

***Love and Forgiveness***  
--a sermon for the Days of Awe--  
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First Unitarian Church of Des Moines  
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**Sermon**

“If only it were so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere else insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were simply necessary to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”<sup>1</sup>

So wrote Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Russian, Nobel Prize-winning writer and historian, and controversial figure who, at least in his public life, seemed to be, in many ways, a walking contradiction. He supported the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, later equated the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia during the Kosovo War with the actions of Hitler, and, at the same time, was reputed to have held anti-Semitic views.

Clearly Solzhenitsyn was a complicated man, a man who seemed to embody an often-quoted phrase of Walt Whitman, who though writing about himself, was also describing, I think, the human condition: “Do I contradict myself?” he wrote. “Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large. I contain multitudes.”

Solzhenitsyn’s recognition that within each of our hearts is a “line dividing good and evil” cannot be ignored, because, we each know the truth of it. Within each of us lie contradictions: desires for love and peace betrayed by actions of animosity and conflict; dreams of affirmation and acceptance denied by our fear and closed-heartedness; yearning for wholeness left unsatisfied by our tendencies toward fragmentation and isolation.

This being human is a complicated, confounding enterprise, no doubt about it. There are no easy answers to the most important questions of our living, beyond searching for ways to “consecrate our lives” and more completely immerse ourselves in the redemptive possibilities of

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<sup>1</sup> Jack Kornfield, *The Art of Forgiveness, Lovingkindness, and Peace*, (New York: Bantam, 2002), p. 81.

love. But we know that to claim that the primary purpose of life is “to love” is also not as simple as it sounds.

What does it mean, after all, to love? And if loving is the goal, how do we reconcile the different, often contradictory, circumstances and expressions of the human yearning (conscious or unconscious) to love? How do we reach beyond our attempts to love that are more accurately attachments to self-justification or control of others? How do we move past our attempts to love that are more about receiving than giving? How do we learn to inhabit the love that is grounded in our connections to and understandings of others and our shared lives rather than in our attempts to preserve an ever-elusive sense of individual safety and certainty in a world where loss and disappointment are always lying in wait?

Life and love are never as simple as we either want or hope them to be, even if your minister tries, for the sake of a sermon, to describe them that way.

Last week, I preached a sermon in which I drew upon my understandings of an approach to difficult communication called “Crucial Conversations.” I explained that this approach assumes a four-step sequence of human behavior:

- 1) We observe something [say someone cuts us off in traffic]
- 2) We tell ourselves a story about what we have observed, in other words, we assign meaning to what we have seen or heard, whether at lightning speed or over time. [that driver is an idiot, a danger to society who must be set straight!]
- 3) The story we tell (even when we don’t know we are doing it) leads to an emotional response (we feel something) [We become fearful and angry]
- 4) Our emotion leads to an action. [We lay on the horn or shout an obscenity]

In the sermon, I used the July arrest of Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates outside his home as a springboard to talk about how this sequence often works in the difficult interactions of our own lives. Something happens, we draw conclusions about what is happening, often based in assumptions or presumptions (created by our past experiences, our present fears and/or our future expectations), which leads to an emotional response that drives our behavior, sometimes in ways that we come to regret because they betray our ultimate desire for compassion and understanding. In the sermon, I contended that both Gates and the officer who arrested him must have been driven by

stories (both factual and incomplete) which helped create emotions that led to what we can all agree was an unfortunate outcome.

Then I invited those attending to consider their own story-telling tendencies in the difficult relationships of their lives, particularly the ways in which our emotions--particularly when driven by assumptions and presumptions--can lead us away from the facts of the situation, and can thereby interfere with our ability to effectively (and lovingly) relate to our sisters and brothers.

I shared a description of an encounter I had in a potluck line here at church in which a member asked me a question that I interpreted as an attack, which led to me to be defensive and more confrontational in my response than I would have been had I been more thoughtful about the story I told myself about her intentions, a story based in assumption more than the facts, which, in my haste to jump to conclusions, I couldn't fully know or discern.

In the end, the sermon contained two primary assertions:

- 1) Our emotions arise as a result of our conscious or unconscious interpretations of reality (the stories we tell ourselves about what we observe). People don't make us angry. Our interpretations of what they do create emotions that lead us to act in anger.
- 2) Seeking to pay attention to the stories that we tell (even when we didn't know we were telling stories before we began paying attention) can lead us to more effectively align our emotions (and therefore our actions) with the facts; thereby enabling more effective communication, and a higher possibility of outcomes that will more likely draw upon the truth of all the people involved, and will therefore be more responsive to and reflective of reality. If we learn to question our heightened emotions, seeing in our anger, for example, the possibility that we could be telling ourselves stories based in assumption rather than fact, we may be able to change the stories, which can change our emotional response, and therefore the actions that will follow.

I attempted to articulate that our emotions are not necessarily our final truth and are therefore worthy of examination. It's not enough to claim that someone made us mad or we had no choice but to disengage or dress someone down. Our emotions (especially our tendencies to clam up or lash out) can be signals to us (warning signs, even) to reflect upon the ways we are viewing (and perhaps reacting

to) a set of circumstances. Do we have enough facts to draw the conclusions that lead to our emotions that lead to our actions? Sometimes we do, but many times we don't. And our relationships pay the price.

So, in a nutshell, that's what I think I said last week. Now, in our liberal religious tradition, a sermon is not intended to be a proclamation of ultimate truth to which listeners must adhere. Thank goodness, right? No, in our tradition, we see revelation as continuous and truth as ever-advancing. Therefore, a sermon is never just a monologue; rather it is an invitation to dialogue. That's why I'm pleased to tell you that, after the sermon, I heard from several members who disagreed with portions of that sermon, who questioned my assertion that emotions are something that we, in effect, choose, and who challenged the implication that our intellect can manage our emotions. I was gently reminded by some of these kind folks that some human behavior theorists would assert that emotions are not a mere figment of our storytelling; rather, they are an expression of truth and are therefore not to be ignored or interpreted away but lived with and through as a means to discover what is real. The choice, these folks would say, comes not in how to control our emotions through our intellect (as in the stories we tell), but rather in how to accept our emotions as essential pieces of information in the understanding of our stories. To deny emotion, they suggested, would be to deny something important, if not essential, about ourselves.

After hearing these reactions, I believed the sermon I offered had been provocative in what seemed to be the best ways because not only had some of you been agitated by it, but now I was having to go deeper in my reflection, too. And later this week past, I heard about couples, friends, and families who continued to ponder the ideas, even the ones about which they disagreed, long after the service, leading to some real creative interchange. This is our UU approach at its best: We seek to stir up our own thoughts and presumptions so that we can reflect together on the meaning of our lives in ways that not only grow our understandings, but that inspire us to be intentionally open-minded in how we interact with one another. When we are at our best, we are always seeking more information, searching for more understanding, and interacting with the expectation that we cannot assume there is a final resting place for truth.

So that I could continue the dialogue begun last week with you today, I asked some members to share further reflections with me, and Linda Lemons accepted my request. Linda has spent many years in the field

of mental health and has done much reflection on this topic. In her response, in which she asserted her belief that emotions are not to be denied, but rather, balanced with our intellect, she reflected on the emotional regulation skills training of psychologist Marsha Linehan, who stresses the importance of mindfully relating to our emotions, experiencing them without judgment or attempts to inhibit them. This approach contends that when a person is encouraged to view her painful emotions as potentially “bad” or inappropriate, she will be more likely to feel guilty or anxious, usually making the consequences of a negative situation even more difficult, in part, because her judgment of herself may keep her from grappling with the truth of what her body is telling her and therefore limit her possibilities of action. In other words, if she is too busy judging the worth or validity of her emotions, questioning her right to be angry or fearful or sad, she could more easily succumb to abuse or other’s inappropriate or uncalled-for behavior or denial of her life experience. Her right to be angry and to allow that anger to lead her to necessary, if not life-affirming, action should not be diminished.

Linda’s described approach assumes valid reasons for what we might call negative feelings and encourages thoughtful consideration and acceptance of these painful emotions so that they do not induce suffering, but instead enable us to move to the possibility of appropriate problem solving. The idea, as I understand it, is that the storytelling I described last week can take place after the emotions are surfaced, too, and, with attention and care, can moderate the following actions that otherwise are assumed to be automatic. Just because we feel something, doesn’t mean we have to act, particularly in the moment. We can develop disciplines of thoughtful interaction with our emotions, which can lead us to more controlled outcomes.

I don’t believe Linda’s points are all that different than the ones I was trying to make, nor do I believe the results we seek are necessarily different, but I do accept the reality that the way in which I articulated my understandings clashed with her sense of truth. Fortunately, for both of us, she approached me and initiated a conversation that was helpful, I think, for us both.

From the Crucial Conversations perspective, she experienced my sermon, told herself a useful story about my intentions, had an emotional response, and then acted by approaching me for more understanding. From her perspective, she experienced my sermon, had an emotional response, was thoughtful about that response, and sought me for a conversation.

Either way, we arrived at the same outcome and hallelujah for that! Does it really matter how she, and therefore we, got there? I don't think so.

Therefore, rather than argue the finer points of my understanding, or hers, I submit to you that the process of engagement we shared, which was respectful, intentional, and assumed goodwill until it could be clearly proven otherwise, remains far more important than the details of our differences. Because we engaged with one another with an expectation that we might learn something and grow our "shared pool of meaning", we created the opportunity for an expansion of our reality. We not only grew our connections to one another, we grew the possibility that our stories, our emotions, and our actions would be more intentionally open, curious and brave. We sought not solely the validation of our individual perspectives, but the possibility that we might develop a more interdependent consideration of our shared needs to understand and to be understood. As we stretched toward insight, we approached what I would call love. To love, then, for me, is

--to engage with commitment to the expectation that there is more to learn and experience and be through encounter than we could possibly muster on our own

To love is

--to humbly and persistently pursue a more complete understanding (if not refuting) of our assumptions and predispositions by gently offering them to our loved ones and then sticking around to consider theirs.

To love is

--to assume goodwill until we can prove otherwise, and, even then, to presume there are reasons why that goodwill may be lacking. As Henry Wadsworth Longfellow put it: "If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should see sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility."

To love, then, is to be grounded in and committed to the necessity of forgiveness, the responsibility of relinquishing our tendency toward judgment and hostility in exchange for the possibility of encounter, transformation, and redemption. It is this willingness to forgive, to seek to understand, to move beyond the hurts of the past, that is our "heart's greatest dignity."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

To forgive is not to forget and it does not always happen quickly or without challenges or even sacrifice. To forgive does not require that we put ourselves in danger nor that we have to relate to those who seek to do us harm. To forgive does require, however, that we keep our hearts open to others, even if we must do so from afar, that we move beyond ignorance and fear in exchange for open-hearted empathy, which will, in turn, open the prospect of greater understanding.

I came across a Tibetan teaching that describes this approach well.

“Imagine walking along a sidewalk with your arms full of groceries, and someone roughly bumps into you so that you fall and your groceries are strewn over the ground. As you rise up from the puddle of broken eggs and tomato juice, you are ready to shout out ‘You idiot! What’s wrong with you? Are you blind?’ But just before you can catch your breath to speak, you see that the person who bumped into you actually is blind. He, too, is sprawled in the spilled groceries, and your anger vanishes in an instant, to be replaced by sympathetic concern: “Are you hurt? Can I help you up?”<sup>3</sup>

This wisdom teaching is offered to show us how our lives can be. When we find the humility and courage to recognize that the primary source of the world’s disrepair and pain is ignorance, we can approach even the most difficult, disappointing circumstances with compassionate understanding. We can find it within ourselves to give up the hope for a better past, focus on the present, and open our hearts and our lives to the true greatness of the human animal, the ability to love and, therefore, to forgive.<sup>4</sup>

The Jewish Days of Awe teach us a similar lesson. To intentionally set aside time each year to name those places where we have broken faith with our sisters and brothers and betrayed our yearning for harmony, and to demonstrate repentance and make amends, is a beautiful, hopeful, wonderfully human discipline of trading ignorance and self-justification for compassion and forgiveness. It is a discipline that has much to offer, because it translates love for self into love for others, and love for life. It is an expression of our deepest desires for connection and for redemption. It offers us a model for how we can consecrate our lives, and let go of our judgment.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 36

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

The Days of Awe remind us what is possible when we seek to love and to forgive, despite all the reasons not to. They offer us a glimpse of what is possible and the encouragement to reach for it.

In closing, before we leave this place to consider how we might best approach our own Days of Awe, these precious days of our lives in which we can stretch ourselves toward the love and forgiveness that are waiting for us, I want to leave you with the words of my esteemed colleague Forrest Church, the 30-year minister of All Souls Church in New City, who ended his three-year battle with cancer on Friday. Throughout his writing, and particularly in his most recent work, when he knew his time among the living was soon to end, he shared his understanding of the primary mission of life as “to live in such a way that our lives will prove worth dying for.” For Church, the means to this end was to live each day to the fullest and to always strive to embrace the opportunity to love and to forgive.

In these words, from one of his classic sermons, he leaves us with a poignant reminder of how to “Love, work and serve to a fare-thee-well”. He wrote:

“Meaning does not emerge from longing for what we lack, things we have lost, or will likely never find. It doesn't emerge from longing to be something we will never be or to do something we will never do. Meaning emerges when we embrace what we have. The courage to bare up under pain; the grace to take our successes lightly; the energy to address tasks that await our doing; the meaning to be found in giving ourselves to others; the liberation that follows when we forgive one another; the comfort to be taken in opening our heart to another; the joy to be gained even in the most common endeavor; the simple pleasure in one another's company; the wonder that wells within the simple fact of our shared being. I call this thoughtful wishing. Wishing for what can be ours, what we can do, what we can be, not tomorrow, but today. One more thing. Unlike wishful thoughts, thoughtful wishes always come true.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> From sermon “Thing to Do When You Get Your Life Back”, by Rev. Forrest Church. Preached November 14, 1999 (<http://www.allsoulsnyc.org/publications/sermons/fcsermons/things-todo-when-you-get-.html>)

For more information about the “Crucial Conversations” content, consult: *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When the Stakes Are High* by Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillian and Al Switzler (New York: McGraw Hill, 2002).