

“Be Love,” by the Rev. Suzelle Lynch, Unitarian Universalist Church West,
Brookfield, WI 9-14-08

FIRST READING

From the 13th Century Sufi poet Rumi – from the Mathnawi (VI)

Love is reckless; not reason.
Reason seeks a profit.
Love comes on strong,
consuming herself, unabashed.

Yet, in the midst of suffering,
Love proceeds like a millstone,
hard surfaced and straightforward.

Having died of self-interest,
she risks everything and asks for nothing.
Love gambles away every gift God bestows.

Without cause [the Universe] God gave us Being;
without cause, give it back again.

SECOND READING

From *Bringing God Home: A Traveler's Guide* (St. Martin's Press, May 2002) by
the Rev. Forrest Church – found in UU World magazine

Universalism is an exacting gospel. Taken seriously, no theology is more challenging—morally, spiritually, or intellectually: to love your enemy as yourself; to see your tears in another's eyes; to respect and even embrace otherness, rather than merely to tolerate or, even worse, dismiss it. None of this comes naturally to us. We are weaned on the rational presumption that if two people disagree, only one can be right. This works better in mathematics than it does in theology; Universalism reminds us of that. Yet even to approximate the Universalist ideal remains devilishly difficult in actual practice. Given the natural human tendency toward division, Universalists run the constant temptation to backslide in their faith. One can lapse and become a bad or lazy Universalist as effortlessly as others become ice-cream social Presbyterians or nominal Catholics.

THIRD READING Ode 314 (trans. Coleman Barks, Maypop 1990)

Those who don't feel this Love
pulling them like a river,

those who don't drink dawn
 like a cup of spring water
 or take in sunset like supper,
 those who don't want to change,

let them sleep.

This Love is beyond the study of theology,
 that old trickery and hypocrisy.
 If you want to improve your mind that way,

sleep on.

I've given up on my brain.
 I've torn the cloth to shreds
 and thrown it away.

If you're not completely naked,
 wrap your beautiful robe of words
 around you,

and sleep.

SERMON: "Be Love," by the Rev. Suzelle Lynch, Unitarian Universalist Church
 West, Brookfield, WI 9-14-08 (copyright 2008)

Gary Chapman and his daughter Shelley boarded an airplane one day, feeling grateful that they had been able to get seats, and that they had been bumped up to first class. Unfortunately, they were assigned to rows far away from each other – both in window seats – and the plane was packed.

Still, they hoped to find someone who might switch seats with one of them so that they could sit together on the long flight. Shelley asked the man sitting next to her, "Would you be willing to change seats so that I can sit next to my father?" "Is it an aisle seat?" the man asked. Told no, that it was a window seat, the man replied, "Can't do that. Don't like crawling over people to get out."

A few rows forward, Gary put the question to the man sitting next to him. "Sure, I'd be glad to move," the man replied, and the switch was made.

As he reflected on this incident later, Gary Chapman wondered what accounted for the two different responses. The men were the same age – late fifties. They both were dressed in business clothing. What was it that had one man hold fiercely to his aisle seat, while the other one gave up his seat freely, so that

someone else might have happiness? (from the book “Love as a Way of Life,” by Gary Chapman, 2008)

Mata Amritanandamayi, a Hindu teacher known to her millions of followers simply as Amma, or “mother,” once was found late at night walking around the construction site of a new temple on the grounds of one of her ashrams. She had spent a long day dealing with hundreds of people's personal problems and comforting them, and now, as one of her students watched, she walked around and around, her eyes scanning the dirt, bending down again and again to pick something up from the ground. The student went to her and said, “Amma, what are you doing? You should ... rest.” Amma replied “Son, (I am) picking up these rusty nails.” The young student asked why she was doing this at such a late hour, after such a long and exhausting day, and Amma said, “Many poor people come to this ashram and what if a father of a family pricked his foot and it became septic? He might have to go to the hospital and then who would look after his family?” (From the book, “Sacred Journey,” by Swami Krishnamrita Prana)

Yesterday, as I was on my way to the south side to officiate at a wedding, I realized that I'd forgotten to bring a pen with black ink in it with me. In Wisconsin, all parties – the bride, groom, witnesses and minister have to use black ink for signing the marriage certificate. I'd found out the hard way that if you use blue ink, the whole thing is null and void – and the couple has to go through a lot of hassles to get another certificate!

And so yesterday, knowing that my bride and groom were a bit on the nervous side, and not wanting to add to their stress, I stopped at a drugstore to buy a black pen.

It took only a moment to find, but as I approached the check stand, I saw a great big guy standing there in a baseball cap and a dirty T-shirt while the two checkers were rummaging frantically around behind the counter looking for the particular brand of cigarettes he'd asked for.

I wasn't really in a hurry, and so I just stood nearby, observing what was happening, and waited. “Are you sure you don't have them?” the man asked, as the checkers continued to search on the shelves behind them. And then, noticing me, he smiled, and said, “Oh, would you like to go before me?” I thanked him, and said, “That's very kind of you.” He just smiled in return, and after buying my pens, I left with a smile on my face, too.

To be love, to embody it, to live as love's servants – our Universalist ancestors believed in the simple idea that God's love was so big and all-encompassing, that no one would be left out – no one would be consigned to eternal damnation. Theirs was the radical idea that all human beings share a common destiny, that the division between the saved and the unsaved was nonexistent -- and therefore the greatest commandment was to love God with all their heart and soul – for this

was the way in which God loved them. And, of course, since all people were beloved by God, part of loving God was to love their neighbors as themselves.

Our contemporary Unitarian Universalist principles are rooted in this deep Universalist love – in particular, that we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of each person, and respect the interdependent web of life of which we are but a part – otherwise known as the first and seventh UU principles. Some of us do not believe in any kind of God, and yet, following these principles of affirming inherent worth in individuals and affirming our mutual dependence upon each other and upon all of life, we find ourselves in agreement with Sufi mystic Rumi, believing that love is the way in which we human beings awaken and become who we are most deeply meant to be.

In other words, if we are to grow into maturity and live lives of integrity and worth, love needs to become our spiritual practice.

Spiritual practices are, of course, those things which we do intentionally to bring ourselves closer to that which is of ultimate concern to us. They are the things we do that point us toward wholeness, toward living our deepest values, indeed, for those of us who believe in God, they are those practices that bring us closer to our God.

How do we practice love in this way?

While I am certainly a fan of the kind of love that involves passion and romance, that's not the kind of love that always leads us toward wholeness. Love as a spiritual practice is more like what I've heard one writer call "stirring the oatmeal love," meaning the common, everyday kind of love that is manifested in the three stories I told earlier – about the airplane ride, the Hindu teacher's concern for her followers, and my encounter with the big man in the drugstore.

Gary Chapman, the man from the earlier story about the airplane ride with his daughter, has written a lovely book about this kind of love called "Love as a Way of Life." Chapman is a Southern Baptist minister and marriage counselor who has made a lifelong study of loving relationships. In his book, he suggests that practicing love means practicing kindness, patience, forgiveness, courtesy, humility, generosity and honesty – consciously devoting time and attention to developing each of these characteristics in ourselves. And he tells us that doing so, adopting love as our way of life – enriches our human relationships in such a way that our very lives are transformed, and thus so is our world. In other words, he suggests that if we take it moment-by-moment, with careful practice and cultivation of good habits we can truly live what Forrest Church called the exacting gospel of Universalism.

Now, personally – and no pun intended – I love the idea of living the gospel of Universalism – loving my enemies, seeing my tears in another's eyes, respecting

and embracing the “other.” For in my experience, loving another – whether they be partner, lover, friend, parent, child – is connecting, soul to soul, it is moving beyond the smallness of this self, this body, this limited consciousness. It is knowing, if only for a moment, the incredible spaciousness of the Spirit of Life itself.

And I love the idea that there might be an easy way to do this in everyday life. I love it because it is so absolutely radical and countercultural. In a world where we are taught that we have to be aggressive to win, that we have to claw our way to the top of the heap, that there isn't enough of anything to go around so we'd better grab what we can and hold on to it – in this kind of world, loving is a radical act. To love is, as Rumi so poetically put it, to dare to be naked and awake, while others sleep, cloaked in their words and excuses. Love believes that each human life has the power to help change the world.

Thus, love as a spiritual practice truly is more than a feeling. It's an action we choose, again and again. In his book, Gary Chapman tells the story of Lee Atwater as an example of that choice.

Now, some of you may remember Lee Atwater. He was a political consultant and strategist for the Republican party during the 1980s, a ruthless competitor who sought to ruin the reputations of his political enemies by planting demeaning stories about them in the media. (And, of course, he wasn't the only one who did so then, nor now!)

But in 1990, when he was diagnosed with a terminal illness, Atwater had a change of heart. He began to write personal and public letters of apology to individuals whom he had opposed during his political career, including 1988 Democratic presidential nominee Michael Dukakis. In a *Life Magazine* article published a month or so before his death, Atwater wrote, “My illness helped me to see that what was missing in society is what was missing in me: a little heart, a lot of brotherhood. The '80s were about acquiring — acquiring wealth, power, prestige. I know. I acquired more wealth, power, and prestige than most. But you can acquire all you want and still feel empty. What power wouldn't I trade for a little more time with my family? What price wouldn't I pay for an evening with friends? It took a deadly illness to put me eye to eye with that truth, but it is a truth that the country, caught up in its ruthless ambitions and moral decay, can learn on my dime. I don't know who will lead us through the '90s, but they must be made to speak to this spiritual vacuum at the heart of American society, this tumor of the soul.” (From *Gary Chapman*, and *Wikipedia*) For Atwater, realizing the damage he had caused and choosing to apologize and make amends personally and publicly – these were acts of radical love.

If you're wondering if that spiritual vacuum has yet been addressed, you might be interested in another story Chapman tells, about an event that happened just a year and a half ago.

On a cold January day, a young man dressed in jeans, a T-shirt and a baseball cap stepped into a train station in downtown Washington, DC during morning rush hour, and began to play the violin. He left the instrument's case open at his feet, and as he played, 63 people passed by before one man briefly turned his head toward the musician as he walked past. A few seconds later, a woman put a dollar into the open violin case. Six minutes into the performance, someone stopped nearby and listened.

The young man played for 43 minutes, and during that time, exactly seven people stopped to listen for at least a minute. Twenty seven people tossed money into the violin case.

One thousand seventy people rushed by, only a few feet away, without seeming to see or hear the music and its master.

Who was that violinist? It was Joshua Bell. (I can hear that some of you know him!) He's an internationally known musician, and he was playing a 1713 Stradivarius violin that day. Bell, who normally commands audiences in the thousands, and whose music can bring in up to a thousand dollars a minute, had been asked by the Washington Post newspaper to conduct this experiment – to see if people would stop to acknowledge beauty amid the hustle and hurry of rush hour.

They didn't.

Far more people lined up to buy a lottery ticket at the station that morning than paused to hear the music Bell was creating. Few even paused to look at Bell as they passed him. Chapman wondered, "How often does our busyness keep us from seeing the value of the people around us?" One of the simple, every day ways we can "be love" is to slow down and notice the people who walk this planet with us – whether they are renowned musicians or just the person ahead of us in the checkout line.

A friend of mine pointed out something important to me which, like our busyness, impacts our ability to engage in love as a spiritual practice. When I asked him what he thought that phrase meant, he immediately began to talk about competition. He said, "I have begun to realize that being competitive is the opposite of love." He continued, saying that he'd realized that competition is based in an attitude of scarcity – the idea that if someone else is succeeding, it meant he was falling behind. He went on to say that these days he is working on cultivating an attitude of abundance – for example, if someone cuts him off while he is driving on the freeway, instead of feeling like he has to compete by speeding up and passing the other driver, he consciously relaxes, and thinks to himself, "there goes another child of god."

His story reminds me of another, the tale of the traveling monk who once went to visit a renowned master. When he arrived at the master's house, the master was out, and the monk was greeted quite rudely by the master's wife. She was gruff,

inhospitable, and verbally abusive. Later, when the monk found the master and eventually related how the master's wife had behaved, the master said, "Yes, she's the same way to me." The monk was astounded. "How is it that you find peace – that you become centered -- and realize oneness with the Universe when you have that sort of partner in your home? Isn't she a terrible hindrance to your spiritual practice?" And the master replied: "She is my spiritual practice." *(Thank you to the Revs. LoraKim Joyner and Meredith Garmon for this story.)*

A large component of love as a spiritual practice is just this shift in attitude – remembering that no matter how difficult they may seem to us, all people have inherent worth and dignity. It's remembering that they all have the potential to be in positive relationships, that they all have struggles, that they all need love – just as we do. A few years ago, when I gave a sermon on kindness as a spiritual practice, I put it this way, saying that we needed to treat everyone we meet as kin. ... To treat them as though we are connected. As though we mean something to one another, even if we have just met - even if we have never actually been introduced. To be kind is to realize that every other person is just like us. Everyone wants to do well. Everyone wants to feel good. And everyone experiences suffering.

James Autry wrote a poem that speaks of this. He describes a business setting, an office, but I think his words could apply to nearly any community, even our own.

He wrote,

Sometimes you just connect,
 like that,
 no big thing maybe
 but something beyond the usual business stuff.
 It comes and goes quickly
 so you have to pay attention,
 a change in the eyes
 when you ask about the family,
 a pain flickering behind the statistics about a boy and a girl in school,
 or about seeing them every other Sunday.
 An older guy talks about his bride,
 a little affectation after twenty-five years.
 A hot-eyed achiever laughs before you want him to.
 Someone tells about his wife's job
 or why (his partner) quit working to stay home.
 An old joker needs another laugh on the way
 to retirement.
 A woman says she spends a lot of her salary
 on an au pair
 and a good one is hard to find
 but worth it because there's nothing more important
 than the baby.

Listen.

In every office
 you hear the threads
 of love and joy and fear and guilt,
 the cries for celebration and reassurance,
 and somehow you know that connecting those threads
 is what you are supposed to do
 and business takes care of itself.
(in "Love and Profit" – found in "Spiritual Literacy")

Love as a spiritual practice is just that –
 paying attention to ourselves and one another
 listening
 taking the time
 caring
 being kind and courteous
 connecting the threads of love and joy and fear and guilt
 taking in the cries for celebration and reassurance
 doing it over and over again
 moment by moment
 day by day by day
 and letting business take care of itself.

I invite you to think now of all the ways in which you have already shown your
 love to someone else today.

Just think about them for a moment – savor the feeling....

And now think for a moment of the many ways in which love has been extended
 to you this morning – including the ways in which you have offered love to
 yourself....

May you, when you go forth from this place, go forth with that love,
 to give love.

May we, when we go forth from this place, go forth and
 "Be Love."

Amen.

BENEDICTION

Let the good in me
 connect with the good in others
 until all the world
 is transformed through
 the compelling power
 of love.

(Rebbe Nachman of Breslov – in "The Gentle Weapon")