

Love is at the Center
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I intended to give this talk as part of the adult religious education I have been facilitating about the new UU values statement that replaces our 7 Principles. Since Love occupies a central position in the new system, I decided it is a worthy topic for a worship service. I also think that Love is related to our December theme of “presence.” When we give presence, we are giving our Love.

In centering on Love, UUs reflect our Judeo-Christian heritage. While many UUs, perhaps most, don't believe in a personal God, I think it is fair to say all or nearly all of us, believe in Love as at least an ethical value, and perhaps a theology and belief about the nature of the universe and of life. Considering the importance that Love has always played in our tradition (no matter how much our tradition has changed over the past two thousand years or more) it is strange to realize that the word Love does not appear in the 7 Principles! There were several reasons for revising our 7 Principles but bringing Love back into focus is an all important one, don't you think?

When I spoke at the beginning of this month, I talked about how being fully present alters our consciousness to the extent that we merge with who or what we are attending to, and we are transformed by that union. That kind of complete presence is Love, as I stated. When Rev. Roger Butts visited with us earlier this month his message for our current time, was to check in with ourselves; To ask, how is it with my heart, how is it with my soul? In my understanding these questions are about self-love. The Article II Commission was seeking to revise UU values from being too self-focused and to making them more explicitly community focused. While I appreciate this emphasis, I also appreciate what Rev. Butts told us. One cannot state too frequently that we will be unable to do the work of helping to tear down systems of oppression and corruption, or promote equity and justice, or help to save the environment, if we are not caring for our own hearts and souls. Shannon delighted us in her presentation about being “spellbound” by the beauty of winter and allowing ourselves to feel joy and comfort even as we are mindful of the brokenness of the world.

As I have been thinking about the change from 7 Principles to 7 Values what has seemed most striking is the visual, with Love occupying the central position in the arrangement. Even if the word was overlooked in our 7 Principles, we UUs have been saying for over 20 years that we “stand on the side of love.” In the history of both the Universalist and Unitarian traditions, Love has been central. Universalists rejected the idea that “God the father” intended for Jesus to die on the cross to save humanity. Instead, they saw Jesus as a teacher of Love, here in this life. Early Universalist leader Hosea Ballou said, “Love and life are the happiness of the soul.” Unitarians of the nineteenth century taught that Love was a guiding spiritual value. The nineteenth century Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing taught that we humans are intended to model ourselves after a loving God, to become ever more loving persons.

That Love is the most important value for UUs, was affirmed by an overwhelming vote at GA 2023. It is worth asking what this means exactly and what the focus on Love requires of us? Many congregations use this quotation for their chalice lighting: *“Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law; to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.”* What does this really mean?

It seems that the Commission tasked with revamping the 7 Principles and placing Love at the pistil of a flower, or the nucleus of an atom, was inviting questions for us more than providing answers. That seems different than the way the 7 Principles were presented, as if nothing more needed to be said. But we UUs have always been questioners. We generally don't take other people's words for granted when it comes to matters of belief. Many of us left other faith traditions because we wanted to make up our own minds about what to believe and practice. Ambiguity around the meaning of Love is a good thing, because it encourages us to find our own individual meaning.

While UUs have always been known for our advocacy, social action, and justice seeking, one could ask what motivates this? What is it that inspires us to act? The answer surely is that we believe in Love as our most important ethical and theological value. If we believe in the interconnected web which includes all life and the entire universe, if we believe in promoting justice, equity and pluralism, if we believe in generosity then we surely believe in Love. This is the thinking, in part, that led the Article II Commission to retool our 7 Principles.

Here is our UUA Article II Commission statement on Love which was used for the Chalice Lighting this morning:

We draw from our heritages of freedom, reason, hope, and courage, building on the foundation of Love. Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love.

Again, what exactly do we mean when we say that Love is the most important shared value for UUs? Surely it includes that our communities are to be places of belonging. A survey done here several years ago found that being a part of a community of like-minded people was the most important reason given for joining our fellowship. And in a similar vein, Love must include the fact that we are welcoming of people who might be targets of discrimination because of gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, skin color, or other qualities that might characterize them as a minority. Thus, equity, pluralism and justice are values in our new “shared values” list. In fact, all 6 of the values that surround the central value of Love are meant to convey that each of the other 6 values is informed by Love.

The twentieth century liberal theologian Paul Tillich coined the term, “Ultimate Concern,” as an alternative to the word “God.” What he gave the world with this term was a means for

people who rejected the conventional concept of a personal deity, like a “father in heaven” an alternative. Ultimate concern is the focus on a value that was the most important as a spiritual guide to living, or as those in AA would call it a “higher power.” Tillich asked us to reflect on what was of ultimate concern to each of us. I think the new UU Values statement, by placing Love at the center and informing the other 6 values of pluralism, equity, generosity, justice, transformation, and interdependence, was claiming Love as the ultimate concern of UUs. For many in our movement, Love is a more meaningful and perhaps more inclusive guidepost than “God.” When others ask what do UUs believe we can say, “We believe in Love.”

A UU Hannukah candle lighting service describes the importance of Love this way:

Without Love our lives would dissolve into nightmares of violence and hatred, competition and selfishness. Love is at the center of everything that is good and worthwhile. Only when we are able to Love and be Loved can we find the deepest meaning of human life.

Martin Luther King said, “Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.” If King were alive today, I think he would approve of our new values statement.

During the adult religious education sessions we have had so far on the new values, it seemed to me that the more the discussion among us continued, the more a shared meaning seemed to emerge about each value we addressed on a given Sunday. We seemed to reach agreement that whatever the value under discussion, be it “interdependence,” “pluralism,” “justice,” and so on, deserved a place in the values statement, even as we had differing views as to what each value meant to us.

Our UUA has recently published an e-book of short essays edited by President Sofia Betancourt, with the title, *Love at the Center*, to shed light and to spark conversation about our new values statement. As I read the various essays in the book, it became clearer to me that there is a rich diversity of understanding about Love as a central theology and overarching value and practice. What I am going to do with the remainder of my time this morning, is to share some of my favorite highlights from the book. Some writers emphasized Love as a feeling of care and concern. Some regarded it as an ethical belief and guide to practice. Some regarded Love as a substitute for the word “God,” and a universal force, present in all things. Finally, some expressed that Love is made real in the justice, equity, and pluralism work that we do. We humans are the promoters of Love in the world, it is proclaimed. Most writers in the book emphasized more than one of these aspects. As you listen to these summaries pick out which meanings of Love speak to you the most.

Past UUA President Sinkford was the essayist who most clearly posed more questions than provided answers about Love. He asked, can the new values statement in addition to

affirming what already defines our UU theology, also encourage us to fight new battles for human rights? Can it be more than a consensus of what has been achieved to a challenge of what we can be as a movement? Sinkford said, “Love requires effort; it is not a condition but rather a decision to act. Love is the least worst way to talk about a power and mystery,” that transcends our individual lives.” Sinkford asks, does Love have power of its own or does it work through us? Would placing Love at the center allow us to claim it as our shared vision? Is placing Love at the center an act of faith? Is it an aspiration rather than a current reality? Ultimately, he asks, “...can we experience and find joy in a Love that holds us, and helps us live as we want, even in a world that is demonstrably indifferent to suffering?” Such questions are very thought provoking and challenging.

Rev. Juniper Meadows defines Love as the human desire and need to be “held” by a family or a community. For her, Love is at least in part, a feeling. I quote, “What is it but Love that wakes our hearts at the sight of a newborn child, to appreciate a sunrise, to feel gratitude for all that we have been given?” Meadows also defined Love as, “the bond between self and ultimate reality.” I think she is saying Love is an emotion we can have about a universal presence. It is only through relationships, be they with people or ultimate reality, that we determine our individual identities. She proclaims and I quote, “Love is at the center of who we are [as human beings] ... Love is the spirit of all that we are, all that we do, all that we are becoming.... Love calls us back into the crucible of transformation.” Love for Meadows is a powerful source for personal change that can work through us in our relationships, if we allow ourselves to feel its presence and to open to it.

Rev. Adam Robertsmith also focused on the relationships that Love fosters. He said, “Love is the active realization of relation.” Love is the interconnection that exists between and across species that maintains biological “balance and reciprocity,” what we call interdependence. We breathe in oxygen and exhale CO₂. Plants and trees do the opposite. Interdependence is a crucial aspect of human communities as well. Robertsmith also thinks of Love as a sense perception, like seeing or hearing, a way of experiencing. “Love is the very best version of relatedness,” he declares. I think he is also saying that Love is present in species symbiosis, in the interconnection among species.

Executive director of the UUSC, Mary Catherine Morn said, “Love at the center requires that we fearlessly and joyfully embrace the full humanity of each other and of all.” She observes, “that systems of superiority and oppression including patriarchy, oligarchy, racism and others are barriers to loving others across lines of division.” To enable universal human rights, and to dismantle systems superiority and oppression, we need to place Love at the center of our values. Morn asks us to, “Imagine Love as a force that frees us, each and all, to the fullness of our humanity.” She infers also that Love is the power that enables us to become our best selves, to self-actualize. Love nurtures us, so that we can nurture others.

Harvard Divinity School Professor and minister Dan McKanan said, “Love is the spirit of this church” is the covenant recited every Sunday where he serves. Is this Love *agape*, the

unselfish love of the kind Jesus manifested by sacrificing his life? Is it a more of an emotion of we feel for others? Is it a way of acting? Or is it all of these? Is this Love exclusively for the other congregants or does it extend beyond the walls? Are we expecting to only receive Love or are we promising to give it? Universalists of the past proclaimed “God’s Love” or what we might prefer to call “cosmic Love.” Unitarians of the past preached the practice of Love for others in working for social justice. What we mean now when we place Love at the center is that we take the feelings we have for family and friends and strive to apply them towards social justice work. McKanan believes that each of us has always been loved and are therefore “accountable to Love others.” He quotes Clarence Skinner: “The Universalist idea of God is that of a universal, impartial, immanent spirit whose nature is Love. It is the largest thought the world has ever known.” For Universalists, human Love was regarded as the response to the “cosmic Love,” that we all have been given. McKanan is a believer in “process theology” which hold that every part of the universe strives to be in relationship with every other part. Protons, neutrons and electrons interact to form atoms. Life on earth depends on the symbiosis between plants and animals. Planets, stars and galaxies move together. Life on earth is a complex interplay among species. McKanan sees all if this as manifestations of a central source, he is calling Love. McKanan regards Love not as all powerful, but always a natural force humans are inherently part of. We can only help to transform the world with liberating Love if we have first been transformed by that Love. For McKanan, Love is a cosmic, transforming force that becomes an ethical obligation.

Rev. Rebecca Ann Parker, former dean of Star King School of Theology refers to the passage from Deuteronomy describes the Love and protection that helped the Israelites journey across the desert, with the words of Moses before he died, “underneath the everlasting arms.” If the Israelites choose life, they will have a prosperous future. They will be protected under the everlasting arms, or Love. Love is what sustains and protects all people as it did the Israelites. When we join in Love, we help to create and sustain what MLK called the Beloved Community. Such Love builds on the inheritance of our ancestors. It works here and now finding companions among those who share in appreciation of Love’s blessings, those who embody compassion and kindness, and seek to repair injustices. Our communities are meant to be a refuge from a world of inequities, exploitations and prejudices.

Love indeed is as strong as death. It can and will bear what must be born of difficulty and grief, of tragedy, trauma and threat.... Love does not deny the existence of tragedy or the existence of beauty. Love trusts an ever-larger benevolence and opens itself to ever wider vistas like we see on a summer’s night, out under the stars, when we feel the universe as a quilt stitched with tiny lights wrapping us in a cradle of luminous darkness.

Parker wants us to feel the “everlasting arms,” to see the tiny lights, and extend them to others.

This is the end of my sample of the book. To conclude I summarize some main points: Love has a long history in the life of the soul, and the history of UU. Love is imbedded in human relationships. Love has its counterpart or analogy in the interdependence of creatures and life on earth, on the composition of atoms and among the bodies and energies comprising the universe. Love is the name many UU leaders give to this ubiquitous force. Love is among other things the highest, most important ethical obligation.

I say, it is up to each of us to reach our own understanding of Love as a guiding principle and inspiration for our lives. By placing Love at the center of the new values statement our UUA leaders are asking each of us as individuals and as members of our UU community to place Love at our center. What do you say? How do you want to live with Love as your center? At our center?