

## ***Self Kindness as a Spiritual Practice: Drawing from an Old Tradition***

Ken Wilson, 01-19-20

Considering self-kindness from an older tradition than self-esteem movement of 1960s [mocked by SNL in 90s, Stuart Smalley: “I’m good enough. I’m smart enough. And gosh darn it, people like me!].

Older tradition is from Hebrew Scriptures, interpreted by Jesus.

**Quick summary:** Many rabbis, including Jesus, answered standard question, “Which is the greatest commandment” with “Love the Lord with all your heart .... And your neighbor as yourself” But Jesus put emphasis on latter. In S/M: ***“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you: this is the Law and the Prophets.”*** The apostles echo this: ***“The whole law is summed up in a single command: love your neighbor as yourself”*** James calls love your neighbor as yourself the “royal law” This emphasis probably a function of fact Jesus and his early followers acutely aware of harmful interpretations of Scripture used against people. In the Jesus tradition, love your neighbor as yourself became the test: if your interpretation hurts people it’s wrong.

Today, deeper dive into original context of “love your neighbor as yourself” Leviticus 19. Gold in them there hills.

Read portions of ***Lev. 19 1–8***: reason our eyes glaze over ...

But it gets more relevant as we go: ***19: 9–10*** Early food stamp program ... not restricted to citizens, btw.

***19: 11–13***: delaying payment for months for services rendered (like UM-GM does routinely for ma & pop companies that do work for them) .... That’s a LOVE NO-NO, a form of stealing

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***19: 14 Doing*** hostile things behind the back of people is really bad. If you don’t revere the person, at least revere God.

**19: 15-16** Rules for judicial proceedings [hmmm...] don't favor either the rich or poor; don't deal basely is probably ***"don't spread false rumors about people to get them charged with crimes"***

**19: 17** ***"Do not nurse hatred in your heart for any of your relatives. Confront people directly so you will not be held guilty for their sin."*** (NLT) this translation is closest to consensus of rabbis commenting on meaning of this verse. We've all been on either side of that, right?

**19: 18:** ***Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against your kinsmen, but love your fellow as yourself; I am the Lord"***

Let's notice a few things from this context.

**First, Love your neighbor as yourself sums up a set of commands about relating to others that could be described as "justice love"**

Justice, love of neighbor, love of self, reverence for God--all of a piece. Every relationship is a triangle: you – the other person – God. The God who has a concern for justice.

Self esteem movement came out of a period when psychology was individualistic and secular. My Jewish therapist says the founder of modern psychology, Freud was hostile to religion. [Changed now]

Older tradition of self-kindness in Leviticus has a different context-focus: ***How can we be faithful to God and faithful to our neighbor, including ourselves?***

**Stuart Smalley** character played by Al Franken in SNL sat in front of the mirror to say, ***"I'm good enough. I'm smart enough. And gosh darn it, people like me"***

Leviticus would have us look in the mirror and see God standing behind us with a hand on our shoulder, a concern for justice, and a look of pure love on God's face. [The word

for emanating presence of God that animates all life from God, what God's face shines with is GLORY. NT interprets God's divine essence manifest as LOVE.]

Older tradition: A similar **aim** as self esteem movement [self-love, self-kindness] but a different **path**.

**Second, "love your neighbor as yourself" implies we are in a relationship with ourselves ... and are obliged to attend to it.**

Not every creature can be said to have a relationship with itself.

They don't have the capacity to be "self-conscious" or self-aware.

The gold-standard test for self-awareness is the mirror test. Some animals see themselves in a mirror and don't seem to recognize that its them. They respond to the image as if it's another animal.

[As a kid scaring the living daylights out of myself]

9 species recognize themselves in mirror: elephants, great apes, magpies, orca whales, dolphins ... some ants, and we make the list.

So its fair to say we are the kind of creatures who are aware of ourselves—there is a self observing itself—and therefore we have a relationship with ourselves. [True of God as a Trinity: Within God there is relationship.]

To say "love your neighbor as yourself" is to recognize we each have a relationship with our self ... and an obligation to tend that relationship, to treat ourselves well. Not just anything goes.

Have you ever noticed yourself berating yourself inside your head or maybe even out loud ...? And then you have the thought, "I wouldn't treat anyone else like that!" Exactly.

***Third, loving ourselves is part of loving our community, caring for our community, looking out for the people in our community.***

In a sense, love of self is a very special obligation, in the same way that a parent loving a child is a special obligation because a parent has closer proximity to a child than say, a babysitter.

Let's take Emily as an example. Lots of people love Emily. Rachel. I love Emily. Co-workers: Cassie, Caroline, Diane, Susan ... all love Emily. Lots of you love Emily. But each of us is in a different position to love Emily. But there's only one person who can love Emily who is in closest proximity to Emily. And that's Emily!

We can practice other-love on lots of people. But we can only practice self-love on one person: ourselves. We have **insider information** on ourselves. We're the only ones who can tell we are hungry. Or we're in pain. So we have a **unique position and unique obligation** to love ourselves.

In a real sense, our community is **counting on us** to do our job because no one else has insider information.

My experience: widowed at 60, after 42 years of marriage. Married at 18, father of 2 by 20. A lot of responsibility to care for others at early age. By age 20 suicide prevention hotline.

Seven months after Nancy died, I meet Julia for coffee. Soon, I'm in love. Knew It was too early for people around me. But I also had a moment of divine clarity: MY JOB IS TO LOVE MYSELF RIGHT NOW. I WANT MY KIDS TO LOVE THEMSELVES, AND THIS IS MY OPPORTUNITY TO SHOW THEM HOW.

**Fourth, love of self by the self is assumed in Leviticus.**

No embellishment on love of self ... other than specifics on loving our neighbor. We owe certain things to our neighbor out of reverence for God. That's spelled out. It's *assumed* we owe ourselves the same thing.

Good news. Love of self is our natural default setting. We will love ourselves naturally, *unless something interferes with our doing so.*

In a very basic sense we all love ourselves. When we are hungry, we eat if food is available. If thirsty, we drink. If we put our hands too close to the burner on the stove, we pull it away and soon as we notice. If we get a paper cut, we instinctively stop the bleeding.

Think about infants, how they so naturally make their needs known. If a baby is hungry, the child doesn't think, "Oh I'm number three, mom is worn out, she needs her rest. I won't bother." Love of self is our natural default.

This means we don't have to "**make ourselves love ourselves**" so much as "**let ourselves love ourselves**" –see what's getting in the way of loving ourselves, get some help with removing those obstacles ... letting ourselves love ourselves.

Like when you get a cold. We don't go into "cure ourselves mode"

We just do things that support our body's natural ability to get over a cold: get better sleep if possible, plenty of fluids. We don't make ourselves get better. We let ourselves get better.

End with a homework assignment then a meditation. Last time, homework assignment: 20 seconds to receive a compliment. [Lisa Ruby re sermon]

This week's homework. Think of something you like to do for others that gives you pleasure. Then do it for yourself and look for the same pleasure. [Me, flowers]

## QUIET REFLECTION

First minute: Picture someone it's easy for you to love or like [pets included] Most important thing: easy good feeling you have loving-liking this someone.

Leviticus Mirror Meditation: Imagine yourself looking in the mirror wherever it is you most often look at yourself in the mirror—picture that scene in your minds eye.

Now instead of just staring at yourself, imagine a very loving version of God standing behind you with a hand on your shoulder. And imagine God having the same feeling of easy love that you felt for that other person earlier in the meditation.

***Leviticus 19 Jewish Publication Society Translation*** [except where noted]

**9-10:** When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not pick your Vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your Vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I am the Lord your God.

**11-13:** You shall not steal; you shall not deal deceitfully or falsely with one another. You shall not swear falsely by My name, profaning the name of your God: I am the Lord. You shall not defraud your fellow. You shall not commit robbery. The wages of a laborer shall not remain with you until morning.

**14:** You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall fear our God: I am the Lord.

**15-16:** You shall not render an unfair decision; do not favor the poor or show deference to the rich; judge your kinsman fairly. Do not deal basely with your countrymen. Do not profit by the blood of your fellow: I am the Lord.

**17:** You shall not nurse hatred in your heart for any of your relatives. Confront people directly so you will not be held guilty for their sin [NLT]

**18:** You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. **Love your fellow as yourself: I am the Lord**