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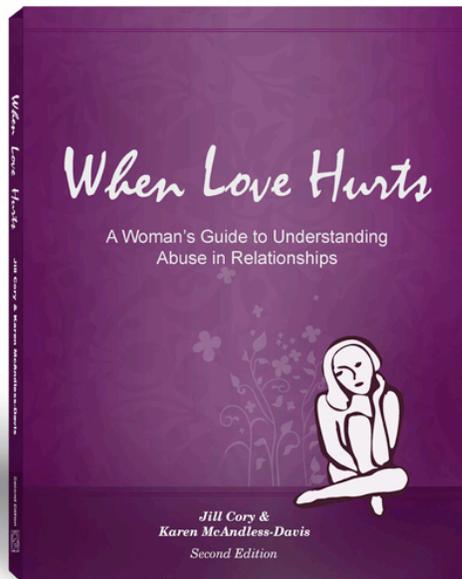
When Love is like God — Fiona Calder

I do not normally stand at the front and do the sermon. But inside of me is a child called Preacher Girl and she has been giving me hassle lately about wanting to preach her stuff. You may have run into her in my emails or when you’ve sat down for a cup of tea with me. She’s not necessarily intellectual, but she is passionate about what she believes to be truth.

Preacher Girl’s talk today is a snippet from my quest to discover more of what Love really is and what it is not.

I’ve been on this adventure to find what Love is for many years—and I’m still on it. Throughout my life, I have experienced several complex, destructive relationships. Within each of those relationships, people were convinced that their words and actions toward me were motivated by 'love'. In fact, much harm was done to me in the name of 'love', and it scrambled my brain, making it impossible for me to trust Love or even to be able to identify what is loving and what is not.

Knowing about my search to better understand what the true nature of Love is, I was invited last spring to take part in a 10-week course facilitated by MCC for women in abusive relationships. It used a book called *When Love Hurts*. The authors, Jill Cory and Karen MacAndless-Davis, had personal experience of abuse and had also supported and counseled women for many years.



Here's something they discovered that the research had uncovered. When a woman is in an abusive partnership with a man, as varied as the circumstances are, there are three main characteristics of a man who abuses his partner.

He believes himself to be

- **Superior**
- **Central**
- **Deserving**

If the man considers himself **superior**, then by definition his partner must be **inferior**. If his needs are **central** in the home and relationship, then her needs are **peripheral**. And if he is **more deserving**, then she must be **less deserving**. In fact, he often believes that she should serve him. The authors call this mindset the '*Power and Control Belief System*'.

In contrast, respectful partners are interested in a '*Relationship Belief System*'. Researchers found that this relational mindset was often the characteristic of the woman attached to the abusive man.

In her relationship the abused woman is looking for

- **Equality**
- **Mutuality**
- **Connection**

Indeed, this is really so. By and large the abusive man's partner would like for him to treat her as his **equal**. She longs for **mutuality** in the relationship—give and take, caring for each other's needs and wants. Finally she longs for **connection**—that they will be able to share their lives deeply together with bonds of trust and respect, and joint decision-making.

Looking at these lists and reflecting on them had a huge impact on me. I chewed on them and meditated on them over and over, trying to understand what they meant for my relationships. Gradually it dawned on me that this went way beyond human relationships, and I saw in the list of the characteristics of the abuser, that here was the god I had once believed in.

I had been taught that He was **superior** and I was **inferior**—very much inferior, grovelingly inferior—for He was Creator and I was a mere mortal. Even my little moments of goodness were like filthy rags to him. I was evil from conception. What a wretched sinner I was!

He was **central** to everything in life and death and I was **insignificant**; less than a worm or a flower of the field that lasts but a moment and then is gone. I had to sacrifice all my needs and wants, laying them down in order to look up to Him and only Him. I must decrease, He must increase. Less of me, more of Him.

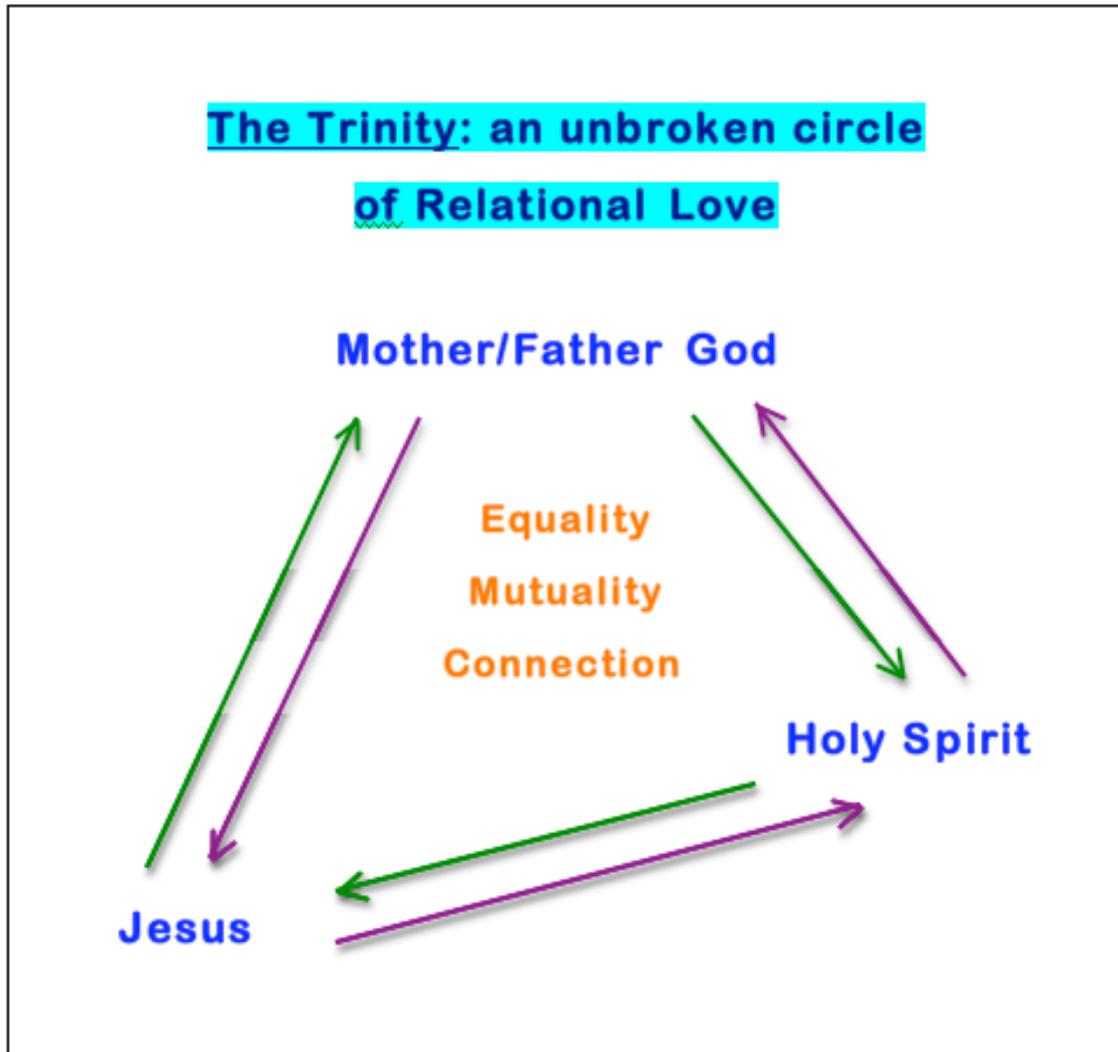
He was **deserving** of all praise and worship and every breath in my body, and I was **unworthy**. I was to serve Him with absolute obedience all the days of my life. God forbid that I should do anything without asking Him first, or that I should question Him about anything. I must treat Him with undying reverence and forfeit all, for the joy of serving Him.

And so here was the god that I gave allegiance to for the bulk of my life. It was what I'd been taught. He was **Superior, Central, and Deserving** ... I was **inferior, insignificant, and unworthy**. Dare I say it? He was an abusive god, and actually not a god of love at all.

In fact, in churches and communities (no matter what religious affiliation they have) where this kind of a god is worshipped, abusive behaviour will not only be tolerated, but it will be sanctioned. The abused are asked to 'suck it up' and religious jargon is applied to justify the abuse. Throughout my lifetime, spiritual abuse has been rampant in my opinion. I have seen it throughout Christendom. Honestly, it's a tragic reflection of the

god that we are serving ... and he is not the God of Love at all.

However, when I looked at the list of the characteristics of the respectful partner, it seemed to me that this was a description of the very Trinity Himself. This incredible relationship between the Father-Mother, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is a relationship of **Equality**, **Mutuality**, and **Connection**. Aha, now I'm getting it! It is a relationship of Love—yes, Perfect Love. And please note: *it is a relationship without hierarchy*.



What if...?

You know that great commandment: love your neighbour as you love yourself (found in Matthew 22:36-40)? Well, it occurs to me:

- ✚ What if it's not just something for us humans to attain to, but what if it's a picture of how God already loves and how He wants us to mirror Him?

- ✚ What if He loves His neighbours (me and you) as much as He loves Himself?
- ✚ What if how He loves Himself in the Trinity is exactly how He loves humankind?

I can hardly take it in! *The Godhead loves me as much as He loves Himself.* That **equality**, **mutuality**, and **connection** defining Love within the Trinity applies to His relationship with each of us.

One of the facilitators at the group I attended commented that we become like the God that we worship, or as John Van Vloten mentioned the other day in his sermon on Transformation, we become like what we love.

My journey of discovering who God is and what Love is expands as I embrace what I learned on my course. It also challenges me since I can surely see myself at times in the list of characteristics of the abusive partner. The moment I try to exert control over another individual, or to promote myself above someone else; the moment I fall back on hierarchy in my arguments, when I consider myself more deserving than another, or I consider my needs more important than theirs, that's when I am departing from Love.

What a narrow path we walk! The reality is that we are all in relationship with spiritually and emotionally unhealthy people, and we ourselves are only slowly growing in True Love.

What an incredible God we have attached ourselves to! What an amazing, outstanding God He is! Of course He is **superior** to us, He is **central** to the universe and beyond, and He is **deserving** of all that we are and all that we have. Of course He is! He's Creator and He's so big and so fine and so pure.

BUT here's the extraordinary truth about Him. *He is Love, and He is nothing but Love. There is no part of Him which exists outside of Love.* (As John captured it so succinctly in 1 John 4:16: "God is Love.")

God demonstrates perfect Love within Himself through the Trinity. And that is the hallmark of the relationships into which He invites us. He treats us as His **equal**, as **mutually** giving and receiving, and He loves to be **connected** with us. *He loves us as He loves Himself!* He seats us beside Himself in heavenly places on heavenly thrones. He shares His wisdom freely with ALL who ask for it. He wants us to freely love Him and He loves to love us back. He discriminates against no one. He calls us His friends and even His Beloved.

I am His and He is mine.
O, the mystery of Love!

So now I know better what to look for in my relationships. I can identify more clearly when a person is being loving towards me and when they are not. Their attitude and behaviour toward me tells me where they are at on their journey. And by the same token I can measure where I'm at on my journey by how I think of and treat others.

You could say I am fixated on Love. It is my passion and my deepest desire to know Love and to be known by Love.

I believe that Love is the crux of the gospel.
Love is the purpose of humankind.
Love is the essence of life.
God is Love and I was created to love like He loves.
It's as simple as that.

Thank you for listening to Preacher Girl. She's been bursting to share what she has learned. She wants you to know that this great big God we've been talking about is a sucker for children like her, whether they live in grown-ups like me or are real live small people! ... He just can't help Himself; He truly loves them. He has loved my sweet little inner cherubs and He has loved my despicable inner Gollums. I am utterly loved by Him. And so are you.

I shrink back when I think of the abusive god I used to serve ... but now, everything within me can dance with whoops and somersaults and uncontainable joy when I think about the God of Love. This God of Love is Whom I have come to know and trust. This is Who I now run to rather than from. This is Who is transforming Fi, simply by loving her.

Knowing God means knowing Love.
If I do not know Love, I do not know God.
God is Love.

Love is the soul's strongest passion. It is the most powerful motivator.
We are shaped by what we love. We become like what we love.

-- *Saint Francis de Sales*