

**Unitarian Universalists of San Mateo**  
**Deanna Vandiver, Summer Minister**  
**July 17, 2011**  
**“Out of all the flags I’ve flown”**

**Centering Quote**

*“Oh, what a catastrophe, what a maiming of love,  
when it was made a personal, merely personal feeling,  
taken away from the rising and the setting of the sun,  
and cut off from the magic connection of the solstice and equinox!...  
[W]e are bleeding at the roots, because we are cut off from the earth and sun and stars,  
and love is a grinning mockery,  
because, poor blossom, we plucked it from its stem on the tree of Life,  
and expected it to keep on blooming in our civilized vase on the table.”*  
–D.H. Lawrence

**Collective Reading: *It Felt Love* by Hafiz (14th century Sufi poet)**

*How  
Did the rose  
Ever open its heart*

*And give to this world  
All its  
Beauty?*

*It felt the encouragement of light  
Against its  
Being,*

*Otherwise,  
We all remain*

*Too*

*Frightened.*

## **REFLECTION (on Love) by Tom Newman, Worship Associate**

It would be hard to talk about love without mentioning Johannah, my wife of 35 years! But I actually have a different kind of love in mind for this reflection.

On the way home from the service last week I told my mother Carol that I was going to be worship associate this week and had an opportunity to write a short reflection on love.

"You're good at that," said Carol.

"You mean good at writing reflections or good at love?" I asked.

"I meant good at love," she replied.

Of course I'm happy to have Carol's confidence, but as I've told her and others, she makes it easy, because she is always so appreciative. What I have trouble with is feeling love for people I don't even like, or that don't like me, or that are, in a word, *difficult*.

I've managed to build myself a pretty protected life, so I don't need to interact that often with difficult people. But I am a pediatrician, and the last time I was covering in the nursery I had some challenging interactions I am still processing. We had a methamphetamine-using couple who came down from a couple of hundred miles away. The mother had had two previous children removed from her custody because of her drug habit, and did not seek prenatal care during this pregnancy until she was in her eighth month, at which time her urine drug screen was, in fact, positive for amphetamines. She ended up delivering the baby prematurely, so he needed to go to the special care nursery.

Our interactions were a bit strained right from the beginning because she was insistent that she was planning to take the baby home with her, and denied having used any drugs during the pregnancy. Her explanation for what ended up being two positive tox screens was either that they had mixed her samples with someone else's or that she passively breathed the speed when her partner or one of their friends was smoking it. So I had to tell her that we would be reporting the case to Child Protective Services in her county, and that she might not be able to take the baby home.

Things only got worse from there, because she wanted to breastfeed her baby and I told her that she couldn't. Of course this was hard for her to hear, because she really wanted to breastfeed, knowing that breast milk is best for the baby, and wanting to make that additional connection nursing a baby she was hoping to keep. And by explaining that she couldn't breastfeed because amphetamines are secreted into breast milk, I was basically saying I did not believe her denials of past and future amphetamine use.

I normally make decisions jointly with parents, but in this case I kind of laid down the law. This unleashed a string of profanity directed at me and other caregivers and an explicit request not to see me anymore, which I was perhaps a little too eager to honor.

Now it is possible that even if I were a perfect doctor this scenario would have unfolded the same way. But deep down, I don't think so. I have to admit that I was kind of mad at this couple before I even met them, based on their story, reports that the father had been abusive to the staff during the delivery, and experience with previous addicts. And if I am totally honest with myself, added to my concerns about how their behavior had affected their baby and the team was how it was affecting me: I was tired and busy and they were making extra work for me. My attempts at respect and empathy were therefore handicapped by those feelings right from the beginning. And I was probably less gentle than I could have been.

I actually first heard the quip here, that "Liberals love humanity, but don't like people very much." And I think there's some element of truth to that. We love people as long as they appreciate all we are trying to do for them. Otherwise it's more difficult.

I would like to get to the point where I can separate the person's actions (of which I might disapprove) from the person, and still see in everyone that spark of the divine that we all share.

But it's not as easy to see it in everyone as it is in Johannah, Carol, and all of you.

I know I am not there yet. But coming here helps me keep trying.

Which I think is part of what we are about here – working together to transform *ourselves* and the world.

**SERMON: “Out of all the flags I’ve flown”**  
**By: Deanna Vandiver, Summer Minister**

*“Out of all the flags I’ve flown, one flies high and stands alone – only love...”*

The centering quote in your Order of Service by 20<sup>th</sup> century author D. H. Lawrence speaks to the narrowing of the understanding of love over the time of western civilization. An ancient concept that included the very fabric of the universe for our ancestors is now more commonly understood within the limits of romance and, hopefully, family.

When I was in high school, one of the clubs had an annual fundraiser linked to Valentine’s Day. For a dollar you could have a carnation sent to someone special. There were three carnations to choose from: White for Friendship, Pink for a secret admirer – a crush!, Red for LOVE. Not even friendship qualified for the concept of love under this high school definition.

In the other extreme, we often use the word *love* to describe concepts as diverse as God, romance, parenting, puppies, and the how we feel about pizza. May we hold in our vast concept of love space for what Rebecca Parker, President of Starr King School for Ministry, knows love to be, “...the gift of gracious, transforming, unexpected invitation into greater life through increased connection and engagement with others, especially with those that the dominating society deemed Other.” May our hearts and lives and faith glow with that kind of love.

For a year I have served among you, watching with admiration, concern, and joy as you have wrestled with expanding your own definitions of love. Last week’s “Undoing Racism” service was a deeply joyful experience for me, both the open-hearted, collaborative co-creation of the service with the Building the World We Dream About Class and your open-hearted willingness to be present and to engage. *You*, whose mission is open-hearted and open-minded transformation of self and world. *You*, whose

vision is to be “a growing, welcoming, and diverse congregation, grounded in and living out [your] liberal religious values.” You, whom I love.

In her poem, *Love Is*, poet Nikki Giovanni wrote:

*Some people forget that love is  
tucking you in and kissing you "Good night"  
no matter how young or old you are*

*Some people don't remember that love is  
listening and laughing and asking questions  
no matter what your age*

*Few recognize that love is  
commitment responsibility no fun at all  
unless*

*Love is  
You and me*

You and me. You and you and you and you and me, all of us wild and wily creatures on this shockingly complex planet.

In my first "Undoing Racism"<sup>TM</sup> training, the point was made that prejudice means to pre-judge and is not an inherently negative concept. On this incredibly complex planet pre-judgements are useful tools for navigating a world that has changed faster than we can evolve. Pre-judging what certain endeavors will be like allows us to make choices about how and where to spend our time in the face of almost limitless options these days. There are costs and benefits to almost all pre-judging, some clear, some hidden.

Children taught to pre-judge strangers as potentially harmful are much less likely to take candy from or accept rides with predators. They are also less likely to see humans as a member of one tribe, intimately connected to each other.

When we teach fear as a primary tool for protection, the collective costs are high. When we make choices for ourselves, our families, our congregations, our communities out of fear, we are rarely joyful about the

consequences. While fear is a useful biologic response, it is rarely a healthier response than love.

Part of what Tom named in his reflection today speaks to the on-going wrestling match between love/compassion and fear/judgment, all deeply embedded within our human beings. So long as you are wrestling, the potential for right relationship is within you. Once you decide to judge the other unworthy of love, harm becomes very possible.

Nobel Peace Prize winner and survivor of WWII concentration and extermination camps Elie Weisel declared that the opposite of love isn't hate – "it's indifference." When we judge someone unworthy of our love, our capacity for harm expands considerably. Sometimes harm is personal. Often it is collective, institutional, systemic. Genocide is perhaps the most extreme human example of this situation. BP's Deepwater Horizon explosion and oil volcano in the Gulf of Mexico last year is an environmental example of extreme indifference leading to previously unimaginable harm.

Each day we choose how we will respond to this world, how we will be in relationship with each other, with this community of beloveds. In her essay, "Education as Liberation," the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker tells the story of a congregation responding to two murders in their neighborhood. They began by asking the question, "how can we respond to these murders in a way that will prevent people in our neighborhood from becoming fearful and isolated?" What a loving starting place!

It became clear to the congregation that there were two general approaches to crime prevention. One involved protecting against crime by acquiring stuff – alarms, security systems, weapons, window bars, more police presence or private security patrols. The cost of this approach? Money for the expensive stuff and living with a deeper sense of fear.

The other approach depends on people building stronger bonds of relationship, including mutual care and a sense of responsibility for and commitment to others in the community. The cost of this approach? Time, attention, caring, concern. Instead of living with a deeper sense of fear though, this approach leads to a deeper sense of joy.

Parker writes:

The congregation's study and action led the neighborhood to create security rooted in relationship and care. Crime went down 50 percent within a year. During the process, the congregation developed a deeper knowledge of the sources of crime. They discovered that most of the neighborhood crime was committed by teenagers from the neighborhood. The question emerged: What is happening in the lives of our youth that leads them to commit crimes? To answer this question, church members visited the family of the young man arrested for one of the murders. They discovered a family deeply stressed by poverty and in need of compassionate support in a time of great pain. Church members sought to help the family. A new question emerged: What needs to happen so that this family and other families in our community have the resources they need for their children?

This congregation, given the chance over and over to turn to condemnation, to judgment, to fear, instead turned to love and to relationship. In the face of alienating, other-ing acts, this congregation chose to connect, to live their faith into being as a religious community. This, I believe is the task of Unitarian Universalists, of Unitarian Universalists of San Mateo – to turn again and again with love into relationship with our community.

*How  
Did the rose  
Ever open its heart*

*And give to this world  
All its  
Beauty?*

*It felt the encouragement of light  
Against its  
Being*

We are that rose. And we are that light.

Universalist minister Gordon McKeeman once proclaimed:

Universalism is not faith in the inevitability of heaven which supports me as I face death but faith in the reality of love. The old Universalist heresy claimed that God's love knew no limits and would find the sinner no matter how far from holiness she or he strayed. The fundamental nature of reality is love.

May it be so.  
Namaste. Amen.

Sources:

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"Only Love" (songwriters: Wayne Hector & Steve Robson )