

Love is . . .



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Introduction

The following wisdom teaching has continued to orientate my living: "in the end three things remain . . . faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is love" (Corinthians, Christian Scriptures). As I have continued to undergo transformative shifts in my perception of Selfhood, the wisdom teaching has remained constant. Even so, the meanings given to the terms faith, hope and love have continued to evolve. Within each new stage of Selfhood, the reverberating question remained: what does it mean . . . now . . . to have faith, hold hope, and to love and be loved?

Within my current stage of Selfhood, I re-turn to the wisdom teaching through the lens of: "the human tradition . . . [which] sees all of humanity in the evolutionary process of maturation."ⁱ Within the human tradition the invitation is to continue to embrace our humanity fully, or in the words of Loch Kelly: "to live a fully intimate human life."ⁱⁱ The human tradition draws from the rich tapestry of wisdom, beliefs, knowledge, and values accumulated within human experience from ancient times through to the present. The tradition includes that which continues to resound in our time and place in history and transcends that which does not.



Previously, I have written on faith¹ and hope² within the context of the human tradition. In a nutshell, faith is experienced as: a dynamic energy, or life force, which both drives and enables us to explore and integrate our deepest truths in relation to meaning making. In a similar manner, hope is experienced as: a dynamic interior response to the

¹ See [www.treeoflife.org.au/Resources/Faith or non-faith: is that the question?](http://www.treeoflife.org.au/Resources/Faith%20or%20non-faith%3A%20is%20that%20the%20question?)

² See [www.treeoflife.org.au/Resources/The nature of hope](http://www.treeoflife.org.au/Resources/The%20nature%20of%20hope)

possibilities in life. In terms of self transcendence, hope involves the possibility of transformative shifts in our perception of ourselves-in-our-world. Now, it is time to offer an understanding of the nature of love.

This article will proceed in the following manner: setting the context and offering an understanding of the nature of Love; outlining the source of Love; exploring three expressions of Love, i.e., beyond, between and within; noting obstacles to the human experience of Love; and concluding remarks.

The context

The anchor point for this reflection on the nature of Love comes from the writings of Anne Hillman:

"We stand at an evolutionary juncture, called to awaken to a new kind of Love. This Love is not a feeling, it is a great power. Awakening to this radically different Love may be gradual or it may come in a flash - an explosion that rocks you to your core. Either way, it will shatter your perception of who you think you are."ⁱⁱⁱ

For the purposes of this reflection, Hillman's quotation stands within the context of Thomas Berry's^{iv} argument that at this juncture in human history we are called to re-perceive, or re-imagine, the human place of belonging within the world. It is Berry's claim that the old Story of how the world came into being and our place of belonging within it, has been broken open. As such, we have been living in between Stories of meaning and belonging. Now, within the new science based creation Story involving 13.8 billion years, we are required to re-perceive our place of belonging.³ Perhaps such a re-perceiving will require awakening to a new kind of Love which will shatter our current perception of who we are.



³ See www.treeoflife.org.au/ The sacred work of being human/Finding our place of belonging

Love is . . .

Hillman's quotation, as set within Berry's context, both draws me towards engagement and leaves me with the question: "what is the nature of this new kind of Love?" As I have continued to live into the question, the following response has emerged. The response is not a definition as such, rather an entry point for engagement.

Love is . . . experienced as a field of energy within Life itself

Love is . . . experienced as a way of being in the world

Love is . . . experienced as standing in our own ground, openheartedly

At the heart of each of these expressions of Love, is the calling forth of relationship. The energies of Love call forth relationship in three particular ways. The first way relates to the transpersonal, i.e., beyond the personal realm.⁴ The relationship called forth here, is Self-in-Life. . The second way relates to the interpersonal, i.e., between individuals. The relationship called forth here, is Self-in-community. The third way relates to the intrapersonal, i.e., inner connection. The relationship called forth here, is Self-love. In this way, Love is experienced as beyond, between, and within.



Love is experienced as beyond, between, and within

What is the source of Love?

Within an evolutionary view of life, where or when does Love emerge? Was Love there from the beginnings of the Universe Story 13.8 billion years ago? Or has love evolved over time? I'm not sure if such questions have been, or can be, answered. What is recognized at this point in history, is that Love is now woven into the very fabric

⁴ Within the context of this article, the transpersonal comprises the evolutionary nature of Life itself.

of Life. In this regard, Bernard Lonergan argued: "there is in the world, as it were, a charged field of love and meaning" which is "ever unobtrusive, hidden, inviting each of us to join. And join we must if we are to perceive it, for our perceiving is through our own loving."⁵ So the energies of Love are not passive, they are invitational; yet they are somewhat concealed. If we are to participate, we must first intentionally choose Love as our inner orientating reference point.

Hillman is of the same mind as Lonergan regarding both the source and the hidden nature of Love. Concerning the hidden nature, she declared: "the energies of Love are subtle - sent and received at depth, these energies are registered beneath thinking, beneath feeling, seeing, hearing, and touching." In this way, Love is veiled within the deeper rhythms of Life itself.

Regarding the source, Hillman maintained that Love is not of a supernatural source.⁵ Rather, the energies of Love are an evolutionary imperative, pulsating within the very heart of Life. Therefore, the source of Love is transpersonal. Even though the source of Love is transpersonal, Hillman declared: "we are life itself - not separate from it." As such, the energies of Love which are intrinsic to Life, also permeate our very being. Accordingly, Love is both transpersonal and deeply embedded within the personal realm. As such, we need not look outside of ourselves for the energies of Love. We must look within.

Even though we are to look within ourselves for the energies of Love, it is important to clarify that Love does not emanate from humanity. Neither is Love bound within humanity. Therefore, the energies of Love do not belong to us. Rather, we can choose to belong to Love. Or in the language of Lonergan, we can choose to live as "*being-in-love*." When we choose *being-in-love*, we allow Love to be the inner orientation for our daily living.



Love is both transpersonal and deeply embedded within the personal realm

⁵ Supernatural within this article means: not of the natural world and/or relating to deity.

The transpersonal expression of Love - beyond

The expression of Love at the transpersonal level, is one of continuing to call humanity into relationship with Life itself. At this juncture in western history, such a call takes the form of an ever-deepening experience of connection, purpose and belonging within the 13.8 billion year Universe Story. As we respond to this expression of Love, we feel *at home in the world*; we discover within us a joyful humility and reverence for the mystery of being human within a wondrous universe; and we metaphorically *walk humbly within the Earth community, with wisdom and compassion*.

The call towards relationship with Life requires that we participate in the ongoing life process of transformative living.⁶ Transformative living involves breaking through and transcending redundant perceptions of ourselves-in-Life. Such an ongoing life process, gives rise to shifts in our perception of Selfhood. As a result, the energies of Love invite us to an ongoing life adventure of coming to know ourselves afresh, again and again.



Love invites us to an ongoing life adventure
of coming to know ourselves afresh, again and again

The shifts in our perception, or stages of development, are named by Ken Wilber et al as: egocentric, to ethnocentric, to worldcentric, to kosmocentric.^{vi} *Egocentric* involves a focus on the individual, in the form of self absorption. *Ethnocentric* both includes and transcends the individual, while focussing on the norms and beliefs of local community groups, religious traditions, nations. Those outside of the *tribe*, so to speak, are given no real consideration. *Worldcentric* both includes and transcends the individual and the tribe, within the recognition that humanity is a whole, made up of many parts, or, belief systems. Within this stage "care and concern" are offered to all peoples. *Kosmocentric* both includes and transcends the former stages, giving rise to the experience of "identifying with and caring for all" life, be it plant,

⁶ For more on transformative living see: [www.treeoflife.org.au/The sacred work of being human/The art of transformative living](http://www.treeoflife.org.au/The_sacred_work_of_being_human/The_art_of_transformative_living)

insect, fish, animal, human, land, or ocean. The kosmocentric stage of development would equate to *being-in-love*.

In light of the above paragraph, the calling forth of transformative shifts, or stages: "does not annihilate [an individual's] resources and their identity by entering so deeply into them."^{vii} Rather the basis of transformation is Love calling forth authentic Self-in-Life. Even so, as per Hillman's quotation on page three, Love calling forth authentic relationships, sometimes requires a shattering of our self-perceptions. How does *shattering* differ from annihilation?

Firstly, the shattering process is to be expected, because it is the nature of creation. In this regard, Raimon Panikkar argued that creation involves both: "continuation and rupture."^{viii} In a similar manner, the shattering that takes place within us, is one of breaking open, or rupturing, current perceptions which would hold us stuck within a particular stage of development. In contrast, annihilation is not to be expected, because it is not in the natural order of creation.

Secondly, after the breaking open and transcending of a current perception of ourselves, we are left with a more expansive view of ourselves. Whilst such a *breaking open* may be painful to endure, it is held within the energies of Love and Hope (as mentioned previously). Therefore, the experience of Love calling forth a *shattering* of our current perception of Selfhood, differs significantly from the experience of annihilation, which involves a total obliteration of identity.



Love calling forth a shattering of our current perception of Selfhood

How do we transform from egocentric to being-in-love?

Theory is helpful, but theory alone is not enough. We cannot simply think our way into *being-in-love*. Whilst there is no step-by-step path

to follow, there are some guidelines to put into practice. Firstly, there is intention. We choose to respond to Love's invitation to orientate our very being and living. Such a choice to belong to Love is usually attributed to saints or mystics. Perhaps at this evolutionary juncture, it is time for common humanity to awaken to this transformative experience of Love. Could this be the next evolutionary leap for the human species?



Secondly, we accept that being human is enough. We need not look outside of ourselves for the energies of Love. In this regard Sharon Salzberg maintains: "within the western world there is a presupposition that we are not enough - we need to be saved by a supernatural being."^{ix} Yet Hillman declared that: "Love holds all our humanity. We had not thought it was enough to be human - to be ordinary, to make mistakes, to embrace, then push away." So, within the light of Love, we are enough as we are.

Even though we are enough as we are, transformation is also required. Such transformation involves taking responsibility for the choice to belong to Love. Such transformation also requires that we take responsibility for engaging in the ongoing process of transformative living. This is no easy task, for the transition from seeking a supernatural being to save us, to taking responsibility for our own being and living, can be quite unnerving.

Thirdly, we cannot fake it until we make it. Therefore, we need to engage in spiritual practices⁷ which allow us to participate in transformative living and in so doing, shift through our natural human stages of egocentric, ethnocentric, worldcentric, to kosmocentric, or *being-in-love*.

How may we know that we are living as *being-in-love*? Hillman maintained: "The energies of Love are registered in an interior stillness." Such an interior stillness receives the whole of our

⁷ For spiritual practices see: [www.treeoflife.org.au/Contemplative practices](http://www.treeoflife.org.au/Contemplative_practices)

humanity⁸ and refines it into wisdom and compassion. As we consciously engage in the ongoing transformative process of allowing our humanity to be refined into wisdom and compassion, we experience *being-in-love* in the here-and-now, within the knowledge that we are also participating in the evolutionary nature of Life itself.



The choice to live as *being-in-love* is not for the faint hearted. The choice takes us on an interior journey which continues to shatter our current perceptions of who we know ourselves to be and then re-forms our view in a new way. So why would we bother? Firstly, when we learn to metaphorically *stop fighting against the process*, it becomes quite an adventure; a lifelong adventure of coming to know ourselves afresh . . . again and again. Secondly, as Hillman so eloquently contended:

"If we are to outgrow the kinds of perceptions and behaviors that have birthed the welter of conflicts in our Time, we cannot do it by relying on moral suasion, good will, trying harder and problem-solving alone. These ways are necessary, but they are not enough. Only the light of a Love that does not belong to us can set us free."

Summary ~ transpersonal

Love is recognized as a dynamic field of energy within Life itself, which calls forth relationship. Such a field of energy does not belong to a supernatural realm or supernatural being. The source is Life itself. Neither do the energies of Love belong to any one individual or group. Rather, we all belong within the field of Love. At the same time, to participate fully requires of us to choose Love as the orientating reference point for our daily living. When we do so, the energies

⁸ The whole of our humanity involves our brilliance, our ordinariness, and our not so desirable aspects. It also involves our personality types and traits.

of Love invite us to participate in the ongoing process of transformative living.

The energies of Love as experienced at the transpersonal level, call us towards authentic Self-in-life. As we respond to the call, our very being is transformed into *being-in-love*, which gives rise to an ever-deepening experience of connection, purpose and belonging within the very nature of Life itself. As a result, we feel at home in the world.

The interpersonal expression of Love - between

Krista Tippett argues of Love: "we've lived it as a feeling, when it is a way of being."^x What could be meant by the phrase, *a way of being*?

One understanding is that the energies of Love take form within humanity by way of the following qualities: wisdom, compassion, courage, commitment, faithfulness, forgiveness, mercy, patience, generosity of heart, kindness, vulnerability, joyful humility, endurance, nonviolence.



love is . . . a way of being in the world

The choice to live from and into the qualities listed above, allows us to break through the isolated, egocentric self and gives rise to an experience of Self-in-community; an experience of Selfhood which is not driven by inner neediness, inner woundedness, dominance, or greed. Rather, it is a Selfhood orientated by the qualities of Love, giving rise to the experience of feeling *at home in community*.⁹ As we seek to consciously live from and into such qualities within our daily life, Love becomes our *way of being in the world*.

Such *a way of being in the world* generates profound connection between individuals. In this regard, John O'Donohue declared that

⁹ Community here could comprise two individuals, or many

a Loving relationship involves the: "act of recognition."^{xii} The *act of recognition* involves seeing beyond each other's personas and truly seeing and hearing^{xiii} one another. Such acts of recognition can "affect the deepest change." Why, because when individuals are truly seen and heard, they drop their defenses and are open to transformative shifts in their perception of themselves. Thus, through the act of recognition, Love becomes action. For this reason, to Love and to receive Love, is the essence of human community.



to Love and receive Love is the essence of human community

A few words of caution:

1. It is important to reiterate that to choose Love as the orientating reference point for our way of being in the world, is not for the faint hearted. It is quite a task, as it continues to reveal to us where we are stuck in our stages of development and calls forth transformative shifts in our very being.
2. Some people hold the misconception that Love is weak. On the contrary, it takes courage and resilience¹⁰ to engage in the ongoing process of transformative living and to live from and into the qualities of Love. Also, the energies of Love are a great power, because they alone are the impetus for authentic living. Furthermore, when we live into the qualities of Love, we have less *internal buttons to be pressed* by others, which means we are less likely to be manipulated. Therefore, we are more able to respond to life circumstances from the place of inner freedom, rather than react from emotional drivers. As a result, Love is not weak ~ Love liberates.
3. Choosing Love as our orientating reference point does not mean that we allow others to treat us abusively and/or metaphorically *walk*

¹⁰ For more on resilience see [www.treeoflife.org.au/Resources/Nurturing resilience in the carer journey](http://www.treeoflife.org.au/Resources/Nurturing%20resilience%20in%20the%20carer%20journey)

all over us. As Sharon Salzberg maintains: "tender hearted concern for others does not mean being foolish. For [Love] to be real it must be paired with wisdom."

4. Love cannot conquer all ills. Therefore, if Love is chosen as a means to an end, then it may well fail. When we choose Love, we are required to let go our attachment to results.

5. There may be times when we have to withdraw from a person or situation which is harmful to us. What is the place of Love in such a situation? We bring all the qualities of Love to bear on the response we are required to make. Such a response may involve simply walking away, or taking some further action.



Love is not weak . . . it is a great power . . . liberating

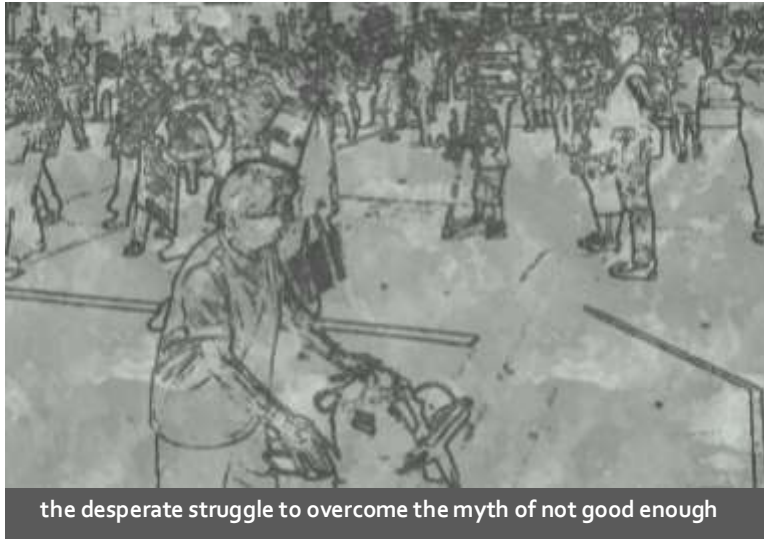
Summary ~ interpersonal

The energies of Love within the interpersonal level, call us towards authentic Self-in-community. Love as experienced within the interpersonal level, takes form within human beings through particular qualities. Such qualities become a *way of being in the world* which generates the potential for profound connection with one another. As a result, we feel at home in community.

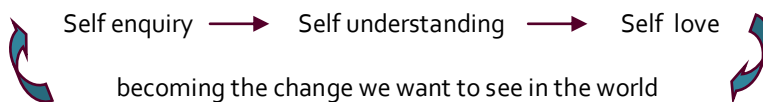
The intrapersonal expression of Love - within

Sharon Salzberg contends: "Viewing ourselves as faulty, incomplete, and guilty of imperfection, we spend our lives in a desperate struggle to overcome the myth of not good enough." There are many ways in which we try to prove to ourselves and others, that we are worthy of Life. For some it is through good works, for others it is through religious piety, or achieving great knowledge or great feats within a field of employment, sports, medical breakthroughs, or whatever.

At some point though, these ways come up short and we once again wonder if we are good enough.



One way of breaking through and transcending the myth of not good enough, is to engage in the ongoing process of transformative living. At the intrapersonal level, such a process involves befriending ourselves within the light of Lovingkindness. Befriending here means, offering the *act of recognition* to ourselves. We offer the act of recognition to ourselves through the practice of bringing all of the qualities of Love to our ongoing spiritual practice of Self enquiry.¹¹ In so doing, we truly see and hear our own selves, i.e., our whole messy, confusing, ordinary, brilliant, human existence ~ within the light of Love. The act of befriending ourselves in this way, paves the way for breaking through and transcending the myth of not good enough.



The ongoing spiritual practice of befriending ourselves within the light of Lovingkindness, gives rise to Self understanding, which in turn gives rise to Self-love. Self-love here involves the experience of personal wholeness and inner freedom. Self-love also involves a robust sense of Selfhood, through which we feel *at home in our own skin*, so to speak. Also, Self-love allows us to become the change we want to see in the world.

The experience of Self-love stands in direct contrast to ego-centredness. Egocentredness, according to Kelly is like: "a looping thought pattern, that creates a feeling of a [small, separate] mini-me inside our heads."^{xiii} On the contrary, Self-love embraces a *dance* of Self/Not-self, without "trying to land in either one."^{xiv} In this way, the *dance* involves both naming and claiming our current Selfhood and

¹¹ See [www.treeoflife.org.au/Contemplative practices/Contemplative Self enquiry and The sacred work of being human/Gently integrating our shadow side](http://www.treeoflife.org.au/Contemplative_practices/Contemplative_Self_enquiry_and_The_sacred_work_of_being_human/Gently_integrating_our_shadow_side)

surrendering our attachment to a fixed identity. Such is the nature of transformative living.

In light of the above, the paradox within transformative living is that we are each a unique Self and an impermanent self which is part of an unfolding life process. Within such a paradox, we require a robust Selfhood in order to surrender our attachment to a fixed identity.



Self-love embraces a *dance* of Self and Not self

Even though Self/Not Self are both part of transformative living, the *art* of transformative living is not about finding a balance. Rather, the *art* involves recognizing which season we are currently experiencing. There are three recognizable seasons within the process of transformative living. The seasons are not linear in nature. Neither are they simply cycled through once. Within each new stage of development, the seasons may well be re-experienced.

The first season is where our current perception of Selfhood holds true within our belief system and life experience. Therefore, we experience personal wholeness and inner freedom. Within such a season we relax and truly live within it.

The second season is where cracks start appearing in our experience of Selfhood. Perhaps some new life experience clashes with a long-held belief, giving rise to a certain disharmony within our inner being. When we notice such cracks, we engage with them with an attitude of nonjudgmental curiosity. We may ask ourselves the open ended question: "I wonder if I am being invited to surrender any attachment here?"

The third season is where our experience of Selfhood has been ruptured, or broken open, giving rise to inner disorientation. This is not a season for surrender, for Love "does not break a bruised reed" (Isaiah,

Hebrew Scriptures). Rather, this is a season to gently re-discover and re-claim our unique Selfhood.



Note: It is worth stating here, that grief will often go hand in hand with letting go an attachment to a particular view of Selfhood. Grief is a natural and healthy human response to loss. Remaining stuck in grief is not. Therefore, conscious grieving may be part of the ongoing process of transformative living. Conscious grieving gives rise to acceptance. Acceptance gives rise to new possibilities

Self-love offers a ground of being from which we live deeply into who we know ourselves to be in the present, while at the same time remaining open to transformative shifts in our perception, if and when, they emerge within us. Such a stance in life is one of living with a robust Selfhood, which is held lightly. One metaphor for such a stance is: *standing in our own ground, openheartedly*.

What does openheartedly mean in this context? Firstly, as Thich Nhat Hanh teaches: "Once you know how to come home to yourself, then you can open your home to other people, because you have something to offer."^{xv} Secondly, once we recognize our current perception of Selfhood is liable to alter over our lifetime, it dislodges the belief that there is only one way to view life; one way to which all must adhere. Therefore, when we are *standing in our own ground, openheartedly*, we can remain open to other people's norms, beliefs, and values, without rushing to either defend or relinquish our own.

Summary ~ intrapersonal

The energies of Love as experienced within the intrapersonal level, call us towards Self-love. Self-love is not egotistical. Rather Self-love gives rise to personal wholeness in the form of a robust Selfhood from which we can *stand in our own ground, openheartedly*. From such a stance in Life, we feel at home within our own selves. When we feel at home within our own selves, we are more able to truly see and hear others.



Self-love: standing in our own ground, openheartedly

Obstacles to experiencing the three expressions of Love

The energies of Love are woven into the very fabric of Life itself, so why is choosing Love as our orientating reference point so foreign to us? John Shea^{xvi} lists some of the reasons as:

1. A "lack of love, nurture, respect and affirmation in the formative years of life." Unlike most species, humans are "born as vulnerable infants." As such, we are totally dependent on others for our physical, emotional and spiritual needs. If these needs are not met, then our ability to consciously choose Love as our orientating reference point will be thwarted.
2. Addictions, which numb our capacity to engage in transformative living.
3. "Dependence on what others may think of us," which sets up a reliance on "someone else for our sense of identity."
4. An experience of "trauma" leaving an individual unable to feel "safe enough" in their inner being to be able to be attentive to their experience.

Also, the Buddhist nun, Pema Chodron, might add to the list: "the human desire for comfort, happiness and the avoidance of pain."^{xvii} As mentioned previously, choosing Love as our orientating reference, can be unnerving.

In light of the list above, we might well become discouraged. Most of us would place ourselves somewhere on it. And yet, perhaps we are doing the energies of Love a disservice by becoming discouraged, for Love meets us where we are and gently draw us towards transformative shifts in our perception of Selfhood. So, within the context of knowing which season we are in, most individuals would be able to engage in the art of transformative living in their own way, at their own time, at their own pace.



Concluding remarks

In the end three things remain . . . Faith, Hope and Love. And the greatest of these is Love. Faith, Hope and Love are each experienced as a dynamic energy, or life force, within the very nature of Life itself. Faith calls forth *meaning*. Hope calls forth *transformative shifts* in Selfhood. Love calls forth *relationship* in the form of an ever-deepening connection and belonging within our own selves, within community, and within Life itself.

Is Love the greatest of the three? Or are Faith, Hope, and Love interwoven, like three strands making up the one piece of rope. Can individuals love and be loved if they have no meaning for their living, or no possibility of transformative shifts in their current perception of Selfhood? If Faith, Hope, and Love interweave together to animate the everyday of human living, perhaps it is impossible to have one without the others.

So, rather than Love alone, perhaps it is a new kind of Faith, a new kind of Hope, and a new kind of Love which we are required to awaken to at this juncture in history.

RESOURCES

ⁱ I first came across this term in Rory McEntee & Adam Bucko's book: *The New Monasticism: An Interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Living*

ⁱⁱ Loch Kelly, *Shift into Freedom: The Science and Practice of Openhearted Awareness*

ⁱⁱⁱ Anne Hillman, *Awakening the Energies of Love: Fire for the Second time*

^{iv} Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*

^v Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*.

^{vi} John Wilber et al, *Integral Life Practice*

^{vii} William F. Lynch, *Images of Hope: Imagination as Healer of the Hopeless*

^{viii} Raimon Panikkar as quoted in the *New Monasticism*

^{ix} Sharon Salzberg, *Love your Enemies: How to Break the Anger Habit and be a Whole lot Happier*

^x Krista Tippett, *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living*

^{xi} John O'Donohue, *Anam Cara: Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World*

^{xii} The phrase 'truly see and hear' is from Parker Palmer, *Hidden Wholeness: Towards an Undivided Life*

^{xiii} Loch Kelly, *Shift into Freedom*

^{xiv} Loch Kelly, *Shift into Freedom*

^{xv} Thich Nhat Hanh, *How to Love*

^{xvi} John J. Shea, *Finding God Again: Spirituality for Adults*. Even though Shea wrote within a Christian context, his understandings also relate to the wider population.

^{xvii} Pema Chodron, *The Wisdom of No Escape and the Path of Lovingkindness*