Teaching Love

TULI PATEL
still and always in formation

Love.

Just four letters.

Inspiration for artists and musicians, poets and dancers, an elusive, harkening, echoing, beckoning promise of what is and might be, no multi syllabic synonyms are needed to evoke Love’s deep complexities. A foundational influence from the time we are born, if we are lucky to have it, binding us to its mysteries and intricacies, some might even think of Love as God.

Minstrels and sonnet writers praise its wonders. “All you need is love,” sang The Beatles. “Love is all you need.”

Some spend an entire lifetime unraveling the enigma — is love a social construct or something that is hardwired into our physiology? Does it belong in the spiritual realm? Whatever form or shape it takes, one can be certain that an examination of love is not likely to make an appearance on a standardized test. Many of us devote decades to exploring Love’s many facets through the prism of our own understanding and experience.

For me, love means commitment and consistency, devotion and dedication. Love is present in the joy that results when understanding and transformation occur. Love is at its best when it gives rise to that other four letter, equally powerful word that makes us or another say: “Free.” And when it does not, we can know that Love is being mis-used.

For me love takes the form of sexuality education; offered freely, offered with commitment and consistency, devotion and dedication. For me sexuality education is offered through Our Whole Lives (OWL), a comprehensive values based sexuality education program developed by two religious groups, the UUA and the UCC (and yet completely secular).

Sexuality education is much more than learning about sexual intercourse and all it’s inherent dangers; it is about body image, self esteem, friendships, intimacy, whom we chose to love, how we see ourselves, within or beyond gender binaries, how we consent to love and loving; it is an exploration of what makes us who we are, the most fundamental of human questing.

I’ve been an OWL facilitator for almost two decades — and I have to ask, “Am I getting complacent?” What if I were asked to double down on love? What would that look like for me and how I offer sexuality education?

I know that I have work to do in widening the circle to include

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LOVE

What does love look/feel/sound like to you?

JASON

CLF Member, incarcerated in IL

That has always been a difficult question for me. As a kid, when I was being abused, I was told it was for my own good and because my dad loved me. My mother told me she loved me, then ran away to the other side of the country. As a teenager, my stepmother said that she loved me, then cut all contact with me for fear my father would find her after he got out of prison.

The only person who has told me that loved me and not abandoned or abused me is my aunt. Through all of the institutions and all of the trials and pain I have had to deal with, my aunt has supported me. Though she didn’t and doesn’t condone the behaviors that got me institutionalized, she has stood behind me. That, to me, is love.

I have never had a girlfriend and never had a date, so I don’t know what that kind of love is like. I have experienced the love of a pet. I had a dog as a child named Alfred. He made the nightmare of my childhood a little less dark. He could always make me smile and even make me laugh when all I wanted to do was cry.

Once I began to walk the pagan path and began to understand who and what I truly am, I have felt a serene love when communing with nature, and an unconditional love from my brethren in the pagan services here.

Now, as for loving myself: that has also been a difficult road. As a child, I was made to believe that I was nothing, that I was worth nothing, that I would never amount to anything. It has been very difficult for me to overcome that. It has taken years, a number of people helping me, and a lot of self-reflection and growth for me to get to where I can love myself and accept myself. As it has been said over and over, the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

So love to me is supporting someone when they need it most, even if you don’t like what they did. It is making someone feel better, making them smile or laugh when they are hurting. Love is accepting someone for who they are, without judgment or reservations. Love is casting away negative external and internal perceptions and truly figuring out who you are and accepting that person.
What is Love?

RYAN

*CLF Member, incarcerated in FL*

L-O-V-E. Probably one of the most misunderstood words in the English language. Mostly due to the fact we only have one word for it. The Greeks however have multiple words to describe different types of love. Here are four of them:

Eros, the easiest, is physical love. This is where we get words like erotic. It’s the love of how things look/feel/smell/taste or any other physical property. This might be an initial feeling towards someone we’re attracted to.

Philia is brotherly love. Think of philanthropy, coming together to raise money for a cause. This describes the love towards friends, co-workers and even humanity as a whole.

Storge is familial love. Not a common root word in the English language, but this is the love one typically feels towards parents, children, siblings or cousins. The most powerful form of love is agape, or unconditional love that continues despite and perhaps even due to our flaws.

This is sometimes the hardest to achieve because as humans we put conditions on so much, usually unconsciously. This is what we as UUs strive for, especially in our acceptance of the LGBTQ+ and incarcerated members. This is the love to strive for.

What about your love?

DONALD

*CLF member, incarcerated in CO*

Love is a simple yet complex emotion for us to truly describe. However, we seem to know it when we feel it. Problems arise when we grasp at, try to control or desire love. Problems also happen when we reject or do not reciprocate love.

Love is at its best when we just allow it to be, and in turn, when we just “be” in it. Love exists outside of us, sometimes with, sometimes without us. We are not necessary for love, but love is a necessity for us.
LOVE

ROBERT

CLF Member, incarcerated in MA

To put into words that which transcends words is something the greatest poets all throughout time have tried to do (with varying success). Since I consider myself to be a bit of an amateur poet and writer, this is something that I have thought on many times.

An over-simplification is that love is just a basic chemical reaction, impulses that are instinctive. Perhaps you can say that of lust, but not love, for love is not a physical reaction, but a social construct, a characteristic of thinking beyond the self.

When I think on love, an old Greek story comes to mind. There was a creature that walked the Earth that was so powerful, it could overthrow the Gods themselves. It had four arms, four legs, and two heads. Zeus, being fearful of what these creatures could do, rendered them in half; to this day, these now split creatures look for their other half, so that they may once again be as one.

What this story is talking about is humans and the concept of soulmates. I always liked the idea that when you are with your soulmate, that the love you have, is the greatest power in all the world.

Another way of looking at it is a puzzle, composed of two pieces. On their own, you have a slight understanding of the image. Maybe two pieces that are not truly matching can be put together, but the story told is disjointed, and doesn’t make much sense. But when they match up, a story for the ages is told.

Nearly 20 years ago, I found that one, the missing piece, my missing half. With her, I felt at peace. The best way I can describe that feeling is with a smile. It’s a special smile, one that only came across my face when I looked at her. It drove her crazy, because one could consider it a “I have a secret” smile.

In a way, I did, and I’ll let you in on it. Now come close, for not everyone can handle this, so they shouldn’t hear it: my love for my wife is the power that makes the Gods themselves tremble.

Forever & Always.
people beyond those who “find themselves in our group.” I am called to engage the large community, whether through schools, neighborhood programs, adult schools, justice systems, or families. I need to work more intentionally with communities of the global majority whose access to and engagement with sexuality education might be compromised.

What of you, Beloved? What if you were asked to double down on love? What would you do differently?

With blessings for each of your journeys of exploration and discovery, deepening, questing, and questioning,

— Tuli

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Butterfly

GARY
CLF member, incarcerated in SC

In the beginning
it was all darkness and fear
I saw no way out
no end to my anguish
a place that conveys death
yet, can offer life?
to become new
I entered into this cocoon,
a target of transformation,
the time out in darkness
becomes a metamorphosis
death and life working together
to bring about a transformation
from the ruins of the old
like a butterfly, to emerge
forever changed
a person I have never been,
but the world, this life
isn’t all rainbows and butterflies,
for you can’t change the mind
if you have not touched the heart

PHOTO BY SAM MGRDICHIAN ON UNSPLASH
Interminable Affinity
(an intermission of love’s omissions)

CHASE COLE
CLF member, incarcerated in MA

this memory unfolds
spilling over my shoulder
with Hyacinth coolness
shades of hair
spiral downward
rose and sweet a meadow’s breath
—lingering—
tickles my tongue
tingling red wine kisses
little sips of you

pale fingers caress shadows
cinders spear lambent gazes
never wandering eyes
tease my vibe
you are the bee
who robs my hive
unfolding myself beside you
will this last?
you ask
shivering autumnal sun
folded legs tucked under mine
petals of fallen white
holding me
shaping your outline
a nimbus of startling height
passes above us
our love
falls before us

we are a tangle of consciousness
steep and wild
merging rivers crashing together
hidden in veils of light
small wild fruit grows upon your
banks
stop and speak
to me
your silk-blue eyes
purple crescent skies
plum blossoms inhale you
I steal your smiles
cup them inside my heart
trap them inside your warmth
hold me lovely tell me I’m yours

you will come dazzling beside me
risen from jelly shaking your soul
I calm your tremors
kissing you lightly on night’s wind
this world hints of you
your rise and fall
inhaling a life we built together
exhaling empires we destroyed
forever promises eternity l
ove demands it
—we rise mountains
smooth summits—
sail thermals
energy
Would you like to represent the Church of the Larger Fellowship at General Assembly (GA) this summer? The CLF is entitled to 22 delegates at the UUA’s General Assembly, which will be held both online and in-person in Portland, OR from June 22-26, 2022.

You will be able to attend online or in-person workshops, programs, and worship services. Proof of vaccination for COVID-19 is required to attend in person.

As a delegate you will be able to vote during General Sessions. General Sessions will be held from 9:30-12:30pm PT on 6/23-6/25 and 12:30-2:30pm PT on 6/26. Delegates should be able to be online or in person to attend the majority of these General Sessions. CLF delegates vote their conscience on matters related to the denomination of Unitarian Universalism, and are responsible for their own expenses.

If you’d like to participate in GA 2022 in this role, please fill out the online application at clfuu.org/delegate-application. Visit the UUA’s General Assembly website at www.uua.org/ga for details.

FOR YOUR REFLECTION

From Tuli Patel:

What if you were asked to double down on love? What would you do differently?

If you would like us to be able to publish or share your writing in the future, remember to include “You have permission to edit and publish my words” somewhere on your submission.
FOR YOUR REFLECTION

In this section, we offer questions for reflection based on ideas explored in this issue. You may wish to explore it individually or as part of a group discussion. To submit your reflection for possible inclusion in a future issue of Quest, tear off your answer and mail it back to us using the envelope included in the middle of this issue, or mail a longer reflection separately.