

Janet said, a few weeks ago, “would you like to do a talk on the power of transformative love?” She’s such a smooth talker, that I paid no attention to the little voice in my head that whispered, “This topic might be kinda consuming.” Actually, I’m pretty sure that I replied, “I’d love to!” There’s that “L” word again.

Here are a few of my notes. It has been a really fun and interesting project, that just grew and grew. What a glorious mess! But, I did want to bring a somewhat cohesive message this morning. So, I metaphorically threw all of this raw material into my internal moonshine still, sealed ‘er up, lit the fire, and let it cook. I set my jug under the curly copper tube, and here are some of the distillations. Hope it’s a good batch. This talk is going to be more anecdotal than analytical, and maybe some of my stories and shared poems will resonate with you.

Unitarian Universalists’ seven principles are deep, and true; my moral and spiritual road map. I really, really like them. As I think about it, though, I realize that we’re not here this morning to talk about affirming and promoting “transformative really, really LIKING”. We’re using the other “L” word today. If our principles are a road MAP, then transformative LOVE happens on the road TRIP, via the potholes and detours and sunsets and unexpected encounters that transform and move us as we travel. Life’s road trips changes us all; every one of us on this planet. Sometimes it’s falling in love or finding a new, fun place to stay. Sometimes it’s encountering hatred or having NO place to stay. Love’s certainly not the only transformative force around. Step back with me for a moment and just think about our earth, and picture the collective changes we’re all undergoing every instant. Fascinating, isn’t it, to think about where this continual transformation may take us as a species? I believe that there are tipping points, meta-transformations, that create sweeping changes in whole populations. I wonder what some of those changes might be? Are you getting nervous? I am, a little, and this is the point in many sermons where the speaker downshifts to apocalyptic predictions, and pitches the blue light special on salvation insurance. Not me, not today. My downshift is to Transformative Love. Our best choice, logically, morally, and spiritually is to learn more about how we can lovingly create shared road maps, and shared road trips, that take us on better journeys.

So, what exactly IS transformative love, anyhow? For that matter, what’s LOVE? Of course, I know what it is. We all do, right? It’s true love, false love, blind love, mothers’ love, eternal love, forbidden love, unrequited love (That sucks. Is there such a thing as requited love? Doesn’t sound particularly romantic, either.) Where was I? Brotherly love, courtly love, jealous love, free love (as opposed to ...costly love?), even muskrat love.....The list goes on. It’s a very big topic.

Out of all the different kinds of love, I want to focus on two that I think can be especially transformative.

AGAPE, as many of you know, has an interesting history, and various definitions. It's spiritual love; unselfish love; an attempt to replicate the kind of love that might exist between us and god. I associate it with NAMASTE, seeing and honoring the divinity that's in all of us; "I see you", in the spiritual sense. I also connect a feeling of appreciative wonder with the concept of agape. Agape is very congruent with our seven principles. It's a goal to be sought. It's work, and "worth the work", as Jules said in her presentation a few weeks ago.

I'll bet you can guess the second kind of love that's particularly transformative. I'll give you some clues. It's totally openhearted, spontaneous, and childlike. Not anywhere near as cerebral as Agape. I'll bet you've all felt it. Give up? Think 4th grade. My classmate, Elaine. Pigtailed. Fastest runner at Rossman Elementary. Lived on my street. She sent me a note that said, "Do you want to be my boyfriend? Please check yes or no." (She's a corporate teamwork specialist now.) I checked "YES", and she waved at me from across the room. Got it yet? Think Cocker Spaniel. YES! I'm thinking the second transformative love is Puppy Love. It's all in, no reservations, unabashed. Lots of us still feel it toward puppies, but not as much with each other. What the heck happened to Puppy Love? For me, I got my heart broken, got careful, listened too much to people telling me I had to be cool, got testosterone, became a "professional". I think puppy love's still in us, it's just covered with scars and scares.

During the 4 or 5 years that my youngest son, Daniel, was living in Denver, I was traveling quite a bit, flying in and out of DIA, so I was able to extend trips and spend a fair amount of time there, in and around different art, music, ethnic, and lifestyle-based "subcultures". We call other ways of living "subcultures", from the comfortable cloak of our own culture. But when you're the only straight, pot bellied, non-smoking, sober, white, old fart from Wyoming in the crowd at a "big city" open mike or poetry slam, it's pretty clear who's the "subculture".

I had gotten to know Amy, one of Daniel's friends, over several visits. She was early 20's, smart, articulate, good writer, sorting out big age and stage and lifestyle changes, kind of unsure of herself at times. Well, Amy decided it would be good to go public with her lively internal dialog at a poetry slam. If you haven't heard about poetry slams, they are part of the spoken word movement, speaking original poetry on stage, often in the same rowdy environments as open mike musical performances. The crowds are enthusiastic, sometimes distracted, given to pretty direct feedback. Honestly, my initial, internal characterization of slam poetry was "loud, strident, pushy, angst-ridden, gratuitous F-bomb-infused venting". But, I had decided that, if my friend and Daniel's friend, Amy, was into it, I would be "open" to it. Very gracious of me, don't you think?

So, Amy had her debut. She and Daniel and I and a couple other friends of his were sitting together, nervous for her because we knew how nervous she was. It was Amy's

turn, and, looking shaky, she went up onto the stage...and nailed it. And, as they say, the crowd went wild. And she also nailed me. I was overwhelmed by the raw openness, trust, challenge, skill and love in Amy's words. Amy came bounding back through the crowd, took one look at me and exclaimed, "Daniel! I made your Dad cry!" And, having sensed that I hadn't previously been a true fan of slam poetry, I guess she figured my tears were at least as good a tribute as the audience's standing ovation.

Not a world changer, maybe, but transformative nonetheless. Amy saw that she had power, even beyond her peer group, and she was right in thinking that going on stage was healthy and strengthening for her. Within the same year, she went to a national poetry slam competition, and won first place. I was jolted out of being an arms-length, arm chair, well-meaning observer, into the much richer space of really "being there". That's often a challenge for me. And I am still the old fart from Wyoming, which is OK.

The poem I'll play for you now isn't Amy's, but it's also from the spoken word movement. The performer is Andrea Gibson, whose poem "ENOUGH" subtly suggests to me that she's probably done some thinking about transformative love.

"ENOUGH"

Last night i painted a purple tree on my bedroom wall
 I woke up this morning in a pile of leaves
 The color of a million different faces
 Thinking of the hand that planted the seed
 Of the family tree
 That grew us all
 And how each one of us
 Will one day fall back to the ground

This morning
 I was listening to my heart pound
 Knowing that with every beat
 A thousand other hearts
 Were falling asleep forever
 On a day they never thought they would
 And i know there are tribes of aborigines
 That decide how and when they'll die
 After a hundred years or so
 They walk into the desert
 Offering up their breath
 And within two minutes
 Soar into a death
 As beautiful as their life
 And i was thinking i
 Will probably never be enlightened enough

To decide how i want to die

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So this morning
I decided how i want to live
What i want to give
What kind of song i want to sing
Now i'm no longer
Looking at my days like they're a cup
Calling them half empty or half full
When they've always been enough
They'll always be enough
To fill me up
If i stop thinking so much
And start drinking them up
Until i get so drunk and high on my days
I'll be walking up to strangers and saying things like
"Hey, i know jesus was born in a manger
But i woke at dawn today
To watch the earth's horizon
Give birth to the true rising sun of god
And i can't stop singing halleluja"
Can you believe we're here?
Can you believe there are gods somewhere praying to us?
I want to be like that nut on the bus
Who's really a prophet
Telling everybody
"Smoking is bad
Stop it!
You might be an opera singer someday
And how are you gonna hit the high notes?"
I want to be like those high notes
That rise from the throats of old ladies
When they see little babies
Riding in shopping carts
I want to start somebody's heart like that
Taking ninety years back
So you'll have sworn
You weren't born
Until you saw me
Planting roses in the sidewalk cracks
So when you trip
You'll fall in love
With someone you thought you hated
And now look what that love has created

Look

There's a sky
On her faded blue jeans
With a flock of birds
About to fly to my words
And my next line's
Gonna rhyme with her eyes
And she'll wink
And think i'm as beautiful as him

I want to live my life
Like it's a little league game
I don't care if i win
I just want to watch some little girl
Get her very first hit
Watch her father cheer so hard
That he spills his beer
And decides to quit
I want to split some woman's
Tired eyes open
Wake her with her own sunrise
So she knows
There's a reason to be hoping
She'll say
"There are stingers in my heart
But i'm sure that i'm a queen"
And that night
She'll vow to swarm
Until every angry car horn
Is reborn a song
Of let there be light
Every angry war cry reborn
A song of let there be life

I want to build a timid teenage boy
A microphone that will
Echo his rhymes
The same way they echo in the shower
When he's home alone

I want to write poems
In the tone
Of your mother's eyes
When she whispered your name
For the very first time
Poems that will make you go home
Pick up the phone

And call her
 Well i called mine to say
 "You know those lines
 On the kitchen wall
 Where i grew taller and taller and taller
 Put a couple more there, won't you?
 Cause i'm growing up here"
 No longer looking at my days
 Like they're a cup
 Calling them enough
 From now on
 They'll be overflowing
 Since now i'm knowing
 It's up to me
 To fill them up

Thinking about what we've discussed so far, several balances emerge for me: If we are to truly affirm and promote transformative love, careful study of the "road MAP", and exuberant participation and immersion in the "road TRIP" are BOTH essential, if we seek to be both mindful and impactful participants in the unfolding of our world.

The positive effect of transformative love is dependent upon both the potency of the message, and the openness of the listener.

What gets in the way of affirming and promoting transformative love seems to be fear, and anger, and people and groups of people being "too different" from each other. Legitimately, wars and disasters and tragedies and atrocities make it difficult for those who are victimized (or victimizers) to be open to transformative love. When it's very difficult for people to become open, "affirming and promoting" demands incredible perseverance, patience..... and openness on our part.

Last week, I was in Atlanta for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention's annual leadership conference. There was a very diverse group of about 400 people there, mostly volunteer leaders from the 75 or so local AFSP chapters around the country. Pretty much all of us had a strong personal story regarding suicide. When I told people back home where I had been, common reactions were, "That must have been depressing, or sad." I certainly understand that response. Part of our common ground at the conference was our shared experience of loss, which has been a strong motivator for people to get involved in their own communities, or with the national organization. But the predominant culture of the conference, and of the group, was very much congruent with today's topic of "affirming and promoting transformative love". Nobody said those exact words, as far as I know; we just did it, partly by reaching out and supporting each other, and just being together in a very enriching way, and partly by celebrating: 75 vital and

effective local chapters. Tens of thousands of people participating in walks and other events. Thousands being trained in suicide prevention and intervention around the country. Successful campaigns to change laws and regulations, to better address this issue and support those who are affected. Millions of dollars of research funded, to better understand and prevent suicide. We planned, and shared strategies for doing more in the coming year.

So I was already pretty darn transformed by the power and scope of what our group does together. It's such a strong culture of support, caring, and purpose. Then, early on the second day of the conference, each person in this large group introduced themselves and very briefly spoke about what had moved them to get involved with AFSP. One volunteer I'd talked with a couple of times earlier in the conference, stood, when it was her turn, and spoke softly. "I'm so grateful to be part of our group, and thank you all for working so hard to find ways that other families can be spared the tragedies that many of us have endured. I became a volunteer with the foundation, because my son killed himself several years ago, right after he murdered several other students in his high school." And she sat down. And it was the next person's turn.

Transformative, for all involved; for her to make that courageous statement to this group, for others to hear it, for her to be accepted, valued, and loved as a member of this hard working group.

Affirming and promoting transformative love isn't a fairy tale. Sometimes it's just hard work. I'm sure that every person in the group in Atlanta, as with our fellowship, doesn't have the exact same feelings about all of this. There's no cookie cutter. But here's the thing about that. Clearly, our shared vision and experience of both road map and road trip, includes:

"We care about and accept each other as we are."

"We make a difference".

"We step up when someone needs our support."

And that helps to create a setting which affirms and promotes transformative love.

I'd like to play a second poem of Andrea Gibson's, which also addresses transformative love, in that very powerful Spoken Word genre. Referring back to my distillation metaphor, this poem, "DIVE", is a bit more "White Lightning" than sipping whiskey. It's only fair to let you know that this one's pretty edgy; not the standard fare for our Sunday mornings. Brief adult language and situations, and intensely redeeming social value. My intent is to share with you what I experience as a moving and transformative poem, not to shock you. So, truly, if white lightning's not your preference today, taking a break, and having coffee and snacks in the kitchen is a good thing, too, and we'll compare notes during discussion time in a couple of minutes.

“ DIVE”

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i often repeat myself
and the second time's a lie.

i love you
i love you
see what i mean, i don't
...and i do

and i'm not talking about a girl i might be kissing on
i'm talking about this world i'm blissing on
and hating
at the exact same time
see life....doesn't rhyme
it's bullets...and wind chimes
it's lynchings and birthday parties
it's the rope that ties the noose
and the rope that hangs the backyard swing
it's a boy about to take his life
and with a knife to his wrist
he's thinking of only two things
his father's fist
and his mother's kiss
and he can't stop crying

it's wanting to speak
the most honest poem I've ever spoken in my life
not knowing if that poem should bring you closer
to living or dying
drowning or flying
cause life....doesn't rhyme

last night i prayed myself to sleep
woke this morning
to find god's obituary scrolled in tears on my sheets
then walked outside to hear my neighbor
erase ten thousand years of hard labor
with a single note of his violin
and the sound of the traffic rang like a hymn
as the holiest leaf of autumn fell from a plastic tree limb
beautiful....and ugly

like right now
i'm needing nothing more than for you to hug me
and if you do
i'm gonna scream like a caged bird
see...life doesn't rhyme
sometimes love's a vulgar word
sometimes hate calls itself peace on the nightly news
i've heard saints preaching truths
that would have burned me at the stake
i've heard poets telling lies that made me believe in heaven

sometimes i imagine hitler at seven years old
a paintbrush in his hand at school
thinking "what color should I paint my soul?"

sometimes i remember myself with track marks on my tongue
from shooting up convictions
that would have hung innocent men from trees
have you ever seen a mother falling to her knees
the day her son dies in a war she voted for

can you imagine how many gay teenage lives were saved
the day matthew shepherd died

could there have been anything louder
than the noise inside his father's head
when he begged the jury
please don't take the lives of the men
who turned my son's skull to powder
and i know nothing would make my family prouder
than giving up everything i believe in
still nothing keeps me believing
like the sound of my mother breathing

life doesn't rhyme

it's tasting your rapist's breath
on the neck of a woman who loves you more
than anyone has loved you before
then feeling holy as jesus
beneath the hands of a one night stand
who's calling somebody else's name

it's you never feeling so greedy
than when you're handing out dollars to the needy
it's you not eating meat for the last seven years

then seeing the kindest eyes i've ever seen in my life
on the face of a man with a branding iron in his hand
and a beat down baby calf wailing at his feet

it's choking on your beliefs
it's your worst sin saving your fucking life
it's the devil's knife carving holes into your soul
so angels will have a place to make their way inside

life doesn't rhyme

still life is poetry- not math
all the world's a stage
but the stage is a meditation mat

you tilt your head back

you breathe
when your heart is broken you plant seeds in the cracks
and you pray for rain

you teach your sons and daughters
that there are sharks in the water

but the only way to survive
is to breathe deep

and dive

Thanks for being here with me today. Our fellowship is both a sheltering refuge, and a source of challenge for me, and most certainly a place that affirms and promotes transformative love, on both my road map and my road trip.
Closing words today are an odd little poem that seems to fit here, for some reason.

LOVE LIKE WATER

Love, like water, creates and sustains us.
Sometimes, it's almost invisible.
In our foolish pride, we pretend we can own it, or contain it, or explain it.

Water, like love, is durable.
We agonize about "saving" the water, but we needn't worry.
We can't destroy it.
Our endless varieties of sewage may contaminate it,
And it may disappear into the earth and into the sky to cleanse itself,
The cleansing only takes an instant, in water years.
For us, though, the wait for the water to return may be too long.
Water can do without people, much longer than people can do without water.

Some animals can't learn how to drink when they're born, and they die.
Most of us forget how to love as we "grow up", and we start to wither.

But whenever we touch even one tiny drop of the love waiting inside us,
We remember, and we truly grow -
In love.