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Presentation Transcription
Authenticity
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At LifeResource Ministries we think a lot about how Christians can pass on the faith to the next generation. How exactly does that happen? How does a baby grow up in the faith, learn of God's ways, and finally come to a personal, independent, loving relationship with a very *real* Jesus Christ? Of course, God is always at work there. He's the One building the relationship. He's the One drawing us. He's seeking that which has been lost. And the Bible also shows us that parents have a lot to do with that – that God works *through* parents to help pass on faith from one generation to the next. But parents are not the only influence. The congregation also has a lot to do with it as well. So, congregations need to be stable, safe, loving places. So, if we here at LifeResource Ministries ever hope to make a difference for all the children, then we need to talk to adults about their behavior, as well as the behavior of children. So this presentation is one of those where we talk to adults about what *they* can do to make their congregation the kind of environment that helps transmit faith to children.

This is a presentation about congregational health then. What makes a congregation healthy? Well, fortunately for us, an organization called *Natural Church Development* has conducted the largest research project I've ever heard of. And they've provided some solid information for us – information that substantiates what we have known all along from the Bible.

One of the eight areas they've identified that causes a congregation to be healthy is loving relationships. Of course, that's almost a no-brainer, isn't it? That's what Jesus said – *by this shall all men know that you're my disciples, if you have love one for another*. Of course, loving relationships would make a congregation more healthy. So the idea of loving relationships as a part of a healthy spiritual environment would be uncontested among us, wouldn't it? Among Christians. And how many times in the New Testament do we see the apostles encouraging the members to love each other. Well, it's just a recurring theme. So the issue for Christians isn't one of proving that we should be loving as a group of people. The issue is learning *how* to love each other.

In our families, we come from the same genetic stock. With our friends, we get to pick who we love. But when we come to church, the choices of with whom we're going to associate is made for us. And so it's more of a challenge.

Now the NCD literature uses a term when they talk about loving relationships and healthy congregations. And that term that they use is *authentic*. What do they mean by that? Well, they mean a transparent presentation of the self – of not hiding what's inside us. Not being mysterious or closed, but open – able to share with other people what's really important to us and of concern for us, and to be able to have enough courage to be able to say what's important to us. We can't love somebody if we don't know them. You just wind up loving a pretense or an image or an idea we have. But when things become authentic, then we really get to know one another and we really have something genuine to love.

So today we're going to travel through the scriptures to see what the Bible has to say about this issue. And I hope, if we find our group or ourselves out of line with what the scripture says, then we will change our ways. None of us lives in a vacuum. What we do affects others. If we adults find the way to make our congregations warm and open, then the faith of our children will thrive.

Let's go to John 15:15.

Jn. 15:15 – Jesus said, *No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing. But I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.* He didn't keep any secrets. And so Christ, here, is setting the tone for interpersonal relationships in the New Testament church. Now, we're all to serve each other. We're all equals. We're all to be friends. We're to share knowledge. There are to be no secrets. We're to be open with each other. An atmosphere of openness was created by Jesus among the disciples.

Let's see how that played out in the church after Christ ascended to heaven. How do we know that He promoted an atmosphere of openness? Well, think about – beside the fact that He said that He was going share everything with them – think about the time that He told Peter to *get behind Me, Satan*. He didn't have any qualms about talking about what was really important and what He was really serious about. And He just brought things right out in the open. Or the time the two disciples' mother came and wanted them to be on His right hand and left hand in the Kingdom. Somehow that was brought out into the open and they just discussed that. It says the other disciples didn't like it when they heard about that. So there was some authentic discussion about it.

Acts 15:37 – This is an interesting occurrence. *Barnabas was determined to take with them John called Mark. But Paul insisted that they should not take with them the one who had departed from them in Pamphylia, and had not gone with them to the work.* So he thinks this guy isn't dedicated like he should be, and he doesn't want to take him with them. But Barnabas wants to take him. *Then the contention became so sharp that they parted from one another. And so Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, being commended by the brethren to the grace of God.*

Okay, so here's a section out of the book of Acts. Who's the writer of Acts? Luke. And he's writing as a historian, but also as a contemporary of these people, isn't he? He knows both of them. He's writing to people – he says the book's written to a guy named Theophilus, a Greek, who knows both Paul and Barnabas – and brings to light this situation where two ministers are getting into it with each other. In our general way of doing things in the Western world, there would be information management around this kind of issue. And that would all be swept under the carpet so that nobody would know what really happened. But in the New Testament church, the brethren were expected to be mature enough and strong enough to endure the unpleasantness because they valued authenticity. Neither Paul nor Barnabas were shielded from this incident that took place among them. There was just a transparent, authentic, open record showing what really happened, instead of a sanitized version put out for public consumption.

Gal. 2:11 – *Now when Peter had come to Antioch, Paul says, I withstood him to his face, because he was to be blamed. So here's a letter being written to the Galatians about something that Peter did. For before certain men came from James, he would eat with the Gentiles, but when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, fearing those who were of the circumcision. So he's hypocritical. When there are no Jews around, he's friends with the Gentiles. But when Jews are there, he won't have anything to do with the Gentile brethren. And the rest of the Jews, Paul said, also played the hypocrite with him, so that even Barnabas was carried away with their hypocrisy. So when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter before them all, If you, being a Jew, live in the manner of Gentiles and not as the Jews, why do you compel Gentiles to live as Jews? Wow! That wasn't a conversation that they had in the back room somewhere. That was put in the Bible – written in a letter – for everybody to read about! I think the Biblical deal is, that if you want to be an apostle – and Peter did – then you have to take what comes with it. Your behavior is going to be held up to a very high standard. And Peter was not living up to that standard. You see, the only real authority is moral authority. And Peter wasn't living up to the moral authority. And here's Paul holding him responsible – right out in the open for everybody to talk about. To Peter's everlasting credit, he responded appropriately though.*

I Cor. 5:1-13 – Paul is writing a letter to a church. The whole church gets to hear this read on the Sabbath. *It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you. Have you ever taken notice of how much sex is talked about in the Bible? It's everywhere. And here's Paul bringing it right out into the open! And such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles – that a man has his father's wife! And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. And then we'll just jump down to verse 12: For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore put away from yourselves the evil person.* So this is a very serious situation. It's a situation that he knows is going to impact the entire congregation. I mean, all the parents are telling their kids that they should be sexually pure, and here is this guy, living in the midst, who's setting a bad example. So, it impacts the whole congregation. And who's called upon to decide what to do? The whole congregation, aren't they. And he says, "Look, you people need to judge this situation." And that's what they did. Think about how embarrassing that

would be – if all our problems with other members were adjudicated by the group – at least problems that affect everybody in the group. It would be a huge impetus to think realistically about our behavior toward other people.

Matthew 18. Turn to one more with me really quick.

Mt. 18:15 – *Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. Don't just suck it up, and hold it back, and pretend you like him when you're really upset with him. Be open! And if he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. We've gone over this before. That word church doesn't mean ministry. It means church. It means congregation. And if he refuses to hear the church, then let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.* So if there is an unresolved problem that's affecting the whole group, then the whole group is supposed to talk about it. It's supposed to be out in the open. See, the point of this discussion was not to win, or to put somebody down, but it was to come to an understanding of what really happened, and to decide how it should be handled for the benefit of the group. And this understanding was based on open and authentic discussion among the people there. No game playing. No politicking could exist in that kind of situation – as long as they were doing what it says to do.

Okay, so far we've looked at the Bible to see how the New Testament church was authentic – and you'd have to read the entire... all the epistles and the book of Acts to really get a complete picture of all of that. They were transparent. Everything was out in the open. A congregation that is open, however, has to be composed of open people, doesn't it? Because the congregation *is* the people.

So next, we're going to do something that you may not hear very often. We're going to *show* you how to do what we've been talking about today. Actually this presentation would be incomplete unless we showed each person *how* to be more open and how to encourage other people to be open, too.

I confess that I have to keep learning this lesson over and over in my life. I grew up in a family where we stuffed everything. We loved each other, and we said it, but we spent so much time doing our own thing that we didn't really have the connection that we needed. So I have to keep learning this lesson over again. And as I work in my private practice and watch how people live their lives, I just see over and over and over again how really important this is in so many different ways.

Now I want to lead into this skill-teaching time by telling you about a conversation that I had recently. I know a young woman. I've known her since she was six or seven years old. And she has always been a delightful girl. I just have always loved being around this person, although I've not been able to be around her as much as I would have liked. And she has endured a lot of pain in her life. She's been plagued with some physical issues that have made her life difficult. They've left their mark on her heart, I think. And as she's gotten older, I've had more opportunity to be around her, and I've noticed that she's grown a great deal in the

ability to love other people. And this young woman is presently in love. And I've noticed that often when young people fall in love, all their energy goes to that relationship – you know, it's all we can think about. And so they tend to pull back from other relationships for a time. Well, this girl, from all I can see, is completely smitten, and yet she still has time and thought for other people.

We recently met her and her family in an airport. And they were way off down the airport at this baggage carousel, and we were coming down this escalator. And so we were up higher than they were, and she could see us through the crowd. She hurried over to where we were as we came down the escalator. And she hugged and kissed us. And it was as though, at the moment, we were the only two people in the whole world. That's how you felt in her presence. Her attention was completely ours. And I can just see why she has so many friends and has attracted the very serious interest of a handsome young man.

And while we were with this very special young woman – we were having dinner with her and her parents – and I was telling them about a married couple in my private practice, who ten weeks ago were ready to throttle each other – could barely sit in the office together. They were so angry. And yet, at the end of the sessions a few weeks ago, they were back to being in love again. And I was explaining to our friends that I had taught this couple a simple way to get down to the real authentic issues and discuss them without getting angry – a way to open their hearts to each other that's called *empathy listening*. Now, when I said that term, *empathy listening*, that term triggered a number of thoughts with this young woman. And she told us that in her psyche program at college, she had learned that communication was mostly about feedback. She said when someone says something, it's really important to feedback to them so that they know if we got what they said, and then to respond to their communication with authentic communication of our own. And then she said something that I found really, really interesting. She told us that when she was a young teenager, and she would enter into serious discussions with her parents, they would say to her, "I need some feedback from you." So they were inviting her to use all of her new brain wiring to think about how other people were feeling, and to open her heart and share her feelings with them.

We can never make anybody share with us what is in their heart, can we? That's always our choice. They have to be *willing*. People have to be willing. We can't drag it out of them. And some people *never* learn to do this. They resist it all their lives. This young woman had to be a willing participant in that process. It was a choice she made. When we talk about choice, we're talking about character, aren't we? Am I going to be open and loving? Or am I going to be defensive and aloof and cold?

And I was sitting there thinking about how successful she's been at making friends – now the possibility of love in her life – and not only was I profoundly filled with respect for her – for what she's accomplished and her character, but I was also really impressed with her parents. You know, you can know people a long time and you still can learn some amazing things about them as time goes by. Because they have nurtured her in a profoundly helpful way and provided a precious gift to her – the gift of an open heart. And this gift is going to cause her to find love and support everywhere she goes. It does. It's doing it now. She knows how to understand what other people are feeling. She has great radar for feelings. And she makes us

all feel understood and valued when we talk to her. And she knows how to share what's in her heart, which causes us to trust her. She's like an open book. You never have to wonder what she's thinking. It's so easy for us to be open with somebody like that. She's not going to be a mystery that her husband has to try to solve. She's going to express her wants and needs and draw out of her mate his wants and needs too. She will know what he needs and be much better able to make him happy. And he will know what she needs because she's going to tell him. And he's much more likely to be able to provide her needs for her because he doesn't have to guess what she wants. Men are really bad at that, you know. It's really hard for us to guess what women want. It's much better if they just tell us. But openness helps so much with that. So this kind of closeness is going to benefit every aspect of her marriage. Her stress levels are going to be a lot lower. They've proved that by research. Energy levels are going to be higher. Their health is going to be better. The ability to open up and share with other people reduces stress. Mental health is going to be better. People that hold everything in get depressed – not in every case, but that's a tendency. Their sexual relationship is going to be better. Their children will feel understood and loved. A couple like this is just going to be a great benefit to any congregation. Everything is going to be better for them. And the chances that they will be a loving, close couple in a mutually satisfying relationship goes way up, because this young woman, and hopefully her man, have learned two skills. I have a feeling she's going to teach him if he doesn't know them now. She has learned two skills. And these are the skills that I want to talk to you about today.

The first one I know by the term *empathy listening*. And here's how you do it. It's really simple. It's simple to understand and it's not that hard to do. It's hard to remember to do it. When someone talks to us about something that's important to them, what we want to do is put everything out of our minds except what we're getting from them. Now that sounds simple enough, but you know what we're always doing when somebody's talking to us? We're thinking about what we're going to say next, aren't we? Yeah. Can't do that. Got to get rid of that, okay? Put everything out of our mind except them. We look in their eyes. We absorb their body posture. We absorb everything we can about them. We don't think about what we're going to say next. We just think about understanding them. Stephen Covey says, "Seek first to understand." So that's what this is about.

And as they talk to us, we try to understand exactly what the other person is thinking. We don't think about what we're going to say in response. And besides understanding what the other person is thinking, we also must surmise how the other person is feeling. And we take that in through our senses. About ninety percent of that is body language – maybe eighty-five. And ten or fifteen percent is hearing what we've heard. Once the person has said what they want to say, then we respond with a summary of all the important things we heard from them, and we try to add the feelings that the person was feeling. Now this is difficult, because most of us don't talk about our feelings. We just talk about what we're thinking.

So, for example, if our son or daughter says to us, "I'm stressed about school," we could respond with, "School is so hard that you're worried you might not be able to do the work, and you might fail, and that thought is really scary." See that's the feeling that might possibly come with it. Now, don't worry about getting it right, because if you don't get it right, they'll tell you. You give them a chance to do that. And after we've said what we're going to say,

then we ask them if we got what was going on – what we heard. And if they tell us we did, then we come to the second skill, and we respond with what we want to say in response to what they said.

Now, before going on, let's think about what's happened in this little example. What we have done is, we have opened our heart up and taken in something important to someone else. And when we give it back with the feelings added, they know that we've understood their inner feeling. They feel *heard* and understood. Now feeling heard is what causes defensiveness to melt away.

At school I talk to parents who are upset with the principal, or their child's teacher, or sometimes me, or just the school in general. And what I do is I listen, and I let them tell me how angry they are, and how unfair it is, and how frustrating everything is. And then I say something to them like: "You came here because you wanted to make something good happen for your child, and you're really upset and angry and frustrated that you can't seem to find a way to make that happen." And you just watch what happens. It's like throwing a wet blanket on a fire. Then they start nodding their head and...I've probably done this fifty or sixty times in the last year, and it's just amazing what happens! When people feel heard, defensiveness goes away. And they're suddenly not angry anymore. And they suddenly start to talk in a more reasonable manner. They feel heard and understood, and that helps people become less defensive and more open. Great thing for all you single people to learn when you're dating – you know, how to talk to guys and girls. Just makes it so much easier to share more. And husbands and wives, too – everybody. It's great.

So, when I talk to people this way, what they get from that is, "He heard me! The first person at this whole school heard me, and I'm still respected! Here's somebody willing to talk logically to me about this problem – and respectfully. So no need to hide my heart from this person. I can talk to them." It's amazing how it works! It's just the most fabulous thing you've seen in your life! And it's so simple that we tend to discount it and think, "Nah. It can't be that good." It's that good! It's that powerful! It's that important.

Okay, so after we've done that, then it's our turn to respond. That's the second thing that we need to learn how to do. We need to have the courage to show the other person what's in our heart.

So, going back to our example of the boy who's stressed about school, we could say...we told him that we knew that he was frustrated and afraid of failing. So we could say, "The thought of failure is terrifying to you, and while that hasn't happened yet, and probably won't, even if you did fail, I believe there are always ways to overcome failure. If you fail a course, you can make it up in the summer. Or you can take something else. In any event, Jesus Christ is ultimately going to shepherd you into a good life. He's with you. And the adversity He's allowing you to experience now is going to make you stronger. It's a chance to build character. And on top of all that, whatever happens, I will always be there with you, because I love you." So there we've shared our heart with our child. And we've talked directly to the authentic issue that they've brought up. We've brought the feelings out in the open. And we've expressed ours. And so now our child knows that we're supporting them and God is

supporting them no matter what happens. And we now know why our child has been so distant lately. He's been preoccupied. And maybe that will give them the courage they need to face the stress and build the character.

So, seek first to understand, then to be understood. So this kind of talking and listening is extremely helpful in congregations so that people can understand each other and support one another. When we talk about our disagreements, it is so important to really hear other people and let them know that they've been heard – and also to express ourselves.

Now, come on, isn't this just a big batch of psychobabble? Empathy listening. Get out of town! Well, let's see if it is. Let's go to Psalms 119, verse 29.

Psa. 119:29 – This is David. This is *King David*. And he says, *I have chosen the way of truth. "I've made a character decision – a choice. I'm going to choose the way of truth." Your judgments I have laid before me. I cling to your testimonies. O LORD, do not put me to shame! I will run the course of your commandments, for You shall enlarge my heart.* Now the word translated *enlarge* – from Hebrew into English – means to open wide – to open wide. When somebody says they've chosen the way of truth, that means they're not going to hide what's inside any more. They're not going to be defensive. "As I study Your commandments, you're going to make my heart grow open. I'm going to be able to take things in and give things out."

Paul said that his heart was enlarged toward the Corinthians. And what he meant by that was that he loved them – that he was willing to talk openly to them. And you think about the letters he wrote. Now there was a guy that knew how to lay his heart out on paper. He was a very open person. So, right here – with this scripture – we have gone from theory to application, from platitude to practicality, from talk to authentic Christianity. This is one of the *big* things that being a Christian is all about. It's a moral challenge for us. Can we live the faith in our everyday lives? Can we open our hearts to each other? Or are we going to talk about it and not do it?

Why is it so hard? Why does David say, "God, I'm thinking about this – living this way of truth – and putting my heart up - but *please* don't bring me to shame." Because when we do open our hearts, we become vulnerable. Other people can hurt us. That's what that's all about.

Several years ago Elaine and I attended a marital counseling workshop. It was a workshop for counselors, and we were learning how to do marital therapy. And as it happened, of all the people that were there, there were only two married couples in the audience. So, of course, the psychologist asked both of us to be guinea pigs. So the other couple went first, and when it was our turn, the therapist asked us to select a personal issue, and this therapist did marital therapy with us in front of a crowd of people. When we got finished, we had a break, and the man from the first couple who had gone before us came up and said, "I want to thank you for your willingness to let us learn from your personal lives. I know that I felt extremely vulnerable after we finished." I mean, there they are resolving a personal issue between the two of them in front of a crowd. Of course I didn't feel that way myself – no, but I did feel a

draft, because it seemed as though I was standing around drinking coffee with this group, and I was the only there who was stark naked!

What does it take to be able to make oneself vulnerable to other people – to share our hearts with others? And again, why is this important? Well, there are two reasons why this is so important for us as Christians. The first is that unless we are willing to be vulnerable, we can never really be loved. If someone says they love us, and yet we haven't really let them know who we are completely, what are they loving? Well, they're loving an idea that they have about what we're like, but they're not really loving us, because we haven't been authentic with them. There isn't an authentic relationship there. And that doesn't really satisfy our need to be loved. We want people to love us in spite of all of our problems and our weaknesses and who we are at the core. And unless we can show people what that is, then we're never going to be satisfied with love.

Our way is that we don't want the important people in our lives to see our weaknesses. And so we cover them up. And when we do that, then we have to start to put on an act, and we have to keep up pretenses. And that's why so many people are disillusioned after they get married. I was talking to a woman who is a client in my therapy practice, and I was just getting to know her, and I asked about her friends. And she said – as best I can remember, this is a word-for-word quote – “I don't have any friends. Friendship is too hard. People hurt you when they leave you.” She wept the whole forty-five minutes she was in there. And there she sits – isolated and alone. So, we can't be loved if we aren't willing to be vulnerable and open ourselves up to other people, because they're not really loving *us*, are they? We're all limited by the information that we can take in about others.

The second thing may even be worse. If we always hold everything in – all the stresses, all the hurts, all the losses – to do that is *so* painful that most of us close off our hearts. We build walls of protection around them. And that means that we lose the ability to love other people – no longer able to take others into our heart because of the wall we've constructed to protect ourselves. And that leads to depression. And it leads to isolation as well.

Look what Jesus said. Let's read that scripture again – John 15:15.

Jn. 15:15 – *No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing. But I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.* So there's Jesus' example to us. He showed us His heart. He opened Himself up to His disciples. He made Himself vulnerable. One of them hurt Him. One of them hurt Him very badly, and betrayed Him to death with a cool kiss on His cheek. But He was still courageous enough to be that vulnerable. So this is a *blockbuster* biblical principle. Jesus Christ, the Lord of the universe, does not keep secrets! His heart is open.

There are so many ways to be hurt in this life. There's the loss of loved ones. There's the loss of the love of loved ones. There are betrayals. There is divorce. There are family breakups. And we're always wounded when these things happen to us. And the natural inclination is to build a wall around our heart, to withdraw – cut off the blood from the part of the heart that's hurt and let it shrivel up and die so that it doesn't hurt anymore.

You know how we talk about this in psychology? We call this *defensiveness*. And I've thought about this a lot. And I really believe that defensiveness.... You know, the purpose of psychotherapy, by the way, is to separate people from their defenses, because everybody recognizes that human defensiveness is harmful to us in the long run. As therapists, we also respect people's defenses because they sometimes serve a purpose. But the defense is almost worse than the original thing. So I've thought a lot about what that is – when I encountered that concept of defensiveness in my studies in my training. I started thinking about Adam and Eve and how open they were – and how authentic – until the devil talked to them. And then what happened after that? Well, they started feeling really naked, didn't they – or realized that they were really naked. And they started hiding out. They felt vulnerable. And they tried to lie their way out of their situation. They weren't going to be open with God anymore. Isn't that interesting? I really believe that we've put our finger on the part of human nature that comes from the devil. And it's defensiveness.

God shows us a better way to deal with the hurts that happen to us in this life. And it's called *walking by faith*. And it's what all of us ought to be doing. David said, "God, I'm going to follow Your law. That's going to enlarge my heart to other people. I'm going to be open, because Your law is the law of love. I'm trusting You to take care of my heart – to heal it when I'm hurt – to help me not withdraw from others, but to always be reaching out to people. So the question becomes one of trusting in God rather than self – rather than self-defense. It's a *choice* that we have to make.

Before concluding I want to offer one caveat. If we're not used to being open with our feelings, the place to start is with the people who already love us. The chances of being hurt are much less. And so this is a very good thing to teach children, who are tender and need to be shepherded through life's meanness. You'll recall my friends, who asked their daughter to practice being open with them – not with strangers. So she learned to be open with her parents first. It takes a great deal of courage to be open. That's why so few of us are able to do it. And that's true, because when we're open, we're vulnerable. And yet, that *is* the example set by Jesus Christ who made Himself vulnerable for our sakes.

I found something that says succinctly what I've been talking about it. It's a poem attributed to Mother Teresa. I won't quote all of it – just some of my favorite lines. It says:

People are often unreasonable, illogical and self-centered.
Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives.
Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies.
Be successful anyway.

If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you.
Be honest and frank anyway.

You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and God.
It was never between you and them anyway.

So, what we've talking about today is the character issue. It's an issue of Godly character. Are we willing to make ourselves vulnerable for Christ's sake, as Christ made Himself vulnerable for ours? If we're willing to put on the character of God – which is open and willing to risk vulnerability without defenses – God promises to take care of us. Our ability to exhibit Godly character trait in our congregation is one important component to building a healthy group.

If I could add one line to that poem, I would add this:

If you are open and loving, people will sometimes hurt you.
Be open and loving anyway.