

Love, Love, Love October 17, 2010

When did you first know you were loved? When did you first consciously do something as an act of love? When did you first *fall* in love? Did giving birth to or witnessing the birth of a child, or adopting a child introduce you to a whole new kind of love? How recently have you taken measure of love in your life? Is it right there, all the time, or do you feel you have to go looking for it? Do you hide your own love, also known as light, under a bushel? What's the risk of showing love, and what is love, anyway? Why does love seem like probably the most valued and desired part of human life, and yet so many millions of people struggle to see it or feel it every day?

If you're hoping I'm going to answer all those questions in the next twenty minutes or so, let me tell you, I love you, but, not a chance. Not only can I not supply all the answers in that short a *time*, I can't supply all the answers, period. So, I'm going to think of this morning's sermon as a kind of can opener. I'll just work it on you all, and myself, just enough to see what happens when our individual lids get metaphorically pried open. Maybe the can opener will serve not only to open our slightly canned hearts or minds, but it will also open some of us to a *feeling* of *can*. I can. I can love. I can experience being loved. I can see and feel love right here, right now.

But, why *speak* about love right here, right now? Now is not the traditional season of honey moon June weddings. Valentine's Day is months away. The trick or treat of Halloween implies at most a kind of *conditional* love--give me a treat or I'll toilet paper your house! And my most common Thanksgiving refrain--I *love* mashed potatoes!--is dangerously reminiscent of Thich Nhat Hanh's reminder to us that statements about loving foods are really about appetite and desire more than they are about love.

So *why* love now? Maybe I am still feeling heavy in my heart, as well I should, about the recent suicides, still rising in number, of too many young gay teens, and the love those people are so permanently missing out on now. Maybe I'm still floating in the tearful joy of all 33 miners in Chile being pulled back up by rescuers from the depths of the earth, reunited with family and friends, after surviving nearly 70 days a half mile below. It could be just pop culture, specifically a recent, Gleeful rendition of Ike and Tina Turner's "River Deep/Mountain High" that's got me thinking about love. Then again, in the end, Ike and Tina's love wasn't so deep, or healthy, and once she broke away, Tina began singing, instead, "What's love got to do with it?"

What does love got to do with it, and where is love? Where is love? Makes me want to invite you to play a kind of Unitarian Universalist version of "Where's Waldo?" challenging you to find love in our seven religious

principles. I've mentioned before that nowhere there does one actually see the word itself, simple and short and monosyllabic as it is.

But that's the catch about love. It comes in so many forms, so many shapes and sizes, actions and attitudes, words and languages, that sometimes it's right under our noses without us realizing it, because we've got our visions limited to whatever tunnel we've spent most of our lives in.

For me, especially, but not exclusively during my teen years, I thought love was what I saw on the big screen. It was Humphrey Bogart in the *African Queen*, shouting "Rosie!" to Katherine Hepburn as they both went down the waterfall. It was Marlon Brando standing on the street, screaming "Stella!" or recent graduate Dustin Hoffman banging his hands against the glass, yelling "Elaine!" as his true beloved stood at the altar with her groom, and Mrs. Robinson not far away. It was Sylvester Stallone, eyes swollen shut, sweat dripping, crying "Adrienne!" at the end of the bout. It was passion, it was power, it was, in Thich Nhat Hanh's Vietnamese word, *tin*. "*Tin*," Thich Nhat Hanh says, "can be very deep, absorbing the whole of your being." Anyone ever felt that kind of love before? I hope so. Because, there's nothing wrong with that kind of love. It's just not the whole picture. Imagine how exhausting life would be if the only love we got to experience was that Bogart-Brando-Hoffman-Stallone kind of love. One wonders what happens *after* the end of such movies, when boy *finally* gets girl, or girl finally gets boy, or boy gets boy or girl gets girl. Do our heroes and

heroines settle down to what Thich Nhat Hanh calls *nghia*? “*Nghia*,” he says, “is a kind of continuation of *tin*h.” But, he continues, “with *nghia* you feel much calmer, more understanding.... You are not as passionate as in *tin*h, but your love is deeper and more solid. Thich Nhat Hanh concludes, “*Nghia* is like a fruit that is already ripe. It does not taste sour anymore; it is only sweet.”

Now, funny that he should use that metaphor, because Aristotle, a few thousand years earlier, says of friendships, “Wishing to be friends is quick work, but friendship is a slow ripening fruit.”

Oh yes, friendship--another wonderful way in which love presents itself. While Hollywood and other media *most* often portray love as *eros*, or romantic, sensual love, *philia*, the love of friends and family is just as significant and just as worthy of our attention, if not more so. I myself don't have a whole fruit-basketful of friends--though some of them are a bit fruity--but the friendships I do have are ones that have not been rushed or pushed or too soon plucked. Slowly, they have grown over the years, even through admitted wind bursts, cold snaps, and dry spells that challenged them. If wishing to be friends is *quick* work, the ripening of lasting friendship is slow, patient, forgiving work.

Because, as First Corinthians, Chapter 13 says, “Love *is* patient; love *is* kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.” We *ourselves*, or our friends, or both, may at times be envious or boastful or arrogant or

rude. But *love* itself? How is that possible? I'm reminded of the psychologist Charlotte Kasl, writing about women and addiction. At one point, she writes, "I would like to see the term *love addiction* dropped from the vocabulary. People may be addicted to euphoria, romance, people, security, but they can't be addicted to love." Kasl continues, "We don't find love by chasing after it; we simply open our hearts and find it within us....We find love by learning to tell the truth, by surrendering to our calling, by having discipline in our lives, by operating from faith. No one loves too much," she concludes. "Love is the ultimate joy."

Now, hearing that love is the ultimate joy, some among us might wish to skip over everything Kasl says right before that and think, "Yeah! Love! Gimme some of that! I deserve it!" And you--we--do. But our minds are tricky sometimes. We can talk *nghia*, but act from *tin*. That is, we can talk depth and solidity, but, unwilling to ground our passion, we can end up more like "noisy gongs or clanging cymbals," as Corinthians says, irritable and resentful, because we have insisted on our own way.

To remind us that we Unitarian Universalists do affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, I might modify that last statement to say, we have insisted on our *ego's* own way. For ego is that tin or *tin* can wrapped around our hearts and minds whose good intention has been to preserve and *protect* our hearts and minds, but which too often

ends up constraining them because it fears being pried open. So our egos do what they can to keep us from facing our fear.

The results are often precarious at best. Of addictive relationships, for example, Charlotte Kasl writes that they are “are enticing precisely because they *avoid* the pain, fear, and vulnerability that are part of getting to know someone and letting yourself be known....” She continues, “Couples often start acting married within a week or two of meeting each other. Instead of going through the challenging process of getting to know each other, they form a bond that *feels* close but that doesn’t really have any foundation.” Without being judgmental of these missteps, Kasl observes, “We think our beloved causes...euphoric feelings in us, rather than realizing they originate within ourselves. The presence of the partner *awakens* feelings of love that we cannot reach on our own. When that happens,” Kasl says, “we feel that we have touched the divine.” But she warns, “Mistakenly, we [too often] attach ourselves to the partner as if he or she were the Divine One.”

I *think* that might be called idolatry--taking one part and trying to make of it the whole. Whereas true divine love, known, especially in the Christian world, as agape, is the exact opposite of idolatry. Agape is seeing that all parts are equal members, and equally *deserving* members, of the whole. It is seeing and honoring, in other words, the inherent worth and dignity of *every* person--father, mother, child, brother, sister, friend, lover,

neighbor, stranger, enemy--and seeing the inherent worth and dignity of every living being on this earth.

It is this form of *universal* love which I believe James Vila Blake is primarily, though not exclusively, speaking of when he says:

Love is the spirit of this church

And service is its law.

This is our great covenant;

To dwell together in peace,

To seek the truth in love,

And to help one another.

Yes, as members of a very human beloved community, in which we work and laugh and pray and worship and mourn and celebrate together, the love of family and friendship is the spirit of this church, too. And when two people in our congregation fall in love and choose to share their lives together, *eros* steps in as well and that couple could rightfully recite in their wedding, "This is our great covenant; to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another."

But whether we believe in a Divine One, or a collection of divine ones, or in no divinity at all, I do believe that as a religious community, we need to go beyond the love of lovers, go beyond the love of family and

friends--even if we *promise* to be friends with everybody in the whole wide world--we need to go beyond the love of lovers and family and friends because I do believe that there is a kind of love that is bigger than our individual hearts can contain. Like that haunting fourth note that can arise when three people are singing in harmony, or perhaps that fifth note when four are being played on the violin, there is a love made not from our efforts alone. Our efforts matter. But so does something else. I call it the spirit of life and love. It is there when I have grown distant from a brother or sister or friend. It is there, when I have failed in romantic love. It is there, always ready to bring me to my truest self, always ready to bring me to relationship with others, always patient, always kind, even when / am not ready or able to be.

The spirit of life and love is with me when I am among friends and my family. But it is also with me when I am alone in prayer. I don't need to call it God or try to convince you that's what you should call it. Similarly, if the word, the idea, the notion of God, with a capital G, feels best to you, then I have no need to not try to convince *you* otherwise. In some ways, I think to debate the existence or nonexistence of god is simply to avoid the work before us--which is to live in the spirit of life and love, to allow the spirit of life and love to live *within us*. To do that, we don't need to chase or pursue anything or anyone. As I quoted Charlotte Kasl earlier, "We find love by learning to tell the truth, by surrendering to our calling, by having discipline

in our lives, by operating from faith.” If that discipline part makes you a little nervous, by the way, remember that discipline and disciple share the same root, the Latin of which is *discipulus*, meaning *to learn*.

All our lives, we have a lesson to learn, and I believe it just might be the lesson of learning how to love--how to love our families, how to love our friends, how to love the stranger, the enemy, and how to love ourselves. We stumble, we hurt others, we fear we will never be forgiven. We risk loving, we get hurt, and we fortress ourselves so as never to be hurt again. But remember, amidst all of this, “Love is patient, love is kind.” And remember this: “love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our great covenant; to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.” Just as our own mission statement proclaims that, “we commit to transforming ourselves through acts of compassion, love, and social justice,” so may we commit to recognizing, acknowledging, and practicing true love in all its different shades, shapes and sizes. In doing so, may it be that tomorrow, and in days, years, and generations to come, when asked, “When was a time you knew you were loved?” those whose paths we cross will think of meeting you, and of this beloved community.

Amen.