

STANDING ON THE SIDE OF LOVE

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper

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During these past few weeks of cold snowy weather, I have received emails and videos from Fellowship members with heartwarming stories about animals who have made friends with animals from species other than their own. One of these was a charming video showing a dog and an orangutan who have become playmates. The most recent was sent to me by Glen Patterson. "In 2003, police in Warwickshire, England, opened a garden shed and found a whimpering, cowering dog. The dog had been locked in the shed and abandoned. It was dirty and malnourished, and had quite clearly been abused. In an act of kindness, the police took the dog, which was a female greyhound, to the [local] Wildlife Sanctuary, which is run by a man named Geoff Grewcock, and is known as a haven for animals abandoned, orphaned, or otherwise in need.

"Geoff and the other sanctuary staff went to work with two aims: to restore the dog to full health, and to win her trust. It took several weeks, but eventually both goals were achieved. They named her Jasmine, and they started to think about finding her an adoptive home. Jasmine, however, had other ideas. No one quite remembers how it came about, but Jasmine started welcoming all animal arrivals at the sanctuary. It would not matter if it were a puppy, a fox cub, a rabbit or, any other lost or hurting animal. Jasmine would just peer into the box or cage and, when and where possible, deliver a welcoming lick. Jasmine, the timid, abused, deserted waif, became the animal sanctuary's resident surrogate mother, a role for which she might have been born.

"The list of orphaned and abandoned youngsters she has cared for comprises five fox cubs, four badger cubs, fifteen chicks, eight guinea pigs, two stray puppies and fifteen rabbits - and one roe deer fawn they named Bramble, which] was found semi-conscious in a field. Upon [Bramble's] arrival at the sanctuary, Jasmine cuddled up to her to keep her warm, and then went into the full foster-mum role. Jasmine the greyhound showers Bramble the roe deer with

affection, and makes sure nothing is matted. ... Jasmine will continue to care for Bramble until she is old enough to be returned to woodland life. When that happens, Jasmine will not be lonely. She will be too busy showering love and affection on the next orphan or victim of abuse.” Glen’s email also includes several photos of Jasmine with her various and sundry animal friends.

If only we humans could learn from our animal friends! Instead, we seem to be mired down in a quagmire of fear and hostility that has enveloped our nation. It is most evident in the polarized political climate in Washington, but it also rears its head in letters to the editor and in media coverage of local and national issues. To me, when Rush Limbaugh criticized the use of American soldiers in the relief efforts in Haiti as “Meals on Wheels,” he crossed the line from insensitivity to inhumanity. The exchange of insults between liberals and conservatives gains attention but it does nothing to solve problems. Effective problem-solving requires listening to one’s opponents rather than destroying them, mutual respect rather than outrage, and simple patience. None of these qualities make for exciting news coverage, but I believe they are the values that will carry us constructively into our shared future. These are values we need to practice ourselves and instill in our children.

If we are to persevere in the face of adversity and conflict, it will be due to the efforts of those who seek to build bridges rather than destroy them. In the aftermath of the shooting that killed two people and wounded several others at the UU church in Knoxville, Tennessee, the Unitarian Universalist Association launched a campaign called “Standing on the Side of Love.” It calls us to stand quietly but courageously with people who have been subjected to the forces of polarization, rejection, and violence in our society, including gay people, immigrants, and bullied school children.

Standing up to the forces of hatred and intolerance is often described in **retrospect** in terms of heroic actions. In reality, they involve simple acts, such as Rosa Parks’ refusing to yield her seat to a white passenger on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955. Many years later she was recognized by the U.S. Congress as the “Mother of the Modern-Day Civil Rights Movement.” What is not widely known is that nine months **before** Rosa Parks refused to give

up her seat, 15-year-old Claudette Colvin refused to move from her seat on the same bus system. Sadly, in spite of the courage of people like Rosa Parks and Claudette Colvin, our schools are now more segregated by race and class than they were forty years ago. [Tim Lockette, “Unmaking *Brown*,” *Teaching Tolerance*, Spring 2010, pp. 28-32]

Standing on the side of love is rarely clear and never easy. On the rare but unforgettable occasions during my lifetime when I have mustered the courage to stand up to the forces of intolerance, I was filled with ambivalence and anxiety. There was a girl in our neighborhood named Judy Thursby. She was a newcomer, she was unattractive, and her skin was darker than the rest of us. We picked on her relentlessly. When we played kick-the-can, we would rig the game so that Judy would stay “It” until the game ended. I remember hiding in the alley with my friends and pelting the back of her house with rotten apples. But one day on the way home from school, something changed. A group of boys that included some of my buddies began throwing rocks at Judy. Rather than joining them, I ran toward Judy and together we ran as fast as we could away from them. My heart was pounding and I knew that I would be ridiculed by my friends for standing with Judy. But something inside me said that this was the right thing to do. Later on, I experienced that same mixture of fear and pride when I participated in a sit-in at a segregated restaurant in Alexandria, Virginia and in anti-Vietnam war demonstrations.

Standing on the side of love is also at the core of our faith tradition. As Angela Herrera says, “The Unitarians taught us that there is one god, one source, and because we all came from that same source, we are bound up together, with our lives as the only true test of our faith. The Universalists taught us that God loves everyone, so we must take care of each other. We must love our neighbors and we must take in the stranger.” [Angela Herrera, “Standing on the Side of Love,” www.uua.org] We affirm the worth and dignity of every person. We stand on the side of **inclusion** rather than **exclusion**. I am saddened and disturbed by the extent to which religion continues to serve as an agent of exclusion. Many denominations continue to be deeply divided on the issue of homosexuality. How tragic it is that so many of those who claim to be followers of Jesus do not follow his example of radical **inclusiveness**.

For more than 30 years, the Unitarian Universalist movement has actively supported the legal and spiritual aspirations of gay and lesbian people. We have not gotten tangled up in the biblical passages about homosexuality—**none** of them attributed to Jesus—that have divided other denominations on these issues. We welcome openly gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people not only as members but as ministers. Most UU ministers, including me, perform services of union for same-sex couples who want to formalize their long-term commitment. As my colleague Rev. Scott Alexander says, “Unitarian Universalists are working in our society to ensure that someday gay and lesbian couples will receive the same recognition and support of their committed, caring, and loving relationships. [quoted in Robert P. Cabaj and David W. Purcell (eds.), *On the Road to Same-Sex Marriage*, p. 150] As far as I am concerned, our movement’s public stance on the issue of gay and lesbian partnerships is exemplary.

The union between lover and beloved is by no means limited to erotic love, whether same-sex or opposite-sex. In a genuine loving relationship, the partners are willing to lose their sense of separateness at times, not only in their connection to one another but also in their shared sense of being connected to a larger whole. As William Houff says in his book *Infinity in Your Hand*, the deep desire for **union** is a core feature of both human relationships and the world’s great spiritual traditions. [The desire of lovers for one another] “is really the spiritual hunger that urges us all toward the divine beings that we are. . . . It includes the love of the craftsman for his work, the love of the mother for her child, the love of friends for each other, the love of the artist for beauty, the love of the scholar for wisdom, the love of the mystic for transcendent oneness or wholeness.” [*Infinity in Your Hand*, p. 85]

The possibilities are boundless. To deny the possibility that people of the same sex can experience and maintain sacred love is to deny the endless variety through which the Spirit of Life expresses itself. *Together in Love*, one of the books listed in the Sermon Resources, is an inspiring collection of love stories from gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender couples. “The people we meet in these stories reflect the love, compassion, tenderness, and spiritual strength of women and men who have struggled through pain, rejection, suffering to lives of wholeness and promise.” [Rev. Marcus Pomeroy, as quoted on the book’s back cover]

On this Valentine's Day, let us celebrate love in all its marvelous variety. At the end of Robert Fulghum's collection of love stories titled *True Love*, he offers these final thoughts:

The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference.

The game of love is never called on account of darkness or rain.

Most of us need love the most when we're the most unlovable.

Every love story has an unhappy ending, sooner or later.

If you concentrate on **giving** love, your task will seem small but the results large;

If you concentrate on **getting** love, your task will seem large and the results small.

The basic question of love: If you love me still, will you love me moving?

Some say God is love; some say love is God;

I say love is holy.

[*True Love*, pp. 237-38]

In closing, let me ask you: **What does love mean to you?**

DISCUSSION

HYMN # 95 "There Is More Love Somewhere"

CLOSING WORDS # 692 (by Lauralyn Bellamy) READ BY LAY LEADER