

A Limitless Love

By Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD January 7, 2024

It comes with a pause, a breath, an intention. Perhaps a hand over our hearts, perhaps eyes closed in deep breathing, perhaps in practicing prayer or meditation or yoga or immersing oneself in nature. It is that intent – the intent to strip away the superficial, to center in our own heart space or soul or spark of the divine. To connect to that of which we hold within. In these practices we strip away the superficial – judgment falls to the wayside, anger slips from our consciousness, jealousy creeps away from our being, prejudice slowly dissolves into the abyss. With this breathing, this pause, this intention of connecting with our still, small voice within, we strip away the outside negativities we have been taught. What are we left with? Love. Innate, inherent, unceasing, limitless, always present love.

Love is inherent in each life. It plays a crucial role in – I argue – each and every one of our world's faith traditions. One common thread is that sacred, holy understanding of some form of the divine residing within each of us. Another commonality is this idea often known as karma, the belief that our actions today affect our lives tomorrow and beyond. Unitarians and Universalists each, historically, hold their own ideas of love and the divine – this idea of inherent goodness, the belief in our own likeness to God. Love changes our lives; love becomes limitless.

Just as each faith maintains its own metaphor for the sacred beyond us – which we have recently explored – so, too, do we hold different metaphors and understandings of that which we hold within. Christians understand this spark as the Holy Spirit – but one piece of their Trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit. In Christianity we are children of God and, as such, hold the spirit of God quite literally within us. Buddhists call this Buddha nature – that true and natural state of mind cloaked behind defilements, a mind eternal and unchanging, present most clearly when our minds and very beings are cleansed of that which causes suffering. This light within is the theology that holds Quakers together as a people of faith. They worship and live with the

understanding of the ability of each being to experience the spark within – the divine accessible to anyone. Jainism holds the idea of a soul, and yet a soul that does not just reside within living forms of life, but one that simultaneously resides in beings alongside fire, earth, air, water – a soul held within literally any piece of nature in this finite realm.

I bring this idea of God, of soul, of Buddha nature, of the Holy Spirit or the light within to this message of love because to many in our own faith these metaphors become synonyms with love. To many Unitarian Universalists, eternal love is the ultimate essence of the divine – that is the spark we hold within. It is at the core of our being; transcending all that is, love. A reflection on Jainism offered by Professor of theology Christopher Key Chapple is this: Jains believe living beings and souls are omnipresent - everywhere and at all times.¹ Remember, their definition of soul is that which is held within every natural thing in this realm. Within our own faith tradition, cannot love, too, become omnipresent alongside life and soul? Held in a rock – soul and love alike. Held in the air we breathe and water we ingest. I offer, too, that it is held in an enemy, in those we dislike, in those we disagree with, in those we do not want to love. Limitless. Always there, always accessible, always present within and beyond.

So, too, do myriad faiths embrace the idea commonly known as karma. A basic definition of this faithful practice, as articulated by scholar Rupert Gettin, is this: karma as “good and bad actions of body, speech and mind whose pleasant and unpleasant results are experienced in this and subsequent lives.”² This understanding is found within Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Taoism, and, more recently, reflected in Western religions, theologies, and practices. In the eastern traditions karma is often directly connected with future rebirths. And yet there are more universal aspects to these beliefs as well. What we offer is reciprocated. It is reflective of how we act, what we say, even what we think. If we offer love, we receive this in return. Our futures become filled with beautiful gifts of this sacred reciprocity. Our lives become richer, fuller, more meaningful, more beautiful –in this realm, the next, or a subsequent life. I offer

¹ *Panentheism Across the World's Traditions* Edited by Loriliai Biernacki and Philip Clayton pg. 102

² *The Foundations of Buddhism* written by Rupert Gettin pg. 320

this metaphor – karma as seeds planted in fertile earth bearing either pleasant or offensive fruits.³ One act of goodness or kindness fosters the next fosters the next fosters the next as we live lives of goodness and compassion – one seed of kindness begins a plentiful, rich, and flourishing garden. In Buddhism in particular this is held deeply within acts of intention – a basic tenet of the Buddhist faith. Intention. We engage deeply with the intentions of our hearts and offer actions that reflect this. Our futures are quite different if our intentions are those of kindness or compassion or love, versus greed or aggression, that which cultivates a future of pain, animosity, anger, and hurt. That piece of the divine, the holy in our bodies, becomes what we offer to the world, and what we receive in return.

To me, these ideas of the sacred within, of intentionally offering love to the world, of our actions affecting all that lies ahead, are directly applicable to our own faith tradition. Love has been foundational to our faith since its founding. In our reflection on Universalism, I begin with a story of the father of Universalism, Hosea Ballou. Universalism was begun from the deeply held belief that no one is damned; that all are divinely saved – universal salvation. The story of its founder is this: Universalist theologian Ballou and a Baptist preacher were traveling together through the terrain of New Hampshire, deeply engrossed in theological discussion. The Baptist turned to the Universalist and offered this: “Brother Ballou, if I espoused this belief and did not fear eternal hellfire, I could commit all sorts of horrible acts and still reside eternally in heaven!” Ballou looked him in the eye and said, “Brother, if you were truly a Universalist, these ideas would never occur to you.”⁴ These ideas of harm and evil and sin would never even occur to you. If we truly hold love in our hearts and offer this to the world, we would never think to harm another. We do good – not for fear of hellfire – but because that is the right, moral, loving, and beautiful way to experience our time in this finite realm.

I invite us into reflection of our own lives, for in joining together in this space made sacred by our presence, we hold within us this traditional idea that no one is damned, and this basic idea

³ *The Foundations of Buddhism* written by Rupert Gethin pg. 101

⁴ Adapted from Rev. Sara Smalley, from *Soul Matters Worship Research January 2024*

that we are all loving, inherently. We are imperfect beings, yes. We make mistakes, yes. But malice? Oppression? Bigotry? Violence? Since espousing our Unitarian Universalist beliefs, have these ills passed through one's mind in any serious, concrete way? This is what it means to be a people of faith. As Buddhists note, it's our intentions – of action, word, and thought. We are lovers of all and see a spark of the divine within each. No one is damned. We do not create hell on earth, we are called to create heaven. Hell on earth is violence, oppression, hatred. Heaven is a universal, unceasing love. One of harm, the other, compassion. The father of our faith espoused this - we do not even consider hurting one another.

What of Unitarianism? The faith founded on this idea of innate human goodness, compassion, and love. We are filled with a splendid, marvelous array of gifts and talents and inner treasures. This is what our namesake – William Ellery Channing – taught and preached. Channing called our inherent, innate goodness and love “powers of the soul” – it is reflective of the divinity held in our nature, our beings. We are called, through life, faith, and study, to feed these powers of the soul and grow in our “likeness to God” – God is his word for the sacred.⁵ We are not a faith that espouses a belief in one form or understanding of the sacred; we are each on our own search for truth and meaning. So, what does it mean for one people of myriad beliefs to grow in likeness to God? Channing offers his own ideas, held loosely within the confines of a Christian God. It means we are in harmony with all that is, holding great sympathy for all of the creations of God. It is that we discern the sacred in all things and know this divine being through intimate experience. It means we aspire to a peaceful life, for a calm heart can connect to a soothing, loving entity – and God can only be enjoyed by kindred spirits. As such we grow into perfection, even though true perfection is entirely unattainable. We carry within us beauty, magnificence, benevolence, and purpose.⁶ Our faith becomes our way of life. Again, it is that faith – that divinity – within. Again, it is acting with love in each of our days and fostering that reciprocity – receiving this in return – in this case, from our God.

⁵ *Blessing the World* written by Rebecca Ann Parker and Robert Hardies pg. 115

⁶ “A Discourse at the Ordination of the Rev. Frederick A. Farley” written by William Ellery Channing

Universal salvation, yes. Innate goodness, yes. But what exactly is love in this Unitarian Universalist faith that has often been deemed heretical, a faith with the courage to fight for justice, a faith of kindred spirits held together by covenant, a faith called to create heaven on earth through offering compassion to all, a faith in which we see within each person a spark of the divine? I reflect upon the ideas of Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Tess Baumberger, whose words we heard earlier. If we are to embrace a universal love for all we need to relinquish this idea of sentimental or romantic affection, for it is not that. I offer that it is, instead, a form of agape love – that of empathy, a desire of goodness and wellbeing for all, an unconditional offering of help and assistance, of unceasing goodness towards each and every being. Ours is an abiding love kindled to affirm everyone’s dignity and worthiness no matter what one does or does not achieve, does or does not believe, does or does not do perfectly, or at all. We have a chance to believe in ourselves and one another so deeply; affirming and promoting our sacred interdependence. Everyone deserves love – even though we have each been hurt, and we have each hurt others. Love is a hope that keeps us surviving, an inspiration to create heaven on earth, it works to overcome evil and promote that which is good. This is an assertion of our values – equity, pluralism, and affirmation of all of creation – care and compassion towards those of any race, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, or political affiliation.⁷ At its core, it is this: we each hold within us a spark of the divine. It is this: we are each called to bring love to the world each and every day. It is this: this love will be reciprocated, and we will live lives of goodness, beauty, and compassion. There are no conditions for this agape love – it is limitless – offered to felon, enemy, harm doer alike – with the caveat that we are in no way called to love our abusers. The love we offer changes our minds and our orientation with the world as judgment falls to the wayside and compassion takes its place, as anger dissipates and kindness fills its void, as violence becomes undoable and instead we become a force for peace and nonviolence in this world. It changes our bodies as we release the anxiety, fear, and depression that accompanies judgment, hate, anger, and animosity. Love transforms us. Love makes us. Love is inherent within us. That is our faith. So may we carry this with us, this day, and every day.

⁷ Includes adaptations of the words of Rev. Tess Baumberger from *Soul Matters Worship Research January 2024*

May it be so, and amen.