

What's Love Got to Do With It?
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Mt. Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church

Meditation

Let us open our hearts this morning to love.

If we are feeling tired, let us give up a piece of that tiredness so we can be renewed anew by love.

If we are feeling lonely, let us renew our hope in the power of love so that we may reach out once again and take a chance on connecting.

If we are feeling cynical, let us walk back towards a realism that knows that progress is possible, though perfect progress is not.

Let us open our hearts further to a larger love. Let us not be afraid to love boldly and to be visionary in our love, to know that our love can hold the hands of our special ones and also embrace the truths of the stranger, of the one in need, of our own hearts' most secret needs.

Let us open our hearts in faith.

In the silence that follows, let us recognize the largest webs of connection that hold us, let us let the largest glimpse of love we dare into our being.

Let us open our hearts to a large and generous love.

The roses on the cover of your program, are, in the actual piece, a deep red—the roses of passionate love. The artist, Michael, was a guest the first season the Charlottesville church we served hosted PACEM, a low-barrier shelter for men who did not meet the sobriety or behavioral standards of the other shelters. The goal was to assist people into more permanent housing, and Michael was set up in an apartment over a convenience store. As we talked, I learned about Michael's art and helped him launch an art card business. Now if you sell greeting cards, you want me as a customer. Since I was his first customer and maybe because I was one of the few people ever to be present to how much art meant to him, Michael would drop by packets of pictures at my office from time to time. The snippets of beauty he created were as real as his place below the lowest rung on the economic ladder. His pictures, often on salvaged paper and drawn with felt tips well-used by our church's kindergarteners, seemed like illustrations for the storybook version of our covenant as Unitarian Universalists, the first principle of which calls us to affirm the dignity and worth of *each* human life.

Sermon: On this Valentine's Day, when red roses are for sale all over the roadsides, I want to talk about love, the love that is a deep commitment to truly *be* with another—whether the other is your beloved or your children making choices that frighten you or your best friend who has done something seemingly unforgivable or the woman on welfare holding up the line filling out her WIC coupons. This love requires *presence*—a noticing of and a willingness to stay in the room

when things get less fun, whether it is spending the night with a sick friend or discovering new ways to be together when things do *not* go as you had planned. Love is being able to sit with a sorrow you cannot make vanish for someone you love more than you ever thought possible or acceptance of mental or physical limitations in people you loved before these changes. This kind of love—a deep and relentlessly present love, a real and creative love—has everything to do with who we are as religious people.

“What’s love but a second hand emotion?” Tina Turner was 45 when “What’s Love Got to Do With it” was an unexpected success. Hers was a seasoned knowledge of love, much different than her first hit single, “A Fool in Love” more than two decades before. In her come-back hit, she knew what love is and what love isn’t. Love is not abusive and love is also not just weak-kneed sentimentality, not just “a sweet, old-fashioned notion.” Love is being present and getting real.

Real love is counter-cultural in a society that too often only wants to emphasize the superficial and the easy. Barbara Ehrenreich, the social observer, released a book last year, *Bright-sided*, about the shadow side of positive thinking. The danger, she says, is that perennial positive thinking keeps people from engaging with and thus changing the less-positive things. An emphasis on being positive at all costs norms the idea of feeling good and suggests that anything that might require effort—or even giving up something you want now for some larger or longer-term goal—is wrong. In our personal relationships, we can get stuck in both extremes—emphasizing the positive too much or getting stuck in the negative. Ehrenreich is not suggesting we all become cynics and grumps, just that we embrace realism. With one in ten families and almost one in five kids lived in poverty,¹ a call for realism seems in order. This reality is why we will host homeless families in our Bortin Hall soon when we welcome the Winter Nights program.

Here is some reality about Michael’s story. For a while, Michael seemed back on that economic ladder, headed back to some form of stability. He had the apartment; a regular, if low-wage job; reconnection with the art that no one in his family had ever valued or understood; a girlfriend; and people who were willing to take a risk or three for him. Michael’s seemed like the storybook happy ending. At the getting-real level, the problems that had landed Michael on the street were not gone. He became depressed about the squalor of his apartment where the college kids partied all night almost every night and the noise kept him awake. He started abusing substances again. He lost his job, got another, lost that. Over time, our conversation stopped.

Real love lets you sit by the side of someone you love who is suffering, or dying or sick. It is the celebratory love that lets you relish the strength that people didn’t know they had. Real love is what gets you below the facts, what takes you deeper to understanding—and it is a love in which the bounds of giving and receiving merge into the creation of some new understanding and way of being, not in an unhealthy way rather in a way that leads to greater good. Next Saturday here we have a virtual smorgasbord of opportunities for engaged and deep love—for the first time we’ll offer our Caregivers Circle and the first monthly morning of respite care and this is also the day of Looking Across The Borders—our conversation about the very real issues at the end of life.

A number of you have asked me recently about my theology. My theology is grounded in this kind of real love, the expansive Universal love of our religious heritage which I am reconnecting

with as I prepare to teach about our history and theology at the end of the month. Henry Nelson Wieman, a Unitarian theologian in the late 1940s said that good was increased in our human sphere when we were able to communicate with another at a real level, a level deep enough that we can glean from that interchange some new truth or meaning that we then are willing to integrate into our own truths. Wieman believed this process of “creative interchange,” allowed us to actually enlarge the amount of meaning and sense of community in the world. This to me is the religious life—to keep seeking those deeper connections, that *generative* love, that larger embrace that transforms us and transforms our communities by equipping them with richer and more potent meanings. In this spirit we will gather in our Vision in Action Summits next month where people will be asked to take an idea they have and combine it with an idea someone else has to make something new to work towards our largest goals together.

Here is a silly, and, of course, hypothetical example of how this works. Let’s say a man and a woman meet and they both are older and one already has a child and each household has its own ways and yet as they listen to one another, they realize, somewhat to their dismay, that they are called to invent something new. And this new life is a little of both, it has more holiday decorations than one of the old lives did and a lot more boxes of papers than the other did and they both cook and yet for one of them that means not using recipes and cleaning up as you go along and for the other it means the precision of recipes and leaving the residue so you can concentrate on the cooking....well, many interchanges occur and *some* of them are creative....

My daughter, who is 20, asked me recently what she should be called to sacrifice for the faith that has been hers since she was a pre-schooler. A little Internet journeying and I discovered many blogs where other younger Unitarian Universalists are asking this question as well. This generation does not need to ask for freedom—freedom is their natural medium—this generation looks for help in deciding what in the endless creativity of their lives has meaning and substance. I have always been suspicious of that word, “sacrifice,” especially in relationship to love because as many of us know all too well, it has been used as a tool of repression so many times and at its worst, it is linked to abusive practices. Recently though, I have come to realize that our obsessions with protecting ourselves may have gone too far and that we may need to think again about the idea of having a little more of what we think we want to have, in fact, what we truly need. At its root and separate from misuse, a sacrifice is simply a gift given in the service of the sacred. At its best, a person’s willingness to soften the boundaries of their life in safe and healthy ways allows creative interchange and that’s at the heart of love. (St. Valentine, after all, was a third-century Christian martyr and you can learn more about his marriage rights advocacy if you stop by to sign a marriage equality valentine in the Bortin Hall after services.)

James Luther Adams, a Unitarian theologian in the 1950s, challenged his contemporaries to be willing to meet the conditions of the world with direct sacrifices. He spent time in Germany during the rise of Nazism and was inspired by the work of the Confessing Church—a group of liberal Christians who confronted the Nazis, some at the cost of their lives. “It is a liberal attitude to say that we keep ourselves informed and read the best papers on these matters, and perhaps join a voluntary association now and then,” he wrote. “But to be involved with other people so that it costs and so that one exposes the evils of society . . . requires a sense that there's something wrong and I must be different from the way I have been.”

I am different than how I have been because of my encounters with Michael—and other PACEM guests. To be changed by them, though, I had to let go of my own view of myself and the

righteousness of my own charitable impulses. Eventually I had to let go of the idea that I could help Michael because only Michael could do that. And yet our congregation and the other congregations working together on PACEM kept in that creative interchange—organizing the collective powers of our membership to begin to address systemic issues that affected Michael and our other guests—issues such as the lack of public transportation, affordable health care, decent housing. I think of Michael often. Whether we ever see one another again, we were present to one another and were real to each other. That is my wish for us as we undertake hosting Winter Nights here for the first time, that we see it as a take as well as a give and allow our own hearts both of service and served.

The need to give up our for a larger good is in the air. We have just been asked by our California Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministry to sacrifice our sense of despair and to spend a little time for 40 days starting next Wednesday taking one action to ask our elected leaders to adopt the most universal, affordable, accessible health care reform possible. We are asked to embrace a generous and large love.

How would our economy be different if we understood a generous love, a willingness to relinquish boundaries so that something new can be created? How would our nation's view of who should be allowed to marry change if we saw love as large and inclusive instead of small and exclusive? How would our sense of how to get peace in the world change? As Adams put it: "If these age-old imperialisms are to be restrained and if a new spirit of cooperation is to be engendered, we must look forward to struggle and sacrifice and not a quiescent peace. Strife among humans will continue as long as they are human: on the one side of the struggle are those who enter into the relationships with their fellows with the view of *imposing* their ideas or institutions, their prophecies and their sacraments, and on the other side are those who believe it is their religious duty to admit that they are human and fallible and that a truth and goodness are possible among men and women which have not yet been brought to birth."ⁱⁱ

This sort of birthing, sometimes literal and more often metaphoric, is what makes the difference in determining what partnerships last or not. It is the difference between a relationship which is a place for growth and one that becomes stagnant. It is about me seeing you and you seeing me and honoring together that we can create some new beauty together.

Love is not about being perfect—it is not just about the good times, it is not just about roses or the color red. Love is larger than that. Love is letting my life touch another's and being transformed. It is about being present and real, generous and creative. May we all be touched by such love. May we all touch others with such love.

ⁱ <http://feedingamerica.org/>

ⁱⁱ James Luther Adams, *An Examined Faith: Social Context and Religious Commitment*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1991, p. 288.