

A MANY-SPLENDORED...?
A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L Greene
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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Did you hear about the unconditional lover who said, “I love you no matter what you do, but do you have to do so much of it?”

Love is an interesting topic to just about everyone in the world, one way or another. Tomorrow is Valentine’s Day, with florists and candy stores doing a land-office business. We think highly enough of romantic love to create a whole holiday around it—maybe because it is the most obvious kind of love.

But we really don’t understand love very well. I consulted a sermon I gave five or six years ago on the subject, and was at least mildly appalled at how I beat around the bush, analyzed three Greek words for different kinds of love, generally had a hard time coming up with satisfactory ways of talking about it. I saw a play the other night that had lines which could have been making fun of my very efforts. Two brothers are talking. From *The Dazzle*, by Richard Greenberg (Dramatists Play Service, 2003):

HOMER. I believe that she’s in love with you.

LANGLEY. Huh.

Is that...?

Really.

H. I believe so.

L. What does that mean?

Tell me exactly.

Turn on the lamps first.

H. It isn’t dark.

L. It will be when you finish.

H. I am not going to go...into all that.

L. Why not?

H. Because,, it isn’t definable.

L. Then on what authority do you speak of it?

H. One can,, *feel* it, without ,, being able to ,, put into words—

L. I don’t agree—I think a word can exist without a meaning but a meaning can’t exist without a word—music is better than either, because it forgoes both—that’s why I hate books—books always seem to me like music explaining itself under duress. But what were you saying?

H. I don’t remember.

L. Love! That was it. You were going to define it.

H. I was attempting *not* to—

..... I know you can’t answer this next question, but I’ll ask it anyway: Do you love her?

L. Oh, I can answer that.

H. You can?

L. Yes. I know what love is; you’re the one who can’t define it.

Today, I would like to offer three very general guidelines about love—love of all kinds—then let the poets speak for themselves. Guideline #1: *we generally know love, of any kind, when we feel or observe it* (sort of like the judge said about pornography, we may not be able to define it, but we know it when we see it). Guideline #2: *if there is a question about whether “it” is love, ask the question, “Is this calling up the best and highest in the people involved?”* (The answer will be “yes” if it is love.) Guideline #3: *we are most religious/spiritual, most Godly, and most fully human when we contribute to the store of love in the world.*

I know that questions and quibbles may be raised about my guidelines, but this morning, we are not going there. This morning, we are putting ourselves into a more, oh, let us say, right-brained state, meditating and reflecting on the loves we have known, the loves we have seen in others, and the love we all hope for, so achingly.

Before a certain thematic exploration of committed love between adult persons, here is a poem of love and death—so close to each other—a reminder of how love is expressed in so many ways, in word and deed. “Touching Miss Leona Gifford’s Hair,” by Jeanne Murray Walker:

Long before my father died
we whispered that Miss Gifford was bald.
That’s why she wore green scarves
summer and winter, to signal her loss, we said,
the same reason I kept my father’s shadow.
Sing, Muse, how after we buried my tall father
he still cast a shadow, heaped up in his death,
filling the four corners of the world
and whatever light the teachers tried to throw
against my mind’s wall—
the good and holy beacons of history and science—
were blocked by the shadow of my father.
When my friends felt its cold edges creep toward them
they wouldn’t touch me, they scattered,
iron filings fleeing from a magnet.
I sat alone at recess on the slatted bench.
One day Miss Gifford held out her thimble hand to me.
I heard her say, Help me carry these books.
With my shadow hands I picked up her books
and walked beside her to her office
where she lifted their mortal weight from me.

Oh sing, Muse, of how she turned
and stripped off the black cape that we said
made her fly like Zorro,
how she unlaced the black rowboats that we said
made her skim across the River Styx,
how she took off the wire-rims
that made her eyes small as a pig’s,

how the blue eyes were wet,
how she said, I'm sorry, Child,
how she looked small and thin and trembled like a wet cat
when she untied her scarf
and shook out her blond hair like a gift
into the darkness.

(*Christian Century*, April 22-29, 1998, p. 434)

Miss Gifford, filled with the suffering compassion that sometimes comes with love.
More familiar at this time of year is *passion*, the longing of body for body, the fulfillment of satisfied desire. "When I Heard at the Close of Day," by Walt Whitman:

When I heard at the close of the day how my name had been
Receiv'd with plaudits in the capitol, still it was not a happy
Night for me that follow'd,
.....
But the day when I rose at dawn from the bed of perfect health,
Refresh'd, singing, inhaling the ripe breath of autumn,
.....
And when I thought how my dear friend my lover was on his way
Coming, O then I was happy,
.....
And the next [day] came with equal joy, and with the next at evening
Came my friend,
And that night while all was still I heard the waters roll slowly
Continually up the shores,
I heard the hissing rustle of the liquid and sands as directed to me
Whispering to congratulate me,
For the one I love most lay sleeping by me under the same cover in
In the cool night,
In the stillness in the autumn moonbeams his face was inclined toward me,
And his arm lay lightly around my breast—and that night I was happy.

(Garrison Keillor, ed. *Good Poems*. New York: Viking, p. 94)

Giving ourselves to that kind of happiness opens us to love's shadows of pain and heartache. Even disillusionment and bitterness, if love is taken lightly, treated frivolously. "Sonnet XLIII," by Edna St. Vincent Millay:

What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,
I have forgotten, and what arms have lain
Under my head till morning, but the rain
Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh

Upon the glass and listen for reply,
And in my heart there sits a quiet pain
For unremembered lads that not again
Will turn to me at midnight with a cry.
Thus in the winter stands the lonely tree,
Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,
Yet knows its boughs more silent than before:
I cannot say what loves have come and gone,
I only know that summer sang in me
A little while, that in me sings no more
(Keillor, 130)

Of course, most of us do not have scores of unremembered lads and lasses to propel us toward self-involved and cynical sonnets. We are more likely to be doing our fallible best to make things work, consulting those whom we hope are wiser than we. “Lending Out Books,” by Hal Sirowitz:

You’re always giving, my therapist said.
You have to learn how to take. Whenever
You meet a woman, the first thing you do
Is lend her your books. You think she’ll
Have to see you again in order to return them.
But what happens is, she doesn’t have the time
To read them, & she’s afraid if she sees you again
You’ll expect her to talk about them, & will
Want to lend her even more. So she
Cancels the date. You end up losing
A lot of books. You should borrow hers.
(Keillor, 102)

A pair of poems, also slyly illuminating some of the ordinary ups and downs of love between two people. “This Is Just to Say,” by William Carlos Williams:

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

Forgive me

they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold
(Keillor, 109)

And the reply. "This Is Just to Say," by Erica-Lynn Gambino

I have just
asked you to
get out of my
apartment

even though
you never
thought
I would

Forgive me
you were
driving
me insane
(Keillor, 110)

If we don't kick each other out, we can keep on keeping on, in old patterns too engrained to do much about. "After Forty Years of Marriage, She Tries a New Recipe for Hamburger Hot Dish," by Leo Dangel:

"How did you like it?" she asked.

"It's all right," he said.

"This is the third time I cooked
it this way. Why can't you
ever say you like something?"

"Well, if I didn't like it, I
wouldn't eat it," he said.

"You never can say anything
I cook tastes good."

"I don't know why all the time
you think I have to say it's good.
I eat it, don't I?"

"I don't think you have to say

all the time it's good, but once
in awhile you could say
you like it."

"It's all right," he said.
(Keillor, p. 136)

Sometimes, old patterns retain some of the passion. "After the Argument," by
Stephen Dunn:

Whoever spoke first would lose something,
that was the stupid
unspoken rule.

The stillness would be a clamor, a capo
on a nerve. He'd stare
out the window,

She'd put away dishes, anything
for some noise. They'd sleep
in different rooms.

The trick was to speak as if you hadn't
spoken, a comment
so incidental

it wouldn't be counted as speech.
Or to touch while passing,
an accident

of clothing, billowy sleeve against
rolled-up cuff. They couldn't
stand hating

each other for more than one day.
Each knew this, each knew
The other's body

Would begin to lean, the voice yearn
for the familiar confluence
of breath and syllable.

When? Who first? It was Yalta, always
on some level the future,
the next time.

This time

There was a cardinal on the bird feeder;
one of them was shameless enough
to say so, the other pleased

to agree. And their sex was a knot
untying itself, a prolonged
coming loose.

(Keillor, p. 132)

And sometimes, the poet knows that years and decades of conscious loving bring rewards undreamed-of in our youth. "Prayer for a Marriage," by Steve Scafidì:

When we are old one night and the moon
arcs over the house like an antique
China saucer and the teacup sun

follows somewhere far behind
I hope the stars deepen to a shine
so bright you could read by it

if you liked and the sadnesses
we will have known go away
for awhile—in this hour or two

before sleep—and that we kiss
standing in the kitchen not fighting
gravity so much as embodying

its sweet force, and I hope we kiss
like we do today knowing so much
good is said in this primitive tongue

from the wild first surprising ones
to the lower dizzy ten thousand
infinitely slower ones—and I hope

while we stand there in the kitchen
making tea and kissing, the whistle
of the teapot wakes the neighbors.

(Keillor, p. 143)

With the teapot of the mischievous old lovers whistling its tune of passion, we leave the world of loving couples. I close with two poems reminding us again of the

various and unexpected ways of love, of how the human heart must needs love. “Those Winter Sundays,” by Robert Hayden:

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
And slowly I would rise and dress,
Fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
Who had driven out the cold
And polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
Of love's austere and lonely offices?
(Keillor, p. 369)

“Adoption,” by Walt McDonald

We took them in our arms, those washed,
donated blankets and week-old babies,
bare facts scratched on tablet paper—
their foster-parents' chronicles
of formula and colic, their bottle
and pajamas, their oddly temporary names.

Three babies in different years, the lightest loads
we'd ever hold. That was the sixties
before I went to Vietnam and back,
branded vicious, a baby killer. Such hope
never happened again, the whole world's peace
at risk. Those wise caseworkers knew about loss,

half trauma nurses, half Santa Claus.
Joyful, we took the babies they gave,
miraculous heartbreak, each almost weightless,
shockingly small, almost too delicate to take
from the arms of a woman who know how to bring
and let go. I can still feel the cling

of fingers wrapped around mine,
the charm of tiny eyes squeezed tight.

We held each baby in the neon gaze
of the state's agency, helpless, tall,
heart-pounding strangers these babies came to—
voices they'd never heard, might never

have picked—big-fisted, dazed,
throat-choked and humming lullabies,
blur-eyed, not caring who might see.
We were only a couple holding a baby
giddy and trembling with questions, and clumsy,
but parents, and our baby was crying.
(*Christian Century*, April 22-29, 1998, p. 432)