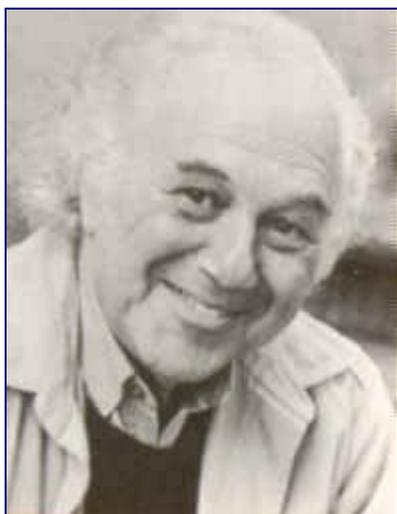


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***A READER'S JOURNAL:***

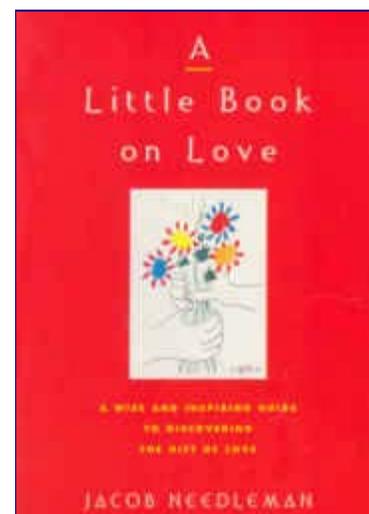
**A Little Book on Love  
A Wise and Inspiring Guide to Discovering  
the Gift of Love**

by

**Jacob Needleman**

Published by Random House/NY in 1996

A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2005



Needleman makes it clear that this is a book about serious relationships, not another pop culture knock-off about how to know if you're in love or not. "This book is about the meaning of *sustained love*. What shared purpose is the missing element in our experience of living together? . . . What is the deeper purpose of the work of living together within the embrace of love?" (Page 21)

**[page 15] We are meant to live in two infinities at once — one leading us outward toward action in the world around; the other calling us to open ourselves to the world within us.**

It is in this second infinity — the one in which we open up to the world within ourselves that we find a sustained relationship most beneficial. It is as if we learn the most about ourselves in a deep way when we love another person deeply. It is a most serious endeavor — one we cannot trifle with, but yet which seems to trifle with us. As Kahlil Gibran says in *The Prophet* on [Love](#): "And think not you can direct the course of love, for love, if it finds you worthy, directs your course."

**[page 20] We think we can play with love, but we are mistaken. Love plays with us. It is far more powerful than we are, and if at first we seem to be fitting love into our lives, this is only love's way of smiling at us as we are drawn under its thrall. Lightly, ecstatically, we cross the bridge that love lays down for us. And soon enough we are fighting for our lives.**

Needleman asks "What can guide us *after* love has set us on fire and we have reentered the world of time and mundane life?" (Page 20) And once more I am reminded of the great vision of Gibran who personified [Love](#) thusly:

*Like sheaves of corn he gathers you unto himself.  
He threshes you to make you naked.  
He sifts you to free you from your husks.  
He grinds you to whiteness.  
He kneads you until you are pliant;  
And then he assigns you to his sacred fire,  
that you may become sacred bread for God's sacred feast.*

Love changes us by consecrating us — which means to make us clean and prepare us for the love of God

to enter us. This provides us one answer to Needleman's question about the purpose of living together within the embrace of love. But there is a deeper purpose to our lives which we can only begin to espy when we have crossed the bridge of love — and that is the meaning of our life here on Earth.

**[page 22] Hidden in the passion of great love there is a "secret" about why we are on earth at all. This secret can and must unfold in the life we seek to share.**

When Perry Como sang, "Two loves have I," we knew that both loves would involve a woman, the same woman. But Needleman calls our attention to two distinctly different kinds of love — the first one, like the love Como sang of, can be luciferic if it is based on self-aggrandizement, but the second one cannot be luciferic.

**[page 25] The first love, the condition of being in love with another man or woman, we know and can call it by its proper name. But we needn't hurry to give this second love a name. We need only acknowledge — vaguely, but with conviction — that there are two fundamental loves within the human heart, one that draws us to the great forces of the earth, and the other that calls us to search for our selves in the universal world. And the moment we acknowledge these two fundamental impulses, we begin to glimpse the whole challenge of our lives: first, to see these two loves in all their separateness and even opposition; and then, to work for a way to bring them toward each other — to make each love serve the other.**

And since the second form of love cannot be luciferic<sup>(1)</sup>, the first cannot serve the second and the second must therefore serve the first. We will discover shortly that the second form of love is what in Greek is called *agape* — the form of love St. Paul wrote about in his first letter to the Corinthians, which is often mistranslated as *charity*, but is best left translated as *love*, so long as it is understood as having the characteristics of *agape* — Needleman's second form of love, as we shall see later.

One of the qualities of loving Needleman identifies as *intentional speech*.

**[page 47, 48] Intentional speaking has an unmistakable flavor or quality and, especially with people who are trying to love, it is almost instantly sensed by the other.**

**Simply put, there is nothing, nothing in the world, that can take the place of one person intentionally listening or speaking to another. The act of conscious attending to another person — when one once discovers the taste of it and its significance — can become the center of gravity of the work of love. It is very difficult. Almost nothing in our world supports it or even knows about it.**

The world is replete with people who constantly demand from those who love them something that can only be given willingly. This kind of demand creates paradoxically the opposite of the desired result. For this reason, [Paul Watzlawick](#) has given it the name, "Be Spontaneous Paradox." This is an apt name because the first two words contains an example of the process which is so deleterious when people do it out of their awareness. Ask yourself if you would do something that would create the opposite of the condition you desire. Would you do it, if you were aware of the contrary result you would achieve thereby? The answer is obviously No, isn't it? That is how one can confirm for oneself that no one would consciously invoke a Be Spontaneous Paradox.

The first two words are "Be Spontaneous" and if you say this to someone, and they attempt to follow your directions, then *whatever they do spontaneously* will be done *as a result* of your command, and therefore it *cannot* be spontaneous. Thus, the operational definition of the Be Spontaneous Paradox is contained in its name, rightly understood.

No one would ever tell you to Be Spontaneous, you say? I agree. But consider whether anyone ever told you to do any one or more of the following things (no matter how colloquially they may have expressed

themselves):

1. Go to sleep. ("Mama wants you asleep.")
2. Get an erection ("Let's see you get it up, Big Boy.")
3. Smile. ("Make a big smile for me.")
4. Be creative ("Be Creative and here's how you do it!" Actual ad on a Betty Crocker Cake Mix box)
5. Be Happy ("Cheer up!")
6. Trust me. (Especially deleterious when a Parole Officer says this to get a parolee to share some possibly incriminating information.)
7. Tell me you love me. ("Do you love me?")

Each of these processes are either spontaneous or they are feigned, and giving someone a direct or implied command to supply the process will ensure you of getting the counterfeit of the real thing. The real thing can only come spontaneously: One falls asleep, gets an erection, smiles, acts creatively, gets happy, trusts someone, and shares one's love of someone spontaneously or else has to pretend, feign, counterfeit, or lie. And all the counterfeit processes are unbelievable — they clunk like a plug nickel, they smell to high heaven, they rankle the nerves, and they leave one with a bad taste in one's mouth like spoiled food. They promise what they do *not* deliver. Given that one receives these counterfeits from others without asking for it — why would anyone ask for them by placing others in a Be Spontaneous Paradox?

Under the heading "What Do We Really Want from Each Other?" Needleman pinpoints how our demands of others can place them in a Be Spontaneous Paradox and place us in no end of trouble.

**[page 66] Bluntly stated, what we often demand of others is that they be devoured by their feelings for us. We feel safe only when the other is obsessed by us. When the obvious signs of obsession are absent, we begin to worry.**

If we feel the need for proof of others' commitment to us, they feel that need and it puts them in a paradox from which there is no escape short of destroying the relationship between us.

**[page 66] We see this situation not only in relationships between men and women, but almost everywhere in our lives. We take anxiety and obsession as a sign of caring; our world often demands a kind of fanaticism as proof of our commitment. How often are we compelled in this respect; to bluff about our feelings — not only in relationships, but at our jobs and in many of the situations of our communal life. Society encourage us to be, or least to act, addicted. And without any other authentic vision of the meaning of care in front of us, this acting often *makes* us addicted. Our world favors a kind of insanity.**

Since trust in the other is a spontaneous activity, it cannot be demanded of the other if it is to be genuine. But Needleman points to an activity of trust that can always be genuine as an answer to his heading question, "What Can We Trust in Each Other?"

**[page 69] The answer, I believe, is that we can trust the lawful nature of the human search for the self. A man and a woman can greatly help each other feel that this search is more to be trusted than anything else in life and that without this search — and the moments of reality it brings — all the other goods of life will sooner or later turn bitter or empty.**

What exactly do we mean when we talk about "the inner struggle" in ourselves or each other? Needleman points to fear, anger, or self-pity as examples of emotions in others which stimulate similar emotions in us. This entrainment of emotions between one human being and another is explained by the [science of doyletics](#) which postulates that emotions are recapitulated bodily states in the present which were captured during some original event before one was five years old. These states are stored in the limbic system of the brain and when some component of the state is viewed or felt in one's companion, a similar state will

be triggered in oneself, if such a state had been stored before five. This is what Needleman calls an "emotional capture" in the passage below.

**[page 70] We can trust the inner struggle in each other — that is to say, we can trust the laws and forces that come into play in human life when there is an inner struggle for the truth about ourselves. When an individual falls into fear or anger or self-pity, these emotions — like small children — strive to evoke emotions in the other of a similar nature. The state of emotional "capture" strives to create "capture" in the other. But if a man or woman trusts that, under the surface, the other yearns to rediscover his or her search, then something new can take place between two people. If, in the midst of emotional difficulty, one person remembers the inner search, the other may also remember — not immediately, perhaps; and it probably will not have the power to harmonize the turbulence. But it can be trusted that the process of remembering one's inner search, faint and intermittent though that remembering may be, will have an effect. No one ever regrets undertaking this kind of struggle right in the midst of emotional difficulty. No one ever regrets sacrificing attachment to unpleasant emotional reactions.**

With my wife and myself, we have over the years come to learn that if we are having emotional difficulties, it is time to do a [doyle search](#). When we have a disagreement, a "loud learning opportunity," as we call it, we have learned to go into separate rooms to do a speed trace to remove the heavy emotional content of the argument. And we have never regretted sacrificing our bad doyles — they are exactly what Needleman refers to as "unpleasant emotional reactions."

And now for the exposition of agape which I promised earlier:

**[page 103] The New Testament teaching about love centers around the Greek word *agape*. *Agape* is the love that descends upon human beings from God, or from a higher state of being. As such, it is usually distinguished from ordinary human love, which is rooted in incompleteness and desire. *Agape* is the love that pours out from fullness; ordinary human love, so goes the conventional analysis, arises out of lack and the sense of personal need, which we can take to include sexual need, or social/psychologically conditioned need, which itself sometimes includes elements of the moral strictures and demands that are part of the social fabric.**

Agape is a decision, an act of the will, and it is not necessarily an emotion — I make a decision to love you, I will you good and not evil. Agape is not time-bound — I will live in the moment, I may grow more creative the longer we've known each other. Agape recognizes the right to one's feelings and ideas — I may not agree with you or feel the same way, I am not the same person as you. Agape is dependable — I will be there for you if you ask and will not run away within limits of what is good for me.

This review is but an appetizer to stimulate you to read all of Jacob Needleman's wise and inspiring guide to discovering the gift of love in your lives. As the adjective agape describes, "Open wide."

----- *Footnotes* -----

**Footnote 1.)** In my review of [The Threshold of the Spiritual World](#), I wrote on luciferic love: "A popular expression these days is the 'trophy wife'. This refers usually to a rich man who has attracted to himself a beautiful young wife who looks like a movie star or model. The metaphor of trophy refers to those heads of deer, elk or moose that hunters like to have mounted on the walls of their den to show off their prowess as a hunter. The hunter gets an enhanced feeling of self from showing off his trophy. This is an example of a good out of its time or place and therefore an evil due to luciferic temptation."

[Return to text directly before Footnote 1.\)](#)

