

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“Commitment to Love”

Rev. Sam Trumbore March 7, 2021

Opening Words

Love is very important to Unitarian Universalists. The belief in a loving God who loved humanity so much that God couldn't send anyone to hell was the beginning of Universalism. The belief in a God who recognized such potential for goodness in humanity that God would lift us up, excluding none is a foundation of Unitarianism. Though today we do not agree on the nature or existence of God, love is the unifying principle that holds Unitarian Universalism together.

That doesn't mean love is easy, far from it. Today we consider how commitment helps us in the challenges of bringing love to life.

Readings

From *Loving Each Other* by Leo Buscaglia (1984)

“And they lived happily ever after.”

So goes the eternal myth of loving each other. The fantasy that being in love and forming relationships based upon love will solve all of life's problems and provide us with deserved instant and lasting happiness. The myth is delightful. The reality is too often fierce. But we love to believe in fairy tales. “And they lived happily ever after,” says Joshua Liebman, “is one of the most tragic sentences in literature. It is tragic because it tells a falsehood about life and has led countless generations of people to expect something from human existence which is not possible on this fragile, failing imperfect earth.” ...

Learning to live with and love others requires skills *as* delicate and studied as those of a surgeon, the master builder and the gourmet cook, none of whom would dream of practicing each profession without first acquiring the necessary knowledge. Still, we fragile, ill-equipped humans plow ahead, forming friendships, marrying, raising families with few or no actual resources at hand to meet the overwhelming demands. It is no surprise, therefore, that relationships which often begin with joyous wide-eyed naivete too often end in disillusionment, bitterness and despair.

From *Conscious Loving: The Journey to Co-Commitment* by Gay and Kathlyn Hendricks (1990)

Love is a powerful force. If we do not know how to handle its power, we slip very quickly into its powerfully painful distortions, such as conflict and co-dependence. But know this: It is resistance to love that causes the problems. There is nothing wrong with love. Love is a force that focuses its light on the deepest shadowy parts of ourselves. It brings to the

surface the parts of ourselves that we most desperately try to keep hidden. When these parts of ourselves emerge, we often retreat, blaming love and those who have loved us.

Words by Valerie Kaur who spoke Wednesday night (3/3/2021), offering the "Willard M. Kiplinger Lecture on Ethics in American Society. The title of her talk was: [The Ethic of Revolutionary Love](#).

Revolutionary Love is the call of our times. In an era of enormous rage, we must resist dangerous policies and acts of hate that threaten our most vulnerable communities. But resistance alone will not deliver us: We will burn out or even start to mirror the rage we are resisting.

So we are staging a cultural intervention to birth a new future. Our mission: to equip our movements and communities with tools to labor in love — love for others, our opponents, and ourselves. When we pour love in these three directions, then love becomes revolutionary.

Sermon

“We are answering the call of love, hands joined together as hearts beat as one. Emboldened by faith, we dare to proclaim we are answering the call of love.”

You probably remember the original words of Hymn 1014 in our “Teal” hymnal, *Singing the Journey*, “**Standing** on the **Side** of Love” and the ableist controversy about the reference to “standing.” The author of the lyric, the Rev. Jason Shelton, wrote those words inspired by UUA President Bill Sinkford in 2004.

Shelton was meeting with Sinkford at the UUA headquarters when word came that President George W. Bush had called for a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage. Sinkford took a call to tell a reporter: “We are standing on the side of love.” Shelton started scribbling notes and lyrics. The song seemed to jump out of the walls of 25 Beacon Street in “one of the most powerful, sacred, creative moments I’ve ever experienced,” [Shelton said].

UU World article [Fall 2017](#)

The recent change in lyrics to make them more inclusive *doesn't diminish* the song's power to communicate our Unitarian Universalist commitment to love. Our hymnals are full of beautiful songs extolling the value and beauty of love. We may not be able to agree about the nature or absence of divinity in the universe, but we do come together with an embrace of the importance of love as a core value of Unitarian Universalism.

We are hardly alone in appreciating the value of love. The great writers and poets lift our spirits with words like:

“Till I loved I never lived,” by Emily Dickenson

“Love one another, but make not a bond of love: Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.” “And think not you can direct the course of love, for love, if it finds you worthy, directs your course.” by Kahlil Gibran

Hafiz extolls, “The heart is a the thousand-stringed instrument that can only be tuned with Love.”

And this by the suddenly controversial Dr. Seuss, “You know you’re in love when you don’t want to fall asleep because reality is finally better than your dreams.”

Enthralled as humanity is with love, be it romantic or familial or friendship or of the saints or the holy or the divine, *sustaining* such a relationship over time, is not easy. As Leo Buscaglia puts it so well, there isn’t a “happily ever after” for any loving relationship. Loving is subject to “the cruel slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,” as Hamlet lamented. And in the challenges, decisions must be made to act or not to act.

Close and intimate relationships are the ones that torment us the most. In the hormone spiked bloom of fresh love, our beloved glows on the street like a neon raspberry. Our beloved can do no wrong. Or if they make a misstep, it can be easily ignored compared to the enchanted glow of their radiance. What cruel twist of fate, that the vision deluding mist must eventually dissipate and the reality of the other person is exposed in full sunlight. “Where o where were those warts and blemishes when I first set eyes upon you?” laments the disillusioned lover.

Another great source of stress for those who marry are in-laws. Most of us don’t do a complete inventory of who we are agreeing to be in relationship with when we marry. And those relations usually don’t get a say in the family they are going to have to join as part of a marriage. There are likely to be unpleasant relations we’d rather avoid. And they will be there to celebrate weddings, baptisms, and funerals, Thanksgiving and Christmas, for the rest of our lives.

Although we might get along with our neighbors, draw the circle wide enough in your neighborhood and you are likely to experience conflict. Neighborhood or Condominium Associations inspire some of the most vicious and hostile behavior you’ll ever encounter. I would like to challenge Jesus to be the President of a Condo Board that [needs to raise its fees to pay for capital improvements](#). Love my neighbor? Yeh, right!

And let us not look back with rosy colored glasses on the Civil Rights era of the 1960’s. We tend to forget how many losses there were. Every victory was hard fought and fragile. Waves of hate had to be encountered at every step. People were injured and died, Black and White, but many, many more Black, Indigenous and People of Color over the last 400 years. I continue to be amazed at the depth of resistance that blocks and tries to reverse any gains in undoing white supremacy.

What discourages me most is watching *myself* turn away from love. A surge of anger can easily harden my heart. One of the reasons I meditate every day and practice loving kindness meditation is to catch anger before it overwhelms my self-reflective mindfulness. Knowing that anger is present, can allow me to choose my response. Getting flooded with anger can interfere with choosing wiser ways to respond in the moment. Intense desire can also cloud my mind and stimulate unwise selfish behavior that turns away from love. The problems with lack of love in the world are not all out there ... they are in here too.

What I've found can make a difference is making **a commitment** to love. Where we put our energy **consistently and reliably** is what will move us and transform us.

Famously, Hamlet wasn't much into commitment and spends most of the play waffling. Lack of commitment in relationships can easily sabotage them.

What gets in the way most often are strong emotions that trigger old patterns of relationship behavior. The parents or adults around us, while we were growing up, modeled how to behave in relationships, programming our default settings. Unfortunately, strong emotions can disengage the frontal cortex and activate less evolved, more reactive brain centers. We then, in a sense, switch on "relationship auto-pilot" and let go of the controls. By auto-pilot, I mean the habitual programmed response we observed and practiced as children. The challenge of commitment to love is to turn off relationship auto-pilot, take the controls, and develop wiser and healthier relationship skills.

What helps me move out of reactivity and reactivate my cerebral cortex is being curious. The Buddha highly praised investigation of the present moment as one of the [seven key factors](#) that lead toward enlightenment. Getting curious opens the opportunity to learn and grow. What are the fears and worries that are operating in each of us? What do each of us fear losing in this situation? What is being protected from harm?

One important question to investigate is if there is an "unmet need" that is driving the situation on either side. Marshall Rosenberg [wisely identified needs](#) as the drivers of human behavior. In their elemental form, needs are basic and universal human drives for meaning and value. Everyone needs safety. Everyone needs sustenance, shelter and rest. Everyone needs autonomy, connection and care. Whether a need can be met or not, they are universally appreciated human values. When I name and appreciate a need that is present for another person in the present moment, **that itself** is an act of love. I am saying, "I see you and I appreciate you in this moment whether I can help you meet that need or not." A commitment to love is a commitment **to move toward compassion**, toward compassionate communication.

All this takes effort. It takes effort to resist the temptation to go on relationship auto-pilot. It takes effort to move from reactivity to curiosity. It takes **effortful attention** to pursue the needs another person might be experiencing. That might mean bringing into question one's own beliefs, assumptions, and interpretations. That might mean doubting one's ability to observe and interpret reality. This inner process might be quite unsettling to question oneself – for another's benefit.

What I'm suggesting right now takes a lot of faith in love, in life, and in humanity itself.

Right here is the **biggest barrier** to commitment to love. A **lack** of faith.

I doubt I need to persuade anyone how wretched human beings can be toward each other. Every day, people harm each other. Some go further and kill each other. Not only are people regularly harming each other, they harm and kill other species of life too, to the point of extinction.

Regularly, as part of my Buddhist practice, I contemplate [the three poisons](#) that affect all life forms: craving, hatred and ignorance. These poisons make humanity incredibly destructive. Coming into consciousness in separate bodies that have individual needs that often don't get met, **profoundly**

interferes with our genetically programmed, natural inclination toward love. The three poisons *are also* genetically programmed into us *to force us* to attend to the needs of our bodies. The Buddha wisely recognized the widespread and relentless suffering that these evolved methods of survival have caused, not just humanity, but all life forms as well.

Witnessing the relentless suffering of humanity can be quite discouraging. Current incarnations tormenting us include the coming catastrophes of climate change, technologically enabled big brother surveillance, second amendment civilian militarization with powerful weapons, drone warfare, hostility to immigrants, desertification, weather extremes, and on and on. We humans are threatening the ability of our planet to sustain life.

I can easily get rather negative about my fellow bi-peds. Rather nihilistic even.

Contemplating the future today can majorly interfere with one's willingness to make a commitment to love, *especially* to love thy neighbor who is being such a jerk.

An example of this kind of discouragement happened after the election in November. The level of polarization between those who accepted the results of the election and those who believed the election was stolen, reminded me of the vitriol following the 2000 election. It seems like the division between Reds and Blues has never been this deep before, stoked by the losing candidate who will not concede.

[On Thursday night](#), the group I've mentioned before, [Braver Angels](#), had a Zoom debate on this issue. Braver Angels exists to connect Americans in dialogue over their differences. They asked the question, "Should the outcome of the 2020 election be up for debate?" There was internal division within Braver Angels if this should *even be* debated, but the majority held that if they were going to be true to their mission, they'd need to take on extremely polarizing issues, like this one.

I was impressed by the quality of the presentations on both sides and the respectful way the debate was structured. The debate went back and forth from the pro side speaking for 4 minutes with Q and A followed by 4 minutes for the con side with Q and A. All questions were addressed to the chair and answered to the chair to lower the emotional temperature of the exchange.

I heard some statements and proposals from the Red presenters that interested and surprised me. What quickly became clear, at least to me, was the value of a Red side proposal for further investigation of both voter fraud and voter suppression by, say, a presidential commission. Such a commission could respond to the need for increasing and restoring confidence in our voting systems. This could be a way to rebuild mutual trust in elections as a level playing field. Little is more important in our democracy than confidence in our voting methods and systems. And we here in Albany are no stranger to the idea that there *can be* corruption in that process – as I heard one Red speaker from LA County alleging to have witnessed.

Having listened to a respectful, reasoned debate between opposing political views, I felt much more willing to be in relationship with those a couple of hours ago I *probably* would have wanted to reject *without* hearing what they had to say. Now, maybe, I could even care about them as my neighbor.

As Valerie Kaur [puts it](#):

We've got to reclaim love, not as an abstract ethic, or as a rush of good feeling, not as a form of sentimentality, or a practice of civility, no, it is time to reclaim love for a new era...as a form of sweet labor...a choice we make again and again.

Answering the Call of love is not just being willing to be in relationship with those who are like us. Love demands more of us. Love brings to the surface the parts of ourselves that we most desperately try to keep hidden. Sometimes we build a barrier to keep love tightly bound. Corrupted by fear, unwilling to hear, denying the beauty we've found.

A bright new day *can* dawn when we make *and keep* a commitment to love. A commitment to love can help us grow through the limitations we've imposed on love in the search for self-protection. We fool ourselves if we believe love can be contained, managed or controlled.

The power of love is why we exist at all.

Love will guide us, peace has tried us, hope inside us will lead the way, on the road from greed to giving. Love will guide us, through the hard night.

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