

## Stages of self-love

Guest: Dr. Keith Witt

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**Alex Howard - [00:00:09]**

Welcome, everyone, to this interview where I'm super excited to be talking with Dr. Keith Witt.

Firstly, Keith, welcome. Thank you so much for joining me.

**Keith Witt**

It's my pleasure to be with you, Alex.

**Alex Howard**

I think this is a, this is for me a really important topic. It feels like doing a conference on relationships and not talking about the most important relationship really that we all have. The relationship with ourself feels like we'd be kind of missing something. And I can't think of a better person to be speaking to this topic.

Just to give people Keith's professional background. Dr. Keith Witt is a licensed psychologist, teacher and author who has lived and worked in Santa Barbara, California, since 1973.

Keith is the founder of the School of Love, where he offers his School of Love lectures, series blogs, *Therapists in the Wild* web series and integral conversations, audio and video on health, love, relationships, sexuality, spirituality, development and psychotherapy related topics.

Keith is also the author of seven books, has given three TEDX talks and teaches classes across the US.

Keith has conducted over, and I was, when I was prepping this I had to read this twice, over 60,000 therapy sessions. And I'm also mindful, Keith, I took this bio from a few years ago. It may well have gone up since then. Led many groups and has been a contributor to *Integral Life and the Journal of Integral Theory and Practice*.

Keith, I know you've said in various places that everything is relationships. I think that's a great place to start an interview. How did you come to see the world through that lens?

**Keith Witt**

When I first started doing therapy in the 70s, I realized very quickly that the issues that people came in with were always involving relationships with themselves, all the inner people in them, all the inner figures in them and their memories, their potential futures, relationships with their loved ones, relationships at work, relationships with objects. It was all relationships all the time.

And the idea that an individual evolves separate from other people was ludicrous to me at the time. And as I've studied and as we've done research over the last 50 years, that's been again and again and again and again validated.

Realistically, there was one thing once at the very, very beginning, and then there was the Big Bang. And then now there's lots of little things that have been related with each other ever since. And the magic of it is that the evolutionary impulse of this universe has basically turned into you and me having this conversation 13.8 billion years later.

I find that beautiful and magical. And that happens through all the relationships that we have and that we include in ourselves. Because in us, two human beings, we have included and transcended all the relationships in the universe previous to us to this moment.

And that's how it came to me and that's how I've taught and that's how I've practiced and that's how I've lived my life.

### **Alex Howard - [00:03:40]**

It's a beautiful way of thinking about it, about all of that history and all of those ancestral relationships that bring us to this point. And, of course, there's this central relationship in our lives, which is our relationship with ourselves, our self-love, or indeed lack of. Maybe just speak a little bit to how important that piece is as well.

### **Keith Witt**

It's of central importance. It is one of the ongoing existential issues that every human being has to deal with from birth, really not even from birth, from conception onward. And I believe from before conception through morphic fields and intergenerational transmission and so on.

And it's very complex because we're born in relationships and into social groups. We have evolved in social groups and we have a great need to feel secure in social groups.

Now, social groups have standards that we, and I'll get into this a little bit later probably, that we are inherently driven to meet so that we feel acceptable.

And there's lots of them. We want to have a position in the social hierarchies around us, humans create hierarchical systems naturally. But also we have our individual drives to evolve as individuals. And there's a conflict between the demands of different cultures at different stages of our lives and our own need and our own desires to grow. And those desires to grow also come, not just from healthy impulses, to love, to care, to serve, to share and so on, they also come from egocentric or defended impulses. You know me first, you're a threat, push you away and so on.

And we have been learned, have been taught by culture to be critical and ashamed of such impulses. And then we develop into a, reflexively our consciousness, our brains, our nervous systems, developed defensive states to protect us. Sometimes by blocking us from being aware of defenses, sometimes by indulging them and so on. And then there's lots of other things that interfere.

Now, the course of normal human development is through stages of consciousness. And as we move through stages of consciousness. Um, excuse me for just a second. I'm having an interview right now. So you can't do that because I'm not done. So I just got pissed off at my wife.

### **Alex Howard**

I'm just going to make a note to make an edit. Hang on a second.

**Keith Witt - [00:06:28]**

Yeah, yeah.

You can edit it, but, you know, if you don't, it's like, OK, that's a challenge to self-love right there.

You know, I'm embarrassed. Now my wife knows I'm mad at her. She hates that.

**Alex Howard**

It's real life though.

**Keith Witt**

It's real life. So in an embodied person we have to deal with stuff like that all the time.

Now I have to have confidence that she and I will get back to love or I'm kind of stuck with she's irritated me being irritated at her. I have to have humility about having an interview with you, which I've been planning for three months. Then my wife walking in knowing that I'm having an interview being like, oh, God, you know.

And those things, us getting back to love quickly, which will happen, and letting go of this and moving back into engagement with you, are a result of developmental milestones that have been hard won milestones with me over 70 years of development.

**Alex Howard**

And it's also having enough security in oneself and in one's relationship to be able to be true to how you feel in that moment.

**Keith Witt**

Yeah, yeah. And being true to yourself and being true to how you feel is a function of what worldview you have at that moment as you're relating. And people grow through progressive worldviews and they grow through progressive moral systems. And the progressive worldview has a different view of how the world and the relationships with ourselves and other people are being enacted. And the different moral systems have many, many, many standards which we never lose. They're included and transcended into progressive moral understandings.

And navigating that is the challenge and the responsibility of each one of us. And we do it in relationship with ourselves and other people.

**Alex Howard**

Yes. There's a number of things I want to pick up on here. But just to come back to you for a moment, this concept of self-love, because I just want to make sure that we bring people with us on this aspiration.

I think sometimes people can confuse self-love with, for example, pathological narcissism. They can think that, oh, I don't want to be too, you know, it's a very British statement to say, well, that person's a bit too pleased with themselves. Do you know what I mean? And so how do we differentiate? And particularly as we're encouraging people to work on their relationship with themselves, how do we mitigate this fear of I'm suddenly going to become overinflated in that place?

**Keith Witt - [00:09:18]**

There's a lot of detail, but there's a really good discriminator between narcissism and healthy self-love. Healthy self-love connects. It connects us to ourselves, the different parts of ourselves. Both are destructive and constructive, unconscious selves. I call the entire adaptive, unconscious shadow in my book *Shadow Light*. I write extensively about this.

So self-love will connect us to other people in positive ways and connect us in positive ways with both constructive and destructive parts of ourselves.

Narcissism disconnects. It disconnects us from this destructive part of ourselves this denial is denied. And it disconnects us from other people because in narcissism you lose your capacity to socially reference from a moral perspective.

In other words, in narcissism, because you get arrested at a very young age where narcissism is isomorphic, where it's normal, you know, three years old, two years old, not that two year olds and three year olds can't be generous but those are more egocentric times, as anyone who's raised children can attest.

**Alex Howard**

My youngest just hit four. So I'm very familiar with what you're talking about.

**Keith Witt**

Oh yeah. Four is the famous power gods. I have a *Therapist in the Wild* thing on parenting four year olds and they need external constraint when they're coming from an unhealthy place. And then when they come from their wise self, which they have at four, they need respect and admiration. And that respect and admiration when they're being socially appropriate and coming from their wise self helps them move to the next stage of development, which is the role self, which will happen between five and seven, where their interiorly more motivated to be a good boy or a good girl and to fit the standards of the social groups that they identify with that they're embedded in.

And so narcissism, you lose that. In narcissism. If you're not giving me my narcissistic supply, you essentially disappear as a psychological being and I have to get rid of you. And so basically, that's the discriminator. Self-love, connects, narcissism disconnects.

**Alex Howard**

That's a very, very helpful way of thinking about it. And just building on what you were just saying around, for example, the stage development at four, you mentioned that self-love looks different at different stages of moral development. Do you want to just speak to a little bit about these stages and how self-love evolves with that?

**Keith Witt**

OK, so first, let's talk about the evolution of self-love and then we'll talk about moral development, which is more intricate.

**Alex Howard**

In the third trimester we're beginning to have consciousness of a sort. We're taking, we're laying down implicit memories in our brains. Implicit memories, and we do this our entire life. Implicit memories are when we react in a particular way, in a particular situation, but we don't exactly know why we did. OK?

**Keith Witt - [00:12:27]**

So there's a feeling there's a little story that comes up, there's an impulse, but it doesn't feel like something is being remembered. And these are implicit memories.

Explicit memories come online when the hippocampus in our brain is mature enough around two years old, where there's a sense of something being remembered. And I know lots of people have that for things when they're younger than two, but mostly that's how it works, because everything with humans is relative.

So in the last trimester, especially in utero, the experience of the nervous system is I am the universe.

Now, my definition of love is being at one with, I got this from David Deida back in 1997 or something, and I love this definition and I love, like I love most stuff about David Deida, I wrote extensively from his system in my first several books and still do when I teach masculine and feminine.

I am love. Now, there's no self, there's no me in that consciousness. But there is, I am one with the universe. The neural networks of I am love have been laid down and they'll stay there forever in some fashion.

So then the infant is born. When an infant is born, the only muscles that work are the face and the neck. And why is that? So the infant can turn his head, his or her head, look mom in the eye. Because that infant has 85 billion neurons, but only 17 percent of them are hooked up into neural networks. And as that child looks into his mom's eyes, the resonance and mirror neurons systems, that child's immunological system, their metabolic system, their cardiovascular system, their behavioral system are all being wired in inner subjective connection with mom.

And she's looking at him and she is wired biochemically to just adore this infant, as are fathers. There's just all kinds of hormonal changes that happen. Like, for instance a guy's testosterone goes down 25%.

**Alex Howard**

Is that right?

**Keith Witt**

Oh, yeah.

And estrogen goes up 25%. I wonder about Olympic athletes who have infants.

And so the baby's experience is I am loved. I am loved. And if you've got modern parents who get enough support, which unfortunately has been rare, it's getting less rare that's the experience of that child for the next 9 or 10 months. I mean, everywhere that kid looks, it's like you're loved. I am loved. So you go from I am love to I am loved right.

Around 10 or 11 or 12 months the child has enough neural development that they can feel separate from parent and then want to go to parent when they feel connected. They're developing a separate sense of self. They also, at this time begin to walk. They also at this time develop a capacity to feel shame emotions. Children under 10 months can't feel them, they don't blush when they're disapproved of. There's not enough self to feel distressed. They feel the shame emotions when they get a nonverbal indicator of disapproval and that shame emotion causes their muscles to get weak, look down for them to freeze.

And think about it in a hunter gatherer group, when a kid runs off and he's going off next to the big spider and mom goes, stop, with that non-verbal disapproval. The kid goes into a shame reaction,

freezes, looks down. The mother now can control the child at a distance and the child developed a little bit of social learning.

Now, with a healthy child, she goes up and picks him up and in 10 seconds, that child is back to a happy, sympathetic arousal. Your sympathetic nervous system is pretty active at this point in the second year, and a little social learning is taking place. And the message that the child has gotten from mom is I am loved conditionally. Because at that moment of stop, the child has the same experience with mom as he would have with a stranger, particularly of disapproval. I don't feel loved at that moment. I feel loved conditionally. And so I'm loved conditionally.

### **Alex Howard - [00:16:59]**

Because I guess in some ways in that moment, the child is not aware of the physical danger. The child is aware of the loss of love from mom. That's actually what gets them to stop, right?

### **Keith Witt**

That's exactly right. That's social learning. And all mammals do this at this stage.

Now, human beings, self-aware consciousness, take all the drives and turn them into art. And so with humans, they do this like all other mammals, and yet they do it on an order of magnitude, other level of complexity and beauty.

And a normal infant in the West hears the word no every 8 minutes while they're awake from 10 to 17 months. So, now the more playful that is, while it's still being serious, the less damage is done psychologically because it's during this time that we're beginning to lay down our capacities for defenses. Because those shame emotions are uncomfortable and the child's nervous system begins to develop and also fear is uncomfortable and anger is uncomfortable.

The child's nervous system begins to develop defenses against feeling those. And the defenses aren't always going to mom and getting approval. Sometimes the defenses are denying that they did a problem. Somebody else did the problem. You see the beginnings of all the defensive reactions in response to these shame emotions.

OK, children start to speak at birth. There's a language that all kids have, but the language with words and so on accelerates enormously between 18 and 24 months. As that happens, a child develops a theory of mind. They begin to think of themselves as a thinking being and other people as thinking beings. It's a huge developmental shift.

But also at that point, the child develops the capacity for self observation. So a 2 and a half year old will see themselves break a rule and they will feel a shame emotion, guilt, shame, regret. And now I love myself conditionally.

Now, I am love, I am loved, I am loved conditionally. I love myself conditionally and this sets us on the developmental path of being a human. Because to get back to I am love, we need to grow through a number of stages until we can get to the point where we functionally identify with the universe.

At that point, when I am the universe I am back to, I am love. And that's a journey that any human can make. And all of us seekers are making it throughout our life. We never get there because in an embodied incarnation there are always attachments, things like my wife's interruption that we have to regulate and that we have to deal with.

### **Alex Howard**

What's also interesting what you're saying is we're not talking about a regression back to I am love. We're talking about a progression through natural developmental stages. It just doesn't have to end at, I love myself conditionally.

**Keith Witt - [00:20:06]**

That's exactly right.

And this is what Ken Wilber's point when he wrote *Up from Eden*. Ken Wilber is a friend of mine and an integral theory has blown my mind and informed my work for 20 years.

**Alex Howard**

I'll let you know, I never wrote more notes on a single book than *Up from Eden*. So we're on the same page.

**Keith Witt**

Yeah, yeah. What integral does, it's a meta-theory. It allows you to develop your own cosmology and then in the inside of your own cosmology, then it helps you guide your own development and growth. Because the meta-theory is always changing and morphing depending upon the information that's coming in.

And as we develop self-aware consciousness, there's always wider embrace, wider identification from just me and mom and dad, to me and the people on the block, to me and my friends, to me and my school or my team, to me and my nation, to me and all people, to me and all life, to me and all creation, to me and the universe where I am the universe waking up to itself.

When I do teach about dreams, I say the universe dream came into existence at the Big Bang and it's been waking up to itself ever since. And we're at the edge of the universe dream waking up to itself.

**Alex Howard**

That's beautiful.

**Keith Witt**

So, I was going to, now the next part is the moral part, but I just wanted to say those are the stages of self-love.

**Alex Howard**

I think it's a really helpful way of thinking about it. And I love the way you're grounding in developmental psychology as well, because it gives a map to understand that when we have conditional self-love, it's not actually a failing, it's not something that's broken. It's the natural state of development.

**Keith Witt**

It's an achievement. It's a developmental achievement because loving myself conditionally is a developmental milestone. You know, if I'm not doing that, if I'm not loving myself conditionally, then I'm turning into a pathological narcissist. We've all seen what that could do.

**Alex Howard**

Not naming any names that have had important political roles.

**Keith Witt**

Yeah, right. So all of us are thinking about the same four guys.

**Alex Howard - [00:22:20]**

So let's touch then on these moral development stages and how they met with this.

**Keith Witt**

OK, so we are programmed genetically to have a capacity for moral discernment on at least six moral foundations. The work that was done with this with Jonathan Haidt. In other words, we're born able to taste sweet, sour, bitter, salty but we learn what tastes are more enjoyable and what aren't enjoyable from our own experience of what our culture tells us.

Well, we're also born having an instinct for fairness. We're born having an instinct for care. We're born having an instinct for loyalty. We're born having an instinct for authority because we want to be in comfortable positions on hierarchy, social hierarchies. We're born with an instinct for sanctity, something larger than ourselves and having something sacred. And also, we're born with the desire for personal liberation and freedom to be able to be true to our own inner spirit.

We're born with these capacities and then we learn how to enact them through various stages of moral development.

The first stage of moral development is literally physiological. We are born thinking that snakes are bad and darkness is bad and heights are bad. You know, this is universal with humans. But that rapidly as we develop a sense of self in relationship with our cultures, mom and dad and all that stuff, we develop into a magical moral system.

A magical moral system is mom goes, you know, that's bad because it's bad and you'll go fine. If she says it's bad because spirits don't like it, sure.

A classic example of that is your 3 year old or your 2 year old wakes up at 2:00 in the morning and wants you to make the sun come up. OK, I want it to be morning. According to him, the reason the sun isn't coming up is you're not cooperating bringing the sun up because you're obviously able to do it. It's a magical moral system.

But then we progress. You have a son? A 4 year old son?

**Alex Howard**

I have three daughters, a 10 year old, 7 year old and 4 year old.

**Keith Witt**

Well here you go, 10 and 4.

**Alex Howard**

There's plenty of estrogen going around in my household.

**Keith Witt**

I know. Oh God.

You're in the richest time and the most chaotic time right now. That's beautiful.

Around 4 or 5, we begin to develop a mythic moral system. And what I mean by that is there is a framework that's a mythic framework that informs us.



You know, in the Garden of Eden, the reason why Adam and Eve weren't supposed to eat the apples, because God said don't do it. Essentially, the sacred text said don't eat the apple. And we're supposed to do what the sacred text said. In this case it was oral but, you know.

And we have a mythic moral system we don't really question why we have a mythic moral system. Why should we honor our father or mother, you know, why should we not covet our neighbors? OK, OK. You know, it's a mythic moral system.

Around 11 or 12 or 13 when kids develop a capacity for formal operational thought, meaning that they can manipulate forms. You know, your oldest is hitting this, she's in early adolescence right now.

### **Alex Howard - [00:25:55]**

I know. Tell me about it.

### **Keith Witt**

OK, well, yeah. So early adolescence start questioning more. They start resisting more. They start being more interested in their, also, this is genetically programmed, they become more interested in their social groups, less interested in family.

And they begin to say, well, why should I honor my father and my mother? There needs to be a rational reason. I mean, you know, if you don't have one then that can turn into a problem.

Now, in that moral, in these worlds, the magic world, the mythic world and the rational world, there are things that feel right and wrong that are different.

In the magic world it feels immoral to step on a crack and break your mother's back. I did something bad. In the mythic world, oh, I took the Lord's name in vain. I feel bad. In a rational world, which is based on merit based hierarchies and certainly being accepted in very important social groups. Being a loser can be bad. This is a huge issue with kids in competition. Learning that you can lose and still be morally acceptable and even admirable. It doesn't matter whether you win or lose, it matters how you win or lose. That's a very difficult concept, very difficult, pretty much impossible to teach cognitively to a younger child. But you can start having these conversations with teenagers.

And so that becomes your rational moral system. If you continue to develop, you start feeling it's less important to win or lose or to be successful and more important that everybody's cared for, that's the more pluralistic world system. And then if somebody's not being cared for it doesn't matter whether they're winners or losers, there's something morally wrong about that.

And then there's an integral moral system. And now this is where we cross over into a qualitatively different moral system. At the integral level of conscious development, you can observe all the previous moral systems and see the healthy and unhealthy parts of them, and you can evaluate them both objectively and subjectively.

You still have the moral reaction, but you've developed a witness, a compassionate observer, they can observe that moral reaction and process it in a way that accelerates your moral development. For instance, 6 or 7 year old, bad to lie. 12 year old, it's OK to tell a lie if it's going to help somebody feel better. I like your dress, OK?

A pluralistic person. Well, sometimes you lie to serve the higher good. Sometimes you don't. But it's not a good thing to do. And I don't lie. But if I do, I'm kind of going to avoid it. It gets a bit mushy when you get pluralistic.

At an integral level it depends on the situation. What serves the highest good? And if I'm uncomfortable telling a lie, then I have to process that discomfort and then see, well, should I have followed the do not lie? Was I lying for egocentric reasons? Which is wrong according to serving the highest good. Or was I lying because it did serve the highest good and is there a way to do that in a more effective way?

When you do that, that's your conscious self helping your unconscious self grow and be reprogramed. Because development isn't really measured by what we understand consciously. Development is measured by how our unconscious responds to the world. And this is why I wrote my book, *Shadow Light*.

We move through the world governed by our unconscious, by our shadow selves, giving us constructive and destructive feelings, thoughts, stories and impulses all the time. Our conscious self gets it a half second to a second and a half after and then deals with it.

The more we develop compassionate witness, the more we can feel these guidance's coming, choose the healthy ones, and then take the unhealthy ones and dialysis them to support our growth.

Now, you could see how complicated this can be with six moral foundations because every moral developmental stage includes and transcends the previous one.

And so I actually might step on a crack and go, oh, and then go, oh, come on Keith. And then I've reprogramed my own consciousness just a little bit. That doesn't happen anymore or something like step under a ladder. Or I might swear and feel guilty. And then I go, oh, this is a situation where it works to swear or it doesn't work to swear.

There's a level of objective discernment, but remember, when you do that, there is a wise self observing. Now that wise self develops, I think, about 3 years old. Because, you know from your own children, 2 or 3 they start saying stuff that's just incredible. I think everybody should love everybody. Oh, no, that was wrong that so-and-so didn't share. And you go, God, you know what? Buddha came out of us. And then, you know, 10 minutes later, it's like bam

### **Alex Howard - [00:31:28]**

Attacking her sister.

### **Keith Witt**

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I just hit my sister. But that wise self is either supported or inhibited by development.

And as we grow in it, depending upon what social network we're in, that wise self is supported. If that's supported by the family, as I suspect yours is supported in your family, what your daughters do is say, OK, what feels right to me and how does that fit with moral standards of the social group I'm embedded in? Which is an ongoing dialectic that never has a solution. It's a process that you become comfortable with. And if you're interior sense of right and wrong somehow, or who you are even, comes into conflict with what the culture says, then you go, OK, that's something that I need to not just process in myself, I need to process it with people that I love because we always grew up in relationship with other people.

### **Alex Howard**

Yes. And I think thinking about it this way is incredibly helpful in terms of recognizing what is needed to support and help healthy development at the different stages.

For someone that's watching or listening to this and they're recognizing that they didn't get the ideal support they needed at those stages and they can see that the consequence of that is that their

relationship with themselves is overly harsh or they haven't learned to be supportive of themselves. How can one start to work with that?

**Keith Witt - [00:32:55]**

Well, I just want you to realize what a big question that is.

**Alex Howard**

I know and I'm looking at how much time we've got and I'm like, Keith's got this. He's fine.

**Keith Witt**

Yeah. So this is, everybody has to deal with this. It doesn't matter how great your development was. You know, my son will say I had a perfect childhood and he did, I think. But, you know, he struggles. He's in therapy. You know, he deals with a lot of stuff. Why? It comes with self-aware consciousness.

So the first level of it is recognizing that there are these stages and that I want to help myself through those stages. And that the shame emotions will arise from my unconscious, from my shadow self if I experience myself, if my nervous system experiences me as having violated some value.

OK, so 1. One important process is to notice those little senses of guilt or of remorse or of embarrassment and so on and go, oh, what value did I just violate? Oh, really, I still have that value or that's a good value, I should follow that more. OK, now that resolves if I feel a little bit more self-love because when I'm guilty, I'm not.

Or I think I need to refine that value to be a better value. For instance try hard. OK, when I was a kid, you're supposed to work hard and in my family there was unfortunately, my parents were really great parents for me until I was around 12 and then they were horrible parents until we all learned how to be better. That's why I love therapy. Therapy helped us do that.

So my family, my brothers and I are supposed to be the best at everything. OK, well, being anything other than the best was shameful. OK, so that was a material that I had to work with growing up.

So I found that out. So I feel guilty that I came in 2nd or 5th or whatever, and I go, oh, Keith. So I look at that value, that shame and I go, well, the value I prefer is the growth mindset value. That effort and progress is what matters. And then that's a lifelong process and you did effort and progress and good job. Now the shame stops and I feel a little bit better. I've supported myself lot.

So just processing shame, using shame as a guide to look at those values and then refining the values or following the values or intending to follow. That's one great technique.

**Alex Howard**

Sometimes the challenge can be that, if we think about that inner critic voice that we all have, that sometimes it's making a valid point, but it's doing it in a very crushing and a very aggressive way. And it's often hard then to extract the value because the way it's delivered is so crushing.

**Keith Witt**

Yes, there's an entire system of psychotherapy called Internal Family Systems developed by Richard Schwartz that probably deals with this the most directly.

And I like that system because that's my understanding is it really flows from psychosynthesis and Gestalt therapy and family therapy in the 70s. And Schwartz was a family therapist and he realized we all have a family of people in us. It's a huge family of people and one of those people is the inner critic. And they're all trying to help. There's no part of us that's not a valuable part.

The problem with the inner critic is it's trying to help us in a primitive fashion. Why? We learn to give ourselves a hard time to grow when we were a little kid and someone was trying to help us grow by giving us a hard time.

I grew up in the 50s. The way they raised kids was the way they thought they should raise kids, the way they train soldiers, because everybody just came out of World War II.

You know, you don't tell them good stuff and you tell them to work hard and just shut up and carry on and suck it up and all that stuff. All that John Wayne stuff. That screwed us all up. That's not a good way to do it. Effort and progress is a good way to do it.

So, what you do with that critic is you say, look, you actually talk to it, this is another way, and you say, I know that you want to help me out, OK? But, you know, there's a better way to get me to be better than giving me a hard time. So, look, take a break. You know, go to the beach, have a good time. You're fine. But I'm going to move myself forward in a more effective fashion. And what moving forward am I going to do? I want to do effort and progress.

There's an interesting concept in psychology called criterion velocity. Criterion velocity for those of you that are psychology nerds like I am, obviously, it's your expectation of progress over your experience, progress.

So if I expect that I'm just going to make a little bit of progress with effort and progress and that any progress I make is OK. That ratio is won, OK? I'm always meeting my expectation. I'm just always working to grow and however I grow is fine, but that's not how it usually works.

Usually it works is somehow I feel like I should go farther. You should, you know, it's always there. OK. OK, now I start feeling self-critical and now that critique gets activated, goes now I need to give you a hard time to push you harder. So I heard the critic go, I have a better motivational system than the one you learned.

Now you do that enough times it works its way into your unconscious and you begin to have a different experience with it. Sometimes it goes faster, sometimes it goes slower.

Now, again, this is a very cognitive thing. There is a way to develop self-love that is just basically more direct. There's a guy, Silicon Valley venture capitalist guy wrote a book called *Self Love*, and he came upon a really good way of cultivated. He's got thousands of letters, OK? And it just has three basic components.

And I went, well, you know, you really have similar letters. I forget the guy's name. I'm sorry. But I think you can Google self-love.

One is, you know, that the universe basically is everything coordinating with everything else, OK? The universe is always communicating. Terence McKenna said the universe is communication, it is language. And it's always coordinating towards coherence. Right now, this is a weird thing that you're bioluminescence from your face and my screen is becoming coherent with my bioluminescence with that and vice versa.

So when you have that sense, the whole universe is unity. The universe is love so you can breathe in the love of the universe and then breathe out gratitude for that love. Breathe in love from the universe, breathe out gratitude for that love. Breathe in love from the universe, breathe out gratitude for that love. Oh, no. Then I remember of a time that I was selfish when I was a kid and I did something mean and oh, no, now I feel shame.

So now I cultivate radical forgiveness of me and everybody else who's ever made a mistake and who's ever screwed up. I forgive all of you, all you Keiths, all the Alex's that have made mistakes, everybody. And now I breathe in love and I breathe out gratitude, breathe in love, breathe out gratitude. And intrusion, I forgive everybody for everything. Breathe in love, breathe out gratitude.

If you practice this 20 times a day for the next 60 days, people debate about habits. William James said 33 days, Karen Leaf said 63 days. I don't know where she got 63, but the bottom line, do it every day, a million times.

Your unconscious is going to start doing that for you. And you start feeling more of the I am love experience. Eventually, as you practice this, your unconscious starts doing it for you in different situations.

I recently did a blog on post issue relationships, saying post issue relationships are like what you saw with my wife. Post issue relationships are not relationships where there are problems, problems happen, but within seconds or minutes you regulate back to warmth and love.

Wherever she is now, I guarantee she feels love for me. And she's not blaming me for being irritated with her, for interrupting. She's confident of that because we've done the work as a couple. And this goes back to the interplay between love with other people and love of ourselves.

To have self-love, we have to experience ourself as loving others and being loved by others, important others. Which is a subjective experience because we all walk around feeling like we're observed by a big, invisible audience. Well, you need to feel like that audience is approving, and most of us don't. And so learning how to feel loving towards others and feel loved by others is another developmental milestone.

#### **Alex Howard - [00:42:26]**

What I'm hearing you say is the cognitive understanding is incredibly helpful to map where we are, but ultimately for love for ourselves and love in a relationship that we also have to have the right practices to help cultivate and help support that.

#### **Keith Witt**

That's right. And the right embodiment.

#### **Alex Howard**

Right.

#### **Keith Witt**

That their demands. If I'm in a situation where I allow myself to violate core values for some reason, for fear, for gain, for whatever, then I'm beginning to disassociate from my wise self. I'm beginning to contaminate that compassionate witness. OK, well, then that begins to create problems. And this is why it's very hard to do this kind of practice in environments where people are being abused or discriminated against or threatened.

This is why people go, how are you doing, Keith? I go, I'm fine, I'm in a monastery, you know, I'm in a protected place where I can do my practices and the secret police aren't beating down my door. And I have enough food and shelter and I have loving relationships. And I don't have to violate my core values to live my life.

And every day I feel the stress of all the people that don't have that. I feel that suffering in them and my heart reaches out to them, which is another way to cultivate self-love, which is loving kindness, meditation.

#### **Alex Howard**

It's also a sign of development to the point that one is impacted and cares for more than just themselves and their close tribe.

**Keith Witt - [00:44:15]**

Yeah, you care for everybody. And so I do my best to engage in virtuous social activity. And when I think about the people suffering, I reach out to them and from my heart to them and say, may you be safe, may you be happy, may you be healthy, may you have useful lives.

I do loving kindness, meditation and loving kindness meditation helps you develop self-love. Also, interestingly, it activates antiviral genes and anti-inflammatory genes. It has a genetic effect, loving kindness meditation on your genome.

**Alex Howard**

And we could do with some of that right now.

**Keith Witt**

We can all use some of that right now.

**Alex Howard**

Keith, I'm mindful of time. There's many places I'd love to go with you, maybe for future interviews, but for now, for people that want to find out more about you and your work, what's the best way for them to do that?

**Keith Witt**

Well, you can go to Amazon and read my books. At this point, I've published 8 books. The ones that were most relevant to this conversation are my books, *Integral Mindfulness*, *Shadow Light*, which is about an understanding of shadow and how to work with your own shadows to cultivate your own development.

And *Loving Completely* a book written about how to have loving relationships with yourself and with other people. But I also have books on integral psychotherapy called *Waking Up* and sessions.

And then I have a book called *The Gift of Shame* about this developmental shame dynamic I talked about. And another book called *The Attuned Family* how to be a great parent to your kids and a great lover to your spouse because so many couples neglect their love affair when they have three daughters running around all the time. You really got to teach them about mommy and daddy time. We're taking a nap. Don't bother us unless the house is burning down. I run attune family for them.

So you can check out my books or you can go to my website [drkeithwitt.com](http://drkeithwitt.com). You can see excerpts from my books. You get a free copy of *Attuned Family* if you sign up, doesn't cost anything and you get 14 videos over the next 14 weeks of stuff that I found fascinating and important.

I have hundreds of blogs and I have podcasts that I've done with my friend Jeff Saltzman on the Daily Evolver and a podcast I do for Integral Life. There are a lot of interviews.

So [drkeithwitt.com](http://drkeithwitt.com), check out my stuff.

**Alex Howard**

Fantastic. Keith, thank you so much for your time. I've really enjoyed this and I look forward to hopefully more conversations like this in the future.

**Keith Witt**

Me too. Alex, it's been wonderful talking with you.