In recent times, philosophy has rejoined the lifeworld. Partly under the pressure of modern psychology and psychoanalysis, philosophy has left its empyrean heights and become attentive (again) to the welter of human feelings and emotions. Most prominent among these emotions is the ever-present urge or impulse called “desire.” No doubt, philosophical attention to emotions and above all to desire is commendable and enriching. Yet, care must be taken lest philosophy loses its way and becomes drowned in (what is called) “emotivism.”

The need for caution is evident in the case of desire. Just because it is so readily accessible or such a widely felt impulse, there is a danger that its meaning slips from our grasp. For, if we just stay with the obvious—the fact of desire, or that we desire what we desire—thinking quickly gets stranded. If we are satisfied with just saying “we desire” or “we desire what we desire,” this seems to be the end of the story. And today, in ordinary or common-sense discourse, this is often the end. In our age of consumerism, human beings are defined as desiring creatures, as beings who crave or desire to satisfy their desires—in fact, as beings who desire to have more and more goods and obtain emotional satisfaction from having these goods.

But can this really be the end of the story? Surely, humans are not only desiring, but also thinking and judging beings. As philosophers we remember an older tradition which distinguishes between what we desire and what is truly “desirable.” In some traditions—for instance, a certain kind of Platonism and Kantianism—desire and the desirable are sharply differentiated and even segregated, to the point that a gulf is erected between the seemingly good (found in the Platonic “cave”) and the really good and truly desirable (outside the cave). Yet, in this case a problem arises. For, if the focus is placed entirely on the “really good” and “truly desirable,” the dimension of ordinary desire is likely to be sidelined or dismissed as spurious and misleading. But how can something be really “desirable,” if it is not also somehow desired?
To be sure, desire or the “desired” and the “desirable” are not simply the same. Yet, notwithstanding their difference, there must also be some kind of linkage or passageway between them. We know of such a linkage in the work of Aristotle who distinguished but also connected desire and virtue (orexis and arête). Among more recent philosophers, John Dewey provides some helpful guideposts. In an essay on the “Moral Struggle,” Dewey writes—in a nearly Kantian vein—that “the heart of the moral struggle” is the opposition between desire and duty. We may distinguish, he notes, between actual desire as satisfaction and a desire “based on the idea that the end is desirable—that it ought to be desired.” However, going beyond Kant, the same essay insists that the desirable must also “appeal” to the human heart and mind, such that duty may “awaken” human desire and guide it toward the desirable (372–3).

In the following, I want to turn to another thinker who, while distinguishing desire and the desirable, also forged a passage-way between them. The thinker is Nicolaus of Cusa, also called Cusanus (1401–1464), and the passage in his case is ultimately the way of love—that is, the way of loving and being loved and the linkage between them. In his study devoted to his work, Ernst Cassirer maintained that Cusanus can rightly be considered “the first modern thinker” (10, 13). As I shall try to show, however, Cusanus was also a “more than modern” thinker, someone able to speak to us today (in, what some call, our “postmodern” time). Basically, as it seems to me, at the heart of Cusanus’s life-work is an existential transformation or pedagogy: a practical as well as philosophical journey animated by love (traditionally expressed as amor Dei intellectualis). In many ways, his entire life can be seen as a restless journey propelled by a sincere desire for learning and an intense love for the “desirable,” goodness and truth. For present purposes, I want to follow him on part of his journey, focusing on two major aspects: his emphasis on experiential learning, in the ordinary lifeworld, and his concern with inter-religious harmony and peace.

I A Layman’s Pedagogy

In many of his writings, Cusanus privileges the outlook of the ordinary layman, the man of the street or the market place (idiota). No fewer than three of his important texts carry the term “layman” in their titles: The Layman on Wisdom, The Layman on the Mind / Spirit, The