

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York  
**“The Path to Love”**

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore February 14, 2010

**Spoken Meditation**

O Thou in the consciousness of whose presence  
 the desires of our hearts are deepened and  
 before whom the greatness of our need cannot be hidden away,  
 teach us the wisdom of our own spirits and  
 the lessons left us by experience.

We have listened to the counsels of the mighty ones,  
 the saints and sages, speaking to us over the centuries,  
 and yet we do not know.

And so in our perplexity we have reasoned with ourselves  
 and have said that no man knoweth and  
 that all is vanity.

Yet our own lives teach us.

We have learned how lost we are and  
 how desolate our path  
 when we forsake the truth we know is true.

We have discovered how hate and bitterness  
 can despoil us of life's joy and beauty, and  
 that cowardice will always shrink us.

We have learned how desperate is our need of love.

Then, give us, O God,  
 to sift out this wisdom and  
 to live by what it teaches until we find  
 Thy laws in our own lives, and  
 by obedience to them,  
 come to know at last Thy peace.

- by A. Paul Davies

**Sermon**

What better day to talk about love than on Valentine's Day. Unitarian Universalists can more easily enjoy this holiday because the Roman Catholic Church removed Valentine's Day from their calendar of universal liturgical veneration in 1969. The Church did this because

the historical record of who St. Valentinus was cannot be documented.

The holiday may have been created to counter the Roman holiday of Lupercalia celebrated on February 15<sup>th</sup> in ancient times. Lupercalia originated to honor Lupa, the she-wolf who suckled infant orphans, Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome. One aspect of the celebration included noble youths and magistrates running up and down the streets naked, striking those they met with shaggy thongs. Women would purposely stand before them to be struck, believing, if pregnant, that it would aid in their delivery, and if barren, it would aid in conceiving a child.

Being born on Valentine's day, I'm no stranger to the topic of love. My journey into religious life began almost exactly thirty years ago with an experience of love I'd never had before. I experienced what has become much more familiar to me in the Buddhist context as "metta" or loving-kindness. Other words I've used to point to this experience are, "pure love without an object," and the Greek term "agape." That initial experience and then subsequent similar experiences have never come to me with any specific religious signature or source. I haven't had visions of Allah, or Jesus, or Buddha, or St. Valentine or anyone else when that experience has reoccurred. It has always seemed to me to be a core human experience that connects me to something larger than myself. Naming that "something larger" for contemporary Unitarian Universalists is very problematic and controversial.

So how do we talk about this kind of love? It matters a lot this time of year because so many look for this love in the wrong places. Too many people today believe they can find and experience this love only through a romantic relationship with another person or through conceiving and giving birth to children. This loads up marriage with huge expectations that contribute to the high divorce rate. Much as we might want our partner to love us unconditionally, the reality of human love rarely matches this expectation. If your partner is loving you unconditionally, let me be the first to celebrate your good fortune. The rest of us really need to revise our expectations.

Author Elizabeth Gilbert wrestles with the kind of love I'm talking about today in her book, *Eat, Pray, Love*. The book chronicles her year long journey, eating and learning Italian in Italy, praying in her guru's ashram in India, and returning to human love in Indonesia. Early in her stay in Italy, she struggled with depression. Only weeks earlier, an exceedingly painful, contentious divorce that she initiated had been finalized. In the liberating atmosphere of Rome, she had stopped taking her anti-depressant medication. Now she was face to face with "the goons of depression and loneliness." At the end of her rope, she opened her emergency journal to write, "I need your help." After waiting a moment, she wrote in her own handwriting, "I'm right here. What can I do for you."

After writing about her weakness and fear, a familiar presence came to her offering the very words I know I want to hear when I am distressed, lonely and uncertain:

*I'm here. I love you. I don't care if you need to stay up crying all night long, I will stay with you. If you need the medications again, go ahead and take it—I will love you through that, as well. If you don't need the medication, I will love you, too. There's nothing you can ever do to lose my love. I will protect you until you die, and after your death I will still protect you. I am stronger than Depression and I am braver than Loneliness and nothing will ever exhaust me.*

I dearly want to give this kind of love to my family and this congregation ... and I know it is beyond my capability to offer love that will never exhaust me. My intentions may be exemplary but my capacity is limited. There may be people here today who have an infinite capacity to love. If there are, I bow before that capacity. The rest of us must acknowledge the finiteness of our humanity.

Now, is that message Gilbert got in her journal just a creative writer's fiction or is it something real that transcends humanity? Because if it is something real, I know I want some of what she's getting. When I read that response in her journal, it lit up something inside me that illuminates my past experiences of this "transcendent love."

My struggle this morning is finding a shared language to talk about it with you. We are not all Buddhists. We are not all following the same guru Elizabeth Gilbert follows. We are not all Christians or Jews. The struggle of contemporary Unitarian Universalism is the lack of a shared theological language to approach the topic of transcendent love.

At the end of the Nineteenth Century, Unitarians settled their theological disputes with the Great Commandments to Love God and to Love thy Neighbor. Earlier this week I was reading Existentialist Soren Kierkegaard on love. He puts these commandments at the center of his understanding of the nature of love. Yet, for him, that love is quintessentially Christian in origin and expression. Most Unitarian Universalists today have lopped of the Love God part and retained the Love thy Neighbor part. Kierkegaard would never accept that division.

The language I found that walks the tightrope between a secular and religious understanding of love comes from Erich Fromm's book written over fifty years ago titled, *The Art of Loving: an enquiry into the nature of love*. A German social psychologist, psychoanalyst, humanistic philosopher, and democratic socialist from a Jewish background, I thought, ought to be accessible to most here today.

Fromm frames the problem of love in the human dilemma of being aware of our separateness and having an intense desire for union. We know that union in the womb with our mother, are weaned from it as we mature and seek our own autonomy, then strive for it once we fully appreciate our existential aloneness. The message Gilbert received in her notebook answers this longing for union exquisitely. "I will protect you until you die, and after your death I will still protect you." No separateness in that statement!

So, is transcendent love just a stand-in for infantile love ... or something else? Fromm contrasts infantile love with mature love.

Infantile love follows the principle: "I love because I am loved." Mature love follows the principle: "I am loved because I love." Immature love says: "I love you because I need you." Mature love says: "I need you because I love you."

Erotic love replicates this infantile love with the urge to fuse with our beloved. The intoxication of falling in love is the dissolving of boundaries that promise a freedom from that existential aloneness. Yet the love drug can't and doesn't last forever. Surrendering one's self to the other or absorbing the other into one's self is still an immature, conditional form of love that will not be fulfilling.

So what is mature love for Fromm?

[Mature] Love is not primarily a relationship to a specific person; it is an *attitude*, an *orientation of character* which determines the relatedness of a person to the world as a whole, not toward one "object" of love. If a person loves only one other person and is indifferent to the rest of his fellow men, his love is not love but a symbiotic attachment, or an enlarged egotism.

Fromm sees mature love as an art having four characteristics: care, responsibility, respect and knowledge. The love of a mother for her child mirrors the first characteristic of care. This "love is the active concern for the life and the growth of that which we love." The key word here is active. Care is evident in the doing. Care is closely allied with responsibility. This voluntary, freely chosen readiness to respond is an act of will that is not compelled. A mother can care for an infant irresponsibly by not giving the right care at the right moment. She can offer the bottle when the infant isn't hungry but rather wet, cold or tired. Responsibility implies attentiveness to the needs of the other.

Fromm notes that responsibility is not enough since "it can easily deteriorate into domination and possessiveness, were it not for a third component of love, respect." Respect honors the integrity of the other and the boundaries of the other. It sees the recipient of love as a whole person and not a thing to be controlled and manipulated. It honors the inherent worth and dignity of the other.

That respect of the other is conditional on the knowing of the other. Unless I am open to knowing who you are *at your most essential*, what your needs are, your passions are, your joys, fears and sorrows, I cannot fully respect you, be responsive to you, or even care for you. To fully love you, I must know you, respect you, respond to you, and THEN care for you.

To know, respect, respond, and care all are active, relational moments of meeting. To know and respect you, I must communicate with you. To respond and care, my knowing and

respecting must direct my responding and caring. This kind of mature love isn't about me and what I want. It isn't just about you and what you need. It is a dynamic meeting of knowing, respecting, responding and caring *between* us.

The fulfillment and satisfaction of being able to offer this kind of mature love doesn't exempt us from hungering for the bigger, transcendent form of love. The mystics of all religions forsake the earthly quest and seek it beyond the material world, hungering for God's love to fill the gap. Gilbert satisfies her search in India through a life-changing, momentary mystical union with God. Buddhism cultivates a similar experience on the way to Nibbana, realizing the truth of "anatta" or ego-transcendence. Christians turn their lives over to Jesus. Muslims surrender to Allah. What is the Unitarian Universalist to do?

I'm afraid I don't have an answer for you today. I do know for sure there is no contemporary Unitarian Universalist answer we all agree on. The first step toward an answer may be knowing and respecting the limits of our ability to figure things out, particularly anything that might be termed "eternal." The second step may be cultivating the willingness to care and respond to what we do know and respect.

Fromm suggests a direction in these words:

...the love of God is neither the knowledge of God in thought, nor the thought of one's love of God, but the act of experiencing the oneness with God.

This leads to the emphasis on the right way of living. All of life, every little and every important action, is devoted to the knowledge of God, but a knowledge not in right thought but in right action.

Unitarian Universalism, as it is practiced in this congregation, is all about cultivating right action. As Transylvanian Unitarian founder Francis David said in the Sixteenth Century, "We do not need to think alike to love alike." And in actively living in love, I suspect we will discover for ourselves all we need to know about the nature of divinity.

I may not have the answer for you, but I know quite clearly what works for me. I close with some poetry by Rumi that speaks to my heart:

"Do you understand *at all*  
 what the promise is and what the gift is?  
 God is showing solicitude for the rebel.

When that gracious One called you back so kindly,  
 oh, it is a wonder how your heart remained unmoved.  
 Who, really, can find bazaars where, with a single rose,

you are buying whole fields of roses;  
 Where a hundred groves  
 are offered to you in exchange for one seed,  
 a hundred mines in exchange for one coin?  
 When indeed should fortune like this befall?

A Sea has become the suitor for a drop.  
 In God's name, in God's name, sell and buy at once!  
 Give a drop and take in return a sea which is full of pearls.  
 ...do not make any postponement,  
 for these words come from the Sea of Grace."

## **Benediction**

the Sufi poet Kabir knows all about the path to love. Here is what he says:

Are you looking for me?  
 I am in the next seat.  
 My shoulder is against yours.  
 You will not find me in stupas,  
 not in Indian shrine rooms,  
 nor in synagogues, nor in cathedrals:  
 not in masses, nor kirtans,  
 not in legs winding around your own neck,  
 nor in eating nothing but vegetables.  
 When you really look for m, you will see me instantly –  
 you will find me in the tiniest house of time.  
 Kabir says: Student, tell me, what is God?  
 God is the breath inside the breath.

Go in peace. Make peace. Be at peace.  
 Open yourself to the presence of love  
 and make that love real in action.