

A Decision to Love

by Julia Occhiogrosso

In the summer of 1979, when I visited my sister at the Los Angeles Catholic Worker, I was introduced to a community of adults who were following in the footsteps of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, co-founders of the Catholic Worker movement. Founded in 1933, the movement was borne out of a renewed gospel vision for the call to love as the guiding principle for all interactions.

This bold idealism stirred me and experimenting with this utopian vision of love in action felt meaningful. Performing the works of mercy is one way the Catholic Worker put this love to the test. Feeding the hungry on our food lines or sheltering the homeless in our hospitality houses gives us an opportunity to practice.

In Las Vegas, through our hospitality houses, we have had relationships with impoverished people who when given food, shelter and a safe place are able to cultivate their potential beyond raw survival. Given the opportunity, they discover gifts and talents and offer themselves to others in generosity and joy. Even with its imperfections and challenges, hospitality is an ancient expression of gospel love that can yield healing and hope and capture a glimpse of the beloved community. We have a preview of the heavenly banquet, where people of diverse backgrounds find care and connection with each other.

Then there are those whose internal struggles are so great that they aren't able to accept simple hospitality – like Von – who rode the bus all night, declining any invitation for shelter, even sleeping on our couch. We have witnessed many behavioral obstacles limiting quality of life.

How do you love people who struggle to love themselves, who time and time again sabotage the help they're given, struggle with telling the truth, manipulate situations to get what they want, or lash out and show no respect or reciprocity? These behaviors would compel even their strongest admirers to give up on them. How does a bold gesture of idyllic love fare in these circumstances?

Many of us have known someone who has behaved like this – perhaps a friend, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, son or daughter. People we have been bonded to, whom we may remember as children of

innocence, potential and beauty. Bonds have devolved into fragmented relationships that haunt us with grief, regret, confusion and feelings of powerlessness. We are left yearning for their healing and praying for alleviation of their self-inflicted suffering.

To love in these circumstances requires learning how to love with all our heart, with all our mind and with all our soul.

One needs a heart tender enough to sense the woundedness beneath the difficult and alienating behaviors. A heart that can access its capacity for empathy, that's wise enough to get out of the way when targeted with projection and anger, and that learns how not to personalize or feel the conflict that belongs to the person acting out.

Love needs a heart that knows its limits and knows how to set boundaries. To say no to harmful behaviors while saying yes to the goodness and sacredness buried beneath the pain is a way to cultivate a balanced response. Boundaries, balance and accountability are impactful because they model self-love. They can work to protect and replenish us from destructive and exhausting dynamics.

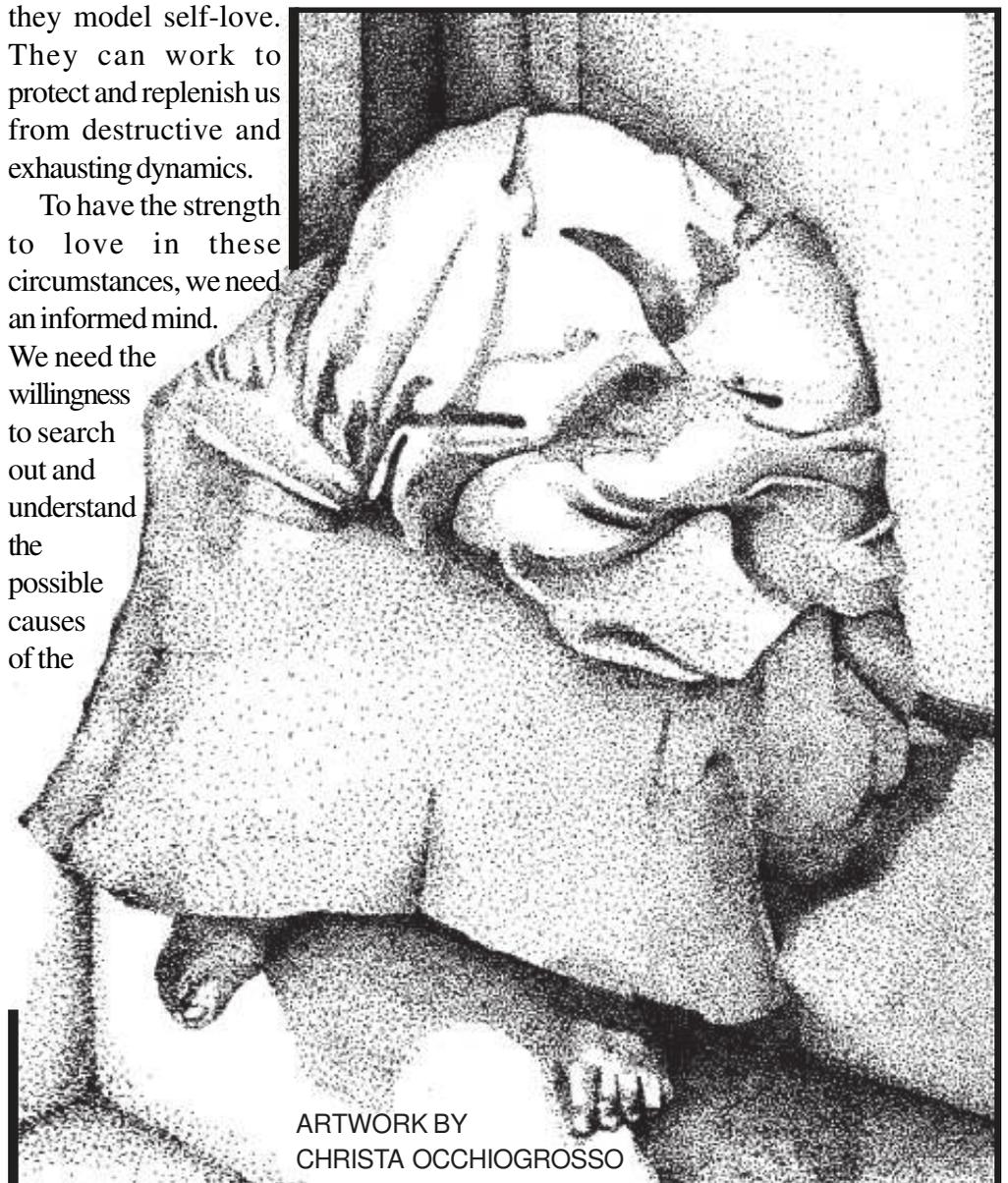
To have the strength to love in these circumstances, we need an informed mind.

We need the willingness to search out and understand the possible causes of the

behaviors. There are ample studies that correlate early trauma to a variety of psychological, emotional and cognitive difficulties. These difficulties are often expressed through addictions, anti-social behavior, aggression and isolation.

While this knowledge may not make the dynamic easier, it at least can help us to judge less harshly and put things in perspective. Love asks us to reserve judgment and choose gestures of full acceptance. To suspend judgment is not meant to condone negative or destructive behaviors, but rather to foster an acceptance that recognizes that these behaviors are only part of the full person. Acceptance enables us to embrace the person in their totality.

When we use our mind, we can learn helpful ways to respond to negative behaviors. When I worked in Colorado as a therapeutic foster parent, I learned responses to help teens who were struggling because of early trauma. One of the most tragic consequences of early trauma is its damage to a person's capacity *(continued on back page)*



ARTWORK BY
CHRISTA OCCHIOGROSSO

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to trust. These children needed calm, nonreactive environments. I learned how to not react to challenging behaviors. Over time, this helped those behaviors to decrease.

A serious trust wound impedes our capacity for healthy relationships. A life void of authentic relationship leads to profound loneliness. Even the sincerest gestures of love are unable to penetrate the wall. Thoughtful reflection on this helps us to see that the only just response is mercy and forgiveness a thousandfold.

And finally, it is within our souls that we will access the inexhaustible potential of love. Our soul's strength enables us to transcend our human limitations and opens us to the mystery of grace. Within the soul realm dwells the energy of our true selves—*born of and for divine love*. Within this realm we can lay to rest our ego needs and fears. When we give ourselves to stillness and attention to our soul, we will find a safe space to breathe and let go of all that we do not understand and cannot control. Here we can be with suffering, grief and loss and allow it to expand our heart, mind and soul into an ever-deepening capacity for love.

As a young person I was attracted to the bold invitation to love perfectly; I knew the Beatles song very well: All You Need is Love. Living in the Catholic Worker community, I've had a chance to prove it.

Now, nearly forty years later, I resonate more with a quote from Fyodor Dostoevsky's Brothers Karamazov often referenced by Dorothy Day: "Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared to love in dreams."

My youthful spin on Gospel love was quickly pierced when I attempted to put the dream into practice. Then I was (and still am) met with my limitations and woundedness. My fears and my needs often sabotage even the sincerest of efforts.

Even with this, I am compelled to continue as a seeker of perfect love. Not because of a mandate but because even with its challenges and sufferings, its harsh and dreadful residuals, it holds the promise of becoming fully human and the gift of abundant life. Even with its tedious moment to moment demands, it is finally, for me, the only path to healing and transformation for myself and for our wounded world.

Stillpoint Center for Spiritual Development

Our friends at Stillpoint recently sponsored a presentation by author Joyce Rupp on *Boundless Compassion*. To view, go to: stillpointcsd.org/joyce-rupp



We are excited to partner with Clean the World Foundation to offer showers to the homeless. Their trailer features four private bathrooms. They will park behind our home every Friday to offer up to 40 hot showers (8 a.m. to noon).

Where there is Hatred, Let Me Sow Love: A Lenten Retreat on the Spirituality of Non-Violence

Julia Occhiogrosso
Saturday, March 19
10 a.m. - 3 p.m.

a Zoom online event

Sponsored by Pace e Bene
Info & Registration
paceebene.org/events
scroll down to March 19

Donations:

Checks: Please make checks payable to

"Las Vegas Catholic Worker" and send to:

Las Vegas Catholic Worker
500 W. Van Buren Ave.

Las Vegas, NV 89106-3039

PayPal Giving Fund:

<http://lvcw.org/giving>

Credit Card Donations:

<http://lvcw.org/donate>

PLEASE JOIN US

To Schedule: (702) 647-0728
or mail@lvcw.org

Thurs.-Sat., 6:00 a.m.

Morning prayer at Catholic Worker

Thurs.-Sat., 6:15 a.m.

Over 300 "To-go" Meals served to poor & homeless people (6:15 a.m.: meal assembly, 7:00 - 7:30 a.m.: distribution of the meals)

Wednesday, 11:30 a.m.:

50 lunches taken to the homeless

Second Sat. of the month:

Knights of Columbus Pancake Breakfast (please call to volunteer)

Third Sat. of the month:

Deliver food boxes to homes in need

We are a Participating

Member of: Nevadans for the Common Good



In December, our volunteer Rich Hadland purchased a pomegranate tree and planted it outside the fence, where passersby can access it when the pomegranates ripen.



The Christensen House

We met in February with the Nevada Preservation Foundation about making our historic home more accessible to the community. Our home will be on their May 1 fundraiser tour of historic Las Vegas homes. We are also designing a brochure about the house and 2 new signs.

Our home was on the cover of the Spring 2021 *Preservation Magazine*, a publication of the National Trust for Historic Preservation.

The home was built in 1932 by an African American couple, LeRoy and Carrie Christensen.

When Julia Occhiogrosso was rehabbing the home in 1989, she met Carrie Christensen, who told her, "I always knew this would be a benevolent home." For more info visit:

christensenhse.lvcw.org

Thank you Mario Intino, Jr. for your many years of proofreading this newsletter, maintaining our *lvcw.org* website and stellar tech support!

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