

Trumpeter (1992)
ISSN: 0832-6193
A LOVING WAY OF LIFE

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Trumpeter

About the Author: *Arthur Gladstone* lives at 35 Saunders St., Portland, Maine 04103, Phone (207) 774-9186, and likes to correspond with people committed to projects such as those described here. He is a teacher, writer and group facilitator who encourages integrative approaches to understanding and change.

Yes, I believe a loving way of life is possible. We can appreciate and take care of one another, instead of ignoring, exploiting, or fighting one another. A loving way of life can bring us personal happiness and much more besides. It can help us resolve our social and environmental problems, the great suffering and destructiveness we see all around us. These are the direct result of our disconnected and alienated way of life, with endless competition among groups and among individuals, narrow and short-sighted views, increasing carelessness, coercive control, desperation, and violence.

A loving way of life is obviously not a new idea. Many people have talked about it in many different ways. Some version of it can be found in every religious tradition. But it goes against our usual ways of thinking and acting, so it is easily forgotten. We may need to be reminded.

We are born ready for loving connection with the people and everything else around us. For most of us, especially men, our impulses to connect are thwarted as we grow up. We learn to think and act as if we (or our special group) were quite separate from everyone and everything else. We discover many dangers around us and develop elaborate ways of protecting ourselves, psychological defenses, fear and avoidance reactions, ways to manipulate, threaten, and coerce others. We are expected and pressured to become independent, to learn to take care of ourselves, to earn our own livings, to find our own friends, to go our own way.

We need to become self-protective and self-reliant in order to survive in our society. But we tend to develop one-sided views, a collection of half-truths. Yes, there are many dangers around us —

but most of them have been created by humans and can be eliminated. Yes, we need to be able to take care of ourselves — but we can do so only partially; we need to recognize our interdependence and be able to take care of one another. Yes, we can be separate and alone — and we can also be lovingly connected, far beyond the relationships and involvements we now have.

Most of us struggle very hard to make decent lives for ourselves, to have food and shelter, good work to do, some friends, an affectionate partner, appreciation and companionship. This is often an endless, painful struggle and many of us don't achieve these no matter how hard we try. This is horrible, intolerable! A decent life is possible for all of us; we must find the way to make it so!

Helping to create a loving way of life has become my central concern. Many people have criticized our way of life; many people and groups are working for change. I am trying to help by developing "an integrative approach to change." I call it integrative because we need to work together and to join different groups and activities into a harmonious and interdependent pattern. The term also suggests that the process is to be guided by *integrative thinking*.

I distinguish integrative thinking from separative thinking. Separative thinking emphasizes differences and disagreements, while ignoring or denying relationships and connections. It tends to focus very narrowly, ignoring contexts and systems. It encourages adversarial attitudes, an Us vs. Them outlook, discouraging compassion and cooperation. Most of our social institutions and practices are based on separative thinking. Separative thinking is sometimes appropriate, as when dealing with certain kinds of danger.

Integrative thinking seeks connections and patterns. It puts together what belongs together, healing by making whole. It recognizes interdependence and encourages mutual aid. Separative thinking assumes that if I get ahead others must fall behind. Integrative thinking finds ways for us to benefit together. Separative thinking is fearful; integrative thinking is loving.

I am working on this through four related activities:

1. Trying to increase my understanding of separative and integrative ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, and to see their relation to our social institutions, our style of child-rearing, and other aspects of our culture. I am working on a detailed description of separative and integrative styles and their connections with other aspects of our lives.
2. Organizing an ongoing support group for integrative change. In this group we look at each person's personal and social concerns and what they are doing about them, working to develop more integrative ways of dealing with them. This means seeing the relation of the concerns to one another and to those of other people and also finding ways to collaborate more effectively. This requires increasing our awareness of separative tendencies, which are often quite automatic and hard to notice.
3. Consulting with individuals and groups who want to learn and apply integrative ways of thinking and acting.
4. I hope to help develop a community for integrative change. This may take a somewhat tribal form, with some people living together and others participating in other ways. The aim is a way of life based on interdependence. This means taking care of one another and being responsible (rather than careless or exploitive) participants in our local ecosystems and social systems. Providing a living example of such a way of life can be a powerful contribution to social change.

I hope you will respond to this. I want to share these tasks with others, the more the merrier. I also want comments, criticism, suggestions, information about related projects and groups, other people who may be in-terested, whatever you think may be helpful.

Citation Format

Gladstone, Arthur (1992) A LOVING WAY OF LIFE *Trumpeter*: 9, 3.
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