

First Unitarian Church of Baltimore

February 15, 2009

How Do I Love Thee? By Rev. Lyn Oglesby, Ph.D.

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.
I love thee to the level of everyday's
Most quiet need, by sun and candlelight.
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
I love thee with a passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints, --- I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life! --- and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Goodness, such love, such devotion, such selflessness. What a delight to be reminded of the affection, tenderness, heart-swelling effects of love for another human being. The romance of it is lovely, and the dedication to sustain such love is daunting.

Love, in all its aspects, is big and complex. If the truth be told, no one really understands it. But lots of people have tried to explain it.

- We cannot live for ourselves alone. Our lives are connected by a thousand invisible threads, and along these sympathetic fibers, our actions run as causes and return to us as results. HERMAN MELVILLE:
- I hold it true, whate'er befall; □I feel it, when I sorrow most; □'Tis better to have loved and lost □Than never to have loved at all.” ALFRED TENNYSON:
- Love: a temporary insanity, curable by marriage. AMBROSE BIERCE:

- Love life and life will love you back. Love people and they will love you back.
Arthur Rubinstein:
- We need not think alike to love alike. FRANCIS DAVID:
- To be in love is merely to be in a state of perceptual anesthesia -- to mistake an ordinary young man for a Greek god or an ordinary young woman for a goddess.
H. L. MENCKEN: Prejudices, 1919

Many of you will remember the Reverend Bill Murry, who spoke to us in January about religious humanism for the 21st century. In his recent book on religious humanism, Rev. Murry, succinctly explains the three types of love, according to the ancient Greeks, who had three words for “love”.

The first is eros, or passionate desire such as romantic love. Eros also refers to love of learning or wisdom.

The second is philia, love between friends or family members, like brotherly or sisterly love.

Agape, the third, ”connotes a more disinterested sort of love, lacking the intensity of eros or the warmth of philia but with a connotation of acting for the well-being of others. Eros and philia are more emotional, while agape is usually understood as an act of will. Thus, when all three connotations of love are united, it means that love has both affective and volitional qualities.”ⁱ

“M. Scott Peck defines love as ‘the will to extend one’s self for the purpose of nurturing one’s own and another’s spiritual growth.’ His definition means that love has a goal or purpose: spiritual growth, meant in a very broad sense. Action seeking the well-being of another springs from respect for the other as a person of dignity and value.”ⁱⁱ

Murry goes on to state that “love is an expression of respect for persons. In ethical terms, this means treating all people as ends in themselves, not as means to one’s own ends...In a word, an essential aspect of moral living is to put ourselves in the position of others before making a moral decision.”ⁱⁱⁱ

WILLIAM SLOANE COFFIN, JR. tells us:

Love measures our stature: the more we love, the bigger we are. There is no

smaller package in all the world than that of a man all wrapped up in himself.

SHARON WELCH, Unitarian theologian and provost at Meadville Lombard Theological School, wrote in her landmark book, *The Feminist Ethic of Risk*, “Resistance to oppression is often based on a love that leads us to value ourselves, and leads us to hope for more □ than the established cultural system is willing to grant ... such love is far more energizing than guilt, duty, or self-sacrifice. Love for others leads us to accept accountability (in contrast to feeling guilt) and motivates our search for ways to end our complicity with structures of oppression. Solidarity does not require self-sacrifice, but an enlargement of the self to include community with others.”^{iv}

So when we love enough to put forth energy for others and the common good, we are enlarging and enriching ourselves in a gigantic way, just as we are enlarging and enriching the world. We are not taking away from ourselves, but giving of our greater selves.

PAUSE

I thought you all might want to hear more variety of thoughts about love, and so I gathered some to share with you.

- Love is patient, love is kind. □ It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. □ It is not rude, 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. □ First Corinthians 13:4-8
- The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. □
- The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. □ The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. □ And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference.

ELIE WIESEL:

- Infantile love follows the principle: "I love because I am loved." □ Mature love follows the principle: "I am loved because I love." □ Immature love says: "I love you because I need you." □ Mature love says: "I need you because I love you."

ERICH FROMM:

- When we understand that man is the only animal who must create meaning, who

must open a wedge into neutral nature, we already understand the essence of love. Love is the problem of an animal who must find life, create a dialogue with nature in order to experience his own being. ERNEST BECKER:

- When we feel love and kindness toward others, it not only makes others feel loved and cared for, but it helps us also to develop inner happiness and peace.

HH THE DALAI LAMA:

- And another from His Holiness:

We can live without religion and meditation, but we cannot survive without human affection.

- Age does not protect you from love, but love to some extent protects you from age. JEANNE MOREAU:

- When the power of love overcomes the love of power the world will know peace.

JIMI HENDRIX:

- Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into friend. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.:

- To live in this world you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go. MARY OLIVER: Blackwater Woods

- If you were all alone in the universe with no one to talk to, no one with which to share the beauty of the stars, to laugh with, to touch, what would be your purpose in life? It is other life, it is love, which gives your life meaning. This is harmony. We must discover the joy of each other, the joy of challenge, the joy of growth.

MITSUGI SAOTOME

- Forgiveness is choosing to love. It is the first skill of self-giving love.

MOHANDAS K. GANDHI:

- The best love affairs are those we never had. NORMAN LINDSAY:

- Do you love me because I'm beautiful, or am I beautiful because you love me? OSCAR HAMMERSTEIN, II:

- The first duty of love is to listen. PAUL TILLICH:

- I love you □ Not only for what you are, But for what I am □ When I am with you.

ROY CROFT:

- What the world really needs is more love and less paperwork. PEARL BAILEY:
- Religion is to do right. It is to love, it is to serve, it is to think, it is to be humble.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON:

That quote from Emerson reminded me of some of the things I love about this church:

- When I come in to work I nearly always hear people laughing.
- You say “please” and “thank you”.
- I don’t hear gossip. I may hear a comment now and then about a person’s shortcomings, but it is never mean-spirited, always sweetened with a comment about something good about the person. And the emphasis is on how to solve a problem or how to diplomatically and thoughtfully manage an uncomfortable situation, rather than demonizing anyone.
- People come to meetings, and they show up on time. During meetings, people stay focused and if occasionally somebody wanders off track, we are gently and firmly reminded to get back on topic.
- You offer to help. And you do. Think of all the people who have come to painting parties, clean-up days, clearing the pigeon droppings, repaired the steps, cooked for special occasions, helped with worship services, volunteered to teach Religious Education, served on the Board, served as Committee chairs, and much, much more. In some organizations and in many churches, a few do the work for many. At First Unitarian, many do the work for all of us.
- You are sympathetic and helpful when neighbors or friends are sick or wounded. Spontaneously, you prepare casseroles or some kind of food, call, visit, and show that you care.
- You sing in church! And thank goodness for that. We have a fabulous choir, and all of you out there are terrific about expressing your love in hymns and songs.
- You are patient, understanding, and forgiving of mistakes. Somehow, there is a spirit of good will here, that assumes everyone means well and intends no harm.

That assumption of good intent in the face of errors, goes a long way toward resolving problems and fixing things.

- You care about process, and how we do things. You take care to make sure everyone who needs to be consulted is asked, and to include the congregation in the decision-making process. That takes more time, but the good will it produces saves time and produces more trust and good will in the long run.
- You have fun. You seem to enjoy your work for the church, and to smile and joke and laugh together, whether it is folding letters and stuffing envelopes, getting the Beacon out, or producing Happenings. There is an ethereal spirit of cooperation and pleasure that comes through.
- You welcome our children and youth in the services, and by your welcoming spirit, mentor and honor them. That is so important, because they are our future.
- Nobody whines. Nobody complains. Occasionally I hear a sigh, and it's true that everything we do is not perfect, but after all, you are all volunteers, working for love.
- You are kind and courteous to the staff. Of course!
- This congregation is open to new ideas, new ways of thinking, and to looking for ways to improve. Change does not come about slowly, but it does occur thoughtfully, with respect for all involved, and keeping our vision and mission in mind.
- You take ownership of the church and what we stand for. You lobby, work for social justice, and to change the world for the better.
- You look to the future. You plan with a positive sense of purpose and determination. Any congregation is an organic, dynamic group that is always in the process of growing in knowledge or number, changing direction, reassessing vision and mission, or perhaps, simply getting stuck and dying on the vine. Frankly, that is what has happened to many of our well-endowed old New England congregations. They coasted on their endowments, faced the world passively, failed to reassess, and got into a comfortable way of being with one another without thinking of future generations and welcoming younger people

who truly needed a loving and nurturing church. They became self-centered.

And they have been dying because of it.

Fortunately, love seems to guide this congregation, and to pervade all we do together.

This is wonderful, and the new minister you call will be a fortunate minister indeed.

I'm grateful for the opportunity to work with you this year, in this atmosphere of love and hope. I know that you will **keep on** loving and learning and caring and smiling and pitching in, because that's the essence of who you are, who we are, at the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore.

Amen

ⁱ Murry, William R. Reason and Reverence. 2007, p. 134. Boston: Skinner House.
www.UUA.org/Skinner.

ⁱⁱ Murry, William R. Reason and Reverence. 2007, p. 134-135. Boston: Skinner House.
www.UUA.org/Skinner.

ⁱⁱⁱ Murry, William R. Reason and Reverence. 2007, p. 135. Boston: Skinner House.
www.UUA.org/Skinner

^{iv} Welch, Sharon. A Feminist Ethic of Risk.