Love’s Conditions

About a year ago I attended a retreat for Unitarian Universalist ministers at which we were invited to reflect on our callings, our careers, as chaplains in hospitals and hospices, or prisons, as military clergy, spiritual directors, teachers, interns, parish ministers. It was part of an ongoing project to help each other name and honor the commitments in our lives, the covenants we keep with loved ones, with congregations, with this beautiful, difficult free faith tradition to which we’ve given our lives. The project is called “Whose are we?” – not “Who are we?” or “Who am I?” which are questions of identity, questions Unitarians ask all the time. They are essential questions. But to ask Whose are we? is to consider the self-in-relation, the self which in fact does not exist except in relationship. Whose are we? expands the eye (the “I”) outward, asking: Who needs you? Who loves you? To whom are you accountable? To whom do you answer? Whose life is touched by your choices? With whose life, whose lives, is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways? What are the bonds of love and necessity that keep you tethered to the ground?

And so at this retreat, we asked each other and we asked ourselves, “Whose are you?” and we did it literally. We sat in pairs, and for 15 minutes one person asked and one person answered, again and again and again. I sat with a colleague I did not know well (but I do now!), and he asked, “Whose are you?” and I responded, and he said “May God be merciful,” which was part of the discipline of the practice. And then he asked again: “Whose are you?” and I answered again, and he said “May God be merciful,” and he asked, and I answered, over and over.

It was a fascinating exercise. It was painful. We had to trust each other before we knew each other. We had to be honest or it wouldn’t work. At first the answers came easily, they were obvious.

Whose are you?
I belong to my family, to my partner, Ross, and my daughter Hope.
Whose are you?
I belong to friends whom I love (and I named some names), and to my mother, and my brothers, and the memory of my father, and to Ross’s mother, and his Auntie Carol, and so on.
Whose are you?
I belong, heart and soul, to my congregation. (And that’s true.)

My colleague blessed each answer with the words, “May God be merciful,” which was awkward for us both at first; we were nervous, we laughed and rolled our eyes. But soon it felt exactly right, as I spoke each name and thought about how easily, how carelessly, I neglect the covenants that I intend to keep, or stretch them to the limit, or betray them. “May God be merciful” helped turn down the volume of self-judgment.

Before long, it was harder to answer the question. There came long silences.

I belong to the ancestors, to loved ones who have died, and others stretching back beyond our ways of knowing. All people, living and dead. All suffering, all gladness. All tribes, all kingdoms, all continents.
My heart belongs to the landscape I grew up in, to old stone walls, specific woods, the ocean. I belong to animals, trees, waters, earth, the stars.

Whose are you?
I belong to what came before the stars and made them: the source, the sacred, the holy. I belong to mystery, to God.

May God be merciful, he said. Whose are you?

After an eternity we changed places.

I don’t remember exactly what I said and in what order, but I know that at some point the way I heard the question shifted. At first, “Whose are you?” meant “To whom are you accountable? To whom are you responsible?” and quickly this became “Whom do you love? Who is within your circle of concern?” But by the end I was hearing something different: By what love are you held? In whose arms are you held? I repeated my first answers, but differently: My family holds me in love. Ross and Hope. My congregation. The stars, the source, the sacred, all mystery. These are lines cast not by my own will, my own desire or intention, but in spite of me. Regardless of anything I want, or anything I do or don’t do, I think I am held in love.

Not long ago I asked someone how she knew when she was loved. She said that for her it’s almost like a physical sensation: “You can almost put your hands out and feel it, know it. You don’t have to keep asking, Do you love me? Am I loved? It’s just present.” What a beautiful idea – in regard to people, in regard to God, or how we are with one another. Sometimes I say our work as human beings is to make tangible the love of God – God being very large and abstract and maybe non-existent (who can say?). We are here to make tangible, and audible, visible, reliable, real, that force field that we might not otherwise believe in. We are here to weave the bonds of love.

In classical philosophy, and in theology, there are different kinds of love, different definitions of what this single word in English tries to mean. The Inuit have a hundred names for snow, the ancient Greeks had at least four for love. Philia refers to friendship, kinship, family, community. It held all the fidelities of friendship, the common, ordinary, miraculous steadfastness of partnership and marriage, the discipline of decency, and all the joy in these. Eros was erotic love, passion, sexual attraction; it could also mean a deep, platonic love for truth or beauty or virtue, concepts you fall in love with. Agape was universal, unconditional and selfless, the kind of love that Christians feel in Jesus, boundless compassion pouring forth; and storge in Greek referred to the love that parents feel for children, or children for their parents, instinctive affection. Storge also meant affinity or loyalty, the way people might “love” their tribe, or homeland, or their king. Philia, eros, agape, storge -there were all these nuanced variations, but we use the same single word to speak of feelings for our dearest friends, our favorite team, a lover, a new baby, ice cream flavors, IPhone apps, movies, books, the person we’ve been married to for decades, God. This semantic simplification does nothing to make love less complicated.

One writer [Rob Bell] says there’s love, and then there’s love. “It’s easy,” he says, or it can be, “to take off your clothes and have sex. People do it all the time. But opening up your soul to someone, letting them into your spirit, thoughts, fears, future, hopes, dreams... that is being
naked.” All the various varieties of love (with lovers, friends, community) are always messy, unseemly even; love almost always calls for nakedness of one kind or another. It is almost always conditional, it makes demands, sets conditions: it almost always wants trust, beyond all reasonable expectations – blind trust, wide openness, the practice, the holy offering, of vulnerability. With no guarantees of anything at all, it asks the hardest thing of us, that we loosen and even relinquish the reins of control. “What you alone think it ought to be,” says writer Wendell Berry, “it is not going to be.” He’s writing about marriage, but this pertains to any love between us or among us. “Where you alone think you want it to go, it is not going to go… You do not know the road, you have committed your life to a way.” Your fiercest commitments ask you to abandon all attachment. Love’s fraught with confusion, and with risk.

Larry Ward is a Buddhist teacher. He offers just a glimpse of love’s risk in the memory of learning to play golf one summer. He is a black man, and his teacher, who is his mother-in-law, is white.

My feet are slipping on the practice green, slipping in my non-golf shoes. I notice the sign in the backcountry golf course that says “No cowboy boots. No high heels” and I know I am far from the ‘hood. I recall my father’s stories of not being allowed to play golf due to policies of racial discrimination. Something in me quickens as I realize that I am here for my father, too. I am also frustrated. How could something that looks so easy be so challenging? Peggy’s mother says, “Oh, Larry, what a lovely day. I’m so happy to be here.” And I am awakened to the presence of beauty, the soft breeze from the Idaho mountains, and the gift of friendship. “Here, let me help you,” she says, as she stretches her short arms around my belly. I can feel her heart beat next to mine. She positions the club in my hands. What am I doing on a golf course in Idaho? I am with my friend, and I soften into this offering of love. We practiced for hours and all I remember is her kindness and her gentle coaching.

Love is entirely conditional, entirely dependent on our own will to let it in.

It walks hand in hand with grief and loss. It walks with death and dares us to embrace it anyway and we do, over and over, because we know it keeps us alive, as lovers, as ones who are beloved. It keeps us alive, the way air keeps us alive, or water, food, or rest at last each night keeps us alive. It demands our hardest work, our best work, our full attention, heart and mind and soul and strength. It is a mighty act of will, and it showers down on us as grace.

Susan Griffin, in a poem, says

Love should grow up like a wild iris in the fields, unexpected, with not a thought to the future, ignorant of the graveyard of leaves, forgetting its own beginning. It should spring up freely like a flower- but it doesn’t. More often, she says, Love is to be found in kitchens at the dinner hour, tired out and hungry; it lingers over tables while the cook is probably angry, and the ingredients of the meal are budgeted, while a child cries feed me now and her mother, not quite hysterical, says over and over, wait just a bit, just a bit; it goes on from day to day, she says, not quite blindly, gets taken to the cleaners every fall, sings old songs over and over, and falls on the same piece of rug that never gets tacked down. It gives up, wants to hide, is not brave, knows too much… It comes from the midst of everything else…
I’d like to read this at a wedding sometime – not to dim the glittery magic or dampen the breathless romance, but to plant them in the solid ground, the rich and grubby dirt of daily days. I’d like have the flowers girls spread dirt here where the silken rose petals usually are spread, and replace the satin slippers and tuxedo shoes with work boots. Love comes from the midst of everything else, and from nowhere else. Instead, sometimes, I offer the words of my colleague, Mark Belletini, who writes more gently and more wisely:

You have chosen to be companions
[literally], cum pane... with bread.
As companions you will share the bread of life together,
The loaf of the sun, a slice of the moon, bright crumbs of stars.
Yours is a call to mutual nurture at the table in your house,
[and] on the common table of earth,
You are hosts to each other, welcomers, companions.
Let your growing love change everything:
    ordinary bread into the bread of life, 
    need into abundance, 
    friendship [to] communion...

You have chosen to be partners, 
[which] comes through the Old French parcenar, 
which, surprisingly, is built on a still more ancient word ...partition.

Partners, it seems, do not blend, like yellow and blue 
becoming some new shade of green; 
[Partners] are partitioned, living rather like the colors on a great work by Matisse, 
in contrast and cooperation, 
held together by the sheer power of delight...

[This is excerpted and adapted from a larger piece.]

And then there’s Carter Heyward, Episcopal priest and feminist theologian, who so clearly sees the way that philia, love of each other, one by one, in marriage, family, community, these little loves that have our names embroidered on them – philia prepares us for agape, a larger love, a larger embrace, that begins to look like justice:

Love, she says, is not fundamentally a sweet feeling; not, at heart, a matter of sentiment... Love is active, effective, the making reciprocal and mutually beneficial relation ... To make love is to make justice... Loving involves struggle, resistance, risk. As sexual lovers, as faithful friends, as activists we know that the most compelling relationships demand patience, and tension and anxiety... Love is a choice -- not necessarily a rational choice, but a conversion to humanity -- a willingness to participate in the healing of broken lives. [You throw yourself in and become] a member of the human family, a partner in the dance of life, rather than an alien in this world or a some kind of] deity, aloof and apart from human flesh.
Our family was travelling this summer when the legislature in New York voted finally to legalize same-sex marriage. We were not in Greenwich Village or Manhattan, where everyone was dancing in the streets, but way upstate on small back roads, in tiny towns where you might expect resistance or disinterest -- but the sense of joy and pride was palpable. We bought a paper in a general store and the woman behind the counter, an ordinary woman in an ordinary country store, was ebullient: Isn’t this amazing? she said. I can hardly believe it! Where are you guys from? We told her “Minnesota,” and she patted my hand and said, “Don’t worry. It’ll happen.” One picture in that newspaper has stayed with me – it looked almost like a faded painting: an old man reading in a wing-backed chair in a little room lined with books, and a crackling fireplace and a flagstone chimney, with candles and a clock on the mantle, old family portraits on the walls, a cup of tea by his side. He’s in his robe and slippers, the picture of tranquility. Just behind him, standing at his elbow and also in a robe, his grey-haired spouse, a little stooped, leans gently down to speak to him. Richard Wilhelm, seated, and Ralph Goneau, of Woodstock, New York, together 41 years, plan to get a marriage license on Sunday, the day the New York Marriage Equality law takes effect.

This is the world I want to live in.

Thirty years ago, Ross and I were married in a different town in New York state – exactly thirty years ago tomorrow, on September 19, 1981. We didn’t understand then how something as private as our marriage could have public implications. We did not yet fully understand our enormous, unearned privilege as straight people, didn’t see then how the arrangement of our little household, the arrangement of our hearts, our little love, was bound in every way to larger love, to commitments connected to and far beyond ourselves. Everything connected. We had not yet grown into that spiritual maturity. We didn’t know then, hadn’t claimed yet, whose we are (beyond each other’s); we didn’t see it then, even though we invited our dear friend Marta to sing at the reception, and she came, together with her partner, who was our dear friend Martha. We didn’t know what we know now about the bonds of love and how they intertwine. Philia (how we care about each other) and eros (sexuality) are so intimate, and agape is universal – but they are all connected. We did not yet fully understand that one of love’s conditions is integrity, through and through. We did not yet know, as we do now, that our state-sanctioned marriage will never be a holy sacrament until it was possible for everyone. In these intervening years, we have been blessed by gracious teachers, generous friends, and clear, kind mentors in these matters of the heart, these matters of justice and love. God is merciful.

Whose are you?
Who carries you in their heart, thinks of you, whether you think of them or not?
Whose are you?
Who are your people, the ones who make a force field you can almost touch?
Whose are you?
Who is within your circle of concern?
Whose are you?
To whom are you responsible, accountable? Whose care is yours to provide?
Whose are you?
When you look in the mirror in the morning, whose bones do you see? Whose blood runs in your veins? Who are those people, stretching back in time, beyond memory? Where did you come from?
*Whose are you?*
When you walk out of your room, out of your house, into the sunlight of the day, to whom in this wide world do you belong? Where is your allegiance, by whom are you called?
*Whose are you?*
At the end of the day, through the longest night, in the valley of the shadow of death and despair, who holds your going out and coming in, your waking and your sleeping?
Who, what, holds you in the hollow of its hand?

*Whose are you?*

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18 September 2011
Mahtomedi, MN