

There Is More Love

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Love. A huge, important, but difficult topic. One which I feel compelled to preach about every now and then, because it is so central to my understanding and experience of life, spirituality, and religion. In fact, it seems to me, the one glaring omission from those seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism that we talk about so often, is any explicit mention of Love.

Perhaps love is taken to be implicit in those principles that speak of things like compassion and justice. And if you look at the enumerated sources of our Living Tradition, you will find reference to “the transforming power of love,” and the Christian call to “love our neighbors as ourselves.” But if I were to reformulate our basic principles, I would find some way to include Love, which is after all, as Maren stated in her Welcome this morning, the very spirit of this church.

As with most topics I address from this pulpit, I will not presume to give you the final word on love. It’s too much larger than me, or any person, for that to be a possibility. And so my more modest aim is to share a few thoughts with you, and to encourage your own ongoing reflections on the topic of love, and your own continuing cultivation of love in your lives.

I have used as my excuse for talking about love today (as if I needed an excuse), the recent observance of St. Valentine’s day, an annual holiday devoted to the celebration of love. The original St. Valentine was the Bishop of Interamna. He was an early Christian martyr who lived in northern Italy in the third century and was put to death on February 14 somewhere around 270AD for flouting the ban on Christianity.

It’s not completely clear how St. Valentine’s feast day, Feb. 14, became associated with love, especially romantic love. One explanation links it to an old Roman festival called Lupercalia, which was celebrated right around this same time of year. One custom associated with Lupercalia was a lottery where the names of Roman maidens were placed in a box and drawn out by the young men. Each man accepted the girl whose name he drew as his love.

That sounds like a plausible explanation. In any case, today St. Valentine’s Day has become an annual occasion - with the encouragement of the greeting card, flower, and chocolate industries - to express our love to those nearest and dearest to us. Of course we should be expressing our love, in words and deeds, all through the year. But I think it’s not a bad idea to have an occasional special reminder, especially so long as we manage to focus more on the authentic, underlying sentiments, than simply on the outward trappings.

In honor of the observance of St. Valentine’s Day, I’d like to share one love poem with you. It’s called “Do You Love Me?”, and was written by the Sufi mystic, Rumi:

A lover asked his beloved,
Do you love yourself more
than you love me?

The beloved replied,
I have died to myself
and I live for you.

I've disappeared from myself
and my attributes.
I am present only for you.

I have forgotten all my learning,
but from knowing you
I have become a scholar.

I have lost all my strength,
but from your power
I am able.

If I love myself
I love you.
If I love you
I love myself.

Those of you who are, or have been, in love may recognize some of the feelings expressed there. There's a sense of a blurring of boundaries, of a powerful connection that takes you beyond your usual preoccupation with yourself. There's both an expansion of your world, and a source of greater meaning. And yet, it's not a matter of placing the other above yourself, of loving them more. For the poem concludes, "If I love myself / I love you. / If I love you / I love myself."

True love is a reciprocal, mutually-reinforcing relationship. When you give your love to someone, it's not as if you have lost it. For it comes back to you in ways you may not even have imagined. Love is not a finite resource, which you must conserve so as not to be without. No, love breeds more love. The more you give, the more you get. It's kind of like magic. It's been said that you can give without loving, but you can't love without giving. And according to Elbert Hubbard, a famous American collector of sayings, "The love we give away is the only love we keep."

And of course, all this does not apply only to romantic love between two individuals. It applies to every relationship, casual or intimate, individual or communal, romantic or platonic. Remember that Jesus called on his followers, not to love their neighbors instead of themselves, but to love their neighbors *as* themselves. Loving your neighbor and loving yourself are part of the same package; a part of recognizing that, in some sense, you and your neighbor are one.

Part of the challenge of thinking about and talking about love is that that one small, four-letter word is asked to encompass so much. It just doesn't seem right to try and pack it all into one word. As you're probably aware, the ancient Greeks had several different words to refer to different kinds of love. *Eros* refers to passionate love, with sensual desire and longing – what we would call romantic love. *Philia* denotes the love which accompanies friendship. It includes loyalty to friends, family, and community. *Agape*, which is the word for love in modern Greek, refers to a more general affection than that accompanied by sensual attraction. This is the term used widely in the New Testament, to refer to the relationship between Jesus and his disciples, and in Jesus' instructions to "love your neighbor as yourself", and to "love one another as I have loved you."

Agape is the kind of love meant when one asserts things like “God is Love” or “love makes the world go ‘round.” It’s more than a feeling, or even a quality of feeling. It goes beyond that to a deep-seated commitment and devotion to the well-being of the object of love. To me, it grows out of the recognition of the inherent spiritual connection of all beings. That’s why, ideally, we even love our enemies. Not because we like them, or because they deserve it, but because they too are a part of the interdependent web of all existence. They, too, are a part of us.

(Incidentally, if you’re interested in further exploring this concept of loving your enemies, I commend to you the chapter in Anne Lamott’s book *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith* called “Loving Your President: Day 2”.)

Donald Grey Barnhouse, one of the prominent preachers of the twentieth century had another way of trying to express both the centrality of love and its broad scope - how it intersects and interacts with many aspects of life. He wrote:

Love is the key. Joy is love singing. Peace is love resting. Long-suffering is love enduring. Kindness is love’s touch. Goodness is love’s character. Faithfulness is love’s habit. Gentleness is love’s self-forgetfulness. Self-control is love holding the reins.

You might think of Love as the glue that holds together all that is worthwhile and positive in this world and this life. Or you might think of it as that force, or source of power in the universe that makes positive transformation possible. The transforming power of love. I’ll tell you, my faith in that power is at the core of my spiritual convictions. It is what gives me the strength and the hope to carry on even when hope appears unwarranted or when love seems glaringly absent.

To leave you with a small taste of that transforming power of love, I’d like to close this morning with a story from an author known simply as Annie, who wrote a book called *Love: My Search for Truth*.

It was early morning, yet already it had been a stupendously bad day. One thing after another. The downward spiral continued when a large pitcher of orange juice slid from my hands and smashed to the floor. Glass and sticky juice spewed to the farthest corners of the kitchen, slithering down cabinets and appliances, puddling at my feet.

Stunned, I looked at the mess. Then I dropped dejectedly down to the floor, my eyes filling with overdue tears. The tears came from begrudging and angry acceptance that "today is just not my day."

Bad day or not, errands had to be done. Filled with angst and negative mental baggage, I got in my car to drive into town. In the few minutes it took to travel to the bank I made a decision. I would be careful not to pass my bad day off to anyone else. I would be cordial and polite. And I would NOT retaliate when that harried driver pulled quickly and rudely in front of me causing me to slam on my breaks, dumping the contents of my drink onto the front car seat!

Standing in line at the bank, I was silently talking to myself. Actually, I was scolding myself. All of the events that had accumulated and contributed

to my bad day were, in reality, so very minor and trivial. I was over-reacting. I was indulging in self-pity. I tried to imagine the innumerable, individual lives that had been effected by 9/11, by the war in Iraq, by the tsunami.

For the second time that day my eyes filled with tears as I realized how disconnected I felt from all those individuals who are trying to cope with truly traumatic events in their lives. They all seemed so distant and unknowable, and this justified and intensified my belief that I was being self-centered and selfish. I was sure that all my efforts to be a caring and loving person were for naught.

A voice broke through my mental distractions. Somehow I had mechanically finished my bank transaction and the teller was trying to get my attention. "Young lady," she was saying, "Young lady!"

I looked up and into the eyes of the bank teller, a silver-haired grandmother with a gentle beauty. Her keen eyes reflected concern as she leaned forward and softly said, "I don't know what is happening inside of you, but please, believe me when I tell you that - everything will be okay."

And then she did something quite marvelous. My hands were resting on the counter. She took her hands and placed them gently on top of mine. The touch was quick but electric. And in that moment my world shifted.

In the moment of her touch my self-doubt vanished. I found understanding and acceptance. I knew that love was being channeled through the heart of this beautiful woman directly into my heart. I was infused with a profound awareness - that I am loved. I was speechless. I smiled. It was my first smile of the day. But it would not be my last, as from that moment on my entire day was transformed.

Perhaps without even knowing it, the kind-hearted bank teller allowed herself to be a conduit of divine love. She was instrumental in transforming a day that seemed destined to be a day of tears into a day of smiles. The seemingly small gesture of this gentle woman not only changed the course of my day, it became a powerful reminder in my life. The profound effect of that one simple, loving touch remains in my heart to this day.

More people than not scoff at the idea of world peace. Laugh if you wish. As for myself, I believe it is possible to transform our world ... one act of loving kindness at a time.

Remember: A simple smile. A warm handshake. A kind word. A gentle hug. Through these, we open the transformative power of love.

The song we'll be singing in a few moments says that there is more love somewhere. And not only more love, but more hope, more peace, and more joy. So where is this somewhere? It is, as Annie discovered, anywhere there is a simple smile, a warm handshake, a gentle hug. And it all starts, right here, in each of our individual hearts. If we can find the love in our hearts and spread it around wherever we go, there will be ever so much more love right here and everywhere.

So may it be.