, this also requires a great deal of us. And, really, so many of us are having moments when hope seems something we can’t afford. As we face this terrifying future, it is quite easy to lapse into anger.

Now, it is important to consider [the uses of anger in social justice movements](#). Some argue anger is a useful and valuable [tool for addressing injustice](#). Both anger and love have value and meaning, and they aren’t necessarily antithetical to each other—we all experience both, often in the same contexts. Nothing launches me into action faster and more fiercely than when someone or something I love is harmed or in danger. And, right now, everything is endangered. [Sisonke Msimang](#) writes that, “The work of justice is a fine balance between rage and reason but those who believe in a better future have an advantage. They know that anger is a mighty force, one that is most effective when it is fuelled by love. Love, anger, and activism often work together.”

While love and anger can work together, anger can be dangerous, destructive, power-robbing, and counter-productive. In [Anger and Forgiveness](#), philosopher of justice Martha Nussbaum agrees that anger can have [corrosive effects](#) and is often not the best path to justice. Perhaps we all have to, for ourselves, decide which lights we want to shine the brightest in a particular setting and which afford us and others the most human integrity and dignity.

[Love can be a powerful tool](#) for, and approach to, justice and equity. [bell hooks](#) writes that “the moment we choose to love we begin to move against domination, against oppression. The moment we choose to love we begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate ourselves and others. That action is the testimony of love as the practice of freedom.” hooks invokes the work of [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), another powerful advocate of love. More current activism, such as by [The Revolutionary Love Project](#), centers love, as well. Stanford even teaches an online Coursera course on [Love as a Force for Social Justice](#).

Injustice steals, and demands, a lot from us. We need to find ways to not only correct injustice, but to find a better path forward. We need a lot of tools and approaches to fight it. And, as we strive to teach in this era of intersecting crises, we are learning to expand our approaches, and our hearts.

[Pedagogies of love](#) can be especially powerful in challenging times. [Joan Clingan](#) imagines the possibilities if love were “identified as a methodology, pedagogical practice, and value in leadership, activism, and education.” Love can be a path to [building humanity](#), to [political resistance](#), to [liberation](#), to [affirmation](#), to [peace](#).

If love is the right approach for you, in this moment, there are some ways we can manifest it in our teaching spaces:

- Be vulnerable with students. Let them know when we are struggling, so that they can feel the comfort of knowing that others are struggling, too. [Vulnerability](#), of course, means different things depending on positionality, power and privilege, and context. [Humility](#) is also more important than ever, as we all face so many unknowns.
- Have flexibility, adaptability, and [grace](#), especially during these challenging times. These are also qualities related to the principles of [universal design for learning](#), which maximizes learning for all. As many disability activists are saying, [it’s too bad it took a pandemic](#) to get us paying attention to access.
- Being reasonable about standards and expectations doesn’t mean completely letting them go. Love sometimes means challenging people, and finding the right balance of challenge and support. Lowered expectations, even with good intentions, can be part of a “rigged and unjust” educational system ([Bettina Love, 21-22](#)). Sometimes loving someone requires giving honest feedback (or [“feedforward”](#)) so they can grow; critique can be a gesture of love.
- Create a [caring community](#) in your classroom. Connection and care take on even more importance during these isolated times. Take time to get to know your students, and help them get to know, and care about, each other. I’ve used the [Eight Key Questions](#) to help establish community guidelines at the start of the semester. This can help students think about their responsibilities to each other in the classroom space, and about issues of fairness and equity. More on building community in a college classroom can be found in this [Teaching Toolbox](#).
- Give space for caring in the classroom. Do frequent [check-ins](#). Honor where students are. Recently I did a check-in where I asked students to send out a wish for each other, and they shared quite nice, moving things. But don’t insist on optimism or positivity. Let students express what they need to express. Invite honest answers to the question “how are you?”—or consider ditching that question and trying [these](#) instead.
- Love the students who “seem” to least deserve it. That disrespectful, pain-in-the-ass student? That might be [a student in distress](#) who needs you to reach out to them. Or maybe they’re just having a difficult time, and your gestures of care and concern will mean a lot, possibly more than

you know.

- [Love the colleagues](#) who need it most. The pain-in-the-ass ones, especially! Recognize the struggle in the people around you, and listen to and *for* their stories. Center the needs of those from [marginalized](#) populations who are disproportionately experiencing the negative effects of the intersecting crises of this never-ending year.
- Of course, extend love to yourself. In [loving-kindness meditation](#), sometimes the hardest part is when you are called to extend loving kindness to yourself. We're all sick of hearing that these are unprecedented times, but they actually are. We aren't going to be [as productive](#), as [on top of things](#), as fully present in all our spaces as we might like to be. We might not have the capacity to be our "best selves" (whatever that might mean). It takes a lot just to get by. Honor that in yourself. Exercise self-care and [self-compassion](#), as generously and as freely as the care and compassion you give others.

*If by chance I should find myself at risk  
A-falling from this jagged cliff  
I look below, and I look above  
I'm surrounded by your boundless love.  
—John Prine*

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