

Water Bottles and Middle Seats

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society

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During my recent time away, I attended a show in which songs from nearly a hundred years of American musical theater were performed. One of them* from the 1996 rock musical “RENT” begins with these words,

*525,600 minutes
525,000 moments so dear
525,600 minutes
How do you measure, measure a year?*

Before one has a chance to even consider reflecting on the question, the song continues,

*In daylights, in sunsets, in midnights, in cups of coffee
In inches, in miles, in laughter, in strife
In 525,600 minutes
How do you measure a year in the life?*

And then the chorus wonders,

How about love?

Ah, love. That word so familiar, so central to most of the religions of the world and about which so much has been written and spoken; indeed, perhaps too much.

As Thomas Moore, author of “Care of the Soul”, observes in his latest book “The Eloquence of Silence”, which I happened to read while I was away, “It’s odd that Christianity is based on the simple, easy-to-understand words, love one another. There is nothing mysterious about these words, and there is no way to argue that they are not at the very heart of Jesus’s teaching. Yet people who loudly and ostensibly profess belief in this teaching do not live by the principle of love at all.” “The word love no longer signifies, conveys, or holds meaning. It is vacant, but not empty.”

In other words, it has been so diluted by unreflective repetition it has lost its potency. And while Moore calls out Christianity specifically in the quote I shared, one can easily arrive at the same conclusion for any of the world’s faith that

center love and profess some version of the “golden rule”, which includes Judaism, Islam, Buddhism....and Unitarian Universalism.

Of course it's not like love is faring much better in the secular realm. Look at the attention economy in which we live, most notably manifest on social media, in which images posted of me, myself, and I constantly beg, “look at me”, “like me”.... “love...me?”

So why stand up here and say more about a word rendered so meaningless by repetition that I might as well say, “blah, blah, blah”, two-thousand times?

Well, maybe its because I'm haunted by a nagging sense that love really is the only measure of our lives that ultimately matters; a deep knowing that as Dickens' poor Marley realized too late, “Humankind is our business. The common welfare is our business; charity, mercy, forbearance, benevolence, all our business. Everything else is but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of our business!”

Now, to Moore's point, if upon hearing these words our hearts are merely warmed, we've not heard them properly or taken them seriously. For their intent is not to engender sweet sentimentalism, but to proclaim a radical vision.

A vision of love.

A vision that is at odds with and cannot be reconciled to the ways of world as we know it. A vision of love you can't reason your way into. Love you can't condition, justify, or rationalize within the paradigm of the world as it is. A vision that will never fully “make sense.”

Until we get that we can't reason our way into this vision of love, we will remain more admirers of its sentiment than practitioners living it into being.

Reason has freed us from the strictures of that moody parent in the sky some claim is god, but it has also made us wary of other ways of knowing. Despite the mind's astonishing capacity for self-deception, we modern people are encouraged to trust the mind alone and be suspicious of or explain away our feelings, to dismiss or postpone development of an inner life, and to disparage faith.

Yet all of these are essential to the radical love to which the world's faiths, and indeed our own, points.

This love... it's not the kind that warms our hearts, but sets it on fire and reduces our illusions, our “vested interests” as Bill (Stuart) writes, to ashes. Indeed, “what

you held in your hand, what you counted and carefully saved,” Naomi Shihab Nye warns, “all this must go so you know how desolate the landscape can be between the regions of kindness.”

A few summers ago my husband and I were walking up Wickenden Street in Providence, Rhode Island to visit a favorite antiques shop of ours. I don't recall what the exact temperature was that day, but it was memorably oppressively hot, perhaps record setting, and accompanied by the kind of humidity in which no one, not even those standing still in the shade, was spared the sensation that one was literally melting. About mid-way between where we parked our car and the shop to which we were headed, we came upon a small galvanized metal tub sitting at the foot of someone's front stoop. It was filled with ice and a few bottles of water. Taped to the tub or leaning up against it was a hand written sign that read, “Please, take one.” There was no one sitting on the stoop, no donation box, no indication as to who even put this water out.

Although I didn't take a bottle, I was touched that someone put out these bottles for passersby, strangers, including me, who might want or need one in the day's heat. I was reminded of people I had met nearly a decade earlier in Arizona who would venture into the Sonoran desert and leave water for migrants making the treacherous journey from Mexico into the United States.

Bottles of water left out for strangers may not seem like that big of a deal. But in fact our lives depend on water. We need it to survive. All of us; rich and poor, Mexican and American, liberal and conservative, young and old alike. Offering the water to anyone passing by says you matter because you are not because of how much money you have, where you're from, what you believe, or how long you've lived.

Friends, this is radical love.

Love that rises not from a heart warmed by niceties, but scorched by the pangs and pain of empathy, the heart broken by loss and sorrow, universal, inescapable realities of the human condition. A compassionate heart pumping life into a world where, as Nye writes, “only kindness makes sense anymore.”

It's an alternative world being lived into existence every day, quietly, beneath the rancor of political strife, zero sum economics, and plain meanness.

My spiritual director recently shared with me a story someone shared with her. I can't promise I've remembered every detail correctly, but details aren't what matters here. The story begins at the gate in a busy airport. Slowly boarding gets

underway. The flight is crowded, fully booked, in fact. People are tired and cranky as they often are when flying.

As the plane fills with people a woman in a wheelchair arrives at the gate. She was supposed to be there earlier to board before others, but something delayed her. She's helped up from her chair which is folded up so it can be stored and proceeds to board with plane aided of two crutches. It is a struggle. She moves slowly, very slowly. Some already seated audibly groan with impatience or make comments under their breath as she makes her way into the cabin. She shows her ticket to the flight attendant who glances at it and points toward the back of the cabin. The woman sighs and inches forward slowly. Just then a man in the fourth or fifth row pops up and says to the flight attendant,

"Please, let her have my seat."

"But Sir, the flight attendant says, "Her seat is in row 30."

"I love row 30.", the man replies.

"Row 30, seat B... the middle seat.", adds the flight attendant.

"I love the middle seat!", the man replies and makes his way to row 30, seat B.

Who are you on this plane?

The struggling woman...

A grumbling passenger anxious to get home...

The rationalizing flight attendant...

Or the man who gives up his seat?

If you're not sure, that's okay. I'm not sure either.

But I know who I'd like to be.

And that's why we gather.

As Bill writes, "Joy and peace is dependent on those who gather in empathy and compassion."

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525,000 moments so dear

525,600 minutes

How do you measure, measure a year?

In daylights, in sunsets, in midnights, in cups of coffee

In inches, in miles, in laughter, in strife

In 525,600 minutes

How do you measure a year in the life?

Well, how about love?

Amen and Blessed Be

*The song to which I refer and quote from is “Seasons of Love” by Jonathan Larson