

The Wisdom of Love

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There is an annual occurrence that seems to have lasted through this weekend: leftover Valentine's chocolate is still on sale. I hope this turn of events brings comfort and joy to many. I do wonder, though, if there ought to be more to this season of commitment than a box of candy. Love is wild, powerful, wise, just, and compassionate. We don't need to be romantically partnered to be allies with the Spirit of Love.

Looking around this congregation, I see so many people I admire for your efforts to repair the world. I see healers of the mind and body, teachers, people devoted to caring for family members, scientists, activists, and artists. At the root of each person's calling, I hear the voice of love: love for family and friends, love for the earth, love for humanity, love of beauty, love of the dizzying possibilities for discovery in our universe. Our minds can provide the analysis and our hands can provide the skills, yet the longings of our hearts keep us engaged and refreshed along the pathways of hope. We need our whole selves—rational, embodied, spiritual, and emotional—to make manifest the dream of a better world.

Unitarian Universalism has an intellectual reputation. We do apply reason in matters of faith, yet our religion has more facets than reason alone. Egbert Ethelred Brown, who was a Unitarian minister in Harlem in the early twentieth century, saw the wisdom in bringing our whole selves to church. He wrote, "Religion is ethics touched by emotion. If the intellect dominates and there is no hint of emotion, a cold and barren matter-of-factness results. Conversely, if emotion leads, unguided by intellect, we are doomed to a wild sea of fanaticism. Yet mind and soul united create one music, grander than before." (Quote from "Cold Services," p. 33 in the anthology *Been in the Storm So Long*, edited by Mark Morrison-Reed and Jacqui James)

I believe that emotions bring us a great deal of wisdom. We need to consult our feelings and gut instincts to make the best decisions. In particular, I think love in the broader sense offers three lessons that will help us live out our faith: groundedness, embodiment, and interdependence. Love keeps us here, rooted in the world as it is. Love is active, practical, and at one with our physical selves. Love remembers data and frameworks that our intellect may have forgotten. The wisdom of love teaches groundedness, embodiment, and interdependence.

Love Keeps Us Here

Spirituality aligned with the forces that create and uphold life is rooted in the world as it is, flinching neither from the pain nor the joy that is possible in the here and now. Each of the senses available to us helps us to understand the universe and our place in it. We think, touch, taste, and feel our way into making sense of the world. Love is the capacity that helps us to keep the doors of our perception open rather than escaping into abstraction or obsession. When we are able to truly love the world and the lives it holds, trying to hide is a less attractive option because escaping would separate us from love.

The power of love to draw us into the here and now, to embrace our souls with gentle, cupped hands and breathe fire into the embers, is a spiritual perspective. Lewis Latimer shared it. Latimer was an African American engineer in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He was also a poet, as demonstrated in this piece, "Love is All."

"What is there in this world, beside our loves,
To keep us here?
Ambition's course is paved with hopes deferred,
With doubt and fear.
Wealth brings no joy,
And brazen-throated fame
Leaves us at last
Nought but an empty name.
Oh soul, receive the truth,
E'er heaven sends thy recall:
Nought here deserves our thought but love,
For love is all."

("Love is All" by Lewis Latimer, p. 39 in the anthology *Been in the Storm So Long*, edited by Mark Morrison-Reed and Jacqui James)

Latimer suggests that our loves, plural, collectively form the strongest force that keeps us "here." I can imagine several meanings to where "here" might be. It is not a fixed point. "Here" moves with life and time. Here is where we put one foot in front of the other. Here is the present moment, this time and place and plane of existence. Here we are, gathered in strength, rooted in the world as it is. Love keeps us connected with the ground of our being.

Love is Embodied

The second piece of spiritual wisdom is that love is embodied. Love inhabits physical form and manifests in the real actions of human beings. This is true at the personal level and at the societal level. When we are able to fall in love with the world, to keep faith

with humanity while fully recognizing the human capacity for causing harm, affection becomes action. Similarly, when tangible actions and their effects lead to suffering, we know there is something amiss. Love needs mindfulness and compassion to bear the best fruit.

Unitarian Universalism contains a strong current of humanism. I don't mean exclusively atheist humanists, although some UU's are; I mean people who believe in people. We value human creations like art and literature, we seek human solutions to our shared challenges, and we value dignity and equality as humanitarian goals. Love is an irreplaceable ingredient in this tradition. People can do terrible things, individually or collectively. Love helps us to be humanists anyway, to believe that positive change is possible, that society still has something to celebrate, and that creating an environment for healing is worth the effort. We are sometimes disappointed and often heartbroken, yet we persist in the spirit of love.

One of our twentieth century lay leaders to express this was Wade McCree, Jr., who was a vice moderator of the UUA in the late sixties. He was also the first African American to serve as the United States Solicitor General, and so had plenty of opportunities to see the best and the worst in people. He wrote:

"To me, one's religion is expressed in the manner in which one relates to other human beings. If one fights relentlessly against injustice, want, hate, and every form of exploitation, then one is a religious person. The love of God is not expressed by ritual or ceremony, but by loving." ("By Loving" by Wade H. McCree, Jr, p. 18 in the anthology *Been in the Storm So Long*, edited by Mark Morrison-Reed and Jacqui James)

Across the decades, leaders agree that fierce, open-hearted, actual-feet-on-the-ground love is an expression of faith. People are worth caring for. Spiritual love finds resonance and relationship between the human and the divine. Love longs for the well-being and abundant life of the beloved.

Love for people in general is embodied, and so is love for individual people in particular. For anyone who has ever cared for a child or an elder or a loved one who needs direct physical care, the earthiness of love is undeniable. Lifting, holding, and carrying are physically exhausting. Sleep deprivation depletes people mentally and spiritually. Yet people care for others, often without expectation of return. Within the wisdom of love, a person doesn't have to produce anything or contribute to the GDP in order to matter.

We are all connected. Caregiving is necessary for the maintenance of civilization, and we all benefit when the caregivers and care receivers have all of the resources they need to thrive. All people deserve equality of access to health care, housing, and public

services. Paid family leave, earned income credits, Medicare, and other social institutions make life possible for families with vulnerable members. Love feeds our commitment to the forces that uphold abundant life. Wisdom knows that embodied care and advocacy are aspects of love.

As Universalists, we value people of all ages, races, levels of economic activity, genders, sexual orientations, and abilities. The force of our conviction is made real with concrete actions. Love is embodied.

Love Remembers Interdependence

We can fool ourselves into thinking we are logical all the time. I can appreciate the attraction of making moral choices through what seems like a coldly rational framework. I don't believe that any of us are as rational as we think we are, but even if we could be, love brings us some of the data we actually need to make good decisions.

If we only look at short-term consequences, we may fail to take into account the expense of disaster cleanup when we are figuring the cost of energy. Without love, we might not realize that it is against our long-term interests to cause species extinction as we scrape up the Great Barrier Reef. Without love, humans appear to be statistics, and we might forget that Black and Brown lives matter, and that justice for immigrants makes us healthier as a nation.

Ethical arguments for environmental and social justice might be dismissed as mere sentimentality, because love is made out to be less reliable than money. But of course that's not true. Our gut instincts are sometimes on to something. When we love without apology, we come to our senses. We remember that the potential results of our actions go beyond the predictive models. We remember the interdependence of all life. We remember our connection with the earth.

[Francis Ellen Watkins Harper](#) understood interdependence as an economic truth. She supported a movement called Free Produce, which encouraged people to boycott all products tied to slave labor. "Oh, could slavery exist long if it did not sit on a commercial throne?" she wrote. "Our moral influence against slavery must be weakened, our testimony diluted if . . . we are constantly demanding rice from the swamps, cotton from the plantations, and sugar from the deadly mills."

Her love for her people and this country led her to understand how we are all connected through what we create, eat, and share. Logic led her to relationship.

Love is wise because love remembers the interdependent web. When we love truly and deeply, the tug of emotions and relationships help us to account for data and

frameworks that short-term thinking has forgotten. We are inspired to measure profits and consequences with more than one kind of ruler. Love remembers the interdependent web. That web contains context to fuel compassion and a vast, flexible landscape with room for healing.

Conclusion

If you happen to be enjoying some discount chocolate later this week, I hope it will remind you that love is wise. Love goes beyond romance, beyond sentimentality, even beyond human concerns. When love works in harmony with all of our senses—the clarity of reason, the skillfulness of our hands, the renewal of our spiritual path—the combined wisdom helps us to be our best for each other.

Love keeps us here. In our caring relationships, we hold secret pockets of ourselves, treasures that help us stay connected to the forces that create and uphold life. May love call us back to our truest selves. May we carry resilience and hope for one another.

Love is embodied. Whether our bodies are part of a movement for justice or part of a team that cares for one person, our actions make wisdom visible. Love knows that people matter.

Love remembers interdependence. Cause and effect transcend the next quarter and can't be measured by a single yardstick. We take the big picture into account when the wisdom of love invites us to take a second look.

May we love deeply. May we love boldly. May we love wisely. So be it. Blessed be. Amen.