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# 8 RULES OF LOVE

JAY SHETTY

How to Find it,  
Keep it, and  
Let it Go

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# 8 RULES OF LOVE

How to Find it,  
Keep it, and  
Let it Go

JAY SHETTY

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New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

*To my mum, for teaching me how to love endlessly*

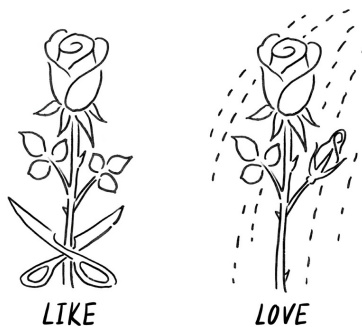
*To my sister, for teaching me how to love unconditionally*

*To my wife, for teaching me how to love actually*

# Introduction

“What is the difference between like and love?” asks a student.

The teacher responds, “When you like a flower, you pluck it. When you love a flower, you water it daily.” This frequently cited dialogue illustrates one of my favorite ideas about love. We are attracted to beauty—we long for it—and want it for our own. This is the flower that we pluck and enjoy. But attraction, like a cut flower, eventually withers, and we discard it. When attraction develops into love, it requires more care. When we want to keep a flower alive, we don’t cut it and put it in a vase. We give it sunlight, soil, and water. And it’s only when you care for a flower over time, doing your best to keep it alive, that you fully experience its beauty—the freshness, the color, the scent, the bloom. You notice the delicate detail on each petal. You watch it respond to the seasons. You find joy and satisfaction when a new bud appears and feel a thrill when it blossoms.



We are drawn to love as we are drawn to a flower—first by its beauty and allure—but the only way we can keep it alive is through consistent care and attention. Love is a daily effort. I want to develop the habit of love with you in this book. I’ll introduce you to practices, mindsets, and tools that will help you love in a way that brings daily rewards, season after season.

It has been said that the greatest pursuit of human life is to love and to be loved. We believe in love—it’s in our nature to be drawn to love stories, to long

for one of our own, and to hope that true love is possible. But many of us also know what it feels like to be a flower that's been cut and stuck in water, only to wilt and lose our bloom. Maybe you've felt that way, or maybe you've cut and discarded a few flowers in your time. Or maybe you haven't found love yet and are still looking. These disappointments might come in different forms: Believing you were in love, then feeling misled. Thinking it was love, only to find it was lust. Being certain it was love, but discovering it was a lie. Expecting love to last, but watching it fade. Maybe we fear commitment, or choose people who do, or set our standards too high and don't give people a chance. Maybe an ex is still on our minds, or maybe we've just had a run of bad luck. Instead of falling for false promises or unfulfilling partners, instead of feeling defeated or hopeless, instead of getting your heart broken, I want you to experience the expansive love that you hope exists.



Romantic love is at once familiar and complex. It has been seen and described in infinite ways across time and cultures. Psychologist Tim Lomas, a lecturer in the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University, analyzed fifty languages and identified fourteen unique kinds of love. The ancient Greeks said there were seven basic types: *Eros*, which is sexual or passionate love; *Philia*, or friendship; *Storge*, or familial love; *Agape*, which is universal love; *Ludus*, which is casual or noncommittal love; *Pragma*, which is based on duty or other interests; and *Philautia*, which is self-love. An analysis of Chinese literature from five hundred to three thousand years old reveals many forms of love, from passionate and obsessive love to devoted love, to casual love. In the Tamil language, there are more than fifty words for various kinds and nuances of love, such as *love as grace*, *love within a fulfilling relationship*, and *a melting inside due to a feeling of love*. In Japanese, the term *koi no yokan* describes the sensation of meeting someone new and feeling that you are destined to fall in love with them, and *kokuhaku* describes a declaration of loving commitment. In India's Boro language, *onsra* describes the knowledge that a relationship will fade.

Our own culture describes love in numerous ways. If we look at the Billboard Top 50 Love Songs of All Time, we are told that love is a secondhand emotion (Tina Turner), love is a roller coaster (Ohio Players), love is a

hangover (Diana Ross), love is a crazy little thing (Queen), love's got Beyoncé looking so crazy right now, and Leona Lewis keeps bleeding love. Movies idealize love, but we rarely find out what happens after happily ever after. With so many perspectives and portraits and parables of love surrounding us every day, I want this book to help you create your own definition of love and develop the skills to practice and enjoy that love every day.



When I was twenty-one years old, I skipped my college graduation to join an ashram in a village near Mumbai. I spent three years there as a Hindu monk, meditating, studying ancient scriptures, and volunteering alongside my fellow monks.

The oldest Hindu scriptures we studied are called the Vedas. They were written on palm leaves in Sanskrit more than five thousand years ago. Most of the palm leaves no longer exist, but the texts have survived. Some of them are even online. Their presence and relevance in the modern world always amaze and inspire me. I've been studying the Vedas for sixteen years now, and for the three years I lived as a monk I studied them deeply. When I saw the practical and accessible wisdom hidden within them, I started sharing these messages and insights with people around the world through podcasts, books, and videos. A big part of my work today is coaching individuals and couples and training others to do the same. This work has allowed me to certify more than two thousand coaches, all of whom use a curriculum I developed that is rooted in Vedic principles.

I've used wisdom from the Vedas to form the concepts in this book. I turned to the Vedas because these ancient scribes speak of love in ways I hadn't heard before. What they say is simple and accessible—an old lens that offers a new perspective. The Vedas introduced me to the fundamental ideas that love has stages, that love is a process, and that we all desire to love and be loved. As I worked with individuals and couples on their relationships and transitions into and out of love, I saw that the validity of these concepts stands the test of real-life settings. Then, in comments on my videos and responses to my podcast, I saw and heard people struggling with the same recurring patterns in their relationships, many of them issues that I had successfully addressed with my clients using Vedic concepts. I wrote this book so that anyone can access these

concepts and discuss them with friends, family, and partners. I drew from the guidance of the Vedas, from what has worked with my clients, from my own travels, and from what I learned with my fellow monks. I love the intersection of modern science and ancient wisdom. The ideas here are supported by both, though we are repurposing Vedic concepts in ways they haven't been used before, applying spiritual concepts to earthly relationships.

## **The Practice of Love**

Nobody sits us down and teaches us how to love. Love is all around us, but it can be hard to learn from friends and family who themselves are just winging it. Some are looking for love. Some are giddy in love and full of hope. Some might be ghosting each other or leading each other on. Some are together but not in love. Some are breaking up because they just can't figure out how to make it work. And some seem content in their loving relationships. Everyone's got advice for us: *Love is all you need. When you meet your soul mate, you'll know. You can change them. Relationships should feel easy. Opposites attract.* But it's hard to know what advice to follow and where to start. We can't expect to get love right when we've never been educated on how to give or receive it. How to manage our emotions in connection to someone else's. How to understand others. How to build and nurture a relationship where both people thrive.

Most of the advice on love is caught up in how to find Mr. or Ms. Right. We think there's a perfect person out there for us, a soul mate, the One, and dating apps reinforce that belief. That's wonderful when it happens, but it doesn't happen to everyone, and it doesn't always stay so perfect. This book is different because it's not about finding the perfect person or relationship and leaving the rest to chance. I want to help you intentionally build love instead of wishing, wanting, and waiting for it to arrive fully formed. I want to help you deal with the challenges and imperfections we encounter on the journey to love. I want you to create a love that grows every day, expanding and evolving rather than achieved and complete. We can't know where and when we'll find love, but we can prepare for it and practice what we've learned when we find it.

The Vedas describe four stages of life, and these are the classrooms in which we'll learn the rules of love so that we can recognize and make the most of it when it comes our way. Instead of presenting love as an ethereal concept, they describe it as a series of steps, stages, and experiences that chart a clear path



forward. After we learn the lessons of one level, we move to the next. If we struggle or move on from a stage before we've completed it, we simply return to the lesson we need—life pushes us back in the direction of this work. The four classrooms are: *Brahmacharya ashram*, *Grhastha ashram*, *Vanaprastha ashram*, and *Sannyasa ashram*.

If you look up *ashram* in a dictionary, you'll find that it means "hermitage." The meanings of Sanskrit words often get stripped down in their English definitions, but in practice they have more depth. I define ashram as a school of learning, growth, and support. A sanctuary for self-development, somewhat like the ashram in which I spent my years as a monk. We are meant to be learning at every stage of life. Think about life as a series of classrooms or ashrams in which we learn various lessons.

## FOUR ASHRAMS



Each ashram brings us to a different level of love.

### *The First Ashram: PREPARING FOR LOVE*

In the first ashram, *Brahmacharya*, we prepare for love. We don't get in a car and start to drive without studying for a learner's permit and practicing the core skills in a safe space. When we take a new job, we might prepare by learning a new computer program, talking to people we'll be working with about what might be expected of us, or reviewing whatever skills we might need. And we prepare for love by learning how to love ourselves in solitude. Alone, we learn to understand ourselves, to heal our own pain, and to care for ourselves. We acquire skills like compassion, empathy, and patience (Rule 1). This prepares us to share love because we'll need these qualities when we love someone else. We will also examine our past relationships to avoid making the same mistakes in relationships going forward (Rule 2).

## *The Second Ashram: PRACTICING LOVE*

The second ashram, *Grhastha*, is when we extend our love to others while still loving ourselves. The three chapters in this stage explain how to understand, appreciate, and cooperate with another mind, another set of values and preferences.

We tend to oversimplify love, thinking of it as just chemistry and compatibility. Romance and attraction are indeed the initial connection points, but I define the deepest love as when you like someone's personality, respect their values, and help them toward their goals in a long-term, committed relationship. You may feel this way about your friends, and I hope you do, but I am talking about maintaining these qualities when you live with someone, see them every single day, and are at their side for their greatest joys, biggest disappointments, and all the mundanity and intensity of daily life.

In *Grhastha* we will examine how to know if you're in love (Rule 3), how to learn and grow with your partner (Rule 4), and how to set priorities and manage personal time and space within your relationship (Rule 5).

## *The Third Ashram: PROTECTING LOVE*

*Vanaprastha*, the third ashram, is a healing place where we retreat to seek peace. We find ourselves here either after a breakup, a loss, or when family life has downshifted to require less of our attention. After learning to give love to others in *Grhastha*, and giving so much, this is an interlude where we reflect on the experience of loving others, discover what might block our ability to love, and work on forgiveness and healing. In *Vanaprastha* we learn how to resolve conflict so we can protect our love (Rule 6). We also protect ourselves and our ability to love by learning when to break up, and how to deal with it if we do (Rule 7).

## *The Fourth Ashram: PERFECTING LOVE*

The fourth ashram, *Sannyasa*, is the epitome of love—when we're extending our love to every person and every moment of our life. In this stage our love becomes boundless. We realize we can experience love at any time with anyone. We learn how to love again and again (Rule 8). We strive for this perfection, but we never achieve it.



Many of us pass through these four ashrams without learning the lessons they present. In the first ashram, we resist being alone and miss out on the growth that solitude offers. In the second, we avoid lessons that come from the challenges that accompany any relationship. In the third, we don't take responsibility for our healing. And the fourth—loving everyone—is something we never even consider because we have no idea it's possible.

This book follows the order of these ashrams, which essentially follow the cycle of relationships—from preparing for love, to practicing love, to protecting love, to perfecting love. Thinking about these four ashrams, I narrowed them down to the eight rules we need to learn and qualities we need to develop to move from one ashram to the next: two rules to prepare for love, three rules to practice love, two rules to protect love, and one rule to strive toward perfect love. Eight timeless, universal rules. These rules are cumulative—they build on one another. I intend for you to approach them in this order, but they're meant to serve us at any age and stage of a relationship. Some of them are counterintuitive. I talk about solitude as the beginning of love. I tell you that you must put your purpose before your partner's. I explain that your partner is your guru. These are new approaches to love that will guide you in how to improve your chances at finding love, what to look for on your first date, what to do if you have a “type,” how to present yourself, when to say “I love you,” when to make a commitment, how to handle conflict, how to manage a household, and when to call it quits.

Each of these rules helps you develop a mindset for love, whether you are single, in a relationship, or breaking up. You can practice solitude in a relationship. You can reframe your approach to conflict no matter what your situation. These rules come into play in all life scenarios.

This book isn't a collection of manipulative techniques. I won't give you pickup lines to grab people's attention. I won't tell you how to make yourself into the person they want you to be or how to make them into who you want them to be. This is about embracing your preferences and proclivities, so you don't waste time on people who aren't good for you. It's about learning how to display your values, not how to advertise yourself. It's about letting go of any anger, greed, ego, self-doubt, and confusion that clouds your heart and interferes with your ability to love. Along the way, I will give you techniques to

help you work through loneliness, let go of expectations, nurture intimacy, and heal from heartbreak.



When I decided to ask Radhi to marry me, I set out to arrange the best, most romantic proposal of all time. I asked a friend about engagement rings and bought her a classic diamond ring. Then, on a beautiful spring evening in 2014, I suggested to her that we meet near London Bridge to take a walk down the bank of the Thames (we were living in London at the time). I told her we were going to a nice place for dinner, knowing she would dress appropriately for the night I had planned. Just as we passed an idyllic spot with one of the best views in the city, a man suddenly appeared and gave her a huge bouquet. As she was marveling over the flowers, an a cappella group burst out of nowhere and joined the bouquet-bearing man to sing the Bruno Mars song “Marry You.” I got down on one knee and proposed to her. She cried; I cried too. After she said yes, a vegan meal was delivered, and we sat down to eat at a table I had set up on the bank of the Thames. She thought that was the end of the fanfare, and we got up to head home, but as we rounded a corner, there was a white horse-drawn carriage. We climbed aboard, and it carried us through the city, passing all the major sights. She was shouting out, “I’m engaged!” and passersby cheered for us. Finally, we went to share our good news with her parents.

But on the way there, red spots appeared all over Radhi’s face. By the time we arrived at her parents’, she was covered in hives, and their first words to us weren’t “Congratulations!” but “What’s wrong with your face?” That was the day we discovered she’s allergic to horses.

I thought I had choreographed the perfect proposal, but as time passed it occurred to me that all my ideas had come straight from Disney movies and viral proposal videos. Does Radhi actually enjoy a cappella music? Sure, but she isn’t into grand gestures. Does she have an attachment to the Thames or to riding through London? Not really. Clearly, being near horses and covered in hives isn’t her dream date. And it turns out diamonds aren’t her gemstone of choice. What does Radhi really care about? She loves food, and while I’d arranged for a vegan restaurant to deliver food to us at the river, it arrived cold and bland. The one detail she would have appreciated the most was the one I

planned the least, and its execution was the worst. Also, Radhi adores her family, and if I'd been considering that, I might have planned for them to jump out of the bushes to surprise us instead of the singers. She would have loved that.

We had fun, and I lucked out—Radhi said yes and never complained about any of it—but my proposal wasn't particularly personal. Throughout my life, I'd seen love presented through over-the-top romantic gestures, and I thought that was the only way to show how I felt. The hives were a gentle hint that I didn't know what I was doing; that I should think about the person standing in front of me instead of the images of fairy-tale love that constantly bombard us.

For my whole life I'd been surrounded by stories that told me how love should play out. We all are. And most of us unconsciously gravitate—in love and all things—to a conventional path. In heterosexual relationships, men still do most of the proposing. On the wedding site The Knot, 97 percent of proposal stories are of grooms-to-be popping the question. Eighty percent of brides receive a diamond engagement ring. According to a survey in *Brides* magazine, more than 80 percent of brides wear white, and 76 percent of women take their husband's last name. The nuclear family is still the most common family structure in the US, with only one in five Americans living in a household with two or more adult generations under one roof—roughly the same percentage as in 1950. Seventy-two percent of Americans live in or near the city where they grew up. And even though the number of people who say they'd *like* a nonexclusive partnership has risen, only about 4 to 5 percent of Americans are actually in a consensual non-monogamous relationship.

The storybook version of love I displayed for Radhi wasn't the love that would sustain our relationship. Fairy tales, films, songs, and myths don't tell us how to practice love every day. That requires learning what love means for the two of us as individuals and unlearning what we thought it meant. That's why I'm sharing my imperfect story. I don't know everything, and I don't have everything figured out. Radhi has taught me so much about love, and I continue to learn with her. I'm sharing all this book's advice with you knowing how much I could have used it myself and will use it in the future. Love is not about staging the perfect proposal or creating a perfect relationship. It's about learning to navigate the imperfections that are intrinsic to ourselves, our partners, and life itself. I hope this book helps you do just that.

## PART 1

# Solitude: Learning to Love Yourself



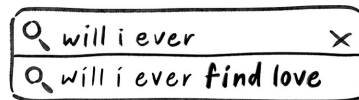
In the first ashram, *Brahmacharya*, we prepare for love by learning how to be alone and learning from our past relationships how to improve our next one. Alone, we learn to love ourselves, to understand ourselves, to heal our own pain, and to care for ourselves. We experience *atma prema*, self-love.

# Let Yourself Be Alone

*I wish I could show you, when you are lonely or in darkness, the astonishing light of your own being.*

—HAFIZ

We can all agree that no one wants to be lonely. In fact, many people would rather stay in an unhappy relationship than be single. If you type the phrase “Will I ever...” into a search engine, it predicts that the next words you will enter are “find love,” because “Will I ever find love” is the most popular question people ask about their futures.



This question reveals our insecurity, our fear, our anxiety around loneliness, and these very feelings prevent us from finding love. Researchers at the University of Toronto found through a series of studies that when we’re afraid of being single, we’re more likely to settle for less satisfying relationships. Specifically, we’re more likely to become dependent on our partners and less likely to break up with them, even when the relationship doesn’t meet our needs.

Being in a relationship seems like the obvious cure for loneliness. Aren’t we lonely because we’re alone? But the fear of loneliness interferes with our ability to make good decisions about relationships. My client Leo had been dating Isla for nearly a year when her job took her from Philadelphia to Austin.

“You should do what’s best for you,” she told him. “I want to be clear. I’m not sure where our relationship is going.” He was unsure at first, but a month after she left, he moved to Austin.

“Most of my friends were in relationships. I basically felt single without Isla, and I didn’t want to be lonely, so I decided to join her.” Instead of thinking about the pros and cons of moving—What were his job prospects? What was he leaving behind in Philadelphia? Who did he know in Austin? Did he like it there? Would this step benefit his relationship?—Leo was primarily focused on avoiding loneliness.

A month after he moved, Isla ended the relationship. Leo moved in order to avoid loneliness, but he ended up working remotely from a town where he knew nobody and found himself lonelier than ever.

Do we want to choose or stay in a relationship based on insecurity and desperation or based on contentment and joy? Loneliness makes us rush into relationships; it keeps us in the wrong relationships; and it urges us to accept less than we deserve.

We must use the time when we are single or take time alone when we are in a couple to understand ourselves, our pleasures, and our values. When we learn to love ourselves, we develop compassion, empathy, and patience. Then we can use those qualities to love someone else. In this way, being alone—not *lonely*, but comfortable and confident in situations where we make our own choices, follow our own lead, and reflect on our own experience—is the first step in preparing ourselves to love others.

## **Fear of Loneliness**

It’s no wonder we dread being alone. All our lives, we’ve been primed to fear it. The kid who played by themselves in the playground? They were called a loner. The one who had a birthday party, when the cool kids didn’t show up? They felt unpopular. Not being able to find a plus one for the wedding makes us feel like losers. The terrifying prospect of having to sit alone during lunch is such a common theme in high school movies that Steven Glasberg, a throwaway cameo in *Superbad*, has made it into the Urban Dictionary as “that kid who sits alone at lunch every day, eating his dessert.” It was drummed into us that we had to have a prom date, to fill our yearbooks with signatures, to be surrounded by a squad of friends. Being alone meant being lonely. Loneliness has been cast as the enemy of joy, growth, and love. We imagine ourselves stranded on an island, lost, confused, and helpless, like Tom Hanks in *Cast*



*Away* with nobody but a volleyball named Wilson to talk to. Loneliness is the last resort. A place no one wants to visit, let alone live.

When I spent three years as a monk, I spent more time alone than in the rest of my life put together. Though there were many monks at the ashram, much of our time was spent in silence and solitude, and we certainly didn't have romantic relationships. The emotional isolation allowed me to develop and practice skills that are harder to access among the pleasures and pressures of a relationship. For instance, the first time I went on a meditation retreat I was appalled when I saw that I wasn't supposed to bring my MP3 player. Music was my life then, and I couldn't imagine what I would do during breaks if I couldn't listen. But on that retreat, I discovered that I loved silence. I found that I didn't need anything to entertain myself. I wasn't distracted by conversation, flirtation, or expectations. There was no music or device to fiddle with to fill my mind. And I was the most engaged and present that I'd ever been.

If you haven't learned the lessons of an ashram, life will keep pushing you back to that phase of life in one way or another. Many of the key lessons of *Brahmacharya* are learned in solitude. Let's begin by assessing how much time you spend alone and how it makes you feel. This baseline audit is important whether you're in a relationship or not to see if you are using your time in solitude to understand yourself and ready yourself for love.

## TRY THIS:

### SOLO AUDIT

1. First, spend one week keeping track of all the time you spend alone. This means without a companion. Don't spend the time with the TV on or scrolling mindlessly through your phone. I want you to track active solo pastimes, such as reading, walking, meditating, exercising, or pursuing an interest like cooking, going to museums, collecting, building, or creating. No, you can't count the time when you're asleep. For this part of the exercise, you don't have to go out of your way to be alone. At this point we just want to observe what your habits are.

Next to the time you spent alone, write down what you did and whether doing it without a companion bothered you. You might enjoy doing dishes alone, or you might find it a painful reminder that you

cooked for one. You might like to walk alone, or it might make you feel lonely. Think about why you were comfortable or uncomfortable. When do you feel comfortable alone? The point of this exercise is to help you take stock of how you spend your solo time before we develop your practice of being alone.

<b>TIME</b>	<b>ACTIVITY</b>	<b>COMFORTABLE/UNCOMFORTABLE</b>	<b>WHY?</b>

2. Now that you've assessed your baseline solitude, start doing one new activity alone every week, and I want you to deliberately choose how to spend that time. Pick an activity that you've rarely or never done by yourself before.

**See a movie, performance, or sports event**

**Go to a museum**

**Make a reservation for dinner for one**

**Go to a restaurant without touching your phone**

**Go for a hike**

**Celebrate your birthday**

**Enjoy a major holiday**

**Go to a party on your own**

**Engage in a one-time volunteer opportunity**

**Take a MasterClass**

Try this every week for the next month. During the activity, pay attention to how you react to a new situation. Observe any intrusive thoughts that make it hard for you to be alone. Use the questions below to reflect.

**How long does it take to feel comfortable?**

**How different would it be if you were with another person?**

**Are you better able to enjoy yourself alone?**

**Do you wish there were another person here?**

**Is it hard to know what to do with yourself?**

**Would your opinion about the activity be influenced by a companion's reaction?**

**(Depending on the activity) are you tempted to distract yourself or engage your mind with your phone, the TV, or podcasts?**

**What do you love about the experience?**

**What are the pros and cons of being by yourself?**

If you can't go to dinner on your own without feeling uncomfortable, what would it take to make it more comfortable? You might discover that you like to bring a book or work assignment with you because it makes you feel engaged or productive. Having a brief, friendly conversation with the waiter might be all you need to start your solo dinner on the right foot.

If you see a movie on your own and miss sharing the experience with someone, find a new way of expressing yourself to yourself. Write a blog post, an online review, or a journal entry about the movie. The same is true if you take a class. Did you learn from it? What did you like? What would you have changed? Record a voice note telling yourself how you felt about the experience. It's nice to exchange opinions with someone about a movie, class, or lecture, but when you attend by yourself, you practice developing your ideas and opinions without the influence of someone else's taste.

If you are unaccustomed to hiking alone, set a fun, low-pressure goal for yourself. It might be a physical goal, like making your best time on the hike, or it might be to find something that captured your attention and bring it home with you. You might set out with the goal of taking a photo you love (that you can keep for yourself or post to social media).

The purpose of the solo audit is to get more comfortable in your own skin. You're getting to know your preferences without leaning on someone else's priorities and goals. You're learning how to have a conversation with yourself.

## **Solitude Is the Antidote to Loneliness**

Paul Tillich said, "Language has created the word 'loneliness' to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word 'solitude' to express the glory of being alone."

The difference between loneliness and solitude is the lens through which we see our time alone, and how we use that time. The lens of loneliness makes us insecure and prone to bad decisions. The lens of solitude makes us open and curious. As such, solitude is the foundation on which we build our love.

Solitude is not a failure to love. It is the beginning of love. During the time we spend without a sidekick, we move through the world differently, more alert to ourselves and the world. In one study, researchers gave more than five hundred visitors to an art museum a special glove that reported their movement patterns along with physiological data such as their heart rates. The data showed that when people were not distracted by chatting with companions, they actually had a stronger emotional response to the art. As the researchers wrote, those who were alone were able to "enter the exhibition with 'all of their senses open and alert' to a greater degree."

The participants also filled out a survey before and after their visit. Ultimately, those who came to the exhibition with a group reported their experience as less thought-provoking and emotionally stimulating than those who went alone. Of course, there's nothing wrong with chatting and letting the art slide past, but think of the inspiration those museum visitors missed out on. Then apply that to life in general. When we surround ourselves with other people, we're not just missing out on the finer details of an art exhibition. We're missing out on the chance to reflect and understand ourselves better.

In fact, studies show that if we never allow ourselves solitude, it's just plain harder for us to learn. In *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes, "Our current research with talented teenagers shows that many fail to develop their skills not because they have cognitive deficits, but because they cannot stand being alone." His research found that young people were less likely to develop creative skills like playing an instrument or writing because the most effective practice of these abilities is often done while alone. Like those talented teenagers, when we avoid solitude, we struggle to develop our skills.

## **The Path from Loneliness to Solitude**

By itself, solitude doesn't give us the skills we need for relationships. You can't just decide you're going to use solitude to understand yourself and make it so. But if we use it to get to know ourselves, there are many ways in which it prepares us for love. Remember, in a healthy relationship, you manage the intersection of two lives best if you know your own personality, values, and goals already. So, as we make our way out of loneliness and into a productive use of solitude, we will explore our personality, values, and goals. There are three stages on the way from loneliness to solitude: presence, discomfort, and confidence.