

15 February 2009 ❖ The Things We Do for Love: Keeping It
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It wasn't until a week ago that I realized my publicity for this sermon (with its promise to reveal "Ten Commandments of Love") might have come across as heavy-handed. Someone at our Newcomer Orientation last week told the joke about UU's not believing in the *Ten Commandments*, but rather in the *Ten Suggestions*. In that anti-authoritarian spirit, I hereby offer you my Ten Suggestions for keeping love (in a similarly anti-authoritarian spirit, you're invited to take or leave, to practice or *not* practice, or to otherwise amend as you see fit).

First, a disclaimer: I hope you'll believe me when I say that I know how hard it can be to sustain loving relationships, and that I'm no Love Guru. I may preach on top of sixteen inches of chancel, but there's no "talking down" happening here.

*** Suggestion #11** (...because if we can change "commandments" to "suggestions," then I can also count as creatively as I want to): **You're the Decider**

It's not the case that easy relationships are automatically the good or worthwhile ones, and that complex or difficult relationships are less healthy. I don't believe that outsiders can ever have a truly accurate understanding of your relationship, especially when it's one of the messy, complicated ones. Only *you* – the one in the relationship – gets to decide whether yours is a love worth fostering and strengthening. Only you can judge your relationship, no matter how easy or hard it is, and know whether it's worth valuing. You can listen to the observations and feedback of those around you – or ask their advice, if you're intrepid – but at the end of the day, you and that other person comprise a Universe of Two, both its sole constituency and governors.

*** Suggestion #10: It Takes Two to Tango**

It takes two to create love. It takes two to build intimacy. It also takes two people to rupture a relationship, and it takes those same two people to decide to repair it. If a relationship is a constituency of two, then both of its parts must be invested and interested in the relationship's success. Whether it's platonic or romantic, a loving relationship can't survive if one person is half-hearted or indifferent. If that's the case, it's both tragic and liberating for the invested half: tragic not to have your love and commitment returned, but freeing to know that, in the timeless words of that great philosopher, Bonnie Raitt, "I can't make you love me if you don't... you can't make a heart feel something it won't."

*** Suggestion #9: Self-Differentiate**

If you need saving, one person's love will not save you. Last week,¹ I noted that some people live with such a sad, deep hunger for love that no friend, no lover, no community can possibly fill it. Intimacy and love are mutual propositions; if you're not reasonably comfortable with and loving towards yourself, then happiness and security

won't enter your life when you find the "right friend" or "soul mate" (I'm not even going to try to unpack that term). Self-differentiated people love well because they know that intimacy stems not from need, but from knowing ourselves and wanting to know another person. That's self-differentiation: being your own person, doing the work, taking "responsibility for ourselves, with all the discomfort that may apply."²

*** Suggestion #8: Practice the Art of Fair Expectations**

One person cannot be all things to another; nurturing love means tempering our hopes against reality. A life partner can't be expected to be a great lover, steadfast friend, wise counsel, skilled home repairperson, gourmet cook, fearless breadwinner, witty conversationalist, unfailing calendar coordinator, spiritual co-pilgrim, compatible co-parent, *and* someone who puts the cap back on the toothpaste.

*** Suggestion #7: You Get to Ask for What You Need**

In healthy relationships, notes one psychotherapist,³ "there is an... understanding that each person will be actively supported in their psychological and social growth by the other, and is not in need of protection from reality." It's up to you to discover, and voice, what you need from the other person to live into that growth. Your needs might change over time, requiring some flexibility on your partner's part and patience on your own. But you get to ask, without demanding, for that which will allow you to be the most authentic self you can be.

*** Suggestion #6: ...And So Does the Other Guy**

If love is a dance of reciprocity, then we also need to check in with those we love, and create space for the other to freely express whether we're helping meet their needs. Balance often requires infinite small adjustments, on all sides.

*** Suggestion #5: Love DOES Mean Saying "I'm Sorry"**

I can phrase this no better than does psychotherapist Stephanie Dowrick⁴, whose commentary is as follows:

...[O]ne of the most mindless phrases that ever came into widespread use is from the 1970 movie *Love Story*, a saccharine tale of two, beautifully, barely adult lovers torn apart by cancer and untimely death. Ryan O'Neal and Ali McGraw... did their best, but neither they nor we were well-served by a line that came to be closely associated with a bizarre version of selfless love. 'Love,' murmured Ali, as she edged towards the Great Horizon, 'means never having to say you are sorry.' On the contrary, Ali. Loves allows you not only to say that you are sorry, but to *be* sorry – and to rise again.

*** Suggestion #4: Beware the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse**

If you haven't heard of Dr. John Gottman,⁵ you might think that I'm going Biblical on

you. I'm not. Gottman, a marriage researcher and therapist, has spent three decades studying couples, and how they communicate with each other in heated moments (he does this in his "love lab" at the University of Washington). As a result, Gottman can predict with 90 percent accuracy whether a couple will divorce, and his research has revealed four behaviors that seem to invariably spell disaster in any marriage. Those four behaviors – ominously referred to as "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse" – are: criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling. If you hear the hoofbeats of these behaviors in your relationship, proceed with care.

*** Suggestion #3: Life-Giving Relationships Are Fed by Life-Giving Fuel**

In order for two people to thrive in a loving relationship, you have to bond over that which is life-giving. If your identity, as partners or as friends, becomes seeking grist for a mill of criticism and complaint about the world and people around you, your relationship is doomed. One of our Unitarian grandmamas, the Transcendentalist writer Margaret Fuller, listed four kinds of marriage⁶: the most elevated of which is "the pilgrimage of two souls toward a common shrine." This tenet is expressed differently, but similarly, in the words of a modern Zen practitioner,⁷ who says, "I really believe that you can't have a sexual and love relationship without each having a relationship with the Infinite – or with some spiritual path. *There has to be that third element... [you] relate to each other through that Infinite...*"

*** Suggestion #2: Love Might Not Be Enough, But History Matters**

Sometimes, love isn't enough to hold two people together. Some friendships and other "love relationships" have a life expectancy that falls short of our own wishes and expectations, and willfulness. If your needs go unmet for long periods of time; if your "other" cannot or will not actively support your growth and well-being; if your personhood is assaulted or disregarded by the other, you get to decide whether to leave the relationship. You are allowed to sacrifice relationships when they're damaging to you. Decide carefully, knowing that your decision might be irrevocable. Consider, too, that a shared history with someone else *counts*; it *matters*, and sometimes we don't realize that until it's lost.

*** Suggestion #1: Love Means Choosing Again and Again**

You don't necessarily choose your loves, but you must choose to *keep* loving them. Loving friendships and *agape* – the love of beloved community – are ours only as long as we invest time and energy into them. *Eros* – romantic love, the love of intimate partnerships – even more so. In the whole of human history, ours are (just about) the first generations in which people have been able to marry the partner of their heart's choosing. For much of human history, marriage was done for economic reasons, for political reasons, for reasons of lineage and reproduction and inheritance. Today, in this country, we marry for love – something, it would seem, wholly beyond our conscious control.

But it *is* within our control. It *must* be. Once love chooses us, we must choose it *back* through our simple, everyday actions. Through repair attempts. Through learning to listen. Through making choices that uphold and reinforce love.

What do your loves – your friendships, your community, your partners – ask of you? What are you able to promise them, and live up to?

May we be newly grateful for the love in our lives, and ever more committed to protecting and strengthening it.

Endnotes

1. “The Things We Do for Love: Finding It,” delivered on 8 February, 2009.
2. Stephanie Dowrick, *Forgiveness & Other Acts of Love*, p. 305.
3. Dowrick, p. 303.
4. Dowrick, pp. 304-5.
5. For more on Dr. Gottman and his research, see www.gottman.com/research/.
6. In Richardson’s *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*, p. 193+.
7. Quoted in *Forgiveness & Other Acts of Love* by Stephanie Dowrick, p. 105.