

Preface

WE ARE so glad you picked up our book on relationships. We hope this book helps you understand how to repair conflict, move from disconnection to reconnection, and discover God's movement in your life and relationships. From couples to families, community, and God, we outline a model for how healing happens and relationships can be transformed.

From our years of counseling individuals, couples, and families, we decided to slow down the process of reconciling to show what it looks like and describe it in micro-moves. How does change happen? We call this model for repairing and healing NAME IT (Notice, Acknowledge, Merge, Embrace, Integrate, and Thank). Change requires us to first connect with our own hearts and stories, then understand the other person's position, and finally merge those two truths (or versions of what is happening). In doing so, our deepened honesty and openness will draw out a response from the other person. The potential for change is there. Throughout the upcoming chapters, we invite you to apply this to your relationships and see what is possible. We know it works for us in our relationships and those we serve.

As coauthors, we both learn so much through the process of writing and sharing together. We bring different ideas and experiences to one another, and as "iron sharpens iron," we help each other refine our ideas and discover new and better options than either of us could come up with on our own. The process of connecting and repairing requires humility and the ability to risk, but as we find in our creative process, the results greatly outweigh the cost. Take this journey with us and see if you agree!

Acknowledgments

THERE ARE SO many people behind any creative effort and many we wish to thank. We are both grateful for the opportunity to work on our second book together and that the effort really does get easier with practice.

We want to thank the Rev. Dr. Lynne Baab, who several years ago made a connection for us with the Rev. Beth Gaede. As our fearless editor, Beth pushed us to clarify what we mean and refine our focus, and asked thoughtful questions that also deepened our books tremendously. We cannot imagine working with anyone else on our combined efforts. We know the book is far better because of your input and encouragement.

Both of us work on a team at the Greenwich Center for Hope and Renewal with nine other counselors, two other staff, and a supportive board. Our shared team and supervision meetings, trainings together, and collegial support and affirmation help us both become more thoughtful and compassionate counselors and people.

We are grateful to Fortress Press for including us in their vision for the Living with Hope series and trusting it will equip many, both clergy and lay, to face life's challenges with greater meaning and resolve.

I (Heather) wish to thank my entire extended family and dear friends for loving me through the labor-intensive task of book writing. For my husband, Mark, and children, Douglas, Catie, and Alyse, thank you for standing by me, putting up with a distracted wife/mother, and letting me tell some of your stories in the book. I

also want to thank my parents, Geoff and Betsy, for their willingness to let their stories be told and for teaching me what it means to grow up knowing you are loved.

I (George) wish to thank my entire support network: my friends, colleagues (both firefighters and therapists), the Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT) community, the Faller family from College Point for teaching me the value of family, and Kathy and my boys for putting up with all my psychobabble and still wanting to spend time with me.

Finally, we both want to thank God for this opportunity, the words that came, and the inspiration to keep trying each day to love those who cross our paths with the love of Jesus Christ. To God be the glory.

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Designed for Relationships



Love impacts and inspires us all, yet understanding what it is and how it works often leaves us all confounded.

SO OFTEN as clergy and therapists, we are honored by the stories that come back to us. I (Heather) was presenting on loss to a large group. A gentleman raised his hand to share a story about his lifetime love affair with his wife, which extended into her last decade as a person with Alzheimer's. He shared the challenges of being a caregiver to his wife—dressing, bathing, feeding, even putting on lipstick on her. He shared that he came to understand her increasing limitations and find ways to work with them. One routine with her continued to her last day, even when she had to spend the last five years in a skilled nursing facility. He would arrive and announce in a glad voice, “Ellen, I’m here for my kiss.” Despite the quiver of emotion in his voice, he smiled broadly describing how his wife puckered up her lips from bed every time he arrived for his visit. Love transcends losses, even those of our cognitive functions. When he finished speaking, there wasn’t a dry eye in the room.

What is love, really? We know love when we see it, like in this story, and we all long for a loving relationship that has such enduring beauty and tenderness. Love impacts and inspires us all, yet understanding what it is and how it works often leaves us all confounded.

As complicated as life and love can be, God has a simple plan to make it all manageable: the circle of life. This loop from life to death and back to life is found everywhere, from the smallest molecules to vast solar systems. Nature, energy, continuously moves through three

states: (1) connection (life), when different elements work together harmoniously; (2) disconnection, when a failure to join typically results in tension, fighting, or stagnation (death); and (3) repair, moving from disconnection back to connection (rebirth).

All of existence, including human relationships, follows this same pattern. Look around, and you will notice humans are not so different from the birds flying or the tree in which they build their nest. A flower blooming today dies tomorrow and turns into the mulch and fertilizer necessary for its seeds to live and replace it. There is an economy of grace in this circle of life, because all three elements—life, death, and rebirth—are essential to continued growth and development.

Obviously, relationships are central to the function of all creation, and connection is the good stuff all organisms strive to achieve. Think about the best moments in your life: your first kiss, the birth of a child, a meaningful conversation, or an inspiring sunset in an exotic setting. They all share a felt sense of connection. Another word for the state of connection is love. Love is the energy holding everything together. This invisible force of love is operating everywhere. Because humans are made in God's image, love is the most important raw material of our lives.

Although love is challenging to define and takes on different forms in different relationships (love of partner, child, friend, country, God, things, activities, and so forth), it's a state we all experience. Love makes us feel good, in sync, open, alive, safe, curious, creative, inspired, passionate, attuned, trusting, and joined in the present moment. Connection is the whole point of life. God's design for love is for it to be a constant state of reciprocal flow between people giving and receiving. In this dynamic exchange, we need to pour ourselves out to make room to receive, and in receiving we have more to give. Higher degrees of active sharing translate into robust connections, while poor engagement leads to distance and disconnection.

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Inevitably, people cannot perpetually stay in a state of connection. Something comes along that breaks connection, leading to feelings of hurt, disappointment, fear, pain, loneliness, unfairness, anger, sadness, helplessness, and hopelessness. These negative feelings are our body's signal that something is wrong. If the disruption to connection can be repaired, then it is no big deal. However, if the disconnection is prolonged, then we are set up for chronic isolation. Most of today's mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual ailments are directly linked to disconnection.

Still, science is discovering that disruptions are not always bad; in fact, they are necessary for our survival and growth. For organisms to thrive, they need to be open and adjust to feedback from their environment. Otherwise they do not change, and the lack of feedback leads to stagnation and apathy. Relationships are like our muscles: they need a work out and to stretch to grow otherwise they wither away. It turns out to achieve the best connections, we all need a little bit of disconnection, fighting, and distress. There can be no true union without separation, no return home without leaving.

Often, disconnection is just a sign telling us we need to do something differently. Disconnection provides necessary, healthy information to correct our course and adjust our ways. Striving for a perfect relationship devoid of any disconnection is impossible and certainly guarantees only inertia and futility. Learning to embrace the opportunity in disconnection is a much healthier response than believing the disconnection is proof the relationship is failing. Often, the beautiful gift of connection arrives wrapped in the ugly packaging of disconnection.

The crucial factor in transforming disconnection into connection is the ability to repair. A successful repair improves upon what needs fixing and brings people back into connection again. Unsuccessful repairs lead to further disconnection and pain. In relationships, true repair isn't trying to return people to the connection they had prior to the rupture. Rather, it's trying to create a new relationship through the growth caused by the changes of the disconnection.

God's love loop is so vibrant and resilient because all three parts—connection, disconnection, and repair—are absolutely critical to our well-being. Take away any of the three, and the loop is incomplete. When the loop is complete, the repair from disconnection to connection is trying to get people back not to the “old normal” of their relationship but to a new destination that is always unfolding with new possibilities. Real connection is never boring because it is forever changing and full with the excitement of unlimited potential.

Enjoying the fruits of relationships and becoming part of something bigger than ourselves is at the very core of our existence. Let's explore love and the factors that bring us a greater sense of life, vitality, and spiritual purpose.

What Is Love?

Turns out defining love is not so easy. Looking for the answer to this question consistently ranks on Google among the highest search requests every day. For ages, the quest to define love has been championed by philosophers, poets, scientists, religious scholars, and many others. Although the answers seem endless, we believe love is simply our need to connect. We are designed to constantly be in multiple relationships simultaneously. We must relate in families, with friends, in small groups, in large communities, with nature, with our environment, with God, and with ourselves. We all share a common starting point of being born into connection, and we all share a mutual destiny of returning to connection with God when we die.

Think about our ancestors, trying to survive against saber-toothed tigers and a hostile environment. Lacking speed, size, large teeth, or claws, we seemed doomed for extinction. Yet, our abundant shortcomings were compensated for by our greatest gift: our ability to connect and work together. Getting along with others to pool resources, to offer support and mutual defense, is as essential to our survival as food, shelter, and oxygen. In fact, human brains grew as

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our social group expanded. Today, scientists have discovered that the strongest predictor of a species' brain size is the size of its social group.¹ The whole point of a big brain is to help us navigate the complexities of connection.

The significance of relationships can't be reduced to a healthy "want" that enriches our lives. Rather, relationships are a fundamental "need" if we are to exist. Babies deprived of human contact, even though their physical needs for food and water are met, not only fail to thrive, they literally die. Our nervous systems are created to connect, and when they fail to connect with another they wither away. We must bond with others; that is our nature.

This longing for others is planted in our hearts and is the only truly healthy addiction. The reward centers in our brain crave interaction and fire off with delight when their need is met. We are not supposed to go without connection. When we fail to bond in healthy ways through relationships, we will bond with a faulty substitute: food, drugs, alcohol, gambling, porn, television, smart phones, or social media. There is no denying the truth that we are going to bond to something; our choice is what we decide to bond to.

The key to healthy bonding is forming a relationship with someone who is available and responsive, which creates a sense of security, trust, and understanding. Knowing there is someone to depend upon makes it easier to explore the world. In the presence of another, we can celebrate the victories and receive comfort in the pain of defeat. Having the freedom to choose who to engage with and invest our time and energies in is risky because what if the person we choose to relate to is unresponsive? No one can be forced to open their hearts to love. One could argue that we can be made to perform certain actions, but the decision to give oneself in love is always voluntary. That is what makes the other person's response so magical. They freely made a decision to come forward and engage. Love yearns for participation and longs to be seen, heard, felt, needed, and desired. At the end of our days, our

accomplishments and accumulations matter much less than the connections we formed with those we love. The freedom of love transcends time and space. We believe love is the very thing we carry over into life after earth.

In all types of relationships, it is the active nature of love that awakens the heart, unleashing passion, creativity, exploration, and amazement. Love doesn't care about last year or tomorrow; it is alive in the moment. Talking, listening, embracing, and kissing are all responses to the now. When we are in sync with someone, the connection is like we share a brain and body. In a deep conversation, it is common for one person to finish the other person's sentences, because their nervous systems are literally linked. Scientists demonstrate how people's brain waves, heart rates, and bodily responses coordinate and create a shared rhythm. If we listen, our hearts, minds, and bodies will send us clear signals of love working.

The proof of connection is found in feelings of happiness, joy, excitement, playfulness, elation, warmth, calmness, peacefulness, lightness, safety, trust, harmony, satisfaction, empathy, and affection. In love, the body expects the positive and doesn't worry about the negative. When we are in the zone of connection with another, our body keeps score by sending clear signals of positive affect. All we need to do is check the scoreboard to tally up the good feelings versus the negative feelings to see if we are succeeding at the game of love. This takes the guesswork out of the mystery of love. If the bond is strong, the body tells us everything we need to know.

I (George) remember walking on the beach with my one-year-old son CJ, when he stopped and pointed up to the sky and said, "Bird." It was his first word, and I was awestruck. In this simple moment, we joined together to enjoy a bit of wonder. The sparkle in his eyes and smile on his face were contagious. I beamed with delight and wanted to stretch out that amazing moment for eternity. I stood there grinning until the same bird flew over and pooped on CJ's head, replacing the smile with tears. To get back to smiles

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and to celebrate the milestone, we bought some ice cream, because everyone knows ice cream makes everything better.

What Does the Heart Have to Do with Love?

For centuries, the word love has been intimately linked to the heart. To discover love, Cupid is aiming for the heart, not a headshot. Paying closer attention to our heart reveals how central it is in understanding connection. The heart is like a GPS for relationships. It is much more than a pump. Science is supporting poets by demonstrating that the heart is actually a highly complex, self-organizing information-processing center that functions like a second brain. The heart's neural circuitry enables it to act independently of the upper brain to learn, remember, make decisions, and feel.² The brain-heart connection isn't a one-way street where the brain sends commands down to the heart; rather, both organs reciprocally respond to and affect each other's functioning.

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Listening to both the heart's intuition and the brain's insight helps us speak our needs directly. Honest words said in love can lead to a mutual and responsive relationship. The heart constantly assesses how we are relating to those around us and provides immediate information about how the relationship is doing. Is your heart racing with fear or growing cold from the distance of disconnection? Or is your heart jumping with joy or radiating the calmness of connection? Listening to the heart's signals empowers us to flexibly adjust to the changing needs of relationships.

To better understand our heart's signals, it is useful to know about the hormone oxytocin, also known as the "cuddle" or "love" hormone. The purpose of oxytocin is to help us stay calm while it primes us to connect with others for support. The warm feeling of oxytocin released during connections such as holding a child, seeing an old friend, or making love to your partner is evidence of a connection working well. Certainly, oxytocin is critical to any connection, but what most people don't realize is oxytocin is also

essential in disconnection. During the fight-or-flight response to stress and disconnection, the body releases cortisol and adrenaline to mobilize action. Yet, the body also releases oxytocin, trying to encourage us to take action *with others*, to not fight or flee alone. Especially in times of distress, awareness of our need to connect is essential to enduring the distress. Oxytocin increases our ability to read social cues, empathize with and understand others, and figure out our own needs. Oxytocin is always pushing us to repair and turn the disconnection into connection. Interestingly, the part of our body responsible for producing the most oxytocin isn't the brain but the heart, providing strong evidence that the heart is truly the home base of love.

Most of us know the feeling of being high on oxytocin. Picture your first date or your wedding day. Just the memory elicits positive feelings and big smiles. While I (George) was dating Kathy (my future wife), we took a camping trip across the country. I concealed an engagement ring inside my wallet and planned on "popping the question" at our final destination, Yellowstone Park. Two days away from Yellowstone, we stopped for gas. As I pumped, Kathy paid the attendant inside. When she got back to the car, she said, "Here's your wallet" and placed it on the car roof. Well, as you can imagine, I never heard her (a sign of things to come in our marriage), and we drove off. When we arrived at our campsite and I asked for the wallet, she reminded me she had left it on the roof of the car for me. I turned white. We jumped back into the car and retraced our route, going way over the speed limit. I can still today see the image of a small black dot in the dirt road with dollar bills blowing alongside. I threw the car in park and, disregarding the blowing bills, raced to pick up the wallet. It had been run over by a truck, and as I felt the ring, I knew it was bent. But at least the diamond was strong.

Two long days later, at sunrise, I handed Kathy a box of Cracker Jacks with the ring at the bottom. Her surprise was complete, and I still get goosebumps thinking about her tears of joy. When I asked Kathy to marry me, her yes made my heart dance with delight. Like my son's first word, there is something transcendent when two

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people merge to experience something neither can find separately. We both were high on oxytocin, and the power of that moment was so intense that even all these years later the memory still unleashes waves of elation. That's the beauty of connection. It surpasses time and place. Being in connection with another is the homeland of our hearts and souls.

God's Perspective on Love

Love is expansive. When we risk opening our heart to love, we paradoxically come closer not only to someone else but also to ourselves and the world. We experience love in that place in each of us where longing and desire reside. Longing reaches both outward and deeper inward. We simultaneously know another and are known. True union does not erase distinctions but actually intensifies them to create more harmonious diversity. The more one gives one's self in creative union with another, the more one becomes one's self. This union is mirrored in the Trinity: perfect giving and perfect receiving among three who all remain completely themselves.

We are invited to partake of God's eternal love found in the Trinity. Theologians call this relationship between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit *perichoresis*—a dance among three equal, coexisting, and interdependent beings in the one Godhead. We believe our God is three-in-one, meaning all share in one essence but are known in three persons. In this interaction of the Godhead, there is an eternal, mutual, and loving relationship. This way of loving is the template for all connection based on mutually affirming, supportive, and reciprocal responsiveness. There is a constant exchange of giving and receiving in love. Love is meant to be experienced. Michael Brown writes in *The Presence Process*: “Giving and receiving is the energetic frequency upon which our universe is aligned. All other approaches to energy exchange immediately cause dissonance and disharmony in our life experience.”³ Failing to engage in this energy exchange leaves us separated from God's flow.

While the concept of the Trinity is often just beyond the edge of our comprehension, we do know those moments when our hearts are so filled with love for another that we are transported to something greater. We describe those moments of transcendence as “a taste of heaven.” Knowing love in all its fullness brings a feeling of peace and joy. Our hearts find contentment, and we have that sense of homecoming to something that we were made for and only occasionally experience.

Because we are made in God’s image, we are hardwired for relationships. Because we are relational at our core, connections with God and others bring us a greater sense of life, vitality, and spiritual purpose. They are positive, life-giving forces for health, growth, and transformation.

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Biblical Wisdom on the Power of Relationships

In considering what relationships are meant to be, we look to the Scriptures for grounding. In our Christian faith, the Scriptures tell us that God is love, God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Son, and others will know we are Christians by our love. Love is at the center of our relationship with God, because God first loved us, and love is the call of the Christian life. It is to be at the center of how we interact with others.

A Scripture passage often read at weddings defines love. ¹ Corinthians 13:4–8 gives us a list of both what love is and what it isn’t.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

The Scriptures are specific and insightful about what character traits and attitudes are going to cultivate growth and deepen connection. None of us desire a relationship that is marked by the opposite

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of these claims. Let's try that out. What if the text read, "Love is not patient or kind but is jealous, boastful, and proud. It demands its own way. It is irritable and resentful, rejoices in injustice, and despairs when the truth wins out. Love gives up, loses faith and hope, and can't survive under pressure. Love ends." That sounds dismal, doesn't it? We know the power of the correct reading, how it was intended. Operating within God's design makes sense, even for people who don't have a spiritual frame of reference. We believe anyone you ask would identify the correct reading—certainly agreeing it describes what we want from the people closest to us.

Paul goes on in verse 13 of chapter 13 to tell us, "Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love." Faith and hope seem so foundational that it is remarkable love gets first-place billing. Perhaps Paul knew that the only way to have hope and find faith is born out of love. The love of God for us inspires us to love God in return. "*We love each other because God loved us first*" (1 John 4:19). God invites us to a loving relationship. When we abide in God's love, the Spirit of God abides in us. We are invited into a mutual relationship of love and respect.

How are we to live out this God-inspired way of being with others in light of God's invitation? We find more answers in Colossians 3:12–14:

Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony.

These verses remind us of the ways we are to engage with others and what love means.

By being rooted in the love of Christ, we can be filled with the fullness of God. Life is meant to be full, abundant, like streams of living, overflowing water. That fullness can be with us, on the

good days and the bad. That God is with us is a promise repeated throughout the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, thou art with me” (Ps 23:4 KJV).

We are never alone; nothing can separate us from God’s love. Realizing this fundamental truth encourages us to follow God’s example and lead with love, so “they will know we are Christians by our love.” First-century Christians, as described in Acts 2, were known and respected by others outside their community for how they loved one another. Their generosity and concern for each other’s welfare drew other followers, and others were saved as a result (Acts 2:47). Love in action draws us in and inspires something better in each of us as a result. Like the waves of the ocean, the call to love never ceases.

The Scriptures hold up for us an ideal. They reveal something of the heart of God, and of the love of God, to which we can aspire through the power of Christ’s love at work in and through us. Not only is Christian love meant to mirror the love between the Trinity, but it also serves the function of healing lives and relationships, bringing about what our Jewish friends call *tikkun olam*, actions to better, perfect, or repair the world.

The challenge is that often we’re living somewhere between love and disconnection in our relationships with our spouses, children, parents, and friends. We have not yet met a person who has not grown up with bumps and bruises along the journey of life. Things haven’t gone 100 percent their way. People have let them down. At some point, they’ve learned what it’s like to feel “unlovable.”

The good news is that love can heal and restore. The work we do in counseling is often to repair those places in us that feel lost, alone, frightened, and even worthless. Those feelings often drive our sense of shame and, because we fear negative responses, can keep us away from others. Our shame and fear keep us from the very thing that will bring recovery and wholeness. We may run away from the only true source of healing, because the risk of possible rejection feels

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too great and the negative tapes we've come to believe have been reinforced too often.

The power of counseling for couples and families is that they have a chance to begin to repair those places where that unlovability resides and to receive love not only from a caring counselor but also from their own loved ones, whom they take with them beyond the counseling hour. People learn to love each other differently and therefore can operate in a new way in their relationships outside the counseling office. Our job as ministers and counselors is to help people to love better and to remove the boundaries and walls that keep them from receiving love that is there for them.

In many respects, the journey from love to disconnection, to repair could also define our spiritual journeys. We begin in love, not only through the love of two humans who have decided to partner in our creation, but also in the unconditional love of our heavenly Parent. Most of us along life's journey experience a season of disillusionment, of wondering, of questions and doubts. We have that sense of unlovability, not only with human love but with divine love as well. Many of us have a hard time believing that God's love is as deep and wide and long as the Scriptures promise. So, we often keep God at arm's length, fearing judgment and condemnation or, perhaps even worse, indifference. We might also question the existence of God, even as we seek for a sense of meaning and purpose.

But these disappointments and doubts along the way can lead us back to the heart of God. Our sanctification is a process, notably of seeking and finding but also of surrender. Just like with human love, opening our hearts to God is a risky and courageous thing to do. Yet, the alternative—to not connect—denies our nature. God's promise is crystal clear: eternal life is found in love. When we remember that God, as Trinity, is eternally in a loving relationship and inviting us to participate in the same relationship, we realize we have everything to gain by accepting God's invitation.

The ultimate goal of this book is to help readers accept God's invitation to love. The ups and downs of life are gradually readying our souls to join in the eternal intimacy of Divine connection. We believe God is less concerned with intellectual doctrines and laws and more interested in what is burning in our hearts. As so many artists showed in the old paintings of saints with their hearts on fire, God longs for our active and passionate participation. When we are disconnected, God craves to redeem, not judge. We are the "beloved of God," and nothing we do can change how God relates to us. Unleash the song in your hearts, and fulfill your purpose of union with your Maker.

For Reflection and Discussion

We invite you to spend a moment journaling or talking with a confidant about these questions, and see what bubbles up for you.

- 1 Do you agree that relationships are necessary to your survival? How might you change the way you relate to others if you behaved as if this were true?
- 2 Do you have any addictive patterns, whether work, substances, technology, or food, that serve as a go-to substitute when dealing with relational challenges?
- 3 Does your connection with God feel safe to you? Do you carry a sense of "unloveability"?
- 4 How does knowing God loves you and will always be there for you impact how you interact with others and see yourself?

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