

Love is one of those words I find a little annoying. It is both noun and verb, specific and general, precise and yet ambiguous, powerful and yet weak. In both speaking and hearing the word, we can attach lots of different meanings to it, and that can get us into a lot of trouble.

The Greeks had more than one word that translates as love, which is far more useful.

There is storge – empathic or familial love - affection through the fondness of familiarity, that of family members, or people who relate in familiar ways who have otherwise found themselves bonded by chance. An example is the natural love and affection of a parent for their child. It is described as the most natural, emotive, and widely diffused of loves.

Friendly love – philia - is the strong bond existing between people who share common values, interests or activities, such as friends or colleagues or comrades in arms. There is eros - romantic, passionate love driven by desire.

We're all familiar with these kinds of love. They are a central part of what makes us human, essential to the human condition. They bring us both pain and joy, disappointment and delight.

And then there is Greek word for divine love, agape. In Christian theology, this is the love of God for humanity. In a broader sense, it is that universal, unconditional love which persists regardless of changing circumstance, and this kind of love shows up in one form or another in many cultures and places.

This is what we talk about when we talk about love in Unitarian Universalism, and it is very specifically grounded in our Universalist heritage.

Universalist Christians believed in universal salvation; that a just and loving God would not – could not - condemn anyone to eternal torment, that all souls were eventually reconciled with God. This was in sharp contrast to the prevailing belief that salvation was for the elect, and that morality depended on fear – that people would not act well without the threat of punishment at the hands of an angry God.

Indeed, you could get out of jury duty by being a Universalist – since people thought you couldn't possibly judge moral issues if you believed in divine forgiveness.

There's a story told about an exchange between the prominent Universalist preacher Hosea Ballou and a more traditional religionist.

The man said, ""Brother Ballou, if I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle, and ride away, and I'd still go to heaven.""

Ballou looked at him and said: "If you were a Universalist, the idea would never occur to you."

The idea of universal salvation is still suspect, still considered heretical. Not so long ago the evangelical pastors Rob Bell and Carlton Pearson were driven from their churches when they dared to preach the message of universal reconciliation and question the torments of Hell.

But they weren't preaching anything new, really. Hear the words of the early Universalist minister Elhanan Winchester, published in 1788.

How dreadful the thought that God should punish his creatures to all eternity without having the least design for their good or happiness! Can a wise and good God punish for no purpose, but merely satisfy what they call vindictive justice, which they say can never be satisfied to all eternity? Endless Misery seems to reflect upon the character of God, and for that very reason I cannot believe it to be true.

The idea of universal salvation rapidly expanded into the idea of a more inclusive religion based in universal love. If God loves everybody unconditionally, then how could we aspire to less?

This aspiration led many Universalists to be early advocates for many social reforms - including the abolition of slavery, women's rights, & prison reform. Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman" speech was given at a women's rights convention held at a Universalist church. Clara Barton, the first president of the American Red Cross, was a Universalist. The Universalists were the first to ordain women, and by the time women gain the right to vote in this county in 1920, 88 women had been ordained as Universalist ministers, while the Unitarians had ordained 42 women.

By that time, the Universalists were contending – and contending very strongly - that the hell we must concern ourselves with is not hell in the next world, but the hell we humans create right here on earth.

And so we are called to love the hell out of this world.

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I want to pause this line of thought a minute and weave in a few other threads before I return to it.

The first of these is that our theology is obviously no longer Judeo-Christian. We hold that lineage as one of our sources, if not the primary source. But I don't want to forget that our journey as a faith has taken us through humanism, and also draws from many other sources.

Humanism asks the question, “What is the source of our values and ethics?”

It answers that our ethical values are derived from human needs and interests as tested by experience. They arose from our evolutionary history as social animals. Being social animals, humans needed rules for living together. And the basic rule is that we must not behave in an antisocial manner; that we should help and support our fellow members of society and act, not for ourselves alone, but for family, friends and the whole community. We succeeded not as individuals, but as groups.

One of the more obvious proofs of this is that we see similar values and ethical constraints across all human cultures, theist and non-theist.

Another question it asks is, “Who or what will save us, if not ourselves?” No one, it answers. Which aligns remarkably well with the Universalist insistence on humanity solving humanity’s problems rather than waiting or relying on God’s aid.

Humanism is also concerned with love. To quote Michael Werner, past president of the American Humanist Association:

For all the talk about reason and science, humanism is really about a passionate love affair. It is a love affair with life, not a mythical hereafter. Humanism is a love affair with a progressive vision of civilization where each of us can add to our growing library of wisdom, our evolving knowledge of what there is, and what is truly important. None of the great achievements in history would have been possible without a love of the adventure of learning and of creating a better life. We have great cultural achievements in science, art, music, literature, philosophy, history, psychology, and political thought that all inform each other and were borne of that long humanist tradition.

He goes on to say:

Humanism is merely that ongoing, evolving life stance that challenges us beyond atheism, beyond our own self-centeredness, and beyond our own fear of larger commitments to embrace the best of what we and society can be.

... Some have neglected to use the full breadth of humanism’s resources. Some would see science answering everything we need to know, but that ignores the many tools the humanities have given us. Democracy and the concepts of human rights are gifts of history and civilization. Philosophy gives us tools for critical thinking and a conceptual framework. Literature and art heightens our awareness about what values are important. As Curtis Reese, one of the founders

of modern-day humanism, said we must relate to others in a purposeful fashion in order to “weave the best personal values into a noble social order.”

What is Beloved Community if not a vision of a noble social order?

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Another thread I want to weave in this morning comes from another source, the Peruvian Andes, and two of the foundational principles of their culture, as expressed by their mystics and shamans. There are many other principles, and they work with complex religious and social technologies, but I want to keep things simple.

The first of these is *Munay*, which could be translated a love, but simply means unconditional acceptance. Unconditional acceptance of what? Everything. Everyone.

Yes, even those other people. You know the ones I’m talking about.

The second is *Ayni*, the principle of reciprocal sharing, based on respect for every living thing, and whose desired outcome is that all interactions – social, personal, energetic, commercial – be mutually beneficial.

The Peruvians are also trying to build a noble social order. As are all peoples, in one fashion or another.

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Before I return to where I left off, I want to return to the concept of *agape*.

It’s not surprising that quite a number of theologians have spent quite a lot of time on this subject. Theologians love to analyze and debate the finer points of scripture and meaning. Which is a good thing, as it keeps them off the streets and out of trouble.

And although they don’t always agree on everything, most of them agree that what distinguishes this higher love from other kinds of love is how it reciprocates.

Agape is about right action in response to the realities of the world. *Agape* returns evil with good, with forgiveness and healing.

With that which serves the greater good, with what is mutually beneficial.

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The threads converge, and weave themselves into a strong and beautiful cloth.

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So.. back to this business of loving the hell out of this world.

The most helpful way to talk about this kind of love is to say it promotes overall well-being, the survival and flourishing of ALL sentient beings. All beings want to survive and flourish. It's in their nature. It's what evolution designed us to desire.

And this love does not require us to feel all warm and fuzzy about people, or things, or events. I think this trips a lot of us up.

Because we are human, those kinds of thoughts and feelings can help, but they can also get in the way.

Love asks to accept them as they are. We don't necessarily have to like them, or agree with them, or support their actions. We don't have to feel affection. But we have to meet them with open hearts.

And we are required to reciprocate in mutually beneficial ways, which means being absolutely and utterly inclusive.

One last thing: love is not enough.

Love defines the field of action, as it were, and it helps guide our actions. But we also need to bring our intellects, our reason, our compassion, and our understanding to the field of action.

Love must be balanced and measured by these things so that it can be effective, and create lasting change. To create a just and noble social order.

It takes all of our gifts and skills and talents to love the hell out of this world.

And that's what we mean when we talk about love.