

OUR LOVE IS HERE TO STAY
Rev. Kit Ketcham, Feb. 07

Here's a song I'll bet you've all sung at some time or place in your life! The theology is a bit lightweight, but it's fun to sing anyhow, and I hope you'll really indulge yourself in the harmonizing, like we did at summer camp!

"Tell me why the stars do shine, tell me why the ivy twines,
tell me why the sky's so blue, and I will tell you just why I love you.
"Because God made the stars to shine, because God made the ivy twine,
because God made the sky so blue,
because God made you, that's why I love you."

I remember so clearly sitting on huge logs around a campfire at Camp Arrah Wanna, up near Mt. Hood, as a teenage girl singing this song soulfully, staring hungrily across the circle at the latest of my many teenage crushes, be it Bob or Doug or even Harland, who, though not anywhere near as popular and cute as Bob and Doug, at least seemed to notice I existed.

My understanding of love, at age 15 or so, was limited pretty strictly to the love I felt within my family and close friends and the panicky, heart-stopping kind of attraction I felt to boys in my vicinity. I didn't realize at the time that I was simply making my way along a pathway in learning to love.

There were people I loved who did not love me back. Some were adults, some my own age, some male, some female. I learned to temper my expression of love, to measure the output from someone else before I gave my heart. Within my family, this had not seemed so important, as I was lucky to grow up in a nourishing circle of physical affection.

But once I started looking for love outside the family, I had to be careful.

In time, I did have boyfriends, young men who seemed to love me a lot in exchange for a steady date and kisses behind a steamy windshield. I always worried that I didn't love them the same way they seemed to love me. The once or twice I felt great love for a young man, he did not seem to love me back in the same way. So True Love, to me, seemed to be a difficult-to-achieve, imbalanced kind of deal-----I didn't know if I'd ever discover how to love and be loved at the same time.

My American Heritage dictionary defines love this way: 1. an intense affectionate concern for another person, a passionate attraction to another person. 2. A beloved person. 3. A strong liking or enthusiasm for something. And of course, 4. A zero score in tennis.

My love life seemed to be like a tennis game!

In her book "Teenage Romance or How To Die Of Embarrassment " Delia Ephron quotes from her heroine's diary:

"Dear Diary, Remember I told you I wish I could find someone I really like? Well, diary, da-da-da-da, I have!!!!!! He's in my French class so I guess I was wrong--French won't be my most boring, worst class after all. His name is Jeffrey Dobkin. Oh diary, you should see him. Brownish hair, taller than me (very important), blue eyes.

"I noticed him right away because who wouldn't? He's really popular. I mean really, really popular. Compared to him I'm practically a zero in popularity. When I first saw him close up, I didn't think I would like him. He just didn't seem like my type.

But then I started thinking about him more and more and yesterday during algebra, which is my class after French, I was thinking about him and I just knew. Diary, I'm in love. Do you think that's weird?"

I remember those days-----do you?

Since the days when we lurched from crush to crush into a love partnership that we hoped we could sustain, our understandings of love have definitely evolved.

Some of us, wounded in the past by hurtful actions disguised as love, carry a suspicion of love that is difficult to overcome. We sometimes distrust the love we are offered, preferring to choose the love we are familiar with, even when this means one disastrous relationship after another.

Eventually, we may learn enough about the love baggage we carry to be able to set it down and find love which, though not perfect, is satisfactory and ultimately fulfilling. We may have to admit hard things to ourselves-----that we are attracted to members of our same sex, or that we were abused as children by a person we trusted, or that we are alcoholic or attracted to addictive relationships. We may need to conquer shame and deal with a negative past.

It's not easy facing who we are as fallible, imperfect human beings, but loving ourselves as we are is the first step in learning to love another. This wisdom is an integral part of virtually every world religion, sometimes stated as the Jewish and Christian scriptures do: "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself" Or as other sacred texts: "Do not do to your neighbor what you would prefer he did not do to you.

We struggle because we often think of love as a feeling, an emotion. We get confused by the sensory rush that strikes when we see someone who is appealing to us. But that's only the first step in an intimate relationship, the part that gets our attention. This rush of feeling occurs whenever we meet someone who seems interesting, whether or not we are sexually attracted.

We may be drawn to a new friend because we hear him or her express an opinion we share. Or her knowledge of art seems unique. Or we may laugh at his wit. People are initially appealing to us for a wide variety of reasons. Sometimes we're disillusioned and move away from the relationship; often we're drawn closer because of what we like in the other.

But as time goes on and encounters become more frequent, whether this is a romance or a friendship, certain obstacles arise in the relationship and must be dealt with. She shares our views about politics, but she eats meat! He is passionate about the environment and yet he is a hunter.

Somewhere along the line, feelings no longer work as glue for a relationship. Feelings are too volatile, too changeable, too unpredictable. The passion we feel today may not be easily called up tomorrow. Author Susan Campbell has described the stages that relationships go through on their way to becoming permanent and productive.

Campbell states that most relationships begin with a Romantic stage, and I argue that this occurs in platonic friendships and even in parent-child relationships as well. There's romance in being with someone with whom we have a certain chemistry, whether we're on a date or in a committee meeting or feeding the baby. We are in tune, and that's fun, even if it's just a daily task we carry out.

Romance is fun, flirting is fun-----and I believe non-sexual flirting exists. Flirting is a way of showing approval of someone, interest in another person.

So we go through a romantic stage. We acknowledge the relationship to others; we declare that we are dating or going steady or best friends or members of a certain group. We spend time together, we look forward to the time, we may step up the amount of time we spend together, always expecting the relationship to continue to grow.

As we spend more time together, we begin to notice the ways we are very different. We notice that our values and tastes may differ. This creates conflict in a relationship that was based initially on an attractive top layer.

This stage is called Differentiation, and it can be full of turmoil and very scary. Lots of times, we give up at this point. We're not sure we have enough commonalities to sustain the relationship. Because of our old baggage, we may cut our losses and leave.

But our alienation may be based on misunderstandings, rather than on a true appraisal of the potential of the relationship.

If we manage to make it through the Differentiation stage, Campbell says we move into a stage of Stabilization. We have moved through our conflicts--though disagreements still arise, they are not as threatening---and we have come to a workable compromise, accommodating our differing needs.

In some of us, our baggage makes us suspicious of this stage. Rather than acknowledging the growth that has occurred to bring us this far, we worry that a stable relationship is a boring relationship. If we grew up in a chaotic environment, we may unconsciously wish for the excitement that is the hallmark of chaos.

We may recreate the excitement in positive or negative ways. Sometimes we can't bear the stability and we leave to cycle through romance and differentiation once again.

The longer we can maintain the Stabilization stage, the more likely we are to move eventually into a stage of Commitment and on into Generativity or Co-Creation. By this time we have achieved a sense of history together; we've developed rituals, traditions. We've reconciled most of our conflicts. We're investing in the relationship. And we're able to give to others--children, volunteer work, church.

It's important to realize that we move back and forth through these stages.

Conflicts we think we've resolved come back to bite us in the rear end. Because changes in our lives cause us to have to adapt in other areas as well, our intimate relationships may take a beating when we experience grief and loss in another area.

Couples who lose a child to death often have to struggle mightily to hang onto their relationship. It is hard to be stable and generative in one relationship when our hearts are shattered in another. The friendships of a woman who has lost her mother may be disrupted by her need to grieve, if her friends cannot bear her extended period of mourning.

So our understanding and experience of love evolves. We move from the love we experience as children from parents and other nurturing adults into platonic friendships, on to romantic friendships and partnerships that may produce children of our own to love. We face the challenges, learn to deal with our baggage--we hope--and shape our lives through our use of what we know about love.

At some point in our lives, we realize that there is another possible use of love, beyond family and friend. We may learn it in Sunday School or in a family context. We discover that though we may not like somebody very well, it is possible to feel love toward that person.

What a perplexing concept for a child, to hear the admonition, "love your neighbor as yourself" or "treat others as you would like them to treat you".

This seems impossible sometimes. I remember thinking, "Love Freddy? He's the one who made those gross remarks in biology about how worms do it. What a creep! How could anyone possibly love Freddy? The best I could muster in loving my neighbor Freddy was to not hate him---very much.

But the idea grows as we mature. We begin to understand the reasons for people's behavior and we learn to look beyond superficialities for character beneath the surface.

Perhaps we discover our ability to love our neighbor when we take time to volunteer. Perhaps an encounter at a homeless shelter or with a hospital patient broadens our awareness of the common humanity we share.

Perhaps another person's kindness to us when we are in crisis shifts our perspective on who is our neighbor and how we can love that neighbor. We begin to understand the interplay between giving and receiving love in a context other than family and friend.

How does this knowledge about love and the stages of relationship translate into a religious community setting like UUCWI?

First of all, it's important to recognize that, just as in one-on-one relationships, our earlier experience affects how we are in a group. If we have had negative experiences in other religious communities, we bring that hurt into this setting. We may feel wary and critical of words and rituals that bring back negative feelings, not understanding the positive feelings of others about them.

If we have had positive experiences in other religious communities, we bring that sense of trust when we come. We may feel a familiarity and at homeness with word and ritual that keeps us from understanding the negative feelings of others.

This is one of the most important challenges that a Unitarian Universalist congregation faces. I had a conversation not long ago with some UUs who were putting together a service entitled "Making Meaning: the perspective of Atheism, Agnosticism, and Theism" for another congregation.

We were all fascinated by how each person there had at time felt excluded within their congregation, by the use or the non-use of certain words and rituals or assumptions made by others about who they were as human beings in a congregation. Interesting, isn't it?

Let's look at ourselves here at UUCWI through the lens of relationship development. We have people here in all stages of relationship development.

Some of you have just been attracted to us recently. You've visited a service or two, maybe at the invitation of a friend, and perhaps have found something intriguing. Our services are a little different; we meet in a Baptist sanctuary; the people are friendly; we welcome diversity; we don't have a dogma or doctrine to push. Maybe you'll come back, check us out a little more, join an activity, maybe even sign the membership book. You're in the Romance stage.

Some of you have gone through the initial attraction phase of your relationship with UUCWI and are experiencing the stage of Differentiation. You've discovered that you're different from a lot of folks here. You thought we were all soulmates; now you're not so sure. Sometimes you consider leaving and finding a different congregation. Differentiation isn't always fun!

Some of you have stuck it out through the Differentiation phase and are Stabilized in your relationship with UUCWI. Maybe you're on a committee or the board or teaching the children. You've decided to make UUCWI your church home and despite the challenges, you're going to stay. You'll work things out as they come up. You have moved into the Commitment stage.

Others of you are even more committed. Your contributions reach beyond our walls and into the larger community, here and in UUism. You have moved into the Generative or Co-Creative phase of your connection to UUCWI. You are stable and committed to this congregation and have a desire to contribute more.

So, how do we ensure that "Our Love is Here to Stay"?

Scott Peck's definition of love may be helpful here. In "The Road Less Traveled", Dr. Peck defines love in this way: "Love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth.."

How can we extend ourselves for the purpose of nurturing one another's growth as human beings?

Whenever we talk about diversity in UU congregations, the ideas "respect and acceptance"; keep coming up. Whether we are talking about people with different abilities, with different cultures, with different religious beliefs, respect and acceptance are the keys to building relationships.

Within our congregation and within our personal relationships, our respect for others and our acceptance of who they are is crucial if we are to build love that lasts.

In closing I quote from Erich Fromm, in his classic work, "The Art of Loving":

"The only way of full knowledge lies in the act of love; this act transcends thought, it transcends words. It is the daring plunge into the experience of union. To love somebody is not just a strong feeling--it is a decision, it is a judgment, it is a promise. "

Let's pause for a moment of silent reflection and prayer.

Our closing hymn is #318, "We Would Be One"

BENEDICTION:

Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that love is the greatest gift we can offer to each other and to the world. May we find love for ourselves among family and friends and may we learn to love beyond that context, giving respect and acceptance to those who come into our lives, developing our ability to nurture one another's growth, and may we plunge together into the experience of union, as members of a larger family, the diverse family of UUCWI. Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.