

# Can LOVE make progress

THOMAS JAY OORD

THE IDEA THAT HUMANS can make progress strikes some as naïve. With every war and its chaotic aftermath, looming ecological disasters, and the deviance reportedly inherent in human nature, it seems absurd that things can get better. In fact, say some, things seem to be getting worse.

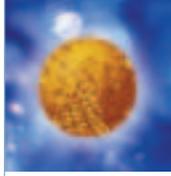
Of course, even pessimists admit that improvement of a certain sort has been made. Humans have made progress, if we mean an increase in the quantity of commodities. Some speak of the inevitable progress of technology, and who can question that more people have access to more information than ever before? But, say pessimists, increases in commodities or access to information do not indicate genuine progress.

Either *nothing* can make the world a better place, or the world will *necessarily* become better. To say it another way, progress is either *impossible* or *inevitable*. Which do we choose?

A third option exists. This option says that progress is possible, but not inevitable. In terms of moral progress, we might say that love can make progress. But we can also step backwards, fail to love, and witness evil's increase. In either possibility, there is no inevitability. Love may or may not make progress.

Most, if not all, of us actually want to witness love making progress. Progress in love, in other words, presupposes that we have at least a vague notion about which actions promote well-being and which do not. We entertain a vision for what a better tomorrow might be. Or as Henry David Thoreau put it, "Love is an attempt to change a piece of the dream-world into reality."

We want love in action, and we would love to be a part of that action. Permit me to suggest seven general arenas in which we might make progress in love:



## WE CAN MAKE PROGRESS IN LOVE IF WE . . .

### 1. PROMOTE THE EXEMPLARS

A few weeks after 9/11, the late Fred Rogers of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* fame answered this question from a reporter: "What should parents tell their children now?" His words are worth taking to heart: "Tell them to keep their eyes on the helpers." In terms of love, we might say that progress can be made if we keep our eyes on the lovers.

Models, mentors, and exemplars of love put flesh on the abstract idea of loving one's family, neighbor, and enemy. We need not only to encourage those we know to become love exemplars, but we also need to promote such lovers in the public square.

### 2. PRACTICE SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

For centuries, religious people have found help in following various practices that have enhanced the well-being of both those who practice them and those with whom these practitioners relate. Love can make progress when we follow religious practices that engender wholeness and genuine happiness.

Not all religious practices enhance well-being, of course. Just because an act is religious doesn't mean that the act is good. For love to make progress, therefore, we must make decisions about the helpfulness of various religious practices. This process is personally and politically charged. But perhaps love can become the measuring stick for believers as they ponder how they might best practice religion and make judgments about the fruitfulness of practices.

### 3. INCREASE SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE ABOUT PROSOCIAL BEHAVIOR

An increase in scientific knowledge, by itself, does not necessarily mean progress in love, but increases in scientific knowledge related to the giving and receiving of love can be helpful. In his American Psychological Association presidential address fifty years ago, Harry Harlow declared:

*Because of its intimate and personal nature, [love] is regarded by some as an improper topic for experimental research. But, whatever our personal feelings may be, our assigned mission as psychologists is to analyze all facets of human and animal behavior into their component variables. So far as love or affection is concerned, psychologists have failed in this mission. The little we know about love does not transcend simple observation, and the little we write about it has been written better by poets and novelists.*

There is much to be done—by psychologists, biologists, neurologists, sociologists, cosmologists, anthropologists, and scientists of other stripes—that could increase our scientific knowledge of love.

### 4. THINK DEEPLY ABOUT THE MEANING OF LOVE

Learning how to use our reasoning powers can be a powerful aide in the progress of love. This does not mean that the most brilliant are also the most loving. But being as clear as we can about what love means allows us to bypass the errors of rampant ambiguity. And using our reasoning abilities can help us to think creatively about how both to love and to overcome love's obstacles.

It has sometimes been said that a reciprocal relationship exists between wisdom and love. The most profound expressions of love are often accompanied by a series of wise decisions. Progress requires us to act both for the love of wisdom and for the wisdom of love.

### 5. PARTICIPATE IN AND ADVOCATE THE GROWTH OF LOVING COMMUNITIES

We are beginning to see that Western culture has generally overemphasized individualism to the neglect of community. Alasdair MacIntyre preaches the importance of community in his highly influential book, *After Virtue*. He writes, "What matters [now] is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained." MacIntyre's emphasis upon community is vital to understanding and practicing love.

If love is relational, community is essential to the progress of love. And not just any community will do. After all, communities can be hotbeds for hatred as well as workshops of love. One way that love can make progress is by participation in and the advocacy of communities that promote love.

### 6. SPEAK OUT AGAINST NEGATIVE CULTURAL INFLUENCES

Progress in love requires proactive behavior to support activities and structures that promote well-being. But progress also comes through reactive behavior that opposes activities and structures that generate ill-being. Becoming a voice for the oppressed against the oppressors—in their many guises—is an act of love that increases the common good.

Although opinions vary about the specifics, the majority of social scientists point to aspects of culture that thwart the establishment of well-being. Progress in love

requires lovers to be social activists and cultural critics. Maximal progress in love cannot be made by individual or community activity alone. The broad structures of culture must be evaluated by the prophets of love.

## 7. ENDORSE A VISION OF GOD AS THE SOURCE OF LOVE

Some religious traditions better support the idea that progress in love is possible. Those traditions that consider creatures to be free to some degree, that acknowledge standards of good and evil and also encourage their adherents to seek something better, are likely the most powerful religious forces in the progress of love.

Theistic traditions may be more convincing and appealing if they understood God to be both the source of our love and the one who loves steadfastly. This step

seems to be an important one toward resolving the age-old problem of evil that challenges the faith of both theists and atheists alike. If we all want to attune our lives to the ways of the Ultimate Being, and if we believe that the Ultimate Being loves us all steadfastly, we have grounds to trust that we make progress in love when we attune our lives to the Ultimate Lover.

Can things get better? Yes! Can love make progress? Yes! It is not inevitable, but progress in love is possible. 

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# Social Healing Selected Resource Guide

## WEBSITES

### Building Bridges for Peace

c/o Seeking Common Ground  
[www.s-c-g.org](http://www.s-c-g.org)

Summer programs for Israeli/Palestinian teens

### Satyana Institute

[www.satyana.org](http://www.satyana.org)  
Programs on gender reconciliation, leadership, and spiritual diplomacy

### Forgiveness Institute

[www.forgivenessinstitute.org](http://www.forgivenessinstitute.org)  
The role of forgiveness in social healing

### The Parents Circle

[www.theparentscircle.org](http://www.theparentscircle.org)  
Healing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

### Compassionate Listening Project

[www.compassionatelistening.org](http://www.compassionatelistening.org)  
Person-to-person citizen's diplomacy

### The Witnessing Project

[www.witnessingproject.org](http://www.witnessingproject.org)  
Turning the witnessing of trauma into healing

### One by One

[www.one-by-one.org](http://www.one-by-one.org)  
Transforming the legacies of genocide through dialogue

### The Forgiveness Project

[www.theforgivenessproject.com](http://www.theforgivenessproject.com)  
A touring exhibition of inspirational stories

### The Karuna Center

[www.karunacenter.org](http://www.karunacenter.org)  
International training programs in conflict transformation

### Conflict Transformation Across Cultures

[www.sit.edu/contact/overview/index.html](http://www.sit.edu/contact/overview/index.html)  
Professional development program

### Institute for Healing of Memories

[www.healingofmemories.co.za](http://www.healingofmemories.co.za)  
Website of Father Michael Lapsley

### Human Dignity and Humiliation Studies

[www.humiliationstudies.org](http://www.humiliationstudies.org)  
Breaking the cycle of humiliation

## BOOKS

### *A Human Being Died that Night*

by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela  
(Mariner Books, 2004)

### *Common Shock: Witnessing Violence*

*Every Day* by Kaethe Weingarten  
(Dutton, 2003)

### *Creating Sanctuary: Toward the Evolution*

*of Sane Societies* by Sandra Bloom  
(Routledge, 1997)

### *I Thought We'd Never Speak Again*

by Laura Davis (Perennial Currents, 2003)

### *Long Shadows: Truth, Lies and History*

by Erna Paris (Bloomsbury, 2001)

### *The Moral Imagination*

by John Paul Lederach (Oxford Press, 2005)

### *My First White Friend: Confessions on*

*Race, Love and Forgiveness*  
by Patricia Raybon (Penguin, 1997)

### *Remembrance and Reconciliation*

by Bjorn Krondorfer (Yale Press, 1995)

### *Returning to the Teachings: Exploring*

*Aboriginal Justice* by Rupert Ross  
(Penguin, 1996)

### *Revenge: A Story of Hope*

by Laura Blumenfeld  
(Washington Square Press, 2003)

### *Solidarity and Suffering: Towards a*

*Politics of Relationality* by Douglas Sturm  
(SUNY, 1998)

### *The Spiritual Roots of Restorative Justice*

by Michael Hadley, ed. (SUNY, 2001)

### *Transcending: Reflections of Crime Victims*

by Howard Zehr (Good Books, 2001)