I picked up the book *Perfect Love, Imperfect Relationships: Healing the Wound of the Heart* by John Welwood with a great deal of trepidation as visions of the many self-help titles I have read over the years danced maniacally in my head. I glanced to my right to see shelves full of those very same titles—old, yellowed books read once, shelved, and forgotten—as I looked for the next title that I knew would be my salvation.

Immediately this book struck me as different from the rest. Welwood (2006) addresses this difference when he says that most self-help books offer helpful techniques for fixing relationships that turn out to be patches that soon fall off because they fail to address the root of human conflict and misunderstanding. He explains that, unlike other self-help books, his book addresses “our wounded relationship to love itself” (p. 4). In simple yet eloquent prose, he introduces what he calls “*the mood of unlove,*” which he describes as “a deep-seated suspicion most of us harbor within ourselves that we cannot be loved, or that we are not truly lovable, *just for who we are* [emphasis in original]” (p. 4). Our insecurity about love makes trusting in ourselves, others, or life itself difficult. Many of us disconnected from love during childhood when, in our family of origin, we did not feel fully “embraced or accepted” (p. 9) for who we are. We carry the affects of this “dissociation” or “turning away from pain” (p. 10) for the rest of our lives. Welwood goes so far as to say that all the horrors and beauty on earth arise from the same root: the “presence or absence of love” (p. 11). He believes that apart from a few neurological disorders and biochemical imbalances the DSM could begin: “Herein are described all the wretched ways people feel and behave when they do not know that they are loved” (p. 12).

Welwood believes that the human propensity to harden the heart against hurt and turning away from love creates the fear that gives rise to setting up an “*other*—someone or something over against myself—and then making this other wrong” (p. 14). We end up with a “*mind-set of grievance*” (p.14) that pits me against you, them against us, as we continue to look for love in all the wrong places. He says we will not find what we seek in others, “in our imperfect relationships with imperfect people who are wounded like we are” (p. 18). Thus, Welwood suggests that “war arises from grievance against others, and that the grievance is rooted in our love-wound—which we blame on others, taking it out on them” (p. 13). His book lays out a path for understanding and healing this core human issue. He reminds us that healing is not about fixing something that is broken because love, which he defines as “a potent blend of openness and warmth, which allows us to make real contact, to take delight in and appreciate, and to be one with-ourselves, others, and life itself” (p. 7), is our essential nature.

The author draws on examples from clients, students, and his own journey to demonstrate how we can come to terms with our own woundedness. Many of the exercises, which are presented at the end of the book so as not to interrupt the reading of the chapters, involve feeling-into our experience. Welwood suggests a four-step process: *acknowledge* sensations in the body touching them with awareness; *allow* the feeling to be there; *open* to the feeling directly; *enter* into the core of the feeling, softening into it, and becoming one with the feeling.
and not separate from it. This process and many exercises in the book guide the way to letting ourselves be fully the beings that we are and realizing that we are already loved and loveable exactly as we are.

In the chapter entitled Holy Longing, Welwood (2006) offers a perspective on desire that I found refreshing. Most of us grow up with a troubled relationship with our desire for love. Because of early conflicts, many of us grow up denying our need for love while, at the same time, love is the thing we most desire. Welwood says that we cannot receive love from any source unless we can “open to the raw and tender experience of wanting it” (p. 121). Desire is a “radiant heat” (p. 125) that reaches out and connects us with life itself. The “pure energy of desire, if experienced directly, without straining for fulfillment, [has] a luminous radiance and beauty of its own. It is the juice of life itself” (p. 126). Desire only becomes problematic when it fixates on something outside of us and seeks its fulfillment in someone else, causing us to lose our touch with our vital center. Welwood explains that the key to making friends with our wanting is to concentrate our “attention within the energy of desire itself, rather that on trying to control the object of desire or extract fulfillment from it” (p. 127). In letting ourselves experience our own desire to be loved, we open our hearts to receiving love. Even more than receiving love as if it comes from a source outside of us, we experience our own heart center as the perfect love we seek. “To know that you are loved, then, is to know that you are love” (p. 147).

Though the focus of this book is healing our relationship with love itself, the final chapter of this book touches on how healing our own wound of the heart can affect our way of being in the world. Welwood (2006) suggests that our birthright, as human beings, is “direct access to perfect love, and our privilege is to serve as a channel through which it flows” (p. 139). Receiving and giving, the inhalation and the exhalation of love, are both essential. The more we know we are loved as we are, the more capable we are of loving others as they are. “Letting the sun of absolute love shine upon us … ripens our capacity to embody unconditional love in the world around us” (p. 154).

This book was a pleasure to read. I also found myself challenged by the ideas presented. I faced my “mood of unlove” and how it affects my interactions with others. Welwood’s (2006) compassionate and heartfelt writing style is a strength when covering material that is as provoking and triggering as facing our deepest fears about love can be. Because the material may be challenging for many people, I feel this book could be a beneficial addition to psychotherapy; a book that therapist and client could read together, explore, and grow into. I also believe this book would be beneficial to anyone wishing to be a more loving and compassionate presence on this earth. This book will not be forgotten on my bookshelf but will continue to be an influence in my daily life.

The Author

John Welwood, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist, author, and teacher. He has published more than 50 articles and several books including: Journey of the
Heart, Love and Awakening, Toward a Psychology of Awakening and Ordinary Magic. Currently, Welwood leads workshops that integrate Western psychology and Eastern spiritual wisdom.

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