

# **A More Difficult Love**

**a reflection  
by Rev. Bill Gupton**

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The covenant we recite together to begin our worship service proclaims "Love is the spirit of this church." This brief affirmation, adapted from the words of James Vila Blake, a 19th century Unitarian minister, is read or sung in hundreds of Unitarian Universalist churches across North America each Sunday as a congregational covenant or doxology.

This morning, I would like to challenge us to look at these familiar words - words which in many ways are better known to us, and to many Unitarian Universalists, than even the words of our UU Principles - I want to ask you to look at these words in a new light, and perhaps to reconsider what it means to love. This morning, in particular, it is my hope that such words can take on renewed significance as we honor the life and dream of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Martin Luther King was a prophet, in every sense of the word. He called to account the political, religious, and social leaders of his day on pressing issues of racial injustice that threatened to rip apart the very fabric of our society. He spoke out against war, at peril to his own life. He envisioned a time in which prejudice and hatred were no longer barriers to brotherhood and sisterhood. And King also elaborated for us a means to achieve that dream - a method that was at the same time ancient, revolutionary ... and supremely challenging. A method called love.

Now if ever a word has been overused, misused, and misunderstood, it's the word "love." Perhaps the English language is to blame - after all, unlike many languages, it restricts us to that one small, ambiguous word to cover such a wide array of possible meanings.

Greek, on the other hand - the language in which the biblical gospels were originally written - employs at least three separate and distinct words for different types of love. *Philia* connotes friendship, affection, mutual regard - "brotherly love." *Eros* was used to refer to passionate feelings of desire, in which an object of love is longed for based on its ability to satisfy some need in the heart of the beholder. And *agape*, the uniquely biblical noun usage of the same Greek verb, connotes a love that exists regardless of the merit, goodness or lovability of the loved one - what we today might call "unconditional love."

But in English, the simple word "love" is stretched to cover all these meanings, and more. After all, it is possible to say, "I love your tie." Or, "I love chocolate." And of course, you've all seen those bumper stickers with the red hearts in the middle: "I love my cocker spaniel." "I love fishing." "I love New York." Just the other day I saw one that said, "I love my grandchildren."

Ah, now at least we're getting somewhere. For love, in the transformative religious sense, is a love of people, a love of the divinity that resides in every person.

It seems to me, the ability to love in a way that can be truly powerful, that really can change the world, can only come as the culmination of a difficult, four-step progression outward, from self to other. Martin Luther King's great legacy is that he - like Jesus, like Buddha, like many of the great religious teachers - reminded us of the fourth and final step - the most difficult love of all - and called upon us to take that step.

Those who work in the field of psychology tell us that we cannot really love another until we love ourselves. That's the first step. Here I'm not talking about narcissism or selfishness, but about the knowledge and assurance that one is, deep inside, basically a good person, endowed by the Creator with inherent worth, and thus, worthy of respect and love.

Unfortunately, for some people - perhaps victims of guilt or abuse - even this first tentative step toward transformative love is itself quite difficult to take. But for most of us, with this as a base, we are able to take the second step - love for another, be they spouse, partner, friend or family member.

This type of love is characterized by its reciprocal nature. We love someone who also loves us. We give something, but we also get something in return. Though we may sometimes fear this second step because it makes us vulnerable, its rewards far outweigh its dangers.

The third step is, for me, best captured in another bumper sticker. Have you seen those bumper stickers that read, "Practice random acts of kindness and senseless beauty"? There's probably one in our parking lot right now. It's a catchy saying - but did you know it's also actually a movement? True participants in the "random acts of kindness" movement are encouraged to do things like put a quarter in an expired parking meter for a total stranger, or give their lunch to a homeless person, or leave a note saying "Have a nice day" on a telephone pole at a busy intersection.

The idea behind such random acts of kindness is not the accumulation of good karma points, but rather the transformative power of simple loving acts toward strangers. According to Daphne Kingma, who literally wrote the book on the subject, "In doing these beautiful, spontaneous goodnesses, you transform the world. And then that world - embattled, bitter, divided, discouraged, bone-weary with its dog-eat-dog mentality - suddenly becomes freshly laced with the sweetness of imaginatively unpremeditated love. Its atmosphere alters. Quietly, almost imperceptibly, because of the little kindnesses that have been unleashed upon it, it begins to sing."

Yet wonderful as random acts of kindness are, transforming as they may be both for the giver and receiver, this kind of love is only a third step on the way toward the most difficult - and potentially most transformative - love of all. The world will not ultimately be changed - and, as Martin Luther King and others have long argued - may not ultimately survive, until and unless we can love not only ourselves, those who love us, and those we do not know - but love also those who are our enemies.

I don't know if you notice the little quotes I put at the top of the order of service each week, but if not, I encourage you to consider the words of a six-year-old named Nikka, on this week's bulletin. Nikka said, "If you want to learn to love better, you should start with a friend you hate."

I considered quoting the Buddha; I did quote the Christ - but it doesn't take an enlightened one or a savior to get the message across. Little children have

a way of cutting right to the heart of the matter, and telling us all we really need to know.

Nikka's suggestion is the wisdom of the ages - and it is the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. King envisioned a day when we human beings would become capable of loving each other - even, and especially including, our bitterest foes.

A Baptist minister, King knew full well the power and the challenge of the great teaching of Jesus: "You have heard it said, love thy neighbor and hate thy enemy - but I say unto you, love thy enemy."

King took to heart those words from the Sermon on the Mount. He also took to heart the non-violent resistance taught by Mahatma Gandhi. And in filtering Jesus' doctrine of redemptive love through Gandhi's practical social-action stance, King was able to inspire profound societal change.

In one of his better-known sermons, King said, "At the center of non-violence stands the principle of love. A non-violent resister hopes that in the struggle for human dignity, the oppressed people of the world will not succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter. To retaliate in kind would do nothing but intensify the existence of hatred in the universe.

"Along the way of life, someone must have the strength to cut off the chain of hatred. This can only be done by projecting the ethic of love into the very center of our lives."

That ethic of love, said King, includes not only love for self, love for loved ones, and love for neighbor and stranger, but the most difficult love of all - love for our enemies.

This is where King truly challenged us. I ask you to stop for a moment and consider this prophetic message. Look deep inside yourself. Can you really love someone who has done you wrong? Are you actually capable of returning kindness for evil? Love for violence?

Luther King Jr. said, emphatically, yes, you are. And King not only presented us with the challenge, he showed us the way to do it.

While imprisoned in a jail cell in Georgia on civil disobedience charges, King wrote an essay called "Loving Your Enemies." In it, he offered three concrete suggestions to his followers who, at the time, were facing incredible hatred, violence, and oppression, and who were divided among themselves as to whether or not King's non-violent approach was a realistic way to achieve their goals, or just an idealistic fantasy.

Today, as we stand on the brink of war with Iraq, as we fight an ongoing war both pre-emptive and retaliatory against terrorism, King's three suggestions are just as relevant for us, as they were for the freedom fighters of the 1960's:

First, King wrote, "We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. One who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love."

Secondly, he said, "We must not seek to defeat or humiliate our enemies, but to win their friendship and understanding."

Third, he continued, "We must recognize that the evil deed never quite expresses all that the enemy is. An element of goodness may be found in even the worst enemy."

Here, King is talking about what we Unitarian Universalists often refer to as "the inherent worth and dignity" of each person. About the spark of the divine that resides in everyone.

Of course, King went on to admit that there's a big difference between loving a person and liking them. How can someone be expected to like a person who is beating their father, or burning their church, or abusing their children?

But by searching for, and then acknowledging, that part of the enemy where, in King's words, "the element of goodness may be found," by recognizing the enemy's common humanness and, yes, holiness, we can love that person. And, as King so powerfully put it, "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend."

In a speech late in his career to the anti-war group Clergy and Laity Concerned, King went on to universalize his doctrine of love: "When I speak of love, I am not speaking of some sentimental or weak response. I am

speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme, unifying principle of life."

That principle is one I experienced firsthand in the aftermath of April 4th, 1968. One of my most profound childhood memories is of the day Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated.

I was nine years old. Even at that young age, I had seen the specter of racial prejudice. I was growing up in a small town in Tennessee, being raised by a single mother. She was struggling to make ends meet, and we were living in a tiny apartment on the very edge of the "white side of town." A black neighborhood began literally just beyond our backyard.

My mother - who, bless her soul, cared not a whit for the social taboos of her day - worked as the office secretary in a small black elementary school a few blocks away. It was through her friends there that she had arranged for someone to babysit when she wasn't home.

My babysitter's name was Peggy. Peggy was a young African-American woman in her early 20's. Every day she would fix me an after-school snack, play games with me, read to me, and talk with me about her dreams, and mine. The funny thing was, we never talked about race. It must have been something she thought about often, but it hardly even crossed my mind. She was just my friend. I looked up to her, and I loved her.

Then one evening the news came on the television: Martin Luther King had been killed. In Tennessee. By a white man. I didn't really know who Martin Luther King was, but I knew that something had forever changed between Peggy and me. For the next several days, when she came to babysit, Peggy barely spoke. All she did was sit at the window, staring out into the backyard, and cry. I couldn't do a thing to make her stop crying. I longed for everything to be the way it had been - but somehow, I felt, it never would be again.

Oh, how I wanted Peggy to stop crying. But no matter what this little nine-year-old boy did to try to cheer up his old friend, I couldn't right such a terrible wrong.

Yet there was a very powerful force at work in Peggy's tearful silence. A force bigger than her, bigger than me. A force that was capable, if not of

making things right again, at least of healing our wounds. As King had preached, the power to love and the capacity to forgive were doing their magic somewhere deep in Peggy's heart - the heart I knew to be so warm and caring. It took a while, but Peggy stopped staring out the window. She quit crying.

She began talking to me again. And though lifelong scars would remain, for both of us, we were healed.

When I grew a little older, I found myself interested in learning more about this man who had made such an impact on my friend Peggy. The more I read about him, the more I came to admire him as one of the finest persons this world has ever produced. But I believe that it was in those awful days of early April, 1968, as a young boy, that I came into personal contact with the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

King reminded us that all the great religions of the world have recognized the supremely unifying power of love. Unitarian Universalism, too, proclaims this wondrous gift. But when we sing "Love will guide us," when we say "Love is the spirit of this church" - just what kind of love do we mean?

Are we merely singing about our love for ourselves? Are we only talking about loving our loved ones? Or can our love include those we don't even know? The homeless person on our streets? The white supremacist on the television talk show? The militant Islamic fundamentalist?

Can our circle of love include even our enemies - wherever they may be, whatever shape they may take in our respective lives?

Martin Luther King Jr., like Jesus before him, was no more, or no less, human than anyone in this sanctuary. But both men had a dream. They believed, unequivocally, that we do have the power to change the world. That by taking love to its limit, by taking that last, most difficult step toward forgiveness, and finally being able to feel compassion for even our bitterest enemies, we can transform ourselves, our enemies, and thus, our world.

May this be the kind of love that guides us through the dark night.

May this be the kind of love that is the spirit of this church.

Amen.