

Exploring Self-Love  
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“It’s a joy to be hidden and a disaster not to be found.” ~ D.W. Winnicott

We long to be loved. Part of the problem we have in feeling loved is all of us, to some degree or another, have grown up believing there are parts of ourselves are less lovable than others, or not lovable at all. Hence, our “joy to be hidden.” We feel safe in not showing those parts of ourselves that feel unworthy of love. But “the disaster not to be found” is that we cannot feel truly loved unless we expose all parts of ourselves and, in this way, let ourselves be found.

Through our childhood experiences growing up, we contort ourselves to get love, approval and attention, either by being how we were encouraged to be, or by avoiding behaviors or self-expressions that were discouraged, or even punished. What we learned to believe (often unconsciously) is there are parts of us that aren’t acceptable. *This has happened to every one of us.*

Much of this process was pre-verbal *and* non-verbal, and because it was daily and repetitive, a part of the very fabric of our environment, it was totally internalized and ingrained. Also, because we were completely dependent on our care-givers, these issues with how we behaved felt like a matter of life or death. The message might have felt like: If I am truly myself, I will be abandoned or banished.

In order to survive then, we develop a false self, or at least a one-sided self, and all the rest goes into “shadow,” what’s hidden or repressed. We develop a belief we can’t be loved for our real or whole selves. We develop a system of strategies and defense mechanisms in order to stay at least partially hidden.

What goes into shadow is not always along the lines of “positive” or “negative.” For instance, our creativity might have been hampered because we could never carry out our self-expression perfectly, or our aliveness or exuberance shot down because it was “too much.” On the other hand, perhaps anger was modeled, and kindness not supported, or even rejected, and so our more tender aspects went underground. It’s important to note that the parts that were accepted or rejected in our early environment *are the parts that we tend to accept or reject in ourselves.* Furthermore, how we’ve been loved as children conditions us to how we love and how we receive love as adults, so all these historical dynamics are likely to play out in our current relationships.

Self-love is accepting ALL parts of ourselves, and learning that our vulnerability and authenticity are beautiful, and to understand fully that our limitations are a part of our beauty. Places where we aren’t like we wish we were need our love the most. Psychoanalyst and author Robert Karen says our “shadow is love-starved.”

There’s a paradox inherent in all of this: what is being asked of us is to accept ourselves as we are, while at the same time doing our inner work to heal and grow. A part of that work is to start teasing apart what is authentic, what is in our shadow and what are our defensive strategies, and cultivating more and more self-love to traverse the often painful terrain on the road to becoming more and more ourselves.

*Marla Estes, M.A. is offering a one-day workshop, Exploring Self-Love, on Sunday, May 1<sup>st</sup> from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. in Ashland. For further information, marla16@charter.net or 541 482 4948. Visit her website [www.marlaestes.com](http://www.marlaestes.com)*