

Love at the Center

Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
September 15, 2024

Reflection on the Theme by Lacey Stokes

There are a lot of things I delight in. I took Kipling quite seriously when he wrote “delight in the little things.” I could tell you about the thousands of small moments that bring me delight throughout my day, from watching the steam rise gracefully out of my favorite mug as I sip my morning coffee, to the sound of my child laughing, to feeling the warmth of the sun on my shoulders, to a beautiful song and a glass of red wine as I sing and dance around my kitchen cooking dinner for people I love. There is so much delight in my life and I’ve made it a point to stop and notice all those small things that fill my heart to overflowing.

I’m a VERY lucky woman.

I wasn’t always. Fifteen years ago, I thought my life was destined to be one of misery. From the outside it looked like a good life. I had the husband, the kids, the house, I got to be a stay at home mom, I volunteered at the school and was the PTA president. I think most people who knew me at that point would have imagined my life was a happy one. They would have been very, very wrong. The truth is, I was barely surviving. My marriage was desperately unhappy and my husband was angry and abusive behind closed doors. The one and only time I had tried to leave, the church we attended wouldn’t believe me about the abuse we were experiencing. Since they hadn’t seen it, it couldn’t be real, right? After all, he was a godly, Christian man. Our church didn’t give much credence to women and certainly not women who wanted to defy god and get, shudder, divorced.

It took me several more years to actually leave. I started a new journal when I told him I was leaving. I began with a list of who I wanted to be. A woman who didn’t need a man. A woman who didn’t yell at her children. A woman who wasn’t afraid. I got to the end of the page and I looked back at what I had written and it seemed so absolutely impossible that I wrote across the bottom of the page, “I don’t think my life is salvageable.”

I couldn’t see into the future. I couldn’t see the mornings I would spend visiting with my children and delighting in learning and understanding their hearts more and more. I couldn’t see the peace I would cultivate in our home. I couldn’t see the love I would be so blessed to give and to receive. I couldn’t see how amazingly beautiful my life could become. I didn’t even truly believe it existed out there in the abstract. I left thinking only, well, it can’t get any WORSE!

I took my daughter to see Hozier in concert last week. Opening for him was Allison Russel. If you haven’t listened to her music, I highly recommend you do. She writes lyrics with so much power they took my breath away. While she was on stage, she shared about the abuse she had suffered as a teen. She stood on this stage, beautiful and strong, and said, “If you had told me at 15 I would be here, I wouldn’t have believed you. I didn’t think I would even make it to 18. If things are hard, please know, they get better. Things can always get better.”

I didn’t have those words to give me strength when I thought my life wasn’t salvageable. I wish I did, I wish I could go back and wrap that terrified and despondent woman up in my arms and tell her, “It’s going to get SO MUCH better. You are going to have everything you could possibly dream of wanting.

Your life is going to be EPIC.” Maybe that’s why now I take so much time to notice the delight. I know that every moment I get to live in light and love is a gift. It’s not perfect. It never will be. But oh my goodness gracious. It got so much better. I’m a VERY lucky woman and I am absolutely delighted to get to live the life I have been given.

Love at the Center© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

Delight is our theme this month. It is one variation on the theme of love. We adopted changed bylaws this summer at our General Assembly which include a new way of describing our faith – using values instead of principles, though the values can be found in the previous language of principles that had held us for over 40 years. Who we are hasn’t changed, but how we describe ourselves to a newer audience has. As you heard this morning, it comes with an acronym that some clever person thought of to remember 6 of the values, plus love at the center. JETPIG – we’ll get to all those this year, but we begin with Love at the Center. And it comes with a visual – not the pig visual, but the graphic, that can be turned into a delightful art project.

As worship and chalice circle leaders talked about how to incorporate these value words into our work, we decided to circle back to the word Love three times. We generally have theological themes for nine months out of twelve each year, and the words that JETPIG represents are six, leaving three months to deal with the missing value, love. September is our first treatment of love, and we’ve chosen Delight to describe one aspect of this Love which lies at the center of our faith.

The theme allows me to talk about things that delight me this month, that might also have theological import for you. This morning, having just returned from Romania where I contemplated our international historic roots, I want to share some of our American roots through the lens of my own family. Specifically, our Universalist roots. I was studying our Unitarian roots in Transylvania – and will share more of that next Sunday, but this morning I’ll focus on our Universalist roots in this country.

I am fortunate that my family has letters from the Civil War era. My mom, who is a history buff, first introduced them to me when I had to write a 7th grade history report – I don’t know if it had to be on the Civil War, but I wrote it on that era, using this original material from my own family. Then, I remember transcribing both letters and cassette tape interviews with relatives about this. And I think that hooked me – my delight in history. I am fascinated by what came before that made us who we are now.

And so I want to share my delight in that history with you this morning. I generally tell my own story of being a Unitarian Universalist from the beginning of my dad hearing about Unitarianism in a world religions class at WSU. My parents became Unitarian when they had children. And that makes sense – our Unitarian roots in this country are closely aligned with universities and learning. You’ll find historic Unitarian churches next to universities in this country – such as University Unitarian Church in Seattle located near the University of Washington, or the one I know best - the First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City which is located just below the campus of the University of Utah where I went to school. But the truth is, both my parents are the first to graduate college in their families. Both their fathers went to college but had to drop out because of the Great Depression and never finished. So, my academic and Unitarian roots are only one generation deep.

We come from Midwestern farmer stock before that. This is where the Universalists thrived and evangelized. Their churches are located in remote areas – such as the Universalist Unitarian Church of East Liberty, Michigan located in Clark Lake which, let me tell you, is not easy to find, on rural backroads. I preached there a few times while in Michigan and it was always an adventure to find it. Not in town,

or near any college or university, but out in the fields. And they proudly put Universalist first in their name – the Universalist Unitarian Church of East Liberty. I'm not sure if its in the pulpit or on the wooden rail in front of it, but beautifully carved into the wood, it says "God is Love and Love Never Faileth" They trace their local roots to 1856. So when we talk about Love being in the Center of our Faith and Values, we can credit our Universalist ancestors for carrying that forward.

God is Love. These ancestors were evangelical – they proclaimed the good news that a loving God wouldn't or couldn't condemn his creatures to an eternity of hell. These Christians proclaimed the good news that all are saved, and preached it with a fervor and enthusiasm that rivaled the energy of the Great Awakening. Only they weren't preaching hell-fire and brimstone.

No, while the preachers of the great awakening were threatening fire and brimstone, the universalists were proclaiming the everlasting love of God.

Now, some Christians weren't buying it – such as my great-great uncle, Lemuel Reed who served in the United States Christian Commission during the Civil War, which is the forerunner of the Red Cross– so this would be around what would be the third Great Awakening, he wrote from Kent, Ohio on September 3, 1866:

"...Uncle William's health and also his family's is very good. Mary has joined the Universalists church in town. There came a minister of that denomination here and has kicked up somewhat of a dust by telling people they would be saved and that God is love and cannot punish his creatures and has organized a church, and upon the day of admission of his members he told them that the joining of themselves to his church would not exclude them from the pleasures of the world and what they had been enjoying so long. My opinion is if we live a Christian life and come to judgment and find that the Universalist doctrine is right, why we're all right anyway, but if we live according to the Universalists doctrine and find out Christianity is right then we are certainly in a backfire. So it is profitable to live a Christian life anyway..."

So, the written records in my family reflect a rejection of Universalism, although Mary would have been related to me as well. I just don't have her writings or the reasons she became a universalist while I know why her nephew, Lemuel, rejected it or at least why he said he rejected it.

I would dearly love to know from "what pleasures of the world they had been enjoying so long" from which Lemuel felt a need to abstain...

It doesn't seem from a letter Lemuel wrote July 7th of 1866 that it was alcohol because in that letter, he wrote:

"On the 17th of June Grandfather Cackler was 75 years old. He had all of his children and grandchildren came to his house to dinner who could. I went over, 5 of his children were present, 2 were absent, and 5 were dead. He has 32 grandchildren, 23 are living and 6 were present. They have one great grandchild and it was present. He passed around the wine to all of his guests and then sat down to dinner after which the afternoon was spent in his telling of incidents of his early life which was very interesting indeed. Mrs. Reese came over and declared she could throw him down and both bragged, but did not try it..."

I suppose it is possible that maybe the universalist preacher assured Aunt Mary that wine was okay to drink and Lemuel objected – but not only would that be unusual for the universalists of the day to approve of alcohol consumption, the letter I just quoted doesn't give hint to disapproval on Lemuel's

part. Perhaps the pleasures of the world included card playing and dancing. I just don't know. But if it does, I'm clearly a Universalist.

Lemuel's brother, Frank, was in Iowa and in the union army. Their aunt Ellen – whom we assume to be sister of William in the letter, husband of Mary, was also in Iowa and interviewed for a newspaper article in Eldora Iowa May 9, 1912, a year before her death at age 87. Though we don't think she joined a universalist church, as did their Aunt Mary in Ohio, we do have evidence of her universalist theology. The article is about Mr. and Mrs. Hulbert – their aunt Ellen and her husband, a childless couple who said "that a man should act as he talked" and "where the friendless could find refuges from hunger or cold." The newspaper article reads:

"One colored girl who came to them after having been turned out of doors by southern sympathizers when suffering from lung fever was given the kindest care and consideration and when death claimed her, was buried in the Hulbert lot in the Eldora cemetery. Mrs. Hulbert said that when the angel of death comes to her, she desires that her body be placed alongside her husband and this little black girl, for, in the world beyond the stars, the color line is not drawn."

"In the world beyond the stars, the color line is not drawn."

That is the beauty and power and delight of the universalist message. It is the doorway to liberation for generation after generation of people who have been ill-treated and downtrodden. Abolishing slavery in one generation because in the world beyond the stars, the color line is not drawn, and women's suffrage in the next, because the gender line is not drawn, and subsequent freedom movements, all based on the universalist principle that we are all God's children and a loving god would love her children and treat them fairly. Voting rights act, gay liberation, women's rights, feminism, equal treatment for people with disabilities, elder rights, trans rights – it's all here, in this place, in this church, because we believe that we are all One and Love is central.

How delightful is that theology? It's the good news we can shout from the rooftops! and the heaven we can build here on earth. We know that transformation is possible, that people can change and that the world can change. That with each generation we come closer to creating the beloved community. We are One and Love is central.

Love is the doctrine of this church. That language comes from one of the most popular readings in our hymnal, written in 1933 by Universalist minister L. Griswold Williams. According to Harvard Square library – an online resource of Unitarians and Universalists, "Rev. Williams rode a circuit ministry around Pennsylvania and Ohio before settling into the ministry of the All Souls Universalist Church in Marion, Ohio. During the first World War he earned the suspicion of the FBI and the District Attorney of Marion for speaking out against the mistreatment of persons of German descent."

Love is the doctrine of this church, the quest of truth is its sacrament, and service is its prayer, begins this reading. Love as a doctrine and a decision was so beautifully practiced by my distant relative, Aunt Ellen, who takes in a girl dying of lung fever and buries her in the graveyard set aside for her own family. The girl was "colored" and Aunt Ellen, white, and if you aren't aware of the history in this country of segregated cemeteries, please know this was a radical act.

"To consider ... that love is a decision we make is a profound paradigm shift," writes Jeanne Harrison Nieuwejaar." leading us toward responsibility and to commitment. We decide to love one another not because the other is loveable but because we are loving beings. We love because love is our essence, because we are called to make love real in this world..."

Lacey made love real in her world by, like so many before her, rejecting a life of oppression and violence. Now, years later, she delights in the smaller gifts life has to offer, the ordinary moments which she better appreciates for having lost access to them for a difficult period of time. Now she says, “There is so much delight in my life and I’ve made it a point to stop and notice all those small things that fill my heart to overflowing.” Making ‘a point to stop and notice’ is a decision she makes every day. Love is our essence. Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center. We do the work of living our shared values – those JETPIG values - through the spiritual discipline of Love. We are called to make love real in this world.

One way we make love real is through delight – by noticing what it is that pleases us and appreciating it, building on it, sharing it, proclaiming it.

“With a billion sparkling beings illuminating the sky, is midnight the time of shimmering delight?” Asks Dan Vera in the poem Lacey excerpted for you earlier. Vera also asks:

“And if I feel delight at the twinkling of stars that long burned out in the blue ovens of night, what is the half-life of delight?”

“An east-bound train from Omaha to Denver is traveling at 110 miles an hour and a west-bound train from Denver to Omaha is traveling at 95 miles an hour. They both leave their respective stations at the same time and the distance between Denver and Omaha is 537 miles. How much time will it take the train conductors to feel delight at their meeting?”

“Is desperation jealous of delight?”

“Do the bells at the top of the hill ring with anything but delight?”

Dan Vera poses questions that cause me to wonder about delight and what brings me delight, and to remember to practice delight and love, not because the world is delightful and loveable, but because my essence and yours, the essence of God, if you will, is love itself. God is Love and Love Never Fails. Amen.