

The Transforming Power of Love

Readings 'Praise Song for the Day' by Elizabeth Alexander
 From 'Loving Your Enemies' by Martin Luther King Jr.
 'Wade in the Water' by Tracy K. Smith

Song 'How Could Anyone' by Libby Roderick

I love that hymn for its directness and lack of guile. The words get right to the point. Nothing is couched in metaphor. Nothing needs to be inferred. It is so earnest it can be hard to sing sometimes, especially when you are invited to sing it directly to one another, I know.

How could anyone ever tell you you were anything less than beautiful?
How could anyone ever tell you you were less than whole?
How could anyone fail to notice that your loving is a miracle?
How deeply you're connected to my soul.¹

Those words came into my life at a moment I needed to hear them. I was sixteen. Like too many sixteen year olds, I felt less than beautiful, less than whole, and decidedly unmiraculous.

And then these words entered my life – in a youth worship service at a Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly. At the end of a long day of business meetings and workshops and navigating an unfamiliar city, I was in a generic small room in a convention center, sitting on the floor with dozens of other people, mostly strangers. And for some reason, that night, the directness of the lyric pierced through my cynicism and doubt. As we sang, as we looked at one another and sang these words over and over and over again, somehow, I believed them. I felt beautiful, whole, worthy in a way I hadn't before. There was a certainty there, a comfort, an assurance, almost a confidence.

Have you had moments like that? Moments when you feel secure in your own inherent worth, your own value? Your own wholeness and beauty? Times when you know you are loved. Take a moment to remember...

Too often these moments are fleeting. Within a day or so, I was back to my normal state of self-doubt and uncertainty. The assurance and confidence were gone... but I had these words and I had the memory of a roomful of people singing them. My understanding of what it is possible to feel had broadened – and that, in itself, mattered. It gave me a scale to measure communities and relationships against. Do I feel as secure in my worth as I did that night? Do I feel as whole and as beautiful?

¹ Roderick, Libby. 'How Could Anyone.' #1053 in *Singing the Journey*. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2005.

The Unitarian Universalist Association names six sources for our faith, for our individual and collective religious wisdom. This is part of bylaws that have been discussed and adapted and amended by the General Assembly, the annual gathering of representatives from our congregations.

The list of sources is a surprisingly poetic text for a piece of bylaws. It reads:

The living tradition which we share draws from many sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
- Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Grateful to the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another mutual trust and support.²

I hope your ways of religious knowing, the sources of your meaning-making, and the answers you have found to the big questions that matter to you are found on this list. If your sources are not listed outside of the circle that this document creates, let me know. I'd love to hear about – these sources are a democratically created document that it is possible to amend... and, because I have fielded this question a number of times before, I want to make clear that to be Unitarian Universalist, you do not need to be inspired and informed by all six sources. The list is a collective description, not a mandate for individuals.

As you might have noticed, I borrowed the title of this service and this sermon from the sources, the second source – 'words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers

² Article II, section c-2.1, lines 22-42 in 'Unitarian Universalist Association Bylaws and Rules as amended through October 18, 2019.' Retrieved from https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/uua_bylaws_2019.pdf

and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.' The transforming power of love. What a delicious phrase.

I think it is especially important in this season, when the Valentine's Day chocolate is on deep discount at a store near you, to think about love – and how love is bigger and more unwieldy and more powerful than those selling chocolates and cards and flowers would have us believe. Whether you embrace Valentine's Day or avoid it, remember that love is more than what is brought forward to celebrate this season.

Three weeks ago, I quoted adrienne maree brown, an activist, facilitator, and writer from Detroit, in my sermon. Several years ago, she wrote a blog post about Valentine's Day that I return to annually – those of you connected with me on Facebook might have already seen this. She writes, in part,

'The kind of love that we will be forced to celebrate or escape on Valentine's Day is too small. [This kind of love is not sufficient, even if it is the greatest love(s) of our lives.]

We're all going to die if we keep loving this way, die from isolation, loneliness, depression, abandoning each other to oppression, from lack of touch, from forgetting we are precious...

From religious spaces to school to television shows to courts of law, we are socialized to seek and perpetuate private, even corporate, love. Your love is for one person, forever. You celebrate it with dying flowers and diamonds. The largest celebration of your life is committing to that person. Your family and friends celebrate you with dishes and a juicer. You need an income to love. If something doesn't work out with your love, you pay a lot of money to divide your lives, generally not telling people much unless it's a soap opera dramatic ending. This way of approaching love strangles all the good out of it.

What we need right now is a radical, global love that grows from deep within us to encompass all life.³

Brown calls us to embrace more than romantic love, more than the *eros*, that Rev. Dr. King names in the piece Beth read earlier. Love is a powerful tool of the prophets, the ones who are a source of our faith and lead us to confront powers and structures of evil. Many of you have heard me quote Dr. Cornell West to say, "justice is what love looks like in public." The other piece of that quote is that "tenderness is what love looks like in private." Today, I want to focus on that tenderness and how we nurture the love deep within us so it might grow to encompass all life.

³brown, adrienne maree. 'Love as Political Resistance: Lessons from Audre Lorde and Octavia Butler. *Bitch Media*. February 14, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/love-time-political-resistance/transform-valentines-day-lessons-audre-lorde-and-octavia>

Next month, you all will get to hear Beth Bullmer preach on love. It's a sermon that she workshopped and refined as part of the sermon writing class I led last church year. It is great sermon and you should mark your calendar for March 29. (And you should think about if you might want to be part of a sermon-writing class that will happen next fall.) In her sermon, she names that other languages have many more words for love than we do. Rev. Dr. King makes a similar point in today's reading.

There's a word for a particular feeling related to love that has lingered with me since I learned it a few months ago. It is naz, a word in Urdu, the official language of Pakistan which is also spoken in other areas of South Asia, a word that is transliterated to English as N-A-Z. Naz means 'the pride and assurance that comes from knowing you are loved.'⁴ That is such a beautiful concept to have a name for. I think I glimpsed naz that night in a youth worship at a convention center. I think chasing after naz brought me deeper into congregational life and much of our work here is efforts to plant the seeds of naz in one another. It is the core of our religious education program. It is, fundamentally, what I hope happens every time people gather. It is what it means to be a Beloved Community.

What would your life look like if you felt naz always? If the pride and assurance that comes from knowing you are loved was a constant companion, not an occasional, fleeting experience, if you experience it at all? How would you act? What risks would you take knowing that you are loved? What energy would be freed up if you were certain, all the time, that you were loved? How would our world be different if everyone knew they were beautiful, whole, and loved? If the striving after such things ended because we knew, deep in our bones, that we have achieved it.

But is everyone loved? You might be wondering. 'Yes,' I would answer... and I offer a few different sources for that yes, depending on which sources you use for your religious knowing. First, I believe that everyone, over the course of their life, has been loved well by someone else, usually by many people. Some of us were loved in the families that raised us, or by other trustworthy adults who helped us grow – teachers or coaches or neighbors. We have been loved by friends and by romantic partners, even if we are now separated by distance or death or the end of a relationship. We are loved by the people in the communities we belong to, including this one. I know that many of us have experiences of people who were supposed to love us and couldn't – or showed what they thought was love in a way that caused too much pain for us to receive it as love. All of that is true – and I believe that everyone has someone who has loved them well.

And many of you know that I am a mystic – that part of my religious knowing is direct experience of the transcending mystery and wonder... which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life. I often understand that mystery as love, as a presence alongside us, holding us in despair and heartbreak and encouraging us toward the good. This, alongside this community's aspirations to care for one another, is part of what I am naming when I say every week that we are wrapped in a love that surrounds us. And because we

⁴ Sanders, Ella Frances. *Lost in Translation: An Illustrated Compendium of Untranslatable Words from Around the World*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 2014.

are a religiously diverse congregation, I don't expect you all to share this understanding. I am grateful for those of you who trust me enough to share your different understandings. Speaking with respect and trust about what we know to be true, especially when the truths are not the same, is one of the great gifts of this community.

Traci K. Smith, in her poem for the Geechee Gullah Ring Shouters describes an experience that I would call being held in love,
'One of the women greeted me.
I love you, she said. She didn't
Know me, but I believed her,
And a terrible new ache
Rolled over in my chest,
Like in a room where the drapes
Have been swept back. I love you,
I love you, as she continued
Down the hall past other strangers,
Each feeling pierced suddenly
By pillars of heavy light.'⁵

That 'terrible new ache' that sudden piercing 'by pillars of heavy light' is the painful realization of the absence of love, of the assurance of love, created by feeling it for a moment. Most of the time, we get by, we survive with our lack of love, but every once in a while, we have a moment like the one the poet described – and the goodness is almost bittersweet because it highlights the absence. It is painful to recognize how much of our lives we spend feeling unloved, unworthy, less than whole.

I wish I could fix this once and for all. I wish I could stand here in front of you with the lyrics we sang to one another earlier one more time and by some mystery they would echo and reverberate within each of us – and we would believe them. They would become a repeating chorus in our internal monologue, words that greet us first thing in the morning and our last thought each night. That sound would be the song that gets stuck in our head and our heart throughout the day... and then when we had each believed them, we could sing or say them to the people in our lives and the process would start over again within them. And it would ripple and ripple and widen from there... all of us proud and assured that we are loved. It would become the love that adrienne maree brown calls us to, 'a radical, global love that grows from deep within us to encompass all life.'

How could anyone ever tell you you were anything less than beautiful?
How could anyone ever tell you you were less than whole?
How could anyone fail to notice that your loving is a miracle?
How deeply you're connected to my soul.
May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.

⁵ Smith, Traci K. 'Wade in the Water.' in *Wade in the Water: Poems*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2018.