

Living With An Open Heart

Unitarian Universalist Church of Winchendon

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We are an opened hearted, loving people. In fact, if our physical heart was really like our emotional heart we would all be rushing in to have heart surgery to close up those holes! But instead, the more open our seat of emotions, the more we thrive. Having an open heart is not easy, but it is what we are called to do and to be. I am grateful to be in community with all of you, women and men, adults and children. This is the church of the open mind, loving heart, helping hands and caring community.

Today we are celebrating one of the most popular holidays of the year. Yet most of what Valentines Day has become has so little to do with the kind of open hearts that we have already honored this morning. Mostly, Valentines Day has become a day when people are lulled into limiting our concept of love by simply making frilly Valentines, by buying lingerie, roses, diamonds, new cars and every other luxury that the consumer world wants us to purchase, in the name of love.

In many ways the industry has us in its powerful hands because who does not want to celebrate love? Who does not want to delight in

love? Who doesn't want to be told "I love you" at least once a year?
Nobody!

Someone once complained to me that preachers only preach about love. He said it is just love, love, and more love. Even my own mother agrees with this assessment of preaching. She told me once that she goes to Mass every Sunday because it is important to her to celebrate the sacrament but by the time the priest gets up to give his homily she knows exactly what he is going to say. "Love, Love, Love." So maybe the sellers of Valentines and chocolates and diamond bracelets are just tapping into the same thing that we preachers are tapping into; love, love, love. Only we preach the message every week.

Of course there is more to life than love. But not much more, and it all circles back round again to love in its many faces. Love is such a powerful emotion that just the word conjures up a myriad of images for everyone who hears it. Some of us think about the love between parents and children. Some go directly to romantic love between men and women or women and women or men and men. For other people just the word love brings forth the idea of God itself as Love. And so it is no wonder that we spend so much of our energy and our words, and our Valentines Day money, in trying to grasp on to this elusive and encompassing thing, we call love.

In our opening words, the poet Mary Oliver talked about love. She said “From the complications of loving you I think there is no end or return. No answer, no coming out of it. Which is the only way to love, isn’t it? This isn’t a playground; this is earth, our heaven, for a while.” We have no accurate answers to our questions about love, no coming out of our desire for love and no end to our joy and pain in loving. We will never see clearly what love really is and why it is that human beings are so drawn to fall right into it, time after time.

In one way or another most of us do fall into love, over and over again; sometimes to our delight and sometimes to our grief. From the smallest child to the eldest man or woman we hope to love every day of our lives. Valentines Day is just a day in which we flaunt our hopes about love but every day we love, and lose, and love and lose again. That is the nature of love.

In the Buddhist tradition we learn about the kind of love which the Buddha calls “Boundless Goodwill.” The prayer, the Metta Sutra is a Valentine about loving the entire cosmos and everyone in it. “Even as a mother watches over her child, so with boundless mind should one cherish all living beings; radiating friendliness over the whole world, above, below, and all around without limit.” As in our story about the baby bear and the mother bear, nothing can take away this kind of deep love.

To me, the amazing thing is that most of us love this way every day. We stretch our hearts and our minds and our souls so wide that we try to cherish all living beings over the whole world. The only problem is that most often this kind of loving hurts. Imagine your emotional heart, your place of loving, growing bigger and bigger, filling up like a helium balloon, flying higher and wider until it covers the earth, and then, because this always happens, the balloon, your heart, bursts. All that love then spills over the earth. And often, it hurts.

I know that all of us adults and many children have already experienced this kind of love. The love that cracks open, rips open, and breaks your heart into pieces because the love is too big to handle. That is the kind of love that the Buddha was talking about when he said that we cultivate boundless goodwill like a mother watching over her child. This is the kind of love that my nephew Marty experienced when he was 9 years old on September 11th 2001. He said to his mother “I think that I am supposed to do something about this. I am just a kid but I really think that it is my job to make things better and I don’t know how.”

Anyone who has watched over a child knows the love that breaks your heart over and over when your child is in danger, or your child is just sleeping and you are so filled with love and fear and awe that you can hardly breathe. That kind of boundless love for something we can hold but cannot control. Like the love of a mother or a father, or a grandparent for a child; the love that can hurt.

This is the kind of love that we feel when we hear about large scale tragedies in the world, like the earthquake in Haiti. When we listen, really listen, to the reports about horrific events, our hearts crack open and that love spills out and it hurts. And we know that we are not in control. And we wonder what if anything, we can do with our boundless love. Should we put up steel walls around us so that we do not feel this kind of love?

This kind of open hearted living is perhaps the greatest kind of love of all; excruciating, boundless compassion. But how, how can we, fragile human beings, children and adults, how can we live this way and stay fresh and joyful and willing to keep on loving when we are called into a life of boundless compassion?

One of the hardest tasks of loving the world is caring for our own hearts. Every religion teaches ways of caring for our hearts. The Buddha recognized this and meditation as a kind of heart medicine. He understood that we cannot care for the world unless we love not only the parts of ourselves that we like, but the parts that we usually hide or are ashamed of; our failing and our faults. And we all have plenty of those!

The Buddha said that loving kindness toward all beings starts with finding how to compassionately stay with ourselves. The Buddhist teacher Pema Chodron calls it “unlimited friendliness toward ourselves.” She said that this unlimited friendliness toward ourselves is a way that we humans can practice “trusting that we have what it takes to know

ourselves thoroughly and completely without feeling hopeless, without turning against ourselves because of what we see.” She says that while we are facing the tragedies of the world we must face and love and stay with all aspects of our own humanity.

The Buddha taught meditation; focusing on your breathe, going in and going out, not pushing away our own broken places, our own failings and faults, but just letting them be. Breathing in all that is, and breathing out and letting it go. It is a way of practicing trusting ourselves, our bodies, our breath and our heart, without turning against ourselves. This practice of meditation is one way of caring for our own hearts so that when we are faced with troubles in the world we can take in what we can because we are already living with a heart that has become much less critical and rejecting of ourselves.

Another way of taking care of your heart is monitoring the kind and amount of images you watch. If the television keeps giving images of crashing buildings and crying babies and dying people, it may be time to turn off the television. Not turn off your heart or your mind, but turn off the repetitive pictures so that you can keep open enough to find small or larger ways, to offer what service we can. To love the world with an open heart we do not have to protect our hearts by erecting steel barriers around us and refusing to engage but it does mean that we need to find more ways to strengthen our hearts, to solder our broken places with

caring so that when our hearts stretch again for someone they will be flexible and ready to open.

We are a loving people, a gentle loving people and our hearts are wide open. This is a good and beautiful thing. A heart, our seat of emotion, is a precious part of our spiritual makeup. Everyday, not just on Valentines Day, the heart deserves to be recognized and strengthened. To live with an open heart is our calling. However you do it, through meditation or prayer, through talking or acting, please do not neglect to care for your heart. Love is the greatest gift that we humans have to offer and to receive. To love the world, care for your heart.

Sources

Mary Oliver “A Pretty Song” from Thirst

“Unlimited Friendliness” by Pema Chodran in Tricycle Magazine winter 2009