

Liberating Love: Beyond Eros into Agape

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Good morning Vashon Island Unitarian Universalists! Thank you for the opportunity to worship with you this Sunday morning. As we have gathered at the end of January with the theme of Liberating Love, I want to give thanks to the space in which we find ourselves. A space with minds that think, hearts that love, and hands ready to bend the arc of history toward justice. Our faith, and this community, at our best, strives for the liberation of the individual and community from the pain of hurt, the wounds of trauma, and the despair of isolation. May we all be open to the Spirit of Life and Love in these imperfect words spoken and the perfect words written in all of our hearts.

I've heard it said that "love" is perhaps the most overused and misused word in the English language. I can love tacos. Music. Weather. Tea. Bad 80s hair metal. Travel. Netflix period dramas. Friends. Family. Church. Community. Country. In English, this one word conveys a multitude of emotions and experiences, from the mundane to the sacred. Etymologically, we trace this back through the Old English word *lufu* and *lief*, into Indo-European roots shared with Sanskrit, with its origin meaning "desire or happiness." In Latin, the associated word *libet* means "pleasing" and is the root for words like "libido" related to desire.

And these are just the symbols and meaning of the experience. Even the way we experience love in our brain is different. Romantic love shows increased activity in reward centers and decreased activity in the prefrontal cortex, inhibiting judgement and skepticism. Part of why we have the saying "love is blind." Platonic love is related in terms of neural connection yet, does not include the hormones responsible for emotional and physical arousal. And altruistic, empathetic love involves a whole different neural process.

No wonder our word “love” is so easily misunderstood and misconstrued. Another example: when I’m out with a group of friends, someone recommends going for sushi. I say something like “Oh, I’m not in the mood for sushi.” And their response is “But I thought you loved sushi?” Which is true, I enjoy sushi quite a bit. I would perhaps say that when I’m eating sushi, I really “love” it! This doesn’t mean I want it all the time. Yet the idea is if I love something, that must mean I want it all the time! Which is not always the case. I love my partner dearly. And if they were around all of the time, I imagine our love would also carry many different words some of which I shouldn’t speak from a pulpit.

Love can be aggravating! This same word I use for sushi can also applied to my human relationships. Completely different contexts. The love I feel for my child is such a different experience than the love I feel for a friend. They both carry a sense of commitment; compassion; connection. Yet the quality of the love is different; and these differences are so difficult to name. And we are all supposed to just inherently know the difference.

Other languages don’t have this issue. In Greek, there are multiple words for our English “love.” *Eros* is the romantic, passionate love one feels that moves individuals into companionship and sensuality. *Philia* is the word for the deep, authentic friendships humans can experience over a lifetime. *Storge* is the unconditional and committed love to tribe and family. And *Agape* is, in the western tradition, known at the highest form of love – the empathetic, sacrificial, universal love for life and the world beyond all these other concepts.

In Greek, I would not use “love” outside of the realm of relationship. For basic items in the world, like food, the word for “like” is used. In the context of art and nature, the word meaning “adore” is conveyed. This is found in many other cultures as well. The need to differentiate “love” from other attractions and desires and attachments. Perhaps rightly so; the

human emotional experience requires nuance and context – especially when, epistemically, words are always a pale comparison of experience.

There is no way for me to know, intimately, the experience of another person. As much as we try to put ourselves in another person’s shoes, we can only go so far. In my work as a chaplain, there is a common phrase that is discouraged at the bedside. Especially when someone is describing hurt, pain, injury, and trauma. The phrase is: “I know exactly how you feel.” The intention is to convey solidarity and understanding. Yet, the reality is I have no idea what it is like! To experience an aneurysm; to lose the use of my arms or legs; to need intensive and invasive surgery. And even if I had; I can only know my experience of these, which perhaps is a similar, but not exact, knowledge.

At the bedside, instead of saying “I know exactly how you feel,” I name the truth. “What you describe seems so difficult. I’ve never gone through something like this; I’m sorry this is happening. How are you coping with all of this?” I believe we need to be more intentional about the words we use, and more curious about how others use these same words. Because, as we see in our culture today, “love” is big and confusing and used so often that it is almost... meaningless.

Yet: “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.” (1 Cor 13: 4-8) This is attributed to Saul of Tarsus when writing to the new Christian community in the city of Corinth, Greece written in the 1st century CE. He wrote these words to encourage this community about how to be in *agape*

with one another, as the community navigated disagreements and differences threatening to tear them apart. Something that, even 2000 year later, we can understand and learn from.

So what do we Unitarian Universalists believe about love? Our principles and sources give us insight into our religious perspective. Especially our first principle which serves as a foundation for the rest – as Unitarian Universalists we covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Which is absolutely beautiful; a belief that inspired me to become part of our Unitarian Universalist community. In this statement, I felt seen and included regardless of my history or my situation.

What kind of love affirms the worth and dignity of every person? The kind that intrinsically believes all human beings are more than the worst action they have ever done. That everyone is capable of redemption. Regardless of ethnicity, culture, economics, spirituality, immigration status, where someone lives, or who someone chooses for their lives. This love includes those experiencing homelessness. The addicted. Individuals who have raped and murdered. White supremacists. All human beings.

This love is hard. It can be painful. It requires good boundaries and deep spiritual practice. *Agape* is what is at the end of the arc of history as it bends toward justice. Loving someone does not mean agreeing with them. Or endorsing their message or belief. Or even forgiving them. It means working toward a world that doesn't throw away people like trash. When I'm in the hospital, I don't just visit the "good" patients, or the "worthy" ones.

When I was working in the juvenile detention center in downtown Seattle, I met with a 12 year old who had murdered someone with a gun. Who grew up homeless, surrounded by violence and addiction. This child had done horrible things to people. And now, behind bars and locked away, was asking the most basic question, "Am I worthy of love?" For some reason

looking to me to see some speck of human in his being. Out of my Unitarian Universalism, I could look at this child, and unequivocally say, “Yes. You are worthy of love. You will always be more than the worst thing you’ve ever done. And no one can take away your worthiness, not even you.”

This is the foundation of our faith. We believe in powerful love and no one is left behind in that love. Which does not mean that our love is powerless, or ineffective. It is the kind of love that peacefully and persistently grinds to dust the walls of hate and ignorance. Even in our most recent history of 100 years, we have seen such miracles as the laws of our country changing to include the right to love; the right to live free from prejudice and hate; and the right of all to shape our democracy. And even as powers seek to turn back the clock and make us “great again,” we know the truth that our greatness is not in the past, but in a future in which *agape* is realized.

Which is why this love liberates. Because aspects of the human animal that seek to diminish, enslave, or destroy human lives cannot exist at the same time as selfless love. An experience of the interdependent nature of life. A deep knowledge that an injury to one is an injury to all. Prophet womanist bell hooks explains in her 1994 essay *Love as the Practice of Freedom*:

“In this society, there is no powerful discourse on love emerging either from politically progressive radicals or from the Left. The absence of a sustained focus on love in progressive circles arises from a collective failure to acknowledge the needs of the spirit and an overdetermined emphasis on material concerns. Without love, our efforts to liberate ourselves and our world community from oppression and exploitation are doomed. As long as we refuse to address fully the place of love in struggles for liberation we will not be able to create a culture of conversion where there is a mass turning away from an ethic of domination.”

bell hooks’ use of love in this way ultimately points not to an erotic or saccharine love, but a sacrificial and empathetic love. A Unitarian Universalist love. Because our other principles flow from this foundation; our commitment to justice, equity and compassion, acceptance that

we need not think alike to love alike, and a focus of communal and collective foundations that protect the vulnerable and the Earth.

So how do we develop this spirit of *agape* in our lives, and liberate ourselves and others in the process? I believe it begins in gratitude, every morning, for the breath of life. If the hospital has taught me anything, it is that I am not promised one day. Even this moment, right now, could be my last. With this realization is an intentionality that, if I get to be alive today, *how* will I choose to live? If I am truly grateful for the breath of life, on what am I dependent for this breath? The Earth which provides habitat and home. The flora and fauna that provide air and sustenance. Those human hands that cultivate the Earth and provide food, shelter, service, and peace. There is no “me” without so many “we.”

There is another word for *agape* in theological terms – *caritas*. Which is Latin for charity – the unconditional gifts we give to the world and others. Out of gratitude for the breath of life can be the spiritual practice of charity. Giving for the sake of the wellbeing of others. Because just believing in the inherent worth and dignity of every human is meaningless unless there are actions that make our belief a reality. Which makes charity a spiritual practice intrinsically connected to our experience of *agape*. Give not only out of abundance, but even out of scarcity. Do not let fear of “not enough” keep us from making sure there is something for everyone.

A third spiritual practice to consider is moving beyond the golden rule, “do unto others that which you would have done unto you,” into the platinum rule, “do unto others the way they would have done unto them.” Not just thinking of my own experience as the bar for the needs and wellbeing of others. But allowing others to name their needs and wellbeing for themselves. And act accordingly out of *agape* and *caritas*. This can be as simple as using someone’s

pronouns correctly, or as difficult as donating a church building for the sake of affordable housing. In all actions, as possible, “not for ourselves alone.”

Siblings in faith, Unitarian Universalist love is not for the faint of heart. As there are no atoms of love or molecules of charity, so it is up to us to make them real. They are transcendental human ideals that move out of our beliefs and put into action. And while some may think this kind of love is oppressive or burdensome because it may feel like “less,” this is only a focus on the material. What we reap are the rewards of love – which come as freedom from fear, hate, and isolation.

I will tell you this truth – I have been at the bedside of hundreds of dying people. Of all walks of life, means, and ability. And the best, most beautiful deaths have come not from an abundance of anything except love. In the end, all is stripped away except the memory we leave behind. And if our memory is to be a blessing, then we must live like a blessing to others. Every single day.

Friends, may the Spirit of life provide us with the gift of love, in all its forms. May *eros* move us into joy and pleasure; *philia* grant us friendships of depth and support; *storge* bring us kin of blood and kin of choice; and *agape* liberate our hearts and minds from the shackles of hate, fear, ignorance, and pain. I close these words in this prayer of peace:

Life, make me an instrument of your peace:
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
where there is sadness, joy.
Please grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console,
to be understood as to understand,
to be loved as to love.
For it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

and it is in dying to self that we are born into eternal life through others.
Amen.