

“A Story of Love”

Kayla Parker

First of a Three-Part Reflection on Radical Love
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT

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I wanted to think of a profound yet simple story
of a time I experienced love.

And because I'm a millennial
I obviously thought of Facebook first.

No really, it's true!
Love can happen on Facebook.

Some of you have heard part of this story before.

A little over three years ago
my Dad (who is pretty young and fairly healthy)
was supposed to have died from a massive
hemorrhagic stroke.

Thanks to his near proximity to Boston,
an ambulance,
a helicopter,
and a gutsy surgeon, who decided to do a risky procedure,

my Dad is still alive today;
and though he'll never be the same person,
he's regained his basic functioning and can drive around
and talk some sense into me from time to time.

When my mom called me that night to tell me the news,
I was in my first semester of divinity school,
a friend was over and we were studying for a mid-term.

I honestly can't remember the conversation.
But I know she was trying to not sound so worried

or make it a big deal.
 You don't need to drive up, she insisted.
 What happened, again? I asked?
 Yeah, I'm coming up, and I'm telling Michael (my brother)
 he needs to too.

I knew my father could die any minute;
 I couldn't stay put.

My friend left our apartment,
 and my partner at the time drove us up to Mass General in Boston.
 While in the car I called my brother
 and told him he needed to get up from DC.
 I called one of my best friends in DC and had her book him a ticket,
 pick him up, and give him a ride to the airport.

She was ready, mobilized and jumped into action
 the way a good friend would,
 with the added benefit
 of being one who's been deployed to war zones.

She's the lady to call in crisis, and I've called on her many a time.

And as one of my best friends, I would expect this from her.
 It's just what we do.

--

It was all of the other people,
 their support,
 that I didn't expect.

One of the first things I did in my state of shock
 was to post on Facebook that my dad had this stroke
 and that we weren't sure what was going to happen.

The outpouring of love and support I received
 from friends, colleagues, distant family and acquaintances
 was just absurd and amazing—
 not believable at the time,
 just like everything else.

Someone who lived down the hall from me in college
sent me a message saying she worked in the area
and she'd be happy to deliver food or make recommendations
of places to eat when we needed to get out.

Tons of people just posted and sent
so many messages of love and support—

people from high school
I didn't even realize I was still connected with,
people I had just worked with or met a few times,
old friends I had long lost touch with,
friendly acquaintances who had never been let into
the vulnerability of my life.

All were there, as witnesses and support.

I would ask for some songs to cheer him up,
and tons would be posted.

The love and care my family and I received
through my Facebook account
was amazing.

It made us feel so supported.
We had a whole network of people there for us
cheering us along,
living with us through the fear, the setbacks and the triumphs.

Through no large sacrifice of their own
my friends and acquaintances on Facebook
were truly able to transform my feelings of fear and loneliness
to one of gratitude and awe of the power and love
of community
however far-flung and seemingly loose it may be.

In the spirit of loving community
of support
for those we know well and those we hardly recognize,

let us light our candles of community.

Anyone is welcome to come up, state your name,
and briefly, so we might all share,
let us know the deep sadness or joy that is on your hearts today.

“Thoughts on Radical Love”

Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull and Kayla Parker
Second of a Three-Part Series on Radical Love
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT

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Kayla

Love is. As to what it is and how it is and why it is, we will ever be in a state of discovery. As love embraces us, we will ever find ourselves in a state of grace. This faith that we share draws on many sources, among them the “words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.” It just might be time to whine a bit! Do we really *have* to think about this stuff on Valentine’s Day?

Jan

No, we don’t. We don’t HAVE to think about it at all. It’s just that the words of my late friend and mentor, Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley haunt me like a friend who won’t quit. It was several years ago. I had long before completed seminary, but I wasn’t yet ordained. As a lay leader in my local Unitarian Universalist congregation, I was participating in anti-racism training at the Community Church of New York. Marjorie was one of the facilitators. The conversation inevitably traveled to white privilege. Why would anybody who’s white let go of this privilege, even when this privilege surfaces to consciousness? By posing this question, Marjorie brought to the fore what was surely running through some privileged minds. Her response? “Yes, you lose something by letting go of white privilege; but what you gain is a far richer life.” Thank you, Marjorie, thank you!

Marjorie was one of those prophetic women who “challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.”

Kayla

Micah was one of those prophetic men. He preceded Marjorie by about 2700 years, but his challenge resonates for our own time as it did for the 8th century BCE. Prophetic presence isn’t easy and grates on the nerves of the privileged and powerful.

“...what does the Lord require of you,” asked Micah, “but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.” (*Micah 6:8b*)

Since a long ago translator took liberty with the ancient Hebrew, why not take liberty with the translation? What if Micah’s words were rendered as follows: “What does Love ask of you, but to practice justice, to revere compassion, and to walk in

wonder with all that is holy.” How closely these words approximate a challenge to “confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.”

Jan

“At the center of our faith is not belief, but love,” declares Marilyn Sewell, longtime Unitarian Universalist minister. Love isn’t ideological. It isn’t theoretical. Love is gutsy. Love knows when to let go of fluff—like white privilege, like class elitism, like smart-alecky remarks to get even with someone you just know is your moral inferior, like the temptation to settle back into the comfort of one’s sofa or the soft seating of a sanctuary and speculate or intellectualize or worse, kvetch about the state of the world in the safety of cynicism. We as Unitarian Universalists don’t get off the hook because we speak our principles like some post-modern edition of the Ten Commandments. It’s hard; it’s grueling; it’s tough love to live the love that we claim to be at the heart of our faith.

Kayla

Contemporary scholar Karen Armstrong prefers to speak in terms of compassion—the Golden Rule in its myriad forms—from the declaration of the 6th century BCE Chinese philosopher, Confucius, to “not do to others what you would not like yourself,” into the teaching of Jesus about loving God with everything you have and your neighbor as yourself, on into Muhammad’s 7th century CE pronouncement that no one “can be a believer unless he desires for his neighbor what he desires for himself.” From the negatively stated maxim of don’t do to anybody else what you don’t want done to you into the positively stated, do unto others as you would have them do unto you or “Love your neighbor as you love yourself,” love is many-splendored, but across-the-millennia grueling.... especially when it comes to loving those people you don’t even like.

Jan

Love is what you reach for when nothing else will do. Love is “for the toughest jobs on planet earth.” Love works up a sweat. Love aches. Love hurts. Love can laugh and cry all in the same breath. Love transcends belief and ideology. Love jumps off limbs.

Kayla

Love dares to speak hard truths.

It was the first century of the Common Era. Paul and others had begun to spread the good news of who Jesus was and what he had been about. In his first letter to the church of Corinth, Paul was challenged to address a community whose members were quarreling among themselves. They couldn’t agree on anything. Do you suppose they were training to be Americans, or maybe even Unitarian Universalists who didn’t know it yet?

In the early Christian church, there were so many filters for the teachings of Jesus. It wasn't too early even then for fault lines to taint a gospel of love with the growing illusion that the truth of that gospel was singular, that there was only one filter, one path, one way to hear it, speak it, and live it. But No, said Paul to the Corinthians, Don't let these fault lines deepen. Without love, there is no gospel. Without love, nothing else matters. Nothing.

"Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful....Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

(I Corinthians 13: 4-7)

Jan

This does not sound like a doable model. Can't we just settle for flowers and chocolate? I wonder how these Corinthian clefts move through our congregations. I wonder how these tendencies toward quarreling and sparring and truth claiming move with such vehemence through our living rooms and neighborhoods, our boardrooms and courtrooms, the halls of our schools and the halls of Congress. We know they do. It's just so hard to be patient and kind. It's so hard to refrain from arrogance, to not insist on our own way as *the* way. The return on investment isn't at all clear, nor is the outcome ever reliable.

Kayla

For those of us ready to trade privilege for depth, for those of us adventurous enough to wade into the muck, for those of us ready to take that large leap of faith that love is worth it, every iota of what we risk *is* worth it. It was worth it for Marjorie and Micah and Marilyn, Karen and Confucius and Paul.

Love is a high-risk enterprise. It is not for the feint of heart. Love deep and wide and inclusive is radical.

Jan

In the words of Alice Walker:

“While love is dangerous
let us walk bareheaded
beside the Great River.
Let us gather blossoms
under fire.”

“Let us gather blossoms under fire.” How shall we respond to such an invitation? How shall we respond?

Sources

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“A Story of Radical Love”

Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Third of a Three-Part Series on Radical Love
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Love transforms us. We can never be the same once we've been loved, once we've loved, once we understand that our highest calling as human beings is to love and be loved. Loving our neighbor as we love ourselves is difficult enough, but to love ourselves as we love our neighbor casts another light on the reality that we are all in this together. I wonder if this is what W.H. Auden was getting at in the poem that he titled “As I walked out one evening.”

“O look, look in the mirror,
O look in your distress;
Life remains a blessing
Although you cannot bless.

O stand, stand at the window
As the tears scald and start;
You shall love your crooked neighbor
With your crooked heart.”

Is this what it means to love our neighbor as we love ourselves and to love ourselves as we love our neighbor? Auden's enigmatic lines invite us to open our heart and discover what's in there, just as an “expert on God” did in a story of that name by writer John L'Heureux.

The “expert on God” is a young priest. He had become a priest in spite of the doubts he had harbored about God and other priestly matters. It had early on struck him that adherents of his faith believed in three Gods—the father God, the son God, and the Holy Ghost God. Three persons, one God, a mystery. Here he was a Jesuit priest, still haunted by doubts. He doubted the three-in-one package; he doubted the Eucharist; then he doubted his doubt, which led him to other doubts. Was Christ divine? Was Christ even human? And then, was God's love real? This was his most wrenching doubt. He prayed for faith; he prayed for hope. Publicly he continued as a priest.

Christmas came. No, this is not moving toward a Miracle on 34th Street. The Christmas Day of this young priest was wrapped first in snow, then in rain, then in ice. He had said mass in the morning and was driving back to the house where he lived with other Jesuits, a house where he was theologically in the closet. In his reverie of doubt, events on either side of the road had escalated. He spotted off to the right an overturned car with three boys huddled nearby and looking desperate. He braked, skidded, and then

noticed another car on the opposite side of the road, a red sports car all but jack-knifed in the mode of semis when ice or heights get the best of them.

No help came from the boys standing around the other car. They were stunned, probably in shock. Instinctively the young priest grabbed the oil vials from his glove compartment and raced to the car on the other side of the road. What a horror. The dashboard had been smashed back into the torso of the driver, pinning him head down. There was no obvious way to gain access to this person whom the priest now saw was a boy, dead or alive he couldn't tell. Sobbing and desperate he wrenched the driver's door off its dubious hinges and took a position directly behind the lad, the sole inhabitant of the car until now. The boy, the driver, was still breathing but in a gurgling mode. The young priest instinctively pulled out his oils and administered last rites. The silence was punctuated only by the ghastly sounds of the young man he now held in his arms from the back. He prayed to God. Nothing. "Say something!" he shouted at God. No response. Nothing.

His doubts rose into a furious certainty. It didn't matter. Then, it mattered. What mattered? "What," he asked himself, "would God say if he cared as much as I?" The boy he held was in agony, choking on his own blood. Then he turned his head ever so slightly toward the priest, as if trusting the presence of the one who cradled him.

"And at once the priest, faithless, unrepentant, gave up his prayers and bent to him and whispered, fierce and burning, 'I love you,' and continued until there was no breath, 'I love you, I love you, I love you'"

Sources

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