

Anahata--Standing on the Side of Love
February 13, 2011

On this Valentine's Day Eve, with Paula and the choir having just graced us with the extraordinary beauty of George Harrison's *My Sweet Lord*, I admit I am tempted, with some good reason, to disrupt the lingering of that melody by breaking out into Donny Osmond's *Puppy Love*. For, yesterday afternoon, an eight-week old Beagle-terrier mix I have named Malcolm became the newest member of my little family of four-legged creatures and myself. Malcolm is a beauty and a joy, and a *brave* little soul, leaving his mama and his siblings at such a very young age, and taking up a new life with a much bigger, much older dog, two surprisingly interested cats, and a Unitarian Universalist minister who spent her first night with Malcolm working on a sermon. However thrilled I am to have this young man in my life, though, I will spare you all and forgo the temptation to sully the brilliance of George Harrison with the saccharine sweetness of Donny Osmond--especially now that I have successfully managed to make the first paragraph of my sermon all about my new puppy.

And, my sweet Lord, he is a *cute* puppy. Not only is he cute, he is, as I mentioned in my prayer, Love, already here. He is the love of

his mother; he is the love of the people who rescued his mother and him and his siblings from a farmer and his gun; he is the very breath of life, made manifest for this time, in this place, in a little white and black and tan dog whose life is just beginning to show *me* once again, indeed, that love is already here.

And that's what tomorrow is all about, right? Love? We send cards and flowers and chocolates to those we love and everything is in the shape of hearts, and everyone--well, at least everyone who gets cards or flowers or chocolates--feels loved for the day. For those who *don't* get all those things--because Valentine's Day does carry an air of a popularity contest to it--they may feel love is just out of their reach, not quite yet theirs to have. As with other holidays, Valentine's can end up backfiring for many a heart, and those hearts may long for a time when they will see love, and be with love. It's just as George Harrison sings. I really want to see you, I really want to be with you.

Of course, Harrison, a devotee of Hinduism and specifically of Krishna, is singing not to the love of St. Valentine, but to *his* sweet lord, to the source of all being, all knowing, all loving. As Christians refer to Jesus Christ as Lord, so Harrison, sings to Lord Krishna. And

so one might infer that he is essentially singing to God. I want to see you God, I want to be with you God, but it takes so long...

Or does it take so long? Harrison's lyrics actually carry a tension of a kind, saying sometimes that it does take so long, and at others that it won't take long, my lord. If it *does* take so long to see and be with God, *why*? Is it because God is so transcendent, so far away? Or is that we humans forget just how close God, how close *love*, is?

You know, this past week, I spent about four and half days with roughly 375 other Unitarian Universalist ministers, exploring how to create and sustain excellence in ministry for the sake of our religious movement and for the sake of the world, really. Every morning we worshipped together, each morning's preacher speaking of what it will take for Unitarian Universalism to live into its potential and promise as a transformative religion of our time. Then we would go off to our separate seminars, and then in the evening we workshopped and worshipped some more.

I do want to share more with you the overall spirit of the message we heard this week, but first, I'll tell you what one minister shared during the Wednesday morning worship service about going into a small Christian Church she was visiting. In the sanctuary of this

church, above the pulpit, there was a neon sign, like one you might see at a restaurant. It said, simply, God is already here. God is already here. That line from my prayer, about love already being here, that comes directly from that neon sign.

Now, the minister who shared with us the story of this sign thought that we Unitarian Universalists might, for the sake of atheism, agnosticism, ambiguity or all of the above, she thought that we might make our own neon signs that would say, "Good is already here." OK. Good is good.

But why not cut right to the chase of the matter, and use the word love? *Love* is already here. It works well for the nontheists among us, I'm guessing, as well as for those of us who believe that God and Love are interchangeable. That is, God is love, and/or, Love is God. And, of course, for those of us who do believe in puppy love, we might say Dog is love. But let me not stray.

What if, indeed, to paraphrase that neon sign, love *is* already here, and all we have to do is stop searching so hard for it, stop working so hard for it, stop believing we have to improve ourselves just a little bit more before deserving it, and just open up to it instead? Much of the week at the institute was an unfolding dialogue between

preachers about whether we are called to experience and generate Big T or little t transformations. On the one hand, the purpose of the institute was to help us question, offer us new insights, shake our laurels out from underneath us. And yet theologically, we were there to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, to remind ourselves of our Universalist proclamation that we are *not* unworthy sinners or blemished creations, but blessed children of an all-loving, ever-loving God.

As the week moved along, we tugged back and forth between the goal of being changed, and the goal of loving ourselves just as we are. On the last day, the final preacher, Rev. Aaron McEmrys from Santa Barbara, folded the two into each other, remarking that we each are still becoming who we are meant to be: our fullest, truest selves. Nothing more than that, nothing less--loving ourselves and one another, just as we are, all along the way.

Now, what *kind* of love are we practicing all along the way? Hopefully, we're not just passing each other Hallmark cards, complete with little heart strings of sentimentality. As one minister, Nancy Jay Crumbine of New Hampshire, put it this past week, "we must use a fine tooth comb to rid ourselves of the lice of cliches." In other words, if

the love we practice is a lazy love, a tired love, love by rote, a quaint, cute love, and nothing more, we are *not* on the most loving journey we can be. Love is difficult, as the poet Rainier Maria Rilke says. Loves calls us out of our comfort zones. Love asks that we be transformed--*into* truest ourselves.

Whereas, so often it seems that we put much more energy into running *away* from ourselves. We run to money. We run to food and drink. We run to lovers and shopping malls. We run to Facebook and Twitter--and not so we can have a revolution in Egypt, but so we can check *out*. Check out from the reality of our own lives, from the reality that if we sit still long enough, pray and meditate authentically enough, sing in four-part harmony enough, look deeply enough at the sleeping face of our little puppy or our old dog or our child or our spouse or the moon, we will remember that love is already here.

I think of the lines we read together in the responsive reading: “I am the Self that dwells in the heart of every mortal creature. I am the beginning, the life span, and the end of all.” For some of us, it may be a little tricky, not reading some personified *I* into this, as if some celestial guy named Brahman that’s been microchipped into our bodies is telling it like it is. At times it’s been tricky for me. But what if

the *I*, rather than a personified God, was simply godly, goodly, lovely love? *Love* is the Self that dwells in the heart of every mortal creature. Love is the beginning, the life span, and the end of all.” Love is already here, inside each and every one of our own hearts, and it is divine, and it is ready to shine, and it does *not* ask that we become anyone or anything other than who we, ourselves, are meant to be.

In 1893, when Colonialism and Christian missionary imperialism was still growing and thriving and striving to “civilize” the world (as they do perhaps a bit more covertly today), a young man--a wise monk--Swami Vivekakanda, came to Chicago from India to speak to just this very thing. 1893 was the year of the Chicago World’s Fair and, happening within the context of that great event was the inaugural World’s Parliament of Religions. Practitioners of ten religions from the East and West--Buddhists, Hindus, Shintoists, Jains, Zoroastrians, Taoists, Confucians, Christians, Muslims and Jews--gathered to be in interfaith dialogue and relationship.

Tucked within the Christian faith were Unitarians as well as Universalists. Now, some Unitarians, most famously Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, had already discovered the wisdom of the Hindu religion earlier in the century. But for many, the

presence of Swami Vivekananda and others in Chicago was a major turning point in East-West tolerance, dialogue, and understanding. And this was brought on in no small part because of what Vivekananda said: “Much has been said of the common ground of religious unity. I am not going just now to venture my own theory,” he noted. “But if any one here hopes that this unity will come by the *triumph* of any one of the religions and the *destruction* of the others...to him I say, ‘Brother, yours is an impossible hope....’ The seed is put in the ground,” Vivekandanda says, “and earth and air and water are placed around it. Does the seed become the earth; or the air, or the water? No. It becomes a plant, it develops the law of its own growth, assimilates the air, the earth, and the water, converts them into plant substance, and grows into a plant... Similar is the case,” Vivekananda concludes, “with religion.”

Similar is the case, / would add, with each soul who walks through our doors--the doors of Wildflower Church, and the doors of Unitarian Universalism as a whole. The elements of compassion, equity, love, and justice, the principle of each person’s inherent worth and dignity, the resounding presence of community and commitment,

all are there to help each one of us grow more deeply, more profoundly into ourselves.

And just as St. John's Wort, or Asters, or Mexican Hats may require different combinations of the earth and the sun and rain in order to grow into themselves, we each have our own particular paths. This is affirmed by the hymn that Swami Vivekananda quotes as his childhood favorite: "As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so O Lord, the different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee." Similarly, the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gita*, which speaks *from* the voice of the Lord, rather than *to* it, says, as Vivekananda quotes, "Whosoever comes to Me, through whatever form, I reach him; all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to me."

If we are believers in *Love* as the source, the beginning, and the end, as that which dwells in the heart of every mortal creature, then what we get is, "Whosoever comes to love, through whatever form, Loves reaches him and her; all people are struggling with paths which lead in the end to Love."

So as we move into Valentine's Day--a day, yes, of cards and flowers and chocolates, but so much more importantly, a day of Love--how will we each stand on the side of love? How will each of us stand with Love residing *within* us? Back in 1893, Swami Vivekananda remarked, "Sectarianism, bigotry, and its horrible descendent, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful earth. They have filled the earth with violence, drenched it often and often with human blood, destroyed civilization and sent whole nations to despair. Had it not been for these horrible demons," Vivekananda notes, "human society would be far more advanced than it is now. But," he concludes, "their time has come."

In 1893 he said this. "Their time has come." We, living with 118 years of hindsight, can sadly see that sectarianism, bigotry, and fanaticism, did not end with the turn of that century, nor with the turn of this one. Yes, at this moment, there is hope in the air, with the people of Egypt spontaneously creating a grassroots movement that toppled their dictating ruler of thirty years in a period of just eighteen days. People, together, *can* change the world. But it takes work and sacrifice and perseverance. It takes believing that part of growing and journeying into our truest selves is not just watching other people's

stories as if they're being played out on the Hallmark Channel, but actually working with them so that they too may journey into their truest, deepest, highest selves.

At the institute for excellence in ministry this week, speaker after speaker raised up specifically and explicitly the Universalist branch of our faith, our belief in the power of love--active love, just love, compassionate love, transformative love, godly, goodly, lovely love--as the means by which we as Unitarian Universalists can live into the promise and the potential of being the religion of our time. True, compared to other religious movements around us, we may be just the seed of who and what we have the potential to be. But on this Valentine's Day Eve, let us commit to growing into our name and our identity. We are wildflowers, persistent, diverse, colorful, unintimidated by the harshest of soils, of the hottest of days, or the driest of clouds. We are here because we are meant to grow into our truest selves. We are here because love is here, dwelling in the hearts of each one of us. Let us never settle for the saccharine sweetness of sentimental love alone, nor for bitter resignation that love is not ours to have. Rather, let us journey together on the path toward love that is real, that is waiting for us to see it and be with it and know it.

Will it take so long, or will it not be long, my Lord, my Love?
Maybe the question is not such much how much *time* it will take, but
how much *love* it will take to help us realize the love that dwells within.
In the spirit of beloved community, let us not be complacent
consumers of love, but passionate, proactive, powerful witnesses to
and practitioners of love. Let us be our truest, deepest, highest, most
loving selves, thus transforming the world into a world of peace, led by
the spirit of life and love.

Amen.

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