

“In Love with Life”
First Church in Boston
February 15, 2026

Part I: “Being There”
John B. Newhall, M.Div, STM.

Love is my religion. I’ve known this for a long time. I don’t often stop to think about one of the most important questions regarding love: Where does love show up in our lives?

While writing this, I was channel surfing (as I do sometimes while writing). Usually, I try to find a soccer match to have in the background. But with no matches on, I landed on *Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood* on PBS Kids. *Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood* is set in Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood of Make Believe. As a Director of Religious Exploration and a lifelong fan of kids’ television, I opted to keep it on. I couldn’t tell you what the episode was about, but one song caught my attention. It was a song originally written by Fred Rogers called “There are Many Ways to Say I Love You.” One particularly poignant line of the song goes:

There are many ways to say, “I love you.”

Just by being there when things are sad and scary.

Just by being there, being there, being there to say, “I love you.”¹

As many of you know, I recently joined hundreds of clergy and faith leaders in Minneapolis, a city under occupation from federal forces. It was, to put it mildly, an incredibly transformative experience. Rumi, the thirteenth century Muslim mystic wrote: “However much we describe and explain love...we are ashamed of our words.”² In the presence of divinity, of what we hold eternal and sacred, words fail. Words trivialize our sacred experiences, they make them feel superficial. Something is always lost in relating it. I’ve been at a loss for how to articulate this transformative experience.

When asked about my time in Minneapolis, I sometimes mention the way the community came together to march in the streets against fascism and authoritarianism. Sometimes I mention the incredible resilience shown by those who gathered at the site of Alex Pretti’s murder. Individually, there was more than enough to be transformative.

But when asked to define where love showed up, the first thing that comes to mind is the massive piles of winter gear (sweaters, long underwear, hats, mittens, balaclavas) lining the halls of the church where we gathered. I remember turning to one of my colleagues tearing up, overwhelmed by the feeling of love. In this seemingly small act of generosity, the Minneapolis community had come together to meet our physical needs

and in so doing fulfilled an emotional need. Love was made manifest through an act of mutual care. There are many ways to say, “I love you.”

My first evening there, I went down to the hotel bar. After getting out of the elevator, I ran into two young adults heading to a late-night anti-ICE protest. Each carried a gas mask in their hands. After seeing my clerical collar, they doubled back and asked if I would say a prayer for them. We came close together, bowing our heads. This sacred moment, shared with complete strangers, reiterated for me how different this work was from anything I’d done before. How do you put a community’s fear, anxieties, hopes, and pain into words? Words fall short. Making things more notable, both told me they weren’t religious but still wanted to pray together.

On Saturday morning, as I was preparing to leave, Alex Pretti was murdered by federal agents. Within a couple hours, a call went out asking faith leaders still in town to stay and provide support. That day, and over the next two days, I sat with community members who came to grieve and gather in solidarity. I sat with their anger, fear, tears, and confusion. A community, already repressed, was again confronted by the brutality of state violence in a grotesque clarity. There are many ways to say, “I love you.” Just by being there.

When it comes to the current political administration, cruelty is the point. When confronted with such reckless hate we must show up with love.³ Just being there in love is a profound act of resistance. What if we love ourselves into a genuine justice for all? As Cornel West has said: “Justice is what love looks like in public.”⁴ In the words of Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Karen Van Fossan, “Love is life itself, which means love can always find us—in a loved one’s gaze, a chickadee’s song, the collective fight for justice.”⁵

Rob Spirko, a former member of the UUA’s Article II Study Commission, wrote: “We are called to risk ourselves for love.”⁶

Love presents itself in many different ways throughout our lives. In relationship. In service. In vulnerability. In commitment to community. Love grounds the covenants we make with each other. “Unitarian Universalists are people of love,” Rev. Van Fossen wrote. “Our love demands an allegiance to each other, even as systems around us collapse, criminalize, and surveil. We must go toward each other to organize systems of support, connection, and resistance. And we must love, especially when that love is criminalized [or dangerous].”⁷

The work of love is endless. The work of just being there in love is essential. Jo Jencks, an award-winning songwriter, wrote: “Love is the water that wears down the rock. Love is the power that won’t be stopped.”

Love is not only a fundamental need every human has or an often abstract something we value. Nor is love only what we say and do to express and receive it. Love is, at least, an infinite invitation to open ourselves courageously. It is an invitation to, in the words of poet David Whyte: “make yourself a door through which to be hospitable.”⁸

When we side with love, just being there in community, we are powerful. When we side with love we can widen the circle of concern. We can meet the moment our tradition calls for. We can choose expansive and transformative love. We can make love manifest in our lives. Love is our religion.

Part II: “Self-Love”

Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

When I was a girl, we lived in a fairly simple two-story house. My room was on the front of the house at the top of the stair. My window looked out to our yard where two trees stood. One was an elm tree that eventually succumbed to Dutch Elm disease. The other tree I loved to climb—finding such pleasure in maneuvering myself higher and higher. Beyond the trees and across the road was a field, a remnant of an old farm around which our suburb had sprung. Sometimes horses would graze upon the grass.

As a child, I would sit beside my window and delight in the view of trees and pasture. I’d wait for the first signs of the grass turning green in the spring—making up silly but earnest songs about the green, green grass and the green, green trees.

During the summer, I would lay on my bed beneath the window trying to cool myself. The attic fan loudly whirled in the hallway pulling a breeze through the window. To this day, I sleep best to the sound of white noise like that big fan.

And I also spent hours hiding in my closet. It had a single door and a small floor area inside. To the right the ceiling of the staircase rose at an angle. I’d place a pillow against that angle, pull a lamp into the space, sit on the floor, close the door, and read for hours. I thought no one knew where I was. I loved it.

It’s funny isn’t it—how the things we love can last a lifetime? While I am obviously much different than who I was at age 8, in other ways I am still that same girl who loves nature, white noise, and reading.

When the call for clergy to go to Minneapolis came, I hesitated. In my 20’s I spent a year in Minneapolis. I knew some of the places appearing in the news. My calendar was already

clear for a week of study leave. I had the financial resources. And yet, I was tired. I was looking forward to my time of reading, of rest, of spending time with a dear friend. Also, as someone with asthma, I was afraid of being in a situation with tear gas.

So, I didn't go. Instead, I showed care for myself and stuck with the plan of reading and rest.

Loving oneself is not always as easy as it seems. For one thing, we may carry within ourselves messages that tell us we are being "selfish" when we prioritize our own needs rather than those of others. This may be particularly true for those of raised within traditional notions that equate being female with being a caretaker of others. We may have been told that our value comes in what we do for others, not simply in who we are in ourselves.

However, as Unitarian Universalists, we have a long history of proclaiming a love that affirms the inherent worthiness and dignity of each person. Which, yes, means YOU. And me. It means that we are *inherently* worthy of love—just because we *are*, not because of what we *do* or do *not* do.

I know that. And it can sometimes be hard to feel that self-love. Because, well, I live with myself all day, every day. I'm there when I forget to do what I promised. I'm there when I snap out a comment I later regret. I'm there when I fail to be perfect. That disqualifies me from love, right?! No. It doesn't.

Love insists on an *inherent* worthiness. Love simply sees a "you"—a miraculous being trying to make their way in the world. And sometimes that being screws up. Sometimes that being is tired, scared, confused, and otherwise in need of care. Sometimes we are the one who needs to be loved.

And, yes, there is also the risk of hiding behind "self-care" to avoid risking love for others. Loving oneself does not mean we stop seeking to love others. We are *relational* beings and need both. To love and to be loved. Including being loved by oneself.

So, I don't want you to hear a simple trope of "self-care" when I speak about self-love. I am talking about living our value of Love consistently towards others and towards oneself. I imagine the beloved community to be an experience of wonder and generosity in which I delight in and learn from you as you delight in and learn from me. I imagine being in community of mutual support where I show up to listen to you when you need to talk and you respect my need to sometimes be alone and read a book. Or vice versa! In other words, I imagine an equitable community in which we support what we each need to thrive.

Remarkably, this church was founded upon this very idea of love. A commitment to “mutual love and respect each to other” appears in our 1630 church covenant. Just like I have and have not changed, so too First Church Boston has and has not changed over time.

The historical record also tells us that the 1630 covenant was signed “under the umbrage of a great tree.” As a lover of trees, I love that part! At its root, this institution is a group of people coming together to promise to show up for one another. Of course, much of what they promise is also to faithfully love their God. While I do not have the time today to fully explore what it might mean to love God, I will suggest that loving God might be a bit like Alex Kingman describes in her poem “Valentine’s Day:”

*Be in love with your friends,
your pets, your children,
yourself. ...*

*Fall in love with the world
and those you’ve chosen
to share it with,
imperfect but yours.*

Which is to say, Love Life! In my understanding, God is Life, the ground of our being. Each of us simply by existing is always part of that wonder too. Imperfect though we may be. To love ourselves, to love others, to love God is all part of the same spirit of Love.

May it be so. Amen. Ashe.