

What's Love Got to Do with It? From Feeling to Action

- Amanda Udis-Kessler, High Plains Church UU, February 13, 2011; updated June 15, 2022

Last year, the Unitarian Universalist Association invited all of its member congregations to re-imagine Valentine's Day as Standing on the Side of Love Day. Instead of focusing on hearts, flowers and romantic symbolism, we were encouraged to take concrete action to make the world a better place, to really live our principles, to put love to work. The email I got explaining this campaign had a wonderful subject line; it read: "Love is a Verb."

Do any of you remember the Tina Turner song, "What's Love Got to Do with It?" The chorus includes the words, "What's love got to do with it? What's love but a second-hand emotion? Who needs a heart when a heart can be broken?" In the second chorus, Turner describes love as a "sweet old-fashioned notion." I loved this song as a teenager. I guess that reveals my age, huh?

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child, and I listened to teenage sappy love songs like a child. The songs I listened to had titles like, "I want to know what love is" and "I can't fight this feeling anymore." I suspect we all listened to songs like this. But when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways and stopped thinking about love in that rampaging, hormone-driven, "hooked on a feeling" kind of way. It's not that love doesn't involve feelings; of course, it does. But love does not hold up very well if it's just about feelings. Love that is not grounded in actions, in commitments, in daily practices, even in risk-taking and sacrifice, is childish love. It's the kind we are invited to put away when we become adults.

We all know this. We've all practiced love as work, exercise, and disciplined action in our romantic relationships, our parenting, our friendships, and even, for some of us, in our pet rearing. But how often do we stop and look at what it means to live out love in the many aspects of our lives? In how we take care of ourselves? In how we relate to our friends and our romantic companions? In our political activism? And in how we relate to each other here as a liberal religious community? I'd like to say a bit about each of these today and invite you to think about the work you are already doing as a lover – of yourself, of those around you, of the world.

Perhaps we talk about the self-care piece the least, but I've always found it interesting that the second great commandment according to Jesus is to love your neighbor as yourself. As yourself? What would that even mean? How are we supposed to love ourselves? And why are we only supposed to love our neighbors as ourselves? Aren't we supposed to love them more? Whether Jesus did or did not actually say this, it's intriguing. It says that we are of a piece with our neighbors, that our lives are bound up with theirs, and that our love for ourselves and our love for them is inseparable. So if we are going to get the loving our neighbors part right, we'd better figure out what it means to love ourselves. Not to mention that we should love ourselves for our own sakes as well.

Psychologist M. Scott Peck, in his book *The Road Less Traveled*, defines love as "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth." This is love as a verb. It involves will and work. And when it comes to nurturing our best selves, love is

definitely something we do, not just something we feel. When we are stressed out, we take action to de-stress. If we have a self-destructive habit, we confront it and figure out how to lovingly let it go. If we have a nagging suspicion that we don't know what our life is about, we search out a path that makes sense for us. If our life is out of balance, let's say with too much work and too little play, we go out and play. If we are unsatisfied with how well we are doing with our jobs or our friendships or even if we just want to play the cello better than we already do – which in my case would mean being able to play it at all – we don't just give up. We get going. To me, these are all examples of self-care. They are all about loving ourselves, both as we are now and as the selves we could be. And they all require love in action.

Here's a wonderful poem about loving ourselves and what it entails. It is by Derek Walcott, and it is called "Love after Love":

"The time will come when, with elation, you will greet yourself arriving at your own door, in your own mirror, and each will smile at the other's welcome, and say, sit here, eat. You will love again the stranger who was your self. Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart to itself, to the stranger who has loved you all your life, whom you ignored for another, who knows you by heart. Take down the love letters from the bookshelf, the photographs, the desperate notes, peel your image from the mirror. Sit. Feast on your life."

Do we sit and feast on our lives? Do we greet ourselves arriving at our own doors and give ourselves wine and bread? How do we love ourselves? How do we give ourselves back our hearts? I suspect that for at least some of us, this is not the natural state of things. It takes a certain amount of effort to trust joy enough to welcome it in, and to accept ourselves enough to feast with the parts of ourselves we don't like so much. Love is a verb.

Then there are our friendships. We take good care of our friends, don't we? If they seem blue, we are quick to pick up on it and to offer support. When they just need a break, we are there to take that break with them. And the better we know them, the more we practice the discipline of just shutting our mouths when they need an ear more than they need advice. Personally, if I keep working on it I hope to be able to do this about the time I'll be eligible for Social Security. But hey, it's worth the struggle. The point is that we don't just have warm feelings for our friends, or they for us. We share a mutual commitment that is often joyous, sometimes difficult, but ultimately worthwhile. Love is a verb.

Unitarian Universalist minister Scotty McLennan [*Jesus Was a Liberal*, pp. 35 and 33] has commented on the concept of mutual love as the ideal by which romantic couples develop their relationships long-term, after the first fires die down. The phrase "mutual love" actually comes from feminist author bell hooks, but McLennan makes some interesting points about how we would know mutual love when we see it. While he is talking about couples and not about religious communities, as today's First Corinthians reading is, McLennan describes mutual love in ways not all that different from Paul's letter to the church at Corinth. McLennan calls mutual love "a discipline of openness and honesty, empathic listening, personal vulnerability, and willingness to change." He says further that "mutual love requires practice, discipline, devotion, and commitment. The compassionate, empathic listening to the other that's required takes energy, especially when it triggers one's own [issues]." For me, reading those passages was a

relief. They clarified for me what I'm aiming for in my own relationship of over 13 years, while showing me where I fall short. They give me something to hope for, something to work toward. Not that my relationship is all work, far from it. But it's not just a mushy pop song either. Even the part of love that involves knowing the other person's weaknesses intimately and striving not to take advantage of them is love in action. Refraining can be as active as engaging. Love is a verb.

What about political activism? Ending social injustice and bringing about equality and real human flourishing for all calls for love in action, self-sacrificing love that offers radical hospitality to the dispossessed and that relinquishes privilege in favor of humane, egalitarian relations. Such a love is profoundly difficult to live out, and we can usually think of very few people who lived it well enough to merit our deepest respect. One such person, who most Unitarian Universalists hold up as a good role model of love lived out in the pursuit of our principles, is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" King reminds us that there is no in-between: we are extremists for love and justice or we are extremists for hate and injustice. Forty years later it is easy to look back at King's urgency as the product of another time, but plenty of us here today would say that there is much in front of us that requires urgent work while there is still time: urgent work to heal lives, to increase happiness, and to live on "a planet transformed by our care," as one of our hymns puts it ["Wake Now, My Senses," #298]. Today as much as ever, we need to build a land where we bind up the broken, free the captives, bring good tidings to the afflicted, and raise up devastations of old. Our work for justice is fueled by outrage, sadness, resolve...and, at heart, by love. Our work is our love. Our work is how we turn our love into a verb.

Even our commitment to treat our enemies well, however we define our enemies, is an example of love in action. As we all know, you don't have to like someone to love them. I doubt very much that Dr. King liked white racists, in the Deep South or anywhere else. But I am completely convinced that he loved them. I am sure that he yearned for their well-being. In fact, he recognized that their well-being and his own were bound together, and that we are all, as he put it, "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny" [hymnal reading 584]. Dr. King's goal was not to overthrow the white power structure and replace it with a Black power structure. His goal, far more radical, was to overthrow power structures entirely and to replace them with structures of love. Dr. King's love for his enemies was incarnated in his work for a just world rather than a power structure turned upside-down.

When we re-imagine Valentine's Day as Standing on the Side of Love Day, we are invited, I think, to apply that to our congregational life as well as our social activism and interpersonal relationships. We are here for ourselves and our own personal development, absolutely. But we are also here to lift each other up. There's a reason our third principle is acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations. Such acceptance and such encouragement are not just about warm, fuzzy feelings. They are about genuinely working for each other's well-being even when we disagree with each other in some pretty basic ways. If Christian symbolism holds some value for you and I think Christianity is problematic all the way down to its symbols, our liberal religion still asks that I make room for some Christian symbolism in our congregational life together even if I find it of no value. Similarly, if you think spirituality is balderdash but you find the intellectual component of liberal religion meaningful,

it's my work to support your intellectual growth here even if I privately wish you were more into spirituality. This is the burden and delight of liberal religion and it points back to our responsibility to love each other, as well as to how we might do so.

Which leads to Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth [a reading before the sermon]. "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

The words are so familiar as to feel trite, but Paul was not writing to spouses to help them put more oomph back into their relationships. He was writing to a religious community that was trying to figure out how to live together. He was acting as what we would call today a church consultant, not as a couples counselor. The so-called "love chapter" is part of Paul's response to questions raised by the congregation, and mostly addresses the newer converts.

We are not a Christian church but Paul's recipe for congregational well-being still raises questions for us. Have we demonstrated our love through patience? Have we been kind to each other? Have we shunned envy, boasting, arrogance and rudeness? Have we managed not to insist on our own way, as difficult as that is? Have we avoided irritability and resentment? Do we seek the truth, even when it makes us uncomfortable? Do we live out our love by bearing all things, believing all things, hoping for all things and enduring all things? Are we willing to relinquish importance in favor of serving each other? Can we feel the pain of others in the congregation? Are we significantly engaged with the welfare of others in the congregation? To anticipate our closing hymn, do we let love guide us? Do we give from deep within us? Do we change the world with our love? I am guessing that for many of us, the answers to these questions are – yes, to some extent, but maybe not as much as I want or as I could. If that turns out to be a common answer, if we as a congregation think we could do even better at cultivating love along ourselves, let's not just think it. Love is not a sweet old-fashioned notion. Let's not just feel that we have the potential to deepen in our loving actions. Love is not a second-hand emotion. Let's take the next step. Let's do it. Love is a verb.

What's love got to do with it? Everything. Let's take the side of love, take our bearings from love, and act in ways that both reflect and create the love to which we are committed. Amen, and blessed be.