

## Love (Worship Service 2/15/2009)

### Opening Words – by Kahlil Gibran

Yesterday I stood at the temple door, interrogating the passers-by about the mystery and merit of Love.

And before me passed an old man with an emaciated and melancholy face, who sighed and said: "Love is a natural weakness bestowed upon us by the first man."

But a virile youth retorted: "Love joins our present with the past and the future."

Then a woman with a tragic face sighed and said: "Love is a deadly poison injected by black vipers, that crawl from the caves of hell. The poison seems fresh as dew and the thirsty soul eagerly drinks it; but after the first intoxication the drinker sickens and dies a slow death."

Then a beautiful, rosy-cheeked damsel smilingly said: "Love is a wine served by the brides of Dawn which strengthens strong souls and enables them to ascend to the stars."

After her a black-robed, bearded man, frowning, said: "Love is the blind ignorance with which youth begins and ends."

Another, smilingly, declared: "Love is a divine knowledge that enables men to see as much as the gods."

Then said a blind man, feeling his way with his cane: "Love is a blinding mist that keeps the soul from discerning the secret of existence, so that the heart sees only trembling phantoms of desire among the hills, and hears only echoes of cries from voiceless valleys."

A young man, playing on his viol, sang: "Love is a magic ray emitted from the burning core of the soul and illuminating the surrounding earth. It enables us to perceive Life as a beautiful dream between one awakening and another."

And a feeble ancient, dragging his feet like two rags, said, in quavering tones: "Love is the rest of the body in the quiet of the grave, the tranquility of the soul in the depth of Eternity."

And a five-year-old child, after him, said laughing: "Love is my father and mother, and no one knows Love save my father and mother."

And so, all who passed spoke of Love as the image of their hopes and frustrations, leaving it a mystery as before.

Then I heard a voice within the temple: "Life is divided into two halves, one frozen, the other aflame; the burning half is Love."

Thereupon I entered the temple, kneeling, rejoicing, and praying:

Make me, O Lord, nourishment  
for the blazing flame...  
Make me, O God, food for the  
sacred fire.... Amen.

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### **Love in the Sanctuary** – by Rick Kimball

Good morning. Let me introduce you to Love.

That is Love over there on the table to your right, Love the Gorilla. I gave him to my wife Tirrell in 1992 when she was the director of religious education here. I remember our son Stephen lugging Love through the Maine Mall while home from college for Christmas vacation. I was afraid Stephen might not come home for vacation ever again, but that proved not to be the case. Tirrell kept Love in her office wearing a heart-shaped nametag until her retirement in 2003 so Love would always be present when kids were around.

Love resides with us at home now. He likes it there, especially when the fire is going and our grandchildren come to visit, but he misses Allen Avenue, too, and sometimes he gets a little jealous of Whacky Quacky. Whacky Quacky, for those who are new, is our minister's stuffed duck. Whacky Quacky sometimes joins us here in Lessons for All Ages.

Love the Stuffed Gorilla might live in New Gloucester these days, but the spirit of Love lives on in the DRE's office and in the rest of the church. That is fitting, for love is the doctrine of this church, as we say most Sunday mornings, love is the doctrine of this church as well as its one-time stuffed mascot.

Our doctrine of love manifests itself in the way we reach to the outside world, the way we treat each other, and the way we teach our kids – especially about love itself. That's where Love the Gorilla's friend OWL comes in. OWL is the avian acronym for Our Whole Lives, the human sexuality course that Unitarian Universalist churches around the nation have been offering to kids and sometimes adults for almost a decade, ever since an earlier course called About Your Sexuality outlived its usefulness. Tirrell and I have had the privilege and pleasure of leading both OWL and AYS for many years, and we hold most sessions here, in the room where we now worship.

Love is the doctrine of this church, and we explore human sexuality in our sanctuary, our spiritual center. Just a few Sundays ago the floor beneath you was half filled with remarkable – and I do mean remarkable – cardboard anatomical models constructed by

seventh and eighth graders as foci for a discussion of physiology and reproductive mechanics. But we talked about more than that, for sex is larger than that. In fact, we said to the kids, sex is a nine-letter word. Its full form is *sexuality*, a vast concept that covers much more than body parts, so very much more, including love.

When we talk with the kids about the connective acts of sex and sexuality, we try always to speak in terms of love and love-making because that is what the larger society around us so often and so very sadly fails to do. Our culture frequently divorces sex from love, so robs both of much beauty and meaning and even pleasure.

Love is the doctrine of this church, and love is much more than sex, so we teach more than sex in this room and in other UU churches as well. Consider the ideas of Forrest Church, senior minister at All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in New York City. Church offers love as counterpoise to death. Love is the only answer to death, he tells us. Love is the immortal in us. "About life after death, no one knows," he writes. "But about this we surely know: there is love after death. Not only do our finest actions invest life with meaning and purpose, but they also live on after us. Two centuries from now, the last tracings of our being will yet express themselves in little works of love that follow bead by bead in a luminous catena extending from our dear ones out into their world and then on into the next, strung by our own loving hands."

Well . . . it's amazing where a stuffed gorilla named Love can lead us, isn't it? From his own furry hide and glassy eyes, to sex in the sanctuary, then sex in love, and on to love as anecdote to death. What a reach that is. Or is it?

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### **Standing in Love – by Beth Fitzgerald**

Books and movies have taught me a lot about love.

My favorite film of all time is *Shakespeare in Love*, which won 7 Academy awards in 1998. Early in the film, Gwyneth Paltrow, in the role of young, beautiful, spirited Viola d'Lessups exclaims:

I – I will have poetry in my life – and adventure – and love –  
Love above all – love that overthrows life – unbiddable –  
Ungovernable – like a riot in the heart.  
And nothing to be done – come ruin or rapture.

And of course by the end of the film she has had all of that – with one of the most gifted writers of poetry the world has ever known – has been the inspiration for one of the greatest love stories of all time – and has been launched on a journey to a new world.

I confess that once in my life I experienced just such a relationship – the exhilarating experience of falling head over heels in love. The rapture was wonderful, but I was not

prepared for the ruin! I will spare you the details of the tumultuous love affair which tore my life apart and thrust me onto the path of discovery of my true self. Ruin and rapture often launch us into new worlds.

In 1978 a book had been published which would remain on the best seller list for over 10 years. My dog-eared copy attests to its importance to me as I negotiated the twists and turns of the new road on which I was travelling. In it, Scott Peck compared the pleasurable effort-less experience of 'falling in love', with the hard work of effort-full love – call it 'standing in love' if you will.

After saying that love is too large, too deep ever to be truly understood or measured or limited within the framework of words, he presumes to give a single definition of love. "Love" – he said – "is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own, or another's spiritual growth."

I realized I had been willing to do that – although I would not have described it then as such – when I decided to become a mother. I was very young, and ignorant in many ways, but I was aware that the experience of falling in love with this amazing new being was going to lead to a lot of hard work. And I am incredibly thankful that I experienced more joy than sorrow in raising children, for it made the work easier.

At least until the teen-age years. I must admit that there were times when the willingness to extend myself for my child's growth – much less my own – was completely forgotten when confronting the surly countenance of a rebellious teenager.

But there was one time in my life when I was painfully conscious that I was extending myself – deciding to love in the best sense.

Toward the end of my marriage – a marriage marked by calmness and civility, anger erupted between my spouse and me. Unbeknownst to us, two of our children had come to the kitchen door and witnessed our angry words and actions. They burst into tears and ran. I ran after them, catching up with them on the stairs. I sat with my arms around them and we wept. My husband had come to the bottom of the stairs. He stood there quietly for a few minutes and then turned to go. In that moment I knew I could turn these children against their father – and a part of me wanted to. But in the hardest thing I have ever done in my life, I pushed my youngest and most hurting child toward her father and said – 'Stay – they are your children too'.

This experience woke both of us up to the realization that our children were more important than our differences. So with the help of my minister we wrote a covenant committing ourselves to obtaining a divorce in the most loving way possible -- and to trying our damndest to injure them as little as possible.

It wasn't easy, there were tough times -- but we must have done a good-enough job. For we became a modern day version of the extended family -- able to come together to celebrate the various milestones of family life.

And for the past few summers we have gathered for a week on Sebago Lake – all the family – including my former spouse, and his wife, who has become my friend. There is a gentle kind of rapture in sitting peacefully in the summer sun while listening to our children recalling their childhood and watching our 8 grand-children play together.

Like Viola, I find that the ruin in my life has brought me to a new world – a world full of rapture – one in which I have poetry, and adventure, and love – love above all. Love for the amazing journey I am on, love for my fellow travelers, and love for the great mystery of life itself.

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### **Ode to a Blueberry Field** – by Erica Bartlett

My dreams of you  
are sweet and urgent,  
pulling me imperatively awake,  
though the sun is barely risen.  
Thinking of you  
I cannot return to sleep,  
instead jumping in my car,  
driving to see you,  
filled with eagerness and delight  
but also slight hesitance.  
Can you possibly be as wonderful  
as I remember?  
It has been a year  
since last I saw you;  
surely my dreams have transformed you,  
made you out to be more than you are,  
for nothing real can be so perfect.  
And so I am steeled for disappointment  
as I turn down your road –  
only to find you  
exactly as I imagined,  
and I fall in love  
as if for the first time.  
As I settle in,  
you make me feel like royalty,  
surrounding me with abundance  
on all sides,  
and I find that,  
though I have told myself  
my visit will be brief,  
as soon as I lay eyes on you  
I know I will linger.

You are like an addiction –  
once in your presence  
I want to stay  
just a little longer,  
a few more minutes,  
until the moments become an hour,  
and still,  
I do not want to leave,  
though it is painful to remain,  
knowing that soon you might be gone.  
Is it folly, then, for me to love you?  
Perhaps,  
but then is not all love  
evanescent,  
a firefly's flash of brightness  
before winking out?  
And so  
I will not let your imminent departure  
keep me from visiting  
as long and often as I may.  
I will cherish you  
while you are still here,  
imbibe as much of your sweetness  
as I am able,  
stain my fingers  
with the juice of your offerings.  
I will store up these memories  
so that when I am old,  
I can dream of you still,  
O blueberry field,  
awake with a smile  
and your sweetness on my tongue,  
and delight in the joys  
I once knew.