

Love in Trust

A reflection by Rev. Jim McKinley

February 11, 2007, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Hendersonville

Opening Words

“Wild Geese” (No. 490 in SLT)

You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.

Tell me about your despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees, the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls
to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting – over and over announcing your place in
the family of things.

--- Mary Oliver

There seems to be some confusion over what to call the central talk in our Unitarian Universalist service. Or maybe it is what to call some of my talks. Sometimes when the thoughts of the morning connect, people approach me after the service or later in the week. They often introduce their remarks with something like, “I liked your talk or sermon or whatever you call it.” Just to clarify, this morning’s talk is definitely a Reflection and not a sermon. I am inviting you to consider some insights and thoughts that I have glimpsed and do not see clearly yet. But I do think what I’ve noticed, the notion, is important and helpful and I want to put it into the wider conversation of your thought and experience. Think about it and share what you see from your perspective. We just might have time for interchange near the end of the service.

The title today on this Sunday before Valentine’s Day is Love In Trust. That’s Love in Trust, not Love and Trust as you might hear it. I think I explained it best in the summary for the Beacon: “Valentine’s Day talks about love given and love received. There are also loves we hold in trust. We often think of someone putting their faith or trust in another, but there are also trusts that we take on by entering into [(or it also turns out simply by being and therefore being in)] relationship; [trusts that hold] a responsibility fo compassion to help others in their own caring.”

We don’t usually think of such a trust even in the broader understanding of connected responsible belonging that comes to mind when we think of love. Valentine’s Day tends to emphasize the limited perspectives of romantic love. The words we associate with it are words like give and get, find and lose. They tend to be words of acquisition and possession: Be My Love, not just Be Love. Love is much more layered than these words allow. It has more valences or perspectives and we have one word.

There is however (and also) a foundational or fundamental love that we are born into. You belong, because you are – not because of what you do, but because you are

alive, because you have been born, because you are part of the stream that is the gift of creation. This can also be thought of as God's or 'goddess's love, but that needs explaining too and I'll get to that later.

The 'in trust' of Love in Trust is also language of value. It holds the sense of trust that is in entrust (spell) or "invested with a trust". "A duty with which one is entrusted". It is love in the sense of a trust That is "What is created when there is "confidence placed in a person making him or her the nominal owner [or holder] of something [love in this case] to be held or used for the benefit of another." So trust here is a trust, ' a property held in this way.' IT seems analogous to a trust fund. The dictionary ends this way of thinking about a trust by calling it; "the legal relationship between the nominal owner and the property."

For this morning's reflection disregard the word legal and think the relationship between the holder and love. Love creates a trust for us to hold. There is a trust created by our very participation in creation by being born, in birthing and in living which by definition is always in relationship. How we manage that trust as its trustee involves choices and awareness, but the trust itself is not a choice. We inherit it by being. It comes as part of being a part of this life and universe. Whether we think we do or not, whether we want to or not, whether we find ourselves capable or not, we each hold love in trust.

(I think the questions, needs, ambiguities, the quiet, persistent voice, perhaps the internal calling of this trust may be a large part of why we gather in communities of faith.)

Maybe the best way to explain this notion or to introduce it to your wisdom and experience, because I am only glimpsing it at this point, is to tell you the situation under which the idea came to me. It involves my family of origin. My father and I have not been that close for the last twenty years. It is not for lack of caring on my part and his too I think. I love him. Deeply. He and my mother are divorced. My dad remarried about 18 years ago. He is of a generation and a personality where social connections and, in a very real way, relationships are the woman's job. The woman if not the trustee, is the broker. My dad's wife is not my mother so that social connection and mediation is broken. And my dad is very private. Without the connection of my mother and with the confusion of a wife who wasn't my mother and with whom I failed to connect, he and I never really figured out a way to get beyond barriers of pride and issues, distance and loyalties and the uncomplicated need for time to ourselves together.

In the mean time the intervening years have gone somewhere and health and the hope of possibility have gone with them. My dad's health now is at the point where he needs the help of his sons. The situation is beyond pride and issues and distance and not being close. Still, (and somehow) love remains. And as sons who love him, my brothers and I realize that we have to figure out how to behave, not in the roles we inherited or grew up in, i.e. not as children, not as siblings, but as capable, responsible, compassionate (I want to say fiercely compassionate) adults.

About three weeks ago my brothers and I (I am the oldest of 3) met with my dad and his wife and her son to see if we could help them share their visions of the next five years and then begin to help make those visions real. We all did good difficult work. We connected successfully. And in the process, our family system matured. The families are much less stuck and we are hopeful that we can help my dad and his wife and our

families move ahead. At one point, however, in the difficult process of simply getting to a focused, open meeting, I sat down on the kitchen floor, my back against the cupboard and said out loud to myself, "It shouldn't be this hard to love someone."

Blaming myself had always been a part of my framing of my problems with my dad. He also didn't help me frame it any differently. He didn't give me much information to go on. But we are (or I am) beyond that now. We have to be. It doesn't matter for the future. And with those expectations and guilts and stuff out of the way, I now see this trust of which I speak. My father held a trust, the trust of love of his children to their father. He held it as father, it came with being a father, a parent. As trustee it was his job to help his children, even as adult children, love him. It was the responsibility of leadership, of trusteeship, to manage the accessibility, the expression of that love that comes with being. As father or parent of Hannah, I know I hold such a trust. I'm learning what it means and I probably could not have seen it before being her parent. It isn't a trust that gives the trustee easy rules with which to withhold or abandon access. It is not a trust of convenience. It is a trust set up beyond or beneath, actually within, the trustees feelings. A good trustee reaches beyond their personal sense in order to manage the trust. For this kind of trust the issues of concern are larger than personal justifications at least as regards the holding and protecting and managing of the trust.

It is a trust of and for love, a responsibility that comes with living and loving and connecting. It is a trust that is in us as beings in the stream of life. We become trustees as we become responsible agents of and for life. I see this in my role as a father. I also see that the trust is now being passed on from my father. One aspect of a trust is that it is often held until such time as the recipient (the family in this case) comes of age.

The way I noticed this idea at first was to say to myself; "As a father, children want to love you somehow. They are going to try. The love and connection stay with them through it all. They may not know how to connect and love and the job of the trustee is to help them find their way, help them access that trust." I know this all gets murky with the problems of family dynamics and children and other people acting badly, but the trust still exists - unless it is dissolved completely ---and still.....

Love in trust. You don't have to be a parent. Think about it with your pets. You love them yes, you care for them. With my dog, Obi, I give him food and water and care, but I also have to show him my love and help him/ let him love me. He not only wants on the couch, he wants on the couch with me.

This last Wed. we had a wonderful "Plan Your Own Memorial Service" workshop. (Yes, you can use wonderful and that title together.) One of the chief concerns expressed was to be sure that the service or whatever was done after the person died, fit the needs of the children. Hear how thinking about Love in Trust fits here. In spending time in this community, in loving your friends, building relationships and being loved by them, you create and participate in and come to hold love in trust. And love for someone who dies is grief. So I suggested that this trust and the need for the community to share their love in their grief should at least be a part of the family's considerations. They now are trustees too.

This thinking about foundational love that is in our care comes directly out of our Universalist tradition. Historical Universalism says that God's love, the belonging of being is not just a part of everyone, it is in everyone. It is not just a select few (i.e. those

that do right, those that somehow are right, by whatever standards, those that get it right) that are loved and get to share love and be loved, but it is everyone. This is the love in trust. There are no separations. God does not abandon you because you have done wrong. He/she/creation is always there to be loved, to belong with.

In 1805 Hosea Ballou wrote his Treatise on Atonement in which he set down the leading notion of Universalist theology for the 19th century. Orthodox Christianity held that God was the unreconciled party that Jesus had to die for in order to appease. Jesus had to figure it out, actually get it right in order for God to love again. Author David Robinson says that for Ballou and the Universalists, God's love was secure even through human sin.

And the sacrifice of Jesus as Christ was a demonstration of that love rather than an assuagement of anger." "Atonement and reconciliation are the same," said Ballou. Both of them, "are a renewal of love." In this understanding "It is human love for God that is renewed, not God's love for humans." (Robinson,p.64.) The language and reasoning of the atonement of Jesus' death is difficult to sort through and may not be an important part of your present spirituality but hear the language. It emphasizes a foundational love that isn't predicated on judgements of exclusion. It is a love that doesn't go away, that cannot go away. It recognizes the need for humans to participate and helps them connect to that goodness. We think about love in trust because we have inherited a world view that sees it as foundational in the way of being.

What Ballou writes about is God's love. This kind of love doesn't say much about boundaries and egos and difficult decisions. And those of us sitting here - we're not gods or goddesses. We're humans after all. How do we take care of ourselves, protect ourselves, forgive ourselves and be open and vulnerable too? It is the Unitarian side of our heritage that speaks more directly to how to be human. Traditionally Jesus was the exemplar. Think of the beginning writings of American Unitarianism and William Ellery Channing and self-culture and all that. But that's for another time.

There is a quote by womanist author, June Jordan that combines the struggle of both larger and practical understandings together. It is a quote that I first read almost 20 years ago and have carried with me since.

"And for ourselves, the intrinsic purpose is to reach, and to remember, and to declare our commitment to all the living, without deceit and without fear and without reservation. We do what we can. And by doing it, we keep ourselves trusting, which is to say vulnerable and more than that, what can anyone ask?"

I think I'll write her and find out if she still believes this. I'll also ask her what vulnerable means to her now.

It is the nature and tradition of our faith community to keep reminding us of the foundational inclusive compassion of the universe. It must always hold up the challenge of hearing this voice in our worldly conversations of choice and commitment.

In this month's Quest magazine from the Church of the Larger Fellowship, Rev. Jane Rzepka begins her column quoting Kurt Vonnegut from his book the Sirens of Titan. "There are creatures in the deep caves of Mercury." She goes on to describe them –

about a foot long and diamond shaped with “no more thickness than the skin of a balloon.” They cling to the walls of the caves and are nourished by vibrations. Rev. Rzepka writes: “I’m not much of a science fiction fan, but here’s the part that captures my attention: By means of the vibrations of the cave’s walls, creatures on Mercury have weak powers of telepathy as they live there in the caves clinging. The first message is an autonomic response to the second, and the second is an autonomic response to the first. Here’s the first message: “Here I am, here I am, here I am.” The response? “So glad you are, so glad you are, so glad you are.” The creatures are called harmoniums.”

Rzepka presents this in Unitarian Universalist terms as “If you are there, I am glad” – or at least respectful.”

She then lists the objections of evil and wrong and greed and people who have done us harm or harmed others and the innocents of the world and still concludes by affirming: “Day to day, I try to go with the harmoniums. In a theological discussion I might make a concession or two, but mostly I believe in the “here I am/so glad you are” approach.”

In a coincidence of thought, she also ends with the Mary Oliver reading, Wild Geese with which we opened the service. Mary Oliver sums up the all these thoughts in poetry. She begins by honoring you, your being, without judgement.

“You do not have to be good, You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.”

What does she say, you should do? What is the trust given you, as trustee of life?

“You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.”

Your body, this body of being that extends beyond your skin.

And then Oliver ends by declaring “Whoever you are, no matter how lonely, the world offers itself to your imagination, calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting – Over and over announcing your place in the family of things.”

Over and over

Your place in the family of things.

Everyone’s Place.

In the family of things.

Love in trust.

May you love what you love.

This Valentine’s day – and every day.