Talking Unity

because God is the love that we are



Jacci Bulman
with 40 contributors

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For mum and dad, with love and hope,
and for the kind man who rowed the boat
on Naini Lake, India

Thank you to all the great people who made this book possible, and to everyone who joins in with creating these descriptions in the future

'One Love'

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Introduction

Talking Unity

I sit to begin writing this book in the Michael Chapel, a small 13th century sacred place, standing beside the grand abbey on Iona Island. *Talking Unity*, let me describe what I mean by this as a set of beliefs I offer to you here, for you to accept or reject, question and contemplate as you choose, and which come to you with loving intention.

These are all only human words, so they can never express or encapsulate perfect knowing or ultimate truth, because only God knows this, and God's language is often silence. But they are a way of understanding, of reaching for a clearly lit path to follow home. I hope you will consider these ideas, to discern if they reach towards truth well for you…and enjoy the considering!

The ultimate non-duality is the Oneness of God.

God is one being, one energy and creator who has no opposite. Unlike all the limited common dualities of life, which each have boundaries and require categorising

in terms of hot/cold, empty/full, in/out, right/wrong, good/bad, and so forth, God is the one divine power who is unlimited, without boundaries, who creates everything and contains everything – who creates all that truly exists – as love.

God only creates love because God *is* love, and knows love in the purest, absolute sense. Everything God is, for eternity, is one loving grace. This is our absolute unity.

Any being or person who is not completely loving (which is most of us) contains – while we reject or deny, are unknowing or afraid of God's love – a 'non-real' void of lacking inside ourselves, because all that is real is love. This means absolute pure evil cannot and does not really exist, because only God really exists.

This is not an easy belief to clarify in our minds, because fear and hatred and greed, and other such non-loving energies, cause so much harm in our world…so how can they not be real? Because only God is real, and all that is real, in the truth of the universe, is created by God, and cherished by God, in the fullness of love.

Every other energy, even if it is horribly destructive (and its causes and effects need to be counteracted and healed), is an empty non-reality, because God is only love.

We could imagine our world full of people, creatures, objects, energies, all going about in linear time and space, and we can see these material things, feel the energies, sense all of creation in the physical world, be affected by events and circumstance – but imagine now a light (any colour you choose), *underlying* all of

this as well as *over-arching* all of this; a light which is non-linear, a light which is actually the only reality, the only true dimension – and this is God's love.

In this true dimension, the parts and energies of us which are 'in-tune', resonating with God's love, are brimming with light, while the parts and energies which are non-loving, resist letting in the light, these show up as dark holes…yet underlying even these superficial, temporarily empty patches, is the full light of God.

It is perhaps not helpful for us to mentally wrestle too much with such words and concepts as 'real' and 'non-real', or 'fullness' and 'lacking', because we are in danger of falling again into the restrictive way of thinking which is dualism – looking for binary categories by which to order and organise our world. This is a natural inclination for our human brains but can cause us to set up 'for' and 'against' arguments and get tangled in limiting considerations. The only 'belief' that contains all answers and all categories is more than a belief – it is love.

To understand this great underlying and over-arching (completely encompassing) unity of God's one love is the way for us to gradually 'come home' to the truth of the love that we are. In this life or thereafter. And we *will* all come home, eventually, to knowing we are this love of God, because in truth we already are home, every one of us, within that love. We just are not yet fully aware of our own reality!

Everyone, everything in creation, is a part of and belongs to the unified and unifying love of God. Great, fully

aware and fully conscious teachers like Jesus came to show us who we really are, every one of us, if we choose to see and listen. To encourage us to realise and activate – be 'full-filled' with – the love of God within us.

I hope you choose to continue with the suggestions, questions, images, and challenges of this book, never being expected to agree with everything but always invited to explore. They are ideas shared by many in the developing and varied tapestry of beliefs about our souls, our God, which is all the richer for its diversity. If you wish to join in with contemplating these (hopefully interesting) threads within the tapestry – welcome!

Chapter 1

We exist as love

'as I abide in you'

Imagine a special ocean that is the ocean of God's love, containing the whole of creation in the universe and beyond. There is nothing outside of this ocean. Now try not to imagine too hard or think too analytically, because, like all metaphors, this image will fall apart a bit if you pick at it too hard, but let's just see where it can take us.

We are all born from this ocean. We exist and live within it, each as droplets of love. No matter where we go in the ocean, if currents carry us deep down or into whirlpools or storms, if waves crash upon us or carry us gently on our way, we will still only ever be one thing – droplets of love. We will still only ever belong to this ocean.

Sometimes we may think we are not droplets of love; we may reject or rebel or deny the ocean. But no matter how far we try to escape, this ocean of God's love is everything and everywhere. We will only ever exist within it and it will always be what makes us.

Some other droplets in the ocean may reject us or tell us we do not belong – that we don't deserve or are too 'bad' or worthless to be a part of this love – but no matter what they tell us, or we tell ourselves, we *are* a part, we do belong to God's love. Because that is all there is.

Still, for much of our lives we may keep thinking we are way too unworthy of being such love; we may even outrightly fight against it with our minds and actions. We may do harmful things to hurt ourselves, others, or our planet. But this is only being done by the part of us which is afraid or unwilling to let the truth of who we are be realised inside us. The love *is always there*, but we hold on to our will to refuse to accept it is there, within us, and develop dark 'holes' of unconsciousness inside ourselves, until we let the light in, let ourselves know who we are.

We can call this our journey of 'reconciliation' with God's loving truth. Becoming 'conscious' or fully alive. Becoming aware of heaven on earth. For Christians like me, we can call this becoming 'Christ-conscious' – aware of the love of God, which is the Christ within us – but other faiths use other names for consciously connecting to God's truth. It is all one reality, beyond the words.

We are all forever made from God's love, in every part of our being, now and when we die. And we will all reconcile with this love, one day. Deep inside us we all long for this realization to come, this secure knowing of being held in a homecoming of certainty we belong to God. We are goodness. And we can only be fully real as this loving goodness, because only then are we our true selves.

God only creates pure love, so that is our truth. Not just what we call our 'soul', as if our mind and body were somehow separate from this loving goodness. Not even necessarily excluding our fragile, but potentially creative, egos. Excluding nothing because every part of us that is real, that truly exists, is love. Because God made us.

God made us to be, if you would like to use another image, the 'vessels', the jugs for God's love, and God filled us, from before the moment we were born, filled us to overspilling, with love. When we reconcile to this truth of who we are, what we are made from, then we can serve our purpose of being born: to enjoy pouring out the love of God, and to simply enjoy being full of love.

God's message to us, through Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, and through other holy teachers is:

'*Abide in me* ***as I abide in you'***

Chapter 2

In love we exist

'Abide in me'

Because we all belong to the ocean of God's love, clearly this love is all around us as well as inside us, in all living and non-living things and in all the spaces between.

We can never really turn away from or be truly isolated or separated from God's love – all we need to do is realise and accept it surrounds us. Welcome our belonging.

Even the situations or people or energies that seem most alien to God's loving, in truth, they are still a part of the ocean. Sometimes it takes great efforts of forgiveness and a choice to follow great examples of grace, to see the love and goodness of God even in those perpetrators of unkind, unloving actions. No-one can pretend this is always easy, but by finding forgiveness we can be healed and help others to heal, because we find and show the forgiving power of God's love.

It is simple to love a 'good droplet' in the ocean, those who are kind and good to us, but to love and forgive one who perpetrates acts of harm or corruption or cruelty or unkindness, this is a great challenge in our life on earth. And a great teacher.

It asks us to understand that people can be forgiven even when their actions are not 'excused'. Wrongdoing still often needs consequences, to keep some order and morality to our human society. But when we forgive, even begin to forgive in our hearts another child of God, we are shown how to understand grace. Not in words or definitions, but in our being.

With such movements of forgiveness, we can begin to see that in our true being we are *all* good, because we are all created from God's pure love, as one unity. No, this is not easy, especially when there are people who seem to be so far from God's goodness in our world, but if we keep believing that God makes every tiny piece of creation from love, then such a belief will hold us through doubt. Even a loving intent towards grace gives all of us the chance to realise more the love that we are, both the forgiver and the forgiven. The chance may be rejected, misunderstood, or shied away from, but by even beginning to forgive one another we celebrate and honour, we justify God's love.

See chapter 4 for more consideration of this challenge.

* * *

The joy of accepting our universal belonging to God's love can be facilitated by our willingness to *listen* to each other. True listening is itself a great act which is very often neglected, in our rush to speak and be heard. To make the choice to be quiet and listen, take in what another person says without busily thinking what we can say next, or rushing to interrupt, is a vital tool for connection and understanding.

We can confidently *respect* each other's beliefs without fearing this means we need to *accept* them as our own. Often by truly listening and taking in a very different way of seeing our God and our world, we can be helped to clarify our own beliefs, rather than confuse them.

The key is to resist the urge to label people or their ideas as good/bad, right/wrong, a success/failure, and instead listen to them as unique, complex individuals who we are interacting with in the present moment of now. This enables us to avoid looking for generalised oppositions to our own sense of what is 'correct', which creates the need to be in automatic dualistic conflict with each other.

If we can prioritise the knowing that we all belong to one complex, diverse unity that will never break, and where simplistic 'binary thinking' gives us no real answers, then we can move towards mutually enriching harmony rather than fruitless 'duelling'. And we can choose to practice good

listening rather than labelling.

* * *

Whenever we are afraid, lonely, grieving, angry, hurt, or insecure, we can find great support in knowing that we are 'held' by God, our creator. Around us is all the love of God's universe and beyond. We may remain focused mostly on being a separate droplet of love, or we may open up our awareness of boundaries and allow ourselves to glimpse a realization, even consciously embrace the knowing that we are in truth *fully* connected to the whole of the ocean.

Whatever we do, in this lifetime or thereafter, we can only ever belong to God, abide in God, exist inside loving energy. And when we need strength or courage, healing or confidence, motivation or compassion, powers of forgiving or kindness, all beyond what we sense to be within our fragile human limitations, what great relief, sustenance and even joy we can find in realizing the true gift of our being – we are each a droplet of God's love, *and* we are the ocean.

'***Abide in me*** *as I abide in you*'

Chapter 3

God is love

'all that is real is love because all that is real is God and God is love'

Because God is love in the purest form, complete, absolute, and unconditional, this truth means that God does not hate.

God is not confined by human emotions. God is unconfined. God may know despair or suffering or even anger (in ways far beyond our human perception of these words) but only ever are these energies of God born in a realm which is good.

Pure love only knows and gives out loving – and this is a great truth to celebrate!

God knows no hatred or jealousy, because such emotions and consequent actions are limited human forms of non-loving. God needs no things such as vengeance or retribution. God needs no 'ransoms' paid, and Jesus certainly did not die in order to bail us out of some kind of 'sin prison'.

God doesn't judge or punish us in any sense familiar to our human understanding of these terms. Any lessons

given to us by God's grace, now or after we die, will be born from a divine justice that comes from an intimate knowing of us, and God's ultimately loving moves to help us find our way home.

We do not know or really need to know how this will be – it is beyond our minds – but we can be 100% sure and trust it will be born from care for us, as God's children.

God doesn't need to send any of us to an eternal punitive hell. Rather – in a complete turnaround of this human-made warning – God intends to bring us all, guide us all, *back* to heaven! With the help and communication of teachers such as Jesus.

We will all come home, no matter how long this takes and by whatever means we are guided – only God knows best how this will happen. God wants us all to enjoy the embrace of heaven; to fully realise the miraculous love we belong to. This is God's intention and so this is how it will be.

'thy will be done'

* * *

Every single living and non-living thing in the universe is loved unconditionally by God. There are no 'ifs' and 'buts' or conditions whatsoever to this loving. No *"I will love you if you believe this…"* or *"…but I will not love you if you do that…".* No! Such concepts are a limited, not divine Unlimited way of loving.

Even after the greatest rejections of the love of God by any people, they are *still* unconditionally loved by God,

because God only loves, and every piece of creation is within that ocean of love, forever.

If we cannot see or feel the love that we are, God does. It may take us our lifetime, (or many), to reconcile our hearts and minds to this great awareness, but the love is always there.

The love of God (what I would call 'the Christ') does wait to be 'invited' in – waits to be welcomed and embraced in our hearts, to be activated and expressed through us, to bring us happiness. But it is always there, holding us securely, waiting.

We are each given the gift of a chance to let go our fearful denial, our false sense of separation from or unworthiness of this loving. We are given an invitation to come home. What a miracle this can be! To have an awareness that God is inside us and all around us with a love beyond all our imaginings – all-inclusive, all-forgiving, and crucially *un*conditional. To sense that God loves us so much, and that heaven is who we are.

'God only loves'

Chapter 4

We exist for loving

'be still and know you are loved'

We are each created as material 'droplets' in this great ocean, so that God can love us.

We can imagine that God finds joy in loving, and we are the beneficiaries of this intent. It may be that God finds distress in caring for us and seeing our continuous struggles to reconcile with who we are. So often losing our way home. But God can of course withstand suffering beyond all that we describe as painful, because God knows what will be.

Always and forever God creates physical life in the universe to enjoy loving. To enjoy having God's 'children'. This is the blessing to us – to be born for loving.

We also exist so that God's love can be expressed *through* us. We are born with the potential and desire to actualise (make a reality of) our capacity for loving – to explore and experience the challenges and power of actively *giving* love to another. We can learn how it feels to sacrifice our own wants and needs for the love of others,

or for commitment to a just cause. To feel compassion. To be kind. To act unselfishly. To work for justice. To enjoy loving.

And we can enjoy the experience of *receiving*, accepting the gift of love from another. Ultimately, we will all come to realise and accept the gift of being loved by God.

This exchange of love between God and creation and between God's children can be experienced as a network of *sharing* – a connectivity which enables God's love to be manifested, expressed, and fulfilled.

All loving action in the world gives fulfilment to the nature of God. By the *relationship* between God and the universe, and between each of us as we love each other as droplets in the ocean, we learn to become the living expression of God's truth. God's goodness.

We may of course not yet be able to know and express this love to our full potential, without limitation. We are humans, still learning! But we can hope and aim to love ourselves and to love others by following the example of how God (and I would say Christ) loves us – with forgiving, unconditional, all-inclusive grace.

We can begin to allow this love to be as welcome and active as possible through us. And at the times when it is hardest for us to either offer or accept such love, these may be the times when God can teach us the most.

When we show grace, when we forgive others or our world, even our God, for any suffering being endured, then we not only give God's transforming love to the receiver, we also can be transformed by this process

of allowing love to heal us. And when we can forgive ourselves for any wrong or harm we have done, for mistakes we have made, again we are transformed by this act of loving.

But when we find loving forgiveness too frightening or difficult to allow ourselves to feel, we can forgive such fear, as we are God's human children, and simply keep ourselves as open as possible to welcoming such grace. By keeping ourselves *engaged* in the relationship of loving, not closing our hearts completely, then love can, as God's healing light, find a way into the darkness.

Simple loving intention enables loving action.

I am wisely reminded here to emphasise that to say and feel *"I forgive"* another (or ourselves), is for certain *not* a condition itself for our being loved by God! For some people it is not possible, and this in no way excludes them from God's *un*conditional love, which contains no judgemental boundaries. Nor does it exclude them from being loving people. All that holds as true is that forgiving as an intention can – if we are ready – teach us what love feels like, what it can transform and heal in us, and in those we are even 'open to becoming willing' to forgive.

There need be no extra heavy pressures laid on people who have been hurt, to feel they 'must forgive' so to be seen as good or lovable in God's (or anyone's) eyes. Or in their valuing of themself. God knows our goodness and waits for us to know it.

* * *

Likewise, there need be no guilt or pressure or even fear in us of fear itself. If we are afraid of someone or something, or some situation or illness, that is enough darkness upon us, enough emptiness, without also being afraid of our fear being 'wrong' or 'bad for us'. Let us not be afraid of fear.

When we are ready to feel God's healing love inside us, we can begin to fill this void. This often comes when we can *accept* our fear, as by this very acceptance we begin to be free of its power over us!

Remember, no-one ever needs feel heavy or guilty for feeling bad. Life can be hard enough! But we can begin to feel the comforting light of God by making the choice to stop trying to *control* our dark fear and give it permission to be loved. Then let God do the rest. Let ourselves be filled with a new awareness of God's courage which – as you have probably guessed – is always within us.

The best two ways I have found (ironically perhaps) to not expand and be suppressed by the fear inside us but (thank God) to reduce and be released from it are: 1) *Acceptance* and 2) *letting go of trying to control* it. To be reconciled with our own true freedom. Because accepting our own darkness then lets in the Light.

To clarify: when we are guided to forgive, this is to help heal us, heal our world. It is not a demand or a prerequisite for our own forgiveness. And when God (or Jesus) advises us *"do not be afraid",* this is to reassure us. It does not mean 'do not be afraid or I will judge you and I won't love you'. If we cannot yet forgive or feel

full of courage – we are still *completely* loved by God.

The brilliant truth is, we never need to become 'worthy' or 'deserving' of God's love. We don't need to earn it or fear not 'qualifying' for it. God loves every one of us *always,* because that is what God always does.

'we are born for loving'

Chapter 5

By loving we exist

'yes'

If we go back to the image of us, as creation, each being 'vessels' for God's love, we can see how these vessels or 'jugs' of love are only put into fulfilled service when they are actually pouring out love!

By loving we allow and enable our true selves to be revealed. The beautiful person we are born as is given permission to exist.

As we practice loving others, this very act opens up the 'channels' of reality, and empowers, encourages us to also be more loving towards ourselves. Loving engages reality. Loving enables true existence.

Likewise, when we are our authentic selves, when we allow our true nature, talents, dreams, and passions to be given a 'yes' to being expressed, then we naturally become more loving, because we become closer to the reality of who we are.

When we make efforts to nurture and find opportunity, even *make* the opportunity for our expression of this that we are, then such authentic existence goes forward

to energise us to become more loving in all that we do, rather than being frustrated and untrue to our own reality.

* * *

The action of loving, the dynamic of this, moves our whole being onto a 'good track' of energy which is the fuel to our realising our own full potential. We come closer to the true energy of God, more 'in tune' with this unconditional love, which is heaven.

The denial of love, either of giving love to others or of receiving love for ourselves, takes us further away from who we really are, into more of a state of 'hell'. But this is not permanent. Not a punishment. One day, even if far into eternity, we will all be guided and helped to realise who we are, and come home to all that really exists, which is heaven.

The sooner we welcome, practice, and enjoy loving, and the sooner we let go (by acceptance) of our fear, let go of feeling unworthy, of guilt, of trying to close ourselves off from the light – then the sooner we open the voids of darkness, and become real.

* * *

Some thoughts for people considering Christianity.

What is important is for us to see that what was 'satisfied' by the death of Jesus was not at all the 'wrath' of God, as some horrid unfair punishment of Jesus 'instead of us', but the very opposite! Jesus died not for 'payment' (which God does not need) but for love (which is all God is). By the death of Jesus, as the fully conscious

Christ, the totally unconditional forgiving love of God was shown, was expressed, was embodied, and was satisfied. Jesus let himself be crucified for and with and in God's loving of us. Saying to all humanity *"This is how much I love you!"*

But (happily) Jesus Christ, as fully conscious loving, could not truly die, because by loving we eternally exist.

Let's remember again that love is *all that exists*. Love never dies. For this reason, when Jesus as the loving Christ chose to sacrifice his human life and be crucified for love of us, what Christians call the 'Resurrection' occurred.

'the eternal love of God
is shown in the eternal life of Christ'

Chapter 6

God is loving

'love is who God is and loving is what God does'

Since before even the beginning of time, before the universe was created, since before even 'before' was a possibility, God has been loving.

To love is an action, a movement of energy, and God is this action to the absolute highest potential, and beyond.

We can imagine and aim towards discovering this power – feel blessed to enjoy and accept the need to sometimes suffer for it. To become unconditionally loving is a literally 'mind-set-blowing' opportunity, but one that asks us to let go of our human fears – let go of hiding behind closed barriers and inside intrinsically judgemental category 'boxes' which feel temporarily secure.

When we can understand all boxes and labels to be within one all-encompassing love, then we can find our true security, which is inter-active.

* * *

We are invited to bravely join in with a *dynamic*

relationship, which the Christian term 'Holy Trinity' can help us to comprehend. The Trinity offers us a way to know God as being loving within and between three 'aspects' of Godself – as Creator, Communicator and Advocate or Father/Mother, Son and Holy Spirit. The joy and fulfilment come, and sometimes the suffering comes, from God giving and receiving love within Godself. The love *is* by being shared as lov*ing*.

Of course, 'The Holy Trinity' is a limited human term and concept, (and there may be many more aspects of Godself than these three), but this way of understanding can at least help us to engage in the exciting reality of God's loving being an *active energy exchange*, not a static state.

This relationship of shared love has been active since forever and is the 'matrix of loving' to which we belong.

* * *

We are also invited to let go of wanting to be in tight control of our lives. Let go of this fearful 'separate' illusion and surrender our self to a deep trust in belonging to God. This does not mean giving up responsibility for our actions or discerning our own best steps, but it does mean knowing that we are not alone. We can submit with relief to being a part of the action of God; and we can find guidance by asking, hoping, trusting, praying, listening to the living God of absolute wisdom, with our being.

'we are each a dynamic part of God
loving God's beloved'

Chapter 7

How can Christ help us to know God's love?

'imagine'

Imagine again the whole ocean of God's love. On this ocean is a boat, which is all of creation. This boat we can call *'The Christ'*, though other people and faiths may use other words.

Please imagine this from your heart, with the boat as an image which simply helps us to comprehend for a moment something so big it is beyond description, but we can try.

Christ is the love in all of creation. Christ is actually inside *and* outside of the boat, but for those of us who are wanting to find their way to the truth of God's loving, find a life in God with awareness, then Christ can be seen as a boat which we can be carried on, as we become conscious of who we are – conscious of the ocean we belong to.

We can 'come aboard', and make our journey feel more accessible, more secure, more tangible and comprehensible to us.

Human words are always limited in our reaching towards the wonder of truth, but we can imagine this boat of Christ as the 'communicator' of God's truth to all creation. If we listen from our hearts, if we are quiet in our minds, ready to notice and listen rather than to think and speak, then we can 'see and hear' God communicating with us, when we connect to and engage with the Christ.

Christ cannot be understood when we think in singular rational categories, because Christ is the love in all creation as well as the words of the truth of this love. The love we are made from *and* the communicator of this love to us.

We can feel this better than think it. The more we let go of needing to 'explain' God as Christ, the closer we come to being conscious and engaged with Christ, in our hearts.

We can commit to this voyage of learning to actively live in God's truth, by 'joining the boat' with Christ. The voyage can be healing, peaceful, fascinating, joyful, or stormy, difficult, making strong demands upon us. But always the boat of Christ is there to hold us, and Christ *never* lets us go.

Even if we 'jump ship' for a while, we will never be thrown out by Christ, and the boat will eternally be there to take us back. Even when we jump out and struggle to be alone in the water, Christ is still with us…because, unlike physical material things on earth, which have boundaries and edges, like boats, Christ is beyond all boundaries. There is no 'out'!

Now, Jesus was and is fully aware, fully conscious of the Christ, within every part of his being. That is why he could perform miracles, rise from the dead, speak with such profound wisdom. Why he can still speak to us now. Very often in his life he taught (and still teaches) by asking people questions and listening – showing them how to understand their own answers. He taught about God's love using stories and images. He taught us 'poetically', with parables and symbols linked to small-scale real life in his time and place, yet which reached so far, they can still reach us now. Jesus, going back to our own image, is (if we choose him) our guide on the boat of Christ, who can help us navigate the water home. And he can throw us a lifebelt to hold us safe when we jump ship!

Jesus wants very much for us to realise that the Christ is also who *we* truly are, because we, like him, are children of God, created by God. And so, we can all perform miracles, overcome death, 'move mountains', when we can allow ourselves – whenever that time comes – to become fully aware of the Christ we are made from and belong within. The love is as strong in you and me as it is in Jesus, and he came to wake us up to this power.

'we can know our true potential when we become Christ-conscious'

Chapter 8

Even the darkness is within God's light

'in the dark…where are you?'

How can we comprehend that God is all loving and all of God's creation is made from pure unconditional love, made from God's light, when our world contains so much horrid darkness?

How do we understand the greed, corruption, cruelty, insanity, disease, disasters?

How can human beings suffer so much, from both the non-loving actions of others and from the sheer 'unfairness' of negative circumstance?

Why does God allow this, if God loves us?

This is very hard to understand. Some people explain it as our world, our suffering lives, even our selfishness, being being controlled by powers 'outside' the realm of God, or somehow a 'mistake'. But to say this presumes that God is not perfect love, who has ultimate power over all things and knows all things.

Some people call our physical world an 'illusion', not real, but this presumes that God did not choose to

create our physical universe, our planet, our humanity. Did not choose to create us just as we are (including our bodies and minds and egos) in this real time and space of now.

Some see life on earth containing suffering as a kind of 'punishment' by God for our sins – but to believe this presumes God's love for us is conditional, and that God needs revenge and retribution in order to be able to withstand our wrongdoings.

These three explanations are lacking (to me), because God *is* perfect love, perfect reality, the perfect unconditional loving grace over all creation. We are the beloveds of God.

So why is there suffering?! How is darkness contained within God's light?

A way to understand life on earth, with all its chaotic rollercoasters of joy and pain, is to *accept* that God has chosen, for our planet (perhaps not everywhere in the universe) two crucial elements: 1) to create the *laws of nature* which are at work on earth and 2) to give *free will* to all creatures that 'think', so that we can discern for ourselves what we choose to do, what we believe, what steps we take into the future.

This first important decision by God gives us inhabitants of earth the opportunity for warm, well-fed, secure and healthy, happy days, but also the risk of the horrors of floods, famines, pandemics and natural tragedies.

The laws of nature include within them, intrinsic to the laws themselves, the chance for both order and chaos, health and disease, positive and negative circumstance,

because that makes life in all its wonder, with its vast array of physical world dualities, such as fragility and strength, simplicity and complexity, uniformity and diversity, constancy and change, on our planet.

Likewise, with free-will being given to us, this intrinsically contains within it the chance, the risk, of our making big mistakes, of cruel wrong-doing, of fearful selfishness, as well as the potential for 'in-tune' reconciliation with our truth of loving kindness, and good action. In God's divine wisdom the honour was given us to have the freedom to *choose* and to learn by our choosing – from our experiences, from our understanding, from our mistakes.

And it is true from the experience of many that we can learn a great deal when we suffer in our life, as well as when it is a blessing. This is not constantly enjoyable, but it is how life on earth works. We do not grasp 'why?' this is from too much analysis of our suffering and are often best to hold on to God's knowing. God's constant love for us. It can be hard, and words can seem shallow, when we reach to understand why we suffer on earth, why we can learn about love through suffering, but – as unresolving as this statement may sound – we do not need to evaluate but to *trust* in our God's love.

The planet could be occupied by all-good robotic creatures with no free will, who automatically perform loving actions towards each other, without ever making choices or discerning what 'goodness' is.

The planet could be a globe of perfect climate with no illness, no suffering, no variation between individuals or

environments or circumstance. But God chose to make life on earth here, now, *this* way, with our freedom and potential to be transformed, to be 'enlightened' to truth, through life being rich in diversity, with the honest reality of darkness being contained within God's light.

How *can* darkness be within light? Because this is God's light, divine. If it helps, we can use a capital letter to show it is beyond human words. Light. With no opposite. Ordinary concepts like darkness and light, joy and pain, blessing and suffering, these are dualistic terms, created by our brains which – as we have considered – need simple binary opposites like hot/cold, empty/full, to be able to help us order, categorise, comprehend and survive in our physical lives, our physical world.

God is beyond all this. God is 'super-natural' in that God is a miracle-making energy who can work within as well as beyond all our natural laws, because God creates and shapes these laws. The One Universal Light is without opposites and contains all opposites. It is a non-duality which our minds can only struggle to reach towards, but which our hearts can help us to find:

the one true dimension – God's light – which is love.

Chapter 9

What do we mean by 'love'?

For plenty of pages now you have been reading the words of one person, but words mean different things to every one of us. When I write the word 'bird', every single reader will see a different image of a bird in the 'memory stacks' in their mind, or perhaps hear a song or feel a feather. And if I write the word 'ocean', you may see a wide expanse of calm water, or wild seas, hear crashing waves, feel the wetness on your skin, or smell the salty air. We used an image earlier of God's love as an ocean. When we use no image, no physical metaphor, and we simply use the word 'love', we find there are countless ways to link this abstract word to a sense, a 'translation'.

There are such a rich variety of meanings of 'love' for us as humans, and underneath all this variation is a feeling which we all share, are all made from, which is beyond description or definition. God is love, so God is beyond description, but the more we try, the closer we begin to reach. And then perhaps the more we let go of trying, the even closer we become?

Here for you now are the ways in which a group of people have chosen to describe what the word 'love' means to them. They are for you to consider (as you have considered all the chapters so far, I hope), by rolling them about in your heart and mind, enjoying them, questioning them, agreeing, disagreeing…and then perhaps finding your own way, unique to you, of describing love, describing God.

A Collection of descriptions by 21 People, in response to the question 'What is love, to you…?'

> For me, love is the ache or pull inside of you that necessitates connection – connection to another person, community, or your identity on this planet – it's that pulse which runs deep within your bones. My daughter lives in Canada and although we often video chat, there is a pull, or deep ache in me that I know can only be satiated through physically hugging her.
>
> For me, love is the paradox of both grounding and freeing – it's the energy that stills your soul, quietens your mind, and drives down to pinpoint a moment in time and space, a connection of standing in the small, still present – and yet equally it's that energy which flows outwards, liberating and expanding beyond all physical and imaginable boundaries, never ending and never contained and yet, somehow, connected.

Some images that come to mind when I think of love are:

The ocean – standing on the shore and experiencing, with all five senses, the ocean waving in and pulling back – a rhythm and force that never ends, is never interrupted, that is all encompassing.

The breath – breathing in, pulling air into my body, expanding to the point where the only response can be letting go – or pushing all the air out of my lungs, expelling everything to the point where the only response is to breathe in.

For me love is far more than a choice, an emotion or feeling – it's something that is way beyond the physical limits of time and space and yet it's that which runs deep into the very core of each of us, anchoring us to the present moment.

Tracey

The Fifth Sacred Thing

There is not of my conditionality here.
Yet the judgements of memory linger in time and place,
where place and time have no meaning in You.
Here, in You, I am known and loved as I am.

There is not of my separation here.
Yet there must be a point (must there?) where I end and
You begin,
boundless and oceanic with You.
Here, with You, there is no skin between us.

There is not of my earth here.
Yet my legs flail in search of solid ground,
gravity has no grip for my will or over You.
Here, over You, I soar to the heights of becoming.

There is not of my fire here.
Yet I am surrendered into an ardent flame,
a flame that burns off everything that is against You.
Here, against You, I am transformed into fire by fire.

There is not of my air here.
Yet I breathe deep and free,
in and out at the same time through You.
Here, through You, I am the breath inside the breath.

There is not of my water here.
Yet I drink and know no thirst,
for I am lost, drowned and liquefied within You.
Here, within You, I flow freely in and out of time.

There is not of my death here.
Yet, my body will dissolve and be re-formed,
into some other reordered design for You.
Here, for You, I die into life and know eternity.

There is not of my power here.
Earth, air, fire and water serve, only serve,
the deathless, unifying, unconditional Essence of You.
Here, of You, blooms the infinite ungoverned fifth sacred thing.

Love, only Love.

Stephen W

In the world of tennis... love means nothing,
But in the world around us, everybody's searching
For that perfect serve, an overhead smash.
Then there's no return,
Game, set and match.

Stephen G

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. (1 Corinthians 13: 4-7)

I can't think of a better summary of what love means to me.

Sarah G

I believe love is the opposite of control. We might think we know how others should be, what they should say and do in our perfect version of events. But we love most powerfully when we recognise another's essential otherness and our own powerlessness over them. To love is to surrender self and control, and instead to appreciate, support and celebrate the other. To be loved in this way feels like expansiveness, value, and freedom – that has been my experience from others and from God.

Nora

Love is...

Sharing your chips
Sharing your pain
A stomach flip on a road bump
Running through the long grass

Complete surrender

Rumi said, 'The door there is devastation'
And boredom
And laughter
And being there

Nicki

Love means everything. When thinking about what love means, I find it easy to come up with a myriad of clichéd movie lines or song lyrics, or even a sterile dictionary definition of love as *'a feeling of strong or constant affection for a person'*.

But love is so much more than a strong affection between people. I see it as that intangible connection we have with nature, our planet, the stars, the universe, and of course, with each other. 'Unconditional love, acceptance, and forgiveness' should be the fundamental defining characteristics of *Homo sapiens;* a blueprint for what it means to be human and how we should treat each other during our journey through this short but beautiful life.

I find it hard to believe that there is a single person who doesn't want to be loved, or who has never loved or been in love, and as a self-confessed fan of the film '*Love Actually*', I also subscribe to the cheesy notion that 'love actually is all around us'!

Mike

Some interviews with 'celebrities' include the question: '*What does love feel like?*', which reduces love to the emotional subjective. But love is founded in the objective, loaned to us like geography or weather, influenced by our reactions, and negotiations. Age provides an

example, love changing as we grow older; our cast-list expanding. Initially we are recipients, later looking for someone 'to love', to exchange and blend love into partnership. Some try to hand on love, by forming families. Love remains fragile in our fractured world, and needs, even depends on, diversity: those of us with established social, sexual or theological identities need generosity to recognise love's catholic nurturing, and expansion. Living and writing in the Christian tradition, I find increasingly that love is essentially wild, as God the ultimate free Spirit is creatively and generously untamed. And it is in that wildness of good wishes for all creation that the encouragement of love is demanded and defined.

Martyn

"I hear a lot about love" said my visitor from Mars *"but when I ask people what they mean by it, they don't seem able to tell me". "That's because love is not a thing like a picture or a book"* I replied. *"It's a way of living that means cherishing each and every human being and each and every part of God's great universe as infinitely precious and therefore treating everyone and everything with respect and reverence so that all may flourish". "Everyone and everything?"* asked the Martian. *"Yes"* I said, *"because that's how God loves us".*

Margaret

I had thought that love ought to be a permanent state. Like a comforting peaceful state of grace which I should reside in *if only I could get it right!* Therein lies trouble. Trouble of blame, trouble of failure, trouble of harshness with myself.

The conclusion I have finally arrived at is this: love is to be found in the smallest of gaps between the outpourings of the ego. And for those brief moments I am grateful.

Lelia

I have been interested that other languages and cultures have several words for love to interpret different meanings. I have studied yoga for some years and Sanskrit has several words for love, in the same way as Greek does. In English we only have the word *love* and I have come to realise that that one word fits all types of love. Love just *is itself* and needs no categorisation.

Jen

Love is an 'upward rising' in my heart, with no thoughts or words attached, which dissolves the illusory boundaries between me and the person or part of creation that I love, thereby inviting, empowering, and allowing me to be become more aware we are One, and at the same time filling me with compassion, even a surrendering

of my own limited needs, for that which I love, and for all that together we are. Phewee!

For me, it is the gift of a chance to touch upon something exciting, slightly frightening, and magically expansive. It is a 'leaping over the fence', which removes all fences.

Loving another being helps me see how life has the potential to be for all of us, all the time – if we dare choose to make the leap.

Love is like a 'portal' which allows us to be in another world, which is our world but with everything making sense and having the magic it deserves, at last. Like a great relief of permission; a huge welcome.

Jacci

Love is a generosity of mind and heart – self-giving and selfless.

To me God's love is the depth of love. God's grace and generosity are the basis of life and creation. As creation is based on love and if we believe we are created in God's image, so we too should show his love in our lives, passing that on to others.

Love is an active word, not just static. It is giving; something shared. As we share love, we are giving God's love to others: love in heart, mind, and action.

It is also a deep emotion, something close to our hearts, the centre of ourselves; God in us, worked out and shown in our behaviour. Love does not put oneself first; it can be – or possibly should be – sacrificial.

Isobel

Love is a private road – you know the sort – no one has taken responsibility for it for too long, but many people use it, despite the potholes, which make you slow down. It is not the responsibility of the council to maintain it. We expect too much of those who govern us. Many break down in the floods. It has a broken charm, I guess; and the glimpses of the golden rooms inside the sandstone double-height bay-windows of homes along the way are worth the ride. I use it. I don't pay for it. Love is for me.

Helen

For me love is feeling my heart expand when I look at my son and wishing him the best possible things in his future.

Deirdre

As a young teenager I stupidly lost the keys for our local tennis club when – having locked the door – I tried to throw them to a friend, and they ended up in a very thick and thorny bush. I could not retrieve them. I had to tell my father, who came out to the tennis club, and stretched his arm deep into the bush to retrieve the keys for me. But not without difficulty, pain, and deep scratches. From then on, the incident has been vivid in my memory as an example of the price of a parent's love, the pain and sacrifice this can involve – and, for God, did involve. That, for me, is love.

David D

Perhaps it's easier to say what love probably isn't. Love, as we conceive of it as humans, can often get mixed up with what could be called 'bargain-striking to meet one's own needs'! *"I will love you if you provide me with something"*, for example children, a home, an attractive body to have sex with, emotional support, attention, faithfulness… And when the other person fails to provide these things, then 'love' can be withdrawn. I don't think that's what love really is. That's a sort of 'transactionality'. But then life in this world can be very tough and we *do* have needs that we cannot meet ourselves, so the transactional nature of our

relationships is totally understandable... It just feels that Shakespeare had it right when he wrote so beautifully in Sonnet 116 *"Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds... It is an ever-fixed mark that looks on tempests and is never shaken... Love alters not with his [Time's] brief hours and weeks but bears it out even to the edge of doom."* I think love in its truest, purest form is utterly unchanging and unwavering, no matter what the external circumstances are. And I think we're learning what it means to embody this unconditional love as a continuous and permanent state. Importantly, by this I *don't* mean having to passively accept bad treatment from others, but simply to love without reserve or distinction. It is an extremely difficult thing to do but entirely possible. I think it is the ultimate human achievement. There are people who *have* achieved this, and I think we all have the capacity to do the same.

Brigid

Ode to Love (extract)
Awake, O Love, to shine
On this our perfect day.
Your light expels all darkness
And holds all things as One.
Your source is fathomless mystery,
But your ache I know so well.

O may I know this light
Within me and without,
Just touch me and another
So we can burn so bright.
Another and another, till all the world
Is full – sister and brother,
Field and fern, slate and stone.
I see myself in all of this…

…For me, Love is the essence of my Being. Love holds all things together, as an invisible 'golden thread' interwoven into everyone and everything. It is not an object or substance. It is eternal, outside of the dimension of time. Spiritually it is everything. Materially it is nothing. It cannot be destroyed because it is not created in the first place. It is transcendent to the mind-made laws of science. God is Love. In our true selves, we are reflectors of that Love, which may be revealed to others as Light. It is the reason for our existence.

Bob

Love is wanting to give, without expecting anything back.

Annie

Love is a tear for someone you have never met, and never will.

Alan

Love is…owning my own scull boat, *'Cara',* which means *'my friend'* in Gaelic. Love is… getting in, tying my feet into the shoes with deliberate anticipation, putting my hands on the blade handles and starting to row. Cara and I becoming one with the Derwentwater landscape. Solo, because loneliness is the most reliable, kind companion; at peace, undisturbed.

Love is…the water; pewter chevrons, silver galaxies, concentric circles, bubbling stern trails, liquid clouds, mirrors, ever changing molecules. I balance on the thin line between water and air.

It is mindfulness when paddling in rhythm, listening to the water sizzling under the boat; the splash of the spoons as they cut the surface.

Love is being encircled by high fells: Catbells, High Spy, the Jaws of Borrowdale, Bleaberry, Blencathra, Skiddaw…resilient yet ethereal through the seasons, every day filled with surprise and beauty.

Love is…sitting quietly in the bay feeding my little birdies cornflakes – the swans, fat Canada geese, squabbling ducks. It is a glimpse of brilliant turquoise – the kingfisher darting in front of frosted reeds, the tap tap of the woodpecker on dark jetty pilings, the solitary heron hiding on the shore line.

Love is all of this and more. Indestructible energy and sound, rippling outwards, converting.

Alison

Big thanks to all our contributors:

Tracey Cooke, Rev Prof Stephen G Wright, Stephen Garside, Sarah G, Nora Tweedie, Nicola Lomax, Mike Bailey, Martyn Halsall, Margaret Ives, Lelia Tanti, Jen Musgrave, Jacci, Isobel Halsall, Helen Fletcher, Deirdre Owen, Rev David Denniston, Brigid Rose, Bob Morley, Annie Tinkler, Alan Bulman, Alison Barr.

We hope that they will inspire you to create your own descriptions of love!

Chapter 10

Describe God's love as…

In this chapter, we further extend our exploration into understanding God as love. In a forest, there are so many different trees, birds, animals, rocks, insects, a stream, a den, a glade of flowers, the soil beneath…and yet all of these are the forest.

So, in God's love there are myriad ways of feeling, understanding, expressing, engaging with, reconciling ourselves to, this energy. Being challenged by it, being expanded, held safe, asked questions, provoked, nourished, lifted up…

I asked a group of inspiring people to describe for us, from personal experiences in their lives, *'God's love as…'* across a wide range of different aspects, such as *'…Trust', '…Play', '…Courage'*. These are not my words, experiences, or ideas (except for my own contributions). They each belong to their creators. And likewise, the people who wrote these pieces do not necessarily agree with my own beliefs or faith. We simply come together in love.

And these are not theories. Only the pieces by Tim are written in an explanatory way, to help us understand the goodness, the Ruach and the Shekinah of God (see later!). All other contributors were asked to write from their own life, with story, image, and example, because Jesus showed us that telling stories from real life can often be the most effective way of passing on good ideas.

Lakshmi, one of the people invited into this writing collaboration (and who created our front cover), wrote to me to say this: "*So much of what is written and expressed of God is theory, but I have such a heart for all projects which aim to bring out the simplicity of experience, love and relationship that is God. Thank you for this wonderful project and inviting me to be a part of it!*"

I hope you will enjoy these descriptions of *'God's love as…'* and then perhaps be inspired to create your own piece, in words or art or music or dance, or even in beautiful silence...

Become a part of it too….and enjoy!

A collection of how we can experience 'God's love as…' in 38 different ways of knowing God:

God's love as…Hope

There is always a light that shines in darkness around us. That message of Hope is given to us by God. Every time it rains, I always look to see if the sun is shining somewhere and then that means I can look for a rainbow. During 2020 the rainbow was a symbol of hope for all of us, of the amazing contributions, acts of goodness and courage, and togetherness across communities. Hope is the smile behind the mask. Hope is the snowdrop reaching up to a grey sky and the daffodil bouncing in a March breeze. *For me,* God's gift of Hope was that feeling of certainty that *"everything will be ok"* when receiving a health-related bolt out of the blue. After some days of sadness and uncertainty following an operation, once again that feeling was there, everything will be ok, have faith and trust. Unhappiness at work, feeling attacked by colleagues – God showed me Daniel in the lion's den. Desperately sad after a falling out with a trusted friend, God directed me to a verse in the Bible that began… *'Call her… '* and gave me the strength to pick up the phone.

In the darkness, look for the sign of Hope that is waiting for you – it's there, have faith and trust to follow the light.

Sarah G

God's love as…Joy

For me, the joy of God's love is knowing that no matter how lonely or sad I feel, I am still loved. When I am surrounded by darkness, and feel no hope, I still know that I am eternally loved.

I am loved by something bigger than I can understand, and I am loved in more ways than I can imagine.

I am loved by all the people in my life, and I am loved by ancestors who I never even met. I am loved by the trees outside my window, and the dogs I pass in the park. I am loved by the author of the book I am reading, and the artist of the painting I am looking at. The musician who wrote the music I am listening to loves me, because I am bringing new meaning and life to their songs each time I listen.

I am loved because I love them back.

I love the people in my life for making me laugh and bringing me tears of joy. I love my ancestors for joyfully continuing their lineage. I love the trees outside my window that sway in the breeze with joy, and the joyous dogs running in the park. I love the authors, and artists and musicians, who remind me that I am connected with each human. Each human who feels joy… and pain.

When I am in the depths of my pain, it is this deep-rooted joy of knowing I am loved, that encourages me to keep going for one more day.

Anna

God's love as…Fellowship

When we consider God's love as the Holy Spirit in fellowship, connecting us together, I wonder if it is the God image in us that is perhaps connecting to the God image in the other person. I love the greeting of Namaste:

The divine in me bows to the divine in you.

When we think about God as love, then maybe the love we have for another person or the love of a special place, or a pet, or piece of music etc, is perhaps the God image in us connecting to the God in those other things.

There is something powerful about being together as fellow believers, all being open to God – all of us created as individuals, with different personalities, ideas, and talents, yet all created by God and containing something of the image of God. Is it this that gives us our sense of unity, belonging and purpose – that sense of being seen as an individual and yet collectively united with others?

As humans I believe we are innately drawn to belong and connect to something outside of ourselves – even a person choosing to live a reclusive life will have strong connections to the natural world and its rhythm.

Maybe God created us to be in relationship because that is where love can be found.

Mother Teresa said*: "Being unwanted, unloved, uncared for, forgotten by everybody, I think that is a much greater hunger, a much greater poverty than the person who has nothing to eat."*

Tracey

God's love as…Family

If God is love then God must be the energy that creates families, the source of invisible connections spanning out, like threads, like Spiderman webs of super strength….and even when they get stretched almost beyond imagination they hold, though sometimes they may be so thin and fragile they disappear from view. This connecting love has a stronger bond than any chemistry…God is magical, delocalised electrons, making love malleable, unbreakable, a conductor of human warmth and electricity!

And maybe a family is anything we choose, there are no boundaries…we can extend or shrink our families to suit ourselves and perhaps God is the power for us to do this.

I don't want to over-romanticise families, they can be painful, tangled, something we want to escape, sources of stress and drudgery. Sometimes my symbol of a family is another empty cereal bowl waiting to be washed, sometimes it's a swooping knot of pure gold. I guess if God (or what we each know as God) is the source of all creation, then God's love must be the strongest super-power, an irrepressible, limitless source of energy that can keep us going, can fire up warm, sustaining connections, and help us feel…better!

Nicola

God's love as… Relationship

"You're in relationship with everything, aren't you?" a friend says, as we walk and talk approaching the end of a wonderfully wild and windy walk. I grin back in response, feeling deeply understood.

Yes – a resounding, gleeful yes! But then in parting ways I wonder to myself – what is relationship? How would I define it? And what about it makes it the foundation of how I experience the world and God?

What I do know is that I feel a deep connection to all that surrounds me – especially the natural world and people. I feel a connectedness, a oneness. Not only do I seek the beauty in all things (sometimes it takes a little effort to find!), but I feel compelled to experience and receive that beauty as fully as I can. Whether that be by pausing to touch, smell, feel and truly *be* with nature; receiving people with a spirit of learning; or expressing gratitude physically, creatively and in written word… In this delight for all things, I feel I am participating in an encircling presence which designed all things and peoples as beautiful. In joining what I understand to be God's outlook on the world, I enter into a loving gaze which makes the world and the people around me come to life with a certain divine vividness. Enamoured by this vivid beauty, I feel drawn to a certain intimacy…and in that intimacy I find God: an upwelling certitude of beauty, goodness, and an assurance of love.

Lakshmi

God's love as… Reconciliation

I experienced a profound moment of reconciliation in a hospital bed 12 years ago. Following a major operation, and a significant house move, I had fallen rapidly into a space of confusion, anxiety, and insomnia. As a bubbly optimist this was not only a shock within, but to all those who know and love me. I had 'broken down' physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. I could not feel God, though had only known life in His presence, and clung to the memory that He was there……somewhere.

In that bed, I had a clear picture. I was clinging to a grassy cliff, soil in my fingernails, rocks and violent sea below. Christ stood above me, and as I looked up to his shining face, I told him I had to let go. I was too tired to live… and I uncurled my fingers to plummet downward.

What felt like a lifetime later, I opened my eyes to the same aertex ceiling above my hospital bed. Instead of alarm, I felt total relief – release from the anxiety that had relentlessly racked my mind. And I slept, for the first time in months. Within days I returned home and began to reflect on what had occurred.

I had surrendered – fully! Let go of all that I clung to, even life itself. And in doing so I regained life – not as before, but fuller and freer.

This, I believe, is the experience of reconciliation Jesus describes when he says, *"Come to me, all you who are heavy laden, and I will give you rest".* Reconciliation between ourselves and

God is a healing space of Sabbath rest, in which we are fully known and loved, whatever our shortcomings! And of course, they remain. Reconciliation does not bring perfection – in fact the miracle is its gift whilst we are still a long way off! What freedom to experience a love that always welcomes us back, never wavers, and releases us to live life to the full.

Sarah S

God's love as…Community

My first experience of a sectarian March was as a 10-year-old on the pavement outside my front door in central Scotland. The divisions between God's communities, writ large in the violence and warfare on the 1970s streets of Northern Ireland, were being played out on the streets of Scotland. For me as a child, this looked like a festival: a fabulous parade with people dressed in brightly coloured clothes, playing lively music, and swaying as they marched. Not until I was older did I understand that the words and the music were actually anti-community – they were, in the name of God, driving fear and division right into the heart of families, streets, churches and neighbourhoods.

Here are some cameos of how I have also experienced the opposite: God's love as community:

- Christians praying together in multiple languages from different theological traditions in Iona Abbey
- Russian, Polish, German, Dutch, Romanian and British theological students building a community centre together on the white plains of Poland shortly after the end of the Cold War
- Hilarity at youth festivals and youth events on Iona where the quality of relationship, the openness of the listening, and the willingness to be changed by the 'other' outstripped the desire to win a theological argument
- The revelation to me as a teenager at a city-centre church discussion group that what divided us was probably more to do with our upbringing, and far less interesting that what united us as children of God.

In all of this I have been continually delighted by the profundity of the Trinity as a metaphor for God's love in community: the creator, the beloved, and the encircling spirit both singular and united, three-in-one, in community. For the glory of God's love experienced in community, I give thanks.

Ruth

God's love as…Serendipity

Coincidence, serendipity, fate, synchronicity or chance, call it what you will, many people think that such 'happenings' are just random collisions of random aspects of our life and the world around us, and that no reason or meaning can be extracted from them. They may be right for all I know but for all I feel and sense, this is not the case.

There have been key times in my life when I have felt that there is a something – God – behind the scenes, both in and out of 'my time', as if waiting for things to fall into alignment. People coming in and out of my life, moving or propelling me on into my unfolding future but always accompanied by an awareness of such underpinning subtleness, softness, and supportiveness which I cannot honestly fathom or articulate but I sense its presence.

A Wise Woman once said to me *"God is in the timing of things – and God is so neat."* Her words made me reflect on key events and turning points in my life where, in hindsight, there were timescales operating outwith my ken (knowledge/awareness) which then culminated at a precise point in time that sent me off along a new path of either challenge or discovery, hardship or ease.

For me there is a quality in the timing of things

– God's timing of things – that is also tangible. As if you could touch it or be touched by it. No matter the enormity of the event, its precision and neatness come twofold, for as God's Time unfolds, God's Love enfolds, holding you suspended in unconditional Love.

Lorna

God's love as…Service

God's love through service is a like a silent mystery in between each word said or act done. When all else fails through emotional suffering (say we are in a resentful state) God's love stops flowing through us naturally, so having the intention of helping someone with our experience saves the day. Doing God's handiwork therefore puts us back in the sunlight of the spirit.

Finding my God in the morning, that quiet time, is the most important piece, followed by listening, which is of course two-way prayer. A simple example I regularly use is asking for direction on how I can be useful to the person that still suffers. The intuitive answer I receive is to connect with this certain being. An added bonus, through altruistic thinking in motion, is that it keeps my self-loathing at a tolerable level. Also, other areas of my life seem to go well effortlessly, as God sees me trying.

God being love in everyone, everything, in and between all, means I can show loving kindness to others and myself.

Having similar experience of other people's pain means we can relieve each other in a way that is totally unique, which influences our serenity, acceptance, hope, faith, and courage. One of the gems I have learned in Alcoholics Anonymous, a fellowship of men and women with spiritual principles, is about giving your time freely to another human being, and that time is the currency in the spiritual realm, as opposed to money in the material world. Giving one's time and playing our role fully and completely in life is God's perfect love.

David B

God's love as… Peace

My contribution here, with humility, is of my personal understanding and intention for living in the moment, to follow my passion for peace.

Serving as a police officer, I have lived through experiences surrounded by conflict, where my inner voice and heart spoke to me of the damage caused.

Following an introduction to the 'Peace Education Programme', I saw with clarity where my own heart and inner voice wished to be fulfilled.

This is to build relations to be able to hear the voice of the heart from others, and to gain the knowledge of how to be in peace.

If I am honest, by accepting my responsibility to learn to know myself, I have taken an uncomfortable step of personal courage, to truly appreciate me, recognising that we have all been given a unique nature and talent.

Given so much from God, my conclusion was not to seek more, but endeavour to appreciate an understanding of my human virtues now, with gratitude, happiness, and love.

Making the choice for the creative power of peace to reside in me, opening the safe space for the inner light of others and oneself to shine.

Following successful community engagements discovering the power of peace, I have witnessed human kindness and the opportunities that arise from this.

Despite the environments that I have encountered of violence, fear, and loss, I have felt my inner strength surrendered in the now with sincerity, and an open heart to hear the inner voice of others.

For me to be in Peace is to be in God.

Damon

God's love as…Passion

Passion, feeling, energy, emotion, suffering, solidarity, sympathy, movement. I feel God's love when I feel. When the feeling starts in my chest and moves down my arms to create a little tingling in my hands that helps me type. This rawness reminds me of the incarnation and our closeness to Christ. He felt. I think it's when we lose this feeling, when we separate ourselves from our deepness, that we lose sight of what our mission for peace is. Because peace is our connectedness, our connectedness through Christ through our bodies.

So, when I'm angry about suffering, I rejoice. Because being angry is the outworking of being so utterly connected to another person and their feelings. Protest is holy. We celebrate the martyrs who gave up their comfortable lives to stand for what they believed in, even in the face of such harm to their own bodies. This passion and energy and feeling flowing through us is the Holy Spirit reminding us of our connection to each other through Christ who became us too. These reactions are not to be quickly suppressed, to be replaced with rational thought. God's love is our ability to feel another's pain, stand in their shoes, fight their fight, just as Jesus did for us. When we register the power of this passion, sit with it, meditate on it, we are worshipping God and giving thanks for this immense privilege of being both so authentically human and so in touch with the Spirit's movement.

Victoria

God's love as…Outreach

When I first began my role for the church engaging with mission and outreach, I thought I knew something of the love of God and the character of Jesus and that my job was to somehow share my knowing with those I engaged with. So, I told stories of the amazing character of Jesus and how the love of God had impacted me, and hoped that by hearing my stories they too would experience this.

But to my great surprise, what I encountered was more of God and more stories of the amazing character that is Jesus at work in this world today. Each and every person I met revealed to me more of what I thought I knew, giving me a much fuller and richer sense of what God is really like.

I believe we are all made by God, in the image of God and so all contain something of the love of God, and as we connect with one another it is this that gives us a feeling of belonging, connectiveness and unity. The God in me perhaps connecting with the God in you.

The Spirit of Ubuntu is about togetherness and unity. It can be translated as *'I am because we are'.*

Why Outreach? Because I am completed by others. I receive a greater sense of who I am, who God is and what the love of God is really like, by being in relationship with others. There is no need to reach out and take God there – God is already there.

Christ has no body now but yours.
No hands, no feet on earth but yours.
You are the eyes with which he looks
With compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks
To do good,
Yours are the hands,
With which he blesses the world.

Teresa of Avila.

Emma

God's love as…Earth

Every morning, in the time just before dawn, I wait in my garden, quietly greeting the different kingdoms of God's creation with prayer and movement. My lungs drinking in the cold air. My body stretching to meet the beings around me. The rooted ones. The winged ones. The tiny ones. The four-legged ones. Mother Earth and Father Sky. Brother Wind and Sister Rain. In this precious time of first light, I taste the true magic of the natural world. How it breathes with beingness, how each element inter-exists with every other, and how through it all flows a subtle, other-than-human intelligence that awakens memories of a different way to be.

I feel God's love manifest in the weaving shape of the oak trees against the night sky as it turns from black to indigo. I hear God's name in the first lucid notes of the blackbird, as she begins her overture, and in the cawing of the rooks, as they gather in the tall pines.

In these moments I am included in the deep peace of the wild, welcomed into a communion of life in which I am only a humble fragment of a much greater mystery.

Now people are beginning to wake up. Soon they will crush the silence with their machines and their noise. And the wild will retreat into hiding, surrendering her magic to the domination of humans.

I sigh and walk back inside to shower and rustle up some breakfast. There are reports to write. Things to do. But God's love remains in my heart, calling me, in the shape of the trees and the sound of the birds. I pray one day this separation will end.

Justine

God's love as…Healing

The word 'health' is derived from a Proto-Indo-European word *'kailo-'* meaning 'whole' or 'complete'. God creates a wholeness, a fullness, a completeness, just as our body, mind and spirit

are whole as one. They are not separate entities but exist together. When we want to heal, we can reach into the deep fundamentality of our life to find what we need to make us whole, like reaching out to God for his healing too.

Lana

God's love as…Jesus

"I felt you and I knew you loved me."

The Anglican Cathedral in Liverpool is a favourite sacred site of mine. Above the west door is a Tracey Emin sculpture; by rights a strip of glowing pink neon words ought not to work amid such monumental architecture. But it does.

These words mean a lot to me. They mean a lot about Jesus. You see, my early experiences of religion were entirely thought-orientated. At school or church, we were taught to believe things *about* Jesus (things that to me as a child were patently unbelievable). We were taught that only if we believed such things could we be Christians and thereby avoid hell. Well, I didn't believe in hell either, and when I said so at the age of 11 in Mr Sharples' class, I got a thorough beating. I certainly came to believe in hell then, though not the one he intended.

In the ensuing years Jesus disappeared from my

life except as occasional abstract encounters, usually with Christians whose ideas of Christ were a kind of spiritual halitosis that repelled me. But they were Christians so, they must be right? I asked Jesus, *"Is that you?"* and was startled by the immediacy of the answer, but put it down to just 'mind-stuff' and went my way.

Then, in a lonely inner place, I sat in a baroque church in Germany. It was empty save me. (Save me!). And I felt a hand on my shoulder and a whisper in my ear and warm breath upon my neck. *"I love you."* I put that down to mind-stuff too and went my way.

A decade on I said to Ram Dass, *"I wish I'd had a guru like you have, someone I had actually met and could see and hear and touch." "'Course you have,"* said he, *"It's Jesus."*

…. one of those conversations where someone drops something in your soul, and it goes bang at the bottom. Of course, how could I miss it, him? How more obvious could it have been all these years? I'd just been looking in the wrong place, outside myself, for a figure, a face, an image, or in persons or places or things…

And then they came reeling in like a film spool in rapid roll…memories and stories and events down the years … That *knowing* that something, somebody was present in me, in the heart of me. All that time I'd been with him, him with

me, seen and known by the eye of the heart. Something my ordinary eyes and mind could not comprehend; not only looking in the wrong place but with the wrong instruments. I'd believed in him all along. Believed *in*. I had felt him, and knew that he loved me, loves me. Love is about relationship. Look there. Look anywhere. There is nowhere that he is not.

There he is. In relationship to all things. *In*.

And that includes me.

Stephen W

God's love as…Church

Here's a question. Why did the Father send his Son into this world, to be born and live amongst humanity? The answer to that is in perhaps the most well-known verse of the Bible – John 3:16. *"God loved the world so much that he sent his one and only Son, so that whoever believes in him shall never die but instead have everlasting life."* Jesus came to show the depth of the Father's love for us.

Here's another question. What on earth is the Church for? And the answer to that is the same as the answer to the first question. Jesus' mission to display the Father's love, is the Church's mission too. Before he left his disciples, he told them *"Just as the Father sent*

me, so I send you." The Church is Christ's body here on earth – his hands, his feet, his lips. A former archbishop is quoted as saying that the Church is the only institution which exists not for the benefit of those who belong, but instead it exists for the benefit of those who do not yet belong. The Church, then, is meant to be the visible expression of God's love here on the earth. God's love as…Church!

I find it heart-breaking then when this is not how many people perceive the Church. Instead of it being an expression of love, they see it as an institution of bigotry and intolerance, and indeed the cause of hatred, division, and war. Where have we gone so badly wrong?

And yet…it is still right here in the Church that I turn and see once again that I am a child of God, dearly loved and cherished. Here is the place that I most clearly hear God say to me, *"You are my own dear son. You are loved!"*

Dave M

God's love as… Authenticity

I spent about six months studying away from home and asked my fellow students if they would like to find a church with me. Over the months we visited a different church each week. Each one varied in character, musical style,

customs, and traditions. In some churches not a soul spoke with us and in others over-zealous congregants would suffocate us with their reception. I was sure that a modern church with younger congregants would be most attractive to our group (of which I was the only one of faith) and yet these were a repellent to my student friends.

One evening we visited a small chapel and were at least fifty years younger than others in the congregation. We were welcomed and shown to a wooden pew. One of the white-haired ladies said how lovely it was to see us, commented that they were a little old fashioned and handed us a hymn book. Another lady played piano, hitting more than the occasional misplaced note. There was nothing polished, nothing pretentious, nothing that looked like it would be attractive to our small group in our early twenties. This was the only church from which we emerged and were unanimous in commenting on the warmth of the welcome and how special it was. It is the only church to which we returned. The authenticity of the congregation as they were simply themselves glowed with God's love and our hearts were filled.

Rich

God's love as…Pacifism

It is not now widely appreciated that during the 1930's, in the aftermath of World War 1, a very considerable number of people had become pacifists and joined pacifist organisations. But as the evils of Nazism became known, in the build up to World War 2, most renounced their pacifism because they felt that in the face of such evil one just had to stand up and fight. With respect, one might classify them as 'peace-time pacifists'. The Sermon on the Mount (See Mathew 5,6,7)) *is* Christianity and is all about 'the love of God'. It tells me '*Blessed are the peacemakers and do unto others as you would that they should do unto you*' and this can't be switched on and off, *which it is*, without rendering it nonsense.

I have not yet succeeded in writing satisfactorily for you about what God's love means to me in the context of peace-making. How can absolutist pacifists (like me, a Quaker pacifist) occupy themselves in wartime and justify their position? And how do Christians justify bombing vast civilian populations in places which have no strategic importance?

A much-loved friend (who died almost fifty years ago) Wallace H Hancock, once wrote things that clarify and describe my own beliefs so well. He said *"Some things one knows to be*

true. This is what Quakers call the 'inner light'. It is true for everybody; it is 'that of God in everyone'. I believe that Christ was divine, but I believe that we all are to some extent divine, because we are all made 'in the image of God'. I take the 'inner light' to mean that because we are made of the same 'stuff' or spirit as our Creator, there is a latent affinity between every soul on earth and God. Some refer to this affinity as the love of God. We should remember this in our dealings with others.

Christianity, as far as I am concerned, is not a bundle of events and theories, it is 'not a notion but a way'. It is a revelation of the purposes of the Creator of the Universe, and the teachings and principles of Christ must, to my mind, be rationally explained before they carry conviction which will change my life. While therefore I do not challenge anyone else's creedal beliefs, for me religion cannot exist except that it can be proved by the experience of living.

I do not think that Christianity can be bolstered up by belief in the wonders of the 'supernatural'. The natural is marvellous enough for me. To introduce the supernatural detracts from the idea of an intelligent creator. What greater can there be than the creation of you and me? These are the miraculous facts compared to which theology is only a pastime.

But against this the teachings of Christ stand out

as a mighty challenge. They are not opinions – they are law with the same force as gravitation or any other natural laws, or they are rubbish. The Sermon on the Mount, which tells us clearly the teaching of Jesus about peace-making, is not just a collection of idealistic dreams; it is something which life on earth ignores at its peril. Life on earth has no future unless it takes on board the teachings of Christ about peace. Other accretions of myth and stories which have grown up around Jesus simply don't matter".

This is what I too believe, as a pacifist. For me the love of God without pacifism does not make sense; and pacifism without the love of God does not make sense either.

Clifford and Wallace

God's love as…Silence

Frequently I walk with our dog in the woods or on the fell near our home.

It is there that I most often experience a deep silence, and through that silence comes the knowledge of God's presence, leading to a sense of his love in the moment of that silence. It may all be part of the wonder of creation and the contrasts that creation brings. Sometimes the wind outweighs the silence, but it is all the more acute and still once the wind has died down. At other times it is alongside the incredible light as

the sun shines through the trees that the power of the silence is so strong: God's love streams in through the silence.

In contrast, the experience of such love has come while sitting at the kitchen table, silent, alone in our house in Greater Manchester…noise and bustle not far away yet seeming distant from this tranquil setting. The struggles and problems of life do not go away but are changed, transformed by the experience of God's love coming through silence and meeting with him.

And yet, there is a dilemma when the absence of God is also felt in silence, and the question arises – where is his love now? In such times you have to dig deep to find trust to get through the sense of loss and distance of God.

But to me it still remains, God's love is found in silence; there is a silence of his love.

Isobel

God's love as…Communication

After decades working 'in communications' – as a newspaper reporter, Anglican 'communications adviser', and writing now in parallels of poetry and prose – I turn to a man of similar age for his insights linking 'love' and 'communication'. Rembrandt offers himself, his frequent eternal imagery always filtered through vulnerable humanity.

Reporting on the human condition relies on the power of story, and its telling. It demands presentation in dramatic light. There is frequently insufficient time, space, or editorial appetite for the subtle, or the conditional. I loved being a journalist because I love to write.

Being a 'communications adviser' in the Established Church was all too often about troubleshooting or overhearing the church talking to itself. A plague appears to be liberating centuries of inward-looking concern, and arcane debate, into greater concern to apply Christ's radical love to societies the church is called to serve. Food banks and credit unions offering more Christ-like parables of love than condemnatory sermons.

Poetry offers liberation. Like love it demands no fixed agenda. In Christian translation it most resembles the Holy Spirit: an untamed wind, blowing where it chooses. Becoming the first Poet in Residence at Carlisle Cathedral meant no resources, or demands, besides an empty notebook. Love could unite the reporter's duty to observe with the poet's responsibility to intrigue.

Rembrandt intrigued himself, staring into the mirror by his easel, interrogating his reflection. In over a hundred self-portraits he summarised the paradox of love: fleeting yet eternal; human yet divine. For all his Christian imagery, it is in his questioning face that love remains, communicating with all who are attentive to it.

Martyn

God's love as…Music

Stomp, stomp, la la la la - stomp…stomp, stomp. I wonder what you heard in your head (and body) as you read that? Music is extravagant! It mirrors in a deep way our living and inner worlds. This voiceless language changes and develops and expands our very selves.

When I'm at my desk composing, the sound-worlds often rush through me.

God's love is pouring like cream, out of a jug of creativity.

Music brings people together.

We make orchestras and rock bands: singing and playing and making bonds of community and expression. It's such a precious gift. It's powerful stuff.

That's why oppressive regimes often ban or control music.

When I pray, I sometimes feel the Holy bubble up in just the same way the music bubbles up as I write. The same Spirit oxygenating me.

This superfluous gift of music, strangely magnetic in its vast array of styles and genres, punctuates scripture in the great book of psalms: prayer and rants, praise and anxieties, all packaged as volumes of cries to God in song.

Music in its very many forms brings life, energy, consolation, lament: all that we feel. We can

move our bodies, let rip with our voices or just get lost within the sound, unlocked, as we dance in God's showers of love.

Pat

God's love as…Prayer

Ever since I was young, pilgrimage has been an extremely important part of my family's Catholic Christian faith. A pilgrimage leads to many different experiences and encounters with the sacred. This type of religious encounter allows us all to embrace peace, community, and reflection. It is amazing how we encounter God in silence, or walking and talking about the challenges, joys, and sorrows of life. By visiting the Marian shrine of Lourdes in France, generations of pilgrims have journeyed on pilgrimage with prayers and intentions to ask Our Lady of Lourdes to intercede for their intentions. This prayer is a human action to speak to God and ask for blessings and graces to help them journey along life's road.

As we pray, we open our eyes with devotion and hopeful praise. It's a choice to walk with God in prayer and be devotional and often inspired by the pilgrimage shrine which is associated with a saint or historic religious encounter. Many people I have held conversations with realise it is both a physical, spiritual, and prayerful event

– a search for answers to the difficult aspects of daily life. To sustain us we often recite this prayer in its simplicity: *'Jesus I trust in you'.*

It is however very difficult for many people to formally link with an established church and maybe through their own path they search for healing, wisdom and look for Christ 'The Light of the World'.

I have travelled on many occasions to pilgrimage sites in Poland and led young people around concentration camps, which are places of both horror and where the human spirit was crushed but survived the cruelty of many. People have searched for God and prayed for answers which to me means faith, consolation, and trust.

The challenge of any pilgrimage is to renew our conversations with God and cross the threshold from the old into a new form of appreciation, and to discern our own image of God and his creation.

Amongst all the places I have visited, I hold Iona in Scotland as a place of tranquillity and prayer. Akin to St Columba, we often travel through the waters and waves of life, hoping to find our destination and trusting God to enable us to navigate a course. The starting point if often ME or US, as we strive to reach our harbour who is God.

So full of courage, hope and devotion – like

pilgrims of the Emmaus story in the Bible – as we recognise JESUS in the breaking of sacramental bread (Eucharist), our eyes are opened, and we discover the Risen Christ in all of creation.

As we pray, our lives are intermingled with memories, experiences of prayer and constant renewal of Christian hope. Like St Ignatius we can pray *'Take Lord, receive, all my liberty, my memory, understanding, my entire will, all that I have and possess. Give me only Your love and Your grace, that's enough for me'*. That is our story, our song, and our prayer.

John

God's love as… Light

In a world of always on,
bright lights, streetlights, office lights, screen lights,
we cannot see the stars for the city glare,
the light for the day.

In a world of always on,
darkness is painted over with glowsticks
and we pretend it's not there
until the shadows creep through cracks,

descending like a cloud,
a black dog upon my back.

In a world of always on
I am crippled by the darkness gripping my soul:
nothingness, emptiness, numbness, flat.

Light fading,
eventide emerges.

In a world of always on,
staring blankly through the meaningless
frenzied activity of humanity,
through the cloud cover,

a single star,
hope.

Rich

God's love as…Action

I work for an English cathedral. Born into a family with a liberal Catholic tradition, I am a fairly happy agnostic these days, but my upbringing means I find it easy to work alongside the sincere faith and steady pattern of worship which inspires and gives purpose to my Salisbury Cathedral friends and colleagues. I also find myself in tune with a place that, while being a grandee of the Church of England – an institution which literally couldn't be more established and traditional – has always had an unconventional streak.

When the vaccination rollout in the UK started in December 2020, my cathedral offered itself as a venue. Over the course of a few days, we helped our local NHS transform a chapel into a pharmacy, a transept into vaccination pods,

the nave into a recovery zone and the refectory into a vaccinators' rest area. I was a welcomer at the entrance on the day the first patients came – many in wheelchairs and using walkers, or with a son or daughter on their arm to help them. Some had rarely or never been inside the Cathedral, despite living nearby most of their lives. Our organists volunteered to practise during the vaccination sessions, meaning that those waiting could hear music played live for the first time in almost a year, sitting beneath the pillars and arches of the nave. If I was a person of faith, I'd say that God's love was in action that day, and every vaccination day since.

Jane

God's love as…Suffering

Would it be honest or whole or healing, to have a collection of writing about how we can know God's love, without including suffering?

To love someone, or an animal, place, a cause for justice, any kind of loving, opens our hearts. We are willing and brave and impassioned to pour out the love from inside us in thoughts, words, actions, even sacrifice.

But all of us who love another are opening up our self-created 'boundaries' of self-protection, and with that comes the risk of pain.

We do this often without hesitation, because we are sure the joy and reward of holding another beloved to us, is worth any costs. But still love can bring pain, grief, guilt, sadness, regret, a sense of failure, loss, even the loss of our own life (as it did for Jesus).

I have known the emotions of guilt and grief in suffering for love. More than this, I know people who have suffered heart-crushing grief, and who have suffered huge sacrifices in their lives, for the love of another, or from passionate action to help heal our world.

But does this pain we endure stop us from wanting to love? No! It is an internal wonder, the power of the human impulse to be loving. Even when we experience love's suffering, we have an inborn will to love.

I have known people suffer so badly they are afraid of loving again, until they find, and are helped to find, a way to be healed; to let love heal them inside first, until the natural wish to love, to bravely activate their hearts, returns to them.

And perhaps when we have known more of the 'whole score', when we have experienced suffering for love, as well as joy, do we know what love is, even more? When we suffer and hollows develop within us, does this dark space in our hearts draw back in the light from a

deeper calling? And does this allow us to feel more intimately, more acutely, the truth of love? Perhaps.

Jacci

God's love as...Courage

What does this brave, bright word say about God?

An aspect of God's Spirit, it encourages and connects human beings. Courage, encountered in others, gives us courage.

'Courage calls to courage everywhere, and its voice cannot be denied' wrote Millicent Garret Fawcett, Suffragist. There are many people whose lives and witness encourage me. In the Iona Community: Helen Steven and Ellen Moxley – peace activists; Stanley Hope – a Rochdale councillor working consistently for racial justice; Runa MacKay – a doctor on the frontline; Ian Fraser – prophet; Kate McIlhagga – pastor and poet. And many others who are still very much alive, as the people I've just named are still present with us: courage is life-giving.

I served with the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel – a non-violent presence in potentially violent situations. People said, *"you must be very brave".* No, I'm your average coward. But in the land that we

call Holy I was able to stand with Palestinian and Israeli peace activists, calling and working for an end to the occupation, and committed to doing this by peaceful means. Sharif and Siham, Itai, Victoria, Naim, the Women in Black. Their *sumoud* – steadfastness – put courage into my heart and still helps me find words to witness what I saw on that hard ground, where Jesus once walked and – with courage – lived out God's love.

Jan

God's Love as…Goodness

Of all the virtues one might associate with God, one is affirmed more than any other in scripture. And that is, God is good.

The Hebrew word '*Tobh*' describes the goodness of God. Not 'good' in the performative way that we use it (Fred is 'good' at football) or in a comparative way (that one's good). Tobh means all that is perfect and wholesome and excellent.

Goodness is not just an adjective describing God's actions – but a noun defining God's very essence. All God is stems from God's goodness. God is 'love' because God is good!

Before anything else is true about God – the first and most important thing we need to know – is that God is good.

In the Genesis poem, when God orchestrated all of creation, God declared it good. All creation stems from God's goodness. And everything God does emanates from God's goodness.

God is the source of everything that is good, and we cannot separate what is good from God. You can't have goodness without God, just as you can't have God without goodness.

No-one and no thing is excluded from God's goodness. Everything God does is good.

Over the last 2,000 years there have been many different doctrines developed about God. But please check them all out against just one measure: *If it's not good, it's not God.*

God's goodness goes before us, God's goodness comes beside us, and God's goodness goes ahead of us – to the ends of the Earth.

One mantra is repeated over and over in the Psalms. May it be yours: *'Give thanks to the Lord for he is good – his steadfast love endures forever'!*

Tim

God's love as…Forgiveness

The most challenging and yet transforming aspect of God's love that I know is forgiveness. When people hurt me or those I care about, when people are cruel, negligent, or corrupt, then to forgive is hard. To forgive asks me to

first be *willing* to forgive, and sometimes this willingness is enough to bring about the change, the healing, but often I need to go further.

I ask myself then to see the person or people as good souls, because I know that all our souls *are* essentially good. Why? Because we are made by God and God is only goodness! So, we are all good, in our 'absolute eternal reality', which is on another level to our conditioned mortal minds. I believe all this, yes…but still to forgive is not always easy!

To forgive needs me to give up judging. To recognise bits of me and memories inside that need healing and, crucially, be willing to forgive myself. To forgive asks me to hold my fellow humans, even hold life, hold my Creator God, in an open acceptance of what is, and love not what I wish for but what I see right here before me now.

When I practice forgiveness, I am reminded that we can all only do our best and not expect to be perfect, even at forgiving – and the more I let go of such judgement, the easier everything becomes! I can begin to enjoy feeling the 'golden thread' of God's love running through me and the person I am willing to forgive, connecting and containing and encircling us both. This brings about a kind of release; a 'setting free'.

That's why forgiveness is perhaps the strongest

key I know that can open a gateway for us into a truer loving reality. To forgive teaches me what love asks of us and what love can do, can transform in us, can lift us into, when we respond to that asking.

Jacci

God's love as…Acceptance

Imagine knowing that you are enough, exactly as you are. Not that you will be enough when you...

?finish that course
?get on top of the housework
?find some time to de-stress
?control your anger
?reconcile with that person

...but that you, right now reading this, are enough. You're doing it. Your 'flaws' are part of the reality that is, and so is your divinity.

Imagine feeling that the deepest parts of you are good and holy. That your body, spirit and instincts are good, and want good for you. That you have the capacity to create goodness and express goodness in the world.

Imagine believing those things not only about yourself but also about the people in your family, at work, in your newsfeed, in the news.

How does that change the things you notice, challenge, or celebrate? The way you approach and communicate? What you expect of others? Of yourself?

That is God's love as acceptance. A gift for us to receive and to extend to others.

Also known as grace.

Nora

God's love as…Trust

I do not tend to experience the kind of interventions by God that might be described as 'dramatic'. Quite the opposite. Yet my sense of 'call' to Christian Ministry was definitely rather dramatic. I can quite clearly identify both the exact place and the precise moment when that 'call' came.

However, while the actual sense of call occurred at one definite moment, I took a while to respond positively to it. After all, how could God possibly trust me – of all people – to offer leadership, care, nurture and so on amongst God's people? I did not (and *do* not) feel in the slightest worthy of such trust. In my eyes, neither my abilities nor my character nor the level of my faith made me the kind of person who could be trusted with such a responsibility.

But I came to realise that this was exactly the

point. God trusts me not because I am worthy of such trust. God trusts me because he loves me. He knows me completely (and I am far from proud of some of what he must therefore know!) and he loves me regardless, and so he trusts me. I have never found this easy to accept. But I know I am trusted because I am loved.

David D

God's love as…Breath

We know that God is love. Love is what defines who God is and all of God's actions. But how does God manifest love to us? How can love be transmitted from a transcendent God to us physical mortals? How does it pass from God to us?

God does it through her breath, or '*Ruach*'!

'*Ruach*' is a Hebrew word in the bible meaning 'wind, breath or spirit'. Before creation even began, we read that God's spirit (*Ruach*) was present. When forming humanity, in the Genesis poem, God breathed on them (*Ruach*) and they then became living beings.

God's breath creates and sustains life. Breath is God's spirit in us! In our very breathing is the transmission of God's love, God's life, into everyone and everything, through God's spirit in us.

Psalm 104 says of all living things: *'When you take away their breath (Ruach), they die and turn again to dust. When you give them your breath (Ruach), life is created'.* The first thing we do when we are born is start breathing. And the very last thing we will do is stop breathing! We take about 26,000 breaths a day. Breath is life.

The very name God gave to Godself was YHWH. It has no vowels. God's name is so holy to Jews, you dare not even utter it – you just breathe it. YH (breathe in) WH (breathe out).

Every breath we take is the divine flow of God's love filling us, energising us, sustaining us, and affirming us as loved by God!

Tim

Love in… Nature

I grew up in a religious family but, as I got older, I found I couldn't accept the idea of God that I'd been taught. Later, living in countries that had Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or Shamanistic faiths, I grew uneasy about traditional religious divisions. I called myself an atheist.

But there is a deep human need for connection to something beyond the Self; something expressed in what we sometimes call Love. I found that need fulfilled in nature. Growing up in the Lake District, on a remote hill farm, I was surrounded by nature; every moment of life influenced by

and dependent on it. Running free on the fells was an experience every bit as profound as being in a chapel. Later, in the deserts of Arabia, or the waters of the south China sea, and the rain forests of Africa, I experienced the same feeling of connection to the natural world of which we are part. I met First Nation people who had no word in their languages for Nature because, they told me, there is no such thing – it is Us. You can have no name for something that isn't separate.

Looking up at a night sky that expresses the enormity of the universe we are part of or holding in your hand a snail shell smaller than your little fingernail, generates powerful emotions. Feeling part of this extraordinary world, so beautiful, so unbelievably intricate, but which can also be ugly, violent, and arbitrary, is for me what unconditional love is – feeling part of the whole of something that involves both body and spirit. Something that gives and takes, but something to which I belong, utterly.

Kathleen

God's love as…Creativity

Love is in jamming with John and his pal with drums, guitar, dance while Brigid slept after hours of poems in a Welsh café interspersed with staring at the murmuration of starlings on the pier; in the drum and pen and legs and

wings; in every moment of greeting the new and rolling it into the universe; in a strange mixture of form, abandonment, grace.

Jacci

God's Love as…Play

Before God I feel at my fullest self; authentic, free… childlike one could say. Before God I inhabit the entirety of who I am. Societal barriers and pressures melt away and I am liberated into a presence who fully understands and loves me. I inhabit my identity as a child of God.

Sometimes I cry before God, in pain and surrender. Oft times I reflect with God, with furrowed brow as mind, heart and spirit churns. And a lot of the time I play with God!

I play with the wind, running, hair flowing…freedom and vividness of life found in the Spirit.

I play with flowers, stuffing my nose into them…the peace of God found in smell.

I play with leaves, letting my forehead be stroked by them…God kisses!

I play with bark, moss, barley…letting my fingertips feel God's embodying touch.

I play with the breeze, dancing with her and letting her encircle me…God's embrace.

I play with trees, climbing them, high-fiving them, marvelling at them…God's humble majesty.

And in this way, I am perpetually playing with God. A God who knows me so fully that together we can be utterly free. Free to live life at its fullest. Free to explore the vivid beauty of this world. Free to express myself with the entirety of my body and soul. Free to laugh, chuckle and smile together. We don't need words. We 'get' each other. We love each other. And so, we play together – in freedom, simplicity, joy and love.

Lakshmi

God's love as…Oneness

For me, Love is the source of all existence. It is universal. It is One. It is the essence of all Being. Everything that is created and is seen or perceived is simply a reflection of Love. In our true selves, we are reflectors of that One Love, channelling it through our consciousness to everything we perceive as being receptive to Love. This is kenosis. Our false ego-based self, meanwhile, selfishly counters this Love in striving for the earthly survival of body and mind, by division and separation – but ultimately, like the material world, the ego is a temporary illusion and has no source of its own.

Jesus' first words in 'The Lord's Prayer', spoken in his native Aramaic tongue and directly translated into English, are: *'Creator God, your name is One, the Universe'.*

Bob

God's love as…the Holy Spirit

"*And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance* " (Acts 2:4). I recently had a problem with a household appliance. Not knowing how to solve it, I found the manufacturer's website and started a chatroom conversation with an advisor. I typed my question and a few moments later received a reply. I couldn't see this person but knew that he/she was there and trying to help me. God shows His love for us in mysterious ways. In times of difficulty and crisis I have called upon Him in prayer and received guidance through the Holy Spirit. Sometimes I have waited a long time, but I have always been answered and shown what to do. Sometimes I have been led by the Spirit in a more dramatic way. Some years ago I was shopping in town on Christmas Eve when the streets were very busy. I noticed an old lady waiting on the pavement for a lull in the traffic. She was bent double and leaning on a stick. As I approached to offer help I saw a group of young men leaving a pub very much the worse for wear. They spotted the old lady and started pointing and jeering. Without making any conscious decision, I found myself going up to the ringleader and asking if he and his mates could kindly step into the road and hold up the traffic so that we could cross. And they did..... Speaking in

tongues does not necessarily mean speaking in foreign languages. It also means being given the right words to say in a tricky situation so as to be a channel of God's love.

Margaret

God's love as…'*Shekinah*'

It isn't just a shaft of sunlight
breaking through the clouds to fall
directly on a single spot within the field
or dance with gentle grace along the wall.
It is more, much more, than that,
an overwhelming, dazzling radiance,
a shining brightness seared into the soul,
"glory beyond all glory ever seen",
as Wordsworth said, descending from the fell.
You do not ask or question, simply stand
transfixed, then kneel upon the ground
and bow your head in reverence and prayer.
When you look up again, it's no longer there,
but field and wall have gained a new dimension
and you know they have been touched
by Something Other, some great Power
beyond our human comprehension
which, if you let it, will transform your life.

Margaret

God's love as…'*Shekinah*'

Shekinah (הניכש) (šekīnah) is a very old Hebrew word that Jewish rabbis have used for thousands of years to describe the abiding habitation of God to a particular point or place. When the Hebrew people were in the wilderness after fleeing from Egypt, Moses built a tabernacle as a dwelling place for God, and we read that God's glory descended in a cloud and rested there (Exodus 40). Then, when King Solomon built the first temple, we are told that the glory of God descended and filled the temple (1 Kings 8).

Shekinah is the manifestation of God's presence. Whenever the invisible God becomes visible, whenever the God who is everywhere becomes localised, this is *Shekinah*. The idea is repeated in the New Testament. When God becomes incarnate in the Christ, we read that God became flesh and made his home among us, and we saw his glory (John 1). That's *shekinah*. But then, when the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, we get the same idea of God's glory descending and inhabiting the disciples (Acts 2). That's *Shekinah* too.

And the most amazing thing is that God's *Shekinah* – God inhabiting a specific place or person with the presence and glory of God – is not reserved for other times or other people –

it's something that can be experienced now by anyone!

1 Cor 3 says: *'You yourselves are God's temple, and the Spirit of God lives in you'.*

(Tim)

We hope that this collection of pieces will inspire you to create your own unique descriptions of God's love as…

Below are the names of the contributors to this chapter, followed by the varied links/organisations/ websites to which some of the people involved in this book are connected and recommend you explore. True thanks to all these people:

Sarah G, Anna Twomlow, Tracey Cooke, Nicola Lomax, Lakshmi Piette, Sarah Snyder, Ruth Harvey, Lorna Douglas, David Bulman, Damon Tulloch-Foley, Victoria Turner, Emma Richardson, Dr Justine Afra Huxley, Lana Walker, Rev Prof Stephen G Wright, Rev Dave Milner, Rich Blake-Lobb, Clifford Wicken (and Wallace H Hancock), Isobel Halsall, Martyn Halsall, Patricia Livingstone MMus BA LTCL Cert Ed, John Wilson, Jane Morgan, Jacci, Jan Sutch Pickard, Rev Tim Cooke, Nora Tweedie, Rev David Denniston, Kathleen Jones, Bob Morley, Margaret Ives.

Recommended explorations

Brigid Rose recommends 'A Course in Miracles' www.acim.org

Sarah Snyder is founding director of the Rose Castle Foundation www.rosecastlefoundation.org

Richard Blake-Lobb recommends thebrokenchurch.net

Damon Tulloch-Foley recommends The Prem Rawat Foundation tprf.org

and Christian Police Association UK www.cpauk.net

Rev. David Denniston blogs as 'Suitcase Sojourner' http://suitcasesojourner.blogspot.com

Ruth Harvey is leader of the Iona Community www.iona.org.uk

Clifford Wicken recommends the book *Testament of Experience* by Vera Brittain (1st published in 1971).

Jan Sutch Pickard recommends The Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel - offering 'protective presence' and witness of international volunteers alongside Palestinian and Israeli activists who are committed to non-violence in enduring and opposing the Occupation. In the

UK and Ireland this World Council of Churches programme is organised by the Religious Society of Friends: www.quaker.org.uk/our-work/eappi

Rev. Dave Milner of the East of Eden Mission Community www.eastofedenmc.org.uk

Bob Morley as a spiritual and bereavement companion rgm1@live.co.uk

Rev. Prof. Stephen G. Wright is spiritual director of the Sacred Space Foundation www.sacredspace.org.uk

Sarah G recommends the Wildlife Trusts www.wildlifetrusts.org/nature-health-and-wild-wellbeing

Dr Justine Afra Huxley is senior consultant for St Ethelburga's Centre for Reconciliation and Peace www.stethelburgas.org

Lorna Douglas of Faith Initiative magazine www.faithinitiative.co.uk

David Bulman recommends Alcoholics Anonymous www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

Nicola Lomax recommends, for mindfulness and loving kindness practice www.sharonsalzberg.com

Jacci Bulman co-founder of The Kianh Foundation www.kianh.org.uk

Front cover artist: Lakshmi Piette (for projects linking creativity/prayer/theology)

https://acreativetheology.webnode.co.uk/

Back cover reviewer: Rev Dr Bill Shaw OBE, CEO of 174 Trust, Belfast www.174trust.org

Moving on: the love that we are

What can it mean to be 'reconciled' to God's love? The Oxford Dictionary (old and new editions) defines the verb 'reconcile' as 'to make friendly after estrangement', to 'purify' a sacred place after desecration, to 'heal', 'harmonise', even (and this is a challenging one for us humans) to 'make contentedly submissive'.

The word originates from the Latin *'re'* (back, with some intensive force), *'conciliare'* (bring together'). To bring back together with some intense force.

Harmony.

It could be that when we are reconciled to the love that we are, in God, we make sacred again our belonging, our part in this whole wonder. When we step forwards from our binary-thinking minds and begin to understand the One great non-duality of all things, do we then move forwards in our human evolution, spiritually? Do we move closer to home, to bringing heaven to earth?

The Proto-Indo-European word *'kailo-'* is the root of the Old English words *'haelan', 'hal'*, and '*halig*', meaning 'to

heal', 'whole', and 'holy'. They come from one source. In my next book, *'Talking Survivor'*, I will explore how we can all find healing, but let's focus now on the idea that when we become 'whole', when we are fulfilled with awareness of God's love being within us and all that we are – then we also become 'holy'.

And when we even *begin* to reconcile with this love inside us – begin to own it with honesty, bravery, forgiveness – can we then more easily love, forgive, and reconcile with our fellows? Can we feel what we share rather than what divides us? See the 'God-ness' in each other? I think so. Do you?

the love that we are

I hope that this small book, with its ideas, images, experiences, questions, descriptions, and challenges, has helped you in some ways to reach towards the great truth which belongs to and unites us all… Every one of us. Together.

For lots more to explore and videos in beautiful nature, with quiet and guided meditations, prayers, and collective activities to enjoy, go to:

www.thelovethatweare.org



Manifold

As we were preparing this book to be published, a choice needed to be made for the colour of the title '*Talking Unity*', on the front cover. White would be good to represent lightness, but then I saw that black is the colour which holds within it all the colours of the rainbow. The 'multiple unity' of God's love can be represented by blackness.

And then I met a friend in the street, and Derek asked me what the new book is all about… I explained how a group of people have described how they experience specific aspects of God's love in their personal lives. "*That would be kindness*", he said, and I realised how such a crucial quality of love – showing and receiving kindness – is missing from the collection! Kindness. The powerful healing energy so needed in our world right now.

Then along came other qualities of loving that could be explored – *daring, dedication, respect, laughter, endurance, compassion, protecting our planet*… What would be your way of describing how you experience a particular aspect of God's love in your life?

If you would like to write about '*God's love as…*' in up to 200 words, you can e-mail your piece (within the e-mail message, not as an attached file), to:

admin@thelovethatweare.org

and this diverse tapestry of descriptions can keep growing, in an array of colours and designs, and in the future, we can create a new collection of descriptions, to go on the website. We can keep 'talking unity' and together be bold in our *active* honouring of the love that we are – in our manifold witness to God's love.

*

Also by Jacci Bulman

Poetry collection – *A Whole Day Through From Waking* (Cinnamon Press, 2016)

Poetry collection – *In the holding* (Indigo Dreams, 2019)

Non-fiction – *Talking God: Daring to Listen* (Lion Hudson, 2021); the first in this series of three books, *Talking God, Talking Unity* and (pending, being created) *Talking Survivor: how to say "yes" to your life.*

You Tube channel – 'the love that we are'

Website – www.thelovethatweare.org

*



How can we be One in each being a part of God?

How can the light in all of us connect us to each other?

How can we describe God if God is love?

A book that majors on the 'love of God' – what's not to love?

For those tired of the 'us/them' and the who's 'in/out' binary narrative that's so much part of traditional church teaching – and Christian writing – here's a timely rejoinder that boldly declares: *"Everyone, everything in creation, is a part of and belongs to the unified and unifying love of God."*

A little volume filled with wonderful metaphors of 'Grace', and what it means to be loved by God and know it…

Rev Dr Bill Shaw OBE, CEO – *174 Trust*, Belfast.

This book beautifully explores aspects of God's love, through the words of Jacci in her opening chapters, then through the words of others, each sharing their personal reflections of God's love as experienced in their lives. Jacci asks us to consider these words by '*rolling them around in your heart and mind*' and in so doing finding your own '*unique*' expression of love.

Lorna Douglas, Co-editor – *Faith Initiative*

A wonderful, rich, and diverse exploration of love. Jacci invites us to see God as not only the one who loves, but as love itself, and to explore the implications of that in the whole of creation. I found myself feeling uplifted, whilst simultaneously having my feet firmly connected to the earth.

Paul Rose, Co-founder – *Mountain Pilgrims*

10% of all book sales go to the Kianh Foundation, supporting children with disabilities in Vietnam.