

## **“A Spring of Love”**

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*October 1, 2023*

*First Church in Boston*

Thirty years ago, I received my bachelor’s degree from Wheaton College, an evangelical Christian school outside Chicago. After graduating, I was restless and ready to create some distance from my Midwest roots. So, I spent the summer at [Holden Village](#), a progressive Christian retreat center in the mountains of Washington State. On that first evening in the Village, I wandered into that evening’s forum, uncertain what I would find, but the topic had something to do with relationships and sexuality so I was definitely interested.

Entering the building, I found an overly full first floor, so I made my way upstairs to a narrow balcony where I sat looking over the rail to the panelists below. One of the three panelists, Allison, looked to be about my age. I listened closely as she began to tell her story. She talked about the awkwardness of dating as a young woman—the first dates and the first kisses and the feeling of not quite understanding the hype about kissing and dating. But then, Allison, who had only been dating men, met a woman and a connection grew. When she kissed the woman, she said it was *nothing* like kissing boys had been. Smiling and a bit lost in the memory, she reached for the right words to convey the power of that first kiss with a woman. The rightness, the joy.

Peering over the railing at Allison, I felt myself rooting for her, delighting in her experience of the electric delight of intimacy with another. After years of being told to condemn the “homosexual lifestyle,” listening to Allison’s story marked a turning point in my spiritual journey. I knew in that moment that I needed to find an understanding of life and religion that affirmed same-sex love and intimacy. I needed an understanding of love that embraced multiple ways of being human.

In my seeking, I stumbled upon the book *Love* by philosopher of religion Diogenes Allen. In his book, Allen draws on Samuel Coleridge’s poem, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” to convey the meaning of perfect love. In the poem, an ancient man, a Mariner, compels another to hear his story of a fateful voyage. The story begins with the crew feeling merry as they depart from port. Soon, however, they encounter difficult weather and a sea clogged with ice. An albatross arrives in the sky and helpfully guides them through the storm. But, just as the crew and the albatross seem to have settled into a comfortable daily routine, the Mariner senselessly lifts his crossbow and kills the bird. Then, the fortunes of the ship reverse again as the wind stops and the ship remains still in the desolate sea. Suffering from thirst and hunger, all the crew succumbs to Death, except for the Mariner. Cursed, he remains with the dead albatross hanging

like a cross from his neck—an image portrayed on the cover of the Order of Service. Alone on a motionless ship of corpses, the Mariner cannot pray, crushed in a numbing despair.

Today’s reading picks up the story at this point. We find the Mariner peering over the railing of the ship watching water snakes move in the water below. Once indifferent, even harshly critical of the “slimy things” in the sea, the Mariner is now moved by the beauty of their “blue, glossy green” and in their swimming lines in the water. Looking with delight upon the beauty and happiness of other lives, “a spring of love gushed from [his] heart, and [he] blessed them unaware.”

In this moment, the Mariner finds he can pray. And the albatross falls from his neck. By opening himself to recognize the value of another’s life, the curse is lifted, his connection with God, with Life itself, is restored as a “spring of love” flows through him.

Too often, Allen explains, we place ourselves as the center of our universe, failing to recognize others in their own right. Using the Mariner to explain, Allen writes,

“[S]uddenly he saw that the slimy things in the sea existed apart from himself. They had a life of their own apart from any use they could be to him, apart from whether they looked beautiful or repulsive to him. To escape for a moment from looking at everything from his own point of view—to let them be independent of himself—brought to him the experience of perfect love.” (9-10)

In short, Allen defines love as “the recognition of otherness.”

Decentering ourselves to recognize another can be hard. Anyone who has been in a long-term friendship or intimate partnership has likely wrestled with this fact. Although overlap of interest and/or attraction may be the basis of a relationship, as you spend time with another person, the differences also become evident. Sometimes these differences may be minor. You prefer coffee black; your beloved will only drink milky tea. But sometimes, these differences can be significant. You want to relocate for a job or to be nearer family. Your beloved wants to stay rooted where you are. Or you want to share more time just the two of you. Your friend wants to spend more time socializing in groups. Most any sustained friendship or intimate relationship challenges us to recognize that the other exists with their own desires, preferences, and ideas. On the one hand, their very otherness can be a source of delight in endlessly learning about another . . . and, on the hand, differences can be a source of frustration as your own preferences and assumptions bump up against the reality of another who just seems to have their own mind!?!

As most adults eventually learn, we *share* the world with others who make demands, need resources, and have desires apart from our own. We are not in fact the center of the universe. In a shared world, we must learn how to live with others. But how? The Jewish and Christian traditions command us to “love our neighbor.” For Allen, loving our neighbor means recognizing “the *absolute* value of every person” and not simply the “*relative* value of people.” (20) In other words, people matter not just because of their wealth, accomplishments, body size, physical ability, or any number of social markers that people use to judge the *relative* merits of one another. Each person also just simply matters. Each person has an *absolute* value, or, as our current Unitarian Universalist first principle says, “each person has inherent worth and dignity.”

Does such “love of neighbor” mean that we cannot disagree with our neighbor? That we cannot denounce their ideas or actions we find repugnant or wrong? No. Just as being in loving relationships with friends and intimate partners means recognizing difference and otherness, so also we can acknowledge the differences and very real conflicts between us and others. We can be clear about how and why we disagree with another’s ideas or actions. However, a commitment to recognizing the *absolute* value or inherent dignity and worthiness\* of a person does mean trying to not dehumanize them, to not reduce others to a caricature, and to not demean or dismiss their own sacred existence. To love a neighbor, a stranger even, is to recognize their otherness.

At the same time, this recognition of otherness also applies to ourselves. We must hold on to our *own* sense of value and worthiness of love. Each of us needs and wants love. We want to be recognized in our own otherness. For someone to see and recognize us as a person with our own story, feelings, and point of view is a gift of love. When we feel lonely, disconnected and unseen by others, it can be too easy to also feel unloved. Seeking love and recognition of our own dignity and worthiness is not selfish, it is part of who we are as relational beings.

Love is the recognition of otherness, says Allen. We both need to be seen in our own absolute value and to acknowledge the distinct worthiness of other lives apart from our own. Over years of reflecting on this mutual need of recognition, I have come to believe our existences are not quite so *independent* as Allen portrays. Rather, I believe we exist in an *interdependent web* of life, impacting one another in ways that harm other lives and in ways that helps life to flourish. So perhaps, love may better be understood as the recognition of *togetherness*.

The recognition of *togetherness* continues to rely upon a recognition of otherness that refuses to dehumanize or demean the *absolute* worthiness of any one of us. But the recognition of togetherness goes farther by also recognizing the *bonds* between and among us: that I see you *and* you see me . . . *and* we both see the water, the earth, and the creatures of land and sea

that sustain our living. To love is to recognize our *togetherness*.

When I began looking for a religious understanding that affirmed Allison's experience of kissing a woman, I could not have predicted that someday I would become a Unitarian Universalist. All I knew was that I needed a religion that was more inclusive of diverse ways of living and loving. When I finally made my way into Unitarian Universalism, I embraced the idea that what mattered was not shared beliefs about God but rather a commitment to an inclusive love and mutual respect in our differences.

Too often people think this absence of shared beliefs means Unitarian Universalism is not a "real" religion. I fiercely disagree. For what could be more religious than a commitment to recognizing the sacredness of Life in one another, even across our differences. What could be more religious than affirming, "Love is the spirit of this church." This is not language of a social club. It is sacred, religious work to intentionally recognize our own worthiness even as we recognize the otherness of people with whom we disagree or may not even like. So also, it is sacred, religious work to recognize our *togetherness* amidst multiple ways of living and being.

Answering the question ["what is love?"](#) may not be easy. As in today's Story for All Ages, the search for an answer may take us many places, show us many possibilities. Today I have sought to suggest one possible way of answering this question that has helped me to love myself and others more deeply by seeking to recognize they are not me, but we are interconnected in this shared world. My hope for each and all of us is that we may love others and feel loved by others as we recognize our *togetherness*.

So may it be. Amen.

\*Note—I use the language of worthiness to avoid any suggestion that human life has monetary *worth*, an idea rooted in the practices of human enslavement.