

LOVE BEYOND BELIEF
By Rev. Vivienne Harmon Chapman
January 24, 2010

When we looked out at the snow during our recent blizzard, we saw a sky filled with thousands of tiny snowflakes falling relentlessly for about eighteen hours. All this snow accumulated hour by hour, since the temperature was below freezing, until close to two feet was on the ground. On another day, if we looked out a window, huge snowflakes floated lazily down very slowly, leaving a shallow white carpet on the ground. These flakes looked like the ones children cut out from folded paper.

In our English language, we have just one word for these and other kinds of snow. If it is wet snow or dry snow, a heavy fall or a dusting, it's always snow. In Iceland or Scandinavia their languages have many words for snow. We are reduced to adding adjectives or phrases to the base word, to describe a particular kind of snowfall.

Unfortunately, "snow" isn't the only inadequate word we use in our language. Take the word "love," for example, a word we use for a significant collection of human feelings and emotions. In spite of the importance of love to most of us, only one English word is available. So, before I begin this morning, I need to define what kind of love I will be talking about. First, I need to mention two other forms of love which we discuss frequently.

The first of these is the type of love expressed within families, the love communicated from mothers and fathers towards their children, and that given by children to their parents. These deep bonds of love drive people to acts of heroism and protection when another family member is in peril; they influence the personal growth of both caretakers and those still needing care. Since, however, some family members are not yet mature, much growing happens within the family. Sibling relations, in particular can exhibit jealousy and anger as well as love.

There is also interpersonal love, often between two persons of a similar age, a love which often extends to intimacy and long term bonding. This feeling, often called romantic love, is the kind discussed when I looked up "definitions of love" on the internet. Our present society is fascinated by this kind of love and its sexual component; it appears in every kind of media available. In spite of its absorbing nature, it is not the kind of love we will be considering today.

posed to Before we leave these two common emotions we call "love," let's look at some characteristic qualities associated with love, however it is defined. First of all, our feelings about another include

accepting that person for who he or she is with all their qualities, rather than ones we wish the other had. We also extend patience and understanding towards them. Generally, we also offer them trust.

Now that we have wandered about a little, let us focus on the kind of love defined by the philosopher and group leader, Thandeka, a brilliant black woman who spoke to us in Providence at the Liberal Religious Educators' conference in October. She kept telling us that Unitarian Universalists had "love beyond belief." Before we can understand what she means by this, we must address the kind of love she is describing. This is a definition of love similar to what the Greeks called "agape," love for our fellow creatures, the sort of love that bids us to see others not as threats, or objects of suspicion, or innately wrong or at odds with us, but as persons with whom we share a common life, with common needs.

It is this kind of love that moves us to feel deep sympathy and concern for the people of Haiti, and therefore to decide to follow their tragedy and to offer them aid. We may not know any Haitians personally, but that doesn't change our concern for their plight. We can imagine the terror of one earthquake after-shock after another. We can feel the grief of so many persons when they learn that one – or several – family members have died. We can feel their hunger or thirst. We can also determine not to forget the long-term requirements for re-building and re-organizing in their country that will be needed in the months to come. This sympathy, together with our giving tangible assistance, is one expression of this kind of love.

Many other people, as close as those in our towns on the Cape, also are homeless or hungry, without a job or health care, whose help we need to address. Again, we may not know them personally, but that does not diminish our responsibility to reach out with our help. Most of us in this congregation feel this kind of love and the personal obligation that goes with it.

Now, while Thandeka would include this interpretation of love on her message, what is also included is even closer to us gathered here today. We, as a congregation of Unitarian Universalists, have a particular relationship with one another. We affirm it when we say our Affirmation every Sunday, which mentions love twice. It is this love that we choose as a spirit to infuse our dealings with one another, in any of our connections with each other.

This love can be manifested in multiple ways, from our greetings to one another, including strangers, at our coffee hours, to volunteering in any of a dozen ways to help with our church's activities, to more focused caring, like that which many of you gave

me as I recovered from what was a mercifully mild stroke. It is the many, many small acts of love that makes our congregation friendly and truly seeking the truth in love.

Earlier in the service I read you a little about Bing Xin, the Chinese poet whose life spanned the twentieth century. Although she wrote poetry, essays, stories and children's books, and lived through the rise of communism in her country, she never lost sight of her primary focus, which was on the kind of human love I am talking about now. Without access to her writing, since hardly any of it is available in English, I cannot absolutely describe the precise nature of her version of love. From what I have read, because she was exposed to Western ideas beginning in her high school years, she developed an approach to universal love that merged Western humanistic thought with the Chinese philosophy of Mozi, writing in the 4th century. He espoused an idea of universal love, opposed Confucius, who promoted a higher value of family love than to people in general. Her experiences while a student in this country only reinforced her world view.

When the wartime militarism was popular in China, and was followed by the pragmatism of the Communists, Bing Xin quietly continued to write in her own style, extending her philosophy of love throughout her lifetime. Sadly, we cannot yet read much of her writings in English, but Chinese students as early as the high school level still read her works.

It is a tribute to the value of universal love that her belief in that love, in another country, has persisted for nearly a century. Her example can inspire us. As I have grown older, I have come to value this loving approach to everyday human interchange. Carrying a loving attitude into every moment is a state of mind, which influences what we do when we encounter life challenges. What do we do if we are approached with hostility? What if we happen to overhear others discussing a problem or challenge with anger and revenge on their lips? Certainly our world is full of anger, even more so now that many people are out of a job, have lost needed funds, or mourn a lost election.

I am not suggesting that we all turn into mindless Pollyannas. In recent weeks, dealing with my stroke, I have had moments of frustration and anger. I didn't love spending Christmas Day in the hospital. But neither did the nurses who were on duty. Besides, I was in no state to make cheery conversation with family and friends. There are certainly times when we must deal with the best humor possible with crabby or hostile people or a difficult situation.

However, what we bring to the mix of conversation and ideas can frequently influence the outcome of a potentially painful episode.

We are observing in the Senate these days what happens when a group of people decide to ignore not only a positive approach to problem solving, but, in fact, decide to defeat a President instead of working for the needs of its citizens. Playing on the anger and uncertainties of some voters, along with publicizing a few lies, the Senate's true role, to provide wise leadership, has sunk under the weight of anger. It is not unheard of for a congregation of any denomination, which is run by its membership, to function as destructively as the US Senate is now.

We, in this Meeting House, hold in our hands much power for good or for destructiveness. It has not been so long since some members were growling, albeit mostly under their breath. Thandeka, speaking about our UU "love beyond belief" could be said to refer to our very different theologies, which, in our congregation co-exist with general harmony. Be we atheists or possibly deists, we can agree that there are many ways to understand that which is difficult to explain. This, interpreted literally, is indeed "love beyond belief."

Would that any group of us could happily agree to every other decision that we as a group must make. I am still reeling from the controversy over what goes in front of the pulpit: flowers or chalice? Any record of the time spent in discussing that issue – with actually no resolution – will show us how acrimonious such a minor disagreement can be.

As we consider this minor issue, we need to return to the potential value of any difference between members, and go back to the need for "love beyond belief." When we do, I urge you to consider holding in your mind our love for others, including those members we may see several times a week. There is a key difference between being mindlessly pleasant and positive, and remembering that each of us thrives on kind words, positive acknowledgement of the small gifts we have given, in time or friendship, as well as the words of others, mentioning our good intent.

We cannot always agree, but we can all remember the cartoon character who reminded us: "If you can't say anything good, don't say nothin' at all!"

There is one more word to be said about love. I noticed in the material fed to me by the internet, that loving oneself is dismissed as "narcissism." Certainly a person whose only interest is in himself or herself is not great company. In addition, such a person is often

controlling, constantly steering others to focus on her, as was the mother in the film, "Precious." In that film, she never said a single positive word about her daughter. But such a world view is very different from knowing and honestly valuing oneself.

When we clear-headedly understand and value our true selves for who we are, we can then go on to value others in the same, clear and loving way. Generations of women, and some men, have been brought up to de-value or undervalue themselves. Jesus was onto something when he urged his disciples to "love your neighbor as yourself." A key part of "love beyond belief" is to realistically apply it to ourselves. At times we may have to counter those who delight in criticizing who we are or what we deeply believe, and it is then that our own self-valuation needs to be front and center, unwilling to pay serious attention to false claims.

At the same time, it always helps to be affirmed by the love of others in our beloved community. Let us consider the endless chances we have, day by day, to share a sliver of positive words, replies, responses with one another. If we focus on being the people who love beyond belief we may well find that we have transformed ourselves not to mention a host of others.

Bing Xin's daughter tells about their experience in Japan in 1946, following World War II, during which the Japanese had brutally occupied China. Her father had gone with his family to Japan to take a diplomatic post. She writes:

"I hated the Japanese. I gathered my Chinese friends to bully Japanese kids nearby... My mother found out and she ordered me to stop it right away. She said, 'Do you know how much ordinary Japanese suffered during the war? Do you know how much their women and children suffered because of the war? You need to learn that no government can 100percent represent the country's people.' That totally changed my view of nationalism."

Later, when Bing Xin became the first female professor at Tokyo University, she began to teach anti-war Chinese poems.

May our commitment to loving others, even in times of anger and hostility, find constructive paths to show itself in ways that move us deeper into the loving spiritual life. May we find more and more ways to love beyond belief.

Blessed be.

Delivered at the Chatham UU Meeting House

On January 24, 2010
By Rev. Vivienne Harmon Chapman