

“A Love That Never Lets Go”

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Reading: “My Commitments to Myself,” By Laura Mancuso

I take care of myself first, because I am deserving of exquisite care.

I take care of myself to maintain the capacity to help others.

I move and stretch my body every day.

I spend time in nature, attuning my senses to the earth's wisdom.

I ration my daily exposure to the news. I identify and access credible sources of information. I protect myself from becoming overwhelmed by information about the pandemic.

I pace myself.

I sit with the reality of uncertainty and impermanence, and allow it to temper my desire for control.

I listen without judgment to others' reactions, which may be different from mine.

I forgive myself and others when stress brings out our shadow selves.

I feel fear fully when I am fearful.

I experience sadness fully when I am sad.

I allow anger fully when I am angry.

I relish joy fully when I am joyful.

I seek out healthy pleasures and indulge in them without guilt.

I remind myself that feelings are transient states that move through me. They do not last. And they do not define me. Nor do my thoughts.

I balance my drive for self-improvement with compassionate acceptance of myself as I am right now.

I initiate contact with loved ones to let them know I hold them in my heart.

I seek out, with increased sensitivity, those who are the most vulnerable.

If possible, I share my resources with those who need help to survive.

When possible, I move away from people, situations, and experiences that do not serve my highest good.

I strengthen my connection to my sources of spiritual strength so that I continue to be replenished.

I acknowledge the nearness of death as a key motivator for living a full life.

I pray for the suffering of all beings to cease.

I grieve my losses and celebrate my successes.

I remain open to new ways of being, surprising sources of joy, and unanticipated discoveries every day.

Sermon/Homily: A Love That Never Lets Go

1. Personal intro

I've been a Unitarian Universalist for almost 30 years, having found this tradition in my teens, and over those years I've occasionally stumbled on the long name. It is a long and awkward name for a faith tradition, isn't it? And so we shorten it, saying we are "UU", which doesn't mean much to the uninitiated, or saying we are "Unitarians". It's tempting to drop the Universalist part, but today I want to lift up that side of our heritage and remind you of some of the reasons we should be happy to call ourself Universalist.

Here's a bit of history:

2. George de Benneville

George de Benneville, doctor, author, preacher, arrived in America in 1741, bringing with him his Universalist faith. De Benneville had converted to Universalism following a profound experience of love that brought him out of a depression of many months. In his own words, reflecting the gender understandings of his time, he suddenly knew "He loved me before I was born. Oh, what grace! He loved me in my fallen estate when I was wholly lost. Oh, what mercy! He even loved me when I was altogether unworthy, and freely too. Oh, what love... Hallelujah! Amen."

For the rest of his 90 years of life, de Benneville worked to spread that love to others. Besides working as a medical doctor, he established a ministry to the Native Americans and served as a school master as well. He preached and had theological works translated and printed for distribution. He wasn't seeking to start a new church or denomination, for he said: no church is pure in all things, so none can be found that does not contain some truth. Glorious truths are found in every church and religion under the sun. And this glorious chain of truths which we believe will someday unite all of them into one form of love."

We modern Universalists owe a great deal to the groundwork for Universalism that de Benneville established in America.

3. John Murray

At the same time that de Benneville was arriving in America, John Murray was being born in England. He was a Calvinist preacher until he learned that a woman of his flock had become a follower of the Universalist James Rely. Seeking to bring her back into the flock, Murray went to visit and try to convince her of the error of her ways. In the end, she did more to convince him of Universalism than he did to convince her, and John Murray became a Universalist soon after.

Shortly after his conversion, his young wife and child became ill, and he fell into debt. Following the deaths of his family and his own time in debtor's prison, he was depressed and lost his faith, deciding to go to America to lose himself in the wilderness.

However, upon his arrival in America John Murray encountered a farmer named Thomas Potter, who had built a chapel on his farm and convinced Murray to preach a message of Universalism there. Murray found his faith in love and goodness renewed, and went on to found a Universalist church and to remarry and have a happy life.

4. Hosea Ballou

One of the next generation to preach this radical good news was Hosea Ballou, who was featured in today's story, an itinerant preacher, a self-educated man from rural New

Hampshire who preached primarily to the working classes. He was spurned by the educated elites of Boston, but was a highly successful preacher, and Universalism reached its heyday during his ministry.

Ballou thought of theology as the science of human experience, and was more interested in lived realities than in abstract concerns. And it was through his study of scripture and the logic of lived experience that Ballou came to the conclusion that not only did God love and would eventually save all of humanity but that that love extended into this lifetime as well. He believed that God wanted humans to be happy.

In Ballou's own words: "... if the Almighty, as we believe him to be, did not possess power sufficient to make all his creatures happy, it was not an act of goodness in him to create them... . If it be granted that God has both power and will to save all men, it is granting all I want for a foundation of my faith."

While we modern Universalists may or may not believe in an all-powerful, or even semi-powerful, God, I think we can appreciate Ballou's viewpoint here. Maybe we weren't created by a design that included that we be loved and happy, but our being is a legitimate miracle of creation and evolution, and we have miraculous capacity for both love and happiness.

5. Joseph Jordan

The first African American to be ordained as a Universalist minister was named Joseph Jordan. Born a free man in Virginia during the time of slavery, Jordan learned to read and write and became a successful business owner, landlord, and Baptist minister. From his perspective as an African American, he preached of the punishments that God would surely afflict white oppressors with. Then one day someone gave him a book on Universalism, and he found himself drawn to this message of universal worth and respect and love for all, even the oppressor.

Jordan traveled to Philadelphia to study with Universalists there, and was ordained by the Universalist Ordaining Council in 1889. The Universalists supported him in starting

two churches and a school in Virginia, and thousands of African American students received an education because of his family's efforts.

6. Olympia Brown

Olympia Brown was born to a Universalist family that valued education, including for women, but she had to stubbornly fight the sexist establishment in order to be admitted first to St Lawrence University and then into the ranks of ordained clergy. She became the first woman to be ordained by a denominational body in America, in 1863.

Brown served as parish minister, but also traveled and spoke on the subject of women's suffrage. The work of women's rights would be her calling for over 30 years, ever motivated by her faith. In her own words:

"Stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it. There is nothing in all the world so important as to be loyal to this faith which has placed before us the loftiest ideals, which has comforted us in sorrow, strengthened us for noble duty and made the world beautiful. Do not demand immediate results but rejoice that we are worthy to be entrusted with this great message, that you are strong enough to work for a great true principle without counting the cost. Go on finding ever new applications of these truths and new enjoyments in their contemplation, always trusting in the one God which ever lives and loves."

7. Universalism

These five stories are just some of the best known stories of Universalism, but countless others have found hope and strength in this faith that tells the good news of love. All are loved, and all are worthy, and all will be saved, whatever that looks like. There is no hell except what we make in this life now, when we become separated from love because of human actions. In these stories of Universalists, many of whom faced tragedy, loss, oppression, and other struggles, I see the truth that there is always a love there, even in the face of difficulty. Love doesn't just come to us when we are happy and successful, but like sunshine, is a reality for all.

8. Know Yourself to be Loved

It's a powerful thing, to truly know and accept that you are loved. You are worthy now, there is nothing you need to do, nothing you need to prove, and nothing you need to earn. You are loved.

This message has always called to me, and is a large part of why I am still a Unitarian Universalist, but I also know that it can be hard to accept. Our society of competition, grades, and capitalist productivity conditions us to strive toward achievement and find fault with ourselves, not feel ourselves to be the recipients of unearned grace and abiding love.

And yet, how would your life change if you could hold that truth in your heart? Would you be gentler and kinder to yourself? Would you take better care of yourself, knowing you are a miracle of great worth? How would you live if you placed love at the center of your life?

9. Know that Others deserve love too

But it's not just you who is loved so completely. Everyone else is too. This one might be even harder to accept. Everyone? Even the annoying? The unfair? Even those who have done awful things? Yes, actually – everyone. No matter what anyone has done, they are still held in that love. This doesn't mean we have to accept all behavior, or that there shouldn't be consequences for causing harm. But it does mean that no one can be simply thrown away. As death row lawyer and activist Bryan Stephenson says, no one's worth is defined by the worst thing they've ever done.

How would we treat one another if we remembered this? That everyone is worthy, that no one is outside that circle of love?

10. The call to happiness

Hosea Ballou believed and wrote that the purpose of life is to be happy, and that happiness as a state of being would naturally move people to compassion. In other words, we could not be truly happy unless we were acting in accordance with love. This

understanding of happiness is not a selfish state of being, but instead posits that, being loved unconditionally, we are moved to therefor love in turn.

We are called to happiness. We are loved, and we are meant to be happy. Accepting this as true might mean a radical new commitment to yourself and your happiness. If you are like me, you may go back and forth between accepting this to be true and then hearing those negative self-talk voices that say No, you can't be happy, you haven't worked hard enough or you haven't accomplished enough. As much as you can, stop listening to those voices. I am loved, you are loved, we are all loved, and we don't have to do or accomplish anything to earn that.

By all means, you don't have to stop doing or accomplishing. Feel free to keep on working, doing what you need to do, and doing what you want to do. Just know that you don't have to do those things in order to be loved or happy. Being loved is about your being, not your doing.

11. The call to justice

And then the flip side of the call to happiness is the call to justice. UU Minister Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd wrote:

If God's name is love, then God compels us to resist the fall to sinful violence by pushing back with muscular resolve against the social structures that confine our capacity to care. A universalist God for a tragic era is not a gauzy, hymn-singing force of personal devotion that draws us endlessly toward itself, but a fierce and compelling power that grips us by the collar amid our rebellious descent and calls us to choose the will to mutuality all over again, even when that choice is so risky that it could utterly remake us.

This image, of being gripped by the collar, may be difficult to reconcile with the all-loving God, but love takes many forms. We can be, and are, loved in our imperfections and failures AND called to continue improving and answering the call of love to side with justice. None of our five historical Universalists just curled up with the satisfying

knowledge that they were loved and therefor saved ... no, they worked to bring about more love and justice in this world, each in their various ways.

What is love calling us to do for justice now? Who and what in this world needs more love? Where is the world hurting? There is no lack of work to be done, from what I can see.

So here is the conundrum. You are loved as you are, fiercely so. And you are called to love others, fiercely so. And between those two truths lies the need for discernment.

We each need to discern our capacity for the work of love, and where our particular hearts, heads, and hands can do the most good. It is no good to help the world by hurting yourself, for you are part of the interconnected world as well. We cannot heal one part of the web by harming another.

At the same time, it does no good to pull inward and simply try to shore up self ... we are all interdependent and ultimately your salvation and wellness is tied up in everyone else's salvation and wellness. Isolationism and individualism won't work in our deeply interwoven lives.

And so discernment is called for. How can you be whole and well? What do you need for your own sacred well-being? And what are you called to do for the world? You won't be able to fix it all, so you'll have to know when you've landed at enough. We each just have to do Enough, and my enough will be different from your enough – everyone's Enough is different.

How do we do this discernment? By listening with the ear of love, I believe. What is Love telling you right now? How would Love ask you to treat yourself? How to care for yourself? How would love have you treat others? This is big love, remember, Love with a capital letter L.

I believe that if we listened with the ears of Love and felt with the heart of Love our discernment would come to us. We would know when it is time to Be and when it is time

to Do. We would care for ourselves and others. We would increase the capacity of Love to make Justice and to show mercy in this world.

And so this is my big ask. Take some time to listen for Love. Sit with love and know yourself to be loved. Your very being is a miracle, and you are surrounded by Universal Love. Be with that truth.

And then listen for the call of love in action in the world. What would Love have you do? In what ways can you increase the love and justice in this hurting world? Do what you can, what you are called to do.

May love surround you, fill you, and hold you. May you be the head, heart, and hands of love in this world. May it be so.