

“The Mystery and Power of Love”
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UU Congregation of the Susquehanna Valley
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(from reading)

Spirit of life and love,
light within and without,
mystery from which we have all emerged,
within which we live and die:
be with us now as we allow ourselves
to drop into the silence and stillness
at the center of our being.¹

Let us drop together into that silence and stillness

Let loose the stresses of this world, this day, this week, this time, and open
your heart to the vast mystery of the universe.

Breathe in that vastness

Breathe in that wonder

Breathe in the beauty that is creation

There is such deep mystery around and within us. The finest minds in
history devote themselves to the eternal task of revealing the truths of the
universe.

Scientists in laboratories explore the cosmos, while philosophers and seers
and poets and mystics explore things that science is unequipped to
address: things like kindness, compassion, love, generosity.

¹ Ludwig, Rev. Laura Holton, *Imprint of Love*, prayer, UUA Worship Web
<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/prayer/imprint-love>

Science does well studying things that follow a certain order of function: physical or energetic things that exist in three dimension in time that is linear. Physics – gravity, the magnetic attraction and resistance of electrons and protons and all the rest. A plant takes in nutrients, converts them to food, and released waste in the form of oxygen. That is transactional nature. Stuff goes in, gets used, and stuff is produced.

Human emotions are a different thing, though. Some emotions, or behaviors, appear to follow the same rules as those that govern our physical world: there is a need, which, when quenched, ceases to exist. A hole in the ground, or in our bodies, can be filled, healed, repaired, covered over.

But what of the spirit world?

I am not speaking of spirits in this case like those of scary stories told around campfires, or legends of ghosts or creatures from a time when magic was the standard answer for much of life's mystery.

I am talking about the spirit of our hearts: the emotions that appear as illogical, irrational, ungovernable, and occasionally self-destructive.

The realm of the human spirit is as vast and expansive as the cosmos in which we live – filled with experiences and emotions that shape and motivate us to engage in certain behaviors.

What is it that causes one abused child to grow up bitter and mean, while another, similarly mistreated, grows up to be generous and forgiving?

Psychologists and others have spent lifetimes trying to explain the vagaries of the human spirit.

Because, we, as humans, have a burning desire to *understand* things, to figure them out, dissect and explain, find the rational reasons for cause and effect, and then to file away the data in archives and repositories, where the theories remain until challenged by new learning.

But the truth of the matter is that there are some things that seem likely to forever remain beyond our understanding.

Will we ever be able to understand the human brain? All of it? Perhaps someday, scientists will achieve that end, but until then we must grapple with the mystery of our present experience.

In Christian scriptures, the Apostle Paul wrote to the emerging church in Corinth about the nature of love:

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.²

Ancient Hebrew and Greek texts describe love in a variety of ways, as typical in antiquity: there is Eros (romantic), Philia (friendship), Storge (family members), and agape (of God). Hebrew scholars, when explaining the biblical concept of love to those who may be neither Hebrew nor scholar, point to the language in Deuteronomy:

⁴ Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.^[a] ⁵ Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. ⁶ These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. ⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.³

In this language, love, or *ahavah*, is infused with a secondary characteristic beyond feelings of warmth or affection: a kind of embodiment “with your heart and soul and strength,” that imbues a commitment, a kind of loyalty, or faithfulness, to the love of the divine. Let these commandments be on your hearts, teach your children, keep them with you always.

Jesus cites the same Hebrew texts when challenged by the Pharisees in the Gospel According to Matthew:

² Holy Bible, NIV, 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

³ Ibid, Deuteronomy 6:4-7

³⁴ Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵ One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶ “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

³⁷ Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”^[c] ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’^[d] ⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”⁴

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Let us breathe in again that silence and stillness at the center of our beings.

Let us marvel at the mystery we find there.

The world is an imperfect, chaotic place, where resources and justice are not allotted fairly to all.

As creatures of this world, we, too, are imperfect.

We find ourselves falling short of our ideals, failing the people and things that feel most important to us.

How can we hope to prevail against so much chaos and irrationality? How can we hope to bring order and justice, compassion and love to the universe?

⁴ Ibid, Matthew 22:34-40

⁵ Ibid, Ludwig

The short answer, of course, is that we cannot. We are mere humans, infinitesimally small specs in the vastness of the cosmos.

And yet.

And yet, we understand the enormity of the feeling of love in our lives.

When we feel loved, or when we feel deep love for another, the terrifying scale of the universe falls away and we are wrapped, and rapt in the power of that love.

We fear that our love is insufficient to heal the brokenness of our world, insufficient to bring into alignment all that is wrong, or askew, or just a little bit sideways from what is ideal.

I return again to the human impulse for sorting and fixing, and finding answers that are neat and orderly and finite. Alas, we humans are as imperfect and irrational in our desire for order as the universe is imperfect and irrational in providing such closure.

When truth, and knowledge, like the universe itself, continue to be revealed and understood, nothing is finite, nothing is permanent, nothing is set, as it were, in stone.

Theodore Parker wrote and spoke his thoughts about that which is permanent and that which is transient in Christianity.

Knowledge, he said, and interpretation of that knowledge is what is transient in religion. What is permanent, though, is a deep truth rooted in love as described by both Hebrew and Christian texts: embodied, loyal, generous, neither boastful, proud, or jealous, but abiding, lasting, miraculous.

It is worth noting that neither set of texts describes love as perfect, unerring, or fair. Love is as open-ended and revolutionary as the expanding cosmos.

As humans, we tend to sell ourselves short. We consider the labels of “imperfect” and “irrational,” as negative things.

Yet, we understand the universe to be irrational and imperfect – because we use those words to build boundaries around behavior and phenomena that can be explained by our current scientific understandings. As humans, we take it as a personal affront that the universe defies being boxed in by our meager attempts to define it.

It is that irrationality that offers us an opportunity to perform magic, because we are every bit as magical and amazing and expansive as the universe to which we so readily acknowledge our connection to and interdependence upon.

Astrophysicist and (I would argue) philosopher Neil Degrasse Tyson offers his assessment of the human condition even as he looks up at the stars in the heavens:

See those lights flashing like paparazzi? Each one is a supernova – the blazing death of a giant star. Stars die and are born in places like this one, a stellar nursery, they condense like raindrops from giant clouds of gas and dust. They get so hot, that the nuclei of the atoms fuse together deep within them to make the oxygen we breath, the carbon in our muscles, the calcium in our bones, the iron in our blood. All was cooked in the fiery hearts of long vanished stars. You, me, everyone, we are made of star-stuff.

With each and every one of us made of literal stardust, how can we doubt, then, that we have the power to affect change in our small little corner of the universe?

We fear that our humanity limits our capacity to affect change, but that runs counter to an understand of ourselves as made of the same material as the stars in the heavens.

Poet Marianne Williamson advises us that we are not meant to present an under-sized version of ourselves to the world:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate.
Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?

Actually, who are you not to be?

You are a child of God.

Your playing small does not serve the world.

There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you.

We are all meant to shine, as children do.

We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.

It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone.

And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.

As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.⁶

And how could anyone ever say that love is anything less than miraculous, and beautiful, and healing and powerful and magic and true?

We – you and I – were born to offer this amazing, magical, irrational gift of love to the world. And we were born with the blessing of an expansive mind, one that, despite its affection for sharp lines of definition, is capable of believing in realities beyond that which we can define up close and personal. We know that the universe is vast and amazing without having to visit each star system to deem it so.

We, too, can know that the power of our love can affect change. We have witnessed it, we have received it, we have felt it, and we have the capacity to create and offer that love on our own.

We are in the season of holidays and holy days. The earth is nearing the nadir of its annual trek around our star and preparing to again welcome the sunlight of a new year.

⁶ Williamson, Marianne; [A Return To Love: Reflections on the Principles of A COURSE IN MIRACLES](#), Harper One, Reissue Edition, 1996

Let us greet this time and one another with the love that we have been wired to offer, and may we find the still, quiet place, where we are able to receive the love the universe has to offer us.

Amen.