



The Discipline of Love

Richard Hames

WITHOUT THE DELIBERATE cultivation of love as method – in law, economics, technology and security, not just in families and faiths – we are unlikely to become a species that deserves to survive. This is not a call for everyone to be nicer. It’s a structural question: what happens when we treat love as an underlying constraint rather than a decorative sentiment?

Love as structure, not sentiment

We are conditioned to speak of love in the least consequential parts of our collective life. We use it freely in pop songs, spiritual homilies, and advertising copy. Politicians drop it into speeches about “loving our country” or “loving our way of life”, phrases that usually mean: defend our interests, fear the outsider, honour our dead above theirs.

By contrast, the arenas where decisions with lethal consequences are made – central banks, defence ministries, technology firms, trade negotiations – are expected to be scrubbed free of love. There, the operative words are security, efficiency, growth, stability, deterrence, competitiveness. Love is disregarded totally or dismissed as being either irrelevant or dangerously soft-headed.

This division is itself a design choice. It ensures that the deepest human impulse towards care is quarantined from the systems that most shape our shared fate.

If love is to be more than a background hum, we need to be precise about what we mean by it in this context. I’m not speaking of a passing emotion. I am speaking of a stance – a disciplined way of relating to others and to the world that shows up not only in gestures, but in the rules we write and the configurations we defend so tirelessly. In that sense, love has at least four recognisable features.

First, it widens the circle of moral concern. It pushes us beyond those who share our genes, our passports, our gods, our skin, our subculture. If my love is restricted to my own kind, it is indistinguishable from glorified self-interest.

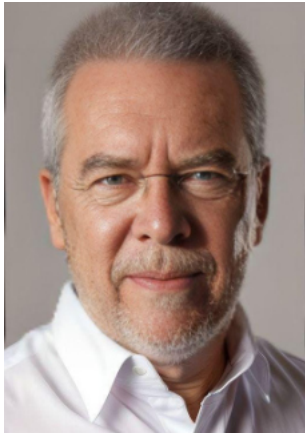
Second, it treats vulnerability as a claim, rather than a weakness to be exploited. To see someone exposed – by poverty, illness, age, status, geography – and to ask, “what can be taken?” is predation. To ask, “what must be protected?” is an expression of love.

Third, it refuses to make any category of person permanently expendable. There may be moments when individuals must be restrained, or wars fought in self-defence. But love never grants itself a blank cheque to erase whole populations from ethical consideration.

Fourth, it takes interdependence – what some traditions call *interbeing* – seriously. It understands that in a tightly coupled world-system, the attempt to secure “our” safety and prosperity by sacrificing “theirs” is, at best, a short-term illusion. Love recognises that the fates of Sderot and Rafah, Bondi and Baghdad, Kyiv and Khartoum, are not as separable as our banners might suggest.

If this is a workable sketch, then love of this kind is not the opposite of realism. It is realism pushed beyond the narrow confines of tribal memes and quarter-to-quarter returns. It insists that any analysis that writes off large segments of humanity as collateral is not only morally bankrupt but strategically unhinged in a world where the blowback from indifference is increasingly, inevitably, global.

The crucial point is that love of this kind does not live only in hearts. It is carried – or blocked – by the deep codes of a civilization: the stories it tells, the



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systems it builds, the habits it normalises. Cultures that preach universal compassion but enforce rigid caste hierarchies are not structurally loving. States that proclaim human rights while dumping refugees into deserts or seas are not structurally loving. Corporations that post solidarity hashtags while extracting data, labour and resources from the vulnerable without meaningful reciprocity are not structurally loving.

To make love matter politically is to ask, relentlessly: how are we building? What assumptions about whose lives count are hard-coded into our institutions? Where, in the circuitry of law, money, media and machines, does the refusal to treat anyone as expendable actually show up?

When love mutates into hate

At this point, a predictable objection arises. Is not love already central to our collective life? Do we not hear constant appeals to “love of country”, “love of our people”, “love of freedom”, “love of God”? We do. But much of what masquerades as public love is a different creature altogether. It is possessive love, defined less by care for the beloved than by hostility to the perceived threat.

Love of country that can only express itself through the denigration of foreigners is not love but anxiety dressed up as patriotism. Love of faith that requires the degradation of unbelievers is not devotion but identity addiction. Love of “our women and children” that motivates the bombing of other people’s women and children is not protection but a carefully harnessed hysteria.

Possessive love is profoundly useful to power. It generates cohesion in frightened populations. It creates a ready reservoir of rage that can be directed at enemies, internal and external. It fuses belonging with resentment in ways that make political manipulation easy and dissent dangerous. Generative love behaves differently. It’s rooted not in shared resentment but in shared vulnerability. It doesn’t need an enemy for its identity. It values the beloved – a place, a people, a tradition – not because they are superior, but because they’re alive. It can therefore extend itself without demanding sameness.

One of the perversities of our current world-system is that it systematically rewards possessive love while starving generative love of institutional oxygen. National anthems, military parades, and campaign rallies are choreographed around the first. The second surfaces in less photogenic settings: palliative care wards, migrant shelters, conflict-resolution circles, local disaster responses.

Ahmed’s¹ sprint on Bondi was an instance of generative love: a particular loyalty (to his family, his faith, his own survival) expanding in an instant to embrace strangers with whom he shared only a shoreline and an unthinkable predicament. The global machinery of commentary immediately tried to capture that act inside existing binaries: “a good Muslim” reassuring nervous white publics that the “bad Muslims” are a minority; an exhibit in

¹ Ahmed al-Ahmed, a drinks-vendor on Bondi Beach, Sydney, tackled a gunman and wrestled away a long-barrelled gun during the December 2025 antisemitic shooting attack.

arguments for or against multiculturalism; a data point in someone's op-ed.

What almost nobody wanted to explore was the uncomfortable implication that if love like that became commonplace, whole business models would fracture. It's hard to sustain an arms industry, a border-security complex, or an economy fuelled by outrage when enough people, across enough faultlines, refuse to see distant others as expendable. When Muhammad Ali refused to fight in Vietnam on the grounds that he had "no quarrel" with the people his government had named as enemies, it was not simply a private act of conscience; it exposed, to millions watching, the intimacy between racial injustice at home and imperial violence abroad. When dockworkers in different ports have refused to load weapons bound for regimes they regard as criminal, or when citizens have withdrawn their labour from oppressive systems at real personal cost, they have done more than make a moral gesture. They have briefly revealed what our political and economic arrangements most fear: that love, allied with refusal, can interrupt the smooth functioning of profitable cruelty.

So the work before us is not simply to exhort more love, in the abstract. It's to understand, and then redesign, the systems that currently transmute love of the particular into hatred of the other – and to ask what it would take to privilege generative love in the places where decisions are made.

Law, economics, and the architecture of care

Love becomes structural, or fails to, in the apparently dry domains of law and economics. These are the core operating systems through which a civilization decides what – and whom – it values.

Law, in most jurisdictions, is still dominated by a logic of punishment and deterrence. Harm is conceived primarily as a violation of the state's order. Victims are peripheral, offenders are processed, and communities are spectators. Retribution is easier to codify than to repair.

Yet wherever restorative and transformative justice practices have been tried – from Indigenous circles in North America and Australasia, to community courts in parts of Africa and Latin America – we glimpse a different grammar. Offenders are required to face those they have harmed. The question shifts from "what law was broken, and how do we punish?" to "who was hurt, and what must be done to make things as right as possible?"

Are such practices scalable beyond the local, beyond the small group? Can they function in societies marked by deep inequality and structural brutality? Or are they destined to remain niche experiments, comforting stories that make no dent in mass incarceration, militarised policing, and the routine disposability of the poor?

Similar questions arise in economics. The dominant model treats the planet as a warehouse, human beings as units of labour and consumption, and success as ceaseless extraction and expansion. Love enters, if at all, as philanthropy after the fact: a fraction of the gains recycled to mitigate the damage.

But there are, at the edges, other logics. Cooperative enterprises that distribute ownership and decision-making. Commons-based management of land, water and forests that assumes reciprocity between humans and the more-than-human world. Experiments with unconditional basic income that decouple survival from wage labour. Feminist and care-economy analyses that count unpaid care as central rather than peripheral. Do these constitute the embryonic forms of a structurally loving economy, or are they easily absorbed back into a system whose core metrics remain indifferent to anything that cannot be priced?

If law were rewritten with the primary aim of healing relationships rather than imposing exemplary suffering, and if economic arrangements were judged by how they treated the most vulnerable and the biosphere rather than quarterly returns, would we recognise those changes as expressions of love? Or would we need a different word entirely, because "love" has been so confined to private sentiment that we cannot apply it to budgets or treaties or policies without acute embarrassment?

I'm not certain. I do know that our choice of language is important. What seems clear is that without such re-coding, biblical calls to "love thy neighbour" will continue to coexist comfortably with structures that ensure the neighbour stays poor, over-policed, and disposable.

Love in technology and security

If law and economics are the skeleton of the world-system, technology and security are its rapidly mutating central nervous system. Here too, love is treated very much as an intruder and a nuisance.

Digital platforms are designed to maximise engagement, not understanding. Their algorithms

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have learnt that outrage, fear and humiliation are powerful adhesives. They bind us to our screens and to our tribes. Calls for violence travel far; patient explanation does not. In such an environment, even attempts to speak from a position of love risks being sucked into the polarisation machinery, misread as betrayal by one camp and weakness by another.

Could it be otherwise? Could we, in principle, build digital architectures that recognise and reward the discipline of love? Systems that slow us down before we share content that degrades whole categories of people. Interfaces that, upon detecting inflammatory topics, surface perspectives from those most affected rather than from the loudest pundits. Algorithms that diversify rather than narrow our informational diets when they detect that our feeds have become echo chambers.

Would such designs survive in a commercial environment that monetises addiction and conflict? Or would they need entirely different institutional homes: public-interest platforms, cooperative data trusts, communication infrastructures treated as commons rather than casinos?

Security doctrines present an even starker challenge. Most contemporary states still operate on the assumption that safety is achieved by deterring or overwhelming threats. Alliances, bases, nuclear umbrellas, surveillance networks, paramilitary policing: all are justified as necessary protections for “our” people against “theirs”.

The actual threats that now endanger our species – climate feedbacks, pandemics, runaway technologies, cascading state failures – don’t yield easily to traditional notions of defence. There is no missile shield against a destabilised monsoon. No aircraft carrier can intimidate a virus. Militarised borders are poor protection against the political consequences of mass displacement. In this context, what would a security doctrine shaped by a love of life rather than fear of the enemy look like?

It would start from the recognition that no society can remain secure on a sick planet or amidst oceans of human despair. It would treat investments in decarbonisation, public health, education, and conflict prevention not as “soft” spending but as primary defences. It would understand that humiliation is as combustible a substance as oil, and that policies which produce it in bulk – colonialism, occupation, indefinite detention, collective punishment, structural racism – are all forms of self-harm.

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It would not abolish armed forces overnight. But it would place strict ethical and strategic limits on their use, informed by the question: does this action reduce or deepen the long-term reservoirs of rage and grief in which future violence will germinate? Is such a reorientation remotely plausible within existing states, beholden as they are to national myths, industrial lobbies, and short election cycles? Or does a truly loving security paradigm require forms of governance we have barely begun to imagine?

Again, I have more questions than answers. What I am certain of is that a civilization which endlessly enhances its capacity to kill at scale, while underinvesting in the conditions that make killing less likely, cannot plausibly claim to be acting from love – no matter how often its leaders invoke the phrase “our people”.

The discipline and its costs

It is so beguiling, when speaking of love, to drift towards consolation. To imagine that if only enough of us attained the right inner attitude, the outer structures would gently realign. Unfortunately, this is not how systems work.

Structural love, if it’s to exist at all, will be expensive. If it sounds soft, that’s only because we have grown used to calling “realistic” any arrangement that offloads its pain onto people we don’t know. It will demand limits on extraction, on production, on consumption. It will require that some forms of power be relinquished rather than purely regulated. It will insist that certain activities – from the manufacture of specific weapons to the speculative trading of staples in a hungry world – are incompatible with any credible claim to care for life.

It will not always feel good. To practise love in this register is to accept losses: of privilege, of

convenience, of comforting illusions about our own innocence. It is to put ourselves, individually and collectively, in the way of suffering we would much rather not see. It's to make ourselves, like Ahmed on the beach, more vulnerable in the short term in order to honour a deeper commitment.

We're used to the idea of austerity for the poor. We are much less accustomed to restraining cruelty. What would it mean, in practical terms, to decide that hatred, humiliation and dehumanisation are no longer acceptable tools of politics or profit? It might look like capping not only carbon emissions, but also the reach of weapons systems and surveillance technologies. It might look like subjecting inflammatory media and political messaging to the same kind of public-health scrutiny we apply to addictive substances. It might look like restructuring work so that more people have the time and security to care – for children, elders, neighbours, land – rather than outsourcing care to underpaid others while we chase abstractions.

None of this will emerge spontaneously from a market or a bureaucracy optimised for speed and scale. It will require deliberate, sustained, and deeply contested choices. That's why I speak of the discipline of love. It's not a mood, but a practice under pressure.

Love, extinction, and worthiness

In "Beyond the Kill Zone"² I described humanity as a threatened species, menaced as much by its own systems as by any external foe. Here the question sharpens. Survival is not just a technical problem. It's a moral one. It's entirely possible to imagine a future in which a fraction of humanity survives in fortified enclaves, protected by automated weaponry and artificial intelligences, while vast zones of the planet become sacrificed areas for the unwanted. That scenario would, in a narrow sense, count as "success" for those inside the walls. In effect, it would amount to a Faustian bargain: continued existence in exchange for the deliberate abandonment of most of our own kind.

Love, in the structural sense I have been sketching, is one way of naming the refusal to accept such a bargain. It is the insistence that survival bought at the price of mass disposability is a form of failure. It is the quiet but implacable demand that any future we dare to call viable must be one in which fewer, not more, lives are written out of the circle of concern.

This is not a utopian standard. It is a minimal one. Without it, all our talk of human rights, of progress, of lessons learnt from past atrocities, is little more than civilized noise over the machinery of elimination.

We don't know whether we have left ourselves enough time to re-design our world-systems around such a discipline. We cannot know whether the fracture lines we have already carved – between classes, races, religions, nations, humans and the rest of life – can be healed faster than they are being widened. It's entirely possible that we will choose differently, and that our story will end as a cautionary tale told by no one. Taking love seriously as a design constraint is simply one way of refusing to make that outcome inevitable.

What we do know, however, is that acts like Ahmed's on the sand are not anomalies in the human story. Across cultures and epochs, people have thrown themselves between strangers and danger; shared food in famine; sheltered those marked for death; refused to torture even when ordered, or when vengeance would have been socially sanctioned. These are not statistical blips. They are data points from another civilizational possibility: one in which love is not confined to the private, the sacred or the sentimental, but is allowed to inform the blueprints of how we live together.

Whether we will choose that possibility at sufficient scale, and in time, remains an open question. But if we do not, then whatever finally brings our story to an end – heat, hunger, pathogens, machines, or some combination thereof – will only be finishing a work of extinction we began in our own hearts when we decided that some lives were expendable.

None of this presupposes a world without conflict, crime or war. It presupposes only that we stop treating vast categories of people as acceptable fuel for our prosperity and security. I'm certainly not arguing that billions of individuals must suddenly become morally exemplary. I am arguing that we can, if we choose, stop building systems that reward the opposite of what almost every tradition calls our better instincts.

I know that from a certain angle, all of this will sound impossibly idealistic. But it's worth asking who benefits when seriousness is defined as the art of working around cruelty rather than any effort to reduce it. The discipline of love doesn't guarantee our survival. It does, however, offer one clear test of our worthiness to survive.

² richarddavidhames.substack.com/p/beyond-the-kill-zone