

What does it mean to be a people of *Love*?



Love is Powerful

When I was about seven years old, I asked my mom, “What is God? Do you believe in God?” Growing up a Unitarian Universalist, I was encouraged to ask these questions. It was the answers that were never so clear. To my question, my mom told me, “I do not believe in God, but if I did, I’d believe that God is Love.” I didn’t know it at the time, but my mom was quoting the Gospel of John, where the writer explains that if we don’t love one another then we can never know or love God, because “God is Love.”

After that conversation, I took on my mom’s atheism, but also her commitment to the principle of Love as a guiding force in how we are called to live. This month, our theme is Love and we will explore what it means to be a People of Love. When I say that phrase, “a people of love,” it sounds a bit silly, or frilly – as if we might be awash in a pink hue from our rose-colored glasses. However, that is not how I heard it when my mom spoke of love. The phrase “God is Love” is a reminder that Love, as a religious principle and practice is a powerful thing. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. whose theological and political foundation was love, said that we do ourselves a grave disservice when we separate love and power. He said, “Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.”

This is the form of love that is a foundation of our Unitarian Universalist tradition. This love is not sentimental and anemic – it is the powerful kind of love expressed in our justice initiative “Standing on the Side of Love” and the power expressed each week, when we read our covenant, which begins “Love is the doctrine of this congregation.”

This view of love is not one of mere emotion. It is a key teaching of how we will see and treat others in the world. It’s not easy to live the doctrine of love. We glimpse what love is through our personal relationships, but the kind of love that King spoke of, or the early mothers and fathers of our own tradition proclaimed, was a love that overcomes fear, that is universal in its reach and that seeks the fullest opportunity for each person. Gandhi said this form of love was so powerful that, “If a single person achieves the highest kind of love it will be sufficient to neutralize the hate of millions.” That highest kind of love is what King sought to achieve, it is the overflowing compassion for all life that Buddhist teachers today seek, and it is the love that we speak of as Unitarian Universalists. But it is important to remember that this kind of love is not something that passively happens to us; it is not a gift we receive; it is actually something we have to develop through effort and practice. It takes discipline. This challenging form of love shapes how we see the world, the value we affirm in each person, and the need for action in the face of injustice. We develop this form of love, first by choosing communities and companions that model compassion and nurture this powerful form of love in our own lives. Next, we develop our capacity to love by being aware of when we are given to pettiness or prejudice and intentionally trying to open our hearts to love and forgiveness. As one Small Group Facilitator put it, “Whenever I catch myself feeling unloving, I tell myself: “I need to grow my heart a few sizes larger.” This kind of honesty and effort to respond to the world and others with love is a key to developing greater compassion in our own lives and living out the challenging words of our covenant. May we be a people committed to living out this powerful form of love.

Rev. Susan

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Living the Theme: Love

Choose one of the exercises below to engage the theme. Come to the meeting prepared to share how you tried to experience the theme and what you learned from the practice.

1 Re-Embrace an Old Love

A Small Group facilitator once wrote, "I was cleaning my hiking boots yesterday- it felt like massaging the feet of an old friend. Looking at the cuts and scrapes-noticing that the sole was worn almost flat, but their character and soul were very much intact. As I rinsed the saddle-soap suds away I realized that my "old friends" were coming apart- beyond repair. I dried them, put them in the sun. All day I passed them, casting growing shadows as they sat there. I felt an unconditional love, and a loss."

For most of us, hiking boots are not the first things that come to mind when one mentions love, or a "life of love." But who of us doesn't have our own version of "hiking boots"? Who of us doesn't have something, someone or some activity that's served as an "old friend"? And who of us hasn't let one of these old friends "come apart"?

That's what this month's exercise is all about: noticing an old friend--an old love--that we've allowed to come apart, to dry up, to fall from the center of our attention and the core of our living. And it's not just about noticing this old love, it's about reclaiming it, about taking a couple concrete steps to bring it back to life--to bring it back to your life. This month:

- Find an object or take a picture that represents a "love" you've let slip from your life.
- Place that object or picture in a prominent place for the entire month--some place you will see it every day.
- Commit yourself to doing TWO things this month that will reconnect you with that love. (Yes, two things: one will come easy; the second will challenge you to get creative!)
- Use that object or picture to hold you accountable.

Here's something that might help. Think about those times in your life recently when you've caught yourself saying, "I used to love to _____." or "I'd love to _____ again." Remember this is not about trying something new. It's about remembering, reclaiming and reconnecting. Unlike the traditional New Year's resolutions which encourage us to reinvent or improve ourselves, this is more about returning to self, to the self that you've let slip a little.

2 Practice a Loving-Kindness Meditation

The basic steps of Loving-kindness meditation are to sit quietly and comfortably, and recite this meditation. Feel free to have a card with the meditation written on it to help you recite it. Imagine yourself surrounded by light and these good blessings as you recite:

May I be safe
May I be healthy
May I be happy
May I be at ease.

The next step involves wishing the same for someone close to you. Think of a family member or friend, picture that person in your mind surrounded by light as you offer the recitation for that person, "May [my friend] be safe,"

Next, picture a neutral person who you see often; someone in the grocery store, dry cleaner, your mail carrier, and offer this recitation for that person.

Next, offer these blessings for someone you have difficulty with; not someone who you are deeply angry with, but someone for whom your relationship is strained or challenged. Again, picture that person in light and surrounded by these blessings.

Finally, send these blessings to all people, to all living things. Imagine all beings held in light, as you recite these blessings for "all." "May all be safe. May all be healthy..."

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Questions to Live With

Simply look over these questions and find one that “hooks” you. Live with it for a while. Allow it to regularly break into – and break open – your ordinary thoughts. Then come to your group prepared to share the journey.

1. **Who, in your life, do you remember most fondly, with the most undeniable feelings of warmth? Does it correspond to people who were loving to you?**
2. **What have you found to be obstacles to being loving, either personally or otherwise? Why are we - all of us - not more loving, more open, less selfish, more present? How might we become kinder?**
3. Often our first response to an unpleasant situation or person is to judge or get angry. What if we recognized those reactions in the moment, how might we turn our outlook more quickly toward love? **Do you have practices or tricks that you use to try to respond with more loving-kindness in the world? Are there ways you have found to cultivate more love in your life?**
4. **Where do you struggle to have love for yourself? When do you find you are most in judgement of yourself? Do you find you judge others along those same traits?**
5. **Has there been a time when you needed and were able to have love and deep compassion for yourself? How did that make a difference to what you were going through? What ways have you found to be kind to yourself?**
6. **How do you treat a difficult person and/or a difficult situation with love? Do you have a story?**
7. Tina Turner sings "What's Love Got to Do With It?" **Are there times when loving someone is not the most important marker? A time when you loved someone, but still had to end a relationship or draw boundaries? Have you ever had to exhibit or been the recipient of “tough love”? What was that like? How does that relate to being a people of love?**
8. **How does one’s understanding of love change over time? Or does it?**
9. **Have you found limits to love? When have you not been able to find love or compassion for someone else?**
10. **Have there been times in your life that were marked by more kindness and love than other times? What factors, situations, people in your life, or your own circumstances were at play in each of these times?**
11. **What is your definition of love? What are some of the descriptors you would use to describe love? How do you define love of a person?**
12. **Do you think love is a natural, ingrained trait within humanity, or something we need to work on to exhibit? Do you see it only as an evolutionary benefit, or does it have more pressing and important implications for our species/ society/world?**



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Wise Words

Love: an unselfish, loyal and benevolent concern for the good of another

The ancient Greeks described love in four different ways.

Agape – unconditional love.

Philia – brotherly love, guided by our likes or healthy or unhealthy needs and desire.

Storge – familial love, a physical demonstration of affection.

Eros – physical love, sexual intercourse.

You can search throughout the entire universe for someone who is more deserving of your love and affection than you are yourself, and that person is not to be found anywhere. You, yourself, as much as anybody in the entire universe, deserve your love and affection.

Buddha

The way of the miracle-worker is to see all human behavior as one of two things: either love, or a call for love.

Marianne Williamson

Our most modern sin is that we do not love the world enough. We have exiled the holy from this realm so we can turn its mountains into money.

Erik Reece, environmental journalist and teacher

The love of one's country is a natural thing. But why should love stop at the border?

Pablo Casals

Power is of two kinds. One is obtained by the fear of punishment and the other by acts of love. Power based on love is a thousand times more effective and permanent than the one derived from fear of punishment.

Mahatma Gandhi

There is no love which does not become help.

Paul Tillich

Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength while loving someone deeply gives you courage.

Lao Tzu

The theology of love must seek to deal realistically with the evil and injustice of the world, and not merely to compromise with them.

Thomas Merton

Love is the voice under which the silences, the hope which has no opposite in fear, the strength so strong mere force is feebleness: the truth more first than sun, more last than star.

e.e. cummings, UU

When scientists looked for a unified theory of the universe they forgot the most powerful unseen force. Love is Light, that enlightens those who give and receive it. Love is gravity, because it makes some people feel attracted to others. Love is power, because it multiplies the best we have, and allows humanity not to be extinguished in their blind selfishness. Love unfolds and reveals. For love we live and die. Love is God and God is Love.

Albert Einstein, in a letter to his daughter Lieserl

In the end, just 3 things matter:
How well we have lived-
How well we have loved-
How well we have learned to let go.

Jack Kornfield

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Wise Words

There have been so many writings about love, so many people have expressed thoughts about love, and so many movies have love as a central theme. It is difficult to have an original thought about love because it has been bandied about so much in every conceivable context. And yet at times there seems to be such a dearth of it across the planet. Sometimes one has to take the time to have a long, hard second look to see all the love that is flowing through the universe. It is worth taking that time.

Small Group Facilitator

We find rest in those we love, and we provide a resting place in ourselves for those who love us.

Saint Bernard of Clairvaux

Love consists in this- that two solitudes protect and touch and greet each other.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries. Without them, humanity cannot survive.

The Dalai Lama

There is love holding me-
There is love holding you-
There is love holding all-
We rest in this love.

Rev. Rebecca Parker, UU

May we love with our whole hearts, for that is the only way to love.

Kathy Davis from The Greatest Gifts

Love is a gift of one's inner most soul to another so both can be whole.

Buddha

Love enables you to put your deepest feelings and fears in the palm of your partner's hand, knowing they will be handled with care.

Carl S. Avery

I remember thinking, one of the first times I "fell in love", that love was the root emotion that split into all of the other emotions- the white light of feeling before it went into the prism and came out as excitement or grief or boredom, etc. Maybe I was just a romantic teenager, but it seemed profound at the time.

Worship Associate

One word
Frees us of all the weight and pain of life:
That word is love.

Sophocles

Love doesn't make the world go 'round. Love is what makes the ride worthwhile.

Franklin P. Jones

The mystical school of Arica uses a meditation in which two people face each other eye to eye, and repeat over and over, "You love me. You love me. You love me." It is very profound to remind yourself that someone else, sitting right in front of you, loves you. It is a very different experience than saying, "I love you."

Worship Associate

Remember that the best relationship is one in which your love for each other exceeds your need for each other.

Dalai Lama

I have decided to stick to love...Hate is too great a burden to bear.

Martin Luther King Jr.

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Wise Words

What does love look like? It has the hands to help others. It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has the eyes to see misery and want. It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men. That is what love looks like.

Augustine

My sense of the holy . . . is bound up with the hope that someday, any millennium now my remote descendants will live in a global civilization in which love is pretty much the only law.

Richard Rorty

“Guidelines”

Here’s what you need to do, since time began: find something—diamond-rare or carbon-cheap, it’s all the same—and love it all you can.

It should be something close—a field, a man, a line of verse, a mouth, a child asleep—that feels like the world’s heart since time began.

Don’t measure much or lay things out or scan; don’t save yourself for later, you won’t keep; spend yourself now on loving all you can.

It’s going to hurt. That was the risk you ran with your first breath; you knew the price was steep, that loss is what there is, since time began

subtracting from your balance. That’s the plan, too late to quibble now, you’re in too deep. Just love what you still have, while you still can.

Don’t count on schemes, it’s far too short a span from the first sowing till they come to reap. One way alone to count, since time began: love something, love it hard, now, while you can.

Rhina Espailat

Love without exceptions.



Unitarian Universalism.

Image credit Tim Atkins, via UUmediaworks.tumblr.com

Love is not a feeling; it is a great power, an Intelligence to which we are all heir and have been forever called.

Anne Hillman

The mind creates the abyss, the heart crosses it.

Sri Nisargadatta

Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.

Helen Schucman in A Course in Miracles

Keep love in your heart. A life without it is like a sunless garden when the flowers are dead.

Oscar Wilde

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Wise Words

From "To Begin With, the Sweet Grass"

What I loved in the beginning, I think, was mostly myself.
Never mind that I had to, since somebody had to.
That was many years ago.
Since then I have gone out from my confinements,
though with difficulty.
I mean the ones that thought to rule my heart.
I cast them out, I put them on the mush pile.
They will be nourishment somehow (everything is nourishment
somehow or another).

And I have become the child of the clouds, and of hope.
I have become the friend of the enemy, whoever that is.
I have become older and, cherishing what I have learned,
I have become younger.

And what do I risk to tell you this, which is all I know?
Love yourself. Then forget it. Then, love the world.

Mary Oliver

All the children who are held and loved...will know how to love
others. Spread these virtues in the world. Nothing more need be
done.

Meng Zi, C. 300 BCE

Love knows not its own depth until the hour of separation.

Kahlil Gibran

The moment we choose to love we begin to move against domi-
nation, against oppression. The moment we choose to love we
begin to move towards freedom, to act in ways that liberate our-
selves and others. That action is the testimony of love as the
practice of freedom.

bell hooks

Love must be learned and learned again and again. There is no
end to it.

Katharine Ann Porter

Love cannot remain by itself – it has no meaning.
Love has to be put into action and that action is service.
Whatever form we are, able or disabled, rich or poor,
it is not how much we do, but how much love we put in the
doing;
a lifelong sharing of love with others.

Mother Teresa



Image credit: Nip Rogers

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Recommended Resources

Books:

The Art of Loving by Eric Fromm (For Adults)

The Fault in Our Stars by John Green (For Young Adults)

The Rainbow Fish by Marcus Pfister (For Children)

Old Turtle and the Broken Truth by Douglas Wood (For Children)

Articles:

Learning about Islam and Organizing to Combat Anti-Muslim Bigotry, from Standing on the Side of Love:
<http://tinyurl.com/anti-muslim-bigotry>

Science Says Lasting Relationships Come Down To 2 Basic Traits:
<http://tinyurl.com/insider-lasting-relationships>

Ten Ways to Bring More Compassion to the Workplace:
<http://tinyurl.com/compassion-at-work>

Videos and Music:

A Playlist of 10 TED Talks on Love:
<http://tinyurl.com/ted-love-playlist>

“Love is the Ride” by Lucy Kaplansky
<http://tinyurl.com/love-is-the-ride>

“All you Need is Love” by The Beatles
<http://tinyurl.com/beatles-all-you-need-is-love>

“Put a Little Love in Your Heart” by Charlie Whitehead
<http://tinyurl.com/put-a-little-love>

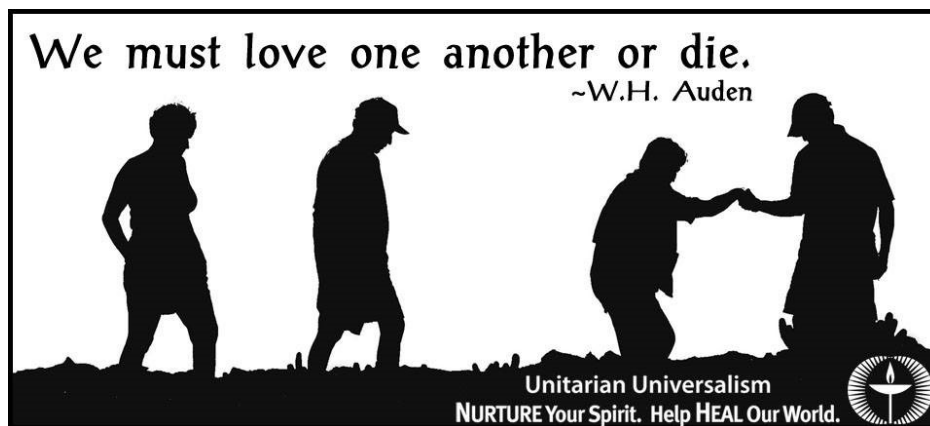


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