

Love and Its Challenges

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Here is one reason why love is a challenge. [On a flip chart using Gregg shorthand, write these sentences: I love you, you love me, her? him? what is love?] Years ago, I learned a simplified version of shorthand from my mother. This is how you write “love.” It is the line for the letter “l” attached to the line for the letter “v.” This is how you write “loving.” This dot is the “ing” ending.

Love is a challenge because it is shorthand. Love is shorthand for too many things. “Love” is a high mileage pick-up truck loaded with odds and ends – some large and cumbersome, some small and elegant, some moist with desire, some tough as nails. Some of love’s odds and ends pertain to individuals, and others pertain to larger groups or society as a whole. It is no wonder love is challenging – we mean too many things by it.

The ancient Greeks had the right idea. They had four different words for attitudes and actions which we expect “love” to convey.¹ “Agape means “love” (brotherly love) in modern day Greek. In Ancient Greek, it often refers to a general affection or deeper sense of “true love” rather than the attraction suggested by “eros.” Éros is passionate love, with sensual desire and longing. It can also apply to dating relationships as well as marriage. According to Wikipedia, Plato refined his own definition: Although eros is initially felt for a person, with contemplation it becomes an appreciation of the beauty within that person, or even becomes appreciation of beauty itself.

Philia means friendship in modern Greek. It includes loyalty to friends, family, and community, and requires virtue, equality and familiarity. Storge means “affection” in ancient and modern Greek. It is natural affection, like that felt by parents for offspring. It is also known to express

¹ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Greek_words_for_love

mere acceptance or putting up with situations. This type of love sounds to me like the Serenity Prayer's acceptance of what we cannot change.

This morning the focus is not on the challenges of finding and sustaining romantic love (that may deserve a Sunday service of its own). The focus is on how to respond rather than react when people "push our buttons." The late cartoonist Charles Schulz captured the gap between our aspiration and our actual experience: "I love humanity. It's people I can't stand."² How is it that people manage to push our buttons on a regular basis?

Specialists respond from within their specialty. A psychologist might say that the annoying behavior may be something we would secretly like to do though we do not accept the impulse within ourselves. Or that the annoying behavior may remind us of annoying behavior we have experienced in the past. Or that our "self talk" (inner monologue) about the annoying behavior itself stirs up and fuels our emotions.

A sociologist might say that our social location goes a long way toward explaining the tension between the ideal of loving humanity in general and the reality of aggravation triggered by particular people and institutions. A theologian might say that we were born sinful and need help becoming more loving. A philosopher might commiserate: People! You can't live with them, and you can't live without them.

Each specialty has wisdom to offer, but being human means being a generalist. Life places so many demands upon us, and we place so many demands on life that no specialty can save us. No speciality can show us how to be more loving. Life is complex enough that no single default response is adequate, whether that default is love, wisdom, compassion, or anything else.

While no single default response is adequate, we do need to develop a baseline of mental discipline to thrive and not lash out with the emotions of the reptilian brain. Focusing the mind or meditating on a mantra is a good way to develop a baseline of mental discipline. "Love" can be such a mantra. While developing a baseline of mental discipline is good, aspiring to have love be our default emotion in all contentious situations is not good.

² Charles Schulz, cartoonist, 1922 – 2000.

“All you need is love . . . love is all you need.” I differ with John Lennon, if that advice is used as a default. “Turn the other cheek.” I differ with Jesus, if that advice is used as a default.

Allow me to explain. When we are approached on the street or at a stoplight by someone asking for money, what should we do? When we are approached by a family member or friend asking for money, what should we do? If love is the default, we should give money to the person in need, if at all possible, right? Maybe yes and maybe no. Giving money may enable the person to start or continue destructive or self destructive habits. Alternatively, giving money may be a band-aid when a more systematic change is what is needed.

A few years ago I was among a group of seminarians who vigorously debated whether we should give money to a person on the street who asks for it. The discussion occurred in a seminary class taught by Dr. Rosemary Chinicci, a Roman Catholic nun and psychologist. I was curious to know how Dr. Chinicci would weigh in, and her response caught me off guard. The right thing to do, she said, was not to respond the same way all the time. A consistent default response risks lulling us into complacency, whether we give the money or withhold the money. If we can predict our response (or our desired response) to a given encounter, we have closed off opportunities for growth. Love – yes, even love -- can lull us into complacency.

One reason not to automatically privilege one response over another is because we interpret every situation based on our level of development. As our level of development changes, our response may change. Only if we are static in development do we respond to a situation the same way every time it occurs.

A further reason not to automatically privilege one response over another (love over anger, for example) is because each situation is always about more than meets the eyes. We are not rugged individualists interacting with other rugged (or ragged) people. We are embodiments of cultural waves, cultural floods, and cultural eddies. We are constituents of multiple shifting socioeconomic blocs. We are perpetrators of change and victims of change. There is simply too much going on from one moment to the next for us to imagine that there is one size fits all response, whether that response is love, longing, or loopiness. By “loopiness” here I mean the quirks of our personalities, not the mental illness of a someone like Tucson’s Jared Loughner.

As I mentioned last week, to prevent crimes such as his, we need fully funded, community based comprehensive mental health care in this country.

If love does not deserve to be our desired default in every situation, then is life a free for all? Is civilization a veneer on a cradle to grave mixed martial arts fest? No, life is not a free for all. Life is shaped by forces which support its flourishing. These forces are constrained, yet they are real. My sister is in Denver this weekend. That is where the annual gathering of the AEA (American Economics Association) is being held this year. Economists and theologians appeared together at one of the workshops. "Let me know what you think," she said in a message left on my answering machine. "Does God have a resource constraint?"

Every entity has resource constraints. We human beings may be God's primary resource constraint. As our capacity for skillfully responding grows, SGod's capacity for good is enhanced. As our capacity for skillful response diminishes (whether that response is love, anger, or something else), God's capacity contracts, as well.

Determining a skillful response is like being plopped into a canoe with a vague sense of which direction to go. Progress depends upon *not* paddling on the same side of the canoe all the time. Progress depends upon a few strokes on one side, then a few strokes on the other side. Mandating love as the default response in all situations is the equivalent of paddling forever on the same side of the canoe. Unless there is a fierce wind, we are likely to go in circles. "Standing on the side of love" has a beautiful ring to it, and I am proud that Unitarian Universalists are supporting immigrants, LGBT people, and others by standing on the side of love. Yet if we only paddle on the side of love and never place our oar on the other side, we are missing the boat, er, I mean the canoe. The Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount was also the Jesus who drove the moneychangers from the temple.

By choosing love as a default, we risk shielding others from the consequences of their behavior. The great social movements which have improved quality of life for people of color, women, and others relied upon the motivating force of love, to be sure, but love alternating with anger, defiance, even rage. Switching from the social level to the personal level, many of us have had

experiences with “toxic” people. This is common enough that AARP magazine contained an article titled “When People Are Poison” by Mark Goulston, M.D.³

Have a strategy in mind before you see people who push your buttons, he writes. “Then, when the person hurts or disappoints you, stay rational. Gently tell them immediately that you’re hurt, and let them know what you would prefer they do in the future . . . If that softball approach hasn’t worked in the past, you can try what I call the Clint Eastwood method. Take a deep breath, let it go, look them in the eye, and then . . . pause. Next, say something that will make them reflect. It can be as simple as ‘Huh?’” Sometimes no coping mechanism works, and we need to distance ourselves from people whose behavior is intolerable. That is when love comes in. We can distance ourselves without trashing the other person, without sinking to their level.

Thankfully, most people are not toxic. Most people are a little rough around the edges, especially when they are under stress. Most of us can say the same about ourselves. Having firm but flexible boundaries is the key to skillfully responding to a variety of challenging life situations, from those who ask us for money to those who unwittingly or willfully misconstrue our behavior. Psychotherapist Martha Baldwin Beveridge observes that “Healthy boundaries allow you to relate in loving ways with others without intruding upon them or being intruded upon, without neglecting them or being neglected, without freezing them out or being frozen out. Ideally your boundaries are both firm and flexible. You can expand or contract them as you deal with different people and different kinds of relationships.”⁴

It may seem counterintuitive, but the most skillful way to be loving may be to love in moderation. It feels countercultural to me to advocate for limits on love from a Unitarian Universalist pulpit, but I maintain that love exists to serve growth. Growth does not exist to serve love. Love as a default is as great a challenge to health as is the failure to love. I conclude with one elaboration on the canoeing metaphor. We are not alone in the canoe. We are plopped

³ “When People Are Poison” by Mark Goulston, AARP magazine, January/February 2011, page 52.

⁴ See <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20100108013524AAnWy6X>

down in a canoe, but eventually we realize that others are paddling in front of us and behind us. Our paddling does not need to be synchronized, but neither can we ignore our companions.

May love be no stranger to us, and may we be no stranger to love. May our firm and flexible boundaries protect us. May it be so!