

## Wisdom Circles 2012 February

# *What Does It Mean To Live A Life Of Love?*

Linguists tell us that of all the languages of the world, English has the richest vocabulary. There is one vital set of human experiences, however, in which the English language is totally inadequate. That is the set of experiences that in English are all denoted by the word “love.” In Greek, for instance, there are at least three words that we would translate as “love” in English, *eros*, *philia*, and *agape*.

*Eros* is the chocolate and flowers Valentine’s Day love. It is romantic passionate love the one lover has for another. *Eros* has a strong sexual component and is the basis for forming most committed relationships and marriages, at least in the West. Powerful hormones herald the beginning of erotic love, but as those who are in a successful committed relationship know this erotic bond can lead to very rich and deep love that goes much deeper. In my experience and observation, it is the deeply honored commitment itself that is the vital factor in the personal growth that a marriage or committed relationship can bring. As one couple who have been happily married for decades said when asked for their secret, “Well, I guess we have never both fallen out of love at the same time.” As that statement implies, a successful marriage requires intentional cultivation of the bond of relationship. It helps whenever we can make a decision to value the needs of the other as much or more than our own. It’s vital that the number of positive and nurturing encounters far outnumber the negative ones. In traditional Christian theology, this kind of love is often seen as inferior to the others I am about to mention. I disagree.

*Philia* is the Greek word for another form of love, the love of friendship. Friendship begins with common interests and activities and leads to great support and comfort. Friendship is truly one of the joys of life. Like a primary relationship, friendships flourish best if they are intentionally cared for. To have a friend, be a friend. Long and enduring friendships will have times of disagreement and conflict, but if these are openly acknowledged and faced they can be turned from problems into opportunities. The rewards of friendship are truly great as expressed by Marian Evans, who wrote under the name of George Eliot.

“O, the comfort, the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person, have neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words but to pour them all out, just as is, chaff and grain together, knowing that a faithful hand will take them and sift them, keeping what is worth keeping, and with the breath of kindness blow the rest away.”

According to Christian tradition what is referred to in Greek as *agape* is the highest form of love. *Agape* is often referred to as divine love or godlike love. This refers to love that is completely devoid of self-interest. Not only is the well-being of the other paramount, but the sense of conflicting needs is completely absent. Many UUs and others, including myself, have had trouble with this teaching. First of all, how can we know that God’s love for us is not erotic. Just look at Bernini’s sculpture of St. Theresa! But most importantly, an interpretative all too common in Christian teaching that we are to sacrifice our own needs for the needs of others is most problematic. This has been used as an instrument of oppression, especially of women.

Two experiences have helped me have a better, more positive understanding of what *agape* means. One is a lecture given to UUs some years ago by the writer Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., entitled *Love Is Too Strong A Word*. Here he opined that he wished Jesus had not required us to love our enemies or love those who would despectfully use us. That is just too hard for human beings to achieve. He wished the Jesus had just said

“respect”. If we had just been told to respect everybody enough to treat them compassionately, no matter if we love or like them or not. If we just tried to see the world from their perspective. I think this is *agape*, or at least one of its meanings.

The other experience is practicing the Buddhist meditation known as *metta*, a Pali word often translated loving-kindness. I know now that a better translation of that word is as an all- encompassing friendliness. One begins the practice by wishing good things for oneself such as safety, happiness and health, all the while noticing the physical sensations at the center of the chest. One subsequently directs this warm sensation, along with the friendly thought to other in our lives, even our enemies, and finally to “all beings everywhere”. My experience is that this meditation truly helps me to approach others with more openness and friendliness.

These experiences have given me a glimpse of the possibility that a selfless love without the need for self-abnegation, is indeed possible and very positive.

With much love,  
Rev. Arvid

*We have not come here to take prisoners,  
But to surrender ever more deeply  
To freedom and joy.*

*We have not come into this exquisite world  
To hold ourselves hostage from love.*

*Run my dear,  
From anything  
That may not strengthen  
Your precious budding wings.*

-from *We Have Not Come To Take Prisoners*, by Hafiz, poet and Muslim mystic

# Our Spiritual Exercise:

## Re-embrace a Love That's Fallen Away

One UU writes:

“I was cleaning my hiking boots yesterday- it felt like massaging the feet of an old friend. Looking at the cuts and scrapes-noticing that the sole was worn almost flat, but their character and soul was very much intact. As I rinsed the saddle-soap suds away I realized that my "old friends" were coming apart- beyond repair. I dried them, put them in the sun. All day I passed them, casting growing shadows as they sat there. I felt an unconditional love, and a loss.”

For most of us, hiking boots are not the first things that come to mind when one mentions love, or a “life of love.” But who of us doesn’t have our own version of “hiking boots”? Who of us doesn’t have something, someone or some activity that’s served as an “old friend”? And who of us hasn’t let one of these old friends “come apart”?

That’s what this month’s exercise is all about: noticing an old friend--an old love--that we’ve allowed to come apart, to dry up, to fall from the center of our attention and the core of our living. And it’s not just about noticing this old love, it’s about *re-claiming* it, about taking a couple concrete steps to bring it back to life--to bring it back to *your* life.

So here’s your charge in a nutshell:

- **Find an object or take a picture that represents a “love” you’ve let slip from your life.**
- **Place that object or picture in a prominent place for the entire month of February. some place you will see it every day.**
- **Commit yourself to doing TWO things during February that will reconnect you with that love. (Yes, two things: one will come easy; the second will challenge you to get creative!)**
- **Use that object or picture to hold you accountable.**

Here’s something that might help. Think about those times in your life recently when you’ve caught yourself saying, “I used to *love* to \_\_\_\_\_.” or “I’d *love* to \_\_\_\_\_ again.” Remember this is not about trying something new. It’s about remembering, reclaiming and reconnecting. Unlike the traditional New Year’s resolutions which encourage us to reinvent or improve ourselves, this is more about returning to self, to the self that you’ve let slip a little.

And have fun with it. Don’t you just love the idea of our friend’s hiking boot sitting in the middle of his kitchen table all of February! Pushing him every weekend to get lost in the woods, and do it with a friend! What will it be for you? A piano book on your office desk that encourages you to set up piano lessons again--for the first time in 40 years!?! A picture of your wife in your wallet that holds you accountable to weekly date nights in February? An order of service from church that reminds you that regular attendance at church ends up making you feel as good (maybe even better) as regular visits to the gym? Or maybe it’s not so grand; maybe it’s about returning to something simple that just makes you happy--like spoiling yourself with really good coffee or wine or cheese! Or making time again for going to the movies like you did as a kid.

The poet, Derek Wolcott, challenges us, “You will love again the stranger who was yourself. /

Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart / to itself, to the stranger who has loved you / all your life,  
whom you ignored / for another.”

May this be a month of welcoming those “old strangers” and “old loves” back to our tables!

- **Rev. Scott**

*(Oh, and don't forget to bring your object/picture with you to your groups!)*

# Questions To Wrestle With:

As always, don't treat these questions like "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply look them over and find the one that "hooks" you most. Then let it take you on a ride. Live with it for a while. Allow it to regularly break into--and break open--your ordinary thoughts. And then come to your Soul Matters meeting prepared to share that journey with your group.

## 1. Are you familiar with "a love that will not let you go"?

While "God" may be debated among UUs, there is a growing comfort in our movement with the phrase "a love that will not let us go." Does that phrase resonate with you? Is there any way for you to make sense of it? Have you ever had an experience of being "saved by love"? What about the biblical phrase, "God is Love"? How do you make sense of that? One atheist says that while she has her doubts about a "God" that loves her, she regularly walks along Lake Ontario and experiences the birds, water and sky "telling her" that she is loved and that everything will be ok. You will never hear the word "God" from her mouth, but she won't hesitate to tell you about "a love that will not let us go." How about you?

## 2. Are you familiar with "a love that calls us to serve needs greater than our own"?

Often we think of choosing our social justice or social service commitments. But isn't there also a sense in which they choose us? For instance, we're reading the paper and suddenly a story "breaks our heart." We didn't choose that. It happened to us. It called to us. Something clicked and we found ourselves being lured from self-love to love of the other. Somehow we didn't just feel called to serve needs greater than our own; we suddenly experienced the needs and pain of others as our own. Does any of this sound or feel familiar? If so, is this "love"--this experience--leading you still?

## 3. Have you ever turned your back on love?

People say, "When love knocks, always let it in." Has love ever knocked, but you chose not to answer? And we're not just talking romantic love. Maybe life offered you a chance to pursue a dream or engage your passion. But you were scared, so you declined the invitation. Or how about a helping hand? Someone tried to offer you assistance; a shoulder to cry on; an invitation to be vulnerable. But maybe that was too scary for you, so you steeled yourself and stood on your own two feet. Do you regret declining this loving support? This invitation to be vulnerable? What might have happened if you'd opened up? Let love in? What did you learn?

## 4. How do you give love?

Have you ever had the experience of finding love (or feeling lovable) by giving love away? The holidays for instance, can be a darker time for some of us. Has "giving love" ever helped you find your way out of such darkness?

## **5. What has life taught you about the relationship between sacrifice and love?**

For some sacrifice is a sign of, or means to love. One thinks of the sacrifice parents make for their children or that activists make for their cause or that artists make for their creations. For others, the relationship between sacrifice and love is more troubled. One thinks of spouses who deny their own needs or allow themselves to be abused “in the name of love.” For many, Christianity has been skewed to encourage sacrifice in the extreme as a form of love, i.e. Jesus dying on the cross for us. There are dangers here, of course. Have you ever sacrificed too much in the name of love?

## **6. How has “tough love” shown up in your life?**

When it comes to addiction, we talk about "tough love" and “zero tolerance” as loving acts. Tough love is also seen at times as being critical to good parenting. Often our friends will offer us tough love and “brutal honesty” as well. How has “tough love” shown up in your life? And has it really felt like love, or something else?

## **7. What has been your “greatest act of love?”**

The question speaks for itself!

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# Wise Words:

We have not come here to take prisoners,  
But to surrender ever more deeply  
To freedom and joy.

We have not come into this exquisite world  
To hold ourselves hostage from love.

Run my dear,  
From anything  
That may not strengthen  
Your precious budding wings.

-from **We Have Not Come To Take Prisoners,**  
by Hafiz

To love a person is to learn the song  
That is in their heart,  
And to sing it to them  
When they have forgotten.  
~ by Anonymous

## Quotes by Mother Teresa on Love

We can do no great things;  
only small things with great love.

~

“The success of love is in the loving  
- it is not in the result of loving.”

~

If we really want to love  
we must learn how to forgive.

~

There is a terrible hunger for love.  
We all experience that in our lives - the pain, the loneliness.  
We must have the courage to recognize it.  
The poor you may have right in your own family.  
Find them.  
Love them.

~

If you judge people, you have no time to love them.

**For My Daughter on Her Twenty-First Birthday**  
**by Ellen Bass**

When they laid you in the crook  
of my arms like a bouquet and I looked  
into your eyes, dark bits of evening sky,  
I thought, of course this is you,  
like a person who has never seen the sea  
can recognize it instantly.

They pulled you from me like a cork  
and all the love flowed out. I adored you  
with the squandering passion of spring  
that shoots green from every pore.

You dug me out like a well. You lit  
the deadwood of my heart. You pinned me  
to the earth with the points of stars.

I was sure that kind of love would be  
enough. I thought I was your mother.  
How could I have known that over and over  
you would crack the sky like lightning,  
illuminating all my fears, my weaknesses, my sins.

Massive the burden this flesh  
must learn to bear, like mules of love.

“Love is what we are born with. Fear is what we learn. The spiritual journey is the unlearning of fear and prejudices and the acceptance of love back in our hearts.”

— [Marianne Williamson](#), *A Return To Love*

“Women are still in emotional bondage as long as we need to worry that we might have to make a choice between being heard and being loved.”

— [Marianne Williamson](#), *A Woman's Worth*

“Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds...”

- from Shakespeare's Sonnet 116

I love you, not only for what you are, but for what I am when I am with you.

- Roy Croft

He who wants to do good knocks at the gate: he who loves finds the door open.

-Rabindranath Tagore

**Love After Love**  
**By Derek Wolcott**

The time will come  
when, with elation  
you will greet yourself arriving  
at your own door, in your own mirror  
and each will smile at the other's welcome,

and say, sit here. Eat.  
You will love again the stranger who was your self.  
Give wine. Give bread. Give back your heart  
to itself, to the stranger who has loved you

all your life, whom you ignored  
for another, who knows you by heart.  
Take down the love letters from the bookshelf,

the photographs, the desperate notes,  
peel your own image from the mirror.  
Sit. Feast on your life.

**SOMEONE UNTIED YOUR CAMEL**

I cannot sit still with my countrymen in chains.  
I cannot act mute  
Hearing the world's loneliness  
Crying near the Beloved's heart.

My love for God is such  
That I could dance with Him tonight without you,  
But I would rather have you there.

Is your caravan lost?

It is,  
If you no longer weep from gratitude or happiness,  
Or weep  
From being cut deep with the awareness  
Of the extraordinary beauty  
That emanates from the most simple act  
And common object.

My dear, is your caravan lost?

It is if you can no longer be kind to yourself  
And loving to those who must live  
With the sometimes difficult task of loving you.

At least come to know  
That someone untied your camel last night

For I hear its gentle voice  
Calling for God in the desert.

At least come to know  
That Hafiz will always hold a lantern  
With the galaxies blooming inside  
And that

I will always guide your soul to  
The divine warmth and exhilaration  
Of our Beloved's  
Tent.

-Hafiz

“The transforming power of love. We affirm the reality of love as a dynamic power within and among us. This power moves us to create relationships of compassion, respect, mutuality, and forgiveness; to love our neighbor; and to recognize everyone as our neighbor. We stand on the side of love when we work for peace”.

UUA 2010 Peacemaking document,

<http://www.uua.org/socialjustice/socialjustice/statements/13394.shtml>

Even after all this time,  
the sun never says to the earth,  
“You owe me.”

Look what happens with a love like that.  
It lights the whole sky.

- Hafiz

“God is Love”

-1 John 4:8, The Bible

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing. 4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant 5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. 7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. 9 For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; 10 but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.  
1 Corinthians 13, The Bible

# Books

**The Art Of Loving, Erich Fromm** <http://www.amazon.com/Art-Loving-Erich-Fromm/dp/0060915943>

**Love is Letting Go Of Fear, Gerald Jampolsky**  
[http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb\\_sb\\_ss\\_i\\_1\\_15?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=love+is+letting+go+of+fear+by+gerald+g.+jampolsky&srefix=love+is+letting%2Cstrip+books%2C272](http://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_ss_i_1_15?url=search-alias%3Dstripbooks&field-keywords=love+is+letting+go+of+fear+by+gerald+g.+jampolsky&srefix=love+is+letting%2Cstrip+books%2C272)

# Movies, Audio and Video

**When Shame Gets In the Way of Love & Connection**  
[http://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html)

Brene Brown studies human connection -- our ability to empathize, belong, love. In a poignant, funny talk at TEDxHouston, she shares a deep insight from her research, one that sent her on a personal quest to know herself as well as to understand humanity.

**Be Careful of My Heart, Tracy Chapman**  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4as1v3FZeYQ>

*This video puts a great twist on this great song.*

## **The Empathic Civilization**

Learn about “mirror neurons” and the stuff in our brains that leads us to naturally lean in the direction of empathy and love!

[http://fora.tv/2010/05/06/Jeremy\\_Rifkin\\_The\\_Empathic\\_Civilization\\_Animated](http://fora.tv/2010/05/06/Jeremy_Rifkin_The_Empathic_Civilization_Animated)

## **An Inspiring and Practical Program Teaching Children to Love!!**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gIgLGt4hZuY>

Introducing Roots of Empathy, an award-winning charitable organization that brings empathy-based (and evidence-based) programming to children. Roots of Empathy is internationally acclaimed and has shown dramatic effect in increasing positive social behaviour and decreasing aggression and bullying. The organization's mission is to create a caring, peaceful and civil society through the development of empathy in children and adults. For more information, see [www.rootsofempathy.org](http://www.rootsofempathy.org).

## **A Bit More on Empathy**

Twenty leaders in the field explain, in two minutes or less, how to cultivate empathy.

<http://empathy.ashoka.org/series-101>

## **Want to rekindle your love of life itself? Watch this! (especially at minute 4:45 on)**

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXDMoiEkyuQ&feature=player\\_embedded#](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gXDMoiEkyuQ&feature=player_embedded#)

## **Free Hugs!**

*May seem sentimental at first, but by the end you can't help but feel love for this thing we call "the human family."*

[http://www.youtube.com/watch\\_popup?v=hN8CKwdosjE](http://www.youtube.com/watch_popup?v=hN8CKwdosjE)

# Movies

## **Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close**

Coming soon. Expect it to be a moving piece about about how love never dies

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/09/movies/awardsseason/scott-rudin-holds-oscar-cards-close-with-extremely-loud.html>

## **Meet Joe Black**

“Meet Joe Black my fav movie is about not settling for anything but a love that makes you head over heels knock your socks off- before its too late.”