

Living Love: Radical Selflessness and Universalism

a talk presented to the UU Congregation of the South Jersey Shore,
Pomona, NJ

Sunday, June 5, 2011

Readings

Albert Einstein

Letter, March 4, 1950 (Rob Kaplan)

The World as I See It, 1993

A human being is part of the whole called by us universe, a part limited in time and space. We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest. A kind of optical delusion of consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from the prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. Nobody is able to achieve this completely, but the striving for such achievement is in itself part of the liberation and foundation for inner security.

HH The Dalai Lama

The foundation of the Buddha's teachings lies in compassion, and the reason for practicing the teachings is to wipe out the persistence of ego, the number-one enemy of compassion. Not to identify oneself with something, or to associate things with the 'me' and to see that the idea that there is a 'me' is a delusion. That is true wisdom.

#SaturdayRomance

Love and ego go together like boiling water and ice cream. The two can't co-exist. It's TRUE: The price of Love is your Ego.

1 John 4:8

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

Living love...
and the opposite of love is ego.

When Barbara asked me if I would be interested in talking with you all,
she suggested as a topic
Radical Selflessness and Thomas Potter's Universalism.

I thought that was a fine idea,
as Thomas is my personal hero,
whose Universalist example
I do my very best to emulate
in every way I can
as my life at Murray Grove,
where I live and work.

And radical selflessness
is the on-going distillation
of my lifetime's
free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

As I thought about it, though,
I realized how little we really know
about Thomas's life,
never mind his beliefs.
His father didn't think proper
to teach him to read or write,
so quite literally
all we know about him,
other than his birth certificate,
his will
and some local legends,
is what John Murray wrote about him,
quoting him in the first person,
in Murray's autobiography.

So I decided to expand the theme
just a little tiny bit,
to cover the entirety of Universalism.
Which, of course,
very much includes Thomas.

And, as it happens,
I've just returned from
the annual Universalist Convocation,
so I'm feeling more than a little bit
imbued with Universalism, anyway.

The Convo is a gathering of folks who want
"to explore and draw from the heritage of Universalist experience and faith
to inform Unitarian Universalism today and help light its way toward the future."

Again, as it happens,
for those of you who find yourselves
interested in these questions,
the Universalist Convocation for 2012
will be held at Murray Grove.
And it'd be wonderful
if you decided you'd like to join in.

So what is Universalism?
The question was easier to answer
in times past,
when most if not all people
spoke in terms of
God, and heaven and hell, and salvation.

Universalism arose in reaction to
the dominant Calvinist theology of the age.
The Calvinists said
that all people are determined by God,
before we are born,
to be bound either for heaven or for hell;
that only a very small proportion of people
are going to heaven,
(by which, of course, they hoped that
they meant themselves)
with the remaining vast majority of humanity destined for hell;
and that there is nothing whatsoever
we can do in this life to change that determination.

Which makes it easy to see why
Universalism was so much more attractive
to a very large proportion of humanity.

The Unitarians,
who also began as a reaction
against Calvinism,
disagreed,
believing it was possible,
by living a good life,
to determine your own destiny.

The Universalists actually agreed with the Calvinists
that there is nothing whatsoever
we can do in this life to change our destiny.
But they proclaimed that
nobody is ever going to hell:
every human being will ultimately be saved.
Because
God is Love.

To the obvious next question, of,

if everyone is going to heaven,
no matter what we do,
then why be good?
the Universalists replied
that being good,
doing good,
living in harmony with the Universal love
that God has shown us,
is what makes human beings happy in this life.

And Thomas Potter most definitely and emphatically
lived according to his understanding of Universalism.
From his youngest years,
he acted with an almost Buddhist equanimity.

He tells the dramatic story of being shanghaied by the British:

“I worked, on these grounds [that is, what is now Murray Grove] until I became a man, when I went coasting voyages from hence to New York. I was then desirous of becoming a husband, but...I was pressed on board a man of war, and I was taken...to Cape Breton [in Nova Scotia]...When we reached Louisbourg, I ran away and traveled barefoot, and almost naked, to New York, where I was known, and supplied with clothes and money, and soon returned to this place, when I found my girl married; this rendered me very unhappy, but I recovered my tranquility and married her sister.”

As his life progressed,
and he became prosperous,
he continued to grow in his Universalist faith.

He sought out strangers and visitors,
to welcome them,
to learn from them and
to offer them his hospitality,
especially including inviting traveling ministers
to hold their
Sunday morning meetings
in his home....
Up to the point in 1760
when his wife Mary
grew so weary
of having Sunday morning meetings
in her home
that she caused him to
build a meeting-house
at what is now Murray Grove.
He did so,
as an act of love
and gratitude
for the prosperity God had given him.

And he was completely certain that God
was going to send him a preacher

to preach in his meeting-house,
and speak of
Universal love and salvation.

John Murray then appeared,
seemingly out of nowhere,
in 1770
and was extremely startled and upset to learn
that he himself was, in fact,
that Universalist preacher
who God had sent to Thomas.
He learned this when he arrived at
Thomas's doorstep,
having been stranded in Barnegat Bay
by a strong wind preventing his vessel from departing.
Thomas proclaimed:

"I have longed to see you, I have been expecting you a long time!"

Murray objected strenuously.
But when Thomas learned that
Murray was in fact a Universalist
and had in fact preached in his native England,
he assured Murray,

"The wind will never change, sire, until you have delivered to us, in that meeting-house, a message from God."

Which he ultimately did,
on September 30, 1770,
which the early Universalists considered to be
the beginning of their movement,
as Murray went on to be one of the central figures
in the Universalist Church of America.
And that is the reason Murray Grove exists.

All due to Thomas Potter's
living out of Universalist love.
He practiced
radical hospitality,
finding Murray
literally wandering lost in the woods,
offering him a place to stay and
eventually a place to live,
engaging him, encouraging him,
causing him to look inside himself
to discover what even he
didn't realize was there,
and to bring it out and share it with a needy world.
Thomas practiced radical selflessness,
acting not in his own selfish interests,
and not in the selfish interests

of Murray himself,
who at first really, really didn't want
to give that sermon,
but acting in the interests
of selflessness,
in the interests
of spreading the good news of love
to be shared among as many
other people as could be.
He lived love.

There was a very interesting moment
at the Universalist Convocation last month.
One of the speakers was
talking about Universalism
before the merger
with the Unitarians,
which, by the way,
took place nearly exactly 50 years ago,
on May 15, 1961,
and about the various creedal statements
favored by the Universalist Church
(where the Unitarians had none).
He recited the most recent
of those creeds,
the Bond of Fellowship and Statements of Faith
of 1935,
and he invited all those amongst his listeners
who knew it to recite with him.
Nearly every voice in the house
rose in unison:

The bond of fellowship in the convention shall be a common purpose to do the will of God as Jesus revealed it and to cooperate in establishing the kingdom for which he lived and died. To that end we avow our faith in God as Eternal and All-conquering Love, in the spiritual leadership of Jesus, in the supreme worth of every human personality, in the authority of truth known or to be known, and in the power of men of good-will and sacrificial spirit to overcome all evil and progressively establish the kingdom of God. Neither this nor any other statement shall be imposed as a creedal test, provided that the faith thus indicated be professed.

Most of these folks had
been Universalists before the merger,
and they all very fondly recalled
that faith.
They are now proud and committed
Unitarian Universalists,
but believe that
Universalism still has
a great deal to offer
to our denomination
and the world.

And the purpose of Universalism
was literally to establish the kingdom of God on earth,
the kingdom of Eternal and All-conquering Love.

These days, UUs being who we are,
you'd get almost as many answers
to the question of
what Universalism means
as there are UUs to ask.

In her moving and inspiring keynote address at the Convocation,
Rev. Naomi King declared that

“Universalism’s primary message calls us to lead lives of bold compassion and work to create tangible
hope...for the people and the planet that are perishing, particularly for those in this moment who are being
shunned, excluded, neglected, and left behind...guided by great and abiding love.”

And UUA President Peter Morales agrees,
urging us to speak about Universalism
“in terms of compassionate love for all people.”

Most UUs would probably respond similarly
to the same question,
“What is Universalism?”
perhaps also including
the inherent worth and dignity of every person, or
the belief that all major faith traditions are equally valid.

And I would certainly agree with
all of the above.
Though in my case,
tending as I do,
to come at things from a
slightly different angle,
I'd respond that,
rather than being equally valid,
all major faith traditions are equally invalid.
Including the faith tradition
of rationality and science.

Human beings are incapable of
fully understanding very much at all
of absolute reality,
of reality as it really is.
Each major tradition does its best
to comprehend that reality
and express it in the idiom of the culture
of which it is a part.
And all succeed,
gloriously,

so long as you take their expressions
as what they are:
as poetry and metaphor and myth.
All anyone really can do, though,
in my personal belief,
to be in harmony with actual reality,
is live as lovingly,
as selflessly,
toward every other human being
as you can.
To live love.

For love,
of course,
is the core of and connection between
Universalism and radical selflessness.
And, when you get right down to it,
of everything else
of meaning in human life.

I personally came to that conclusion,
that love is the sole source
of meaning,
without knowing anything whatsoever
about Universalism,
and I had determined to
live my life
as completely as possible
according to the implications of that conclusion,
back in the mid-1990s.

Some of you may recall
that I addressed this congregation
a number of years ago
on the subject of
radical selflessness,
which I equate with love,
and how the search for meaning
and a place to live out meaning,
upon my return to this culture
after 12 years of
living in Japan,
sandwiched on either side
by 3 years of backpacking in Europe and southeast Asia,
led me on a quixotic quest
to see if I couldn't find
a couple of other UUs who might be interested
in helping me create a
Unitarian Universalist monastic community.
I never found any.
But the quest led me to Murray Grove,

where I continue to be,
to my knowledge, and less than half-jokingly,
the world's only UU monk.

I won't repeat the details of that talk.
But at that time,
I defined
radical selflessness as:

behaving not in our own self interest
and also not in the interest of any other selves
but in the interest of loving and cultivating love;

And that's pretty much
how I'd definite it today.
And, having come to the conclusion,
having truly embraced the faith,
that only love has meaning
and further that, really, only love is real,
the only rational course of action
left to me
is living my life
to the extent I am able
according to that faith.

Living love...
and the opposite of love is ego.

And ego has created our world.

I'd like to offer you
my own personal
creation myth.

Actual reality,
that which is really real,
is vastly more immense
and complex than
human beings are capable of beginning to comprehend.

We are stuck
on one tiny insignificant planet
in one tiny insignificant corner
of a tinyish insignificant galaxy
lost in the immense vastness
of the physical universe.

This vastly immense universe,
in all its physicality,
is comprised
of one thing,

and one thing only.
What we have come to call energy.
Energy
acting and interacting
with itself
in and as the infinite variety
of forms and patterns
and patterns of patterns
and patterns of patterns of patterns
that we have come to call
subatomic particles
and atoms
and molecules
and fields and waves
and planets and galaxies.
Other than energy,
nothing exists.

The range of possible sensory inputs
available to us,
stuck here
on our tiny insignificant planet,
based upon
and emerging from and as
all that energetic patterned interactivity,
inputs of light, and sound, and smell, and sensation,
is overwhelmingly greater than
our human senses are capable of registering.
Just ask your neighborhood cat or dog.

Even the range of inputs
that our human senses ARE capable of registering,
and send cascading in, every instant,
to our human brains,
is overwhelmingly greater
than those brains are capable of dealing with.

And that's not even to mention
the possibility that
the input from the senses,
limited though it may be,
could conceivably not even be accurate at all.
The brain,
stuck inside its bony shell,
has no way of knowing
what's really out there or isn't.

The least religious,
most utterly rational person in the world
is still, of necessity, a person of deep and abiding faith.
They have

and have to have
a belief and a trust,
which informs everything they do
and everything they are:
faith that what their brain and their senses are telling them
about the world they think they live in
is in fact correct.

That faith is misguided.

Their faith in reason and rationality
is just as invalid,
is just as much
poetry, metaphor and myth
as any other.

Our brains,
or, more accurately,
the brains of our evolutionary ancestors,
in an attempt to make some sense
out of all these inputs,
and deal with them in some way,
have evolved a consciousness,
dimly and rudimentarily at first,
Eventually,
this consciousness evolved,
dimly and rudimentarily at first,
using patterns of brain chemistry
and patterns of behavior based on that chemistry,
and then ever more complicated patterns
and patterns of patterns,
and patterns of patterns of patterns,
into an ego.
A consciousness aware of itself
as an individual self
distinct from all other individual selves.

None of which,
except the chemistry,
has the slightest bit
of physical reality,
though it can certainly impact physical reality.

Ego doesn't really exist.
It's a pattern
and a pattern of a pattern
of instinctual and learned behaviors.
However, ego makes us think
that it not only exists,
but that it is the center point of existence.
Because it made us as we are,

and caused us to evolve as we have.
And the primary need of ego,
the primary goal of ego,
is its own survival and aggrandizement.
Not our health,
or really even our survival:
its own survival.

Ego acts always
and only in
its own interest.

Firstly,
to strengthen and glorify itself.
And secondly,
but only secondly,
to ensure the health and survival
of the individual
it inhabits and identifies.

That would be us.

Self-consciousness and ego,
to help ensure that
individual health and survival,
has caused us to evolve
species
and sex
and pair bonding
and family
and culture
and society
and tribe
and nation.

Economics,
politics,
war,
genocide.

Racism,
sexism,
homophobia,
horrors and cruelties of every kind.

Art,
music,
dance,
philosophy,
religion,
literature,

science,
fashion,
sports,
beer,
fine wine,
fine dining,
movies,
tv,
the internet.

The entire mess.
And the entire glory.
And none of it is particularly real
or meaningful
in and of itself,
especially if you take it too seriously.

I can't honestly say
I know any of that for certain.
I certainly can't prove it.
But I believe it.
It is my faith.

There is meaning, though, according to my faith,
and that meaning stems from love.

And love is selflessness.

Love is the direct experience
of the essential
non-reality of the ego.

There is no self.

Selflessness,
love,
is experienced at those moments
of fullest concentration
of fullest engagement
of fullest being,
when consciousness of self ceases,
and identity with
underlying
overlying
innerlying
total energy of actual reality
is "realized".

The experience of selflessness,
of love,

can be fleeting and shallow,
like in the instant
of being taken out of ourselves,
when we
take that first sip of coffee in the morning
(assuming, of course, that it's good coffee)
or that first sip of wine at the end of a long day;
when we
savor that first bite of home-made lasagna
or chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream;
when we
notice the beauty of a flower or a face.

The ego ceases, for that instant, to exist for us,
and we are real.
Or, rather,
for that instant,
reality as it really is exists.

It is the experience of selflessness
that is the source of the meaning of those moments,
not the coffee or the lasagna or the flower.
As we know when ego,
wanting to hold on to,
wanting to possess, wanting to own the feeling,
forces us to continue shoving more and more ice cream
into our face,
or drink far too much wine
long after the experience has ceased.

The experience of selflessness,
of love,
can be longer and stronger,
like when we
immerse ourselves
in a great song or piece of art;
when we
lose ourselves
in a good book or wonderful movie or amazing football game.
The experience of selflessness,
of love,
can be even deeper still,
as when we are
carried away for extended periods
extinguishing ourselves through
"being in the zone"
playing a game we enjoy,
concentrating on doing a job well,
creating a work of art or craft,
making love.

The ego ceases to exist for us in those times,
we are real, we are the total energy of reality.
Reality as it really is exists.

It is the experience of selflessness,
the lack of ego,
that is the source of the meaning of those moments,
not the symphony or the jump shot or the kiss.
Though ego tries to hold on to and own the moment and the achievement.

The experience of selflessness,
of love,
can be completely profound,
as when we
are filled to the exclusion of all else
with a the knowledge of our identity with nature
on a walk along the shore or a hike in the mountains;
when, through practice,
we are able intentionally to suspend
the actions and delusions
of the ego
in meditation or in prayer,
in oneness with the Unity of Being;
when we are overcome
with pure love,
with selflessly and truly and utterly desiring
for a child,
for a lover,
for a parent
everything that they need to make them happy and fulfilled,
committing ourself to providing as much of that for them as we possibly can,
without expecting anything in return for ourself.

The ego ceases to exist for us,
we are real.
We are the total energy of reality.
Reality as it really is exists.

Reality is there.
Reality alone is.
It is the ego that blocks us from realizing it
most of the time.
Non-reality blocking reality.

Evil is ego.

Not the other way around.
Without ego, evil does not exist.
Evil is what is bad
for us,
for the ego.

Without the us,
without the ego,
there is no bad.

There is, of course,
health and unhealth
in the context
of this world
in which we have no choice
but to live.
There is
good and bad
in the way people
treat one another.

But it is the ignorance
which causes so many people
to be consumed by
and unconsciously identify with their ego,
it is the whole world
that ego has created
and in which we live,
that judges and divides and criticizes and condemns and victimizes.
It is ego that invented the hell
that the Universalists denied.

To overcome ego,
live love.

It's not easy.
Ego is stronger and more deeply rooted
than any addiction conceivable.
Ego is who we think we are,
and what we build our entire lives,
our entire cultures around.
Ego is not real,
but it adores its self-created unreality
and won't let go willingly.

Love has gotten a bad rap.
The word, as you may have noticed,
is a bit loaded.
It's been associated
forever
with softness and sweetness and cuteness,
with the worst kind of sentimentality
and the many songs and stories
that celebrate it and wallow in it,
with excesses of sensuality and sexuality.

Though it is, of course,

also responsible
for the absolutely most
exquisite works
and sublime experiences
in human history.

Living love,
radical selflessness,
overcoming the ego
for more than mere moments at a time,
is about the most difficult thing
anyone can try to do.

Love is the absolute bedrock of our very being,
but most of us cannot bear to try and access it
except in extremely controlled and limited ways.

It is the experience of
oneness with
the entirety of the energy
of real being.

Radical selflessness
to the extent that it is possible
is not convenient.
It is not comfortable.
It is not particularly useful in dealing with the mundane issues
of our ego-created everyday “existence”.

But love is real.
It is all that is real.
And the experience of it is beyond blissful.
It is bliss.

As a faith tradition,
we are no longer trying actively to
“overcome all evil and progressively establish the kingdom of God”
who is
“Eternal and All-conquering Love,”
as the Universalists were.

Maybe we should reconsider.

Even more widely
than the realm of personal experience,
love is still
in total truth
the answer,
and the only real answer,
to the world’s immediate and long-term problems.
And it is something

we can try and bring to bear.

The extent to which the largest number of people possible
can be brought at least into a conscious effort,
if not full success,
to live love,
to act in accordance with the reality that is love,
to be in harmony with the energy that is actual reality,
is the extent to which the issues dividing
and plaguing and killing us can be engaged and solved.
Without living love,
none of those issues can truly be overcome.

Economics, and politics, particularly, are totally about ego,
about self-interest,
about creating and maintaining divisions between people.
And the virulently brutal form of politics
that currently has our nation and our planet in its grip,
selfist, nationalist, religionist, sexist, racist,
is ego personified.
in all its ugliness,
in all its violence,
in all its pride.
In acting to counter the influence
of this form of ego politics,
love, selflessness,
is the only possible tool to use.
Anything else is just another form of ego politics.

It seems so obvious to me, that
until every human being genuinely and consciously
loves every other human being more than they love themselves,
until they bring themselves to selfless action,
not in the interest of their own selves,
or in the interest of any other self,
but in the interest of increased selflessness, of living love,
there can be no real, lasting solution
to any significant human or inter-human problem.

That's not likely to happen
any time real soon.
But striving toward making it happen,
even in our limited way,
is where meaning lies.

Living love
is not easy,
and may not be possible
in every moment.
But it is most definitely possible to try
and to succeed a significant part of the time.

The life and example of Thomas Potter
richly testify to that.

How do you live love?

My own halting answer,
inspired by Thomas and many others,
has been
to try and create and organize my life such that
opportunities for
the experience of selflessness,
of love,
to happen
are maximized,
from the trivial to the profound.

To try and discover the ways that
the experience of selflessness,
of love,
happens most easily for me,
and immerse myself in those ways,
and to learn new and more powerful techniques
and practices for
the experience of selflessness,
of love,
to work in my life.

To try to associate to the degree possible
with other people
trying to do the same.

To try to apply
my faith of love and selflessness
in everything I do and am.

And to try to reach out
where I can,
as I'm doing here today,
to others who might be interested,
possibly creating connections
where there might not have been any before,
and hopefully planting a seed
the might bear fruit in the future.

As Thomas did.
And as the Universalist half
of our Unitarian Universalist heritage
proclaimed as their purpose
and mission.

Living love,

and the opposite of love is ego.