

The Spiritual Discipline of Love
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
December 15, 2024

Welcome to the 90's Club – Norm Enfield

This morning we welcome a new member of the club, Norm Enfield. From a family of educators, Norm had a long career in education beginning as the teacher of a grade 5/6 split classroom with 30 students from what was called at the time “disadvantaged families.” “There wasn’t much help for beginning teachers,” he says. “The door closed and suddenly you were in charge. It was exhilarating and *hard*. So much to think of!” He was hooked.

According to Norm’s wife, Jeannette, they first met in 5th grade. Norm remembers knowing her in high school. They became engaged in their senior year of high school and married the following summer as 19-year-olds.

Norm and Jeanette had three daughters, the youngest died of a rare cancer at age two.

Although Norm’s mother had been a Unitarian, he attended a Presbyterian church growing up and later, with Jeanette, a Methodist church where they were active members. However, they had been unchurched for awhile when they began going to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Davis. It felt like home. Both of them took on active roles. Norm served on Buildings and Grounds, worked on the pledge campaign, and served on the Board at a time when the congregation was in search of their new settled minister.

Both their daughters were living in the greater Portland area at the time Norm and Jeannette moved north to Vancouver. They soon found a home at UUCV. Although Susie now lives in Boise and Gail in Phoenix, they continue to be happy living here. They stay in touch with their 5 grandchildren and 5 great grandchildren and have taken great pleasure over the years in watching them grow. In 2025 Norm and Jeannette will celebrate 70 years of marriage!

What advice would Norm give the rest of us from his perch at 90 years?

For parents: Believe in your childrens’ strengths and abilities, and help them with all your power.

For all of us: “Treat everyone with dignity and respect. And keep trying—you’ll never know what you can do unless you try.”

The Spiritual Discipline of Love© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

Like Norm, I come from a family of teachers. It felt inevitable that I would become one. I fought it at first, hoping I’d find a career elsewhere, but then when serving in the Peace Corps, I discovered - kind of like Norm - that I loved it. After surviving a traumatic event in the Peace Corps, I no longer had the energy to try to figure out a different career, so I went back into graduate school in education and did

what others in my family had done – became a teacher. A few years later, in the interview for what turned out to be my last public school teaching job, I was asked ‘what was the most significant factor in the classroom for success?’ – this was an interview for a bilingual position, so the question was asked to me in Spanish, and my reply was quick and certain: el amor. Love, I said, is what makes the most difference in learning. In that same interview, I was asked that standard question about what do you hope to be doing in five years, and to that question, I also answered quite automatically, and a little bit to my own surprise, that I hoped to be in seminary studying to become a Unitarian Universalist minister.

You see by then, I had figured out that it wasn’t really “okay” to talk about love in a public classroom setting. Curriculum was what mattered most and though all good teachers knew that relationships matter and ephemeral qualities such as love are important in the classroom, there just wasn’t a lot of conversation or professional development about those things, at least in that district at that time. Church, I knew, was a place where we could uphold the value of love, examine it, dissect it, practice it, and employ it. *The force of love ignites liberation*. It’s interesting to me now, because back then, we didn’t really talk about love being at the center of our faith, though obviously I must have thought it was since that’s how I answered those interview questions.

Love is our theme this month as it was in September and will be February, because it is that central to our values. This month we’re exploring the Greek concept of agápē, unconditional, sacrificial love. Last Sunday, I talked about the importance of boundaries – the boundary between self and others – and the difference between empathy and compassion. Empathy is the natural born ability to feel what others are feeling and is a pre-existing requirement for compassion. But compassion is more than empathy, and more boundaried than empathy. It is the ability to apprehend the feelings of another but not lose ourselves in those feelings – that is, we maintain our own feelings and boundaries while feeling compassion for the other. Compassion is a learned ability and takes practice. Empathy comes quite naturally to many of us; though we can suffer from what is called Empathic Distress Fatigue, being overwhelmed by empathic feelings such that we shut down or cut ourselves off from those feelings entirely.

In the new Article II language – this is the language in the bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association where we describe who it is we are and what our purpose is – this is where we find those values words that spell JETPIG – justice, equity, pluralism, interdependence and generosity that are centered on Love – in the new language, we talk about “the spiritual discipline of love.” I want to explore that idea a bit this morning.

One aspect was presented in the anthem the choir just sang – that is, *if you want more love, you must give love away*. That’s a spiritual discipline, to not just expect and accept love that comes your way, but to send it out into the world intentionally. Even, I surmise, when it is not easy. *Revolutionary love calls us to see God in the stranger*. Right now it may not be easy to love our neighbors who voted differently in this recent presidential election, but it is our responsibility – if we want to counter hate, we must cultivate love.

The cultivation of compassion beyond empathy is another spiritual discipline. *Revolutionary love calls us to know ourselves deeply*. So many of us practice empathy reflexively and will offer our solutions to another’s pain, not because they asked us to solve it, but because we are unable to tolerate the pain ourselves. That’s why the covenants in our small groups often warn against offering unsolicited advice – we are so good at offering our solutions to another’s pain, whether or not they are asking for them.

Harder is to be with another as they are experiencing pain and not let it engulf you, too, but people in pain, need others who can be with them and stay steady. The chaplains in this congregation, members, Dean Yamamoto and Gwen Morgan, understand this.

Related to this need to stay steady is the question that Dr. Takiyah Nur Amin, a UU dance scholar and educator, asks “What would love do? Is there a more loving option?” It reminds me of James Hollis question “Does this choice diminish me, or enlarge me?” I read about this in the book by Oliver Burkeman that the staff is currently reading together, *Four Thousand Weeks: Time Management for Mortals*. Let me read a bit from this book to you. His words are far better than my attempt to describe them. And it relates to this spiritual discipline of love, as we confront hard choices.

“Where in your life or your work are you currently pursuing comfort, when what’s called for is a little discomfort?” asks Burkeman. He goes on to say

“James Hollis recommends asking of every significant decision in life: ‘Does this choice diminish me, or enlarge me?’ The question circumvents the urge to make decisions in the service of alleviating anxiety and instead helps you make contact with your deeper intentions for your time. If you’re trying to decide whether to leave a given job or relationship, say, or to redouble your commitment to it, asking what would make you happiest is likely to lure you toward the most comfortable option, or else leave you paralyzed by indecision. But you usually know, intuitively, whether remaining in a relationship or job would present the kind of challenges that will help you grow as a person (enlargement) or the kind that will cause your soul to shrivel with every passing week (diminishment). Choose uncomfortable enlargement over comfortable diminishment whenever you can.”

Uncomfortable enlargement sounds like that *love energy more powerful than any force of oppression. Revolutionary love calls us to be better and do better.*

I want to go back to that question I asked you last week about a person you loved or loves you unconditionally and without judgment. I trust you had one. I am fortunate to have had several in my life, and one I think of often is the Rev. Richard Henry, minister of the First Unitarian Church of Salt Lake City when I was in high school and college. I remember how he listened to me without judgment and provided that unconditional positive regard. It was a time in my life when my parents were getting a divorce and weren’t as able to be present to me and my concerns, as their lives were being turned completely upside down. My father had particularly disappointed me greatly, and this man, Dick Henry, a decade older than my father, was able to help me process my feelings, my disappointments and anger, and provide me with a perspective that I needed. Though I’m pretty sure I do ministry quite differently than Dick did, I know that the desire to do ministry at all stems directly from my experiences with him. He died in 2018 at the age of 97. I cried all the way through his memorial service, from beginning to end, which is not something I’ve ever done in a memorial service before or since. His influence on my life was tremendous. He is the reason I knew that our faith was about love, even though we didn’t really talk about it like that then.

As a teacher, I taught the disenfranchised, again, like Norm. As a bilingual teacher, I taught the children of immigrants from Mexico and Central America, who had come to Chelan and Wenatchee, WA to pick apples, mostly. I had one Polish student and one Russian, but mostly Spanish-speaking students. And I was acutely aware of the discrimination they experienced. First of all, the classrooms I taught in were

either windowless or in portables separate from the schools. Our programs were the least resourced, and the discrimination did not end there. I have strong memories of walking into the faculty lounge at Chelan High School and the conversation coming to a full stop, my strong suspicion that the teachers were talking about the students I taught in a disrespectful way but knew me well enough to stop in my presence. Or telling jokes – really distasteful jokes about Mexicans. This was in the early 90’s but even then it was completely inappropriate and hurtful. Just as I knew there were teachers who were prejudiced against the Spanish-speaking students I taught, you can believe those students knew it. And they recognized the adults who cared about them as people, who respected them, who saw them as whole human beings and provided that unconditional positive regard. It didn’t matter if they spoke the same language as that adult. They could tell in a myriad of ways whether or not that adult cared. In short, love matters in the classroom. In environments where the students felt that love, they thrived. When that love was withheld, they suffered. It was as simple as that. And that was the answer I gave that day in the interview for my last teaching job before heading off to seminary.

We draw from our heritages of freedom, reason, hope, and courage, building on the foundation of love.

I’m glad we name *love* as an important value in our faith these days. I mean it was always there, and the 19th century Universalists talked about it all the time. But there was a period of our history when we praised reason and rationality above all else – the mid-part of the last century when this fellowship was founded – and love was a little too “touchy feely” and “woo woo” for the secular humanists among us. I’m wearing a stole from the era in which I think “love” returned to our common vocabulary, in the first decade of this century. The yellow stole I’m wearing says “standing on the side of love” a saying we’ve adapted and updated to “side with love” in recent years, but I hang onto my old stole because it carries such meaning for me. I had two of them, and gave one to the Board of Trustees to wear on Sundays so you can visually identify the Board member of duty. But I hung onto this one with this red heart around a map of Michigan on one side. It didn’t have that to begin with. This is the stole I wore on March 22, 2014 when Barb Byrum of Ingham County (and three other Michigan county clerks) opened their offices on a Saturday to issue the first marriage licenses to same sex couples in the state. I don’t know how many marriages I performed that day, but it was quite a few. At first the county clerk wanted to do them all herself, but then she got overwhelmed with the number of couples coming in and allowed several of us to perform weddings in all corners of the county courthouse. Most touching for me was a lesbian couple from the congregation I served who had been together for more than 20 years. We were delighted to run into each other there on a Saturday afternoon and it was such a joyous occasion that I was able to legalize their marriage. There were so many licenses signed that day, I got ink on the stole which wouldn’t come out. So, someone turned the ink stain into the red heart and map of Michigan on it for me, and I wear it with pride. When I left Michigan to come serve here, members of the congregation signed the back of the stole – including at least one of the couples I married in the courthouse - and so when I wear it, I carry all of them with me.

Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love.

The spiritual discipline of love includes giving love away – loving the stranger, even when we don’t like them. If we want to counter hate, we must cultivate love. *Revolutionary love calls us to see God in the stranger.* It includes turning empathy into compassion, learning how to be with people in their pain but not sacrificing our own health to help others, but rather holding healthy boundaries and providing that

unconditional positive regard for others. And the spiritual discipline of love involves asking, when confronted by hard choices, “What would love do? Is there a more loving option?” and “How will decision enlarge me and my world?” encouraging us to choose uncomfortable enlargement over comfortable diminishment whenever we can. *Revolutionary love calls us to be better and do better.*

I’m sure there are many more ways I haven’t thought of to practice this spiritual discipline of love. Perhaps when you think of the person who enlarged your world, who gave you that unconditional positive support and love, you’ll think of another way this love becomes a practice. What’s important is that we practice it: That we place love at the center of our lives, in our care for ourselves, in our interactions with others, and in our stance toward the larger world.

James Vila Blake, a Unitarian minister born in the latter half of the 19th century, who served congregations in the Chicago area, wrote these much beloved words: “Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.” May it be so.