

"Love at Our Center"
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Pop quiz, and no cheat sheets. Without looking at your bulletin insert, what's the theme for this month's services?

Next, a little harder question, and this time I'd like a show of hands: Who remembers our theme for last month, January?

So, a month ago, we turned from the Path of Finding Our Center, to the Center, and then back out, to the path of Love. At this point it would *not* be cheating to refer to the labyrinth insert in your bulletin.

If you're not familiar with this five-circuit labyrinth, it depicts the ten months of our liturgical year— which is to say, not counting the summer months of July and August— and shows the theme we're focussing on for each month.

The black lines that snake through the labyrinth are the boundaries of the paths. That's a way of saying that the yellow and blue portions aren't two separate paths. They indicate, instead, the two different directions of our walk, the blue portion showing the month and theme as we travel inward, toward the center; and the yellow portion showing our themes as we journey back out. In the first half of the year we traveled from September, with the theme of Belonging; to October and Courage; made a hairpin turn onto November's path of Change; and another hairpin turn to December and Wonder; then to January and Finding Our Center.

The path of Finding Our Center leads us along the very outer rung of the labyrinth until we suddenly find ourselves turned inward to the center. After reaching the center and turning back outward, we— just as abruptly— find ourselves back on the outside rung, on the path of Love. On these two paths, we're closest to the center, in terms of our journey. But, in the placement of these paths on the labyrinth, we're closest to everything and everyone around us when we're seeking our center, *and* immediately after we reach center and are drawn, from that center, onto the path of Love.

You might say, "But the labyrinth is just a clever construction." And I won't deny it. But I think it's a fine *illustration* of how this actually works. So, I hold it up as a way of visualizing, and thinking about, the place of love on our spiritual journeys.

So, where is the place of love on our spiritual journeys? Is it naturally found when we come to our center?

I'd like, today, to take a look at the place of love both in our Unitarian Universalist value system, and in personal spiritual experience.

You might be aware that the Unitarian Universalist Association's Board of Trustees called a Study Commission a few years ago to review Article II, Principles and Purposes, of the UUA's Bylaws, and make suggestions for changes; and that the Commission has now completed its two year study and put forward its report including the Commission's recommended revisions to Article II.

This section of the bylaws represents the covenant that all our congregations and communities commit to. It was last revised in 1987, and you may be particularly familiar with the sections that include our Seven Principles and our Six Sources.

So, this is a big deal.

Today, I'd like to point you to the section of the proposed revision titled, "Values and Covenant."

In addition to the labyrinth insert in your order of service, you'll also find an insert with a graphic from this section of the proposed Article II. You'll find that love is at the center of this graphic, with six values connecting to, or emanating from, the central point of love.

The section is introduced as follows:

As Unitarian Universalists, we covenant, congregation-to-congregation and through our association, to support and assist one another in our ministries. We draw from our heritages of freedom, reason, hope, and courage, building on the foundation of love. Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love.

Inseparable from one another, these shared values are: Interdependence, Equity, Transformation, Pluralism, Generosity, and Justice.

The text then elaborates on each of these six values, and I wish I could read the whole thing. If you're interested, I encourage you to read the proposed revision in its entirety, if not the whole report. (The revision begins on page 19 of that report.) For now, I simply want to underline the way that the UUA's Study Commission intentionally and explicitly places love at the center of our shared values.

And what of us, as individuals? We, too, can consciously and intentionally place love at the center of our lives, and act from that love space. *And I* think there's also a sense in which love is simply and naturally what we find at our core, when we bring ourselves to center.

I'd like to offer, for consideration, my experience of what I find when I come to center in meditation. I can't claim universality for experiences that are my own, but my sense is that my experience is, at least, fairly common and what I describe may feel familiar to you.

The ingredient that brings me to center in meditation is awareness. From this centered awareness springs a feeling of contentedness. Sometimes a tendency toward smiling, or even an inner movement in the direction of laughter arises. Awareness and the corresponding sense of contentment lead, seemingly naturally and inevitably, to appreciation and a general sense of connection. And, from here, an impulse to act from love rises.

I'm breaking this down to put it into words, but, of course, the directionality is only an approximation— a sort of general roadmap— of the effects of meditation. But the point is that when I come to centered awareness, love emanates.

I don't think anyone ever came out of meditation feeling hateful, or feeling more angry.

Does that mean no one who meditates a lot becomes angry? No. It may be that people who meditate a lot are slower to anger, or become angry less often. But I believe that for people who meditate more than I do, righteous anger is still a thing. If we're connected to our center, and to the world around us, injustice is going to bother us, deeply. But the anger over that is felt as a passing mood, a reaction in our bodies that we notice, process, and let go so that we can act from our center, and from a space of love— rather than feeding angry sensations, letting them continue to build, and ruminating on so-called causes of our anger that are often just straws that our minds grasp at to explain the anger and help us feel better about ourselves. (Personally, I'm far from managing to let go of anger quickly and smoothly all the time.)

What about centering experiences other than meditation? Do we need to meditate ..., or do we find love at the core when we engage in other centering activities, as well?

Being in nature, where things relate and flow organically— where the structures we place around things are stripped away— easily brings us to our center ... and to a sense of connection with everything above, below, and around us. I think that love flows naturally from us in communion with nature, as well.

Julia "Butterfly" Hill said, of her 738-day tree-top vigil to keep loggers from cutting down the redwood in which she lived:

I didn't climb the tree because I [was] angry at the corporations and the government. I climbed the tree because when I fell in love with the redwoods, I fell in love with the world. My feeling of 'connection' is what drives me, instead of my anger and feeling of being disconnected.

Engagement in simple activities in everyday life, such as household tasks, can also catch us suddenly in peak awareness. Ruminative thought and feeling drop away, and deep appreciation and a more loving approach flow forth.

It's funny the way our coming to our center stretches us beyond ourselves. Center is where all things come together. So, while our personal viewpoint is always limited by where we stand, so to speak, when we're centered, our viewpoint is actually broadened, and deepened. And we feel more loved.

The poet Ada Limón, in a recent interview on *On Being* with Krista Tippett ["To Be Made Whole," February 16, 2023], shared this memory:

I was sort of very deeply alone during the early days of the pandemic And I was having this moment where I kept being like, "Well, if I just deeply look at the world like I do, as poets do, I will feel a sense of belonging. I will trust the world and I will feel at peace." And ..., what came to me as I stood and looked at the trees was that — Oh, it isn't just me looking. It is the world and the trees and the grasses and the birds looking back. And it felt like this is the language of reciprocity. This means that I am in a reciprocal relationship with the natural world, not that it is my job to be the poet that goes and says, "Tree, I will describe it to you." I have a lot of poems that basically are that. But instead to really have this moment of, "Oh, no, it's our work together to see one another. And to not have that bifurcated for a moment."

When we're in this space of centeredness and loving reciprocity, we're not able to think of, or treat, people as others with whom we engage transactionally, nor things around us as objects to consume. In short, we're not able to see ourselves as separate.

And here we come around to our *coming* month's theme: Vulnerability. Because in this space of reciprocity, we're open. Love opens us up. It softens us. And, referring to our labyrinth one more time, I draw your attention to the fact that March and Vulnerability share the same path as December's theme of Wonder. Wonder and love— these states open us up. One beckons us onto the path of Finding Our Center, and the other is our being's response when our center is found.

Chocolate Ceremony

[Invitation to Chocolate Ceremony:]

As we close out our love month, and prepare to travel the path of vulnerability, let us celebrate, and let us take in the qualities of love ... via a ceremony of sharing—chocolate.

Chocolate has long been associated with love. Chocolate, as you might know, is made from the bean, or seed, of the tropical cacao tree. A writer and artist named Laurel Virtues Wauters describes cacao on her website, [Treespiritwisdom.com](https://treespiritwisdom.com), saying, “Cacao is a nurturing and sacred spirit that wraps us in a blanket of divine love, reminding us of how precious we are.”

<https://treespiritwisdom.com/tree-spirit-wisdom/cacao-tree-symbolism/>

In a moment, I'll invite you forward to take some chocolate (or, alternatively, a strawberry) from the table. Then I ask you to return to your seat and simply hold what you chose until we're all ready. When it's time to come forward, we can begin with the front rows, exiting the pews to the inside and returning from the outside, so that we're moving circular-wise, to center and back out and around; and front to back in turns.

We'll enact this ritual together, but we're all unique, so we can choose which kind of chocolate suits us. We have dark chocolate, a dark chocolate with cherries (that's the one with the little elephant imprint on the rectangular pieces), milk chocolate, and white chocolate. For those who can't, or prefer not to, eat chocolate, we have some fresh strawberries (also associated with love); and, of course, you're free, if you'd rather, to sit this out and be supportively present without participating actively.

And, in case you have concerns, I'll add that I made a point to get fair trade chocolate that's also *very* low in both lead and cadmium.

And we have napkins.

Let us now take a breath; and, when, Stephen begins to play, you may begin to come forward and to center, and back again.

[Music as people come forward and return to seats.]

[When everyone has returned to their seats, and the music comes to a close:]

Now I invite you to, first, see what you hold in your hands. Be with the chocolate or strawberry, and be aware of how looking at it makes you feel. If you will, take in its scent.

And now I invite you to take a bite of it, or put the whole thing into your mouth. I ask you to eat it slowly, and let the sensations bring you to deeper awareness.

Notice the taste, and how the taste changes on different points of your tongue.

Notice *all* the qualities of the chocolate or strawberry, and let yourself be filled with these qualities.

Notice its silky, or other, texture. And how it softens. How does this feel, and how does it make you feel? Does this remind you of how love affects your spirit?

Let the chocolate melt, or chew your strawberry slowly and mindfully, to find its center. Notice how, when you reach the center, it becomes the whole.

As you take in the chocolate or strawberry, take in love.

And, as you take in love, visualize it extending out from you, like an expanding cloud. Let it expand out to fill this space, enveloping all of us here. Notice what this love looks like and feels like. Does the expanding love have a color? A texture? A temperature? Now let it expand further, out, beyond this space, and into the world beyond these walls. Out, and out, into the world.

Blessed be.