

Psychotherapy as love made visible

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Abstract

This paper offers an in-depth exploration of the topic of work, as an expression of love, in the context of a spiritual orientation. In it, I first define spirituality and what it means to be spiritual, from my own, and others' perspectives. The foundation of my spiritual orientation—distilled as openness, authenticity, and love—is then explained, and the variety of ways that I nurture my spiritual evolution are outlined. Finally, an exploration of psychotherapy as 'love made visible' illuminates the way I integrate the role of spirituality in my work and life.

Psychotherapy as love made visible

I recall being immediately taken by the name of the course for which this is my final, integrative paper. With “*Spirituality: from Contemplation to Action*”, I appreciate the sense of movement; from inner to outer, from unseen to seen, from being to doing. It lands in me as an invitation; to consider the movement of spirit in our own lives. To recognise the ways in which our essence, as soul or spirit, makes its way through our innermost core out through the actions of our selves and into our lives in this world.

The course intensive offered a trove of opportunities to reflect, consider, explore, and deeply experience interiority in connection with each other and the divine, in whatever ways—and perhaps labelled otherwise—this is known. In coming to this paper, the instruction to focus on a ‘specific topic’ brought to mind a number of tempting contenders, such was the richness in which we were steeped for that week.

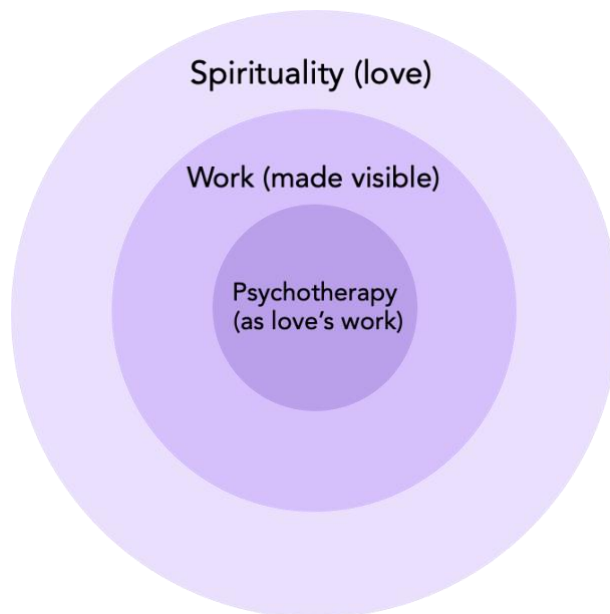
However, in re-reading my notes, I noticed I had copied and highlighted a sentence from *The Prophet*, by Kahlil Gibran, which was quoted in the Therese Madden article (2015) set as required reading for the course. Gibran’s original book nestles quietly on my shelf and yet it took Madden’s article to draw me into its contents; illuminating a long-held belief that when one is ready, that for which we have become ready reveals itself.

The sentence is: “Work is love made visible” (Gibran, 1972, p. 22).

For me, this statement expresses, clearly and simply, the relationship between spirituality and action, as the manifestation of love. It speaks to a view I have long held, that our work is best approached not as something we *have to* do but something we are *able to* bring our whole selves through, in contribution to the world. The clarity and beauty of Gibran’s words ring their truth in me.

And so, this paper is the result of my own, personal, ‘deep dive’ into work as love made visible. It provides an integration of insights from class discussions, class activities, required readings and various other scholarly, literary and spiritual resources. And it asks, primarily: What does it mean to make love visible in our work? And, then, with respect to my own personal context: What if that work is psychotherapy?

Envisaged as three concentric circles, each its own ‘field’ (as depicted below) this paper provides: firstly, an explanation of my own spiritual orientation, founded on love; secondly, a discussion of what can be said to constitute ‘work’, and thirdly; an exploration of what love, made visible, through the work of psychotherapy, might look like in action.



The intended effect is a honed and layered integration of how spirituality, moving as love, in work, might be made visible, through the practice of psychotherapy, for me. Each section is dedicated to one circular field, its contents, necessarily, drawn together through the lens of my own preferences and perspectives. The combined effect, created as this paper, offering its own unique example of what ‘love made visible’ can look like.

Spirituality

As the “animating or vital principle in man and animals” the term spirit comes from the Latin *spiritus*, which means ‘breath’. This points to spirit as essential in human and other beings, something we might recognise as deepest authenticity, or innermost breath, or, what Jared Kass described as, our “fundamental ground of being” (1991, p. 2). Spirituality, then, may be seen as the quality of being concerned with this deep innermost or fundamental ground.

In his comprehensive text *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy: Understanding and Addressing the Sacred*, Kenneth Pargament makes the case that “spirituality starts and stops with the sacred”; the “concepts” (God, the divine, and transcendent reality), “qualities” and “varieties” of which he articulates at length (2007, p. 49). And while I appreciate Pargament’s perspective and the scope of his inclusions, I am uneasy with its fundament, because, by definition, that which is sacred is chosen, or selected, *by us*. Individually and collectively, as human beings, we are the ‘deciders’ of what to deem sacred in our lives, in this world, and beyond. And yet, prior to such decisions we are *of spirit*: we *are* spiritual. As this there seems no ‘starting or stopping’, because it points to the core of what we always were, are and will be.

For a similar reason I find Gottlieb’s promotion of “spiritual virtues” (2013, p. 8) a little off point. While I agree that engaging in practices to develop mindfulness, acceptance, gratitude and compassion is often time well spent and *can* help illuminate our inner beingness, the implication that through developing these ‘virtues’ we *become spiritual*—implies a kind of top-down, or outside-in approach. As Gottlieb himself later points out, such practices do not exist in isolation, but are “surrounded by beliefs about what they mean and why they work” (2013 p. 112). Beliefs which easily appeal to our egoic selves, for example, that if we become *good at* mindfulness, we’ll become *more spiritual*.

The wilful pursuit of spiritual virtuousness can slip us into what Buddhist psychotherapist John Wellwood, terms “spiritual bypass”:

... a tendency among Western spiritual seekers to use spiritual ideas and practices to avoid dealing with ... emotional unfinished business (2000, p. 5).

If we use ideas and practices to develop mindfulness or acceptance or compassion while we are simultaneously unwilling to confront our psychological difficulties, then, as Masters (2010) writes, we become distanced

not only from our pain and difficult personal issues but also from our own authentic spirituality, stranding us in a metaphysical limbo, a zone of exaggerated gentleness, niceness and superficiality (p. 5).

This zone of exaggerated niceness occurs when we neglect to perceive and embrace the whole that we are, including the mindless, ungrateful, resistant, messy and nasty bits.

From my perspective, there’s a call for courage and the willingness to be vulnerable as we attend our work in the emotional, cognitive, physical and interpersonal realms prior to, or alongside, our spiritual journey. But if our aim is true, in doing so, we gradually become more quietly rested within, more warmly aligned with our own fundamental essence or beingness, and more naturally inclined to behave in mindful, accepting, grateful and compassionate ways toward ourselves, first, and then to others.

In this way, spirituality, for me, is much less about virtues or virtuousness than it is about becoming whole and being real. And more than anything else, right now, it’s about openness, authenticity and love.

Openness and surrender

The swami at my local ashram, many years ago, would begin Saturday evening satsangs by telling us that spirituality is the ability to welcome another with an open heart. This capacity to truly meet another person, to appreciate another's perspective, to remain curious and available to *difference*—these are all expressions of one level of the openness which is core to my own spiritual orientation.

Another, perhaps deeper level, is the willingness to open beyond our selves, into our beings, and to remain as this open-heartedness in the midst of the pressure and difficulty life inevitably brings. The more we are able to surrender, within, the more we discover a sense of expansiveness and peace that is our natural, spiritual, soulful state. As openness, we create the space for being, spirit, source and life, to live through us. As Deurzen-Smith (1997) describes it, the function of her self is “to be transparent and to be open so that life (being) can shine through” (p. 178). In this way, we come to know ourselves as “a channel, a river, through which the water of life flows” (Deurzen-Smith, 1997, p. 178).

The extent to which we remain open and available within, is the extent to which, over time, our minds and our selves become increasingly cleaned, and freed, of conditioned judgements, expectations, desires and preferences. It is the extent to which we are able to accept reality; to relinquish any need for anything or anyone to be different from that which it is. In *Loving What Is*, spiritual teacher and author of “The Work”, Byron Katie (2002), points to the opportunity available in agreeing with reality when she writes:

I am a lover of what is, not because I'm a spiritual person, but because it hurts when I argue with reality. We can know that reality is good just as it is, because when we argue

with it, we experience tension and frustration. We don't feel natural or balanced. When we stop opposing reality, action becomes simple, fluid, kind, and fearless. (p. 3)

Remaining open, surrendering to what is before me, in whatever form it takes, without sacrificing the inner peace and quietude that I know to be my beingness within, makes me available, as a vessel, or a channel, or a river; for life to flow through, into this world.

Authenticity and integration

In my own lived experience, a spiritual journey is also one of movement towards essential wholeness, authenticity, integration and unconditional connectedness; drawing us towards the fundamental ground of shared beingness, of oneness. This journey towards authenticity takes us further and further into what is most deeply real, known and true. As Sheldrake (2012) notes, such a journey of transformation, from “the humanly inauthentic to the authentic”, is reflected in the wisdom of every classic spiritual tradition (p. 63).

Wonderful thinkers like Ken Wilber (2008), John Wellwood (2000) and Robert Masters (2010) have warned the movement towards greater authenticity must include the psychological as well as spiritual. That this movement is an iterative, integrative, *becoming* that involves one's self, one's heart, one's soul; the totality of one's humanbeingness. This process of 'becoming', as Buckenham (2000) writes,

entails finding out what (we) really know, believe, value and desire, rather than conforming to what (we) are told. It is a process of liberation and authentic self-definition, and a spiritual process to listen to (our) own inner knowing. (p. 72).

As lived, in my experience, it's a kind of tango; a lurching integration of progressive self-awareness—of personal patterns, tendencies, secrets, preferences, abilities—and an increasing

capacity to rest quietly and listen deeply within, in the knowledge that the *real me* is more than any of that and something else altogether.

Oneness and love

On the first day of our course intensive, Norbert introduced us to a contemplative practice known as Lectio Divina, or, divine reading. A short piece by the monk, writer, theologian, mystic, poet and social activist, Thomas Merton, was read aloud, three times, by different voices. Following the reading we were invited to contemplate a particular word or phrase that had apprehended us, and to reflect and respond in some way. The phrase that landed in me was this:

What we have to be, is what we are.

In response, I wrote this short poem:

Our original essence is spirit

As spirit, we are one

We don't *become* spiritual, we are *of* spirit

It is what we are

What we have to be is not something, it is nothing

Denuded of all that we are not

Stripped of all that is false, distorted and untrue.

Stripped and stripped and stripped

Until all that remains is oneness and love.

For me, love is what moves when we open, beyond our familiar selves, into our deeper beingness. It is the fundament of everything. As the Persian poet and theologian Rumi wrote:

Love is the whole thing.

We are only pieces.

Nurturing my spirituality

Each morning I wake aware of my ‘being body’ within; its qualities of spaciousness, expansion, deep peace and its currents of activation and movement. I take time to fully surrender to that which I know to be deeper than my egoic self. To be truer and more real. As I move through the day I connect, as often as I am able, with the sense of inner quietude and subtle streaming within. I monitor my openness; noticing when I close, tighten or resist and then quietly and warmly allow my heart to open me once again. If this seems impossible, I find safe ways to express any feelings or emotions that arise, until I am again able to reside in my opened heart.

I remain as present and available to life as I can, throughout the day. Appreciating and enjoying the little things: my husband’s smile, a nice cup of tea, the breeze on my face, a deep calf stretch, the sway of lush branches outside my window. Wherever possible I notice, and then relinquish, expectations, judgements or desires—for anyone or anything to be different from what it is, right now. In this, I treasure Krishnamurti’s quote: “I don’t mind what happens” (as cited in Tolle, 2005, p. 198). Not minding reminds me to flow, easefully, with whatever arises.

I take care to spend time and energy on that which matters most in the context of what I understand to be my responsibility here, as a soul-being-person on this planet, at this time and during this stage of the evolution of my own soul and of reality itself. I seek guidance from, and remain intimately connected with, my spiritual mentor. My husband and many close friends are likewise connected within our spiritual community.

In the simplest of terms, I continue to be engaged with a kind of conscious realization and integration of the ‘dimensions’ of me that I am aware of—including person, self, being, soul, spirit. When I am open and aligned, life, as love, can flow through the whole of me and into this world. Making this possible is my real and only true work.

Work

Work means many things to different people and as a whole, it is a topic beyond the scope of this assignment. My specific focus, at this time, is in exploring the ways in which work might be seen to be an expression of love. Leading us to wonder: What kind of work would that be?, and, maybe: How does one go about finding work like that? And then, perhaps, more broadly: What is the relationship between work, spirituality and love?

John Neafsey (2006) attends gently and deliberately to such questions in the book *A Sacred Voice is Calling: personal vocation and social conscience*, which was required reading for this course. Deftly contrasting ‘career’ and ‘calling’ by emphasising the former’s association with success and money-making and the latter’s with value, purpose and contribution, Neafsey invites us to recognise that “vocation is much bigger than what we do to earn a living” (2006, p.2).

Sharon Daloz Parks (2000) expands on the ‘much bigger’ element, by beautifully articulating the relatedness of vocation, calling, meaning and purpose, in contribution to a larger whole. She writes:

Vocation conveys calling and meaningful purpose. It is a relational sensibility in which I recognize that what I do with my time, talents, and treasure is most meaningfully conceived not as a matter of mere personal passion or preference but in relationship to the whole of life. Vocation arises from a deepening understanding of both self and world, which gives rise to moments of power when self and purpose become aligned with eternity. (Parks, 2000, p. 148)

Karen Buckenham (2011) writes specifically about the work of artists, suggesting that many are “called to create” (p. 56). She invites us to consider the relationship between creativity

and spirituality as a process of “becoming”, of “listening to the spirit inside” that calls us “toward life” (2011, p. 57). Buckenham suggests that when we work to create, we “express our deepest selves, allowing God to flow through us” (2011, p. 72).

Assuming we accept that “our lives are an unfolding creative process, a potentiality to be actualized” (Buckenham, 2011, p.72), then all work becomes an opportunity for the realization of that deeper potential. As Matthew Fox, writes:

If what we let out truly flows from our depths, then it is flowing from God’s depths too, and the divine creative energy ... that alone inspires the universe, is happening through us. (1983, p. 185)

In the context of this, and the much more that could be said, it is worth pausing to consider the intensity with which many of us seek to identify and commit to our ‘true calling’ or ‘life’s purpose’ while inadvertently missing, in my opinion, a more significant point. The point being that *what* we do is less important than *how* we are *being*, in the midst of whatever it is that we are doing, workwise and otherwise. As Neafsey suggests, vocation is “less about the particular things we do and more about the spirit with which we do them” (2009, p. 5). That more than anything, our spiritual work “begins with how we treat our loved ones and the people in the circle of our everyday lives” (Neafsey, 2009, p. 5).

To my mind, and from years working with people in all kinds of professions, this point can use emphasis. It matters little that I am a doctor, minister, environmental activist, CEO, teacher or orphanage manager if my reasons for being any of these are motivated by greed, fame, status or self-importance, and if my way, in my work, is dishonest, unkind or disrespectful to those around me. Conversely, as a warm, open-hearted and compassionate house cleaner, dishwasher, garbage collector, cashier or factory worker, I am attending to what matters most;

upholding a greater truth, that we cannot *do* to *be*, and that *being* what we are, what love is, will *always come first*. After all, if light is provided, what matter the shape of the bulb?

I risk belaboring this point in part because of my own response to one particular but pervasive thread of Neafsey's book. As the title foreshadows, he argues at some length that social conscience is inherent to true calling or vocation. And that such a social conscience is acutely attuned to "the cry of the poor" (2009, p. 26). According to Neafsey:

God is always trying to get us to pay attention to the scandal of unjust poverty, the deprivations of basic human rights ... that are the daily reality of most of our brothers and sisters in the world. (2009, p. 26)

Neafsey's confidence that he knows what God is 'always trying' to do lacks humility, I think. But leaving that alone, my discomfort is really with Neafsey linking true vocation with social conscience *as* helping "the poor" (or worse, "the wretched") (2009, p. 27). To my mind this opens up another version of the outside-in issue. If we are led to believe that the way to fulfil a sacred calling is to support and nurture those less fortunate than ourselves and we rush off to do just that, we can easily miss a fundamental pre-requisite: the need to learn how best to support and nurture *ourselves*. Otherwise, what we risk giving to others is our own unique package of lack—of self-compassion, self-care, self-worth and possibly, more.

As it happens, I am currently reading a fascinating book called *Your Soul's Gift*, by Robert Schwartz. Yesterday I came upon a passage spoken by a channeled spirit named Jeshua; best known to us as the man who lived as Jesus. In response to the question "How can I best serve the planet?" (from the medium's client), Jeshua replies:

You serve the planet by *being yourself* ... you are yourself when you feel joy in expressing yourself. Whatever expression you choose, if it feels joyful and fulfilling to

you, it will be inspiring to others as well. ... To serve the planet, do not think of the planet but focus on yourself. ... When you feel joyful in a grounded, peaceful way, you are serving ... Oneness, which is Spirit, and serving yourself at the same time. There is no difference at that level. Put yourself first, and all else will follow. (2012, p. 289)

For me, these words echo a truth that warrants greater emphasis in Neafsey's writing. When I speak with clients about this I use the simple metaphor of securing your own oxygen mask, before helping others. Something that most of us have heard many times at the outset of a plane flight. At a Buddhist leadership seminar I attended some years ago, a fellow participant gave it to me another way when he said "you can't clean the floor with a dirty mop".

Psychotherapy as love's work

Having successfully navigated the previous fields of consideration we now find ourselves at the inner circle, to take in the reality that my own work in this world is increasingly in the form of coaching, counselling and psychotherapy, with individuals and groups. So let us consider, What does love made visible look like, in psychotherapy work? And, better still: What might that look like for me?

It is worth clarifying that in this discussion my focus is not so much on how love in psychotherapy might bring about the healing or 'cure' of the client (as famously suggested by Freud) but rather how the therapist, as the conduit through which love may move and relate, makes love visible in their work with their clients.

We already know that the nature of the relationship, or 'therapeutic alliance' between the therapist and their client is the single most important factor in successful psychotherapy (Stamoulos, C. et al, 2016). According to Carl Rogers, the creator of Person-centered therapy, such an alliance is encouraged by the therapist's "empathic understanding and unconditional

positive regard” (1957, p. 100) along with their “congruence”; by which he meant a kind of authenticity, or willingness to fully be themselves without a professional or personal façade. (Rogers, 1980).

In an article commemorating the legacy of Scottish psychiatrist R.D Laing, 30 years after his death, Mark Nuttall writes beautifully, and at length, about Laing’s approach to therapy as a “sort of interpersonal meditation” in which the therapist is “open and together *with*” the client in a “shared communion state” that Laing referred to as “co-presence” (Nuttall, 2019, p. 226-227). In a 1989 documentary, Laing himself described this as “a field effect happening prior to and behind the words actually spoken” (Shandel, Tougas, & Feldmar). He then offered a fuller description, that this was:

Really to be with another person in a completely open hearted, unguarded way, where one is not on one’s own part somehow or other cancelling, or altering or modifying who that other person is to suit one’s own book ... co-presence: being actually present without reservation, or precondition, or something that one might call communion, which I think is the perfection of what we’re ordinarily meant to be together. That’s the only peace there can possibly be. (Shandel, Tougas, & Feldmar, 1989)

The visibility of love, in this approach, is through the spacious presence of a genuine togetherness and of letting the other simply be. (Calling to mind the poignant work of artist Maria Abramovic in, *The Artist is Present*, that we viewed during the course.) In this way, as Nuttall, concludes, psychotherapists are not responsible for healing their clients. Instead clients make their own way to wholeness “as a result of what arises in, and from, the shared field”. (2019, p. 239). It is easy to see this action as love through Laing’s simple summation:

... the treatment that we give someone is the way we treat the person. It should not be a noun; it should be an active verb. The way we treat one another is the therapy. (Shandel, Tougas, & Feldmar, 1989)

Offering a different kind of illumination on the topic of love, made visible through psychotherapy work, Dean Hammer reminds us that the word psychology means “the study of the soul”, and that the role of a psychotherapist, etymologically, is as an “attendant of the soul” (2019, p. 139). Pointing to the explosion of mindfulness practice in psychotherapy, Hammer suggests, and I agree, that this is most often concealed its Buddhist roots and “privatized as an individualistic, self-fulfillment practice” (2019, p. 139). He then goes on to argue that attention for the soul has been “allocated to the fringes”, and that a reorientation towards soulfulness would take us beyond the mind, encouraging “a more holistic orientation” which would encompass cognitive, emotional and spiritual concerns and provide a broader clinical perspective. (2019, p. 139).

Describing the soul as the “core of one’s being”, Hammer suggests that:

the soul can be experienced in the deep, interior space in which the mind and heart unite to attend to the meaning and purpose of existence amid our finitude and mortality. (2019, p. 140)

And the therapist’s responsibility is to cultivate a “soulful space”, within their own interior, such that this can be offered in their work with clients (Hammer, 2019, p. 140). Speaking from personal experience, Hammer describes this space as having three dimensions: hospitality and compassion, wisdom, and serenity” (2019, p. 140). When held by such a space, the client is able to relax, be themselves and feel safe. The process of engaging and being with clients in this “gracious space” then becomes “a critical dimension of fostering fruitful treatment” (Hammer,

2019, p. 141). While never actually using the word love, Hammer's gentle elaboration of the "soulful qualities" a therapist might embody to "enhance and deepen the therapeutic encounter", offer an exquisite glimpse into what love might look like, in action (2019. p. 142).

Another rich, and personally resonant perspective on the topic is provided by clinical psychologist, Will Adams, of Duquesne University. In his article, aptly entitled *Living life, Practicing Psychology: Personal and transpersonal musings on something (not so) obvious*, he writes eloquently and intimately of the idea that in really living life as it arises, we bring love through our work and into the world.

Starting out simply, he states: "When I work... I am bringing my very life into being with others and for others" (Adams, p. 350). He then depicts this flow of life into being as an ongoing "call and response conversation", in which:

life ceaselessly summons me to respond to the immense beauty and suffering it sends my way. My very be-ing ... is formed, reformed and transformed via my response to these calls. (Adams, p. 351)

I discovered much depth, delight and resonance in Adams' writings on the various ways we are all interconnected and in response to life as it emerges through and around us. I feel similarly that the "question" of my own life-time "is intrinsically an ethical, responsive, responsible one" in which it is entirely clear that I "never exist separately from others" (Adams p. 351). And like Adams I know I am here to be *with* others and also *for* them with as much "awareness, understanding, love, compassion, and justice as I can muster" (p. 351). So I felt like cheering when I read:

Wary of the superficial and banal ways a renowned word is commonly used, and acknowledging that I am often not able to meet the deep urgency of this profound

imperative, let me dare say: For me, it all comes down to *love*. (Adams, 2019, p. 351)

Most of all, what I appreciate about Adams' musings on the (not so) obvious, is the bit that should be obvious, but isn't, at least not in this world. That from the perspective of our spirit, or soul or authentic beingness, our work is simply one stream of expression, or manifestation, of us, in the world, and as love, we are summoned to this, as to everything, in the same way. As Adams writes:

My singular self, and thereby my practice of psychology, spring forth as a distinctive gesture of this one seamless participatory life, a life that appears ceaselessly as the particular relational calls and responses that are transpiring right here and now, yet ever infinitely and eternally. This life includes my irreplaceably unique participation in and gift to the sheer presencing of each encounter. (Adams, p. 354)

Adams writes of his work as "a form of love" (Adams, p. 353). And that being this love "is what I am doing in psychology, just as in the rest of my life" (p. 353).

Once we are able to see ourselves as interconnected, energetic beings it becomes possible to appreciate that everything we say and do has some kind of an effect, on others, and on this world. From there, it's a short hop to realizing that all we can really be responsible for is how we respond to what life presents us; for what we give to what we get.

In this way, for me, in my work as a consultant, coach, counsellor or psychotherapist I am responsible, first and foremost, for *being me*. For bringing authentic wholeness, openness and love, as far as I am able, to all of my encounters and interactions with others, in work and in life. In being me, I give permission for others to likewise be themselves, to know themselves and to find a depth of quietude within from which to respond, as love, to life, as they experience it.

Conclusion

With this paper, I hope I have succeeded in conveying the depth at which Gibran's words landed in me. For me, work is love made visible because love is what we are and work is an important form of our expression in this world. We might just as truly say, that *life* is love made visible, but then the clever counterpoint—of work, as toil, and love, as intimacy—is lost. Gibran's phrase speaks to me of the profound response-ability that is ours to embody in our lives, on this planet. It inspires me to continue to do everything I am able to let life and love flow through me into this world.

Finally, it seems fitting to conclude with Gibran's own illumination of the meaning of his quote. In an exquisite segment from the same passage, he writes:

And what is it to work with love?

It is to weave the cloth with threads drawn from your heart, even as if your beloved were to wear that cloth.

It is to build a house with affection, even as if your beloved were to dwell in that house.

It is to sow seeds with tenderness and reap the harvest with joy, even as if your beloved were to eat the fruit,

It is to charge all things you fashion with a breath of your own spirit,

And to know that the blessed dead are standing about you and watching.

(1972, p. 21-22)

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