

LIFE'S CENTRAL VOW

Our Unitarian Universalist version of religion is not ultimately about beliefs but behaviors, not about creeds but vows—in short, keeping life's central vow...loving and being loved.

Love is the litmus test for the quality of our human journey. As the poet William Blake wrote:

We are put on earth a little space that we might learn to bear the beams of love. Our true identity is to be found in loving.

I agree. Indeed, we're created to bear the beams of love: **bear** in three senses...to bring forth love, to carry love, and to endure love. In the first sense, we're meant to *bring* new love into the world, to be birthers of love. In the second sense, we're meant to *spread* love around, as contagious carriers. And in the third sense, we're meant to grow in our capacity to *endure* love's fierce beauty and pain. Yes, my sisters and brothers in faith, we exist to birth love, to spread love, to endure love.

Now, I don't often preach directly on love. Not because I don't think it's important. Hardly. I mean, if one's heart is stone, then you can't have either wise thoughts or caring behavior. But when your heart softens, when you're no longer self-absorbed, you can allow others to breathe alongside you; you can even appreciate their existence as being equal in value to your own. You can love and be loved.

In a world of greediness, love's the dearest thing we can give or get. In a world of illusions, love's the deepest source of stability. In a world of impermanence, love's the only gift that isn't lost. As my 95 year-old mother's health declined and her world gradually diminished,

much was lost. Much was lost indeed, but not love; for love, the true article, outlasts the rational parts of existence, certainly in my mom's life.

Love's of absolute importance, but it's just that talking about love doesn't get you to the real thing. Preaching about love can, in fact, be a poor substitute for not being or doing love where it counts, in our daily lives. Idries Shah, the renown Sufi scholar once told an audience, after lecturing for four hours, (which, for my tastes, is about 3 1/2 hours too long): "Notice I didn't use the actual words **God** or **love** once during my talk, yet everything I mentioned was somehow about these two realities." So it goes.

However, occasionally we need to wrestle outloud with the ultimate nature of divine and human existence...with love. And today, as my life-mate, Carolyn, and I just celebrated our 34th anniversary, I do so both as a tribute and thank you to my wife for companioning me deeply and adventurously, through thick and thin, for the best portion of my life. I've come to believe, after countless twists and turns, that a good, growing partnership is primarily about choosing again what we chose in the first place. In short, renewing our initial vows daily.

Too many of us unfortunately get caught up in *novophilia*, the passion for newness for its own sake, especially when dealing with a subject so slippery and mushy as love. But there's nothing terribly new in my sermon today, just a bunch of reminders, which are easy to state yet so tough to heed. So here goes.

First, we simply can't forget that love is primarily a verb rather than a noun. Our purpose in life is not to define love, once and for all. It can't be done, plus the exercise isn't all that useful. Our mission on earth is to love—to share, create, give love, to bear love—to be lovers of nature, ideas, humans, projects, animals, plants, the deities. Greek literary giant Nikos Kazantzakis put it deftly: "If I were fire, I'd burn; if I were a woodcutter, I'd strike; but I'm a heart, hence I love!"

A second reminder. For a long while I've thought of love primarily in the active voice. That's understandable, since love isn't a feeling or sentiment so much as an activity. Yet robust love is something not just given but given **and** received, and oh, how hard it is for us earthlings to receive love, particularly for productive, outpouring Unitarian Universalist types. The receiving of love may just be for many of us a more rigorous and riskier act than the giving of love.

Therefore, as an authentic, full-fledged lover, I'm summoned to live ambidextrously between the active and passive voices. Progressive 20th century minister Howard Thurman always used to say, "My heart must be a swinging door that opens in and opens out." This means that we lovers need to allow others into our hearts, encourage others to nurture and caress us, permit others to take care of, even carry, us upon occasion. As the song says: "He ain't heavy, he's my brother; she ain't heavy, she's my sister!" For life's central vow is loving **and** being loved!

Third, our loving is fake unless demonstrated toward those near and dear to us, including family and friends, and, yes, ourselves as well. One of life's tragedies is that people are often more adept at delivering love to strangers than kinfolk, those far off while dodging the imperative of loving upclose. As Susan Griffin put it:

Love should grow like a wild iris but does not. Love more often is to be found in kitchens at the dinner hour, tired out and hungry, lingers over tables in houses where the walls record movements; while the cook is probably angry, and the ingredients of the meal are budgeted, while a child cries feed me now and her mother not quite hysterical says over and over, wait just a bit, just a bit...

Yes, loving is to be delivered upclose and personal, here and now, with those in our very midst.

Another easily-bypassed reminder about life's central vow is that genuine loving can be difficult, even painful, far messier than we ever anticipate or want. In Rainer Rilke's trenchant volume entitled *Love and Other Difficulties* he writes:

To love is good—love being difficult. For one human being to love another: that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation.

It's relatively easy to love when we're feeling grand or to disappear when the going gets rough or even too intimate. What's strenuous is "holding to the difficult": acknowledging ones thorny past or dreary present. "Holding to the difficult" mandates facing another human being with an active gaze and level glance rather than fighting or fleeing.

"Love being difficult" impels us to be strong enough to discipline a child, brave enough to abandon bad habits, large enough to enfold society's dirty outcasts. Just when we think our task is done, love insists upon yet one more appropriate demand. Just when we'd rather stay on the periphery of our Fellowship's life, love calls us to renew our membership vows, to enter the center of responsible action. Just when we're lured to coast in a friendship, love reminds us that truthful, trusting communication is wanted. Just when we'd rather remain comfortably speciest, love impels us to recognize the souls of animals.

At a dinner party some time ago, I sat next to a man who was an oceanographer. At one point he asked me if I'd ever wondered why lobsters could weigh one pound, three pounds, even ten pounds when they had such a hard shell. How could they grow? I had to tell him that resolving this fascinating quandary wasn't high on my list.

He smiled and proceeded to explain that when a lobster becomes crowded in its shell and can't grow anymore, by instinct it travels out to some place in the sea, hoping for relative safety and begins to shed its shell. It's a terribly dangerous process—the lobster has to risk its life, because once it becomes naked, vulnerable, it can be dashed against a reef or eaten by another lobster or fish. But that's the only way it can grow.

Well, plenty of times, Carolyn and I, singly and as partners, have known that it was time to "go to the reef," it was time to grow and change, to become more resourceful, more expansive,

more of our best selves. I'm sure you know the urge—that nagging, creative discontent with where and who you are—an unease sufficient to nudge you out of your shell, drive you to the reef. Staying in a tight shell is invariably a metaphor for stagnation.

Well, that's the deep challenge, the hard blessing of love, isn't it? To shed our shells, to go to the reef, to risk enlarging our lives, to break through self-imposed, constricting barriers, to open ourselves to the surprising risks and delights of loving and being loved by causes, by humans and gods, by life itself! There may not be much new about this vow, and it's not terribly fancy, but loving and being loved remains life's central vow, this year and the next and the next, and if ignored, we merely slither our way through another round of life's thicket.

Which will it be for you, right now in your life-journey? Love or fear? If you choose love, then you'll have no choice but to sit down and ask yourself: what and who you've been put on this region of earth to love? Now listen carefully, because as love cracks open your shell, it'll tell you exactly what this beautiful and broken world needs from you. Love is holy work and cannot wait. So, love big and love wide the rest of 2007 and far, far in the future.

As folksinger-composer, Kate Wolfe, who tragically died of leukemia at the age of 38, put it in one of her gorgeous songs: “You must give yourself to love, if love is what you're after, open up your hearts to the tears and laughter, and give yourself to love, give yourself to love!”

The central vow of loving and being loved came home to Carolyn and me with resounding clarity and power during a trip, a few years, back to the University of Notre Dame at South Bend, Indiana to participate in a glorious rededication ceremony. Back in 1961, Carolyn's father was commissioned by the University President, Father Theodore Hesburgh, to design a huge granite mural to form the face of what was to be the largest university library in the country at that time.

We'd seen postcards of this 160' by 40' granite mural, still the largest of its kind anywhere in the entire world, but we'd never seen it in person, so this wasn't just another trip but a true pilgrimage to honor Carolyn's father's stunning creation.

The University graciously sent us printed and pictorial materials about the mural, so that we might prepare ourselves for this long-awaited visit. Carolyn's late brother David had spoken reverently about the Notre Dame library facade being "the eighth wonder of the world," and although his sentiment could be dismissed as mere prejudicial family observation, the actual sight of Jesus, one of life's consummate teachers, with his arms outstretched in a forty-two foot wingspan was simply staggering, overwhelming, brought us to silence and tears.

After Millard designed this engineering and artistic masterpiece, it took a quarry in Minnesota over a year to cut the thousands of pieces of different colored granite. The mural is known to rabid Notre Dame football fans across the land as "The Touchdown Jesus" but is more formally called the "Word of Life." It majestically depicts Jesus as religion's supreme teacher surrounded by scholars, saints, and scribes from the Eastern and Western branches of Christendom. All the figures are deferentially turning toward Jesus as the culminating religious presence.

In the Christian scriptures Jesus reportedly said, "I am the way, the truth and the life," thereby encouraging pilgrims to experience, if not embrace, his particular pathway to the holy. Whether one holds that Jesus is the exclusive or an exemplary route to the good life, few of us would dispute that his central truth was one of love. His major lesson was unquestionably loving and being loved.

So, here on a mid-western campus, albeit a religious one, notably Roman Catholic, Jesus, the teacher of teachers has been portrayed with compassionate, outstretched arms, welcoming travelers from far and near, from all corners of the universe, to come unto him for challenge and comfort. This magnificent work of art is saying, and I would concur, that the apex of learning is

love, that the fount of wisdom is love, that the summation of all the books contained in that library to which Jesus is beckoning...is love.

So, as we continue our precious year together here at San Dieguito, let's be attentive to life's main mission which remains the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow: namely, to welcome people from all stations of life, to welcome individuals of variant classes and convictions, colors and capacities, to welcome people into our midst as they are...so that they might grow to become whom they choose to become.

May we never ask folks what they believe or what might be their political or sexual orientation, but rather ask their names and how they're doing, really doing. May we greet one another as the Quakers of old did: "how goes it with thy spirit?" May we ask all who enter our doors what they need from our religious community to nourish their souls and what gifts they bring to feed ours in return!

For the heart of our Unitarian Universalist gospel is universal and enduring love (nobody's got a bigger gospel than ours)...and what reminds me of our gospel is my soul's vision of the colossal mural of Jesus with extended arms—beckoning, inviting, welcoming us to a life of giving and receiving love.

There are lots of things in our human existence that we can't control, but we can control one major thing: refusing to leave the table, refusing to renege on our commitments, refusing to walk out on social causes when they become unpopular, refusing to abandon our faith community over a disagreement, refusing to abandon our friends when they're beleaguered, and refusing to compromise our values when the going gets rough.

May that be our vow within and beyond these Fellowship walls: to love and be loved right where we dwell, not in some distant place of desire. May we give our all to the relationships in which we currently reside rather than being waylaid by rosy fantasies. May we fight evil on the

battlefields in North County rather than trying to fix the problems of San Antonio or Amsterdam. May we simply heal that part of the cosmic web where we're planted. For as feminist author Audre Lorde says: "We are the ones we've been waiting for."

When I went into the ministry I was guided, if not driven, by the message: "Hey, I've **got** to love." After 40+ years in this strange and wondrous profession, I realize that my mission was a bit confused and compulsive. I now know that "I **get** to love." Surrounded by the love of sisters and brothers, and immersed in the divine love at the heart of Creation, I'm pulled by gratitude not pushed by approval and am consequently more able to love genuinely in return. Maturing from a ministerial vision of "I've got to love" to one of "I get to love" has made all the difference imaginable in my journey. I get to love and be loved. And so do you.

Hallelujah, blessed be, and amen!

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