

THE EXPERIENCES OF LOVE

#1 - First Love: How Has Your Lived On?

Rev. Jack Donovan – Unitarian Universalist Church
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Prelude: *Where Is Love* from the musical Oliver

Meditation: *Aimless Love*, by Billy Collins

Readings: *Cosmic Love Perspective*, in The Universe is a Green Dragon, Brian Swimme
Diotima to Socrates on Love, in The Symposium on Love, by Plato

SERMON (Readings printed after sermon)

At the beginning of this church year, it struck me as a good idea to focus each month on a new stage in the development of human potentials, which is my definition of spiritual growth.

So in September our theme was about what potentials had evolved in Nature that brought the dawn of humankind – our extraordinary potentials for awareness and self-awareness, for learning, cooperation, communication, imagination, planning, invention, discernment – our potential to respond to these potentials and influence them.

In October, with harvest and Halloween, we pondered the influences of our historical and cultural heritages and the spirits of our ancestors.

In November, with Thanksgiving, we reflected on the influential experiences of our parents and immediate families as they awaited our births.

In December, awaiting Solstice and new light in the world, we pondered the influence of the expectations our parents-to-be and their companions held for us.

In January, the month of backward and forward looking, we pondered the influence of our introduction to the world – how it received us and how we have responded to its influence on our potentials.

So now it is February – the month of love in the northern hemisphere – Groundhog Day of New Birth and second thoughts, Holy Brigid's Feast of Creativity, Candlemas's Days of Expansive Light, crocus and jonquil tips are signaling Spring. Water is breaking over the ice. Hatchlings, bunnies, lambs, calves, and foals are coming to the fields. Puppies, kittens, chicks are coming to the yards. And Valentine's Day is coming to us all, celebration of the timeless Fancies of Love.

What good timing to talk about what many consider the premier experience of life before all others, and perhaps even arising before all others – that is Love. And for this first Sunday of February, naturally, the first experience of love.

When was that? When was your first love?

That question is trickier than I first expected. When I started a list, I found there seemed to be many different kinds of "First Love." Likewise for you?

So let's just identify our First Love chronologically. What's your first memory of first love? Most folks experience love long before mental memory starts, and vibrate with body-stored memories throughout their lives. But after a while, a record of mental memories, including love, starts to be retained.

So what do you recall as your very first experience of love and how has that influenced you?

My first actual memory of love is of being cuddled. When the orphaned Oliver Twist asked, Where is love, much of the world would give an answer he could only imagine. First love is in a parent's arms, being snuggled and cooed to – a breast to draw from, or a lap to crawl on, or a shoulder to sleep on or ride on.

You don't even know it's love – flowing in, flowing out – you only learn later that the feeling requires the name *Love*. And within you, you may experience it as what Hinduism calls *Bliss* – a goal of all spiritual seekers in later years.

Oliver Twist can still have that, we could tell him - and it might be even more powerful an influence for him because of a unique appreciation. But he'll have to seek it out and have some luck. If orphans had wealth, we could become rich giving hugs.

My first actual memory that I would call an awareness of love was on Christmas Eve when I was almost three. We had a creche with a softly radiant blue bulb bathing cattle and sheep and shepherds and a mother and a father and a baby. There I saw for the first time from outside myself a family supported by a community.

And I knew in some unself-conscious way that I had that, too, and that I cherished it and it cherished me and that it was good. And I knew in some way that everybody deserved it. When my baby brother joined us by the next Christmas, I knew he was also within that beautiful sacred light. And when we visited all our many Irish Catholic cousins on Christmas days, I believed they all deserved and received the same light of love as me and my brother.

There have been times in my life when I have been very good at passing on a similar influence – and there have been times I did not understand the breadth and depth of that influence well enough to share it well if at all. It is because of the failures that I have come to believe that observant curiosity, humble reflection, and passionate imagination in prayer (the great spiritual practices, name them as you will) - these are what we can use to build upon the influence of our first experiences of love. And the sooner we learn them and apply them, the sooner and grander we live from that holy light.

There's another kind of first love besides those of bliss. They are experiences characterized, I'd say, by enchantment. They cast a spell. They bathe relationships not in sanctifying blue, but in magnetic fields that alter perception. It is as if we go through years of aimless love, falling for

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so many beautiful beings – then suddenly there is only one beautiful being and love is no longer aimless, but drawn totally to a singular holy one.

For me, her name was Judy. I saw her with her mother from across the playground on the first day she came to third grade at the Louisa May Alcott Elementary School. Her black hair was cut so short in an Audrey Hepburn French haircut that you'd have said she was a little boy – except she was to me exquisite.

First love – pretty much unrequited. Probably my darned glasses.

That love influenced my moods and movements until her family moved a few towns away after sixth grade. Even then, when I walked past her old house taking the long way home, I heard in my mind the song, "I Have Often Walked on This Street Before." Actually, that first love lasted until I was entering my Junior year in college, when I heard she had married her brother's roommate - some guy from Harvard's baseball team. Actually, maybe it lasted until I was 31 when a friend mentioned that in the midst of a troubled time Judy had died from an overdose of drugs. Actually, maybe first loves never die.

The influence of enchanted first love was to lead me into obsession and life-long attention to what is exquisite, beautiful, deserving of care. Not so obsessive that I did not pay even more attention to baseball and kittens and dogs and bows and arrows and classic comic books and tales of the South Pacific and forests and lakes and the wild blueberry fields. You can't be in first love all the time. There is a world out there.

But to start by loving one beautiful person – Diotima was right – the God of Love does give those who love a great power. If only we can learn to use it where it can be used. Let the Bill Murray's of the world be aware – it's always Groundhog Day until you find a love to cherish and be cherished by. It can be a mouse in a light brown suit and it can be a seamstress in a shop window, and it can be the scent of lavender and stone.

Just because it starts out aimless does not mean it will not be drawn, and fly, to a properly propped up heart. It seems that the enchantment of aimless love, wherever it comes from, can be both alpha and omega.

Let me close by offering these general conclusions about First Love. The half-disappointed Romantics might say that *Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting of the celestial light* – and yet they conclude with, *Thanks to the human heart by which we live, Thanks to its tenderness, its joys and fears, its thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.* The cosmological physicist adds to that, *There is at every moment new energy rising in us as the power of first love, to ignite being and enhance life.* And the ancient prophet reveals to us, The God of Love gives power to the lover.

So I offer this prayer: that those who love will grow in power and that those in power will grow in love. And that each of us will be among them. May we go in peace and love.

READINGS

Prelude: *Where Is Love* from the musical Oliver

Where is love? Does it fall from skies above? Is it underneath the willow tree That I've been dreaming of? Where is she? Who I close my eyes to see? Will I ever know the sweet "hello" That's meant for only me? Who can say where she may hide? Must I travel far and wide? 'Til I am beside the someone who I can mean something to? Where? Where is love?

Meditation: *Aimless Love*, by Billy Collins

This morning as I walked along the lakeshore,
I fell in love with a wren
and later in the day with a mouse
the cat had dropped under the dining room table.

In the shadows of an autumn evening,
I fell for a seamstress
still at her machine in the tailor's window,
and later for a bowl of broth,
steam rising like smoke from a naval battle.

This is the best kind of love, I thought,
without recompense, without gifts,
or unkind words, without suspicion,
or silence on the telephone.
The love of the chestnut,
the jazz cap and one hand on the wheel.

No lust, no slam of the door –
the love of the miniature orange tree,
the clean white shirt, the hot evening shower,
the highway that cuts across Florida.
No waiting, no huffiness, or rancor –
just a twinge every now and then
for the wren who had built her nest
on a low branch overhanging the water
and for the dead mouse,
still dressed in its light brown suit.

But my heart is always propped up
in a field on its tripod,
ready for the next arrow.

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After I carried the mouse by the tail
to a pile of leaves in the woods,
I found myself standing at the bathroom sink
gazing down affectionately at the soap,
so patient and soluble,
so at home in its pale green soap dish.
I could feel myself falling again
as I felt its turning in my wet hands
and caught the scent of lavender and stone.

Reading #1: *Cosmic Love Perspective*, in The Universe is a Green Dragon, Brian Swimme

Everything that exists in the universe came from a common origin. This universe is a single multiform energetic unfolding of matter, mind, intelligence, and life. The human provides the space in which the universe feels its stupendous beauty. I sometimes think the primary deed of a parent is to see the beauty and grace of children. The cosmos is the same: humans can house the tremendous beauty of Earth, of life, of the universe, value it, feel its grandeur.

When we look at love from a cosmic perspective, we see attraction operating at every level. Love begins as attraction. The history of life can be understood as the creation of ever more sensitive creatures in a universe where there is always another dimension of beauty to be felt and savored. Each person discovers a field of allurements, the totality of which bears the unique stamp of that person's personality. Destiny unfolds in the pursuit of individual fascinations and interests.

Love is the activity of igniting being, of evoking being, of enhancing life. Through the bestowal of its gifts, elephants, rivers, eagles, ice jams, root beer floats, zebras, Elizabethan dramas, and the whole living Earth become possible. Think of yourself that way, as a supreme power of sensitivity surrounded by magnificence. Our fullest destiny is to become love in human form.

Reading #2: *Diotima to Socrates on Love*, in The Symposium on Love, by Plato

(It came Socrates' time among the gathering to address the question of love, and, speaking of the priestess-queen who had been his teacher, he said,)

"Diotima said to me, 'Love begets virtue and beautiful works in life, Socrates.

Perhaps even you can become an initiate into Love's mysteries.

At least I'll instruct you and spare no pains.

Here is your lesson for today:

The right approach to love is, first, start as young as you can
with loving some beautiful person,
for the God of Love gives its power to the lover."