Looking for Love

by Rev. Don Garrett

delivered February 13, 2011

Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley

What is love, anyway? I don't think there's anything in life that more people agree about in principle but disagree as to what it is. The song, "Both Sides Now," gives us a couple of ways of looking at love, but hardly exhausts the subject.

But the song's two views are widespread in our culture. The first is infatuation, that powerful, intoxicating feelings of attraction to another person. American popular song is replete with this theme: "that dizzy, dancing way you feel," "and oh, that towering feeling just to know somehow you are near," and "all the music of life seems to be like a bell that is ringing for me!" Love is about feeling good, and evolution has seen to it that humans are moved to feel even better through behaviors involving the merging of genetic material, originally designed to lead to the emergence of new generations

But those feelings seem inevitably fated to fade away, and this can be so disappointing as to lead to the cynicism of Mitchell's other side of love, "if you care, don't let them know; don't give yourself away." Or Tina Turner's claim that love is "just a second-hand emotion."

But those are only two ways of looking at love. I'd say that the journey of love is a spiritual one with many pitfalls and possibilities, which each person has to travel for her or him self – hopefully in an unfolding sense of the depths at the heart of human relationship.

What is your epistemology of love? How do you know what love is? There's another classic song that brings in a third aspect of love, perhaps one that connects the preceding two. It goes, "you don't know what love is until you know the meaning of the blues." There's truth here, of course, that the heady excitement of infatuation is all about feeling so good that everything but one's one pleasure tends to fade from awareness. And then your beloved may reject you or choose another, dashing you from the heights of joy into the painful depths of sadness, the dark shadows which always lurk beneath such impulsive happiness.

I was quite sure that I knew the meaning of love, of its ups and downs, when the birth of my daughter, Cypress, turned everything upside down. Her arrival ripped open my heart and turned it inside out. Love wasn't about me any more. It was all about her. I had no way to anticipate what happened to me when I first heard my daughter's cry of distress. It felt like my heart was being ripped out through my chest, so overwhelming and compelling was the feeling of responsibility and obligation to her welfare. Suddenly, love was no longer about how I, myself, felt. It was about how completely my own desires had been subsumed by the needs of this vulnerable infant. All of a sudden, voluntary, joyful, selfless sacrifice became the essence of loving behavior.

I believe that this brings us close to some of the roots of love. Very important things were happening on both sides of this relationship. On my part, I was growing up, moving beyond selfishness to the importance of truly caring for another. On Cypress' part, though, this represented the very beginnings of what is called "attachment," an aspect of human functioning which recent research has shown to have a profound significance at the heart of human experience and identity.

It doesn't take a great deal of reflecting to appreciate the survival value of infant attachment to a powerful caregiver. Human babies are born vulnerable, powerless, and dependent. The presence of a powerful caregiver is the most important factor in their survival. In the wild, separation, even for an instant, can mean death.

Most of us have heard about one animal study of attachment which involved goslings, baby geese. Konrad Lorenz received the Nobel Prize for his discovery that goslings would attach to the first living being they saw after they hatched, even if it wasn't their mother. There are photos of goslings swimming with him and following him on walks, happily bonded to him for life.

Human babies are more flexible but just as needy as goslings. There have been many fascinating studies involving monkeys as well as human infants that have helped laid the groundwork for this field of study. But one starkly revealing result came out of the experiences of so-called "sterile" orphanage nurseries in the Soviet Union where infants were given only food and basic care without any

nurture or emotional bonding. The mortality rate for infants in these orphanages was 75%. Attachment is not an option for humans. The lack of personal human touch can be fatal.

There have been a great many discoveries in the field of attachment theory, and much of psychology is in the process of being revised to incorporate them into its theories and practices. One of the most revolutionary is that it turns traditional drive theory upside down. It was once believed that survival, food, safety and reproduction were the primary drives around which human identity were built and that any feelings of warmth or sentimentality were secondary. This has now reversed. Attachment to others, first to a primary caregiver, has been revealed as psychology's primary foundation.

It is now clear that this is not something that takes place only in infancy. Our attachment needs start deep and stay deep, although they can manifest in various ways as we develop and grow. This is truly a lifelong process.

There have been therapeutic discoveries as well. Just as we have learned that the administration of certain drugs can influence alter behavior, research in attachments has revealed that our social environment – our personal network of attachments – has direct connections to our neural anatomy. The introduction and nurture of secure attachment relationships can actually change our nervous systems and our brains in positive ways.

Last week I spoke about the big questions in life that theology addresses. I said that we all need to have answers to those questions. In fact, we need answers so badly that we need to have answers even more than we need to have good answers. Well, attachments are similar in that way, and this is where things can get tricky. We need to have attachments even more than we need to have good attachments.

And this can make us vulnerable to some very problematic relationships. The joyfully selfless giving I described feeling for my daughter is also a part of a fully functional adult couple relationship. But it is only healthy when it is authentically mutual. Our culture has promoted gender models that have often encouraged women to embrace the sacrifice while leaving men free to selfishly exploit this generosity. The giving up of one's self to another in an unequal

exchange is not limited to women alone, and no gender has the monopoly on one side or another of exploitative relationships.

Many forms of addiction have been revealed to be attempts to repair broken or unmet attachment needs. One of the reasons the Alcoholics Anonymous model has been so successful in helping people overcome addictions is that it focuses on forming stable and strong attachment relationships as an important aspect of the recovery process.

I believe that our culture actually promotes addictive behavior because it is based on unmet attachment needs. We've all heard that the loss of the nuclear family, high divorce rates, and increased mobility have changed our society from what it had been in the past. Some have looked back at patterns of abusive relationships, stifling small towns and judgmental religion and said, "Good riddance!" But in any radical cultural revolution, there's always the risk of throwing the baby out with the bathwater – we may also lose some things of infinite importance because they got tarred with the same revolutionary brush.

What we've lost along with the nuclear family, stable marriages and neighborhoods is a vital, interdependent network of close human attachments. Those quiet chats with the mail carrier, the grocer, or friend, inconsequential or even gossipy in content nonetheless helped to fulfill our most basic human need for attachment, for connection.

One of the early studies in attachment theory used baby Rhesus monkeys. Although they were otherwise well-fed and cared for, they were deprived of their mothers. The researchers modeled a mother monkey out of wire mesh, partially covered with a towel, and placed it in their cages. The films of the young monkeys' behavior when frightened are impressive. They jumped to the wire mesh mother and clung fiercely, their eyes bright with terror. These wire monkeys offered no solace and little comfort, but the babies clung to them nonetheless. When a need is strong enough, as is attachment, creatures will fill that need even if only with a simulacrum of what they crave.

As I said, we will have attachments, even if they're not good ones. Our culture has evolved a complex system of wire monkeys, pseudo-attachments –

attachments based, not on authentic relationship, but on abstractions, ideas, or things.

One form of attachment we have learned to cherish is brand loyalty. I know people who are fiercely loyal to Chevrolet or Ford cars and trucks. There's obviously nothing wrong with preferring one brand over another, but the emotional intensity of these loyalties creates a false sense of community for those that hold them.

Another similar phenomenon is the role that sports teams play in substituting for authentic attachment. Most mass movements are examples of displaced attachment needs.

When we ask why people would act against their own self-interest, as seems to be the case in some of our more impassioned political movements of the day which serve to help transfer wealth from the poor to the rich, we need to stop and ask which needs are paramount. If people feel rewarded and connected for embracing a certain political ideology, they often gladly overlook other costs as long as they can continue to cling to their wire monkeys.

There's another thing about these surrogate attachments, our wire monkeys. Although we may not notice, we sense the emptiness at their core. Attachments like these cast shadows, they have negative consequences because they require polarization and distance; they produce difference. One of the chief characteristics of partial attachments is that they create "the other," the passion that those holding different views another must be wrong.

I invite you to take a look at your convictions, your attachments, and ask yourself if you might be clinging to your own wire monkeys. Secure attachments do not produce difference or distance or polarization. They produce the kind of grounded security that can serve as a source of strength, of generosity of the spirit. When we argue over ideas or ideologies, we're arguing about whose wire monkeys are the best. There's nothing wrong with considering, debating, or holding beliefs about ideas – or ideas about beliefs. It's just that it's important to be aware that this tends to separate us. They can inhibit our ability to fulfill our primary need for secure attachments.

This problem is not new. It is as old as humanity. Every culture and civilization has had its struggles between authentic secure attachment and polarizing affiliations. In fact, since polarizing affiliations tend to make groups easier to control, most civilizations have tended to privilege them as superior. The advocacy of patriotism as a virtue is just one example of this.

There was a mass movement in fourth century Christianity where hundreds if not thousands of men sought the solitude of the Egyptian desert. They came from many backgrounds, and few had any particular education or training for what they were trying to do. They formed monastic communities and have been referred to, collectively, as the "desert fathers."

Dorotheos of Gaza was a leader of one of these early communities. Exasperated by the constant bickering and quarreling over matters small and great, he called his charges together in hopes of providing useful guidance. He said that, since none of them really knew what God was, it was difficult to know the goal of their journey of the spirit. He said that God was like the hub of a great wheel and humans were like its spokes, running from hub to rim. The spokes can't see the hub, so it's hard to know how close one has come on one's journey toward the source. But there was one thing of which they could be sure: the closer they got to the hub, the nearer they would also be to the other spokes. He told them not to measure their progress by how close they were to God, but by how close they were to each other; to measure the quality of their journey by the quality of their relationships with each other.

There's an idea out there that spiritual progress can be measured by how few attachments one has. I think that this gets it wrong. Spiritual or psychological progress can best be measured by how many authentic, secure attachments one has. As secure attachment grows, we can release our anxious grip on our wire monkeys, our false attachments. Secure attachment can bring us the peace that is beyond understanding, perhaps ultimately leading to a transcendentally secure attachment with the unity of all existence. Some may call it God; I call it love.

We can pursue the development of secure, authentic attachments by engaging in intentional relationships that have a clear purpose at their core. These relationships provide the opportunity to cooperate meaningfully in the

achievement of shared goals. Close friendships don't need to be romantic in order to help us in this.

There is a place that is specifically intended to help us in this quest for secure attachment and authentic relationship: church – this church – The Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley. We come together here to learn about life, to trust one another, get to know one another, and learn to differ without divisiveness as we gently make our way toward meaningful connections with each other and with our community of faith, and to jointly achieve the transformation of mind, heart, and spirit that is possible when people of good faith join together to create the Beloved Community.

Are you looking for love? Good. It is here.