

***Love Beyond the Self***  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver  
December 8, 2024

***Welcome to the 90's Club – Asa Reed***

This morning we welcome a new member of the club, Asa Reed. Asa has deep Unitarian Icelandic roots. Her father and uncle were born in Iceland and were raised Unitarian. They immigrated to Seattle where her father met and married an Icelandic woman, Asa's mother. Her brother Baldr was born first, and Asa five years later. Their father died when Asa was 6 and her mother moved them to Port Angeles where she supported the family as a dressmaker.

During WWII, Asa's brother Baldr joined the military and was killed in the South Pacific. Asa's mother received a small pension and used that to send Asa to college. After 4 years, Asa graduated from the University of Washington with a degree in Art History.

In 1950 she married Robert E. Reed, a newspaper reporter from Seattle. They moved to Olympia when he became press secretary to Washington Governor Rosellini. They also followed their UU Icelandic roots by joining The Michael Servetus Fellowship in Vancouver. Their children Ron and Elena were married at UUCV.

She and her husband traveled by sailboat, then RV. After Robert died she continued to travel in her RV as she loved to travel and meet new people. While in Oasis, California she met another artist from whom she learned the "lost wax" and "torch method" of jewelry making. She continued her passion of jewelry creation learning at Clark College. She continues to create jewelry.

And she continues to be a UU.

Asa says that when she first walked in to the Michael Servetus Fellowship (which is the former name of the UU Church of Vancouver) and listened to the sermon, she said "I'm Home".

We will be displaying her photo in our display in the foyer. Barbara has brought the gifts which have become traditional for this ritual - flowers and cookies!

Asa, we are honored to have you among us, grateful for your presence and pleased to know you. We know that you have weathered all manner of challenge and difficulty in getting to this point, and have taken a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction over the years. You have paid the dues and meet the rigorous qualifications. We welcome you to the 90's club!

## ***Love Beyond the Self*© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert**

My theology professor in seminary taught me that theology is not really about God, but rather God is about this “being human.” God is the reflection of our human-ness, that is we depict God as a human-like Parent, or human-like child, but we attribute human traits to this giant unknowable concept of the Mystery on our own journey to figuring out this being human. Rumi says this being human is like a guest house or, rather, Coleman Barks translates Rumi as saying that this *being human is like a guest house where some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor*. Rumi was a 13<sup>th</sup> century Islamic scholar, mystic and poet and Coleman Barks is the American poet who is best known for translating his poetry into English and popularizing it, such as into this David Wilcox song that Allison so beautifully just sang for us. There is a mystery at the center of our universe, whether you call that Mystery *God* or the mystery is this *Being Human*, there are aspects of our lives and our living that we struggle to understand and struggle to change.

Change was our theme in November – transformation, actually. And though the Autumn is a beautiful time to recognize changes all around us, the change that was elected on November 5<sup>th</sup> was shocking and frightening to many of us, though we have seen this before, lived through it before. Though it will be different, it is not quite as curious this time around. The shock of this election only serves to remind us of how much work we have to do to transform our society into the loving, equitable, pluralistic, generous, and just place we deserve. I was going to say “desire” but really, I mean “deserve.” Everyone deserves equity and inclusion and justice and love. We deserve it, but we have work to do to transform our society into that place. *You must ask for what you really want. Don't go back to sleep.* writes Rumi.

There are aspects of our lives and our living that we struggle to understand and struggle to change. Love is one of those mysterious qualities that we know affects us but we struggle to define or capture. This month our theme is *agápē*, one of the Greek definitions of love. I love that Greek has all these different words for love, like the Inuit have for snow (actually, Asa, I learned that there are nearly as many words for snow in Icelandic as in Inuit) but I'm talking about love this month, and the unconditional love of *agápē*. Not the passion of *érōs*, nor the friendship of *philía*, nor self-love of *philautía*, nor the empathy of *storgē*, nor the hospitality of *xenía*, but rather *agápē*.

*Agápē* is often defined as “unconditional, sacrificial love” with what is sacrificed being the “self.” Christians, of course, use this term to describe God's love for his son, Jesus, and Jesus/God's love for humanity – sacrificing his life for the “salvation” of humanity. But rather than focus on the sacrificial part of this kind of love, I'm starting with the unconditional part. Unconditional – in that field *out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing*, or in other translations, *beyond heresy and faith*. That field is a field of non-judgment, where we set aside beliefs and biases, critique and analysis, to just *be*. If you've ever had someone just be with you in that way, without judgment, you know what I'm talking about.

Take a moment to think about someone in your life who loved or loves you with that kind of unconditional and non-judgmental stance.

‘Unconditional positive regard’ is the psychological term we use to describe this kind of love – the love that provides a safe environment for a developing child, but which can be hard to practice in a world that judges us for everything from our physical appearance to our ideas. That's why so many of us pay therapists to work with us, to provide that unconditional positive regard, that our caregivers and teachers could not consistently provide as we were developing...

As we develop, we toggle between the need for acceptance and the need to be authentic. As babies and children, we choose acceptance over authenticity most of the time, so that we can continue to be

cared for in that family. Sometimes our authentic selves are unacceptable to our caregivers and so we submerge the authentic and construct a false self that is acceptable, but it is that false self which can lead us into despair when we lose a sense of identity and purpose later in life.

Being gay in a family that regards homosexuality as an abomination could result in the construction of a false identity – a straight identity that is acceptable to one’s caregivers but inauthentic to one’s self. Or the eventual loss of connection to that family at some point in order to live one’s true, authentic self. That’s an easy-to-understand example and all too common, but far more subtle qualities in an individual can lead to estrangements – either to one’s authentic self, or one’s family of origin: learning differences, major interests, political leanings, worldviews.

With unconditional positive regard, we are able to be accepted fully who we are as our authentic selves – we don’t need to change who it is we are in order to belong. One way that I understand the elusive Beloved Community that we seek to create is that place where everyone is accepted authentically for who they are, which is by definition different from anyone else, and they belong fully. Belonging and Authenticity. Another way to describe these sometimes disparate needs is Connection and Self-Differentiation. We need to be connected with others, and we need to differentiate ourselves from others. Sometimes we sacrifice our authenticity in order to stay connected. At other times we sacrifice our connections in order to stay true to our self-understanding. For most of us it is not easy to remain both connected and self-differentiated in a healthy way. Because most of us weren’t taught by connected and self-differentiated people.

Perhaps it is obvious where I am going with this: *Agápē* is often defined as "unconditional, sacrificial love." The sacrifice, ostensibly, is the surrender of my needs for the needs of someone I love..... and we do that all the time, in raising kids, or romantic partnerships, but of course, the surrender must be temporary to be sustainable, because our needs are, well, *needs*. The sacrifice of our needs over too long a period of time only leads to resentment and depletion.

Which brings me to my big “aha” moment in a retreat with colleagues recently. We were studying with Frank Rogers, co-director and founder of The Center for Engaged Compassion. He talked about a phenomenon that has been mis-labeled as “compassion fatigue.”

This is relevant right now because many of us are feeling overwhelmed by the results of the presidential election and the pain that is being experienced and will increase for many in our society who have been marginalized and whose marginalization has just been given a national stamp of approval. It will only increase. Those of us in those marginalized groups are going to experience increased discrimination. Those of us who are allies with the marginalized are going to witness increased discrimination. Allies, of course, those who are not in the marginalized groups but who see clearly and abhor the discrimination, have a choice – whether to continue to align ourselves with the marginalized and risk our own discrimination, or we can opt out – we can go back to sleep, to use Rumi’s language, go back to sleep and try not to see what is going on. “Compassion fatigue” it’s been called, but Frank Rogers at this retreat, shared some research that helps us break down, understand, and combat the phenomenon.

He is using the research of Tania Singer and Olga Klimecki in an article called “Empathic Distress Fatigue Rather than Compassion Fatigue? Integrating Findings from Empathy Research in Psychology and Social Neuroscience, and Mattieu Ricard’s “From Empathy to Compassion in a Neuroscience Laboratory.”

This big ‘aha’ for me, and perhaps you already know all this, but they draw a distinction between empathy and compassion:

Empathy is when we feel another's feelings. It's when we vicariously experience and understand the feelings, thoughts and behavior of another person. It's emotional attunement. It's when we experience parallel emotional experiences side by side with another. It's when we feel pain at another's tears. It's the urge to calm an upset baby because we are likewise distressed by their cries and distress. That's empathy. Empathy is the automatic biological response that pushes us to care for our young. Empathy accesses the pain-response systems of the body, releasing stress hormones like cortisol, which can lead to poor health, lower immune efficiency, difficulty sleeping, irritability, weakened emotional regulation, etc. Unmetabolized empathy – that is, empathy we haven't processed and dealt with – can lead to protective behaviors like numbing ourselves and becoming callous, dreading encounters, attempting to fix situations instead of being present to the pain of them, withdrawing emotionally or physically, distracting ourselves or anesthetizing... I wonder if any of those behaviors and symptoms are familiar to you following this recent election?

Empathy is merging and belonging and connecting but skips over the authentic, differentiated line between me and you, one and another. Compassion is slightly different. Compassion is when we are connected, but in a way that maintains my awareness of my own state of being, so I'm differentiated from you, but connected to you. It's a state of being both connected and differentiated, where we connect and belong to the other, while also authentically being oneself and differentiated.

Compassion is a learned behavior. Compassion, says Frank Rogers and the researchers he cites, is restorative. It activates the attachment and affiliation systems of the body, releasing oxytocin, sometimes called "the love hormone." It relaxes the distress systems of our body, increases resilience and the capacity to emotionally regulate. It is tiring, but in that good way that comes after exercise, yoga, dancing or creating art. We need to rest from a restorative activity not to escape exhausted from a depleting activity. He uses the acronym PULSE to describe the essential dimensions of compassion.

**P** stands for Paying attention or contemplative awareness. The non-reactive, non-projective apprehension of another in the mystery of their unique particularity. That magical place where belonging and authenticity meet.

**U** is for Understanding or empathic care. "Being moved" empathically in one's gut-level depths by another's experience. Empathy, they say, is a precondition for compassion.

**L** – Loving with connection or all-accepting presence – this is that quality of presence that is non-judgmental, all-embracing, and infused with a seemingly infinite love. Rumi's field beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing where we meet. Landis' potent question, "Can I love this, too?"

**S** – Sensing the Sacred or Spiritual expansiveness – a spiritual expansiveness that relativizes the everyday world – time seems to stop, errands lose their urgency, perennial irritations feel petty and frivolous. Being plugged into, and instruments of, a cosmic field of loving energy – God, a spirit of life, or an energy of creative consciousness – an enduring presence of compassion that is spiritually expansive.

**E** – Embracing new life or desire for flourishing. The yearning that another's suffering be transformed into life's flourishing and the readiness to take delight when such life is birthed and embodied. He warns us to not be attached to the outcome, however. Attachment works like judgment and scares away progress.

These are the essential components of compassion, according to Frank Rogers and the researchers he cites, and what's important for us to note is that we can learn compassion. We can learn to belong and connect while simultaneously being authentic and self-differentiated. It's a skill that we develop

through the ancient technologies of meditation and spiritual practices. *Love is a choice*, says Carter Heyward. *Don't go back to sleep*, warns Rumi. *The breeze at dawn has secrets to tell you*.

Take a moment to think about someone in your life who loved or loves you with that kind of unconditional and non-judgmental stance. Now switch to someone you have loved or love now with that kind of unconditional and non-judgmental stance. Let that field out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, out beyond heresy and faith, that field of unconditional and non-judgmental love – let that field expand where we can all lie down in that grass together, and pray with me, the words of Shelley Jackson Denham (hymn #86)

Blessed Spirit of my life,  
give me strength through stress and strife;  
help me live with dignity;  
let me know serenity.

Fill me with a vision,  
clear my mind of fear and confusion.  
When my thoughts flow restlessly,  
let peace find a home in me.

Spirit of great mystery,  
hear the still, small voice in me.  
Help me live my wordless creed  
as I comfort those in need.

Fill me with compassion,  
be the source of my intuition.  
Then, when life is done for me,  
let love be my legacy.

Let love be my legacy.