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Love matters: embracing love as the heart of higher education

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This reflective essay explores the role of love in higher education through the lens of personal experiences, including confronting situations of tragedy and hopelessness as an educator. Drawing on the philosophies of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and James Baldwin, as well as insights from colleagues and students, I argue that love is not simply an emotional state but a transformative force capable of effecting meaningful, sustainable change. Love can serve as a vital element in pedagogical settings, providing a framework for justice, equity, and communal wellbeing. I offer several practical recommendations for educators to intentionally cultivate a culture of love in their interactions with students and colleagues. These range from self-care and setting boundaries to integrating love into course design and community building. The essay suggests that embracing love as an active force can provide a renewed sense of purpose, particularly in times of collective trauma and uncertainty. Further, it highlights that love can be the necessary counterforce to the challenges affecting both educators and students, ultimately serving as the cornerstone for transformative education. By fostering love in academic settings, we enable both individual and communal healing, enriching the overall educational experience. In the wake of global crises like pandemics, genocides, climate disaster, and political divisiveness, the essay asserts that love remains the enduring force that can empower us to build a more just and resilient community in higher education.

KEYWORDS

trauma, transcending higher education, equity and justice, action love, renewed purpose, intergenerational healing, transformative education

1 Introduction

“Love is the greatest force in the universe. It is the heartbeat of the moral cosmos.”
–Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.¹

Two hours before teaching my first course of the semester in September 2022, I found myself questioning the very fabric of my role as an educator. I reached out to the director of our Center of Teaching & Learning (CTL) at Connecticut College, who is a close friend, and asked: “How bad will it look if I were to ask for a leave of absence now?”

A few days prior to that, I was presenting at another college for their faculty professional development day and in the middle of my workshop phones started buzzing. Then, I heard a panicked participant say “Active Shooter.”

The staff barricaded the door and we all had to seek shelter. While we were hiding, I texted my sisters and told them to let my parents know that “I’ve had a good life.”

¹ Quoted in Jean-Philippe, M. (2021).

It turned out that the “Active Shooter” message, sent via the college’s emergency messaging system, was a false alarm, a hoax. For days after that incident, I kept hearing what sounded to me like gunshots. Of course, there were no gunshots. During the false active shooter incident, there was thunder and my brain misinterpreted the thunder sounds as gunshots. I had to keep telling myself—my body, my heart—that I am “safe.”

Interestingly, I had been presenting about the healing power of relationships.

Earlier that month, August 2022, I had been presenting at a different school on the topic of “hope,” a subject that I have written about before (Imad, 2020, 2021). Before I took the stage, the president of the college informed me that a week earlier one of their faculty members had taken their own life. I was supposed to talk about hope! Yet, in that moment the only reality I could access was grounded in sorrow, not hope. And, if I am to be honest, my gut feeling was something like “It’s hopeless.” I was raised in a tradition that teaches us to bring glad tidings to one another and yet at that moment, I could not, myself, find the silver lining. Although I modified my talk, about 45 min into my trembling presentation a faculty member asked me: “What’s the rational argument for hope?”

His question left me speechless. As someone who teaches about logic, argumentation, and fallacies, I could not come up with a rational reason for hope. I told him something along the lines of our collective resilience, *rooted in love*, defies reason and rationality.

During lunch, I sat with that faculty member and shared with him that, in fact, “I could not come up with a rational argument for hope.” But, I continued: “When hope becomes obsolete, I choose love.”

This essay is a reflection on the notion that when hope feels obsolete or irrational, rather than turning to feeling hopeless, we can and should turn to love. I seek to explore how love is not merely an emotion but act as a transformative force in higher education. In addressing the pivotal role of love in education, I assert that it’s crucial to directly connect this concept to the lives, challenges, and strengths of our students. As Felten and Lambert (2020) highlight, student engagement is essential for successful learning outcomes, yet the ability for students to fully participate in their educations is often hindered by challenges such as academic stress, mental health concerns, and social injustices. It’s important to acknowledge that many policies in higher education, characterized by neoliberal market-driven approaches and a focus on economic outcomes (Giroux, 2019), can create an environment of stress and uncertainty for both students and staff, diminishing the quality of the academic and social experiences within our institutions and perpetuating a zero-sum culture (Brown and Carasso, 2013; Imad et al., 2023).

A pedagogical approach grounded in love and support can offer a counter-narrative to the educational challenges many students face, fostering a sense of community and belonging which is crucial in alleviating these pressures (Noddings, 2015). Hooks (2003, 2018) and Rendón (2014) and others have explored such a culture of love and empathy in education, arguing that such a transformation can significantly improve student engagement.² In this essay, I explore love as a transformative force in higher education, and delve into how it

² This approach is further supported by scholars of public education such as Camangian (2013), Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008), and Ginwright (2016).

can serve as an anchor and a beacon in the face of global crises and personal tragedies, guiding us towards a more just, equitable, and resilient academic community.

1.1 What is love? And why does love matter?

To say that love is merely a feeling or an emotion is to do love injustice. Yes, love encompasses feelings and emotions—and it’s so much more than that. The word for love in the Arabic language is *Hubb* which shares the same root as the word “seed,” *Habb*. Love is a seed *and* the power that nurtures that seed. Love is the potential that can transform us and the world around us into something beautiful, rich, and fruitful (Gloton, 2019). In the realm of higher education, reconceptualizing love as an active force rather than a passive emotion opens up possibilities for creating more equitable and compassionate learning environments. It calls for a pedagogy that is not only intellectually stimulating but also emotionally supportive and socially conscious.

Love endures because it is what connects us to the world around us. When we love someone or something, we feel a sense of unity and oneness with that person or thing, and we recognize that our own wellbeing, and our “why”—our greater reason for doing what we do—is tied to something larger than ourselves.

So, what does love have to do with our work in higher education?

Back to the start of my fall 2022 semester: My CTL friend gave me options and also suggested that, in spite of my feeling burned out and apathetic, I go to meet my class, reminding me that my students energized me and gave me a sense of purpose and meaning. He thought that I might want to go to my first class not out of duty, but out of love for my students. I did, and within minutes of being in their presence I felt a force inspiring and motivating me. Within minutes of starting the class, I forgot about all of the burdens and fears I was experiencing just hours before, and I began to notice that love—my love of being in the presence of my students; my love of teaching; my love of science and the brain; my love of learning—was slowly but surely giving me the strength to face something that hours before felt insurmountable.

I love my students, who come eager to learn and make a difference in the world.

Several years ago, I conducted a survey at Pima Community College, where I asked students what they thought the purpose of higher education is. Here are some representative examples of what students wrote:³

- “To do something that you love and enjoy.”
- “To innovate and leave a meaningful impact on my community.”

³ This was part of a larger study examining student perception of their experience in higher education. The study was approved by Pima Community College’s Office of Institutional Research, Planning and Effectiveness. The study was conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. Written informed consent was obtained from the participants for both participation in the study and for the publication of potentially identifying information.

- “To be able to do the things I love.”
- “To develop skills that can be useful in helping my community; to give back.”
- “To stand on my own and help my community.”
- “To help myself become a better person so I can help others.”
- “[T]o find something you love to learn about and then to learn about it.”

Over the years, I’ve come to appreciate that our students aspire to more than just passing exams and obtaining degrees (Imad, 2019). Their aspirations often extend to community involvement and making a positive impact on the world. This sentiment is echoed in students’ responses, which frequently emphasize not only the value of community and contributing to global betterment, but also the significance that “love” plays in those aspirations. Our students’ motivations are complex and multi-layered, and reveal that something beyond immediate improvement and gain—in this case love (of learning, of community, of humanity) drives their educational desires.

It is critical to recognize that for students to realize their dreams, particularly those centered around community service and improvement, educators must address their holistic needs. In order to do so, educators must foster an environment that not only nurtures academic growth but also supports the multifaceted nature of students’ lives. Crenshaw (1991) notes the diverse social determinants that shape their experiences, and, as Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory highlights, students’ learning experiences and wellbeing are intricately linked to their social contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In order to enable students to thrive and actualize their aspirations of enhancing their communities, we need to cultivate a space that not only acknowledges but actively engages with these varied influences, which encompass everything from personal backgrounds to broader societal structures.

Creating such spaces is not merely about engaging with our students or teaching in our academic discipline; it’s about a profound commitment to our students’ wellbeing and growth. Helpful here is Martin Luther King Jr.’s philosophical distinction between “eros,” a sort of “love of desire” often confined to personal relationships, and “agape,” an unconditional love that transcends and persists regardless of circumstance. As an active force, “agape” love is a profound commitment to the wellbeing and growth of others.⁴ In fact, throughout history love has been a driving force in social justice movements and a powerful force in resistance movements against oppressive systems. For example, the Civil Rights Movement in the US was fueled by a deep love for humanity and a desire to see justice and equality for all people, regardless of their race or ethnicity. King famously asked, “What are you doing for others?” (King, 2012), emphasizing the importance of community and service.

In the context of higher education such selfless love can be transformative, recentering the purposes of education from improvement of self to the improving the lives of others. Love is, in the

words of King, “the active outpouring of one’s whole being into the being of another” (Lehigh University, 2020). When we truly love someone or something, we want what is best for them. We want them to be treated with dignity and respect, and we want them to have the same opportunities and rights as everyone else. Thus, love is often tied to justice—and therefore to resistance and perseverance—because it is a force that drives us to seek equity and beauty for all people. In the words of Dr. Cornel West, “Justice is what love looks like in public—you cannot talk about loving folk if you are not fighting for justice” (Supernegromagic, 2011).

Our current educational practices, for the most part, are still disconnected from the very principles that should guide them: equity, compassion, and community. Education, in its purest form, ought to be an emancipatory journey that fosters critical thinking, nurtures empathy, and empowers individuals to contribute positively to society. However, the prevailing model, driven by a market-oriented framework, tends to commodify education, treating students as consumers rather than active participants in a shared learning process. This not only devalues the educational experience but also perpetuates inequalities, as those without sufficient resources are further marginalized. Moreover, the relentless focus on quantifiable outcomes overlooks the transformative potential of education to inspire change and promote social justice (Rendón, 2005; Imad et al., 2023).

It is in this context that the concept of love inspires us to stand up for what is right and to resist injustice and oppression. Love can give us the courage and strength to fight for a better world, even in the face of great adversity. Sandoval (2013), who discusses a “differential consciousness” that connects “what has been to what is possible,” Shultz describes an “in between” space of growth and learning that “rich with possibilities for changed relationships and realities.” Such a space is “where both substantive and procedural justice can be put into motion and it is there that we find the foundations of full and emancipatory citizenship in the public sphere” (Shultz, 2013). In the process of educating our students, we have the power to create those spaces—within our classrooms and on our campuses—where positive change is possible. Love as justice is more than a personal or social force—it is also about advocating for material changes to people’s lived realities. In the words of Shultz, “Love is a desire for unity, a broadened social sphere, and a response to the catastrophes of poverty, racism, patriarchy, and colonialism. It is also a response to the denial of health, education, employment, access to the public sphere and a healthy environment.” Love can move us to take the power that education offers and use it to make the world a better, kinder, and more sustainable place.

1.2 The power of love in education: cultivating humanity, change, and justice

The education that we offer our students should extend far beyond the transmission of knowledge and skills. From my own experience, education has been a profound journey rooted in the cultivation of my entire humanity. In that sense, we should aim at graduating not merely academically proficient individuals, but also deeply compassionate, truth-seeking, and justice-oriented citizens of the world. This vision of education is inseparable from the concept of love—again, not the ephemeral, emotion-driven affection celebrated in popular culture,

⁴ King describes the transformative power of “agape” love as an “entirely ‘neighbor-regarding concern for others,’ which ‘makes no distinction between friend and enemy; it is directed toward both’ (King, “Strength to Love,” 1963). This unconditional love, as King says, “is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend” (King, 2012).

but a profound, action-oriented love that is deeply aligned with truth and justice.

The students' sentiments about what motivates them are echoed in many of my colleagues' understanding of love in the context of teaching and learning.⁵ For example, my colleague Dr. Bryan Dewsbury⁶ tells me that "Love for my students means radically believing in their potential to be loving and active engagers in a socially just world. The love comes from believing in their desire to not just be passive observers of the world, but to be co-creators and shapers of it." Bryan's use of the word "love" is intimately tied to community, action, and liberation.

I experience the joy of love when I witness my colleagues, both faculty and staff, continue to show up for their students and each other even when they are feeling exhausted and overwhelmed. It is love that gives me the courage to see that hopelessness is a defense mechanism and it is love that pushes me to take risks and to pursue the unknown. When things get really tough, I turn to colleagues I look up to and ask them how they are holding up. I do so, in part, because they are a source of inspiration and courage.

This form of love is in a sense both ancestral and futuristic: it reflects back to ancient wisdom where education was seen as the nurturing ground for virtue, character, and ethical citizenship. And, it also reflects forward to a vision of the future where humanity thrives in harmony and dignity. In that sense, what I am trying to convey is that this form of education insists that at the heart of educational endeavors must lie a commitment to fostering love as a dynamic force—a force capable of driving social transformation, promoting justice, and unveiling truth. And we cannot do this without integrating critical discussions around moral and ethical issues, encouraging our students to engage with the complexities of justice and fostering a culture of empathy and dignity.

In other words, knowledge, to fulfill its true purpose, must be used in service of creating a more just and compassionate world. When hope seems obsolete, it is the enduring force of love—rooted in action,

aligned with truth seeking, and committed to justice—that empowers us to continue moving forward. This love encourages me as an educator to see beyond the immediate challenges, envisioning a future where education not only enlightens my students' minds but also ignites their hearts in the pursuit of a better, more beautiful world.

So, if you are like me and sometimes hope feels obsolete, it may be worth turning to love to see if it can help you find a new way forward. For your students and colleagues, your presence and their watching you resist and push for a more beautiful higher education can also make the case for love.

I recently revisited James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* where he describes the use of the word "love" not simply as a personal feeling or emotion, but rather as a way of being in the world. He reminds us that love is not just about being happy, but rather that love is a deeper and more meaningful experience that involves "quest and daring and growth." Baldwin also describes love as "a state of being, or a state of grace." Baldwin's words have always inspired me to view love as a transcendent experience, a gift that connects us to something greater than ourselves. It is that love that continues to bring me a sense of harmony with the world (Baldwin, 1988).⁷

You may wonder: Love!?!? What an abstract concept! How do I enact love in my professional life as a teacher, mentor, and colleague?

I include below a few suggestions that can help enact a culture of love with your students and colleagues:

- 1 *Slow down.* Pause in order to intentionally be present. Love should not be used as an excuse for self-sacrifice to the point of burnout. While love can be a powerful motivator and driving force in our work, it is essential to remember that self-care and setting boundaries are equally important. Loving oneself is a crucial aspect of love, and we cannot effectively care for others if we do not also attend to our own healing. Love requires us to be attentive to ourselves and to others around us. In your interactions with students and colleagues, take the time to be fully present and engaged with your own healing. With your students, listen actively, empathically, ask questions, and show interest in their ideas and concerns.⁸

5 Reflecting on the seven sample student comments from previous data, gathered several years ago, it's crucial to understand their ongoing relevance and how they can provide fresh insights into the evolving nature of student experiences in higher education today. Over the past three years, through a combination of Zoom and in-person interviews, I have engaged with STEM students across different institutions regarding their goals and aspirations. A recurring theme in these discussions is the aspiration for something greater than just obtaining a degree; students express a desire to make a significant impact on humanity (unpublished data, manuscript in preparation). This ambition is especially pertinent in the context of the recent global challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, which have fundamentally shifted perspectives on purpose and meaning. The pandemic has prompted a reevaluation of personal and professional goals, with many students now prioritizing community and societal contribution and global impact.

My preliminary findings underscore the importance of adapting our educational approaches not only to acknowledge but also to nurture these evolving aspirations. By aligning educational objectives with students' desires for meaningful societal engagement, higher education can become a more responsive and transformative experience, fostering a generation of learners who are not only academically accomplished but also driven by a deep sense of purpose and commitment to global betterment.

6 Phone conversation with Dr. Dewsbury.

7 Baldwin's conception of love offers a radical lens to view our educational practices. Baldwin saw love as a powerful force for change and liberation. In the classroom, this translates to not only educating but also empowering students, recognizing their struggles, and advocating for their rights. Baldwin's love is active and engaged, challenging us to confront injustices within educational systems.

8 This is juxtaposed to James Baldwin's concept of love as a responsibility towards self and others, even those whom we experience as unkind. This conception of love suggests that we as educators should cultivate a sense of duty to engage with and understand ourselves and others including those who may seem antagonistic or different. This approach encourages a learning environment where empathy, respect, and open-mindedness are paramount, even in the face of disagreement or conflict. Embracing this philosophy could lead to more inclusive, compassionate, and transformative educational experiences, fostering a culture where diverse perspectives are valued as opportunities for deeper understanding and growth. It challenges the educational community to rise above personal biases and conflicts, focusing on the greater goal of collective enlightenment and mutual respect (Farred, 2015).

- 2 *Bring the language of love to your courses—to the extent you feel comfortable.* I teach science courses and for years I primarily focused on quantitative reasoning, data, and facts. I did not feel comfortable with feelings and was often worried that bringing them into my courses would be viewed as unscientific. Yet, love as a force continued to show up in my classrooms and labs in various ways. When a student expressed to me that they “love this protein” or when the class told me that they “love [my] writing on the board.” I began to see possibilities to interweave the language of love into my teaching. How? I talk about my love for physiology and my love of the brain and the mystery of consciousness and my love for them, my students, because they help me grow in my humanity each day.
- 3 *Design an assignment that engages the students in the role of love in their discipline.* For example, I have an assignment in my general biology class about how science, which may appear to only focus on quantitative reasoning, data, and facts, is ultimately about understanding and appreciating the world around us. I engage my students in a discussion about how love can be a powerful motivator for scientific exploration and discovery. When we love something, we are often driven to learn more about it and to understand it on a deeper level. Thus, love can lead to new insights and discoveries that can advance our scientific understanding of the world.
- 4 *Intentionally foster a sense of community and empower others to do the same.* Love thrives in a supportive and caring community. Whether you teach in-person or online, whether you are a department chair or a student service supervisor, create a class or workplace culture that values collaboration, mutual respect, and trust. Share with your students and colleagues why community is important for learning and ask them what a healthy and thriving community looks like and what concrete steps you can all take to realize that vision.
- 5 *Prioritize mental health and healing* (Imad, 2021, 2022). The significant rise in mental health issues among students cannot be overlooked (Lipson et al., 2019). Addressing this requires an educational framework that goes beyond academic instruction to include emotional support and understanding. As research by Eisenberg et al. (2007) shows, supportive environments in educational settings can play a crucial role in improving student mental health outcomes. Integrating a culture of care is fundamental in creating such environments.
- 6 *Further your understanding of how love works in learning, in teaching, and in higher education as a whole.* Work with your colleagues and your campus Center for Teaching and Learning to facilitate an event or series of events for faculty and staff to come together and discuss the concept and practice of love within their respective areas. In other words, gain a deeper understanding of love as a pedagogical concept and its practical implications. Perhaps consider reading works by bell hooks, Paulo Freire, Russell Lowery-Hart from Amarillo College, Parker Palmer, or the recent book on love and intergenerational wellbeing (Palmer, 2009; Hooks, 2018; Lowery-Hart, 2020; Freire, 2021;

Karacaoglu, 2021). These authors, and others, can help us because they provide valuable insights and perspectives on the role of love in education, emphasizing its transformative potential and ability to foster deep connections and growth.

This list is not exhaustive, and I invite you to modify, adapt, and build upon the suggestions I include to make them better and pass them forward.

When I think of my own journey within higher education, it's been love all along that carried me from point A to point B, especially when I am feeling hopeless or lost. Turning to love helps me restore my sense of purpose and meaning.

Over the past 3 years, the world has experienced a great deal of trauma: From the ongoing pandemic to wars; from racialized violence to growing and debilitating poverty; from climate change disasters to political divisiveness. We are not only impacted by these events as individuals, but also as educators. The wider world cannot be separated from the contexts in which we work, teach, and mentor. These events impact our students and their ability to learn. At the beginning of fall 2022 semester, like me, many of my students may also have been feeling depleted and overwhelmed. As educators, part of our role includes cultivating spaces for transformation and healing, and love can empower not only ourselves but our students and colleagues to continue to learn, grow, heal, and thrive.

Love as a force that can help us heal was echoed in the words of the wonderful Dr. Laura Rendon⁹ who recently shared with me her understanding of love in the context of teaching and learning. She told me that: “Radical love involves recognizing the traumatic wounds in others, reaching out with an open heart and offering mercy, compassion, and care to those who are broken. As we give of ourselves to others, we create liberating conditions so that all can thrive, be their authentic selves, and operate with heart, integrity, and conviction.” This perspective is particularly resonant as we consider our students, who are both the future of humanity and also active participants in shaping that future. They carry within them the seeds for the change we wish to see in the world, embodying potential and hope for a more compassionate, equitable society.

The depth and complexity of King's and Baldwin's ideas on love remind us that in higher education, we are not just transferring knowledge but nurturing whole individuals. Embracing these dimensions of love in our teaching and administrative practices can lead to a more inclusive, empathetic, and ultimately, transformative educational experience. As we come to the end of this academic year and thinking of the upcoming school year, may your love heal your heart and others', and may it empower you to create transformative spaces in which you and your students can flourish. May it transcend our journey within higher education and inspire us to resist oppression and the status quo, to bring more beauty to our work, to build genuine and meaningful connections, to foster empathy and belonging, and to nurture growth in ourselves and others. In nurturing this growth, we are investing in the architects of tomorrow, guiding and supporting them as they sow the seeds of positive change and development in our communities and beyond.

⁹ Email discussion with Dr. Rendon.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Pima Community College—Office of Institutional Research. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

MI: Conceptualization, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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