Restoring Love and Community in a Divided World: A Conversation with Dr. Stephen Post

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Michael Egnor:

Welcome. This is Mike Egnor from Mind Matters News, and I have the pleasure and privilege today to have a wonderful discussion with my friend and colleague, Dr. Stephen Post. Stephen is the author of a new book, Pure Unlimited Love: Science and the Seven Paths Inner Peace. Stephen is a bestselling author of Why Good Things Happen to Good People, and he's president of the Institute for Research on Unlimited Love. He is my colleague here at Stony Brook. He's professor and director of the Center for Medical Humanities and Bioethics at the Renaissance School of Medicine. So Stephen, welcome and it's a delight to be able to speak with you.

Stephen Post:

Thank you, Mike. You are one of the best conversationalists that I've encountered in years, and so I'm grateful to be here.

Michael Egnor:

What that really means, I think, is that you can't shut me up, which is very true.

Stephen Post:

I didn't mean to imply.

Michael Egnor:

So Stephen and I have been close friends for many years and we've had some just wonderful, wonderful conversations. So Stephen, please tell me about your new book and about your ideas that led you to write it.

Stephen Post:

I was thinking about the condition of our society, which has become so overly acrimonious and reactive and violent. We don't have a sense of community that shields us from frankly killing people who disagree with us, and therefore I wanted to write a book that would capture the need for a different outlook. And it is called Pure Unlimited Love. Actually a title bequeathed to me from Sir John Templeton, the philanthropist, Pure Unlimited Love: Science and the Seven Paths to Inner Peace. And it is the best book thus far, I believe, and it is just about out, so I'm happy to be able to talk about it. This is really my first conversation around it.

And one question people might have is, well, okay, so what is love? I can answer that. I take a definition from psychiatrists. I knew at the University of Chicago when I was a graduate student and I worked with them psychologists as well, like Csikszentmihalyi who wrote Flow. In my view, when the happiness and security, I really mean when the well-being and security of another is as real or meaningful to you as your own and sometimes more so you love that person.

So there's no fancy linguistics, no Greek, no Latin, it's pretty commonsensical, hopefully can be helpful to people who are just sitting down with an old friend who has maybe had a hard time or lost a child or whatever it might be. So I try to live that out, but it's very hard to come into this medical school and be

talking about love per se because it's not exactly the coin of the realm linguistically. So this book is about the 10 expressions of love, which I think are the key ones. And they include compassion. It all depends on what people around you need. If someone has suffered and you want to relate to them at that level and try to hopefully alleviate some of that suffering, then you can call it compassion.

It's also expressed in what I call Carefrontation, which is a word I take from M. Scott Peck, who was a Christian psychiatrist who'd gone to Case Western where I was for 20 years before coming to Stony Brook, we were close friends and he looked at the lifetime of work I'd done on the theme of love scientifically, but also theologically, philosophically. And he said, you need an expression for love that has to sort of keep people on track and be corrective. He was a psychiatrist after all. So he said, carefrontation, not confrontation, but carefrontation not tough love, but carefrontation. So that's an expression of love. There are many expressions of love that are very, very important in everyday life. And the trick is to think about the people you will encounter and envision how you want to approach them. What form of love is important. Sometimes it's creativity. If a person is in the middle of a big project and they're stuck, they're just stuck, they can't get any place.

So then you want to try to nurture them and help them to get unstuck. So creativity. Mirth, I call mirth an expression of love, and I always have. I'm pretty mirthful. I like polite, uplifting, cute, non-derisive humor. I like to make people laugh because in a millisecond you can free them up from all of that negativity that our culture seems to have created for people. If people can't laugh, they can't live. That even goes for non-human primates. And I think our culture has gotten to a point where in many sectors we've forgotten how to laugh, not at one another, but just laugh with one another and I worry about that. So I do spend some time sharing with medical students and faculty, little mirthful moments, little mirthful jokes. Most recently, what do you do if you are agnostic? Have dyslexia and insomnia. There's one for you, Mike.

Michael Egnor:

I don't know.

Stephen Post:

You're up all night wondering about the existence of dog. So things that are uplifted and in a millisecond, there's an institute at UCLA which is devoted to humor. It was started by a guy who wrote a wonderful book about medicine and positive psychology, and they just look at how laughter affects biology, affects the brain and helps people reinvent themselves almost in a millisecond. It's so fast and suddenly they're out of that rut. So I believe that mirth properly stated, is an aspect of love and that's why in the great classics, there's the Laughing Buddha, but there's also Dostoevsky writing about the idiot, a wonderful exemplar of Christian Love in Dostoevsky's view and someone who was actually slightly cognitively disabled, but he made up for it with an ability to be humorous and to give people the gift of laughter. So those were all aspects of love.

Simple helping behavior is an aspect of love. So I view love very broadly. People kind of shy away from the language of love because the culture has confused it so badly. Are we talking about the love of chocolate or maybe the love of designer jeans? That's okay, Mike, if you like chocolate, so do I. But we need to focus more on the natural expressions of love without speaking so much about it. But if we come to our school, our relationships, our daily activities, patients, you being a neurosurgeon with love, Augustine said, "Love and do what you will."

Michael Egnor:

So did Fletcher.

Stephen Post:

Yes.

Michael Egnor:

This is a beautiful concept. The difficulty that I think we face now with this is that there's so much division in our country and I think if one were to go to Portland or to Chicago and stand between the ice people and the people who are protesting or rioting against them and preach this doctrine of love, I think at the very least you get trampled. So how do you enact this beautiful idea when people don't like each other? How can you love if you don't like?

Stephen Post:

Well, that's the story of history. You probably know Jeff Trilling, who was the head of family medicine here for many years.

Michael Egnor:

Sure.

Stephen Post:

And I asked Jeff standing in this office, I said, "Jeff, I've got a definition of love and pure unlimited love. What does it mean to you?" And then he said, and this is in the book actually, "Pure unlimited love is what you see the last time you close your eyes, hopefully." And that suggests that it has a kind of theological dimension, a grace dimension, a metaphysical dimension. And I think that if I didn't have some conviction about that as sort of ultimate reality, I don't think you would actually be able to make much progress. But you have to be open to surprises.

Now, I think unfortunately a segment of our society has been so inculcated with hatred and with the acceptance of violence that it's very hard to bring them back from that. I don't have all those answers. Those are very important questions that you raise. But I do think that we need to as a society, re-embrace notions of forbearance, forgiveness, respect, loyalty to one another as a country and as citizens. That would be my hope. And we'll see how far this gets because I think the book may be a success. I think we need to have more materials out there, not less on serious aspects of love because we won't survive otherwise.

Michael Egnor:

The classical scholastic philosophers defined love in a way that really resonated with me that I think is very simple and it is consistent with the perspective you're offering and is that love is willing, the good of the other. And it's not an emotion, that is that you don't have to like someone to love them.

Stephen Post:

You don't.

Michael Egnor:

Have to will the best for them. Sometimes willing the best for them, as you said with M. Scott Peck is tough love. Sometimes it's stopping them from doing harm to others and to themselves, but it's always willing the good for the others.

Stephen Post:

Yeah, absolutely. And one of my friends, Matt Lee, who's now a professor at Baylor, he speaks about love as willing, the flourishing of the other. I think that's pretty close to what you're saying, and we have to will that otherwise things just get so out of control so quickly because human nature is such that love provides a veneer over what can otherwise be and what perhaps always is underlying a seething boiling cauldron of hatred, of selfishness, of sharpness and violence. And so we need love as a veneer that can keep that under control. And I think what's happened is that to some degree we've lost that veneer. I won't try to say why, but it's a very serious problem.

Michael Egnor:

Well, yes, and I certainly mean, I think just looking even superficially at what's going on politically and culturally in our country, and frankly in the western world, we certainly lost the veneer of love and in a lot of ways would you be willing to address why? Because that's a very important question.

Stephen Post:

Well, it is an important question, and I don't exactly have an answer. I think people are trying to understand this. Jonathan Haidt is very helpful in this area with his work on adolescence and the techno culture that somehow we're not really encountering one another face-to-face or person to person. We are instead encountering electronic images, and that's very different.

Michael Egnor:

There's a literary scholar and philosopher named René Girard who wrote, I think brilliantly on matters of this nature. And he described human beings essentially as primates, and he didn't mean it in a negative way, who imitate. That is that our nature is aimed at the imitation of others. And he was Catholic and he believed that we were created by God to imitate God, to do his will by being like him, by being like Christ.

But we get the imitation all mixed up and we ended up imitating each other. And that becomes a catastrophic problem when we have desires for things that other people have desires for also when we compete for those desires and then we imitate our enemies and it becomes what he called a mimetic contagion where basically everybody hates everybody and everybody hates everybody because they think they're hated by everybody. And it just becomes a very violent scrum. And I think that the internet and social media is essentially like kerosene to the lit match of mimetic contagion that is that a person you can hate a lot more people than you can practically hate them in real life because you can meet a lot more than online. So I think the internet is an accelerant in this, and I think we've only begun to see the catastrophic things that are going to happen because of that.

Stephen Post:

Yeah, and how this generation fares is an absolutely open question. Right now I'm not going to be overly pessimistic, but we need to do some major recalculation. With AI, now you can Google AI psychosis. There's a wonderful psychiatrist at the University of California, San Francisco who's been writing a lot about this in the major psych journals. And his point is that people, because they lack the actual human to human opportunities or don't realize the value of those opportunities, what's going on is that they're going to AI with their suffering, with their struggles. They're asking the AI devices for help and the AI devices can give them this sort of hyper-cognitive set of comments and recommendations.

But there have now been about 17 teenage suicides because the teens have been completely taken up with the AI. And the AI does not have what we would call emotional or affective empathy. It doesn't

actually have an interest in your flourishing or in your good. It can go the opposite direction. And this is a problem. So empathy, they say that Hitler, for example, was relatively cognitively empathic. That's how he was so able to attract followers. But he certainly was not ultimately interested in their flourishing and he became very destructive.

So I fear, now I know in medicine now there's some studies showing that AI can do a better differential diagnosis more quickly anyway of bipolar and depression and some other conditions. Of course, you have to have a psychiatrist around who can interpret and who can be the human touch. But a lot of these young people are not getting that human touch. And there's so caught up in this downward viral sphere of techno living that they've lost their souls. And I'm not sure what to say about it except that we need to get off these systems. We need to restore family life where people actually eat together with their cell phones turned off, where they learn sort of the basics of etiquette and kindness. And that's what this book is about.

There are seven paths of love. Each one is a chapter. The first one is May you Give and Glow, meaning that lots of studies, and it is a scientifically based book. Lots of studies show that when you give with kindness, you typically have a feeling of well-being and elation. That's been quite well demonstrated. I've written many articles about that. And I'd like to see people getting away from their contraptions and doing real kind, giving, not required giving necessarily. Not the kind of giving that feels forced, but just being able to work with perhaps mentors who are generously and palpably kind. And the second path, may you heal with kindness. And we know that kindness makes as a very big difference in terms of a patient's outcome clinically and their recovery, especially with chronic conditions like diabetes where you have complicated treatments and also coronary problems.

Heart problems are very complex now. So you've got to have empathy in your healthcare professionals. But then the third path is interesting. May you follow your callings, and that's important. I use Chagall, Marc Chagall as an example. He's my favorite artist passed away now. He ran away from home when he was 17. He grew up in a small Russian city. His dad had a little store where he pickled herring and he wanted young Mark to take over when the time would come, but Mark thought maybe he was called to be an artist. So he ran away to St. Petersburg, and he lived on the streets. He sketched, he didn't paint. And then he wrote about this 10 years later in a wonderful book, he wrote it in Moscow. It's called My Life. And this experience he had very beautifully.

He was sleeping in an alleyway on an old mattress with a huge working man next to him and he couldn't sleep. And he looked up into the sky and he saw a blue angel descending. Whether your audience believes in these things or not, I don't know, but I just mentioned it because that's what Chagall described. And he just felt that somehow the atmosphere was filled with love. And the next morning he did his first painting and it is called the Apparition. People can Google it, and it's of a blue angel. And the rest of his life he painted blue angels. The Chagall windows at the United Nations are blue because he thought blue was the color of love, the Chagall Good Samaritan window at the back of the Union Church in Pecanico Hills behind Tarrytown, the old Rockefeller enclave. It's all blue angels, but symbols of all the world's religion. So he was still Jewish, but he was completely open to the wisdom of various different perspectives, and we certainly need that.

So I believe that we need to follow our callings now. He followed his callings, and when he died, he was almost a hundred. He was in his studio outside of Paris. And what was he painting? He was painting a blue angel and Picasso who was just a Cubist. Not to say that's a bad thing, but Picasso thought that Chagall was the greatest artist of his generation. And he once quipped said that Chagall, he must have angels floating around his brain. That's pretty much what Chagall experienced. So there is this sense in which love can break into our experiences. There's a beautiful account by the great poet Austin, who wrote The Age of Anxiety. He was mainly in Great Britain. He was British, and he was teaching at a prep

school north of Oxford. And he was just with a couple of old friends. They weren't very close friends, but they worked together.

And then one day he sat there sitting on the lawn and he feels invaded by an energy that isn't his own. It comes from beyond him somehow. And suddenly he looked at these individuals very differently. He, for the first time in his life realized their infinite value, and he understood what this higher form of love is. So that experience, which is classical and as old as the hills, it gives me a sense that even when things look fairly bleak as they do in our society right now, there is really the possibility for these kinds of breakthroughs. We can always expand the canvas from something very negative like a Jackson paint that begins with just a gob of brown paint on the floor. But then by the time he fills it all out with these beautiful colored lines that are full of energy and just perfectly placed, it becomes a thing of beauty. So I do believe that we can make all of this into a thing of beauty, but it's going to be difficult. We have to adhere to nonviolence to get there.

Michael Egnor:

Yes. One of the ironies, of course, is that I would venture to say that most of the insightful discussion of the dangers of social media and the dangers of the internet take place over the internet.

Stephen Post:

Yes.

Michael Egnor:

A good example is we're talking here about personal relationships using Zencastr.

Stephen Post:

Right.

Michael Egnor:

So it seems that we have no choice but to deal with and to some extent to live on this social media. It's here and it's not going anywhere. Obviously, there are pathological ways that one can be dependent on it, and there are productive ways that one can use it. And I totally agree with what has been done. I think in some municipalities that children are not allowed to have iPhones and so on in school. I think that's a good idea, but still, the social media is here and it's not going.

Announcer:

That's it for this week. Join us next time as we conclude our conversation with Dr. Stephen Post. Until then, be of good cheer.

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