

# The Holy No

## Love Sets Limits

A subtle form of what's been called "toxic positivity" may lurk in the culture of spirituality. Looking over this diverse figurative landscape, we might see normal emotional responses and healthy boundaries and limits being vigilantly called out as unloving, selfish, judgmental—as *negativity*. Certain kinds of feelings are denied or otherwise repudiated and bypassed, and as a result, some natural responses are squelched—if they were ever even considered—all in the name of positivity, of love, of *openness*! Hmm. Is the idea to be positive and loving toward all, or only toward others? Does openness have a direction?

Let's zoom out a little. What if the negativity here isn't actually inherent to the feelings themselves? We've all seen an animal become frustrated or angry, or assert its boundaries. But were they being *negative*? So, could our human guilt and self-recrimination around feelings like that actually be centered in our *renunciation of them*? As unspiritual, less evolved, just plain not okay..?

Let's consider that true openness—unconditional love—allows and even welcomes *all* feelings. Setting aside action and reaction for the moment, instead of resisting or denying, say, anger, perhaps we could greet that feeling as something natural, as just one momentary facet of the All-That-Is. Our uncomfortable feelings might be a kind of inner alarm going off, or they might be like a tired child who just needs a little love. But *whatever* may prompt them, in and of themselves, our feelings are simply a form of information—just data about what's going on for us. It's possible—it's really healthy, actually—to listen to what they're saying, or just to feel them, without any self-indulgent acting out.

Yet it's *also* possible, and really healthy, to not preemptively block certain *responses* to feeling data. Like the simple act of saying 'no'. How did this become so spiritually fraught?

I have more questions. What the heck is up with our idea of unconditional love, if it asks us to reject these feelings or responses in ourselves? Besides, when you really look at what's being attempted here, is it even *possible* that we could selectively renunciate our way to a conceptual ideal of unconditional *openness*? I think not! And I invite you to explore with me what *being* openness-in-action might look like. After all, feelings happen. Responses arise. And sometimes, love itself says 'no'.

Yes, as any parent of a toddler hitting their baby sibling with a toy tractor could tell you, sometimes the highest available expression of love *for all parties* is the timely delivery of a firm *No*. If the child's caregivers try to teach with only "positivity," and without clearly interrupting the behavior, the needs of both kids will not be met.

And in adult life, as in early childhood, when healthy boundaries are ignored or trampled, a timely and loving *reproach* might well make the difference between someone's continued unskillful fumbblings, and an avenue opening into self-awareness and growth. In fact, saying a No like *that* might be the most powerfully positive, startlingly \*open\* option available. (Paradoxical? You bet! Deliciously so.)

Yes, as adults, most of us are familiar with the experience of getting repeatedly whacked with that metaphorical plastic tractor. And as spiritually inclined adults, we're probably well-versed in teachings emphasizing acceptance, tolerance, understanding, and self-reflection over reactivity—all beautiful. And.

*I see that the dear being whacking me repeatedly has a trauma history, and I feel such compassion. (\*whack\* \*wince\*)*

*I don't take this whacking personally; I know that it all happens for me, not to me. (\*whack\* \*grimace\*)*

*I wonder how I invited this experience. How do my patterns keep setting this up? (\*WHACK\*)*

Or simply:

*(\*whack\*) Ow! Well, I'm fine. Nobody's perfect. I won't say anything; I don't want to make them feel bad. (\*whack\*)*

Here's a novel consideration: Maybe the whacks are a call for boundaries! Or an invitation from the universe to learn to walk away. And/or maybe they're a call for support in the form of limits, from someone who does not know how to regulate themselves. In the name of all that is holy, say those Nos! Sometimes in words, as in *I'm not comfortable with that tone*, and sometimes in action, as in leaving a relationship.

The Holy No is a yes in 'no' clothing. For instance, we might stay in a relationship after it has stopped working for all sorts of noble and hopeful reasons, including not wanting to cause our partner pain. What we may fail to notice is that leaving turns out to be an affirmation: we've both done our best, and we can now graduate and expand into new possibilities. *Yes, I can claim harmony in my life. And yes yes yes, you my dear deserve to be in a relationship that works, and I see that's not going to happen with me.* Staying in an expired relationship is a kind of untruthfulness that may actually dishonor both parties.

Nobly neglecting our own emotional experience shrinks and limits our contribution in the partnership, and in the world. Putting the oxygen mask on yourself first might be a cliché, but it's true that if we're suffocating we won't be much help to

anyone else. It's also true that unless we're in an actual cabin pressure emergency, we might not notice the more gradual diminishment.

So avoiding a healthy No in the name of a belief or commitment to an ideal might reflect an enormous blank spot in our openness, a hole in our wholeness, as we cordon off and contend with a feeling or impulse, aiming to be deeper or vibrate higher, striving for personal growth. Perhaps the fullest expression of love is a kind of honesty and transparency, an acceptance of all, without and within, that is simply, truly, here.

From one view, in the rarefied space of the absolute, right here and now, all is well. There's a beautiful, paradoxical, perfectly imperfect unfolding of All-That-Is in progress, everywhere and at all times. Yes, even the really hard stuff: on some expansive level, it's just right. To paraphrase Byron Katie, we know that it's meant to be, because it's *happening*. And yet.

We humans also live on the relative level, in form. And a principle of collective growth or evolution suggests that children, elders, animals—all innocents—might be spared the challenges of abuse, wherever possible. For that matter, might unfortunate people caught in conditioned patterns and *perpetrating* abuse best be drawn out of those patterns, where possible? Could we hold *their* essential innocence in awareness as well, even as we intervene to stop the inappropriate behavior?

Within the expansive Truth of unconditional love, it's easy common sense to allow that on one level, there is indeed such a thing as inappropriate behavior. Most of us will agree on what it is, in most instances. And feelings might well arise in response to such behavior, like anger or pain. But there is no inherent requirement to assume a position of condemnation of the actor or even the action, in order to either feel our feelings, or acknowledge the inappropriateness. For others, as for ourselves, setting limits and maintaining guidelines are acts of love.

So, yes, I'm saying that trying to be nice or spiritual can be paradoxically limiting—even negative—while embracing our own darker feelings and learning to say 'no' when needed can let more light pour in!

These *Holy Nos* take many forms. Refusing an exhausting sounding birthday party invitation; giving voice to a creature discomfort, and so offering another a chance to care for us; walking away from mistreatment of every stripe, however clear the innocence of all involved—indeed, to honor and affirm the innocence of all involved!—these can all be seen as expressions of the overarching harmony, the universal YES: Yes to respecting and responsibly working within the natural limits of our own systems; Yes to the sovereignty of individuated beings and to healthy boundaries; Yes to transparency; Yes to honesty, authenticity, and presence; Yes to expansion into greater freedom and flow; yes, Yes, YES.

Saying *No* with compassion, in simple acceptance of the fullness of what's arising—*including within*—can be the highest expression of Love available. Don't let your best intentions rule out your best option. Open to the Holy No.

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