

Little is known about the man or men called St. Valentine. The best guess I can make based on what I've read is that he is an amalgam of historical figures. Perhaps a priest, maybe a bishop—he could have lived in Africa, though it seems fairly certain that at least part of him is buried in Rome! It isn't clear why he was martyred, *if* he was martyred at all...

And yet somehow, the minute the Christmas decorations come down, we are inundated with red and pink and hearts and flowers, chocolate and candy and roses and bears, all inscribed with messages of love, all marketed as gifts given in his honor.

The funny thing is that the one account I could find telling *why* he was believed to be martyred says that “He was arrested and imprisoned upon being caught marrying Christian couples and otherwise aiding Christians who were at the time being persecuted...”¹

If this account is true, St. Valentine was standing on the side of love! In our congregations, Unitarian Universalists sometimes begin a time of prayer by calling on the Spirit of Love. Some say simply that God is Love. Others believe that in the absence of a divine power, love is what holds us together and calls us to treat each other well.

Whatever we believe about God, though, love is more than a simple emotion, more than just a romantic feeling. Perhaps Love is the thing we most wish for—that which we continually seek, the force that binds us together.

Today we are participating in the “Re-imagining Valentine’s Day” initiative sponsored by the Standing on the Side of Love Campaign. “Love is about more than romance, greeting cards and chocolates. We want to celebrate love’s power to transform communities!”

“Standing on the side of love” began its life as the slogan for the UUA’s activism around marriage equality. We carried signs to demonstrations and rallies all over the country, showing opponents of legal marriage for same gender couples that we are not driven by politics or that fearsome “gay agenda,” but quite simply by the force and power of Love.

It was an effective message, and seemed like it might easily expand to include other issues. Organizers of the Salt Lake City General Assembly held a public witness for

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saint_Valentine

immigration reform under the campaign's bright yellow banner. Since then, "Standing on the Side of Love [has become] a public advocacy campaign that seeks to harness love's power to stop oppression."² It does not specify support for one particular issue.

Unitarian Universalists across the country are organizing against employment and housing discrimination, for marriage equality, immigration reform. The campaign now calls for initiatives that support respect, inclusion and compassion, working to "lift up religious voices to influence public attitudes and public policy."

We are re-imagining Valentine's Day. Here's how I see it: If we take away all the expectations and expense and marketing overkill, what's left of Valentine's Day is love. And love is... Love is so much more than a refrain we say to each other without reflection, a refrain that can become rote as time passes. Whether it is romantic love or love between friends or family members, love isn't scarce, but abundant.

Last year in my Valentine's Day sermon, I suggested we use the word love as a verb: Active, dynamic, and relational. When we think of it this way, it becomes an intention, an action, an emotion. UUA President Peter Morales says, "Love is a relationship-founded on the realization that we are all connected, that everyone matters, that every single person is precious. True love does not stop at feeling; it cannot stop at feeling. Love acts."

Gibran calls on us to be courageous in engaging with Love. He says, "if in your fear you would seek only love's peace and love's pleasure," basically, don't bother with love at all. With love, we are able to see each other more clearly, find deeper connections, and live more fully. The love of which he speaks is a risk, it is a journey, it is an active relationship, a transforming process. When we love truly and deeply, when we allow ourselves to be changed by love, we open ourselves to a more authentic life.

It is not an easy task to open our hearts to love. Even though we are almost ten years apart, my sister and I have always been close. When she was born, I went with my parents to pick her up from the hospital in Texas, and we all brought her home together. When she was in high school, my sister started acting out—struggling with addiction and telling the truth. Over the past ten years, my family—including my sister—has been on a roller-coaster of emotions and experience.

² <http://www.standingonthesideoflove.org/about/>

As she has moved in and out of treatment and from place to place, we do not always know where she is or whether she is safe. She has been in and out of counseling, diagnosed with everything from a personality disorder to depression.

My sister has done hurtful things, and I have been disappointed more times than I can count, but through my relationship with her, I have learned that I am called to do one and only one thing: To love her. Not *despite* her limitations, and without excusing the hurt she has caused me. I am called to love her for what she *is*, for the ways she *can* love me. Because my sister is deeply compassionate and funny, creative and resourceful. I have learned not to expect more than she can give me while at the same time allowing her to grow and change.

A. Powell Davies said, "Let the heart be open to pain; let it be stretched by it. All the evidence we have says that this is the better way. An open heart never grows bitter." It has not been easy to find a balance between self-protection and risk, but I refuse to close my heart and create a barrier between my sister and myself. Engaging in the work of love has been a root-shaking, heart-shattering experience, but I have learned the secrets of my own heart, known the pain of too much tenderness, and discovered the sacred gifts of authentic relationship.

Love can also be the impetus to sacred action, borne of our common experience and manifest in a commitment to justice. With compassion and respect for the other, and devotion to the good of the whole, we can create the world we dream of by standing on the side of love.

Standing on the side of love is about making a choice to become an advocate. We must take a stand. It is not necessarily about taking a political side, but about choosing compassion and justice and speaking for those who have no voice.

Like much we do in life, becoming an advocate is a process. We must first learn about an issue, and begin to believe in it as an abstract concept. What does it take to move from belief to advocacy? Sometimes we discover an issue and it fits into our existing worldview immediately. Other times, we have internalized assumptions or prejudices to work through.

Once we believe in an issue, we begin to take action in small ways. We might ask a friend not to tell jokes about a particular group of people, or sign a petition. Eventually, we will have an experience that tips the balance—we may meet someone for whom the issue is personal, or hear a story that changes our perspective.

Somehow, we must move from interest to action. I knew a woman who spoke of a particular event in her life that she described as having “radicalized” her. In her life, there was one single experience that caused her to become a radical and an activist. When I reflect on my own life, however, I realize that my own radicalism developed more gradually. First, I was taught a set of values. Then I tested the boundaries of those values, and made them my own.

When I was in third grade, my mother took me out of school to go to a rally for Walter Mondale and Geraldine Ferraro. I remember the crowds, and I remember the excitement in the air. That day was the *one time* she took me out of school for a non-emergency—any scheduled appointment was made outside of school hours. Later, I realized the clear message she had given me about her values. School was more important than a dentist appointment, but a female vice presidential candidate was more important than school.

That day was one of the ways my mother taught me her values. By exposing me to the inspiring possibility of a female vice presidential candidate, she began to lay a foundation for me: the ground in which the seeds of my own radicalism began to grow. As I entered adulthood, I discovered that it is a radical act to put ourselves out there in the world every day and say, “This is who I am. This is what is important to me.” It is a radical act to speak out against injustice and champion the causes of the voiceless and the oppressed.

Hearts and flowers don’t encourage the depth of engagement required for active and transformative love. The superficial trappings of hearts and flowers and candy obscure the truth of the daily experience of love—the complexities of relationship and the strength required to participate in the sacred action of truly and deeply loving another person.

The great thing about the commercialized nature of Valentine’s Day is that it gives us a perfect excuse not to limit our celebration of radical, transformative, life-changing love

to one day a year! If Valentine's Day misses the mark, we have 364 other days of the year at our disposal—that's 364 opportunities to take a stand. Let us stand together as individuals or in community—as a congregation or a family. Sometimes we are members of the oppressed group and sometimes we are allies.

We might find ourselves in a position of privilege, either within a particular organization, or by virtue of our gender or social location. But wherever we are on the spectrum, we each have a role to play, and we each have the responsibility to add our own voice to the chorus.

May we have the courage to stand on the side of love, and may we never forget what radicalized us. Our actions may be the inspiration needed by the next generation of activists—by standing up for what we believe, whether it is the rights of GLBT persons, immigrants or any one of the many other justice issues of our time, we are tilling the ground in which the seeds of another movement may put down roots.

I have an old framed photograph of my sister and me. It was taken when she was only a few weeks old, and I was almost 10. I'm cradling my sister in my arms—I remember waiting there on the couch for my mom to bring her to me—but you can't see all of my face in the picture, it's obscured by my chlorine-tinged summer-blond hair. My head is bent close to her tiny face, and even now I can remember the rush of love I felt for this tiny person, newly a part of our family—the first twinklings of big-sisterly protectiveness and pride.

Even though our relationship is not easy, and Joanna's life has not turned out as any of us might have expected, that photograph is what sustains me through the difficult times. My heart is not whole, it is most certainly battered and chipped and cracked, but the light that shines through the cracks is a sacred and holy love that is not conditional, that inspires me to action.

My ever-broken and always healing heart propels me to work until every person in the world has access to the power of such strong and transformative love.

May we each find the courage to follow when love beckons.

May we seek the transforming power of authentic and sacred love.

May we tend the garden of our own radicalism, and never, never be afraid to stand up for what is right.

Today and always, let us be champions of respect, inclusion and compassion, with open hearts calling for justice and peace for all the children of the world.

So May It Be.

Call to Worship by Angela Herrera

Don't leave your broken heart at the door:

Bring it to the altar of life.

Don't leave your anger behind

It has high standards

And the world needs vision.

Bring them with you,

And your joy

And your passion

Bring your loving

And your courage

And your conviction

Bring your need for healing

And your powers to heal

There is work to do

And all that we need to do it

Is here.

So let us come in

And then reach beyond the walls of this church

Let us fill this sanctuary with love

And then harness its power to stop oppression

Let us join together in worship

And together let us stand on the side of love.

Today's reading is from *the Prophet*, written in 1923 by Khalil Gibran. Throughout the following selection, the Lebanese poet refers to Love using a masculine pronoun, and I have chosen to leave it as originally written. My intent is to preserve the original cadence of the text though I understand Love to be gender-less and without form.

On Love by Khalil Gibran

When love beckons to you, follow him,
Though his ways are hard and steep,
And when his wings enfold you yield to him,
Though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you.
And when he speaks to you believe in him,
Though his voice may shatter your dreams as the north wind lays waste the garden.

For even as love crowns you so shall he crucify you.
Even as he is for your growth so is he for your pruning.
Even as he ascends to your height and caresses your tenderest branches that quiver in the sun,
So shall he descend to your roots and shake them in their clinging to the earth.

Like sheaves of corn he gathers you unto himself.
He threshes you to make you naked.
He sifts you to free you from your husks.
He grinds you to whiteness.
He kneads you until you are pliant;
And then he assigns you to his sacred fire,
that you may become sacred bread for God's sacred feast.

All these things shall love do unto you that you may know the secrets of your heart,
and in that knowledge become a fragment of Life's heart.

But if in your fear you would seek only love's peace and love's pleasure,
Then it is better for you that you cover your nakedness and pass out of love's threshing floor,

Into the seasonless world where you shall laugh, but not all of your laughter, and weep, but not all of your tears.

Love gives naught but itself and takes naught but from itself.

Love possesses not nor would it be possessed;

For love is sufficient unto love.

When you love you should not say,

'God is in my heart,' but rather,

'I am in the heart of God.'

And think not you can direct the course of love,

for love, if it finds you worthy, directs your course.

Love has no other desire but to fulfill itself.

But if you love and must needs have desires, let these be your desires:

To melt and be like a running brook that sings its melody to the night,

To know the pain of too much tenderness.

To be wounded by your own understanding of love;

And to bleed willingly and joyfully.

To wake at dawn with a winged heart and give thanks for another day of loving;

To rest at the noon hour and meditate love's ecstasy;

To return home at eventide with gratitude;

And to sleep with a prayer for the beloved in your heart and a song of praise upon your lips.

Benediction (by Laurel Sheridan)

Take from life its coals, not its ashes.

Fan the flames of love and justice;

Join hands and hearts in common endeavor;

And there will be no limit

To what we can achieve together.