

Leo Tolstoy
Love One Another
1907

I should like at my leave-taking [1] (at my age, every meeting with one's fellows is a leave-taking) to briefly tell you how, in my perception, men should live so that our lives may not be evil and bitter, as it now appears to the majority of men, but may be what God wishes and what we all wish, namely, the blessed and glad things they ought to be.

Everything depends on how a man understands his life. If I take life to be the life given to me – John, Peter, or Mary – in my body, and believe that the whole aim of life consists in obtaining as much joy, pleasure, and happiness of all kinds as possible for this “me” – John, Peter, or Mary – then life will always be unhappy and embittered for everyone.

Life will be unhappy and embittered because all the things that one man desires to obtain for himself are also desired by every other man. Since each wishes to get for himself as much as possible of what is desirable, and since the desirable things are the same for all such people, it follows that there will never be enough to satisfy them all. Therefore, if each person lives for himself, each cannot avoid snatching from one another, fighting, and being angry with one another, and so everyone's life will be unhappy. Even if men sometimes get what they want, it never satisfies them; they try to obtain more and more, fear being deprived of what they have obtained, and envy those who have what they have not.

The lives of men can only be unhappy if they consider that the life of each one of them is in his body. And so it is now for all such people. But life should not be unhappy. Life is given to us as a blessing, and such we all understand life to be. But for life to be a blessing, men must understand that our real lives are by no means in our bodies, but in the spirits that live in our bodies. Our welfare consists not in pleasing our bodies and doing what they want, but in doing what our spirits desire. Our spirits are one and the same in us and in all men, and what those spirits desire is their own spiritual welfare. Since the spirit is the same in all men, it follows that the spirit desires the welfare of all men. To desire the welfare of all is to love men, and to love men is a thing no one and nothing can hinder. The more a man loves, the more his life gains in freedom and in joy.

This shows that, however much he may try, man is never able to satisfy his body, because what that body wants cannot always be obtained. Or, if it is obtainable, it entails strife with others. It is, however, always possible to satisfy man's soul, for the soul only needs love, and one need not strive with anyone to love. Not only need one not strive with others, but on the contrary, the more one loves, the more one is united with other people. Nothing can hinder love. The more any man loves, the more he becomes happy and joyous, and the more happy and joyous he makes other people.

That, dear brothers, is what I wish to say to you at leave-taking. It is what all the saints and sages, including Jesus, and all the wise men of the world have said: that our lives are miserable because we make them so, and that the Power that sent us into life, which we call God, did not send us here that we might be tormented,

but that we might have the very blessedness we desire. We fail to get that predestined blessedness only when we misunderstand life and fail to do what we ought.

We complain of life and say it is badly arranged, and do not consider that it is not life that is badly arranged, but it is we that act amiss. This is as though a drunkard were to complain that he got drunk because there were so many beer-houses and gin-palaces. The truth is that there are so many beer-houses and gin-palaces simply because there are so many drunkards like him. Life is given to men as a blessing, if they would but use it as they should. If only people lived not by hatred of one another, but by Love, life would be an unceasing blessing for all.

Now on all hands it is constantly said that life is evil and unfortunate because it is badly arranged, and that if we but changed the bad arrangement for a good one, our lives would be good.

Dear brothers, do not believe it! Do not believe that your lives can be made good or bad by this or that arrangement. I will not dwell on the fact that all those who are busy planning a better life disagree and quarrel among themselves. Some propose one arrangement, considering it to be the best; others say that that arrangement is the very worst, and that the only good one is the one they offer; a third group rejects this proposal also, and offers its own as the best, and so on. But even if there is a best kind of organization, and even if we agree that the best organization has been found, how are we to get people to live according to that organization, and how is it to be maintained when people are accustomed to living badly and prefer to do so? Whatever we undertake we spoil, but we say we shall begin to live well when things have been well ordered. But how can the order be good, when the people are bad?

Even if there were some very best organization of life, yet people would have to become better to obtain it. But you promise to lead a good life when, in addition to your present evil life, you have striven against people, coerced them, and even killed them in order to introduce that good order. That is saying you promise a good life when you yourselves have become worse than you are now.

Do not believe this! Do not believe it, dear brothers! There is but one way in which life can become good, namely, by men themselves becoming better. And when men are better, life will arrange itself in the way proper for good people.

There has long existed among men an illusion to the effect that a good life may be arranged for bad people by good regulations, which is like making good bread out of bad wheat. This illusion has done much harm, and still does harm. Formerly, this illusion was only propagated by the governing classes. They tried (or at least said they tried) and still try by means of various kinds of coercion – taking property, imprisoning, and executing – to make a peaceful and good society out of evil people. And now the Revolutionaries try to do the same, and call upon you to share in their attempt.

Dear brothers, do not succumb to this illusion! Let the rulers, czars, ministers, policemen, and officials do their evil deeds. But you, who have kept clean from it until now, try to remain clean. And in just the same way, try to be clean from participation in those deeds of violence to which the Revolutionaries invite you. Your salvation, and that of all men, lies not at all in the sinful

coercive ordering of life, but in the ordering of your souls. Only by that – by ordering his soul – can each man obtain both for himself and for others the greatest blessing and the best organization of life that men can desire. True blessedness, such as each human heart seeks, will be granted to us, not in some future organization of life maintained by violence, but now, to all of us, everywhere, at every moment of life, and even at death. And it is obtained by Love.

That blessedness has been given to us from the beginning, but men neither understood nor accepted it. Now, however, a time has come when we can no longer refuse it because, in the first place, the disorder and suffering of our lives are becoming unendurably painful, and secondly, the teaching of Jesus, becoming more and more revealed to us, has now become so clear that, for our salvation's sake, it is no longer possible for us to avoid acknowledging and accepting it. Our salvation now lies in this one thing: in acknowledging that our true Life is not in bodies but in that spirit of God that dwells in us. All those efforts which formerly we devoted to the improvement of our bodily lives, individual and social, we can and should devote to the one thing really necessary and important for man: the education and confirmation of Love by each man in himself – Love not only of those who love us, but as Christ said, of all men, and especially of those who are alien to us and hate us.

Our present lives are so far from this that, at the first moment, such a transference of all our efforts from cares for worldly affairs to the single, invisible, and unaccustomed affair of Love for all men seems impossible.

But it only seems so. Love of all men, even of those who hate us, is much more natural to the soul of man than strife with and hatred of his neighbors. Not only is a change in our understanding of the meaning of life in our day not impossible, on the contrary, what is impossible is to continue the embittered lives we now lead, all struggling against all. Not only is this change not impossible, but it alone can save men from the miseries they suffer, and therefore this change must inevitably come about sooner or later.

Dear brothers, why and for what end do you torment yourselves? Only recollect that the greatest blessedness is offered you, and accept it. It all rests with you yourselves. It is so easy, so simple, and so joyful!

Perhaps people who suffer and are poor and oppressed will say, "Yes, it may all be very well for the rich and powerful. It is easy for the rich and powerful to love their enemies, when they have those enemies in their power. But it is hard for us, who suffer and are oppressed." This is not true! Dear brothers, it is equally necessary for the ruling rich and the oppressed poor to change their understanding of life, and it is easier for the poor than for the rich. Without altering their position, the poor and oppressed need only abstain from deeds contrary to Love, and not participate in such deeds as the violence of the police and the army. Then, all this organization opposed to Love would collapse of itself. It is much more difficult for the rulers to accept and fulfill the teaching of Love. To fulfill that teaching, they would have to reject the snares that enthrall them – the snares of power and

riches – and this is harder. The poor and oppressed have only to refrain from engaging in new forms of violence, and especially from taking part in the old forms.

As man develops, so does humanity develop. The consciousness of Love has grown and still grows in it, and has so grown in our day that we cannot help seeing that it must save us and become the basis of our life. Today's events are but the last dying convulsions of a life that was violent, evil, and loveless.

Even now it cannot but be plain that all these struggles, all this hatred, all these coercive arrangements, and this maintaining of Powers and Government of various people are a meaningless deception, leading only to ever-increasing calamities. And it cannot but be clear that the sole, the simplest, and the easiest salvation from all this lies in admitting the basic source of the Life of all men to be Love – that source which inevitably, without any effort, replaces the greatest evil with the greatest blessedness.

There is a tradition that the Apostle John, having reached extreme old age, was completely absorbed in one feeling, which he always expressed in the same words, saying, "Children, love one another." This was the expression of one man's old age, the expression of life that had reached a certain stage. And just so, on reaching a certain stage, the life of humanity should express itself.

It is so simple and so clear. You live – that is, you are born, mature, grow old, and die. Is it possible that the aim of your life can be in yourself? Certainly not. "How then?" man asks himself.

"What then am I?" And the only answer is this: I am something that loves. At first it seems that I am something loving only myself. But one need only live a little and think a little to see that to love the self, which passes through life and dies, is impossible and purposeless. I feel that I ought to love, and I love myself.

However, loving myself, I cannot but feel that the object of my love is unworthy of it. Yet not to love is impossible for me. In Love is Life. What is to happen? To love others – one's neighbors, friends, and those who love us? At first it seems that this will satisfy the demands of Love. But all these people are, in the first place, imperfect, and secondly, they change and, above all, they die. What is one to love? The only answer is this: Love all, love the source of Love, love Love, love God. Love, not for the sake of the loved one, nor for oneself, but for Love's sake. It is only necessary to understand this, and at once all the evil of human life disappears, and its meaning becomes clear and joyful.

"Yes," people say, "that would be well. What could be better? It would be well to love and live for Love, if all would live so. But how can I live for Love, and give my all to others, while others live for themselves and for their bodies? What will become of me, and not of me alone, but of my family and of those I love and cannot help loving? Love has long been talked about, but no one follows this advice, and it is impossible to follow it. To yield one's life to Love would only then be possible if all men suddenly, by some miracle, changed their worldly, bodily life for a spiritual, divine life. But the miracle does not occur, and therefore it is all impractical talk." So say those who soothe themselves in their false, accustomed ways of life. They say this, but in the depth of their souls they know they are wrong. They know these reflections to

be untrue. They are untrue because only for the advantage of our worldly, bodily lives is it necessary that people should all suddenly change their lives. But it is not necessary for the spiritual life: the Love of God and man.

Love does not give blessedness to man by its consequences. Love itself gives blessedness quite independently of how other people act and, in general, independently of all that takes place in the outside world. Love gives blessedness in that man, when loving, unites with God, and not only desires nothing for himself, but wishes to give all he has, and his life itself, for others. It is in surrender of himself to God that he finds his welfare. Therefore, all that others do, and all that goes on in the world, can have no influence on his conduct. To love means to yield oneself to God and to do what God wishes. God is Love – that is to say, He wishes the welfare of all, and therefore cannot wish man to perish, and this Love fulfills His law.

Only the loving man does not perish among the non-loving. Or, if he perishes among men, as Christ perished on the cross, then his death is joyful to himself and important for others – not despairing and insignificant, as is the death of worldly people. So the excuse that I do not yield myself to Love because not everyone does the same, and that I should be left alone, is both incorrect and bad. It is as though a man, who ought to work to feed himself and his children, were not to begin working because others were not working.

Yes, dear brothers! Let us devote our lives to strengthening Love in ourselves, and let us allow the world to go as it will – that is, as is ordained from above. Let us act so, and believe me we shall then receive the greatest blessedness for ourselves, and do all the good to others that it is possible for us to accomplish.

It is so simple, so easy, and so joyful! Only love everyone. Love not only those who are affectionate, but love all as Christ taught us, especially those who hate. Then life will become an increasing joy, and all the questions that erring men so vainly seek to solve by violence will not only solve themselves, but will cease to exist. "We know that we have passed out of death into Life, because we love the brethren. He who does not love abides in death. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him."

One word more, dear brothers. One cannot know whether anything is good or bad unless one tests it in life. If a farmer is told that it is good to sow rye in rows, or a beekeeper is told that it is good to use frame-hives, a reasonable farmer or beekeeper will experiment to find out whether what he has been told is true. And he will follow or not follow the advice, according to the degree to which his experiment succeeds.

So it is with the whole business of life. To surely know how far the doctrine of Love is applicable – try it!

Test it. Resolve for a certain period to follow the doctrine of Love in all things. In all things, live so as to remember, first of all, not to swerve from Love with every man – thief, drunkard, rough officer, or dependent. In the business you have with any man, to remember his need rather than your own. And having so lived for the appointed term, ask yourself: was it hard for you, and have you damaged or bettered your life? And in accord with the result of your

test, decide whether it is true that the practice of Love gives welfare in life, or whether that is so only in words. Test this. Instead of returning evil for evil to the offender, instead of condemning a man who lives badly behind his back, try to respond to evil with good, and say no evil of any man. Do not treat even a cow or a dog harshly, but treat them kindly and affectionately. Live in this way for a day, or two, or more, as an experiment and compare the state of your soul with what it was before. Perform the experiment, and you will see how, instead of a surly, angry, and depressed condition, you will be bright, merry, and joyous. Live thus for a second and a third week, and you will see how your spiritual gladness will grow and grow. Your work will not fall into disorder; instead, it will prosper more and more.

Only try this, dear brothers, and you will see that the doctrine of Love is not a matter of mere words, but is a reality – the nearest, most intelligible and necessary reality.

[1] Translator's note – This article, representing as it virtually does an appeal to all, originated in Tolstoy's desire to address a few parting words at the close of a series of meetings of local peasants held at the house of a friend of his in the neighborhood of Yásnaya Polyána during the summer of 1907. Hence, its character is that of an intimate and direct personal appeal.