

Fear and Love

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
March 29, 2020
(text of live-streamed worship)

Call to Worship and Lighting of the Flaming Chalice

We gather for worship.

We gather in spirit and with love.

May we feel our care and concern, our love, for one another no matter the distance that separates us...

For we are all, always, connected, our lives interwoven.

During this shared time of worship...

May those who need comfort, receive comfort.

May those who need inspiration, receive inspiration.

May those who need to feel the love... feel the love.

Now and always.

And may the flame of our chalice - flame of truth, of freedom, of community, of love – symbol of our Unitarian Universalist faith, remind us of all that we share – whether we are side by side in a pew or in distant cities.

Meditation and Prayer

May we now pause, slow down, breathe into this moment, breathe into full presence, body, mind, spirit...

Noticing our breath... more fully present to our surroundings... wherever we are... present to sounds of the day outside our windows... just noticing, present for it all...

And from this deeper presence... yearnings of our hearts may arise: our prayers:

As each week, prayers of healing for those suffering in the midst of these days, whether suffering with illness, with financial hardship, with anxiety and fear, or with loneliness.

We reach out our hearts.

And prayers of abiding gratitude for those on the frontlines of Covid-19, health care workers, first responders – courageous everyone.

Prayers of gratitude too for all those keeping us fed – grocery workers, takeout service... gratitude for pharmacists helping to keep us well... for journalists keeping us informed... for legislators and governors, all those leaders who speak the truth and seek to help.

May we pause in silence... knowing we share this time wherever we each are, knowing we hold one another in our hearts, wherever we are.

Readings

From the Christian tradition, 1John 4:18:

Perfect love casts out fear.

From the Buddhist tradition – Narayan Helen Liebenson, one of the leaders of the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center quotes the Greek Aeschylus:

Especially in times of darkness, that is the time to love, that an act of love might tip the scale.

Then Narayan goes on:

Given our interconnectedness, I think it's so important to remember that although fear is contagious, love is as well. Although we are being asked to keep a physical distance between us, love has no boundaries. We can reach out in so many ways, which helps others as well as ourselves. It warms the heart to express kindness, and warmth is certainly needed right now.

In that spirit, one more reading, some practical advice from Episcopal priest Barbara Taylor Brown:

...the best thing to do when fear has a neck hold on you is to befriend someone who lives in real and constant fear. The best thing to do when you are flattened by despair is to spend time in a community where despair is daily bread. The best thing to do when sadness has your arms twisted behind your back is to sit down with the saddest child you know and say, "Tell me about it. I have all day."

Message

Does perfect love cast out fear?

One of my first thoughts as I began to reflect on that ancient, often quoted line from Christian scripture had to do not with this moment in time in which we are now living, but with a time in my life forty-five years ago.

A couple of years out of college, I took a part-time job as an activities aide at a school for children with serious learning and behavioral challenges, many of them diagnosed as severely autistic.

My degree in philosophy had done little to prepare me for this.

I knew nothing relevant (or so I thought), and had no experience with autistic children – but the school was hiring just about anyone who was willing and was reasonably groomed and apparently kind... for these few hours every afternoon.

Well, my initial reaction to many of these children was something close to fear – some of their behaviors were bizarre by any usual societal standard. And when it came to a few of the

very tightly wound, big and strong kids, prone to sudden uncontrolled violence, my response was even closer to fear.

But here's the thing. As we got to know these kids as individual human beings – and it actually didn't take very long – we came to really love them. Proper precautions of course for safety's sake when it came to those who could be violent through no fault of theirs. But always with compassion and love.

Casting out the fear – at least most of it most of the time.

Well, how might this apply to these days in which we are living? Maybe we could think of love as a sort of re-direction of the energy of fear. Here's what I mean.

Our worries, even our fears – for ourselves, for our family and friends – are understandable and real, no need to deny it. But when we open our hearts to love and then express that love... through a phone call... in a letter... in a contribution to a food pantry or shelter – the fear, which is often sort of free-floating, not always with a specific object... the fear in significant measure dissipates – like clouds broken by the light of the sun.

It's as if – maybe not as if, maybe this is how it is: Fear and Love cannot coexist in the same moment.

And since both fear and love *are* contagious as Narayan said (and she's surely correct), we would do well to choose love whenever we can.

Finally, can an act of love tip the scale, as Narayan affirmed? I believe it. I see it. I'll bet each of you do too. Think of a moment in your own life, a hard or low moment, when someone reached out to you (whether friend neighbor, parent, sister, brother) and feel in your bones and in your heart the difference that made...

Indeed, we've all been hearing about and seeing acts of love every day tipping the scale in the midst of this pandemic:

The unbelievably courageous doctors and nurses and aides – everyone in every hospital...

Young people delivering food to elders or taking out their trash.

Musicians giving of their talent and their time.

The list goes on.

So, undeniably, Covid-19 is causing huge amounts of suffering and hardship. But it is not the end of us. Indeed, it might be the beginning of a new era – this is my hope anyway – of at least a little more care and compassion from person to person and around the globe – this lesson, also undeniable now, of our intimate interdependence, one with another and with all life on this dear earth.

Well, maybe perfect love casts out all fear. But I know for certain that our imperfect love (since we are imperfect human beings) helps us live with our fear, dissipates much of our fear, because our love reminds us that we are not, and have never been, alone.

So may it always be.

Closing Words and Benediction

A poem: "Remember"

Julie Cadwallader Staub

There is no such thing as quantity in love
my mother said, correcting me.
No such thing as "much" love.
You can't count it.
No such thing as "all my love."
You can't contain it.
Love expands.
There's an endless supply.
I love you, she said.
That's sufficient.

Be well. Be safe. Take care of one another.

Blessed be. Amen.