

# Theoretical Foundations for Studying the Cube of Love: Chiara Lubich’s Spirituality of Communion, Abraham Joshua Heschel’s “Transitive” Perspective of Human Nature, and Robert Selman’s Theory of Social Awareness

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*stages of growth in social awareness, they suggest that the Cube’s effectiveness may lie in its coherence with authentic human relationships and with the insights of developmental psychology. The authors propose these insights as avenues for research into how the Cube of Love might help to transcend the cultural categories that limit studies of social development, which in turn may offer the Cube as a way of developing a positive culture in diverse educational settings.*

**I**n an address delivered at the Catholic University of America in 2000, Chiara Lubich described the process of education as articulated within a spirituality of communion:

In our approach . . . in which the spiritual and the human penetrate one another and become one . . . [e]ducation’s goal, its highest aim, becomes a reality. In this we experience the fullness of God’s life, which Jesus has given us, a trinitarian relationship, the most genuine form of social relationship, in which a wonderful synthesis is achieved between the two goals of education to teach the individual and to build the community.<sup>1</sup>

The pedagogical approach to such a goal is based on what Lubich calls the “art of loving,”<sup>2</sup> a practical way of implementing a fundamental tenet that every system of belief and all people of good will who hold no particular religious affiliation subscribe to: the Golden Rule, “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

1. Chiara Lubich, *Essential Writings* (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 2007), 223.

2. *Ibid.*, 14.

*The authors note how the Cube of Love facilitates the living out of trinitarian relationships inherent in a spirituality of communion. Drawing upon Abraham Heschel’s writings regarding the “transitive” nature of human experience and on Robert Selman’s exploration of*

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Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture, Vol. 3, No. 1 (March 2014)  
74–78 © 2014

This art of loving is introduced in educational settings through a kind of rubric for living out the Golden Rule. Lubich describes it in this fashion: “It requires us to *love everyone*, to *take the initiative in loving*, to *love*, to enter into the reality of the other person, *making oneself one* with the other person, and to see and love Jesus *in the other, in any other person* [as Jesus explains in his account of the last judgment in the Gospel of Matthew: ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me’ (Mt 25:40)].”<sup>3</sup>

This rubric is lived out through a game-like technique called the “Cube of Love.” Each of the statements in Lubich’s description is written on the face of a die: “Love one another,” “Love everyone,” “Share the other’s hurt or joy,” “Love your enemy,” “Love the other as yourself,” and “Be the first to love.” In a classroom, for example, the die is rolled at the beginning of the day, and the teacher and students alike attempt to live out the particular injunction; at the end of the day, students and their teacher can journal about their experience or share it aloud. Since its introduction in 1988, the Cube of Love has been adopted in family and school settings worldwide, with well-documented success.<sup>4</sup> As it is implemented in increasingly wider educational contexts, however, there is a risk that it may be misunderstood as simply one instrumental “tool” among many, rather than as an opening into the fundamental relationship that constitutes authentic education.

3. Chiara Lubich, “Children, Springtime of the Family and of Society: The Evangelization of Children,” an address delivered at the Jubilee of Families, the Vatican, October 12, 2000. In Michael James, Thomas Masters, and Amy Uelmen, *Education’s Highest Aim: Teaching and Learning through a Spirituality of Communion* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2010), 141.

4. See, for example, “Theory and Practice: Applying a Spirituality of Communion in Academic Settings,” in James, *Education’s Highest Aim*, 41–116.

If the Cube is considered in an instrumental fashion, the practice becomes merely an event, just one among the many that occur throughout the school day. Lubich’s vision, however, is about nurturing relationships. From this broader perspective, the Cube can be considered part of a process that has three key elements: First, it enables teachers to address concerns that children are being prevented from establishing full relationships in the classroom. Second, it enables both teachers and students to engage, through a clear and intentional process, in behaviors and dispositions that can be taught and that produce measurable growth in relationships. Third, as the Cube is not an event that takes place for limited time, it enables a lived experience of a spirituality of communion that has as its focus the other, for no other reason than that each person has value in and of her or his own right.

Most experiences with the Cube of Love have taken place in the setting of Catholic education, and to a lesser extent in public schools. Our intention now, given Chiara’s intuition that a spirituality of communion has widespread implications for every dimension of human thought and experience, is to draw from parallel writings in other sources that show the universality of the goal of reciprocity and building community. We begin with a Jewish perspective and follow it with a social psychology perspective to introduce a theoretical framework, based on a research framework already in practice, for examining reciprocity and communion in the language of the academy.

The rabbi and scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel offers a useful perspective on human nature in which the life of every individual has intrinsic value. To describe the depth of human experience, he uses the term “transitive,” which one commentator describes as “Man’s ability to transcend his egocentric interests and to respond

with love and devotion to the divine demand, to His ‘pathos’ or ‘transitive concern.’”<sup>5</sup> Individuals derive their worth not from what they do but from their very nature. Heschel posits three typically human actions as “transitive”: concern for God, which is the dimension of the holy; concern for self; and concern for others, or as Heschel calls them, our “other selves.” Expanding on that notion of “other selves,” Heschel says: “The essence of life is intense care and concern. . . . Such concern is reflexive: it refers to one’s own self and is rooted in the anxiety of the self about its own future. . . . A vital requirement of human life is its transitive concern, a regard for others, in addition to a reflexive concern, an intense regard for itself.”<sup>6</sup>

The usefulness of the Cube in promoting such authentic, or, to use Heschel’s term, “transitive,” relationships is supported by research in social psychology, particularly Robert L. Selman’s *Promotion of Social Awareness* (2003). Selman and his team conducted experiments in which public school children were asked how they would respond to certain relationship dilemmas, such as breaking a promise to a friend. They would then explain the reasoning behind their decision out loud to an interviewer. Researchers classified each child’s reasoning according to a scale Selman created to capture the level of responsibility and accountability the child expressed. Using these classifications Selman and his team created a social development scale (below) similar to those of Piaget and Kohlberg.

5. [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud\\_0002\\_0009\\_0\\_08873.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0009_0_08873.html).

6. Abraham Heschel, *Between God and Man* (New York: Free Press, 1959), 108–10.

Table 3.1 Developmental Levels of Interpersonal Action Based on Social Perspective Coordination<sup>7</sup>

Shared Experience: Related Aspect	Social Perspective Coordination Levels	Interpersonal Negotiation Strategies: Autonomy Aspect
Unreflective imitation or enmeshment; lack of differentiation	Level 0: Undifferentiated, egotistic	Physical force: impulsive fight or flight or freeze
Unreflective sharing of expressive enthusiasm	Level 1: Differentiated, subjective	One-way, unilateral power: orders of obedience
Reflective sharing of similar perceptions and experiences	Level 2: Reciprocal, self-reflective	Cooperative exchange reciprocity: persuasion or deference
Empathic sharing of beliefs and values	Level 3: Mutual, third-person	Mutual compromise
Interdependent sharing of vulnerabilities and self-identities	Level 4: Intimate, in-depth, societal	Collaborative integration of relationship dynamics (commitment)

Source: Author’s compilation.

Two unique aspects of this research may prove useful for those of us who do research from the perspective of a spirituality of communion. First, Selman explains the social development of children in terms of stages that they go through as they become other-directed. The Focolare spirituality refers to a “language of

7. Robert L. Selman, *The Promotion of Social Awareness: Powerful Lessons from the Partnership of Developmental Theory and Classroom Practice* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007), 38.

reciprocity,” though it does not discuss this reciprocity in terms of stages of development. Second, Selman’s research is grounded in developmental theory, on which basis he created a curriculum that captures children’s different responses and scales the children’s reasoning for their responses in terms of a growing sense of responsibility toward the other. To become reflective learners, students must learn how to probe for the reasoning behind their responses.

Public school curricula already incorporate the teaching of other-directedness in literacy education. Because of this, the language of reciprocity so integral to the Cube of Love can be not merely added on, but woven into the curriculum. Selman’s curriculum focuses on children reading about problems other children face and reasoning out how they would resolve them. Students do exercises that draw out their understanding of other-directed reasoning, all in the context of a curriculum in which children are taught with the expectation that they will grow and that the teacher is to lead children to improve their self-understanding, accountability, and responsibility. From the perspective of a spirituality of communion, such behaviors would be said to contribute to building unity. This approach aims for a transitive (in Heschel’s terms) transformation of children’s growth in being accountable for their decisions and responsible for creating and sustaining reciprocity in relationships.

In the Selman curriculum, children are guided not to disregard the other but, by factoring the other into their decision-making, to account for the being of the other and develop empathy—we might even say *agape*. The other is one who deserves consideration. Selman reports that he does not aim for children to surrender wholly

to other children’s needs but simply to take them into account during the decision-making process. His studies are backed by the data, unlike many “character counts” types of programs used in schools, all of which are based not on research but on anecdotes.

Selman does recognize that cultural differences could invalidate his theory; cultures in which fidelity to family takes precedence could affect how children make choices in their relationships with others outside the family. He states: “There may be variations in the social thought of individuals from the perspective of systematic group differences between girls and boys as well as between people of different social classes, ethnicities and other group identities” (23). The universality of a spirituality of communion and its being lived out through the Art of Loving and the Cube of Love may offer a way to transcend the cultural limitations of Selman’s approach.

The Cube of Love assumes an understanding of human nature that is consonant with that which Abraham Joshua Heschel offers: “The concern for others is not an extension in breadth but an ascension, a rise. Man reaches a new vertical dimension, the dimension of the holy, when he grows beyond his self interests, when that which is of interest to others becomes vital to him and it is only in this dimension, in understanding of its perennial validity, that the concern for other human beings and the devotion to ideals may reach the degree of self denial.”<sup>8</sup> Human beings achieve their highest sense of self when they live in function of the other before them. In her 2000 address at the Catholic University of America, Chiara Lubich offered a view complementary to

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8. Heschel, *Between God and Man*, 109–10.

Heschel's transitive notion of human relationships: "The goal that has always been assigned to education (*to form the human person, so as to render him or her independent*) is implemented, almost paradoxically, by *forming the person-in-relationship*, which for us means *the human person in the image of the Trinity*, one who is capable of continually transcending self in the context of the presence of Jesus in our midst" [emphasis in the original].<sup>9</sup> *Education's Highest Aim*, a study of the connection between a spirituality of communion and education, connects the goal of education and the means for achieving it that Lubich posits with the Cube of Love: "The Cube of Love has helped schools establish a consistent ethos, transforming their cultures from ones based on rules to ones based on relationships. . . . The 'secret' to their resolution lies in a constant reorientation of self via practical application of a spirituality of communion."<sup>10</sup>

Although the Art of Loving and its application through the Cube of Love reflect the Christian context from which they emerged, we propose that they are effective in educational contexts in general because they touch upon the intricate religious, ethical, psychological, and social dynamics of human nature. Heschel's insight into the transitive nature of authentic human relationships, which is also reflected in Lubich's spirituality of communion, together with Selman's research findings that social awareness progresses through developmental stages provide a theoretical framework for exploring the impact of the Cube of Love in classrooms.

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9. Lubich, *Essential Writings*, 223.

10. James, *Education's Highest Aim*, 49, 117.

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