

Everyday Spirituality: Two Rough Rocks in a Bag – The Rev. Suzelle Lynch,
Unitarian Universalist Church West, Brookfield, WI 02/11/07

Readings

From “Going the Distance” by Lonnie Barbach and David Geisinger.

(a quote from an individual) “I believe a good relationship is a lot like two rocks with rough edges that are in a bag together. Over time as they come into repeated contact, bumping into one another, chips are knocked off each of them, rough edges are smoothed out. Eventually you get two pretty smooth stones with polished surfaces, but it does take a while.”

From Leo Buscaglia, in “Loving Each Other,” p. 24

“There is no being or becoming without relationship. From the beginning, we grow to sense the need and import of relatedness. We human beings have the longest period of dependency of any living creature. At birth, in total helplessness, we engage in our first coupling, mother-child, and from that time on, the more sophisticated our lives become, the more interrelated we become. In a sense, we spend our entire existence weaving one relationship into another until we’ve created, like the web of a spider, a complete pattern.”

Sermon

Rough rocks and spider webs – interesting images for relationships. I know myself to be both of those things – the rock slowly being smoothed as my many rough edges chip off encountering my loved ones, and the spider spinning out strand after strand of tensile silk, weaving the pains and joys of a life lived in the company of others into a pattern that sustains my being. A pattern that grows and changes, tears and is mended. The process of being alive, of being in relationship, is simultaneously a breaking down and a building up of ourselves – each a step leading to the next on life’s spiritual path.

When I perform a wedding for a heterosexual couple or ceremony of union for a same-gender couple, I don’t usually speak about rocks, but as a part of the blessing of the couple after they have exchanged their vows and given one another their rings, there is a line about weaving. It reads, “From the rich encouragement of their affection, may they each complete the unfinished pattern of their true selves.” I have always loved this line, because it so neatly sums up why anybody should be courageous enough to make such a commitment in the first place: because by being in relationship with one another we become more fully who we are meant to be. By being in relationships, we bring to fruition that which in us is most precious, most central, most whole and holy. And this soul-making quality is true not just of intimate partnerships, but also of any enduring

relationship that involves mutuality and intimacy – including friendship and family relationships.

It's this process of becoming whole by being related that makes this a subject to talk about in a religious context. Whether we think about it consciously or not, all of us are on a journey – what some might call a spiritual path -- leading somewhere we cannot possibly know. Our relationships are an important part of this path – including the relationships we have with one another in our congregation, and with our congregation as an entity, and our relationship to Unitarian Universalism as a faith.

Unfortunately, no one really teaches us how to be in community or relationship with one another. As author and student of relationships Leo Buscaglia says, (in *“Loving Each Other,” pp. 18-19*) “Learning to live with and love others requires skills as delicate and studied as those of the 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 naiveté too often end in disillusionment, bitterness and despair. The initial aura of magic seems to fade somewhere in the day-to-night processes of existence.”

It's like the Sufi story about Mullah Nasrudin (from *“Chop Wood, Carry Water”* by Fields, Taylor, Weyler and Ingrasci) “One afternoon, . . . Nasrudin and his friend were sitting in a café, drinking tea, and talking about life and love.

‘How come you never got married, Nasrudin?’ asked his friend at one point.

‘Well,’ said Nasrudin, ‘to tell you the truth, I spent my youth looking for the perfect woman. In Cairo, I met a beautiful and intelligent woman, with eyes like dark olives, but she was unkind. Then in Baghdad, I met a woman who was a wonderful and generous soul, but we had no interests in common. One woman after another would seem just right, but there would always be something missing. Then one day, I met her. She was beautiful, intelligent, generous and kind. We had everything in common. In fact, she was perfect.’

‘Well,’ said Nasrudin’s friend, ‘what happened? Why didn’t you marry her?’

Nasrudin sipped his tea reflectively. ‘Well,’ he replied, ‘It’s a sad thing. It seems she was looking for the perfect man.’”

I wonder if all of us haven’t been in Mullah Nasrudin’s place at one time or another – seeking but not finding the love our lives cry out for because we are looking for something outside ourselves – the perfect man, the perfect woman, the perfect friend, the perfect parent, child, teacher, student -- to fulfill the missing thing which can only come from within. And yet, we do fall in love, we do build lasting relationships that move us and our loved ones steadily toward our best selves. How is this so?

In today's day and age of a consumer mentality that says a relationship "has to meet my needs or it's not worth pursuing" – it's nothing short of miraculous that people marry or form committed partnerships and stay together, nurture friendships that last for ten, twenty, forty, sixty years; maintain good relationships with their parents and children and siblings over a lifetime. What seems even more miraculous to me is that the methods for sustaining long, loving relationships really haven't changed much since our grandparents' day. What has changed and is still is changing, however, is our understanding of why we need to be related to one another.

Lawrence Kushner has a poem that speaks to this – it's from "*Honey from the Rock*":

Some seem to be born with a nearly completed puzzle.
And so it goes.
Souls going this way and that
Trying to assemble the myriad parts.

But know this. No one has within themselves
All the pieces to their puzzle.
Like before the days when they used to seal
jigsaw puzzles in cellophane. Insuring that
all the pieces were there.

Everyone carries with them at least one and probably
Many pieces to someone else's puzzle.
Sometimes they know it.
Sometimes they don't.

And when you present your piece
Which is worthless to you,
To another, whether you know it or not,
Whether they know it or not,
You are a messenger from the Most High.

In days of old, or so I'm told, people married or maintained relationships with one another out of a sense of duty. Duty to family of origin, to the role of provider or nurturer, duty to children, duty to one's station in life or one's community. . . Duty was the glue that kept families and friendships together – even as it often kept them stuck and stagnant and miserable.

But myriad changes in our culture have given both women and men more freedom, more mobility, and more choices – particularly if we are middle class or well-off. Duty no longer takes center stage in the theatre of relationships. It has been replaced in unhealthy relationships by the hope for perpetual romance or eternal happiness, and in healthy relationships by commitment. Commitment may sound an awful lot like duty in a new dress, but it is actually the ground of being created by freedom of choice that permits us both to offer and to accept

the missing pieces of life's jigsaw puzzle from one another. When we have freedom of choice, commitment allows us to take advantage of the possibilities relationships offer us to awaken to our deepest selves.

Commitment does not mean doggedly staying with someone through thick and thin, it means: being working with what arises when we are in a relationship out of our mutual interest in one another's unfolding. Let me say that again – commitment means working with what arises in a relationship because we are dedicated to one another's unfolding. It means trust. Commitment isn't something we can promise or vow – it is something that develops over time as we navigate the tests and challenges of being with another. “Unlike something manufactured out of duty, hope, or preconceived ideas,” writes psychotherapist and spiritual teacher John Welwood, “(commitment) emerges organically from the relationship's own ripening, and is full of passion, freshness, and spontaneity – the very juice of love.” (*Journey of the Heart*, p. 88) There isn't a cultural ritual like a marriage or union ceremony for friendships, or for the kinds of relationships we choose to have as adults with members of our family of origin – but that process of ripening that comes with freely choosing those relationships, is the same.

Love is a spiritual path, a path of deepening, in which we are each other's guides and hiking companions. John Welwood remarks, “When we live alone, it is often easier to remain blind to [the places where we are stuck] because we live inside them. A relationship, on the other hand, provides a mirror that heightens our awareness of all our rough edges. When someone we love reacts to our unconscious patterns, they bounce back on us and we can no longer ignore them. ...in the context of a loving relationship, a desire to move in a new direction naturally begins to stir in us. Then our path begins to unfold.”

I'd like to say a little about some of the signposts along that path. Mike Rupsch asked me to sing, “Love Walked In,” today, and every time I practiced it, I couldn't help but think of the day I met my husband. It was at the home of a mutual friend in California, where we had gathered for a meeting to plan a Unitarian Universalist Young Adult conference (for people in their 20s and 30s). I was standing in the kitchen of our friend's house, cutting up oranges for a snack, when Young walked right in the front door. I looked up and he looked at me. Some electric, important soul-connection flashed between us that day – something hard to name. It wasn't love at first sight – it didn't play like love at first sight, at least. We were mere acquaintances for a while, and then became friends. It took seven months before we shyly declared our increasing interest in one another and entered into what I have written here in my manuscript as “a delightful romance.” And it was delightful! But it was so much more than that. For something happened between us on that day we met, a sort of recognition, some uncommon understanding at a level deeper than conscious thought.

John Welwood writes, “When two people connect being-to-being, they experience a deep ‘soul-resonance’ that goes beyond mere romance or desire. Something powerful and real inside them starts waking up and coming alive in

each other's presence. It is often surprising, because they cannot reason themselves into or out of it." (p. 89)

This soul-connection isn't always something we recognize, and unlike infatuation, it isn't always romantic, either. We may also feel it with dear friends, and sometimes with siblings or cousins or other close family members. It's as though something larger than life is present in these relationships. Another name for it might be kinship – that sense of being related on a deep level such that it is almost as though a part of our soul lives in the other person's being.

This sense of connection helps us get through the inevitable challenges of any relationship, of course, but it is only a beginning. As we come to know another person more deeply, and to intertwine our lives more closely with theirs, we also need courage. We need courage because in any relationship rough times will come – those rock-knocking-together times when the bag that holds us and the other person feels suffocating, not secure, and we fear losing not just our rough edges, but essential chunks of who we are to the relationship.

The inevitable risk, of any real relationship, is that we will have to change. We know our partner or friend will change, too, which brings up issues of control and abandonment. Thus a certain quality of surrender, a limberness regarding change, is an essential part of the spiritual path of being in relationship. We are challenged, as John Welwood says, to "open ourselves to the sacred play of the known and unknown, the seen and the unseen, and the larger powers born out of intimate contact with the great mysteries of life." (*Welwood, p. 141.*) And we must understand that sometimes change leads us to the end of a relationship – and learn to surrender to that as well.

Compassion is another signpost on the path of relationships – the turning we must follow when someone we love is in pain and we face our own helplessness.

There's a story about a Hasidic rabbi that speaks to. This rabbi, who "... was renowned for his piety. ... was unexpectedly confronted one day by one of his devoted youthful disciples. In a burst of feeling, the young disciple exclaimed, 'My master, I love you!' The ancient teacher looked up from his books and asked his fervent disciple, 'Do you know what hurts me, my son?'

The young man was puzzled. Composing himself, he stuttered, 'I don't understand your question, Rabbi. I am trying to tell you how much [I love you], and you confuse me with irrelevant questions.'

'My question is neither confusing nor irrelevant,' rejoined the rabbi, 'For if you do not know what hurts me, how can you truly love me?' (*from Madeleine L'Engle in "Walking on Water".*) Compassion is a deep faith in the other, in the one we love. It is a willingness to trust their knowledge of themselves and to be present with them through their struggles.

When we love, we become messengers of the Most High for one another, says Lawrence Kushner. When we love, we are like the spider, weaving our full

pattern from the silk of our interrelatedness, says Leo Buscaglia. When we love, says the pundit, we are like two rough rocks in a bag, becoming smoother and smoother over time. When we love, says John Welwood, we become a higher, more developed self.

But what is the point of becoming a higher self when perhaps a lower self will do? Why become a smooth stone when we may indeed like our essential roughness? Some of us are really good rough! We're good craggy; we're interesting! Why work to complete the web's pattern when every spider knows that any web will do to catch a fly?

These questions remind me of a poem called "Conversation with a Stone," by Polish poet Wislawa Szymborska. I'm not going to read the poem today, but in it, there's this human being who knocks incessantly at a stone's front door. She wants to be let in to the stone so she can look around – she's curious about the beauty and being of a stone. What's it like to be a stone? She demands to know.

The stone refuses to let her in, finally saying, "You lack the sense of taking part – and no other sense can make up for (this) missing sense. . . . You shall not enter, for you have only a sense of what the sense should be, only its seed, imagination. If you don't believe me, says the stone, just ask the leaf, it will tell you the same. Ask a drop of water, it will say what the leaf has said. And, finally, ask a hair from your own head..."

This sense of taking part – the sense of our kinship with all of life – this is what we grow toward when we walk the spiritual path of relationship. It is what Teilhard de Chardin calls "a love of the universe." It is what our Universalist ancestors called the love of God. Our conscious loving of one another leads us beyond human relationship, beyond the process of growing an individual soul, and into communion with life's greater wholeness.

And in this communion, this relatedness with the larger life of which we are a part, we change. Love moves us to care for our planet and all the living things and beings in it in a way we can now only imagine.

Perhaps someday we will truly live this relatedness – or perhaps our descendents will. But we need not wait! Until that time, let turn to the rich encouragement of our human love and affection for one another, and trust it to help us complete the unfinished pattern of our true selves. Let us walk the spiritual path of relationships – the skip of romance, the stroll of a long-term partnership, the dance of friendship, the shared history of siblinghood, the ever-changing stride of parenthood – so many companions, so many roads – so much love.

Amen.

