

One Eternal Answer

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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I have a young Presbyterian minister friend, Daniel Orr, who was very curious about Unitarian Universalism during the ten weeks we spent together in 2002 as hospital chaplains. In our conversations he and all of the chaplains learned a lot about our faith and how one can be a religious person (even a minister) and not necessarily believe in things considered pretty much essential by most of the mainstream denominations. Perhaps I illustrated this more by my actions than by my attempts at finding that ever-elusive definition of Unitarian Universalism.

Mostly I have lost touch with those other chaplains, although it is hard to understand why considering we spent such an intensive time of our ministerial training together talking and reflecting on the most personal parts of our lives and getting down to the very core of our callings to the ministry. And so it was by pure chance, and delighted surprise, that Daniel and I ran into each other this past summer at Chautauqua. He was still curious about my ministry and our UU tradition and our conversation took off just where we had left it five years ago.

Maybe this topic was on his mind on that day, but he asked me if Unitarian Universalists were “into” blessings, as in the expression God Bless You. I told him that yes, we were into blessings, but not necessarily blessings from supernatural beings. I believe there are two kinds of blessings, the first being those things that come from the world itself, that are basically undeserved blessings, like food, heat from the sun, even something as non-tangible as beauty. The second category of blessing comes from those things we do and feel for each other – you might call them voluntary blessings as contrasted with the involuntary blessing of water, for example. Voluntary blessing comes from our sense of justice and equality and compassion, all of which, I will propose in this sermon, come out of one thing, and that is love. We are each an instrument of love in the world. Or can be if we choose to be.

From where do the undeserved or involuntary blessings come? I will argue that these, too, come out of one thing, that same thing that I am calling love. I am using the word love for lack of a better word, perhaps, to describe the force and the laws and the one energy that in its various relationships with itself constitutes our entire universe. It seems very plausible to me that this is the very thing that many millions of people in our world call God; God as the creative and sustaining love of the universe. Indeed, it is often said that God is Love.

It feels right to me that this universal energy can be called love because the laws governing its relationships all work toward perfect relationship – right relationship – an interdependent web in complete balance. We humans are the force that sometimes works to create an unbalance mostly because, as I have often said, we think ourselves outside of

the natural world. If we, and all the people of the world, were to somehow come to understand, and feel, the oneness of everything that is, including ourselves, how could we help but act with love toward what we would know is an extension of ourselves.

The Jewish concept of Shalom is close to what I am talking about. It means much more than just peace. "The Hebrew word *shalom* has a wider meaning than the English equivalent *peace*, for it signifies welfare of every kind: security, contentment, sound health, prosperity, friendship, peace of mind and heart, as opposed to the dissatisfaction and unrest caused by evil. The word *shalom* comes from the word *shalem*, meaning complete, all parts together. *Shalom* is when all parts of the whole, all people in the group, blend together in harmony. It is translated sometimes as whole, full, or finished." <http://doggo.tripod.com/dogggoodlife.html#SHALOM> It is the interdependent web in a perfect state of peace and balance. This, to me, is what can also be described as a state of perfect love.

Christianity uses the term Agape to describe this kind of love that unconditionally promotes well-being. Christians call it God's love, which they are called to return. I would call it the unconditional nature in which we are each held in this web of existence and our responsibility to respond to the web, the world around us with the loving intention of which humans are uniquely capable. The term Agape is also related to the idea of charity and to the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus told his disciples that the two greatest commandments were to love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might, and to love your neighbor as yourself. These were insights directly out of Judaism, and also insights repeated around the world in various phrases by various insightful and enlightened human beings. Whatever the source, these are two great "suggestions" a word we Unitarian Universalists are jokingly said to prefer over "commandments."

I personally translate the "loving God" part of these wise words, whatever you call them, as loving the possibility of perfect relationships, of Shalom, with all your heart and all your soul and all your might, not just with your mind and heart, but also with your might, or your embodiment so that we might pass on that love and make the world a better place. This making the world a better place is the loving our neighbors as ourselves. For me, they are one and the same commandment, for as I said earlier in this sermon, how can we help but act with love toward others when we understand them to be an extension of ourselves and ourselves as extensions of the universe, the universal love, or God.

Unitarian Universalism has its seven principles that describe a very good way of being in right relationship with the world and others. In a sermon about those principles last year I ended with a question about the missing word love in our seven principles. In thinking about this missing word "love" in the months since that question, I have decided that I *would* like it to be included, because it is such an important concept (particularly given what I am saying this morning) but at the same time I understand that the word itself does not have to be written for it to be implicitly implied or assumed.

What *is* affirming the inherent worth and dignity of every person, if not love?

What is the simplest and most loving thing we can do for another human being? To affirm their existence.

What is promoting justice, equity, and peace but appreciation for, a love of, the equally deserving nature of all persons?

What is democracy but the outward expression of a belief in the equal opinion and worth of each of us?

What is understanding ourselves as part of an awesome interdependent web of existence but the mystic love of all related creation?

Our UU principles are very hopeful principles, knowing what we do about how things are going in the world these days. But to truly love is also to know hope, because unconditional love (of life or another being) understands the possibilities that remain open, eternally, even in the darkest of days and times. Rabbi Michael Lerner, in an essay on the meaning of Chanukah, writes: “When progressive Jews light the Chanukah candles we affirm our rejection of ‘realism’ and we affirm the possibility that the world can be transformed and that healing – tikkun in Hebrew – is possible. That same hope is at the heart of Chanukah, as it is also at the heart of Christmas, Kwanza, and other celebrations of light in these dark time.”

(<http://files.tikkun.org/current/article.php?story=2006102812233485>)

Love keeps hope alive, keeps the candles burning. Unconditional love knows about possibility. Salvation, as we know it here, is learning to live in, by and for that love, that we may direct it not only toward others but also toward ourselves.

If I don’t actually talk about the beauty of our world, I think about it personally all the time. For it occurs to me that when we recognize and rejoice in things beautiful, we are celebrating and connecting to the love that *is* our world. It’s something that can bring us back to hope when hope wears thin.

There is a website called Yahoo Answers on which one recent question was about love as the answer and the reason for the universe. One blogger wrote “If love is the answer, rephrase the question.” Another asked “Why would love be the answer to anything? It’s only a natural human emotion, nothing else.” I think this person answered his own question, actually, although I wonder if he will ever realize it – his signature was a phrase of some disgust that I cannot repeat to you here.

If human beings come out of the same energy of which the entire universe is created, and if love is somehow one of our “natural” human emotions, then does it not follow that love must be a product of the universal energy? My logic may not be perfect here, but it’s good enough to make my point – the phenomenon of love, of the possibility for shalom and real peace (not just disarmament) is the most real aspect of all existence that I can

imagine, and therefore an answer to a great many questions, maybe all of them, I'm not quite sure yet. Two weeks ago we talked about eternal questions and our mostly temporary answers. Could love be one possible eternal answer? As I said to you recently, I don't have all the answers, or even all the questions figured out yet – I just pass some of my most recent thinking on to you in the form of these sermons. I am grateful for the opportunity to do so, by the way. Thank you.

Wouldn't it be lovely if there was a real Puck, as the character in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, who could provide us with a potion that would cause us to fall in love with not only the first thing we saw upon awakening, but all things? Was Jesus such a character? Did he not, as have others, by their example, and their stories, try to instill a quality of unconditional love into humanity?

Maybe we already have this capability – of loving, unconditionally, everything and everyone – but it's something we have either forgotten or fallen out of the habit of using.

My hope today is to remind us that we are all creatures of an amazing, mysterious, perfectly interconnected universe (could we say loving universe, even though I do not mean that in an active, purposeful sense?) that gives us, also, the capacity to give some of that energy and love back to a hurting world.

We are agents of love, with the capacity to bless each other, and the world, with our lives. And so I answered my friend's question "Yes, Daniel, Unitarian Universalists (at least this one) do believe in blessing."