

## **Unitarian Universalism: What's Love Got to Do With It? – Richard J. Grzywinski, Lay Speaker**

March 22, 2009

A few years ago, in one of several attempts at semi-retirement, I taught sailing. My students would often ask me “where and how far can you go in a sailboat?” I would reply that you don’t sail to go somewhere, you sail for its own sake. You seek the invisible and variable forces offered by the wind and currents to propel you forward, challenging your ability to become a partner with nature, exhilarating your mind and your body, and reconnecting you with the universe. You might initially feel a bit uneasy being away from the familiarity and safety of port, but it will pass if you keep at it. (Well, maybe I didn’t say it quite so eloquently, but they got the point.)

And so it is with Unitarian Universalism. We are on an incredible journey of exploration focused not on just being somewhere, or travelling to a specific destination (e.g., heaven), but on ever changing, learning and becoming. And if we keep at it, our fears will also pass away and hope and anticipation will take its place.

Thank you all for again allowing me to share my personal journey with you today. Inspired by that often-recited Buddhist saying “Be ye lamps unto yourselves,” this talk is very much my unguided personal exploration of the subject of love, and to a large extent an outgrowth of my previous talk on Humanism.

So let me start off with a few notable love quotations. (Sound a little boring? Let’s see.)

“Love means never having to say you’re sorry” - from the book “Love Story” and the 1970s movie of the same name. Does the word “icky” come to mind?

Another one: “I love to hit people. I love to.” – Mike Tyson, Professional Boxer

“To love another person is to see the face of God.” – Victor Hugo

“There is nothing I love as much as a good fight.” –President Franklin D. Roosevelt

“Museums. I love museums.” – Tony Randall, actor and TV personality.

“I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.” – Martin Luther King, Jr.

“I love the smell of napalm in the morning. It smells like...victory” – Robert Duvall as Lt. Colonel Bill Kilgore in “Apocalypse Now”

“I love one egg, steamed, firm, and not runny with a piece of whole wheat toast. I really love that.”  
Oops. Wait. That was me, just about two hours ago.

It is odd, isn’t it, how the word love is used to express such a wide range of sentiments, meaning everything from a simple “Gee, I really like it” to “It’s my number one, all-consuming passion and what I live for.....or what I would die for.” We quote the prophets and religious leaders from antiquity who, of course, didn’t even use the English word love in their vocabulary but somewhere a wise translator decided that that is what Jesus Christ, Abraham, Mohammed or Buddha meant – that the English word

love was the right word, and is sufficient. There was a time when a distinction was at least made between erotic love, and sisterly or brotherly love, and benevolent love. But no longer. It's all just love.

It's impossible to talk about love without the lyrics of Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, Sammy Kahn, Burt Bacharach, The Beatles, or even George Thorogood popping into your head. "Tell me, who do you love?" (George Thorogood)

Love. We look for love (often in all the wrong places,) find love, make love, buy love, (we conclude that money can't buy you love), fall in love and out of love, destroy it, and allow it to destroy us. It is used as a means to accomplish great good or to bring great joy, or misused to impose great sorrow or as a weapon for great evil.

So, how does the word love when used to justify shooting a bullet into the chest of another human being under the guise of "love of country" differ from the love we give to family, friends, fellow congregants, the environment, or the universe? Can these all be the same love? "Yes, but it's all just a matter of context" you might say – but I think it's more than that. I think most of us, including myself, really don't know what we're talking about.

Perhaps no other word in the English language has such diverse meaning or interpretations combined with such broad common usage. Maybe it's because we're so lazy, looking for shortcuts even in how we communicate on such an important topic encompassing our moral, ethical and emotional relationship to everything and anything. So there's that word "love," convenient, utilitarian, and gradually becoming meaningless. The only other word I can think of that might meet those same characteristics is "hate."

As UUs, we claim that love is the doctrine of this church, we sing about standing on the side of it, about how wondrous it is, how we have it like an ocean in our soul, and about how we nonetheless need to search for more of it somewhere. What is it we really want, and do we have any idea at all about where to find it? I wonder how many of us stop to contemplate the meaning of that word we use so generously. I know that some of us even substitute the word "love" for the word "god" when encountered in our UU liturgy.

I think we're a bit confused at best, a little careless at worst, even with our best intentions.

As a Unitarian Universalist, I am uncomfortable using a word without understanding its meaning. I am unwilling to claim it as a central doctrine or sharing that word with others who may have an extraordinarily different understanding of what I, or we, mean – if I even know what I mean.

Maybe if we had another William Shakespeare around today, that great inventor of English words, we could come up with a better word to describe our central doctrine, but we are too busy already creating new words like dis, blog, e-mail, website, moodle, upload, Phish, and modem. I don't think the word love is likely to get much attention by linguists.

I suggest the problem is simply one of usage and definition. What we need instead of a new word, or a new basis for our doctrine, is a fuller discussion of love to find its real meaning. It should be part of our regular dialog, an item for reasoned exploration and argument. I think it's worth a special service periodically where we can share our meanings and interpretations – where we can learn from one another

how we can understand love, love more, and love better. So when we use the word love, we can say, ah, yes, that love!

I think I can tell you fairly confidently what love is not. The love we have to find, and define, and understand is not the version of love that is motivated by duty or responsibility, or payback, or quid-pro-quo, or self-esteem building, or satisfaction of our ego. It's not born in passion or in anger. That is all transitory love, and cannot be sustained. It can leave as easily as it arrived. It is love that is apart from our existence, not a part of who we are. It functions not within us but apart from us because it depends on the expectations and behavior of others, not ourselves.

But the love that is within us cannot be changed by others, will remain as long as we wish. It's the love that, like sailing, operates for its own sake. It's unilateral, unidirectional, and complete. As in the Martin Luther King quote earlier, it is unconditional. I think it's the only thing in the universe that defeats impermanence as long as there is a thinking human. And as I will discuss further, it even defeats death. All else will pass.

So let me continue by telling you what I think love is. Not any love, but that love that is consistent with spirituality or religious feeling, the love that Jesus Christ taught, the love that Gandhi and Dr. King demonstrated, the love that we all want, the love we sing about, chant about, and some of us even pray for.

Now that's a bit presumptuous of me, I know, but permit me to give it my best shot. But before I do, I have to briefly address the subject of spirituality.

In my previous three talks, those of you who paid attention, if any, or perhaps found what I said worth remembering, know that I, as well as other congregational speakers, have adopted a convenient model for characterizing human behavior. That model says that the human brain operates in two modes simultaneously and in concert. The rational mode and the spiritual mode.

The rational part of our brain guides us throughout the day like a minicomputer. It tells us if A is greater than B and B is greater than C, then A is greater than C. It computes probabilities to guide our behavior – that traffic light is yellow but if I hit the gas I'm sure (it's highly probable) I can make it through the intersection safely. It designed the space shuttle, determined that  $E=mc^2$ , concluded that the universe is ever expanding, found a cure for many diseases, and designed this microphone I'm wearing. It acts according to the laws of the physical world always seeking balance, equilibrium, symmetry, cause-and-effect. It is the source of reason, logic, and rationality.

The other part of the brain I call the spiritual part. That is the part that recognizes beauty, breeds creativity, begets compassion, empathy, forgiveness, patience, joy, sorrow, acceptance and understanding. It is what we euphemistically refer to as our heart or our soul. It's the binnacle where our "moral compass" is mounted and points us in the right direction when we encounter moral or ethical dilemmas. How our spiritual brain acts I call our spiritual temperament.

So, now, back to the definition of love....

Love is the state of being where all things, internal and external to yourself, have become part of your spirituality. (Repeat) When you love, you have become "soul-mates," as it were, with the universe.

Clearly, that means that what you love is not a conscious choice, but a spiritual commitment to love all things. You cannot love this, but hate that. Then your love is self-serving, and it's not love at all but some sociological or psychological maneuver. Love is complete and total, or it is nothing. It cannot exist in part. You must welcome all things into your spiritual being.

For those of you who appreciate simplicity and brevity, let me restate that definition in 8 words instead of 20. Love is our spiritual being acting upon reality. (Repeat)

Now that's not to say that love does not permit you to form a particular attachment to a special person or thing, but certainly not to the exclusion of anything else. I do love my wife, Cynthia, very particularly. I do love this congregation particularly.

Love (at least the concept that I am expounding today), is not proffered by the gods, not a function of any cosmic energy or any such invisible forces, but solely contained in this amazing human mind that sits atop our bodies, imprinted on our DNA, reinforced by the example of those whom we admire, taught to us in the essential teachings of the inspired (those we sometimes call the prophets, perhaps). It is the key to happiness, is critical to our survival and our emotional health, and provides meaning to our short lives.

A quote from His Holiness the Dalai Lama from *The Little Book of Buddhism*:

"If there is love, there is hope that one may have real families, real brotherhood, real equanimity, real peace. If the love within your mind is lost and you see other beings as enemies, then no matter how much knowledge or education or material comfort you have, only suffering and confusion will ensue." The last eight years rushed into my mind when I first read this.

I chose the particular poem read a few minutes ago because I saw it as a poem about love in two respects. Certainly Peter Everwine's evocative poetic passages convey his perception of the beauty of the world around him. As the saying goes, he is finding "the sacred in the ordinary," and expressing what he finds lovingly and poetically. But more importantly, I believe he has found that state of complete love as I defined it earlier. I imagined Peter Everwine sitting there in his mode of poetic composition being inspired by everything around him – the singing handyman under the floorboards, the memories of his father, the light out in the garden, a small bird singing to the heavens. Whatever he sees, hears or remembers enter his spirituality and is expressed outwardly as poetic love.

This idea of complete and unconditional love is difficult to accept, I know. Why do the names Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Pearl, and George W. Bush come immediately to mind. Also, Saddam Hussein, Adolf Hitler, Vlad the Impaler, Osama Bin Laden, or, for that matter, my ex-wife. Both of them. If I am correct in my definition of love, I must love all of the above. I'm not sure I'm ready to do that, but I'm going to try it.

Some of you may recall my talk on justice about a year ago when I sent both George Bush and Saddam Hussein into a confessional to confess their sins to a priest and accept their "penance." Saddam Hussein was hanged, George Bush was sent on a helicopter ride back to Texas. I opposed then our complicity in the hanging of Saddam Hussein just as I now cannot condone President Obama, whom I respect and admire, seeking to find and kill Osama Bin Laden or to win the war in Afghanistan through more violence, killing and destruction. Find and Kill? Bombing? There is no love in any of these actions. He proposes to conquer evil with evil.

May I quote the Bible? Regardless of what you think about the origin of the Bible and whether or not it represents the word of a god, you must admit that it holds essential truths, some of which are outdated due to cultural changes, for example, and no longer applicable, but some that have withstood the long test of time.

“Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Romans 12:17-21).”

“But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you (Luke 6:27-28).”

Now let me ask the important question, why must we love?

I say, because we are cursed as human beings. Cursed with a thinking brain and the knowledge of our inevitable death. We have life and an inquiring logical and spiritual brain that struggles with a need to know why am I here?, what's it all about?, why must I die?

Well, as to the first part, with our thinking brain, we have learned that this is an inhuman universe in which we reside. The more we learn from science, the more we understand this lack of spirituality and love, except on this little petri dish we call earth, swarming around with various forms of life. But this small planet sits within a universe that is large beyond our comprehension. It is cold, loveless, logical, and calculating. It's like our human brain without that spiritual component. Our spirituality seems to be the only source of love in the universe.

Woody Allen's greatest movie, in my opinion, is Crimes and Misdemeanors. In that, the character “Professor Levy” muses about life, morality, and love. His observation sums it up pretty well, better than I ever can:

“... we must always remember that when we are born we need a great deal of love to persuade us to stay in life. Once we get that love, it usually lasts us. But the universe is a pretty cold place. ....Human happiness does not seem to be included in the design of creation. It is only we, with our capacity to love, that give meaning to an indifferent universe. “

The second part of the curse of life is death.

The Rev. Dr. F. Forrester Church is the minister of Public Theology at the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City. On February 4, 2008 he informed his congregation that he had terminal cancer.

In an article in UU world in the summer of 2008, he summed up his thoughts with these inspirational words:

“When those we love die, a part of us dies with them. When those we love are sick, we too feel the pain. Yet all of this is worth it. Especially the pain. Grief and death are sacraments, or can be.....Unless we

armor our hearts, we cannot protect ourselves from loss. We can only protect ourselves from the death of love. Yet without love, nothing matters. Break your life into a million pieces and ask yourself what of any real value might endure after you are gone. The pieces that remain will each carry love's signature. Without love, we are left only with the aching hollow of regret, that haunting emptiness where love might have been."

So, Unitarian Universalism: What's love got to do with it? Everything, I say. What Unitarian Universalism offers us through a doctrine of universal love is meaning and life everlasting. It is the doctrine of love that imparts meaning and purpose to our lives. It is only love that ensures humanity will survive and this planet will continue. It is only love that ensures the continuation of our consciousness through the free exchange of thoughts and ideas. That is life everlasting.

Now, I am not a minister and have no right to admonish this congregation to love more and better. But I do say to you that each of us is more than just a spark in the fire of humankind, more than a burning ember. We are the fuel. It is our individual action that separates us from coldness and indifference of the universe. As humans, we have a responsibility and a need to love deeply, fully, and comprehensively.

So when we sing about having love like an ocean in our soul, believe it. Because that capacity to love is as big as the universe. It's an infinite ocean. And we sing about finding more love somewhere, believe that as well, because we are loving only an infinitely small portion of that which can be loved. Look around you, take time to be in the moment, and appreciate all this wonderful existence has to offer.

Love, and be loved.