

The Character of Love
A Sermon by Elizabeth Marsh, Intern Minister
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A preacher in Texas says that “Love is something you do, not something you feel.” Other wise people I know say it this way: that love is a verb. Love is a deed. All of these good folks are getting at the idea that love is more, much more, than a feeling. Love is something we do, for ourselves and for other people.

My mother, like many mothers, shows her love through actions. When I was growing up, the financial resources were not very plentiful in my family; my father was laid off from his industrial job in a tool manufacturing plant and afterward, he experienced years of impossibility finding work. So money was often tight to non-existent. My mother, despite all of this, wanted her children to grow up as creative, thoughtful people. One summer, maybe when I was 10 and my brother was 8, she found out that the local art museum provided scholarships for families to attend summer classes taught by professional artists from our city. Eagerly she signed us up, and for two weeks one summer, my mother, brother and I rode our bicycles the two miles along the off-street paths and city sidewalks, from our neighborhood to the Art Institute downtown.

I have very fond memories of this class. I remember painting a lot of cardboard in their bright, high-ceilinged studios. My mother tells me that the focus of the class was for families to open our imaginations by re-using corrugated cardboard as our canvas. I recall that we cut, glued, folded, and painted old boxes into picture frames, magnets, knick knacks, and all manner of little objects that have long since deteriorated. But the crowning glory of the class was when each family was given a refrigerator box along with the instructions to go wild.

After sketching out idea after idea, my mother, brother and I decided we would tip the box down on its long edge, so it was lying along the ground rather than standing tall.

We would attach a smaller box to the front, cut a door and some windows on the long side of the box and turn it into our very own cardboard school bus. This is what we did, though we did not simply paint it yellow and call it a day. We decided that we would paint it all crazy colors, with peace signs, flowers, butterflies, and our names, and call it our hippie bus. That is exactly what we did. I can still remember crawling on the floor to get the paint just where I wanted it to be. At the end of that two week summer class, I'm not sure how we got our hippie bus from the art classroom to our back yard considering we were on our bicycles. But I do know how much fun my brother and I had that summer with the neighborhood kids climbing in and out and taking make-believe trips in our colorful cardboard bus.

What about that story is love in action? If love is a deed more than a feeling, what about that story demonstrates the character of love?

The idea about love that I see in this story comes from today's reading, by cultural critic bell hooks. She writes that love is "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth." When I think about my mother with this in mind, I can understand that seeking out scholarships for us to attend this art class was an act of love. Applying for scholarships was not easy for my mother, a very proud woman. Likewise, riding a bicycle was not her favorite activity, but she did both of these things so her two children could nurture their young spirits. More than likely, her own spirit was nurtured by the chance to play and create with her children at the art museum for two whole weeks. My mother extended herself not only by stretching her own comfort zone, but she extended herself by offering what she could of her knowledge and abilities so that my brother and I could learn and grow.

Nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth... by invoking the word "spirit," this idea of love probably has something to do with our connection to the ultimate, the intimate, that presence that is larger than ourselves. In another way, nurturing someone's spiritual growth can also mean paying attention to that inner part of us that thrives with encouragement and care yet can diminish with burdens too heavy to bear

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alone for long. Like the song that the choir sang for our prelude, the spirit in each of us, indeed the life in us, can be measured in love; measured with the kinds of love it has given and received.

Perhaps you've heard of the Unitarian Universalist Association's new public witness campaign called Standing on the Side of Love. This name and the intention of the campaign are strong statements on the character of what love is. For starters, the first word, "standing" reminds me of that old country song "Stand By Your Man"—or in our case, "Stand By Your Partner." In this sense, to stand by or to stand on the side of something or someone expresses a commitment, a devotion. On the side of love implies that there are other choices: we could stand on the side of fear, hate, or indifference, apathy or even a lukewarm form of "like." But no, this public witness campaign expresses a firm commitment to choose the side of love.

The Standing on the Side of Love message seeks to harness the power of love to stop oppression, exclusion, and violence of all kinds. When Unitarian Universalists show up to support immigration court cases, or to offer kindness to a family that just experienced a religious hate crime, this is where we are speaking and acting from a place of love-- we are offering what we are to nurture the growth and flourishing of another person's spirit. The Standing on the Side of Love message a wide circle of attention toward many cases where love is needed. Because today we celebrate National Coming Out Day, and many of us will be participating this afternoon in the National March for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Equality, because we will be marching to oppose oppression and to affirm inclusion, the Standing on the Side of Love message relates to us today, too.

I'll tell you a story of the devastating effect that oppression can have on love. Perhaps some of you have heard the sad story out of Florida, of a lesbian woman struggling to fight discrimination she faced when her partner was hospitalized. Janice Langbehn's partner of 18 years, Lisa Pond, suffered a brain aneurysm in February 2007, shortly before they were to sail with their three children on a Caribbean cruise. At the Marsh 3

Florida hospital her partner was taken to, Janice Langbehn reports that a social worker and doctors would not let her visit her partner. The social worker allegedly stated that Janice could not visit Lisa because Florida is "an anti-gay state." So for eight hours, Janice was not allowed to visit her partner. Only after Lisa died was Janice validated as the spouse. Only then were Janice and the couple's children allowed to come near.

Janice Langbehn and Lisa Pond were residents of Washington State, had health insurance in that state, and the children were legally adopted by both women in that state. Janice presented hospital staff with a Living Will and Advanced Directive, showing that she was to make Pond's medical decisions if her partner were unable to do so. All of this was to no avail; the hospital staff stood in her way. Later, Janice Langbehn sued the hospital for discrimination but last week, the case was thrown out by the federal court in Miami without any attention to the matter.

Love is "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth." The hospital certainly did not do this. Exclusion and oppression, perhaps even fear and misunderstanding, seem to have been the matter of the day in that Miami hospital. This is exactly the kind of story that reminds us how important is our Unitarian Universalist commitment to compassion, justice, wholeness, and love.

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Rockville is an official UUA Welcoming Congregation. This is the term used to designate a congregation that has gone through a process of discernment and discussion to ascertain whether it is ready to include bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgender persons in all levels of its congregational life. This congregation has done the work necessary for the designation as a Welcoming Congregation. What's more, for a number of years, the congregation has sponsored the Rainbow Youth Alliance, a support group for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning teens and their allies. What a critical offering of this congregation's resources to nurture the spiritual growth of the youth who come here twice a month to the Rainbow Youth Alliance. For some of the youth, this might be the only place they

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can feel safe. What important work. I give my thanks to this congregation for committing itself in many ways to the inclusion of LGBT people's experiences, needs, and presence.

Such a thing can still be rare for religious institutions to do. For example, you may be aware of the recent news about the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America. The ELCA is the most progressive of the American Lutheran churches, and in August it approved a statement regarding church leadership and same-gender relationships. The statement gives individual ELCA churches the ability to decide whether it should call as their clergy gay and lesbian pastors who are in committed, same-sex relationships. Before this statement was made, official church policy was to allow congregations to call only celibate lesbians and gay men as pastors. As a consequence, many lesbian and gay clergy felt a need to keep themselves and their partnerships closeted. Because of the statement made in August, however, that situation has changed, and an ELCA pastor described it this way: "ELCA congregations who believe God is calling them to welcome gay and lesbian couples, individuals and their families into fullness of life and fullness of ministry, are no longer barred from doing so."

It is important to recognize when religious communities make these steps toward justice, toward nurturing the spiritual growth of excluded members of their communities. Still, the road will not be easy for ELCA congregations. Some members have left their churches or have left the ELCA altogether; a church split has been threatened. But with expressions of inclusion such as the one the ELCA made, along with the proactive choices I mentioned earlier that this Unitarian Universalist congregation has made... through these expressions of inclusion, we get more and more glimpses into the character of love.

I wonder if you're thinking what I'm thinking, though: what took the most progressive Lutheran church in America so long to allow gay and lesbian pastors in committed relationships to serve their churches? This is a simple justice issue, how can everyone be so conflicted about it? We Unitarian Universalists have been open-minded

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and committed to our gay and lesbian clergy for years.

Then I take a step back and remember, humbly, how difficult it can be to love, especially when to love means that I may be asked to change my mind and heart on something that is very precious to me. I remember stories of how difficult it was in our UU past for gay and lesbian clergy to be called to our pulpits; I know women ministers who could tell us stories about when it was near impossible for women in general to be called as UU ministers. We have not always been as inclusive and as welcoming as we are now. And, frankly, we still have work to do: I know transgender Unitarian Universalist ministers who have difficulty finding jobs right now because the congregations say they're not ready to be served by a transgender minister. Later today, some of us will be marching for LGBT equality because equality does not yet exist. The lesbian woman in Florida encountered a hospital that refused to give love. Change takes time, yet the theological imperative still exists to press forward for change, when that change requires us to love more and to love better.

Sometimes it feels difficult for us to act in a loving, inclusive way. Love is not easy; to love demands effort. Yet to love actually nurtures the giver, too. When we love, we are not only changing another person's life for the better, we too are affected. When we love, our spiritual lives grow and are nurtured, too. Our hearts are stretched and, like a balloon, have a harder time going back to their original, smaller shape. Have you noticed that when a balloon is first blown up and then the air is let out, it becomes easier to blow the balloon up later? Perhaps our hearts are like that, too: when we are stretched to love, afterward it becomes easier to love again and again.

Love is an action, a verb, a deed. Love as an action shows itself in many forms. I'm lucky to have had a mother who loved me and my siblings in the way she did. She offered us the chance to play and create when she registered our family for that creative cardboard art class—and she didn't just send my brother and me off to class. She participated in class with us. She stood by us, committed to actively participating with my brother and me as we grew our souls. She stands by me now, encouraging my

ministry.

Likewise, how many countless mothers love their children by standing by them when the child comes out of the closet? There are mothers and fathers in this very congregation who have committed to nurture their young and grown children's truth about their sexual orientation or gender identity. There are parents and friends who join national groups such as PFLAG, or Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, or other similar support or advocacy groups. Love as an action shows itself in many forms, and I hope with all of my heart that each of us experiences acts of love from one another, the groups we're involved in, and ourselves on a daily basis.

For those of us who love by including rather than excluding... for those of us for whom LGBT equality, or immigrant rights, or religious and cultural pluralism, are easy no-brainers... our role then becomes to come out. To come out on the side of love; to come out and march for equality; to come out and provide a space for youth to feel safe in their sexuality; to come out and be a religious community where all people—clergy, singles, couples, and families—can feel included.

And what luck for us—today, as I said before is, National Coming Out Day. Today is the day when LGBT folks are encouraged to come out of the proverbial closet to themselves and their families. I'd also like to think of it as a day when friends, allies, and everyone already out of the closet can make our support known. The act of "coming out" never really ends; it's more of turning point in the life-long process of becoming ourselves—as individuals and as a religious community. To come out and stand for love is itself an act of love. So, Happy National Coming Out Day, everyone! Let us continue and continue to come out on the side of love.

Blessed be, and Amen.