

The Velveteen Person

A sermon for Unitarian Universalist Congregations by Martin Bryant (MBryant@io.com)

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For our children's story today – we did not hear “The Velveteen Rabbit”. This is because – as much of a classic as it is – it's presentation of the hard reality of disease and the discarded toy contrasted with the fantastic nature of it's conclusion, at least in my opinion makes it “too much” for the three to five year old audience that this kind of story is usually intended for. But many here know this classic story. In it – a favorite toy – a velveteen Rabbit – is for many years the dearest thing to a small child and is a companion through many trials. Eventually, though the toy is forgotten and just as we are convinced this dear toy will be abandoned altogether – it is “redeemed” and transformed into a “real” rabbit that is free to run around the forest.

In the story – the velveteen rabbit is made “real” by a child's love. It is interesting to note that in the language of the tale, the toy is not made “alive” by this force – or “free” – but “real”. To restate, we could say that the rabbit is given a unique concept of reality, consciousness by the force of the child's love. In fact, an accumulated, residual love, as the child has effectively forgotten of the rabbit by the end of the story.

In the recent film “A Beautiful Mind”, Princeton mathematician/ and Nobel prize winning economist John Nash's schizophrenia has him developing whole characters and aspects of his life that are phantoms – they are very real to him – but inventions of his disorder. Nash's delusions are so real for him that the only way he can tell what is “real” is by comparing his reality to that of others around him. Early in the film, this is often very uncomfortable, as Nash argues and plays with those in his mind that are invisible to others.

At the peak of Nash's schism between his self-absorbed personal reality and that of those around him, including his loving wife, she tries to help him sort things out. Alicia holds her hand tenderly to Nash's head and says "This is real" – and then holds his hand to hers saying "This is real" She holds his hand to her chest and says "This is real" and then places her hand on his heart --- "This is real". **Alicia offers "Perhaps the heart can know what the mind cannot"** Struggling against the seeming hopelessness of John's disorder and his battle to hold the same reality as those around him, she looks him in the eye and says **"I need to know that something extraordinary is possible"**.

At least in the film – a fantastic pseudo reality in and of itself – something extraordinary is possible. Guided by Alicia's love, Nash discovers that resocializing with those around him can help him to not a cure, but self-treatment for his condition. Nash closes the gap between himself and others and rebuilds his productive life and his relationships.

This film can be deeply spiritual: I recommend it to you. Nash's schizophrenia is not merely analogous – it is representative of each of our wonder as to how much of the existentialist reality we experience is like those around us - is like what is "true" or "real".

Our lives seem to be spiritual journeys we make alone. We wind our way through trying to "figure things out" – the high-sounding UU term is usually "the search for truth". Like some sort of dynamic three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle, we try to fit religious symbols like reincarnation, prayer, "God", community, faith, hope, and love into the "holes" in our perceived reality. Much of this process seems to be solitary – but we work some on it together here.

Sometimes, well in fact, often, (something extraordinary is possible) we find a special relationship – not necessarily a romantic relationship – but a soul-friend an Anam Care, who gives us the opportunity to "compare notes". Often this means not just

talking about our feelings, our lives, our philosophy, but a chance to get glimpses of “what makes that person tick”.

I’m reminded of the old Woody Allen joke – I was flunked in metaphysics for cheating – I got caught peeking into the soul of the person sitting next me. **But of course in this ongoing examination – there is no cheating – collaboration is not only encouraged – collaboration may be the answer itself.**

My own twenty-one year marriage has been such a relationship. Mary K. and I have been so fortunate that although we do not share identical spiritualities – they have grown together as a force in our lives and have proven compatible enough to nurture each other. Through my marriage and family I’ve learned countless spiritual lessons, many too subtle to write about. **The love many of us feel for our partners and children is not just appropriate for them – it is instructive on how to treat our world – our very reality. This is perhaps the most important spiritual lesson we will ever learn.**

Love’s instruction isn’t always gentle – sometimes when we experience perceived betrayal, or disappointment or loss in the context of our beloved ones – we really feel that sword among those feathers. It can be very painful. We can even feel a little slice of death. But these lessons truly show us the value of love and our beloved and they teach us to be careful in our own actions. And there can be great beauty in both love’s ecstasy and agony. These can be real growing experiences – the pruning is as important as the nurturing. The heart can heal to be stronger.

I find it interesting that most UU churches regularly offer classes on sexuality – but rarely – and there are exceptions – offer the kind of couple enrichment classes that other churches do. It seems the psychological, spiritual, health, and practical advantages of successful partner relationships are so obvious for gays and straights that UU churches would see this important way to serve their congregants.

As celebrated in countless songs and poems, and experienced by most of people in this room, let us recall for a moment – the dizzying feeling of being deeply “in love”. For many, their lives have complete focus – on the object of their affections. We do not become dysfunctional – but idleness is unnecessary as all of our “free time” is spent enjoying, contemplating or serving in some way our beloved. Other aspects of life seem to have new purpose. Reality shifts a little – some types of inputs – the smell of flowers – the sound of children laughing – certain kinds of music – that went unnoticed are brought to the fore of our attention – other things – like worries and doubts are swept aside. Joy is more possible. Tenderness is possible and all relationships and interactions may be handled more softly. Optimism is possible as we look forward to the next chance to explore our love.

Now what I’ve described above – and many of you remember – hopefully more than a few are experiencing – is exactly the condition that most religions would want you to experience through their offices – new purpose – focus – appreciation of simple reality – joy – gentleness – optimism. This may explain why many cultures develop what is essentially a “religion of romance” – complete with hymns, readings, services, and even clergy – to encourage people to enter this condition. Being there is enlightening – in more ways than one.

For those of you that have read Khalil Gibran, whose “the Prophet” I read from to start this, and his Sufi counterpart, Rumi – this idea, that romantic love is more than analogous, but rather representative and instructive of divine, encompassing love is a major theme for both mystic poets.

Many experience this “in love” feeling not only with romance but with its frequent result – a new baby. And children remain a spiritual force in our lives – I believe that parenting is usually the most spiritual thing that any of us ever does. Parenting is a

connection to the timeless eternal – and our children infuse us with such love, tenderness, purpose, and optimism.

Religions talk about the relationship of the church to God or a prophet as like that of man and wife – people talk about “marrying” their faith. We speak of “God” as a father or mother brimming with parental love. Churches, including ours, even try to ‘get in’ on some of this spirituality as an enabler by marrying and dedicating children. But the fact is, we may do some spiritual things here – but we should face it – the most spiritual things that most of us will ever do – involve our relationships with our lovers, parents, and children and they won’t happen here. – even so treasure those things as the “worship” and “religious education” they are.

Some religions would even like us to know “rapture”. Most of us would probably associate this word “rapture” with a sexual experience. Sexuality is a fascinating aspect of our personal realities because it clearly illustrates that as powerful as it can be – we really remain unsure how much of the experience was shared by the other person – did they experience the same thing I did? “Was it good for you?”

However sometimes – certainly not all the time – we feel we have really shared something other than fluids – and we become somewhat lost in that “rapture”. We’ve touched something pretty deep and mysterious. After this, our sexual relationship can be not so much about satisfying impulses, or procreating, or even giving and receiving pleasure - but about getting back to that experience, something pleasurable and deeply satisfying, but also timeless, even holy in a way. Something very far from dirty – something sacred in everyday life.

As neat as this is, of course, love is even more than this. Note that we have this one word – Love – which means the love we share between lovers – partners in exploring sexuality – and life partners – but it also means the love we have for our families – and the love

we have for our friends and our communities – even the love we share with God – however we define that relationship.

Love, in all of its forms, makes things better – not only does it take us from our self-absorption and give us a “reality check” on everything around us – not only does it bestow on us the blessings of focus, purpose, appreciation, joy, tenderness, and optimism – but it seems to just plain “improve things”. We love; things get better. We could even come to think of love as being the same as “better” – some say we could think of love as the same thing as God.

And yet love itself, like God, remains a mystery – providing another blessing in assuring us that there is mystery – that our reality is not complete – cannot be complete without interaction with this mystery – the force of the other – the outsideness that makes us whole. The fact is – most find that if they continually journey inward, alone into their own psyche – they are very likely to get lost. To use some religious language – God is not so much in each of us as in all of us and we probably cannot find a whole God in solitude any more than we can find a whole reality.

Can love make us real? When we are loved, whether it is by our mates, parents, or our children, or our religious community, or by the driver that lets us into the traffic flow in front of Wal-mart we are receiving no less than divine instruction on how to treat our reality. And when we love, we are in a state of grace.

Each string – when touched by love – must sound -

This is the stuff of transcendence – from the velveteen to the real rabbit – from the atoms, cells, and fibers, blood and bones to the luminous spirits we are.

And if that isn't making us “real” beyond real – I don't know what is... – something extraordinary is possible.