

Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley

Bethlehem, PA

How Great Is Your Love?



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About a month ago, I attended the Unitarian Universalist Mid-Atlantic Community, a UU summer institute, or UUMAC, as it is known for short. UUMAC is something I look forward to all year; it's my own Brigadoon community. Like that Scottish legend, it appears for a short time after a year of seeming to vanish. While the people who come to UUMAC aren't any more perfect than people are anywhere else, it DOES strike me that somehow we get so many things right. There is earnest and prolonged debate about the most inclusive practices, the most loving way to set a limit on someone's behavior, and abundant attention paid to meeting needs more often forgotten. We go way beyond offering a vegetarian option in planning meals and only our own UU General Assembly is more serious and intentional about mobility issues and meeting the needs of people with disabilities-those you can see from the outside and those you can't see and wouldn't know about without asking.

The most compelling thing for me about UUMAC is the way we go out of our way to accept and welcome every person who attends and include them in any activity they're drawn to. I looked over the list of past leadership and found a pretty even balance between women and men. Every part of the LGBTQ population, (*lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender people and those who identify as gender queer*) is not only represented, but accepted as routine, and when appropriate, celebrated. Two of our highest profile and most loved members are a lesbian couple who got married as soon as the law in their state allowed it. Their daughter was my son's first girlfriend and my family was invited to their wedding-which was held at their UU church with the reception catered by their congregation. Another regular is a transgender man, one of the funniest and most caring people you could meet. For the past 3 or so years our number has included a person who does not identify as either female or male-that's the gender queer part; they are accepted and valued. It would never occur to any of us to declare them unfit for a role at UUMAC because either their gender identity is different than most people. Indeed, that difference may make them even more in need of acceptance than most of us.

One of the partners in the lesbian couple posted on our private Facebook site that in light of the violence in Orlando in early June, she was particularly looking forward to the safety and love of UUMAC this year. For those of you who don't know what I'm talking about, there was a shooting incident in the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida where a lone gunman killed 49 gay men and wounded 53 others. Actually, one of the people killed was a mother who flung her body in front of her gay son to shield him from a bullet meant for him. And while the Rosewood massacre of 1923 and the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890, both of which targeted people of color, are also a part of American history and the death count from each of these exceeds that of Orlando, the Pulse nightclub gun violence was the worst mass murder in modern American history.

So, you can understand the importance of safety and acceptance, especially for people who live in the shadow of risk and exclusion.

You've all met UUMAC's minister of the week! Rev. Libby, who has done such a wonderful job in this pulpit over the past few weeks, ministered to the UUMAC community as well. She and our theme speaker, the Reverend Doctor Tracy Sprowls worked together to coordinate the message and impact of both worship and the week's theme talks. Our worship was grounded in ideas of Radical Hospitality and our

theme talks were about Radical Justice. The word “*radical*”, in both cases, didn’t mean wild-eyed or crazy weird, but it did mean stretching ourselves to look beyond current practice surrounding both words. The word “*radical*” originally meant “*root*”, as in fundamental or essential and in both of these cases, calls us to look further than our usual practices and AUDIT ourselves. We were challenged to look beyond our current ideas about both hospitality and justice and find the gaps that are out of our awareness and that we have come to tolerate. Where are we not hospitable and welcoming? Where do our efforts to pursue justice stop?

Rev. Tracy, our theme speaker, used the phrase “*How great is your love?*” on the last full day of UUMAC, and with it, proposed a shift in our thinking about religion. Instead of focusing on belief, we can choose to focus on who we love, how we show that love, and whether or not we accept limits on that love. And of course, by love, I’m referring to the same kind of love that I talked about earlier this year. There are many different kinds of love, and I don’t want any of you to begin by misunderstanding me. I referred to *metta*, the Buddhist concept of loving-kindness, or benevolence, or good will and that is the kind of love that I’m talking about today. You can extend it to the idea of the love between friends or neighbors, but just so you know, I’m not talking about a Valentine’s Day greeting card kind of love!

Rev. Tracy’s question, “*How great is your love?*” inspires a shift in our thinking about the meaning of religion. Any number of prominent religious thinkers from the past and from our own time have made the shift, including Meister Eckhart and mystics generally, Mother Theresa and our own Peter Morales, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association. All of them, in both word and deed, have claimed a greater allegiance to love than to doctrine or shared belief. They all have their own private beliefs, of course, and those beliefs undoubtedly compel their actions, but they do not demand that everyone believe the same as them, and they do not withhold help from those with different beliefs.

Their actions say loud and clear that love is more important as an orienting principle than belief. Morales has been quite explicit about love being the foundation of his religion. He writes:

I am now convinced that “belief,” in the way we usually use the word, is actually the enemy of faith, religion, and spirituality. Let me say that again: *belief is the enemy of faith*. When we dwell on beliefs we ask all the wrong questions. My faith is much more about what I love than about what I think.¹

One consequence of making religion about belief rather than love is that it leaves us vulnerable to conflicts between those who believe one thing and those who believe something else. **The classic Unitarian Universalist conflict of belief is between those who believe in God and those who do not believe in God.**

A former professor of mine at Moravian Seminary said this kind of conflict isn’t unique to Unitarian Universalism, it’s just that other denominations split the hair a little finer.² They insist that only their religion’s views are correct. Issues such as age at baptism, method of baptism, Jesus versus Christ, what happens to the bread and wine in Holy Eucharist, whether we say Eucharist or Communion, who wrote the Bible, the place of

¹ Morales, Rev. Peter, *Belief is the enemy of faith*, UU World, 9/16/2013, fall, 2013.

² Simmons, Steve, director of continuing education at MTS

women in church, whether or not to ordain gay people, whether or not to require a seminary education before ordination, who can talk to God, etc, etc, rock their world and in many cases, cause splits in their church and spin off new religious denominations.

I have to laugh a little at people who say “all Christians believe this”, or “all Christians act this way” because they demonstrably don't all believe the same things or act the same way. They're just as likely to show up at a rally against some form of social injustice and hold protest signs; they're just as likely to be rowdy party animals, and they're just as likely to help people in need-without regard for religious belief and certainly without some kind of creedal requirement. So, I agree with Rev. Libby that for many people, exploring religion includes God language and that we may have false perceptions around those theists called Christians and that this denomination would benefit by overcoming this particular conflict.

And I want to be crystal clear that I am NOT advocating for any particular position. Let me say that again-I am NOT advocating for any position on the theist to atheist scale. People should be able to pursue meaning in their own way without being looked down upon. I am going to propose a way to get out of this particular conflict that leaves all of us free to pursue meaning using God language or without using God language. I only use this particular conflict as an example!

Like any difference of opinion, it has the potential to become a conflict when we begin to take an antagonistic stance and make negative assumptions about those whose views are not the same as ours. And I've heard both of these conditions coming from the mouths of both the theist and the atheist camp. You and I may not agree that this conflict is the most important one to resolve in order to grow Unitarian Universalism, but it IS a conflict and it comes up over and over, so I think it's worth our while to talk about conflict and to use this one as an example.

I discovered the work of Kenneth Cloke by accident. I was looking for ways that conflict management and spirituality might relate and his name kept coming up, so I began to be very deliberate in my search and look for his writings. He has worked as a lawyer, a judge, and a mediator, and is currently Director of the Center for Dispute Resolution in Santa Monica, California.³ ***I find his work absolutely fascinating and very congruent with my own training in counseling.*** In addition to the heavily intellectual language you and I might expect from an author with his degrees in law related areas, I found that his understanding of the emotional aspects of conflict gave a richness and nuance to the subject that I did not expect to find.

He describes the process of mediation in 5 steps, the first 3 of which are pretty much what many of you have heard of. 1) stop the fighting and de-escalate the confrontation, 2) settle the issues, develop strategies, come up with an action plan if you will, for dealing with the immediate problem, and 3) uncover and resolve the underlying emotional reasons for the conflict.

However steps 4 and 5 begin to go deeper, into territory we might label spiritual. Step 4 is to transform the conflict with understanding of each of the parties to the conflict. Transformation usually involves forgiveness, perhaps of each other. We may recognize that our own unrealistic expectations contributed to the conflict and, as author Annie Dillard wrote, “we give up all hopes of having a better past”.

Cloke calls Step 5 transcendence. Transcendence is that point where the conflict we were experiencing is no longer a conflict. Differences may remain, but we no longer experience the antagonism of a conflict. Those in

³ <http://kennethcloke.com/booksandarticles.htm>

disagreement have transcended their disagreements. This is not to say that they don't disagree-it's just that those disagreements don't come between them and they are able to move on to other things. They are truly reconciled.

Worth noting is the fact that our collective ability and experience in how to do these 5 steps gets progressively thinner as we ascend. Many people know how to de-escalate a conflict. Fewer, but still several people know how to settle the immediate issues. A much smaller number of people have skill in addressing the emotions underlying a conflict and the numbers of those who can forgive and then achieve full reconciliation is almost miniscule!⁴

I'm sure that there are people who look askance at the ideas of forgiveness and reconciliation. We've all encountered people who have difficulty with forgiveness and any related subjects, such as apology, acknowledging error, holding grudges, trust, or anger. And frankly, the word reconciliation, for me, came with a lot of institutional religious baggage. It conjured up images of restoring relationship to what I saw as an abusive God and I wasn't sure I wanted that. I wanted to serve a hurting world, but I had reservations based on false perceptions. **The question I finally had to ask myself was:** Am I willing to reconsider my assumptions so that I am free to serve the world? There were really 2 levels to my conflict, my own personal reluctance to trust people who had hurt me, and the conflict at a larger level wherein I believed that hurt stemmed from a different belief system. It took a sustained experience of people with different beliefs than my own for me to consistently see the humanity I had in common with people who have a strong belief in God. During my 4 ½ years in seminary, I interacted daily with theists, and came to know them as people who possess the same endearing characteristics **and** the same maddening characteristics as the people in this church. They are both helpful and insular, kind and bullying, understanding and self-righteous, outgoing and shy, and perhaps most telling of all, there are people who can look past differences in belief and people who can't. The people who could look past differences in belief were invariably the ones most motivated to help, to find good, to care for anyone in their path. To resolve my own personal conflict issues, I had to question my assumptions just as I had when examining institutional practices. I had to recognize that what I see in the people around me is quite like what I see inside. **I'm** helpful **and** insular, kind **and** bullying, understanding **and** self-righteous, outgoing **and** shy and sometimes I can look past differences **and** sometimes I can't.

Cloke, the author I mentioned before, has written a number of books on the subject of mediating conflicts. In the one entitled "The Dance of Opposites", he gives a list of Ten Paths to Transcendence.⁵ Remember that in the description I gave of the meaning of transcendence, this is the end point of conflict resolution, where the parties to the dispute are able to be reconciled and continue their relationship on a non-antagonistic basis. I will read all ten, and then go into a little more depth with a few of them. Here then, are Kenneth Cloke's Ten Paths to Transcendence:

1. *Engage in committed, openhearted listening.*
2. *Use a spotlight of narrow, focused attention, and a floodlight of broad, sweeping awareness to clarify what is taking place beneath the surface.*

⁴⁴ Kenneth Cloke, *Journeys Into the Heart of Conflict*, 4 Pepperdine Dispute Resolution Law Journal Issue 2 (2004). Available at <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/drlj/vol4/iss2/5>

⁵ Cloke, Kenneth JD, PhD, LLM, *The Dance of Opposites: Explorations in Mediation, Dialogue, and Conflict Resolution Systems Design*, Goodmedia Press:Dallas (2013)

3. Use dangerous empathy to search for the center of the conflict within yourself, then ask questions to discover whether the same might be true for others.
4. Use dangerous honesty to communicate your deepest understanding to others.
5. Use your heart to locate a heart-space in the conversation, then open and expand it.
6. Craft a question that asks people to speak and listen directly from their hearts.
7. Work collaboratively to redesign and reform the cultures and systems that produced or reinforced the conflict.
8. Clarify and reinforce what was learned from the conflict, and use it to improve and evolve to higher levels of conflict and resolution.
9. Move the conversation toward forgiveness and reconciliation.
10. Design and execute a ritual of release, completion, and closure.⁶

I thought I would say a little bit about Cloke's use of the word "dangerous". Regarding the phrase *dangerous empathy*, Cloke means "vividly imagining what it might have been like for others" and "understanding what might cause US to feel or act the way THEY did". "This might mean dropping our pretense of objectivity...admitting our humanity (including distasteful qualities within ourselves).⁷

Dangerous honesty is taking the risk to share even painful truths. This does NOT mean yelling and disregarding the other person's feelings. It means communicating as we would like be communicated with, telling hard truths, but being careful to establish an empathic connection with the other person before we speak, being careful to keep our voice low and quiet and perhaps slower than usual and being prepared to accept their perhaps less carefully modulated response without escalating. Keep in mind that the harder something is to communicate, the more likely it is to be just the thing the conflict between you needs in order to be resolved. Often, the hard questions are getting closer to acknowledging the possibility of loss, that fearful thing that most conflict is about.

This conflict is only one issue among us. I don't necessarily think it's the most important disagreement we have; I use it only to illustrate how a conflict can be resolved and transcended. We have occasionally been known to malign other people's positions on the issue of God. Theists have expressed their opinion of atheists as cold and intolerant; atheists have expressed their opinion of theists as gullible and stupid. Both Rev. Libby's recounting the feeling of theists that they are made to feel "embarrassed" by God talk and atheists' feeling of being marginalized seems a likely result of shaming. Both "camps" have been the victims of this shaming and some members of the two "camps" have been the victimizers.

Surely, this isn't the best we have to offer the world. Imagine what Unitarian Universalism could be if we ¹⁾ stopped calling each other names, ²⁾ developed strategies for working around our differences, ³⁾ listened to each others' FEELINGS, ⁴⁾ transformed our conflicts into mere disagreements by understanding each other and forgiving past hurts, and ⁵⁾ transcended those conflicts by accepting each other and reconciling ourselves to people as they are.

What a dynamic and inspiring presence we could be! We're already known and deeply respected for the justice work we do. With the release of the energy that we currently expend needlessly over squabbles about belief, we could transform our planet. I've heard it said disparagingly that our 7 principles aren't a real guiding

⁶ Ibid, p. 125.

⁷ Ibid, page 128.

force for us the way a true creed would be. My counter position would be that the 7 principles aren't creedal or rooted in belief because our religion isn't about belief; it's about living a good life, a life of compassion, peace, freedom, justice, acceptance, and mutual respect.

So, to come back to the phrase Rev. Tracy used at UUMAC earlier this summer-***“how great is your love?”***- you might ask yourself, what's love got to do with it?

For the record, love's got everything to do with it! Understanding the importance of compassion is rooted in love, desiring peace and freedom for the world is rooted in love. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that “justice is love in calculation...justice is love correcting that which revolts against love.”⁸

You remember the phrase “we need not all believe alike to love alike? If you've dabbled in UU history, you might have heard that early Unitarian minister Francis David said it, but I have to let you down. Scholarly research tells us that David said no such thing! Probably, it's a paraphrase of John Wesley's, the founder of the Methodist church, come down to us through the murky path of history.⁹

It's still a great saying! And it's true, we need not believe alike to love alike. May we be ever loving in all our endeavors.

⁸ <http://www.jeubfamily.com/2012/01/16/mlk-justice-is-love-in-action/> downloaded on 8.10.16

⁹ Hughes, Peter, UU World Magazine, fall , 2012 <http://www.uuworld.org/articles/uu-rumor-mill-produces-quotes>