

Love: The Final Frontier
Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo
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So here we are at another Valentine’s Day – when everyone talks about love. Valentine’s is one of those holidays that is very meaningful for some people, and completely ignored by others – a committee this week was looking at scheduling their next meeting and someone asked if we could avoid setting the meeting for next Tuesday, and it took me a minute to remember why they would want that! I guess that says something about my love life, or social life, or priorities, or something!

Of course, love is like the weather – everyone talks about it, but no one seems to be able to do much about it. We fall in and out of it, we give or withhold it, we know there are as many different kinds of love as there are snowflakes – sweethearts, friends, parents, siblings, shiny new romance and that wise and resilient love that has been tested by time, the love that moves us to help others we do not even know – the cover story in this week’s TIME magazine is about deep and abiding friendships between non-human animals – and for all that abundance of meaning we have this one word, love.

Love, I believe, is both the easiest and the hardest thing we do as human beings. It is natural and easy -- after all, we come into the world pre-programmed for love. We are neurologically wired to bond with our caregivers from the very moment we emerge from the womb, programmed to engage in relationships of reciprocity and mutual care from our earliest days. That early bonding love between parent and child is how we survive our infancy, and it is vital to our survival as a species. If you have ever spent much time with a parent whose loving patience with their screaming infant lasts far beyond your own – especially if they are seated in the row behind you on a four-hour airplane ride – you know how important that bond of love is to our staying alive when we are particularly difficult to be around. Love keeps us alive.

Our neurobiology for love surfaces in a new way as we move into adulthood, of course, as another type of love bonds us into couples and families, the constructions of human connection that form the social and economic building blocks of society. That love is about survival, keeping people secure and connected to each other in larger groups – it is love in its various forms that assures that we will persist as individuals and as a species, and that is fundamental to the great power love has for us. The same deep impulse that bonds the infant and parent also binds us into family and tribal groupings, creating strong and resilient ties that can be nearly impossible to sever. That is at the heart of the positive power of love, and our loving care and good will extends into the world from that strong base. Love, literally and metaphorically, keeps us alive.

Love is built into who we are at the most basic level. We know that the patterns of our gender identity and who we fall in love with are also part of our neurobiology, central to the way we live in the world. The patterns of healthy love and family formation come in a wonderful variety that enriches our full humanity. On Valentine’s Day and in this season of love, we honor all those loving connections, knowing that they are part of our thriving in the world.

Even as we honor and celebrate all the varieties of love and connection in our human lives, we know that there are still lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals, couples and families who are subjected to discrimination, oppression and the day-to-day insults of bullying as they live out their lives of love and connection. And we know that the consequences of that discrimination and bullying can be devastating, even deadly.

In September 2010, bullying became national news when four boys committed suicide in unrelated instances in different parts of the country, because they were bullied for being gay. Each boy's story is different, but there is a common theme – being bullied until they could no longer stand it. William Lucas, age 15, hanged himself on his family's farm because "everyone made fun of him and he just couldn't take it any more." Asher Brown, age 13, was bullied about his apparent homosexuality, and shot himself with one of his father's guns. Seth Walsh, also 13, admitted to friends and family that he liked other boys. He was bullied relentlessly and hanged himself; his mother found him and then stood vigil as she watched him die after a week on life support. Tyler Clementi, age 18, a freshman at Rutgers University, jumped off the George Washington Bridge after his roommate posted a video of Tyler kissing another man. Just a year later, here in Western New York, 14-year-old Jamey Rodemeyer took his own life after being incessantly bullied by classmates. In the life and death of each of these young men, we see the effect of casual cruelty, often amplified by the power of instantaneous communication technology, on the lives of individuals and families in all parts of this country.

Bullying. Bullying is an abuse of power, an abrogation of human relationship in which one or more people who have physical or social power use that power to hurt another person, physically, mentally, or emotionally. There is no reason in bullying except the pleasure of hurting someone else. It is violence in its purest form, simply for the sake of causing pain in another, dominating another, to make the bully feel stronger or in control, reinforcing negative tribal boundaries that divide and oppress. Bullying, though it may stem from the same tribal connections that foster love, is an offense to love, an offense to life and health and relationship.

Researchers define bullying into two types: direct bullying involves physical aggression such as shoving and poking, throwing things, slapping, choking, punching and kicking, beating, stabbing, pulling hair, scratching, biting, scraping and pinching. There is another type of bullying, called social aggression or indirect bullying, which is characterized by threatening the victim into social isolation. This includes tactics such as spreading gossip, refusing to socialize with the victim, bullying other people who wish to socialize with the victim, and criticizing the victim's manner of dress or other characteristics.

Other forms of indirect bullying can be more subtle and more likely to be verbal, such as name calling, the silent treatment, arguing others into submission, manipulation, malicious gossip, spreading lies and rumors, staring, giggling or laughing at the victim, saying certain words that trigger a reaction from a past event, and mocking. It is so common in schools, particularly in middle schools, that school districts for decades have been trying to figure out how to address it. School violence has a category all its own in the statistics, and I imagine that most of us have seen it around us when we were in school, even if we were not targets of bullying ourselves. It is not insignificant that of the young men who took their own lives, two were thirteen years old, one was fourteen and one fifteen. The other was a college freshman. All at vulnerable times in their lives, all victimized by the casual cruelty of bullying.

I think bullying is much more prevalent as a behavioral pattern, a social and political pattern in our society than we are usually willing to admit. I was bullied when I was in middle school – by two girls a grade or two older than I, who simply made my life miserable, calling me names, coming up behind me and pulling on my clothes – it was a long time ago, and you could say they did not really do me any harm; I was not targeted because of my sexual identity, or any other reason I can identify, and this was long before Twitter and Facebook could take these insults viral -- but just as other bullying victims we hear about, I was terrified. I felt helpless, constantly on alert, and sure that something even worse was about to happen.

Since those days, I have seen bullies in action in social settings, office interactions, in meetings of boards and committees, all around us in our day-to-day lives. The bully gets an expanded sense of his or her own power by making someone else powerless, by creating social isolation, by excluding them from the network of relationships wherever that occurs.

Children learn bullying from adults, who often use aggressive and demeaning terms about others in day-to-day speech, sometimes even unaware of what they are saying. Bullying is turned loose on the school bus, on the playground, in the routine interactions among children as they play out a set of power dynamics that may be inherent, or may be learned in a culture where so many have become more powerful by victimizing others, where we have not learned to use power wisely, where we have not learned to be accepting of each other, to be kind to each other, to be comfortable in our own power and to lovingly support the power and potential of others who are not like us.

I think a lot of the political rhetoric we hear these days is bullying disguised as a rational debate, with name-calling, innuendo, unfounded criticism and often scant attention to the facts in the case. We routinely allow bullying to enter the political debate in our society. Even though in every political season someone calls for an end to the mud-slinging and pledges to run a clean campaign, by the week before the election nearly everyone has been pulled down to that unacceptably low level. Why do we tolerate that? The politicians and pundits would stop doing it if it did not work for them!

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, intersex and transgender people have long been the targets of bullying at all levels in our society, from individual interactions to institutional systems. Name-calling is still enormously common, as are gossip and innuendo, teasing and social isolation. Personal violence against those of different sexuality is not at all rare. The vicious murder of Angie, a transgender woman, a few years ago in Colorado made headlines for weeks, horrifying people in its sheer cruelty, but I wonder how many we don't even hear about. How many scarred and broken lives, how many deaths. How much bullying, just because people are different.

Sometimes laws and regulations, like the "Don't Ask Don't Tell" rule that persisted in the military for nearly two decades, or the national Defense of Marriage Act and its counterparts in a majority of states, are simply a form of institutional bullying – using institutional power to suppress men and women who are different from the mainstream, gay and lesbian individuals who have stepped forward to serve the nation in the military, or who wish to have equity in their right to family formation – bullying by imposing the power of the majority on a sexual minority by labeling them as dangerous, forcing them into social isolation, banning their love from legitimate expression.

A mental health network reported that gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth hear anti-gay slurs such as "homo," "faggot" and "sissy" about 26 times a day, or once every 14 minutes. Another study found that in a single year thirty-one percent of gay youth had been threatened or injured at school. As a mother, as a minister, as a human being, I declare that to be unacceptable. That is simply not the world I want to live in, not the world I want my son, or any other mother's child, to live in.

There is hope. We are seeing a shift in popular opinion about the rights of sexual minorities, especially in our youth. We saw an end to the Don't Ask Don't Tell rule in the military last September. Marriage for same-sex couples is now legal in Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, Washington, D.C., in the Coquille Indian Tribe in Oregon, and as of just this past summer, right here in the Empire State – and this congregation was part of the movement that made this breakthrough possible in New York State. The turning of the tide is slow, and changes

constantly; a new judicial ruling this week in California keeps the decision about marriage rights there still in play, moving (we can hope) towards “yes” for marriage for all as a right in one more state. There are indeed signs that love will emerge victorious over institutional bullying, with open-hearted, intentional and persistent effort.

You know, there are a lot of problems in the world for which it is difficult to know what any one person, any one organization can do. Not so on this one – there is so much we can each do, and so much we can do together. This church took a very important step about 15 years ago when it studied the issues, made a decision and did the work to be recognized as an official Welcoming Congregation. That course of action was courageous and proactive, a clear statement of commitment to the principles that honor human worth and dignity, equity and compassion. It is good to be in a Welcoming Congregation.

The month of February, the month of Valentine’s Day, has been designated as Standing on the Side of Love month by the UUA’s Standing on the Side of Love campaign. As they say about us on the front lines of the struggle to end oppression and discrimination, we Unitarian Universalists are the love people – that is our Universalist core. This month of love is a time to recommit ourselves to love in all its forms, in all its power, to resist bullying, to be kind and to teach our children to be kind, to open our hearts to each other, and to accept all people in their marvelous variety. For that is who we are – we are the people who stand for human dignity and worth, for equity and compassion, against shame and isolation, for love. Our universalist forbears said that God is love, and it is in living and standing for love that we find our true humanity. So may it be.

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