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Love Thy Neighbor as Thyself

The title does not make fun of Jesus or anybody. I take Jesus seriously but I cannot succeed at loving my neighbor much, let alone loving my neighbor as I love myself. This essay is about how to make sense of his teaching given my limitations. I think other people share my limitations.

Some unusual people might succeed at loving their neighbors in the sense that Jesus asked. I am not sure if people such as Saint Francis of Assisi and Mother Teresa succeed. I don't know if people such as homeless shelter workers and aid workers succeed. I am not that good. I don't know what to make of these great people. I don't go into the purity of their motives. I am glad they grace this world; I try to learn from them; I know I cannot follow their example; and I leave it at that.

I am not sure of the relation between what Jesus said and the injunction to have compassion toward all humans, gods, and animals, as in Buddhism and Hinduism. I include in "compassion" the teaching from the Upanishads that "you are that", meaning that we are essentially the same as others and they are the same as us, I am essentially the same as him-her and he-she is as me. "You are that" is a strong form of "there, but for the grace of God, go I". I think much of the underlying feeling is shared between "love thy neighbor" and "compassion". Still, there is a difference. In Hinduism, we are the same because we are all sparks of Dharma, and Dharma chooses to play this role through me or that role through another. We are all part of the same system. If we see well enough, there is no divide between me versus he-she. In Jesus, I think the feel is not like that. There is a real divide from one person to another, and we have to reach past that divide. I don't go into more detail here.

In "Jesus for Most People" and "Religious Stances", I mentioned "Love God" and "Love Your Neighbor as Yourself". I did not stress them because I have found that to stress them makes people give up right away. It makes people freeze. They are worse off than if they acted more naturally. People know these are impossible goals. If you have to meet impossible goals to go to heaven, then you might as well give up. Instead, I think it is better to give people goals that are high but that they still can work toward without necessarily expecting to succeed fully. "Work hard to make the world better", the Golden Rule, rule of law, and "all rules apply to everybody equally" are such goals. You can hold "love thy neighbor" as an ideal that lies beyond those.

Jesus said his burden was light, his yoke was easy. "Love your neighbor as yourself" does not seem light or easy. It is heavy and hard. So Christians, and maybe me, have to reconcile a contradiction. I don't waste time here trying to do that. I see what I can do and I hope the result comes under the general category of loving my neighbor.

Some people are inspired by this un-worldly request to love their neighbors to see beyond themselves and to do amazing good. This ideal has changed many lives for the better. I doubt that Christianity could have succeeded without the fervor that this ideal kindles. It has led to a lot of good in the world. Thinking about it has inspired me although not much good has come of me yet. We do need this idea as one of our ideals. I don't want to get rid of this ideal. I want it not to do harm and not to do more harm than good. I want to love my neighbor as best I can without feeling I am a failure if I am not perfect and I want not to let myself entirely off the hook by finding excuses because I am less-than-perfect.

I am not precise in using biological language in what follows. To be precise would require far too much space and too many unfamiliar ideas. What I say is true enough.

I evolved. I come from a long line of evolved organisms. As such, I have a pretty strong basis for loving myself, wanting to succeed, wanting to love other people only to the extent that it does not undermine me, and learning to harm other people if harming them helps me. I have a fairly strong evolved basis for not loving my neighbor as I do myself. In the past, people who did love their neighbors as themselves did not leave as many descendants as people who usually loved themselves more than they loved their neighbors and loved their neighbors only to the correct extent.

I also evolved to love my children (if I had any), love my spouse, love my parents, love other kin, make friends, make allies, be generally good to the people in my group, and even be good to other people around me not in my group. I have a biological basis to love more than myself to some extent. The people in the past who loved nobody but themselves left fewer descendants than the people who loved themselves and loved people around them to the correct extent. The people in the past who loved only themselves and their immediate family, but did not love their near neighbors and the people in their group, did less well than the people who could extend some love beyond their families.

I also evolved to distrust people not in my group and to not easily make friends with them or love them. It is unlikely I evolved always to be harsh to people not in my group such as by physically hurting them, stealing from them, or raping them. I did evolve to learn to do that more easily with people outside my group than to do it with people inside my group. We have a capacity for bad behavior but we don't have any predetermined targets.

We have a biological basis for love and to extend love. We also have biological impediments to showing too much love or showing it too far. We have a biological basis to learn to be bad and we more easily learn to be bad to people the farther away they are from us and our family.

Despite that we have a natural basis to love, extend love, and even extend it beyond the family, still, trying to love all my neighbors as myself goes against the natural grain. It is really hard. It is like going through a really hard initiation ceremony such as tattooing. It can be done but it is not natural.

So what do we do? We use the biological basis to love and we extend it as far as we can. We use the basis to love as a way to control the basis to exclude, treat less well, and do harm.

We do what people have been advising for thousands of years, and to which add little. I only remind. I put things in perspective so you can do something real, will not be seduced by bad ideologies, and will do no harm.

Begin with the word “love”. I don’t go into the original Greek. When Americans hear the word, they first think of romantic love, then love of family, then love of country. Through long practice, Americans do extend the word “love” to country but, in the back of their minds, draw a sharp line between the kind of love we give to spouse or family versus other love including love of country. Those are not the same kinds of love. Americans find it a bit creepy to think of loving your neighbors and of loving people even more removed than neighbors, likely because they can’t get past romantic love and family love as the root models for all love. We need to think of love more broadly. Here the Dharma idea of compassion helps but we need to be more specific as with the Golden Rule and rule of law.

What relation is meant by “love” in the saying of Jesus? Without going into detail, and without trying to figure out exactly what Jesus meant, I think it is better to think not of loving a neighbor as we love ourselves or family but (a) to think of behaving well to our neighbor much as we behave well toward adult siblings with whom we are on good terms and (b) to think of how we act toward their kids, our nieces and nephews. Treat people like brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, and cousins. We have enough of a biological base so that we can stretch our base to do this if we practice. If we can go back to childhood, think of loving neighbors as we loved our siblings when love consisted of playing well together, defending them, and staying on good terms even as we grew older and apart. We helped our siblings as children and still help them as adults such as by giving them a place to stay for a while or helping with medical bills. For people who are members of a church in which members help each other, think of extending that help and those feelings as widely as you can. Love your neighbor as you love your dear sister or brother, and love your neighbor as you love your dear fellow parishioner. I think Jesus meant more than this but likely we have to settle for only this at first and not falter by demanding amazing full total love.

When Jesus says “love thy NEIGHBOR”, he means to make you see everybody as in your group, even the people outside your, especially the people outside your group. That is the lesson of the parable of the Good Samaritan. What is different about how you see people in your group versus out of your group? How do you see people in your group that makes it easier to extend love to them and how do you see people not in your group that makes it harder to extend love? Again, without trying to figure out exactly what Jesus meant, it works well enough to say we think of people in our group as persons while we don’t think of people outside our group as persons but think of them as workers, teachers, bus drivers, grocery clerks, hoodlums, thugs, bitches, Whites, and “them”. If we can see people as persons, as full humans, as well-rounded people like us, then it is easier to extend to them the kind of love we give to others in our group such as those in our family or our church.

It is a lot easier to live by the Golden Rule if you think of people as persons like you as much, and as often, as you can. It is hard to live by the Golden Rule if you don’t practice doing this.

You can't always see everybody as first a person, and you don't want to. You don't always see yourself as a person. You don't want to always see the bus driver as a person and you don't necessarily have to learn about his-her family and problems. But you have to be able to see anybody as a person when the time comes.

Still, you have to practice thinking about people as persons even if you don't put the ability into practice all the time. It is like the young couple on the bus in Paul Simon's song who make up stories about people on the bus. It is not like Rita in the Beatles' song "Lovely Rita Meter Maid". How and when to think about people as persons, and how and when not to do so, is a big topic in itself, and I can't go into it more here.

Practicing-thinking-of-people-as-persons-even-if-you-don't-always-interact-with-them-as-persons likely is the most important thing you can do toward loving your neighbor as yourself and toward behaving in the best way consistent with the ideal.

Much as I love animals and nature, they are not the same as human beings. Still, it helps a lot to think of animals as like persons and as deserving our care and love. If you can learn to love animals, it will help you love in general.

If you get better at thinking of people as persons then any more advice here is only something to remind you about what you have already heard. Advice here cannot be new.

Learn about your society and economy. Learn about nature. Try to be a good citizen. Doing the duties of a good citizen helps your neighbors about as much as anything you can do.

Don't take up bad ideologies. Don't take up ideologies that call on you to see others not as persons but as dupes, fools, bad people, devils, honkies, niggers, bitches, bastards, yuppies, people who kill babies, gun freak hypocrites, us, or them.

Assess your abilities and the needs of your society. Be honest about what you like and what you don't like. Use your abilities where they do the most good and least harm as long as to do so does not force you to do what you dislike and forces you not to do what you do like. If you are a doctor and you like to help people, then volunteer. If, in your heart, you don't like to work with patients but you do like to listen to music, then support your local live musicians including the local orchestra. If you don't like working at the local homeless shelter but do like working in politics, then carefully choose the right candidate with the right ideas and programs, and work for him-her. If working with real live people hurts your heart and head, then help animals or help the local river. If you are financially comfortable, then buy a young couple a house or send a few young people to college. Give to a charity outside your race, religion, gender, and age. Support a candidate not of your party.