

What Makes Us Whole

What Makes Us Whole

Finding God in Contemporary Life



Noel Cooper



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For Andrew, Paul, and John

Your quest for wholeness
encourages all who love you.

*The Spirit helps us in our weakness;
for we do not know how to pray as we ought,
but that very Spirit intercedes
with sighs too deep for words.
And God, who searches the heart,
knows what is the mind of the Spirit.*

(Romans 8:26-27)



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Introduction

Life is a journey in search of wholeness.

From our earliest moments until our last conscious breath we are building the person we are. Sometimes consciously and sometimes with very little awareness, day after day, year after year, we are shaping our *selves* by the choices we make.¹ Always we are influenced by other people, by events, by forces in our world. But ultimately we must take responsibility for who we are as we seek to be true to ourselves, to find peace of heart: to become whole.

“Wholeness” is a profound word expressing the goal of the human journey. After Jesus healed a suffering person he would sometimes say: “Your faith has made you whole.”² The religious word “holiness” derives from the same root as “wholeness” and has the same meaning. To the extent that we are true to ourselves, we are faithful to God: holy. Wholeness means completeness, fullness of life, holiness.

¹ This way of speaking about moral responsibility was borrowed more than thirty years ago from John Giles Milhaven’s book, *Towards a New Catholic Morality* (New York: Doubleday, 1972).

² The Greek word *sesoken* (See Mark 5:34; Luke 7:50; 8:48; 17:19) can be translated “made you whole,” “made you well,” “healed you,” or “saved you.” Try to have all those meanings in mind when you read the word “wholeness.” The introduction to the “Wholeness” section of this book will elaborate on the meaning of the term.

The human journey, then, is a quest. The term “quest” evokes timeless symbols of journeying and searching. The trials of life and our personal shortcomings ensure that wholeness will always remain an objective rather than an accomplishment. We are wounded voyagers, always seeking to overcome obstacles and to persevere in pursuit of our true self. As we travel we reflect on our progress, reaffirm our purpose, and reshape the path we are following.

What do we need to reach our true destiny, to achieve wholeness? This book will blend the insights of the Bible with the concerns and insights of contemporary believers, and will discuss our life’s journey in search of wholeness and the role of God in that journey.

In the first section of the book we will consider five of the elements that contribute to wholeness or fullness of life for human beings: loving and being loved, a sense of purpose, a consistent personal value system, freedom, and emotional well-being.

The Good News is that we do not have to achieve wholeness by our own efforts. *God’s* part in our quest for wholeness is described by the word “salvation.” Jesus’ saying, “your faith has made you whole,” can also be translated as “your faith has saved you.” Salvation and wholeness are different words for the same reality. The term “salvation” refers not primarily to life after death, but to the action of God now: God saves us while we live. In the journey of our lives, God intervenes as a spiritual power and leads us toward wholeness. God enables us to respond to the situations we face in life as free and responsible people. God helps us to make sense of our lives, to be wise, to live in love, to make good choices, and to have the courage to do what is right. We believe that if we open our hearts to God’s action (or “saving power”) and build our lives with God’s help we can grow toward fullness of life—*no matter what happens* in the course of our lives. “God saves us” means “God reaches into our lives and leads us to wholeness.”

The second section of the book will attempt to describe how God affects our quest for wholeness. Part of that discussion will

express dissatisfaction with some traditional ways of speaking about God that seem unsatisfactory or incredible to many adults. Only by facing the difficult questions can we maintain a spirit of faith in the face of life's difficulties and contemporary challenges to faith.

This book is addressed to a wide range of intelligent contemporary believers, and especially to parents who hope to express the value of faith to their children. Many readers may have had some early education about believing but now find that the traditional expressions of faith they learned as children do not respond to their adult need to reflect on the meaning of the human journey. Others may have continued to learn about the Gospel proclamation as adults and wish to explore various points of view about familiar and difficult questions. The book is written from a Christian perspective but is not intended to present the teaching of any one denomination. It is meant to be understandable even to those who may be quite unfamiliar with the language of theology.

What Makes Us Whole is the product of more than thirty years' experience as a husband and member of a "parenting team" and an equally long career as a teacher of students and adults in the field of Religious Education in Roman Catholic schools in Canada. Significant additional experience was gained after retirement, when I participated in a (non-religious) parenting program for fathers of young children. Working with groups of men whose only requirement for participation was being the father of a child under the age of six, I met hundreds of dads who discussed their hopes and dreams for their children and the problems they faced in trying to be good parents.

An early form of this book was written in the months following the death of my beloved wife Patricia in 2002. At that time I began to write about my efforts to find the hand of God in the illness and untimely death of this vibrant woman, a noble mother and teacher. With the devoted help of our three sons and their beloved life partners our family survived a period of mourning that continues still, but we have all managed to go forward with

our lives in a manner that can be described as a continuing journey toward wholeness in a spirit of peacefulness. This book is dedicated to our three wonderful sons, Andrew, Paul, and John. Together we are family in the best sense possible.

Of course, few people can thrive in loneliness. Before and after the death of their mother, Andrew, Paul, and John found and committed themselves to loving and supportive women, Lauren, Sarah, and Kate. The most surprising outcome, however, was reserved for me. About a year after Patricia's death, by the most unexpected coincidence, I renewed acquaintance with a woman, also named Pat, whom I had known through the decade of the 1960s. She too had been married and widowed. We had not seen each other for more than thirty years when Pat happened to encounter mutual friends (whom she had not seen for many years either) as they strolled past a booth she was staffing at an autumn fair. Our friends told me about their chance encounter; Pat and I made contact; and fifteen months later we married at the age of 66. We are enjoying happy and peaceful lives in retirement and feel immensely grateful for the good fortune that brought us together.

To return to the theme of the second section of this book, I believe that my remarriage is an important part of our whole family's journey toward wholeness (in a deeply religious sense). I give thanks for this great blessing, but I do not believe literally that God brought Pat and me together any more than I believe God caused or could have prevented the death of my late wife, Patricia, before she reached the age of 60. We have to find a way of understanding the role of God in our lives, in good times and in bad. That search for faith and wholeness is the subject of this book.

PART ONE



What Makes Us Whole

Your faith has made you well.

(Mark 5:34)

Life is a journey in search of wholeness. But what does “wholeness” mean? A number of synonyms may help us understand the meaning of the word more fully.

Modern popular psychology uses a word that derives from the same root word when it speaks of “wellness” or well-being. When Jesus healed people, often he concluded with a phrase that is now usually translated as “your faith has made you well.” Other translations use the word “whole” in that quotation, because “to be whole” means to be well, to be in touch with one’s true self, to be growing toward fulfillment.

“Peace of heart” is another phrase with a similar meaning. The Jewish greeting *shalom* (“peace”), though often used as unreflectively as our “goodbye” (meaning “God be with you”), speaks of deep inner peacefulness. Jesus refers to the deeper meaning of *shalom* in John’s narrative of the Last Supper when he says: “my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives” (John 14:27). The peace Jesus gives is what we mean by wholeness.

It is possible to be a peaceful person in the face of tragedy and oppressive circumstances. On the other hand, some situations can destroy or seriously weaken a person's peace of heart. When a person becomes less peaceful, to that extent the person's journey toward wholeness has been hindered. Our quest for wholeness is essentially a quest for inner peace.

We mentioned in the introduction that wholeness and holiness are synonyms. To the extent that we are true to ourselves we are faithful to God, and therefore "holy." The Gospel according to John uses the term "fullness of life" to express the meaning of "wholeness" in terms that are distinctive to that gospel: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

The last word in this series of near-synonyms is "happiness." What does it take to make human beings happy?

Early in the twenty-first century, discussions about happiness are plentiful. Some, like this one, are conducted in religious terms. Others are based in psychology. The work of Dr. Martin Seligman¹ is based on his insight that while psychology has understandably devoted itself to the problems people face, it should also emphasize the sources of happiness in people's lives. Seligman's work identifies a number of factors that contribute to human happiness and encourages readers to recognize and appreciate them in their own lives.

Wholeness, wellness, well-being, peace of heart, holiness, happiness: these are all terms that describe in slightly different ways the goal of life's quest.

To the extent that we are believers, our quest for wholeness is built on the foundation of faith. Faith is supposed to support and strengthen us as we search for personal fulfillment, for well-being, for peace of heart, for happiness. Faith helps us understand what wholeness involves, and faith assures us that we do

¹ Martin E. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002).

Dr. Seligman's website is also interesting: <http://www.authentic-happiness.sas.upenn.edu>.

not have to achieve wholeness only by our own efforts: God's saving energy strengthens us and leads us forward on our quest. We will discuss God's role in our journey in the second half of this book.

In this first section we will consider some of the elements that contribute to wholeness, holiness, wellness, well-being, peace of heart, and happiness in an individual human life. No doubt there are dozens of possible factors. In the following chapters you are invited to consider only these five elements of wholeness:

- Knowing that you are loved is the indispensable cornerstone of personal growth.
- Everyone should be aware of, and periodically reconsider and reaffirm, a sense of purpose in life: a focus for all one's activities, a sense of direction.
- We are forming ourselves by the decisions we make. Living consistently according to a personal value system is an important element of growing toward wholeness.
- All of us desire to be free, to set the course of our own lives. God supports human freedom.
- Emotional well-being is essential to human wholeness.

Chapter One



Knowing You Are Loved

Love is the most precious possible gift one person can give to another. It is an essential element of human wholeness. Knowing that you are loved, being able to express love for someone else, and accepting love from others are part of the foundation of every successful human life.

Love is a transforming gift. If someone says “I love you” for the first time, you are a new person. You become capable of things you never knew you could do. When someone says “I love you” over and over again, in word and action, the feeling within you is a perfect ambience for pursuing your quest for wholeness. Further, love is creative. Besides the obvious truth that love can lead to the creation of new lives, love brings forth all kinds of creative juices in lover and beloved. In the face of loss or profound injury, love heals in the form of comfort or forgiveness.

Our religious tradition strongly affirms the value of love. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18) was identified by Jesus (and many rabbis) as the second-most-important commandment in the entire Law of Moses, which included 613 laws. Jesus’ own teaching is reported in the Gospel of John: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this ev-

everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). For humans, to love each other as Jesus loved is a beautiful but usually unattainable ideal. Paul's first letter to the Christian community in the Greek city of Corinth offers this more practical, but equally memorable wisdom: "Love is patient; love is kind. . . . It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends" (1 Corinthians 13:4-8a).

Our tradition also teaches that God loves us, and indeed that God is Love. The faithful love of God is etched into every page of the Bible. Even so, it is very difficult for a person to accept that teaching if the person's life is marred by neglect, violence, and abuse. The second section of this book will discuss how people can find the loving hand of God even in the turmoil and tragedy of life. In this chapter we are considering the human interactions that are indispensable elements of our quest for wholeness.

Unconditional love is precious; it is also rare. If you perceive that you are loved unconditionally, you should not take it for granted. Appreciate it, and express your appreciation often to your beloved.

In the remaining pages of this chapter we will speak of the importance of love for people of all ages—and of the dangers of forgetting to express and appreciate love.

Young Children

The most worthy recipient of unconditional love is surely a newborn baby. Most parents welcome their children in a spirit of profound love and hope. Parents will do anything for their child. They want to protect and support that child, whatever happens. Mother and father both look on their child as someone who deserves to be loved, to be cared for. Parents always wonder what will become of their child in life, and always they hope for the best. They know that love is indispensable for the present and future happiness of their child.

Even so, because of circumstances faced by their parents, some babies are born unwanted or barely tolerated. The chances of their ever growing to wholeness are limited from the outset.

Even children who are born into a loving environment sometimes suffer from deprivation before they have lived many months. Many babies cry a lot; babies demand attention and make their demands known in ways that try any parent's patience. At the same time, parents' energy is often consumed by adult preoccupations, interests, and tensions. Problems might arise from an unhappy relationship between the parents; sometimes one or even both parents never accept responsibility for the child, never offer the love the child needs. When a mother or father suffers from depression in the weeks following the birth of a child, the child may instinctively experience a deficit in the required emotional attachment unless the other parent makes up for the shortfall.

Love deficiency for young children is sometimes the result of fears related to money in a society that advertises luxury but rewards primarily those who are clever, industrious, and entrepreneurial. The problem might arise from exhaustion, as both parents must work long hours to preserve even a modest lifestyle and now have a child to care for in addition. Or the problem might be "success," as parents who have been eager participants in the marketplace want to continue enjoying the adult leisure activities to which they have become accustomed.

Young children sometimes grow up feeling that their parents consider them a nuisance. The parents "have no time" for their child. They are more involved in other issues than wiping runny noses or marveling at butterflies. When such children instinctively try to attract attention, their behavior begins to be described as problematic or uncontrollable. What they really want is love.

One of the resultant problems in schools, surprisingly, is violence in kindergarten. Many people react with incredulity to that assertion, but these are the children who are using foul language, hitting and biting other children, throwing sand or heavier class-

room objects, and kicking teachers. That is violence. It is less lethal than violence in high school, but it presages later escalation. Some parents come with their children on the first day of kindergarten and say to the teacher: "I hope you can do something with him, because we can't control him." Sometimes parents of young children describe emotionally-charged conflicts with each other and then express surprise that their child has been suspended from school for behavioral offenses in kindergarten. Shockingly often, adults express regret that they ever decided to become parents. Many children feel inadequately loved in their first three or four years of life. No one should be surprised when children living in such situations explode into violent behavior at an early age, and as adults endure lives characterized by cruelty and abuse.

First and most important, children need to be accepted and loved unconditionally. Young children need to know in their hearts that they are loved, *no matter what they do*. This is by no means to say that they should be allowed to do anything they want. Such wanton permissiveness is an indication of neglect rather than love. Good discipline is defined as "setting limits with love." There will be more comment on this issue in the chapter on freedom as an element of wholeness.

It is essential that children feel a strong sense of being loved in their families; if they do not, the damage to their personalities may be almost irreparable.

Adolescents

As young people mature they seek love and affirmation from people their own age even more than from their parents. Adolescents often agree that they act like different people when they are among their friends than when they are with their families. Some parents are offended that their school-age children care more about their friends than they seem to care about their parents' approval. This, however, is the reality of growing up.

Life at home still continues to play a large part in teenagers' self-understanding, not always for the best. Sadly, high school

students have been heard wistfully declaring, "I don't know whether my parents love me or not." They report that life at home is characterized by repeated demands and constant criticism, and sometimes by threats of physical violence or ejection from the home. When students say, "my father would kill me if I got pregnant" (and their mothers at meetings of parents report the same fear, using the same words), they are expressing a depth of apprehension that should not be dismissed. The result of such repeated utterances is an atmosphere in which it is very difficult for parents or children to express the unconditional love all people need.

Many are the adults who report that their parents, and especially their fathers, never expressed love for them in words. Many of these now grown offspring continue to be resentful toward one or both parents, especially if there was seriously harmful behavior associated with their upbringing. Many express the desire to do a better job of parenting than their parents did for them, but a great many young parents nonetheless continue the patterns they observed in their homes when they were children.

Other adults declare that they know their parents loved them, though the words were never spoken. "Actions speak louder than words. I know that my father loved me by the way he related to me all through my childhood." Those are the words of wise and fortunate people—but in current generations, it is still best if parents can make explicit, in words spoken to their children, the love that they believe their actions display.

Most parents would probably insist that they really do love their children deeply, despite the preoccupations and the criticism, despite their failure to express love in word and action, and even at times despite their frank dislike of the 'kind of person' their child seems to be. Some parents are even described by teachers as too supportive of their children, refusing to accept consequences for misbehavior, accusing teachers of unfairness, rejecting demands for responsible self-discipline. More will be said about this tension later, particularly in the chapter on free-

dom. The point of this chapter is simply that parents' deep underlying love must be expressed in word and action, repeatedly and endlessly, so that it becomes the dominant and obvious basis of their relationship with their children.

At the same time, young people should be encouraged to recognize their parents' love and good intentions and to accept responsibility for their behavior. It is not easy to ask a child to reverse a custom and express love for a parent, but parents who express their love in word and deed deserve to hear "I love you too" from their children. All of us need to know that we are loved, *no matter what we do*. No one can grow toward wholeness without feeling loved.

Adults

Adults, too, need to feel loved, and we need to express our love for the significant people in our lives repeatedly. Think about your own personal network of love. Appreciate the importance of love in your life, and express your love to the people who love you, often.

Unconditional love, though, is rare and precious. Many people in our society are motivated more by self-interest than by self-giving. The fact that so many relationships and marriages do not stand the test of time is a function of people's instinctive preference for their own concerns over the needs of their loved ones—who, usually, are equally devoted to taking care of themselves. People hurt each other in so many ways; sometimes the offenses are perceived literally as unforgivable. Unconditional love is most clearly tested and most clearly expressed in situations where forgiveness is required. "Will you continue to love this person, for better or for worse, no matter what happens?" Many who have been married for some years would no longer answer in the affirmative.

Is unconditional love possible? I believe that it is. If you are in a situation of being loved unconditionally, be glad and thankful. Never take it for granted. If you are so blessed, most likely

you do express your love often, in words and in action. If you have neglected daily opportunities to express your love for everyone in your household, take advantage of this moment of awareness and speak your love aloud.

Jesus urged us to build our quest for wholeness on the cornerstone of self-giving love and forgiveness. We will discuss his wisdom in more detail in the chapter about a consistent personal value system. The brilliant paradoxical insight of the Gospel is that we can best become ourselves by giving ourselves in love. Jesus' ministry and his death were examples in action of what he preached. His exhortation to generous lifelong love is truly radical, truly countercultural in our society. "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another" (John 13:35). In spite of the scorn of the modern marketplace, Jesus was right. Loving well, and knowing you are loved, are essential elements of human wholeness.

Reflection Questions

Each chapter will conclude with a series of questions. They can be used for personal reflection about the content of the chapter or for discussion with companions on the journey toward wholeness.

1. How would you describe the wholeness to which you aspire as a goal of life's journey? (Make your answer as wide-ranging as possible.)
2. Discuss the importance of expressing love, both in word and in action, to young children, adolescents, and adults whom we love.
3. Under what circumstances can parents' attempts to express love for their children be counterproductive?

4. What are the obstacles that prevent people from saying “I love you” right out loud? How can such obstacles be overcome?
5. Express the role of God, if any, in your personal efforts to be more loving in word and deed.

More reflection on the importance of love will be found in chapter 3, “A Consistent Personal Value System.”