

Just What the Doctor Ordered

As I've thought more about the possibility that life serves the purpose of learning to love, I found myself asking the question: When we got to the end of our physical life, how would we know whether or not we had learned to love? Would we add up the number of times we hugged or kissed someone? Would we have to have a certain number of good deeds? I've asked these questions in earnest, and I found that I really wasn't sure what it meant to love.

In my scientific training I was taught that in order to measure something you had to define it first. And in order to do that, sometimes you had to give it an "operational" definition. What objective evidence was there to measure whether or not something happened? If we were trying to measure or observe love, what behaviors would define and indicate that someone was demonstrating loving behavior?

I reflected on my Christian religious training and remembered when the prophet Micah (6:8) spoke of what the Lord required: "To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." The apostle Paul talked about the importance of faith, hope, and charity. I thought about Jesus and the qualities and character of his person. I also remembered my Boy Scout training and that one was to be thrifty, brave, reverent, etc. I thought that these would be examples of loving behavior; that is, if one were just or fair, merciful, humble, charitable, and reverent, these would be demonstrations of love.

I thought of other qualities or traits that similarly would demonstrate love: compassion, kindness, caring, listening, sensitivity, support, tenderness, patience, sincerity, loyalty, friendship, sympathy, respect, courage etc. Then it occurred to me that these were the very qualities or behaviors that we usually admire most, especially at a time of crisis. I thought about patients and families who had strokes, or great pain and upset, and how the experience of suffering and distress could teach us the real value of love.

It is when we are feeling most travailed that we truly learn to appreciate loving acts. If life serves the purpose of learning to love, times of suffering may actually be blessings in disguise! This doesn't mean that suffering is necessary or that it is the only or best way to learn to love. Metaphysicians have referred to human existence as "a veil of tears." It seems to be a given that life is going to have its turmoil. However, if life is about learning to love, then human existence with all of its seeming tragedy and suffering, may be just what the doctor ordered.

Excerpted from *Why Love Heals* by Dean Shrock, Ph.D.