

8 February 2009 * The Things We Do for Love: Finding It
© Rev. Erika Hewitt * Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation

Reading: excerpt from *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert (p. 156)

“I remember a story my friend Deborah the psychologist told me once. Back in the 1980s, she was asked....
....these two questions of love and control undo us all, trip us up and cause war, grief and suffering.”

Sermon: “The Things We Do to Find Love”

What does it mean to love? What does it mean to crave it? What will we do to get it?

When I was a kid, everything I knew about romantic love I learned from “The Love Boat.” I’m certain that nine-year-old girls weren’t the target audience for that television show, but my friends and I watched each episode with fascination. A few years later, in a world without Harry Potter or *Twilight*, I learned still more about the heady world of courtship from romance novels, the 1980s’ most common form of teenage “literature” (and I use that word lightly, as one would apply the term “cuisine” to cans of spray cheese. English teachers: grab a Kleenex).

As is true of many things, once I learned all this dross about romantic love, I had to *unlearn* it. (There’s very little that’s real or true, in the universe where strangers’ eyes meet across the Fiesta Deck.) It’s one task of our *becoming*, as people: to crack through the candy coating that our culture puts on love, and discover on our own terms how to bring love into our lives – love of *all* kinds. Most of us, eventually, learn how to honestly assess what love is, how it works, and what it requires of us.

At this point, I want to define love in its broadest terms. In addition to romantic love, captured by the Greek word *eros* (root of our word “erotic”), there’s the love of family and friends (*philia*, which forms the name of Philadelphia, “the city of brotherly love”). I often think in terms of a third form of love: in the Koine Greek of the New Testament, *agape* is used to capture the relationship between Jesus and his disciples. *Agape* is love in community, the love between those devoted to one another as well as to a shared, larger whole (my friend, the Rev. Cathleen Cox¹, was speaking of *agape* when she declared at a ministers’ gathering, “People come to church to get *loved up*.”)

* However you name it, all of us want it. All of us *need* love, in some form. It’s a quirk of our species: we cannot live without love – or not very well, anyway. Elizabeth Gilbert posits, in our reading, that our hunger to be loved drives humans to their greatest suffering (*How much do you love me?*); I believe that our impulse to *give* love also lifts us to our greatest capacities, and into our most satisfying joys.

Whether it's in intimate partnership or in spiritual community, we go to extreme lengths to find love; some of those lengths arise from healthier impulses than others. The question *How much do you love me?* can be a loaded one; in our story² this morning, it was asked with the playful innocence of a child. Sometimes, though, that question emerges from the dark, swampy places in our souls, or from stark existential loneliness.

* I believe that some people yearn for a love so impossibly pervasive that they carry that dull ache with them their whole lives; it can't be filled by any one person, or family, or even by a thousand friends. Whether that hunger arises from early damage or from simple hard-wiring, some of our boats sail on a sea where the menacing dragons of loneliness circle. In these circumstances, it takes a supreme amount of clarity to separate what's "mine" and what's "yours." It takes knowing ourselves and our needs well enough to answer, with honesty, the questions *Will your love be enough for me?* and *Do I have love to share with you?*

In the best of circumstances, I think, people come together with both a need to *be* loved and a need to *offer* love. Whatever form it takes, with however many people, when the fluctuations of give and take are averaged out, love at its best is reciprocal... even when it begins with very small steps.

During my study leave (one cozy evening after cross-country skiing in Oregon snow), I curled up with a book for ministers, by ministers, about fostering right relationship in congregations.³ "By 'right [relationship]," they emphasize,⁴

we don't mean "right and wrong." The word in this context refers to being in an appropriate, healthy, or God-intended position in relationship to others... relationships characterized by honor, respect, love, and care. Right relationships are creative, mutual, and generative; life-giving things are birthed.

These authors suggest an essential foundation for right relationship – these relationships of love and care – that I'd never pin-pointed before: *curiosity*. It wasn't until I'd digested their book that I realized that curiosity is a hallmark of love, and also a powerful threshold for sowing the seeds of love.

For love to flow freely between two, or three, or one hundred and thirty-six people, we need to know, and be known by, one another authentically. "Before we can really get to know other people," explain my colleagues,⁵ "we have to let go of the stories we have made up about them....The fallacy lies in thinking that by knowing ourselves and remembering what we have known about others, we know this new person." Curiosity is a desire to know someone beyond what we *think* we know of them; the wish to observe a sliver of the world through their eyes. It's hard to fake.

When I consider that complex dance of knowing and being known – of growing from acquaintanceship to friendship, to *agape* – two major obstacles come to mind. The first is beyond our control, the second within it.

First (and no matter how tidily “The Love Boat” produced love in one-hour segments), love takes time. Discovering who another person is, and revealing yourself to them, takes time for creatures as complex as we; people unfold a few petals at a time, and each opening creates a new mosaic to behold.

Within the realm of *eros*, I’ve never been able to swallow that horrid line about marriage, which some people bemoan: that you’ll be “stuck” with one person for the rest of your life. If you’re doing the work – if you’re living an examined life, and allowing its observation to inform your becoming – you’re not the same person from year to year. If you’re lucky enough to have a partner who does the same, he or she grows across time, revealing new facets of himself or herself that simply weren’t there at the beginning of the relationship.

Agape – the love that permeates intentional community – is no different. At Live Oak, we take seriously the business of creating connection, not *despite* love’s long arc, but *because* of it. Our Covenant Groups are an important way we do this; it takes some people a while to realize that, as central as Covenant Groups are to our mission, they’re no Silver Bullet to intimacy. Recently, Carter⁶ was telling me about his Thursday night Covenant Group, where there’s a near-sacred feeling of “close connection” – of loving care – among its members. He reminded me that he and Wendy have been in the group for several *years*. That love took time to build.

Beyond the immutable laws of physics, there’s a second obstacle to finding love: the sum of past hurts that love has inflicted on us. Every person in this room knows that love can take years to construct and protect, and an instant to lose.

For those who bear the most painful scars, stretching out your hand towards love is a form of risk. And yet, we do it. *You* do it. I’ve seen you make manifest our human longing for, and ability to, love. You’ve sought out religious community in days of lonely despair. You’ve demonstrated faith in marriage, even after a divorce (or more than one divorce). You’ve fought to bring children into your life, after losing a pregnancy (or more than one pregnancy). You’ve mended fences with estranged family members. All of these actions are a way of stepping over fears to take the risk of seeking love again.

There *is*, I’ll have you remember, a spiritual context for this inexhaustible search for love. Unitarian Universalism is a faith that embodies both love and hope. For a very long stretch of our Unitarian and Universalist traditions, our religious forebears modeled our congregations on their beliefs about the Holy, and the Holy’s relationship with us. In historical terms: ours is a loving, forgiving, merciful God, and so we have strived to be a

loving, forgiving, merciful people. Full stop. Dogma? Doctrine? Creed? No, thank you. Instead of perfecting dry statements that can neither be proven nor enforced, we'd rather perfect the fragile art of loving one another into wholeness; of walking together in love. People come to church to get *loved up*.

As a people of faith and a community of *agape*, may we continue to create a safe vessel of love for people who seek it; may we feed one another's hope, echoing these closing words, written by poet Mary Oliver:

“West Wind #2,” by Mary Oliver (from *West Wind*)

You are young. So you know everything. You leap into the boat and begin rowing. But, listen to me. Without fanfare, without embarrassment, without any doubt, I talk directly to your soul. Listen to me. Lift the oars from the water, let your arms rest, and your heart, and your heart's little intelligence, and listen to me.

There is life without love. It is not worth a bent penny, or a scuffed shoe. It is not worth the body of a dead dog nine days unburied. When you hear, a mile away and still out of sight, the churn of the water as it begins to swirl and roil, fretting around the sharp rocks – when you hear that unmistakable pounding – when you feel the mist on your mouth and sense ahead the embattlement, the long falls plunging and steaming – then row, row for your life toward it.

Endnotes:

1. Personal communication. Thanks, Cathleen!
2. *Mama, Do You Love Me?* by Barbara M. Joose, illustrated by Barbara Lavallee.
3. *Practicing Right Relationship: Skills for Deepening Purpose, Finding Fulfillment, and Increasing Effectiveness in Your Congregation* (Alban) by Mary K. Sellon and Daniel P. Smith.
4. Sellon & Smith, p. 7.
5. Sellon & Smith, p. 49.
6. ...who gave me permission to share both his story and his name....