

“True Love”
by Rev. Meghan Conrad Cefalu
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As I walk around our town at this time of year, and this week in particular, and see in the storefront windows and along the grocery store aisles hundreds, if not thousands, of roses and hearts, Cupid with his bow, red boxes filled with chocolates, sappy poems scrawled in cursive writing on Hallmark cards beseeching the recipient to “Be my Valentine” I start to wonder what an alien would make of all this.

For fun I sometimes imagine having to explain the curious ways of the human to an extraterrestrial being. Seeing all this Valentine’s Day paraphernalia I imagine the alien creature might ask for an explanation. The easy and obvious answer is that we have a holiday every year to celebrate love, especially romantic love.

But the whole device of “explaining-our-ways-to-an-alien” is designed to invite further exploration; to look objectively at what we take for granted in order to get some perspective. In this case the question begged is the age-old, “What is love, really?”

In my daydream I would then have the task of explaining that there is much more to love than a box of chocolates and a candle-lit dinner. I would emphasize that, in fact, true love between humans takes real and sustained effort. To do it right requires a bit of training and lots of clumsy practice, and a willingness to take serious emotional risks, be vulnerable and let go of one’s pride.

In sharp contrast to all the frilly images of hearts and the saccharine poetry printed on lacy paper, *true* love is tough and earthy, robust and hearty. I like the image UU minister Jan Carlsson-Bull creates when she writes, "Love is knotted and gnarled, like an old tree fighting with the wind, like branches too brittle for their own good, like roots that relentlessly inform how deeply we can trust and how freely we can forgive."

When you get past the beginning parts of a new romantic relationship - with all the breathlessness and the butterflies in your stomach and electricity shooting out your fingers and toes - when you get beyond that the real work of learning to love and to be loved by someone begins.

Amy Bloom says, “Love at first sight is easy to understand; it's when two people have been looking at each other for a lifetime that it becomes a miracle.”

Thich Nhat Hahn wrote a little book called “True Love” that explores the concept of love from a Buddhist perspective. He says that there are four elements of true love.

The first element is *maitri* [MY- tree] which is a Pali word that can be translated as loving kindness or benevolence or unconditional friendliness. Thich Nhat Hahn explains that, “Maitri is not just the desire to make someone happy, to bring joy to a beloved person; it is the *ability* to bring joy and happiness to the person you love.” He makes the point that even if your intention is to love this person, your efforts at love might make him or her suffer.

As I ponder the wise words of the venerable Vietnamese monk my mind turns, of course, to the cartoon character, Pepé le Pew. He was that French skunk who strolled around Paris in the spring in search of l'amour. In each episode he spots what he thinks is a female skunk but which is actually a black cat who somehow got a white stripe painted down her tail. Pepé is immediately smitten and tries to woo the little cat but he is overly aggressive in his passion for her, and does not take no for an answer. The little female cat spends the majority of each episode trying desperately free herself from the clutches of her malodorous, would-be lover.

Pepé le Pew would probably be more successful in love if he were to practice maitri. He does not take the time to really see and understand the object of his desire. If he did he would surely notice that she was not at all interested in him and in fact, not even a skunk.

Even as a child I found the Pepé le Pew cartoons disturbing. If the characters were human it would be a sexual harassment case in every single episode. As I've gotten older I've known some people in relationships like that. People who are convinced they loved someone but in reality they are just fixated and obsessed and don't actually even see the person. It is no longer even about the object of their desire but is rather a self-absorbed narcissism. It can really go into a dark place. The clichéd scenario that we've all seen in TV movies: A man is convinced that he is desperately in love with his ex-girlfriend but has actually become obsessed with her. The ex-girlfriend ends up taking out a restraining order to keep him away from her. His fixation ends up making both of their lives miserable.

My only experience with something like that was a relationship I had years ago with a man named Jeff. It was all very exciting when we first discovered our mutual fondness for one another. In the first few months we hiked and cooked meals and went camping together. As the end of the summer neared I began to realize that something just didn't feel right. He was a nice guy. He was tall and handsome. I couldn't put my finger on it exactly. He was always kind to me, but he responded to me as if I were a different person than I was. And I found I was strangely unmoved by his words of adoration because it felt as if he could have been saying them to anyone. I began to feel lonely even in his presence.

I didn't have the language to explain myself very well at the time that I ended things with Jeff. But looking back I realize that I didn't feel like he really saw me or understood who I was. And because of that all of his gestures of love fell flat.

C.S. Lewis said, "Why love if losing hurts so much? We love to know that we are not alone."

I think people long to be truly known, to be seen and understood by another person. To have yourself reflected back accurately is an essential validation. It is the grounding that helps to support your larger view of how you fit into the world.

And I think that it is only in a loving relationship with another person that we are able to know ourselves fully. A friend or sweetie or a child who loves you will expose parts of yourself that you had become blind to.

So this first element of true love, maitri, is about gaining the ability to bring joy to the person you love by looking deeply in order to truly understand them.

The Buddhists would say that the second element of true love is compassion or *karuna*. And just like with *maitri*, this is not only the *desire* to ease the pain of another person but also the *ability* to do so. Thich Nhat Hahn says that to do this you have to look deeply into another person to understand their suffering and begin to be able to help them.

It can be so painful when someone you love is suffering. I know parents who have told me that if they could have they would have taken the pain of their child's earache a thousand times over just to ease the agony of their little one. Too often there is not much we can do to make things better for a loved one and that just drives us crazy.

When I was a hospital chaplain my friends asked me incredulously what I said at the bedside of a dying patient. They could not begin to imagine coming up with any soothing words for the gathered family members. I told them that the best thing I could ever do is just be there with them, even if I didn't say a word. Our simple presence is often the most soothing thing we can offer. Just simply being willing to witness their sorrow and not turn away or try to make it better is the most supportive thing one can do.

Barbara Kingsolver wrote, "The friend who holds your hand and says the wrong thing is made of dearer stuff than the one who stays away."

It takes a whole lot of courage to simply remain present in the face of suffering. Every fiber of our being wants to do something or say something or just get away from the anguish of it all.

This element of true love, compassion, asks us to take an honest look inward and recognize that it is usually our own discomfort we are trying to avoid. And when we take the emphasis off ourselves, when we stop worrying about saying and doing the right thing, and we focus on the other person, the one who is suffering, that is when we begin to be able to help them.

Karuna asks that we stay present and look deeply through the suffering so that our loved one knows we see them and we are with them even in their pain.

The third element of true love is joy, or *mudita*. It is translated as "rejoicing in another's joy" or "the pleasure that comes from delighting in another person's well-being rather than begrudging it". Thich Nhat Hahn says that, "If there is no joy in your love it is not true love."

I knew a woman once who helped me understand this concept the hard way. Angelica was smart and pretty and vivacious, and was extremely successful and everyone who met her liked her right away. I did too. We became friends. One day she called me and asked if we could have a talk. She told me that I had said a few things lately that had made her feel bad. I was totally unaware that my offhand comments had hurt her feelings. At first I felt defensive. But I told her that I was sorry and that I would think carefully about why I had said them.

Later in a meditation session I was able to get really honest with myself and realized that Angelica was *so* smart and pretty and vivacious that I was feeling diminished by her. In my mind her every success served to highlight my inadequacies. The remarks I had said were snide little comments that in the moment I tried to pass off as jokes but had really spoken the truth of my own insecurity.

When I realized this I felt bad. I was a horrible person. What kind of friend was I that I couldn't just be happy for Angelica in all her success? My feelings of inadequacy were not even about her, they were about me.

Rumi said, "Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it."

I had come up against a barrier within myself. I am grateful to this day for Angelica's willingness to share her hurt feelings with me. It was a real gift she gave me. I know it took courage on her part to even bring it up when she could have just written me off. She helped me to discover that I was limiting my own experience of joy by my unwillingness to simply delight in the well-being of someone I cared about.

The forth element of true love is called *upeksha* which means equanimity or freedom. Other translations are, "The ease that comes from seeing the bigger picture." to "see with patience" or to "see with understanding".

Thich Nhat Hahn says that "when you love you bring freedom to the person you love. You must love in such a way that the person you love feels free, not only on the outside but on the inside as well."

I think of it as a grandmotherly type of love. The grandmother clearly loves her grandchildren but, thanks to her experience with her own children, is less likely to be caught up in the drama of her grandchildren's lives.

It is not easy to do. Usually we want to change our beloveds, even in just some little ways, to make them better. If only he would pick up after himself more. If only she would fill the gas tank before she comes home.

Practicing *upeksha* means we allow the ones we love to truly be themselves. *Upeksha* means we see them, including all their faults and failings, with the eyes of understanding. And this understanding gives our loved ones the breathing room they need to feel free.

As we approach Valentine's Day let us keep in mind that true love is not for sissies. It takes effort and self discovery. To truly love someone entails a willingness to look inward, into your own heart and mind to see all the ugly stuff you are ashamed of and not turn away. You also must look outward and be willing to see the ugly stuff in your beloved and not turn away. As hard as it can be, I know for certain that all this inner work we put ourselves through for true love makes us better people; better members of our communities.

I use the word *love* in my sermons a lot. I believe it is the core of what my ministry is about. I think the greatest thing we will ever learn is just to love and be to be loved in return. It is our highest calling, the supreme task in our lifetimes and the most important legacy we can leave our children and grandchildren.

We can practice true love in our partnerships and our friendships but we can also practice the elements right here in this religious community with one another. One of the main differences between a spiritual community and any other organization is that here we have the vague notion that we are supposed to love everyone all the time. It can be alarming or unsettling when we first discover that someone here is not a perfect manifestation of lovingkindness. This is supposed to be a church, after all!

Perhaps you remember your earliest disillusionment years ago. If not, let me be the first to tell you, all of us here are still learning and we goof up and make mistakes and might hurt your feelings at some point. But we are also striving to improve.

Most Unitarian Universalist congregations go through a process together by which they create a written covenant that states clearly how they aim to be with one another. Some agreement about intentions to stay rooted in love in their interactions with one another and what to do when there are disagreements.

It just happens that immediately following this service we are holding our first Right Relations covenant meeting. I hope all of you who can will stay because the process of creating this document is almost more important than the finished work. It may be true that the process itself can be messy and there might be some conflict, but this is the precious work of love, my friends. And what could really be more important?

In closing, let us hear words again from Carter Heyward. She said, "Love is a choice -- not simply, or necessarily, a rational choice, but rather a willingness to be present to others without pretense or guile. Love is a conversion to humanity -- a willingness to participate with others in the healing of a broken world and broken lives."

May it be so in our lives.

Amen. Blessed be.