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The Divine Embrace - discovering the reality of God's love

Harper Collins, London 2000
Notes Alison Morgan October 2000

This is a lovely book, heart-warming stuff, short chapters, perfect for first thing in the morning and last thing at night. It isn't what she says; I'm not sure I can even remember what she said. It's the warm glow of closeness to God she leaves you with.

Introduction

'I could not worship a God who did not love me'.

Believing in love requires trusting and taking risks; we need to risk living as if love really mattered.

If we do, we will discover the reality of God's love.

1. In the beginning

I am loved, therefore I am, p 2.

Holy Spirit - as a child she imagined him as 'second cousin to a whirlwind'.

This chapter about God as creator.

2. Partners in the dance

Met a man who told her of a moment he'd had when he'd been in a hotel room with 400 other people, playing bingo, and suddenly he'd become aware he could hear and understand what everyone in the room was saying. He became frightened, and it went.

Jesus - must have grown to understand that he was God as he grew up.

'I believe that there is a divine paradox at the heart of growing up: the more 'mature' we get as followers of Christ, the more childlike we become. The less we will think we know it all, and the more we will realize that we are just beginners on this journey called life and the way called love. The less it will matter that we get life 'right', while, paradoxically, the more it will matter that we listen closely to God and heed the slightest breath of the Spirit. Like children, we will delight in play and laughter, we will take the risk of opening our hearts and lives and arms to the people we encounter, and we will reach out to those who are dying with the longing to be shown some sign that they are loved. We will extend the generous welcome of Christ, knowing that we have also been welcomed in the extravagance of God's love. We will look for ways of enjoying life, and bringing that joy to others, instead of ways of organizing life and controlling others. We will create more 'free' time, where we will face the possibility that we will hear the voice of God, or the cries of others, or even the deep desires of our own hearts. We will risk curling up in the lap of God and forgetting our fears, knowing them to be but deceptive shadows. We will throw back our heads and laugh at the future, knowing it and ourselves to be held by the One who is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow'. 29

3. Who am I?

How are we like God? Primarily in that we have the capacity for love.

Anderson-type identity in Christ list p 42.

'I think there is something about God's love that prevents our acceptance of it from being entirely passive'.

How we are meant to show it - that is our calling.

'Just as we know that energy cannot be destroyed, only changed, so we must learn that love cannot be destroyed. It may change shape or seem to disappear, but it cannot be destroyed. Sometimes, we will have to love in silence, because the person we care about cannot accept our love. Sometimes, we have to watch while someone we love chooses to walk a different path. But still we love.' 48

4. How then shall we live?

'With the Spirit's help I will be able to assess my limitations with the eye of realism and love, and not give in to the temptation to tell God that my creation was a mistake. I will learn to love myself, and if I cannot manage that all at once, then I will live *as if* I loved myself. Even if I consider those around me to be a pain in various parts of my anatomy, I will treat them with the respect with which I wish to be treated. I will forgo the temporary release of self-deception and the folly of blaming and shaming others.' 52

Emerson: 'do the thing you fear and the death of fear is certain'. Go beyond the comfort zone and try hard for sth you want, but had been too frightened to attempt.

Take the time and take the risk.

5. The smile within

Joy - why isn't it always possible to pick the Christians out of a crowd of tired commuters or harrassed shoppers? It takes a lot of effort just to cope with living in our modern world. The hassle factor is enormous - forms, bills, crashing computers, MOT certificates, 1001 details. Most of the world doesn't have this level of day to day hassle, just the simple task of getting water, food, shelter.

She recommends eccentricity - friend who has little plastic dinosaurs all round the house. Put things, little things, into your daily life which bring you joy, things which stop you getting so wrapped up in the crisis of the moment that you forget what life is really all about.

Keep things around which make you laugh.

Discover the things which make you happy, and build them into your life to remind you of the joy God feels in creation.

Keep looking for God - most of us discover him in our lives when we get into the practice of looking for him in the things we usually take for granted.

Holiness 'means to live in such a way that one's life would not make sense if God did not exist' 71.

Need to discover the art of being if we are ever to grow joy and become holy. How often do you give yourself permission to do those things which free your mind to think beyond your 'to do' list? Are you able to it or wander around and *do* nothing without feeling an identity crisis coming on?

6. When it all goes wrong

'If only life could always be filled with love, joy, peace and the ability to sit lightly to one's problems, but it's not like that. We get depressed, we get ill. People whom we love leave us or die. We experience rejection, violence, cruelty and neglect. We trip up, physically, mentally, morally, ethically and psychologically. For some, just being alive hurts, and the pain seems unrelenting...

How we see the world and ourselves was initially shaped by what we learned when we were children. What messages did you learn as an infant and as a young child? Did you know, deep down, not in an intellectual way of knowing but in the very core of your being, that you were loved and accepted?.. Remember what your true identity is and make the choice to believe the best about yourself. No matter what you have done or experienced already, no matter what you may do or experience in the future, God loves you. Nothing you do can alter God's opinion of you. Nothing that has happened to you can affect how God sees you, except perhaps to increase his compassion and the depth and breadth of his mercy'.

'There are moments in our lives when we are like trapeze artists, and we have to let go of the swing we are holding in order to reach out for a new swing or the hands of another trapeze artist. If we cannot let go we will never move on, never change.'

Sin. There are ways of looking at sin that can help us to put it into God's perspective. Mother Julian looked at sin as the process of taking away some of the good of what we were created to be and producing instead a black hole. Seen that way, sin becomes a deficit, a negation of our identity as beings made in God's image. *The solution is not to concentrate on our sin as if it were some unwelcome aspect of who we are, but rather to see it as something that takes away from, that negates, our true selves.*

Though we sin continually he loves us endlessly, and so gently does he show us our sin that we repent of it quietly, turning our mind to the contemplation of his mercy, clinging to his love and goodness, knowing that he is

our cure, understanding that we do nothing but sin. If there be anywhere on earth a lover of God who is always kept safe from falling, I know nothing of it - for it was not shown me. But this was shown: that in falling and rising again we are always held close in one love. (Mother Julian)

Suggests looking at self in mirror and making positive declaration about yourself as quickest way to get results with affirmations.

Masks. During a telephone conversation with a colleague, I told him how his support and enthusiasm gave me strength. He responded by saying that he took me to be a fairly buoyant person. Ah yes, I told him, but you have no idea what it takes to be buoyant!

But most people don't need to know what's going on inside. That's for your one or two very close friends, or those people who come into your life with amazing timing and are there to help and then move on. I believe God sends certain people when we need them, as God also brings the right books and opportunities into our lives. That is part of what I mean when I say that I try to 'live in the Spirit'.

Poster with caption 'I can live for a month off a good compliment!' Probably true - look for ways of handing them out.

Don't be surprised if breakthroughs are strangely followed by times of depression or difficulty. Your once healthy confidence is knocked and buffeted. The people in your life seem to be in trouble or needing you all at once. You thought you had moved beyond old patterns of thinking and behaving, and you feel as if you're back to square one. These can be signs that you're experiencing spiritual warfare. Don't be afraid. The battle is already won.

7. Love in action

The love of Christ can heal us, but it usually has to be administered through another human being. Most of us can only see Christ in other people when we feel the love of another. 'You and I are set to be nothing less than disclosures of God to other people' - John Tinsley. We can know Christ through nature, music, silence, animals. These things are linked to joy. But most hurts and wounds, at some stage, require the healing touch of another human being. If there is no one to do that for us, our initial wound is made worse by a sense of isolation and alienation.

8. When God calls

Perhaps I can best describe my own sense of calling as a sense of obedience. I am aware that I can obey God or not, and if I were to abandon what I am doing, or even change it, I would feel as if I were disobeying God. I'd like to be able to say that, as a result of my calling, I am filled with inner peace and fortitude at all times - but that just isn't the case. Sometimes, the positive, feel-good factor is completely absent and all I have to go on is this sense of obedience, that I am following where someone else is guiding. Usually, it's a case of wondering how thick the cloud is at any given time. Glimpses of blue sky, when I can see clearly where I am going, are nice but not necessary. Being called gives purpose, vision and strength, but not always an overall view of how things will unfold. Corrie ten Boom - we need the ticket when we are about to board the train, not before.

Part of the good news of Jesus Christ is being set free from rules. The burden of getting life right is replaced with an invitation to follow the Lord of Love. But sometimes it seems that following the way of love plunges us back into a myriad of rules and regulations. Her exp of trying to keep all the rules. 'After several years of living like this, I realized that I still could not control all my actions and words, and certainly not my thoughts. I also made the mistake of confusing my basic human needs and desires, as well as strong temptations, with sin itself. Just having impure thoughts made me feel guilty, and in response to my imperfection I pushed myself even harder.' Looking back, she thinks she was trying to earn spiritual brownie points and earn God's affection. 'By trying to be the best Christian on earth, I had created for myself my own rat race, my own criteria of how good I was, and I was withholding my own acceptance and praise from myself whenever I felt I didn't come up to the mark.' Treadmill. Failure. Try harder. Or get off. Began to realise, because others told her, that she didn't have to strive.

'It's easy to see now that it was because I could not accept God's love for me, but at the time I didn't know what I was doing wrong. I could not even accept God's love when I knew I had done something worthy, because I was so conscious of the seething turmoil of my inner thoughts.' Romans 7-8. *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death.*

9. Being there

We need to do better at being there for one another. God didn't *tell* us about how much he loves us, he showed us in Jesus.

Chris Collingwood, in a tube train:

'quite without warning I was taken out of myself and transported by the experience of a love in which everyone in the compartment, myself included, was held, and which gave to each a real and unique personal identity. No longer were they faceless individuals. Rather, at the deepest level of all they were seen to be part of one another, loved and of infinite value and significance. In my mind's eye I saw each person going home, to be met and welcomed by people to whom he or she mattered. I saw an endless variety of persons in their unique individualities and yet bound together in a fundamental unity from beyond' 120.

William Countryman:

'the world will not be safe for any of us until it is safe for all. However difficult the principle of love, and however demanding and hard at times to define, love is the only moral principle that opens a door to the future. When I truly believe that I am as human as you and you are as human as I, that God loves us indistinguishably, I shall begin building a different kind of world' 121.

It's not possible to love your neighbour like this unless you know something of God's love for you. Your love for others will reflect how you know yourself to be loved by God and your view of other people as also beloved by God... God loves because God *is* love. God loves because God has to love. God loves because that is the whole point of life, or our existence. There is nothing higher. There is no other virtue or goal or concept that is higher than love.

She has a friend called Bill Thatcher, who works for the Foundation for Community Encouragement. Workshops on how to build and sustain communities characterized by unconditional acceptance. Aspects of this type of acceptance are openness, the willingness to let go of prejudice and blame, the acknowledgement of personal responsibility and the courage and ability to discern how to live more honestly and authentically. Communities based on these principles become places where it is safe to share pain as well as joy, and where people learn to reach out and connect with others in ways which are freeing and enhancing to everyone involved.

10. A mutual delight

Sexuality is part of identity; it is more than sex. It is a part of who we are. Storkey: 'only one aspect of our sexuality is expressed in sexual intercourse. We also express it in warmth and touch, in closeness and care for the other persons who are dear to us... Deeply satisfying human intimacy, whether in marriage or outside, is in the end not dependent on copulation but on a faithful sharing of our hearts and lives with those whom we love, and a longing for their well-being and peace'.

Sexuality is part of spirituality.

Accepting love helps us to know who we are. It is only by relating to others that I can learn who I am. Through the special touch of a lover, I am able to learn things about myself that I could not learn in any other way.

'Our sexuality and sensuality are part of our spiritual awareness, and there can, at times, be a cross-over between spiritual and sexual longing, as many writers and artists have expressed throughout the centuries.'

She wrote a psalm:

*I have felt the hands of an angel
And the flood of your power.*

*I know the rhythm of your love
And the wash of your peace.
Lord, take us into your soft valleys,
Lead us into your fields,
Set us loose in the starlight of your dance.
Then let us praise your name with our bodies -
Swinging round and round
In the garden of your word.*

She doesn't know whether it 'works' for anyone else but her.
Experience of meeting someone for the first time, and yet feeling as if they had known each other for ever.

*And there we stood,
bared to the soul,
an ancient recognition
whose dawn began before our time.
We have come to where we should:
the tangled maze has led to good.*

'There is in some meetings with other people the sense of belonging, of coming home, of having found a place where we are safe, where we can risk being vulnerable. These are feelings that many people have had about God, and they are, at heart, a mystery, impossible to analyse fully in an objective sense' 144
There is something about God's love, love that is always reaching out, always offering itself, that, if we let it, can get through all our masks and barriers and touch us in the core of our beings. We can know this love in times of prayer, in worship, in creativity and in nature, or at any other time we are able to lift the veil and let God in. A further miracle is that God allows this love to be shared between people, and offers it to us if we are willing to let go of our insistence on perfection and our drive always to get it 'right'. For love will always be a mystery, it will always elude precise definition and description. It will come when we are least expecting it, and it will rarely, if ever, appear on demand. What we must do is to live our lives in such a way that we remain open to the God of love. We can cultivate an open heart and a receptive spirit, and learn to look for opportunities to give love, as well as to receive it.

'Above all, and no matter what, in the middle of our raggedness and need, our longing and ache, we can entrust ourselves to the One who is our Desire beyond all other desires, in whose love we are always held and in whose embrace we can come to remember who we are' 145.

11. The valley of shadows

Death

12. The Divine Embrace

God is in the yearning we have for things to be different, to be better. Sense of longing. Unwelcome. But these feelings are the Spirit of God looking for a way in, looking for a way to catch our attention and love us. The ache of longing we feel is a tiny drop compared to the ache that God feels for us. 'The nagging doubt persists, and we shove the untidy shirt-tails of our longing into our skirts and trousers and vainly hope that no one will see the telltale signs that there is more to us, more to life, than we are happy to admit'. In order to open selves to God's love we have to get rid of some of the lies we've been telling ourselves about who we are and who God is. 'The longing carries on, the ache for something more, and when we've used up all our friends and the free passes to the gym, and flown all the air miles, still we want more'. Need to acknowledge our need and look for the love and truth that's trying to break into our lives. God is the Source, and if we don't go to the Source, our rivers and streams and pools of relief and satisfaction and pleasure will run dry. But part of the miracle is that when we go to him, we also find new channels between us and other people opening up.

Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving*: 'the deepest need of man is the need to overcome separateness, to leave the prison of his aloneness'. How? Strong, passionate, physical love gives us a glimpse. Intimate friendship gives us a

glimpse. But the best way we can know ourselves as not alone is if we accept our identity as children of God and experience the love of the Spirit. Love is not a safe option; it is the choice of the brave, the obedient and the faithful. It takes a great amount of character and strength to risk opening ourselves to give and receive love, and to let go of our old falsely self-reliant way of living.

Mother Julian again:

From the time that it was shown I desired often to know what was our Lord's meaning. And fifteen years after and more, I was answered in inward understanding, saying, 'Would you know your Lord's meaning in this? Learn it well. Love was his meaning. Who showed it to you? Love. What did he show you? Love. Why did he show you? For love. Hold fast to this, and you shall learn and know more about love, but you will never need to know or understand about anything else for ever and ever.' Thus did I learn that love was our Lord's meaning.

'The huge joy is that we do not have to do it by ourselves. We have been given each other and the transforming, enlivening power of God's Holy Spirit. If we allow the power of God's love to have freedom in our lives, we will be amazed at what we can become. From time to time we have felt and seen what we, and all of life, can be like if we open the door to God.' We try it for a bit, then relapse into striving.

But, 'one day we will be free, and we will know ourselves as we are known: the beloved made in the image of the One who is Love, held for ever in the Divine Embrace' 172.

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