

# Relationship as a Spiritual Path

Connie Myslik-McFadden

**M**y husband and I have a new puppy. He's an eight-month-old Bearded Collie named Max—a bundle of boundless energy, high intelligence, childlike curiosity, silken beauty, and an irresistible desire for human contact. When he runs, he flies over logs and streams, his long black-and-white hair streaming fluidly behind him. When he's sleeping, he looks like a furry raccoon rug. When he tilts his head, searching with eyes and ears to understand human language, he is the funniest looking dog I've ever seen! He's all heart—the embodiment of unconditional love. He brings us joy, and he serves as a mirror to the higher self qualities we long to express more fully in our own lives.

According to the Pathwork, a psycho-spiritual way of understanding and working with human development, difficulties, and transformation potential, we all have three essential higher self qualities: love, power, and serenity. (For more on Pathwork, visit [Pathwork.org](http://Pathwork.org).)

In their distorted forms, love becomes submission, power becomes aggression,



and serenity becomes withdrawal. These distortions are ways we learned in childhood to cope with whatever challenging circumstances we were faced with. The distortions mask the authentic self and belie feelings and needs that were not responded to with enough love and compassion. Children learn to pretend in order to be loved, cared for, and safe.

We all have the lower self qualities of fear, pride, and self-will as well. We want to deny these qualities in ourselves, as they don't quite fit into our ego's notion of what wonderful people should be. But they are there. Until we accept their presence within ourselves and work toward

understanding and transforming those qualities, they will continue to manifest in ways that cause trouble for us and in our relationships. This happens commonly through projection—we notice and are repelled by those awful qualities in others while being unconscious that they exist within ourselves. To the extent that we hate what we see in another, there's an excellent chance we are carrying that quality, unacknowledged, in ourselves. We may even

get perverse pleasure out of watching someone act out what we would never allow ourselves to do.

We humans live in a dualistic (me-and-them) world, yet we have a deep longing for personal wholeness and connection with others, for the bliss of the unitive state. We experience the unitive state for brief periods of time, i.e., during meditation, yoga, in nature, in ecstatic dance, in prayer, lengthy aerobic exercise, or sexual union. Yet we experience our isolation and separateness, painfully, more of the time. To live in union with life in all its forms as an ongoing state of being is only possible when we heal the split within ourselves.

Pathwork says, "Only the actual contact of one individual with another establishes the requisite conditions in the personality for true inner union" (*Surrender to God Within*, p. 17). This means that until we have reached a certain level of consciousness, we will inevitably attract to ourselves the people who demonstrate the qualities we most resist knowing within ourselves. Therefore, the people we react to most strongly can be seen as a gift and a mirror, affording us an opportunity to more deeply explore our own psyches. Only as we rise above holding to the two apparent opposites ("I'm kind, she's cruel," "I'm neat, he's a slob") with honesty and compassion, can the third option arise—the unitive state.

When I sit by the wood stove in the evening with Max resting his head on my slippered foot, I feel genuinely loving and peaceful. We are both in the unitive state. If my husband and I had chosen an aggressive dog for a pet, bred to guard or attack, we could have that kind of relationship with our dog. But while we might appear to be friendly, nonaggressive people, and think of ourselves that way, that choice would indicate one (or both) of us was carrying unacknowledged fear and aggression, which would be obvious in the dog's behavior toward others. We might deny it in the dog, or secretly find pleasure in the dog's powerful negative effect on people. The dog would be mirroring the lower self qualities we have denied in ourselves.

According to Pathwork and many other traditions, every relationship—with one's friends, partner, colleagues, children, dogs, horses, and people of every nation and persuasion—can be seen as a mirror and a path toward spiritual growth. When understood from that perspective, conflict can be welcomed as the learning opportunity it is. And the harmonious relationships we do have can affirm progress toward a higher level of integration and harmony within. ■

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