

## Love Will Guide Us

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It was one of those Sundays when I just wasn't sure how the whole service was going to hang together. Since many of you have listened to me preach for almost two years now, you are probably aware that this happens from time to time. You have a theme you are going for, and not all of the pieces of the service fit in just the way you hoped. This was back in Omaha many years ago, and it was just about an hour or so before church started, and I hadn't come up with a good meditation. I leafed through some of my collections of meditations and finally found one. It was a bit off in left field from the "main message" of that Sunday, but I thought, "What the heck!"

The meditation in question was a brief poem entitled "When Love Ends." It was about a person who was both mourning, and at the same time celebrating, the end of a relationship. The poem was naming the pain of saying good-bye to someone you have or do care about, and yet not turning away from the significance this person played in their life. A complex set of emotions to express in a such short poem to be sure, but

that is what makes it good poetry I guess. The worship service began, I read the poem during the spoken meditation not unlike how Rev. Barbara does, and the Sunday continued pretty much as expected.

What was not expected was the e-mail I received later that week. Sometime it takes a couple of days for sermons to soak in, and the real reviews come in the form of my inbox sometime around Wednesday; just when I am thinking more about the next sermon than the last one. But this e-mail was not about the sermon that Sunday; it was about the poem. It came to me from a relatively new member. She and her husband had jumped into the congregation feet first. It seems that their marriage was in trouble, and on the car ride home from church, the spoken meditation I read had restarted a conversation about where their relationship was headed. Immediately I had her come into my office for counseling.

Their son was having trouble in school and later it was discovered that he had a drug problem. Dealing with that situation put a strain on their marriage; she was a therapist who wanted to use modern, some might say liberal, therapeutic techniques in handling the son's problems. The husband had not the patience for that; all he could do was yell. Things were reaching the breaking point, and so they decided to do a trial separation for a while.

By this point I was working with both of them. One Saturday night, a few months later when I was sweating out another sermon, he called me up. He had been asked out on a date by a co-worker. The separation was his wife's idea; what should he do? I surly didn't know. We talked about how he felt, and what might happen if he said yes to this offer, and if he said no. In the end he didn't. But the incident prompted the couple to get back together. They realized they could not divorce, they simply meant too much to each other. To this day, so far as I know, they are happily married.

In our reading today, Robert Walsh reminds us that we can never predict love or even understand love as it applies to other people. A relationship is a mystery to everyone else beside the two people involved. Even the kids may not understand their parent's relationship. This is one of the many things that frustrates me about people who condemn or judge same sex relationships. How do I know what that relationship is like unless I am a part of it? So often love is a surprise.

Of course the paradox of love is that it is also so common, so everyday. Today we celebrate Mother's Day. Zen Master Dogen holds up a mother's love as the paragon for loving kindness. "Just as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so too with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings." Even if your relationship with your mother is strained or non-existent, we can still imagine this mother that Dogen speaks of, holding on, protecting, holding her son or

daughter close to her body. That kind of love is the love we should show not only our own mother, not only our children or friends or neighbors. But all living beings should be regarded in such a way. He gives some detail about the size and distance and direction of all living beings, just so there is no confusion. Imagine the tiniest ant that lives in your house, or the mosquito buzzing around you in the summer's dusky humidity just looking for a place on your body to land. Now imagine that that small insect is your only child and you are its mother who will protect it with your life. I don't know about you, but I swat those things! Obviously I have a good ways to go along the spiritual path before I am able to attain true loving kindness for all living beings.

It is good to meditate on a mother's love on Mother's Day. A mother's love is the embodiment of loving kindness. I think about not only the mother who protects her child, her only child, with her life, but what about a few years down the road. That only child is about to head off to college for the first time, or even kindergarten. The mother holds on to protect at times, but also knows when to let go and let that child grow. The world is a harsh place where not everyone practices loving kindness. But if that child has known a deep and abiding love from his or her mother, then they also know that the world can be a warm place as well. By allowing her child the freedom to experience both life's difficulties, and her kind embrace, a mother truly does embody a healthy and mature sense of love. That is what Dogen is urging all of us,

mothers and fathers and people who have no children, to model ourselves after.

I consider myself lucky because I had a very loving mother, despite the rivalries of my siblings. You see my brother and I have a long running joke about which one of us is the “good son.” Like all jokes in my family, this started with a rather embarrassing and even painful incident. When my grandparents died one of my uncles declared that of the four boys he was the “good son.” He did this both with a straight face, and with a strong sense of entitlement. The other brothers were incredulous at his arrogance, and this strained some relationships within the family for a couple of years. Now all is forgiven; it was a dumb thing to say in a moment of fear and grief. But that doesn’t mean we still don’t laugh about it!

When my brother Chris and I heard about our uncle’s statement, we each tried to figure out which one of us was the good son to our parents. Both of us sign e-mails and tags on Christmas gifts with the self-proclaimed title of “The Good Son.” My Dad of course joins in the fun. He e-mailed me this week to say that the rival good son was taking them to dinner for Mother’s Day. Not to be out done, I called my mom and asked her what she really wanted for Mother’s Day—a gift that would outshine anything my brother Chris might give her. Last spring I gave my sister my old computer since she didn’t have one. When she offered to pay me I said, “Pay me nothing. But for one year whenever

there is a debate about who the good son is, you must side with me.” Last summer, my sweet little niece who is about six gave me a birthday card. Inside she had written in crayon in that cute little girl script, “Happy Birthday Uncle Josh. My daddy is the good son.” Corrupting his own child! Sometimes just to tease us, my parents will say that my sister’s best friend, who is a gay man, is really the good son.

Now I don’t mean to minimize sibling rivalry. It is a real thing, and it does tear families apart creating pain for decades and even generations. I think everyone in my family plays along with this joke because we all know it is a joke. My parents, and certainly not my mother, would ever play favorites like that. My mother’s love for her children is truly unconditional and unbreakable. If I were to go to jail, even if I was guilty, I know my mom would still be in my corner. That unconditional, unbreakable bond that is a mother’s love is truly a holy thing when we find it.

Indeed, our Universalist ancestors often compared the love of God to the love of a parent to a child. We must remember that Universalism is a theory about the goodness and infinite compassion of God, not of people. God, the Universalists taught, is all good and all loving. You can never break that unconditional bond. Humanity, on the other hand, has a lot of work to do before we get anywhere close to that good. We still slap at mosquitoes instead of protecting their lives as if we were their mother. In other words, human beings sin.

Sin of course is a very loaded word. In point of fact, there are two kinds of sin in Christianity. The first is personal sin. If I steal your car or lie on my tax return I have committed a personal sin against someone or something. The other kind of sin is Original Sin. This is a sort of metaphysical sin in the form of separation from God. Augustine argued that we commit personal sin because we are separated from God's goodness and are therefore disobedient. However the Universalists argued that we can never be separated from God's love. Nothing could ever create that chasm. They would agree that we are imperfect, that obviously you read the paper and you see people stealing from each other. But they are not outside that eternal love and forgiveness that none of us can move out of or away from. Just like a mother who embraces us time and again whenever we mess up and have to spend the summer living on the couch because our latest job scheme fell through, God takes us back again no matter how often we fail or how imperfect we are. It is a very powerful theology of love. It is a theology that says the universe itself loves us all of the time regardless of what we do or how we think.

Because love is embedded into the very fabric of the universe, love will guide us. We have to let love guide us in our lives. So often we impose our own will, our own selfish way of being and doing in the world that we forget to quiet down for a moment and just feel loved by the people around us. I hate to brag, but I have it easy. Most days when

I come home my four year old son hears the door, runs over to me and will give me a hug. Sometimes he will say, “Daddy I missed you!” Ah, how these days are fleeting. I am sure I will blink my eyes and twelve years will pass and the best acknowledgement of my presence from him when I get home will be a demand for my car keys. So I try to save it up and remember those days when the universe explicitly tells me that I am loved, be it from the voice of my son, my wife, close friends and colleagues, and even some of you. And of course from my mother. Hold those moments especially dear, and pull them out to remind yourself on those other days when the world seems cold and lonely and you have no friend in the world.

I hope you, like me, have some of those people in your life who tell you they love you, and that they are in this room with you right now. I have spoken before, and will speak again, of the Unitarian Universalist idea of the covenant; those promises we make to each other that bind us together as a religious community. And while ministers and theologians might prattle on about the covenant and the Old Testament, what we are really trying to talk about is love. If you regard everyone here, old friends and strangers alike, as if they were your mother or you are their mother, then you can't help but to live out and strengthen our covenant. Love is the foundation of our being together as a religious community. Yes we may disagree and even hurt each other at times. It happens. But with love comes forgiveness and trust that we can still be in relationship

even when we are on opposite sides of an issue. Love says that we can still be who we are as individuals even when we are connected. Love says that we can set our own boundaries for who we are without disconnecting or cutting off from others. Love says that I do not need to take on your anxiety, and you do not need to take on mine. We can just be together even if we are imperfect individuals because the bonds of trust and love support us.

Robert Walsh was surprised by love. We can never truly know what goes on in another person's life or in their relationships. I was surprised to find a couple in my old congregation who seemed to have it all together and yet they were at the brink of separation. And I was surprised again when they put it back together. Walsh's admonition at the end of his meditation is right; we should not let ourselves be surprised by love. We should expect it. The Universalists taught us that the whole world was infused with love, and it was the purpose of our life to live according to that reality. Or if you are an atheist, to live as if that were actually true. Either way, love begins to guide you. What does that look like? It looks like a mother caring for her only child, protecting it with her life, and at the same time making room for that child's own life to flourish. That is where love guides us.

So let's celebrate mom today. If you have a mom, tell her you love her. If you lost your mom, recently or long ago, pause at some point today and just remember those moments when she best expressed her

love to you, and maybe when you expressed it to her. If you have a hard time relating to your mother or have a difficult relationship with her, then pause to remember a moment when the universe spoke words of love to you through the mouth of another; a spouse or partner, an ex-lover, or even a close friend. May those moments of love, however we remember and embrace them, inspire us to create new moments of love that will ring throughout the world as our legacy for generations to come. Amen Blessed Be.