

“You shall love your neighbour as yourself”

The neurobiology of self-love and world peace

By Avigail Abarbanel

Mar 31, 2024 06:49 PM · 13 min. read · [View original](#)

(If you have received this by email, please click on the title to read the latest version. I often continue to edit and correct typos after publishing the first version)

If I told you that you have to make yourself *the* most important person in the world to you, it might sound selfish. But please hear me out. The image above, by the great Australian artist [Michael Leunig](#), is called ‘Heartscape’. I have been using it (with Leunig’s permission) on my social media accounts in relation to Israel’s genocide in Gaza and in Palestine in general. Leunig’s image was not intended to represent an actual bombing, or a war. ‘Heartscape’ is

about the *inner* warfare that most people live with so much of the time. One of the most common symptoms of ‘internal warfare’ is chronic anxiety. The fact that we are in the midst of an anxiety pandemic, I believe testifies to the ubiquity and extent of people’s inner warfare.

A great deal of Leunig’s work is about how sad and broken human beings can be on the inside. He often comments on how the brokenness inside people hurts other people, and our whole world, including nature, and our fellow creatures. When people hate themselves, criticise, or doubt themselves; when they constantly question what they feel, it does not just make them miserable. It impacts on everyone around them.

Everything in life is interconnected. The world we create together is a magnified version of our inner world. In turn, the outside world affects how everyone feels inside. Given most people’s dreadful and sad inner state, and the state of the world, it seems like we are on a downward spiral. The more unhappy people are, the more unhappy and troubled the world is. The more troubled

the world is, the more miserable people are, and downward it goes... It is little wonder that young people suffer so much too. Why should young people feel well and happy, when they are surrounded by anxious, and lost adults? Why would they feel positive or hopeful when they begin to realise they are growing into a dangerous, soul-destroying, troubled world?

When did we learn to hate ourselves?

When did it all start? (How much time do you have?). The truth is that we can only speculate about when and how we learned to hate ourselves so much. Jesus told his followers, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself", and he called it the 'second greatest commandment'.

Legend has it that [Rabbi Akiva](#) (b. ~50AD), a famous Jewish scholar who was killed by the Romans, used almost the exact same words. Akiva taught his followers, 'You shall love your friend as you love yourself' (In Hebrew: *ve'ahavtah le'reacha ca'mocha*), which he considered one of the most important principles a person needs to know.

Why did Jesus and Akiva feel it was so crucial to teach this to their followers 2000 years ago? It is safe to assume that back then loving one another, and loving oneself were already not the norm. Both Jesus and Akiva understood that this principle was fundamental to our wellbeing and our humanity.

Our Biblical creation stories remember the appearance of our self-awareness as a kind of punishment for a 'sin' we allegedly committed. The Bible accuses humans of being disobedient, and eating a 'forbidden fruit'. Self-awareness was a horrible punishment that got us expelled from the 'garden of Eden'. Prior to becoming aware, we roamed freely, gathered food with ease, did not worry about our naked bodies, and were mindlessly content. (It is reminiscent of how mammals live in the natural world when we do not mess things up for them). As soon as we became aware, everything started to go wrong.

Our species is obviously not responsible for becoming self-aware. We did not become self-aware overnight, or from eating a fruit. It [happened to us](#), and it

was a long time ago. All we have left is a faint echo of an all but lost memory. Biblical and other ancient narratives are poetic, literary ways of describing, or trying to explain something monumental and disturbing that profoundly changed our species overnight in evolutionary terms. The stories are, however, clear. We did not see self-awareness as a gift or a blessing. We saw it as a punishment, a liability, something that made us miserable and troubled.

Science cannot yet explain how our species became self-aware, let alone why, or how it happened so fast. But we know that our brains and heads became much larger than they were. The baby's head no longer fitted the mother's birth canal, causing pain in childbirth, and leading to higher risks to the baby and the mother. All mammals are afraid to die. But we were suddenly *aware* of our inevitable death, of suffering, and our fear of them. We began to be afraid of fear itself. Self-awareness makes things complicated. I believe we have not yet overcome the original shock of the relatively sudden appearance of human self-awareness.

While major religions do teach to 'love your neighbour as yourself', they also teach people that they are sinners, and that loving oneself is selfish. People are taught that the right way to live is to give to others, forgive, be selfless, and that suffering is a virtue.

Orthodox Judaism teaches people to see their bodies as dirty, and sinful. The body's needs and functions are seen as an obstacle to a spiritual relationship with the Divine. In Judaism, bodies are a necessary evil people have to live with, but are forbidden to indulge. Indulging the body makes people more like animals than beings created in the image of God. Orthodox Judaism does not have much reverence for non-human animals, which it sees as inferior, and something for humans either to ignore, or to exploit.

Hating the bodies we are born with, our feelings, our needs, may in part be a result of religion. But more likely, they were already there when religion was invented. Either way, self-hatred is alive and well even in a largely secular world. If it were not for people's inner warfare

and self-loathing, psychotherapists like me would not have a job.

Warped self-love

Self-help books and self-development gurus teach people that they should love themselves. But most people have no idea how to do it. A few short decades ago, the ‘inner child’ movement in psychology was a big fad. But for the majority of people it has been useless. In the early days of my practice, a quarter of a century ago, I used to try to teach clients how to ‘love their inner child’. It became clear quite quickly that it was not obvious at all how to put this into practice. Many people, especially those with trauma, just could not do it.

Understandably, many people are also sceptical of concepts like the ‘inner child’, and psychological metaphors in general.

Teaching people to love their inner child could also backfire. Some people saw this as permission to be irresponsible, selfish, and self-indulgent. Back in the 70s and 80s, Gestalt therapy — an incredibly important and serious body of therapeutic theory and practice — has

been hijacked by people who thought that Gestalt gave permission for people to do whatever they liked. By the time I studied Gestalt therapy, in the late 1990s, my teachers warned us repeatedly about this, and spoke about ‘responsible spontaneity’. Yes, we do need to aspire to be spontaneous and free to express ourselves, but always with respect for the rights of others.

Western psychology and New Age philosophies have long been overrun by our soulless, materialist, and staunchly individualistic economic philosophy, aka ‘neoliberalism’. According to neoliberalism, the world is a ‘dog eat dog’ jungle, and it cannot change, because underneath our veneer of civility, humans are just savages. Therefore, if people want to survive, and ‘get ahead’ they have to look after ‘number one’. Neoliberalism might as well have been taken straight out of the ‘narcissism handbook’, if there was one. Inappropriate focus on ‘number one’, or our own little ‘tribe’ can easily lead to selfishness, materialism, entitlement, and self-absorption. It also leads to tremendous psychological suffering.

It is not uncommon for many people to start out with good intentions. Many people set out to do something for others, and make a positive contribution. But if they give to others at the expense of themselves (because they think that giving means self-sacrifice), they can end up disillusioned and resentful. Generosity can flip on its head, and turn into selfishness. The Sixties generation went from idealism, and a desire to change the world for the better, into becoming some of the worst bankers, warmongers, and world destroyers around.

The neuroscience of self-love and world peace

Whatever caused our accelerated evolution or development left us with a serious problem. The truth is we are not well ‘put together’. We have two incompatible brains that were somehow grafted together, and that do not communicate well with one another. The mammal, limbic, brain is ancient. It is fear-based and is focused on our physical survival. It generates our emotions/feelings, which are information intended to help us stay safe and alive as long as possible. The limbic brain is a

product of our brutal and insecure ancient environment, where life was precarious and full of dangers, and our survival was not guaranteed.

The prefrontal cortex (executive brain) is our relational, and ethical brain. It is the brain that regulates all our feelings and behaviours, and makes us more than mindless creatures. It gives us our self-awareness, and the ability to care about everyone and everything, not just ourselves and our little tribe. It makes us safe to ourself, and everyone else. It also gives us our need for purpose and meaning.

The limbic brain knows precisely what the meaning of life is. Stay alive as long as possible, and look after yourself and those closest to you. But the prefrontal cortex tells us that it is not enough to survive. Our life needs to matter somehow. Interestingly, our sense of meaning is always tied up with caring for others indiscriminately and unconditionally. Our prefrontal cortex gives us our 'god-like' nature. There is no 'compassion fatigue' in the prefrontal cortex.

It is as if we have two 'creatures' with

two completely different ‘personalities’ sharing the same skull.

The reason most people struggle psychologically is because our ‘higher’ brain, ‘god-like’, spiritual, inclusive, compassionate brain, is not naturally connected to our ‘lower’ ancient, survival-focused, and fear-based mammal brain (our limbic system). We cannot be well as humans when those two brains do not work together properly. (There is a whole lot of good and detailed multidisciplinary science behind this. I recommend any book by Dr Daniel Siegel who has been doing the hard, scientific legwork for the rest of us).

Integration, or good connectivity between the brains are not given to us from birth, but we are born with the potential to integrate them. In fact, to be fully human, we *need* to integrate them. This is the same as what happens when we learn to speak our language early in life. We are not born with a language, but with the potential to acquire it (wire it in). To learn our primary language we need our environment to wire it in, that is to

provide the right input for the brain regions responsible for language and speaking to wire with one another. The same principle applies to our psychology,¹ except it involves connectivity (integration) between our mammal brain (limbic system), and our prefrontal cortex. As with language, and everything else we learn early in life, we need the the right input from our environment to connect/integrate them. Sadly, most people rarely get the right input for this to occur. Even people who grew up in relative safety, and a loving environment, may not be well integrated. It is why people who do not have any childhood trauma can still live with chronic anxiety. Their parents loved them and kept them safe, but did not offer the right input necessary for integration. I am not saying we are a brain. I do not believe we are only matter. But our brain and the way it works is central to how we function, and how we are psychologically. When our brains are not well integrated, our mammal, fear-based, tribal, 'selfish' brain, shuts down our 'higher' brain *every time* it feels threatened². When our integration improves, the limbic brain is no longer able to shut down, or weaken

the prefrontal cortex. We can stay 'adult', grounded, compassionate, empathetic, inclusive, principled, even under threat. The limbic brain continues to do its job as our internal 'intel officer', but it does not try to run things anymore.

Loving ourselves, means that our two brains communicate with each other constantly without interruption. Each of the brains does what it is supposed to do. It makes us live in a permanent state of what we call love and connectedness. A healthy flow of communication between the brains leads to a life that is truly self-less, and generous, but without sacrificing our own needs inappropriately. We can give generously and sustainably without risking 'compassion fatigue', or burnout, and without becoming resentful.

When our integration improves, our inner warfare with ourselves disappears by itself. Anxiety becomes a thing of the past. If you are afraid of something, you are clear about your fear, and do not live under that ongoing amorphous fog of anxiety. Integration leads to inner peace,

and our inner peace leads to a more peaceful environment around us.

When we are better integrated, we do not have to ‘live underground’ anymore. We do not have to worry too much about how our feelings are received by others, and we are far less fear-driven. Internally we develop an ongoing, loving and validating dialogue between our executive brain and our ancient limbic brain. The executive brain acts like the perfect parent if you like, for our limbic brain. It is the parent we should have all had in childhood, but most of us did not.

We need both brains in order to be fully human. We cannot choose between them — between our ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ selves — because it would mean sacrificing one aspect of ourselves for the other.

Humans are neither limbic, no prefrontal. We are both and more. If we sacrifice our limbic needs, we burn out, or worse. If we sacrifice our relational and ethical brain, we live without purpose, and condemn ourselves to living in fear. Either way, we suffer. To be fully human, both brains need to work well *together*. There are no

shortcuts to enlightenment, or good mental health.

Helping adults develop better connectivity between the two brains is the job of psychotherapy. Adults have a golden opportunity to help children develop better connectivity from the start of life, so they never need psychotherapy in adulthood. Helping children develop a well-integrated brain is what it means to help them to develop towards full humanness. Most parents are good at keeping their children alive, but I am not so sure that many parents know what it means to help their children develop to full humanness. I do not blame anyone, because we cannot know what we have not been taught. We do, however, have the knowledge now. It offers us an opportunity to take ourselves, and humanity as a whole to the next level of development or evolution possible for us.

[I want to see a world where we do not need psychotherapy anymore, because everyone is well integrated.](#) Integration automatically stops us from hurting one another. It also prevents us from just standing by and saying nothing when we

witness harm being done. People stand by and do, or say nothing because their limbic brain's fear is in charge of them. It prevents them from standing up to bullies and protecting their victims, because they are afraid for themselves.

Well-integrated people will never want to harm anyone, or anything. It will not be a struggle for humans to not fight. It will be the norm, and fighting would seem incomprehensible. Compassion and inclusiveness will be natural and effortless for us, and our focus would shift from mere survival (limbic existence), to growth towards our potential (integration).

As we improve our integration, loving one another, and loving ourselves become the same thing, and it is effortless. Better integration is associated with what we call growth, and development, self-regulation, and with healthy and mature spirituality. We can transcend the way we are made. The potential is in almost everyone.

Achieving better integration is based on two simple principles:

1. Breathe a bit more deeply to access your prefrontal cortex. People who meditate regularly are good at accessing their prefrontal cortex.
2. Once you have accessed your prefrontal cortex, *validate* everything you feel no matter what it is. All feelings are information from the limbic brain. Validation creates connections between the prefrontal cortex and limbic brain.

Yes, it is that simple. It is not necessarily easy at least not in the beginning, but it is simple. Have you ever wondered why it feels so good when someone tells you it is OK to feel what you feel? It is because validation of our inner experience is what our brain needs in order to grow to our potential. Growing to our potential is the condition for us to become fully human. Although validation is such a basic human need, we rarely get it from others. Most people do not know how to do this for themselves, because no one taught them. A lot of available advice about emotions is based on unscientific, harmful nonsense. I find it especially heartbreaking and disappointing when [I](#)

witness children's feelings mishandled by adults.

Validate your own feelings as much of the time as you can, and you will begin to change. As your connectivity improves, you will notice that you recover quicker from familiar responses to familiar triggers, and your anxiety will begin to diminish. This is only the beginning. It gets better.

Integration opens the door to healing from past hurts in a natural, safe, and efficient way. Until we have enough integration, we cannot 'let go' of the past, and free ourselves from what was wired into us early in life and throughout. Since connectivity in the brain always grows exponentially ('arborisation'), the more you practise, the faster and more robustly you change. Then you can effortlessly love others as you effortlessly love yourself.

A comment on paid subscriptions:

Substack encourages writers to create paid subscriptions. They take a small cut to enable them to provide this otherwise free-to-use platform. A few readers have pledged money for monthly or yearly subscriptions, to which I am grateful. But

for now I am holding back on monetising my Substack channel.

Instead, below you will see a **‘buy me a coffee’** button. If you haven’t seen it before, it is a way of offering a small donation to freelance writers, and others who provide similar services that are not paid work. It is entirely voluntary.

Payments are processed securely on the [‘Buy Me A Coffee’](#) site, using Stripe, and I believe people can keep donations anonymous if they wish.

Thank you for reading my work!

(PS. If it were up to me, I would abolish money. I would make physical survival a given so everyone, everywhere can concentrate on growing to their potential...)

[Buy me a coffee](#) 🙏