

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

February 13, 2011

“Love Is ... Sunshine, Roses, and IV Drips”

Rev. Kathy Duhon

Love Is ... Sunshine, Roses, and IV Drips

Love is. ... Love is fun, exciting. Love is joyful, wonderful. Love is patient and kind. Love is a many-splendored-thing.

One of my colleagues that I used to be in a UU ministers' study group with, the Rev. Liz Lerner MacClay, recently wrote this about love: "Love is the most powerful, beautiful, spiritual, human quality there is. All love – between family members, between friends, between lovers, it's all ultimate and precious and spiritual. Because it is with each other that the divine spark can be most fully experienced and expressed."

Love is what I have the privilege of talking about with couples who are about to be married, as I have done recently with two couples here on the Northern Neck. My wedding couples are so in love and are beautifully expressive of this great gift that has entered their lives. To hear them speak is to think of sunshine – illimitable light that glows and flows between them and through their lives and spills out everywhere. The sun shines a little brighter on everyone around engaged couples and newlyweds, those sweetie-pie lovers who are living and planning their bliss and blessings.

They are all about love. I got an email from a bride-to-be, someone whom I have only really known for about 3 hours, and it is signed, "Love, so-and-so". I still get cards and letters and photos from couples I married in the '90's, whom I barely knew, but who love to share with me their blooming love and families.

I am inspired by the couples I marry – they have great wisdom. One couple told me, a few years ago, that they felt that the love they experienced was bigger than the two of them and just their emotions. They felt like they had tapped into something remarkable, something beyond

time and space. They tried to pull words from the air to explain this wonder which seemed beyond mere language, and “Love Eternal” was the closest they came to expressing their experience. Now, they were atheists and so I thought how interesting that “Love Eternal” is one of my favorite names for God.

We tend to think, those of us who are not all shiny about love, that love is an emotion, a good emotion, one we like to get and to give, but my wedding couples know that love is the air they breathe, the life they live. Sometimes couples choose the Bible reading we just heard from in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13 that begins “Love is patient and kind”, and I like to remind folks that the Greek word translated “love” is an active verb, not as much about emotions. That’s why it sometimes used to be translated “charity” in older Bibles. The love in that passage is not about how you feel, but about how you behave; what you do that is loving.

In this culture we tend to believe that our emotions, such as love, anxiety, sadness, lead to our actions, but in other cultures, including the Hebrew and Greek out of which came Judaism and Christianity, another understanding is there as well. How you act leads to your feelings. Sometimes you just feel crummy, not the least bit loving, but if your actions are loving, soon you and your loved one will feel love.

Love is not only sunshine and Love Eternal and loving actions. I can forecast that my loving wedding couples will also experience clouds, rain, and storms as they travel the journey of married life. Love is challenging and hard work. Love is surprising and unnerving. Love is complicated and confusing.

When my marriage came apart after 30 good years, I wasn’t entirely sure, at times, what love was. That which I had been so sure about – love, the center of the universe – seemed much more like a mystery. I suppose that is not too surprising, if you’re talking about the center of the

universe – religiously or scientifically – it is a mystery. And yes, I am back to being rock-solid sure about love and also, I understand that love is a mystery which I cannot totally understand. I suppose it's not too surprising that Mystery is another one of my names for God.

Love is a dozen roses. I don't believe it is any coincidence that we use flowers to express our love, and especially roses. They are beautiful, and fragile, complicated and contained, delightful ... and full of thorns. They come to us when we are ill or have a baby or celebrate an important life event, and they stand for love. Roses are with us in the good times and also with us in spite of the bad times. And they scatter their petals and are born again in the next season.

Do you remember the movie "Love Story?" A big theme from it was "Love means never having to say you're sorry." I disagreed with that for years, since when you love someone, you had better apologize, and probably quite often. John Lennon said, "Love means having to say you're sorry every fifteen minutes." But I hear it differently now. Love is never *having* to say you're sorry, never being *compelled* to ask forgiveness, never doing it because you or your loved one thinks it is *required*. Love is saying you're sorry because you mean it and because you want to say it. You might even say you're sorry with roses.

Love is sunshine and roses, light-heartedness and mysterious complexity, and love is also what breaks your heart. I have a book by one of our ministers, Robert Fulghum, called *True Love*, which he researched by asking random folks to tell him their true love stories. It is very rich indeed, and sweet and complicated, and painful. There is a line he was told that he savors: "Every love story has an unhappy ending, sooner or later." Think about it – besides separation and disappointment, no matter how marvelous love is, death also is, and that combination of love and death means heartbreak and suffering. If we have loved, we have grieved. With loss, holes are opened up in hearts everywhere. Love that has filled our hearts to bursting also blasts gaping

holes in our suffering hearts, draining them so that they may be filled even more completely with . . . love.

Love is IV drips to the veins of our lives. Love is uncomfortable chairs in a hospital waiting room or hard benches at the courthouse or folding chairs at the funeral home, where love gathers a beloved community that keeps faith and hope alive, even if barely, drop by drop by drop. I have been there, haven't you? Some very recently.

I never knew the UU minister Mark DeWolfe - he died young and many years ago. I knew his Dad, Bill DeWolfe, another UU minister. Mark wrote this, probably when he was dying: "We know that the love which blooms inside us is stronger than fear, for people who love find strength they didn't know they had. We know that the love inside us is stronger than illness, for people who love hang in when physical health is gone. And we know that love is indeed stronger than death, for people who love are like stones tossed into a pool; the circles of love radiate out and echo back long after the stone has come to rest at the bottom. So we remember, our love is the source of our strength. So we remember who we are: lovers tossed by these difficult times."

Love is both strength and being tossed. Love is IV drips - that is a very meaningful image to me. Once, many years ago, I lay in a hospital bed for weeks, hooked to an IV and a bunch of other gadgets that saved me; IVs and the drops of love and faith and hope that came from those around me saved me. A few years later I went through a dark time of grieving and I remembered the IV and adopted the image of God as the drop drop drop of Spirit IV that kept my heart alive, if barely.

I used to work with the dying as a hospice volunteer many years ago. My heart was clobbered then. You were supposed to take on only one hospice patient at a time, but I couldn't

resist two of them, Candy and Joe. I was assigned to Joe, but Candy had come to our hospice class, in a kind of a macabre show and tell, and made such a profound impression on me, that I just had to visit her. She'd lived long enough with her cancer to plummet the depths of spirituality, philosophy, life – and I wanted to learn from her wisdom. So, I was deeply involved with the lives of two dear people, opening their hearts to me and I to them in their most vulnerable of times, and they were both dying, and soon. What a heart-hurting time it was. I wrote something about the heart in my journal at that time, decades ago:

“Today my heart was heavy and full. It has been a very full week of seeing human need, misery, suffering, ... and of feeling the poverty of my own drops in the ocean of love and healing. [Someone] told me that what he sees [of his patients] ‘breaks his heart.’ No, with prayer I see a very large and heavy heart, enlarged by love and heavy with pain. The heart doesn't ache because it breaks, but because it fills up. Yet the filling up is what makes me know I'm alive, human, and on some sort of God-road....”

I have one more IV love story to tell you. This one is about Emil. He was a congregant at the church where I was an intern, a student minister, a baby minister, if you will. Only, part way through my internship, the regular minister went away on sabbatical and I was the only minister for several months. Emil was in his eighties, and strong and active and sharp. He was an atheist who came to my "Understanding the Bible" class and asked great questions, respectfully, of me, baby minister that I was. He had a great attitude.

At one point Emil explained to me how each day he thought of every member of his family, one by one, what they were going through, and he hoped for the best for them in each of their particular situations. He didn't use any religious language, not even quasi-religious, like sending them good energy or whatever, but he did believe that what he did was good and real. I

thought how when I do what he was doing that I call it prayer, and I had a feeling it was no different in substance, even if I attempted to have an address and he just said what he needed to say, inside his mind, or to the universe, believing somehow in the power of his love.

One day Emil was fixing the roof - yes you heard me right - eighty gazillion years old and up on the roof with a young fellow, and Emil fell. And there was surgery and something else - heart attack or stroke, I forget, and I was the one to go visit him in the intensive care unit, the baby minister in among the IV drips and other gadgets and tubes - at least I was used to the scenery from my past experience. He was quite bad off and had nearly died the day before. In our brief visit, that atheist of many decades told me, pointing to his rather large nose, "I came nose to nose with God." hmm. I could just see it - a variation on the Sistine chapel finger to finger with God - it seemed more personal to get up that close, nose to nose. I liked it. I was surprised that he used a God image, but I knew this was not some deathbed conversion - this was just the comfortable imagery that came to this hurting man who was in a vulnerable and drugged state. I didn't query him about his "nose to nose" - he could barely talk or sit up as it was. A couple of days later we had another hospital visit when he was a bit better and he told me, as though for the first time, "I came nose to nose with Eternity." Okay, that sounded more like Emil. I could tell he was going to be fine.

Love is sunshine and joy and light and kindness. Love is a dozen roses and sixteen dozen ways to go through the ups and downs, crazy, mysterious ins and outs of gritty, down in the dirt as well as up in the air, real-life love. Love is IV drips to the broken heart, coming nose to nose with fragile mortality and an eternity of love. Love is stronger than fear and illness, bigger than dark nights and loneliness, greater even than death. The good news of every religion

is all about love - love is, and we are loved and we are loving, and love saves us and transforms us.

The Bible says God is Love. I have heard many tell me and show me in oh so many ways the strong and timeless love they experience, and it makes me believe that maybe it's the other way round: Love is God. Or maybe we can just say that love is sacred. Love is holy. What a joy that Love is.

Happy Valentine's Day, everyone! Love is! Amen to that.