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Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

# Cliches, Lies and Love

## Poetry

a service presented by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene and Debra Smith  
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship  
February 14, 1999

### **Reading**

**In My Craft Or Sullen Art**, by Dylan Thomas

In my craft or sullen art  
Exercised in the still night  
When only the moon rages  
And the lovers lie abed  
With all their griefs in their arms,  
I labour by singing light  
Not for ambition or bread  
Or the strut and trade of charms  
On the ivory stages  
But for the common wages  
Of their most secret heart.

Not for the proud man apart

From the raging moon I write  
On these spindrift pages  
Nor for the towering dead  
With their nightingales and psalms  
But for the lovers, their arms  
Round the griefs of the ages,  
Who pay no praise or wages,  
Nor heed my craft or art.

### **Debra's presentation**

When I began my student teaching assignment, the cooperating teacher warned me about 8th period: 9th grade English. It was a nightmare class -- the kind that comes along every once in awhile. You just gird your loins and get through the year, one day at a time. When I took over the class after about two weeks, her whole demeanor changed: she looked ten years younger. The class was indeed a nightmare. One student was a sensitive, perceptive boy, who was absent three days out of five, and produced nothing but exquisite illustrations like those in a Japanese comic book. One was "into" Satan and Hitler. One was just back from a drug intervention program. One was the poised and intelligent daughter of a very right-wing fundamentalist Christian minister. A wonderfully challenging diverse assortment of budding individualists! And then there were my two Brontosaurus: great big bodies and little teeny brains. Both boys were tall, very tall. And, well, mature -- physically -- at just barely fifteen. They both had red hair, freckles, disarming smiles, mischievous antics, good intentions, and capable of doing the stupidest things. One of them was, I'm sure, sexually active.

We were reading "Romeo and Juliet." Ninth graders have been reading "Romeo and Juliet" since as long as there have been ninth graders. My approach to teaching the play was to try to get them to see the difference that Juliet -- her essence -- had on the quality of love Romeo was capable of experiencing. I began by contrasting the sexually

charged bantering that the Capulet and Montague "boys" engaged in and their gentle teasing of Romeo, swooning in love for Rosaline. I contrasted that with the first words that Romeo and Juliet exchange. I noted that the first thing they do together is create art: a beautiful sonnet.

[Romeo]

If I profane with my unworhiest hand  
This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this;  
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand  
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

[Juliet]

Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,  
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;  
For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch  
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.

[Romeo]

Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

[Juliet]

Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

[Romeo]

O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do!  
They pray; grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

[Juliet]

Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.

[Romeo]

Then move not while my prayer's effect I take.

Romeo then snatches a kiss, and Juliet responds that he kisses "by the book." In other words, he is clever, and can use words to woo, but hasn't a clue as to the true requirements of love--which to Juliet is a holy, and wholly serious, thing.

My students were required to keep a journal while we studied Shakespeare. One of the 'prompts' was that they write a poem about

something or someone they hold dear. It could be two lines, or twenty, I explained, but it had to be genuine, true, and specific. To demonstrate what those terms meant, I read a couple of poems that I thought paid tribute to a lover in most remarkable ways. We talked about truly acknowledging what was significant about the object of our affection, what was the essence of that person that we admired or appreciated. And we talked about its opposite -- we talked about cliches. I read Shakespeare's sonnet # 130.

My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;  
Coral is far more red than her lips' red;  
If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun;  
If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head.  
I have seen roses damasked, red and white,  
But no such roses see I in her checks;  
And in some perfumes is there more delight  
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks.  
I love to hear her speak; yet well I know  
That music hath a far more pleasing sound:  
I grant I never saw a goddess go;  
My mistress, when she walks, treads on the ground.  
And yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare  
As any she belied with false compare.

"You see," I said, even by Shakespeare's time -- and that was almost four hundred years ago -- all of the love poetry describing the lover and using those 'cheeks-like-roses,' 'eyes-like-diamonds,' 'hair-like-silk' similes -- they had already been used. "We call those the June, moon, croon rhymes," I continued. "They don't have any power any more. You must discover a new way to proclaim your love."

With what anticipation did I look forward to reading their journal entries that weekend! With what disappointment did I close the first spiral notebook. Then the second. And the next. And so on. I felt I was producing, single-handedly, the next generation of writers for Hallmark

Card Company. And then I came to one of my brontosaurus -- you know which one. He professed his love for this young woman using the most trite expressions and most cliched similes, revealing only a superficial knowledge of the object of his "love." I don't know what I expected from him...but the knowledge that he and she were capable of making a baby left me exasperated! He could not express one thing about her that was unique or special or in any way a more apt partner than any one the 700 young women at his junior high school. Now, I know that we don't expect poetry from juveniles. Adolescent boys, especially, are tongue-tied at best when it comes to expressing emotions. Teenagers are a whirl of emotions and to be able to give voice to those emotions is a substantial demand. So, I accepted the perfunctory attempts from the class, and we moved further on in the text. After all, we had to be through Act II by the end of the week, so the lesson in the quality of love via love poetry, was dropped. Except for my brontosaurus. I asked him to rewrite the poem. I told him I didn't think he really loved his girlfriend. I said I wouldn't believe he loved his girlfriend until he could tell me something about her qualities -- physical, yes, but also her personality, her character -- something that made her special. "Tell me who she is," I said, "that I may love her, too." And then I read him this poem by way of example:

My clumsiest dear, whose hands shipwreck vases,  
At whose quick touch all glasses chip and ring,  
Whose palms are bulls in china burrs in linen,  
And have no cunning with any soft thing

Except all ill-at-ease fidgeting people:  
The refugee uncertain at the door  
You make at home; deftly you steady  
The drunk clambering on his undulant floor.

Unpredictable dear, the taxi driver's terror,  
Shrinking from far headlights pale as a dime  
Yet leaping before red apoplectic streetcars--

Misfit in any space. And never on time.

A wrench in clocks and the solar system. Only  
With words and people and love you move at ease.  
In traffic of wit expertly maneuver  
And keep us, all devotion, at your knees.

Forgetting your coffee spreading on our flannel,  
Your lipstick grinning on our coat,  
So gayly in love's unbreakable heaven  
Our souls on glory of spilt bourbon float.

Be with me, darling, early and late. Smash glasses--  
I will study wry music for your sake.  
For should your hands drop white and empty  
All the toys of the world would break.

--*John Frederick Nims*

"Now," I said, "go write me a poem that convinces me!" He came back in two days -- mind you, he was not being graded, or receiving extra credit -- and he had revised the poem. It was not a great poem. But he had genuinely tried to "catch" something about his girlfriend. He pretty much failed, of course, because he really didn't know -- on a verbal level, anyway -- what was special about her or why love matters, after all. And so he resorted to vagueness, and cliches.

But I think I planted a seed. He now knows that there is an expectation that when you profess that you love someone...you owe it to yourself and your lover to be honest. This is, I think the lesson that Juliet taught Romeo. Stop fooling' around with your clever language and your swooning. Love's words are serious business. Do not resort to easy cliches and vague generalities. Enduring love -- and why bother with any other kind? -- makes demands on us. For who knows when the easy courtship and blissful marriage will be scarred with the dreadful sickness of a child, or bankruptcy, or the isolation of depression? And if, God's blessing, none of these tragedies befall the lovers, surely

there's no escaping the fact that the blush and beauty of youth will pass -- and what will be left? What is the foundation of the relationship? Silken hair and cheeks-like-roses? Or is there something in the lover's character which should be cherished? Something over which time has no consequence? Well, what is that something? Good love poetry demands that the lover be acknowledged, known, and appreciated. Love poetry teaches us to love with our eyes wide open!

## **Elizabeth's presentation**

Now that Deb has given us the gift of several lovely and deep love poems, let me share one from a wedding anthology, one with an appropriate message, but without the depth one would wish. (Apologies if you chose this for your wedding!) Poetry with eyes wide open (like love!) echoes with a rhythm of life; it lifts images which evoke further soul reflection; it sings courageously of the uncertainties and the complexity, as well as the power and the glory of love. Honest, open-hearted love and poetry inspire us with awe and gratitude, for it feels that they partake of a mystery greater than we are. This poem struggles to do these things, but doesn't quite make it.

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

I love you,  
Not only for what  
You have made of yourself  
But for what  
You are making of me.

I love you,  
For the part of me

That you bring out;  
I love you,  
For putting your hand  
Into my heaped-up heart  
And passing over  
All the foolish, weak things  
That you can't help  
Dimly seeing there,  
And for drawing out  
Into the light  
All the beautiful belongings  
That no one else had looked  
Quite far enough to find.

I love you because you  
Are helping me to make  
Of the lumber of my life  
Not a tavern  
But a temple;  
Out of works  
Of my every day  
Not a reproach  
But a song. ("I Love You," by Roy Croft, in Kingma, p. 128)

Such a poem might be chosen by the relatively-few extremely young couples for whom I perform weddings, those young men and women barely out of brontosaurus time-those couples who can scarcely articulate an answer to the question, "Why are you getting married?" Awe or gratitude are not even on the horizon.

There are other couples, of course-usually with some life experience behind them-whose weddings are luminous with the intent to live and love with eyes wide open. A poem by Robert Bly, "In the Month of May," would move these women and men. (And also the discerning younger men and women.) Its themes are very similar to the Croft poem, but, oh, the difference!

In the month of May when all leaves open,  
I see when I walk how well all things  
lean on each other, how the bees work,  
the fish make their living the first day.  
Monarchs fly high; then I understand.  
I love you with what in me is unfinished.

I love you with what in me is still  
changing, what has no head or arms  
or legs, what has not found its body.  
And why shouldn't the miraculous,  
caught on this earth, visit  
the old man alone in his hut?

And why shouldn't Gabriel, who loves honey,  
be fed with our own radishes and walnuts?  
And lovers, tough ones, how many there are  
whose holy bodies are not yet born.  
Along the roads, I see so many places  
I would like us to spend the night.  
(in Hass, p. 36)

The very prosaic statement, "I love you/For the part of me/ That you bring out," is transformed into the profoundly simple and evocative, "I love you with what in me is unfinished." The "lumber of my life" has become "what in me is still changing, what has no head or arms or legs, what has not found its body."

I am inspired by the couples who would respond to the Bly poem, for I see them understanding the complex, paradoxical and sometimes-difficult nature of love. These men and women glimpse the truth of how delicately and myriadly do people and things lean upon one another; they cannot speak in plain words the longing part of themselves that struggles for birth, that will emerge because of love's

journey, uncharted, terrifying, miraculous.

Marge Piercy, in her poem "To Have Without Holding," speaks to us of open-hearted love, love that is passionate and unflinchingly honest in both the giving and the receiving. Love expressed afresh, gilding prosaic images with a startling new sheen.

Learning to love differently is hard,  
love with the hands wide open, love  
with the doors banging on their hinges,  
the cupboard unlocked, the wind  
roaring and whimpering in the rooms  
rustling the sheets and snapping the blinds  
that thwack like rubber bands  
in an open palm.

It hurts to love wide open  
stretching the muscles that feel  
as if they are made of wet plaster,  
then of blunt knives, then  
of sharp knives.

It hurts to thwart the reflexes  
of grab, of clutch; to love and let  
go again and again. It pesters to remember  
the lover who is not in the bed,  
to hold back what is owed to the work  
that gutters like a candle in a cave  
without air, to love consciously,  
conscientiously, concretely, constructively.

I can't do it, you say it's killing me, but you thrive, you glow  
on the street like a neon raspberry,  
You float and sail, a helium balloon  
bright bachelor's button blue and bobbing

on the cold and hot winds of our breath,  
as we make and unmake in passionate  
diastole and systole the rhythm  
of our unbound bonding, to have  
and not to hold, to love  
with minimized malice, hunger  
and anger moment by moment balanced.  
(in Sewell, p. 43)

## **More Poems**

### **When You Are Old**, by William Butler Yeats

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,  
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,  
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look  
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,  
And loved your beauty with love false or true,  
But one man love the pilgrim soul in you,  
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,  
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled  
And paced upon the mountains overhead  
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.  
(in Yeats, p. 40)

### **Sonnet 116**, by William Shakespeare

Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments. Love is not love

Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove:  
O, no! it is an ever-fixed mark  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;  
It is the star to every wandering bark,  
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.  
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle's compass come;  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.  
    If this be error and upon me proved,  
    I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

**The River Merchant's Wife: A Letter**, by Li Po

While my hair was still cut straight across my forehead  
Played I about the front gate, pulling flowers.  
You came by on bamboo stilts, playing horse,  
You walked about my seat, playing with blue plums.  
And we went on living in the village of Chokan:  
Two small people, without dislike or suspicion.

At fourteen I married My Lord you.  
I never laughed, being bashful.  
Lowering my head, I looked at the wall.  
Called to, a thousand times, I never looked back.

At fifteen I stopped scowling,  
I desired my dust to be mingled with yours  
Forever and forever and forever.  
Why should I climb the look out?

At sixteen you departed,  
You went into far Ku-to-en, by the river of swirling eddies,  
And you have been gone five months.

The monkeys make sorrowful noise overhead.

You dragged your feet when you went out.  
By the gate now, the moss is grown, the different mosses,  
Too deep to clear them away!  
The leaves fall early this autumn, in wind.  
The paired butterflies are already yellow with August  
Over the grass in the West garden;  
They hurt me. I grow older.  
If you are coming down through the narrows of the river Kiang,  
Please let me know beforehand,  
And I will come out to meet you  
As far as Cho-fu-Sa.

**An Older Couple In the Cafeteria**, by Debra Smith

She fed him pasta,  
In public. Unabashed.  
They could have chosen  
    the roast beef,  
    the hard roll,  
    the french fries-  
Ultimately more manageable  
(He being in a wheelchair and all).

But she fed him pasta,  
And herself,  
With the same fork.  
And chatted easily.

She cradled her hand  
Under the forkful  
Up to his chin,  
This wedding cake ritual  
Every day, every meal.  
(in cold-drill, p. 100)

## **Sukey, You Shall Be My Wife**, traditional English

Sukey, you shall be my wife  
And I will tell you why:  
I have got a little pig,  
And you have got a sty:  
I have got a dun cow,  
And you can make good cheese.  
Sukey, will you marry me?  
Say Yes, if you please.  
(in Hass, p. )

## **A Marriage**, by Michael Blumenthal

You are holding up a ceiling  
with both arms. It is very heavy,  
but you must hold it up, or else  
it will fall down on you. Your arms  
are tired, terribly tired,  
and, as the day goes on, it feels  
as if either your arms or the ceiling  
will soon collapse.

But then,  
unexpectedly  
something wonderful happens:  
Someone,  
a man or a woman,  
walks into the room  
and holds their arms up  
to the ceiling beside you.

So you finally get

to take down your arms.  
You feel the relief of respite,  
the blood flowing back  
to your fingers and arms.  
And when your partner's arms tire,  
you hold up your own  
to relieve him again.

And it can go on like this  
for many years  
without the house falling.  
(in Kingma, p. 119)

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