

Love Makes a Family, Families Make a Nation

A sermon preached by the Rev. Lee Bluemel
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"Let us be enraged by injustice, but let us not be destroyed by it." – Bayard Rustin (1912–1987)

"Our world is a sacred whole in which we have a sacred mission." – Joanne Macy (b.1929)

"Love is the water that wears down the rock... Love is the power that won't be stopped..."--Brother Sun

I'd like to talk a bit about love today... about the power of love.

This week, I listened to a colleague and friend
struggle to articulate how she's feeling these days.

She had no words, so she told a story- a story about her family.

Since then she gave me permission to share it with you.

Her mom was a girl in Warsaw during WW II.

To be more exact, her mom was a Jewish girl, living in Warsaw during WWII.

She and her mother had a neighbor, Mrs. Devrit. And Mrs. Devrit had a dog that bit people.

Mrs. Devrit took this Jewish girl and her Jewish mother into her home.

They had some false papers, and they had the mean dog to guard the house.

Mrs. Devrit, the false papers and the dog saved their lives.

When my colleague's mom and grandmother fled Poland,
there was no one left to stay for.

Everyone else had been killed or displaced.

My colleague finished the story by saying,

"That is what sanctuary is: risking your life for others."

The experience of living under Hitler and then Stalin
profoundly shaped my friend's mom- and her too.

My friend said that lately she has been feeling deep fear and the desire to flee,

even as she knows rationally, *intellectually* that her present situation

is not nearly as dire as anything her mom faced.

But here's the truth of the matter: this story has shaped not only her fears, but her commitment to choosing love *over* fear. She said, "My mom survived because a couple people along the way chose love over fear in the face of evil- and at great risk. Because of them, I am here to tell the story... and to hopefully pass the power of that along."

We all have stories- family stories- that shape us profoundly. Some of those stories are part of our family lore and some are unfolding in real time, today. Some are about the family that raised us, some may be about an adopted family of friends and companions.

These stories often convey far more about us and our identity than descriptive words, theological explanations or political arguments ever could. They can be powerful.

They can determine the history we memorize, the values we adopt, the heroes we adore, the wisdom we turn to, the people we vote for, the poetry we read, the music we listen to, the food we eat, the causes we champion, the assumptions we make, the religion we follow, the amount of money we give away, the communities where we feel comfortable, the places that feel like home, the earth we love- and the people, too.

Some stories are triumphs. Some are humorous. Some are love stories. Some are secret or unspoken. And some, no doubt, contain fear or shame, struggle or pain. Just the mention of those very words might evoke a story for you- a story that is present for you today, or one from your family's past.

Now, if we can help it, most of us like to avoid things like fear, shame, struggle and pain, right? We like to avoid it in our own lives- or even *hearing* about it in others. So we tend to silence those difficult stories more than others.

The trouble is that silence is a great way to avoid the truth, and avoiding the truth can lead to more pain and suffering, to the isolation of individuals and peoples in their struggle, to injustices and even death.

As Unitarian Universalists, we strive to be truthful as well as loving. We are all about keeping it real— no need to pretend you believe something else than what you believe, no need to pretend you are anyone else other than the person you are, no need to pretend your family has a certain constellation, no need to pretend that we or our institutions are without flaw, no need to pretend that reality is any different than it is.

We believe that integrity and honesty are more valuable than uniformity. We observe that God, or Life, or the Evolutionary Process- just *loves* diversity. There's a story we tell in my house about the biologist who, when he was asked what his studies told him about God, said, "God is inordinately fond of beetles."

We are called to love diversity, too. We are called to confront isolation, injustice and unneeded death. So, in general, silencing the truth is not OK with us.

Silencing our truth as individuals is not OK. Without truth-telling, we can't be honest companions. We can't build trust, or help and heal one another.

Silencing truth is not OK as a society. We need truth-telling about history and its reincarnation in the present,

truth-telling about the experiences of minorities in our nation,
truth-telling about the perseverance of pain, prejudice and discrimination.

We need truth-telling that even if women and Muslims are senators,
and an Anglo-African American once sat in the White House,
and gay people can be legally married,
that sexism, racism and Islamophobia and homophobia
are still alive and well in this nation. *(Amen? Amen!)*

Silencing truth is not OK as people of faith.

We need truth-telling about the ways religion has been used
to oppress people or frighten people, or abuse and ruin lives.

We need truth-telling about our own problematic history -
including the times when we've been part of the problem,
or worshipped ungrounded optimism instead of engaging in active hope.

We need truth-telling that- as the Civil Rights strategist Bayard Rustin once said-
not only does power corrupt, but the absence of power can corrupt also.
So finally, we need some truth-telling about our own power.

We need truth-telling about the depths of our own resilience and about the power of love.

I invite you to listen to this poem by Becky Brooks:

we were erased and still we loved
we were shamed and still we loved
we were expelled and still we loved
we were laughed at and still we loved
we were hunted and still we loved
we were sacrificed and still we loved
we were marketed and still we loved
we were legislated and still we loved
we were murdered and still we loved
we were murdered
and still we love

This is what I'd call a truth-telling poem, a poem about resilience and love. It could be about any group of folks who've been erased, shamed, expelled, laughed at, hunted, sacrificed, marketed, legislated or murdered in this land or elsewhere. It could apply to people of conquest or slavery, to people of minority ethnicities or faiths, to female or GLBTQ people. Indeed, the title of the poem is this: *Still Queer in America*. Its words are sobering, but it is a poem of triumph— ending, *"still we love."*

The reality is that each person in this room is poem of triumph.

And if you are someone with love in your heart,
love for another being, love for the earth, love for God or love for life,
you are a triumph, a human love poem!

I think about that wonderful, whimsical reading
that the Rev. Tess Baumberger shared with us today:

*"Wouldn't it be great if you could take a picture of your soul?
Then when your mother wanted to brag about you,
she could show people the picture and say,
"That's my daughter, that's my son, don't they have beautiful souls,
all sparkly and many-colored and flowing all around them?"*

Praise be for all those who still love, for all the sparkly souls in this room!
Praise be for the many-colored souls who come across our path
and all those walking on this earth- praise be for those who despite it all, still love!
Praise be for the times when we see with the heart instead of the eyes
and appreciate the beautiful essence of another person!

Whose sparkly soul do you love?
Whose happiness do you long for?
Who or what do you hold in your heart?
Perhaps it's an individual, or perhaps a larger entity, like the earth, or a mountain,

or a certain group of people, or all the beings of the ocean or the skies.

That counts!

That love counts, because our nation has seen more troubled times than this, but our earth has not.

For whom- or for what cause- might you pour out your own life?
What family story or personal has broken open your heart,
opening you up to a new level of understanding and greater compassion?
Has it given you purpose, perhaps led you to a kind of ministry, a sense of sacred mission?
You might want to share your answers to this with someone else today.

The truth is, if you're in the middle of that story,
you're likely just trying to put one foot in front of the other, just trying to survive.
It is once we get through the crisis, out to the other side,
that we can spin our fears and pain into gold,
into deep understanding and true compassion for others who walk in similar shoes.

And if your family story has been smooth of late,
you might want to dig a little deeper to find the thread of suffering
that can lead to compassion, solidarity and sacred mission.
What challenges did your ancestors survive?
What is one thing you care about because of your family's history?
You might need to look back into your family's history a generation or two.

I decided to list some of the challenges in my own family of origin,
and in short order I was quite impressed.
In just the past three generations, my family's story
includes things like alcoholism, mental illness, depression, a suicide attempt
and military service that led to mental breakdown and death.

Our story includes blindness, deafness, disability and cancer.
It includes unplanned pregnancy and early marriage, infidelity and divorce,

abortion, adoption, and children not being loved by their parents as they truly needed to be loved.

My family story includes Republicans, Socialists and Democrats, Lutherans and United Brethren and Methodists and Unitarians. It includes entrepreneurs and success, business failure and reinvention; it includes poverty, hunger and the working class grind. It includes putting all one's hopes in a good public education and both upward and downward mobility.

It includes evidence of sexism and unseen benefits of racism. It includes abandonment of a native language and ethnic identity deemed to be that of an enemy of these United States. And of course it includes much more, just like families everywhere.

Thanks to the timing of my ancestors immigration, their countries of origin, accidents of history and the way that racism developed in America, the direct line of my family story does *not* include, as far as I know, genocide, slavery, war refugees, incarceration, internment, a holocaust, exile or deportation, as some family stories do. And so I know that I have some extra work to do, some extra history to learn, some extra poetry to read, and some people to thank for taking the risk to name the hard truths of their own stories.

Laura Hershey writes about taking this risk in a piece called "Telling". Today, her words have me thinking about the Dreamers- the young people who were brought here illegally as children by their parents, and stepped out of the shadows to tell their stories but also to register with the government under the Act called Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. These words might make you think of someone else.

What you risk telling your story:

You will bore them.

Your voice will break, your ink spill and stain your coat.

No one will understand, their eyes become fences.

*You will park yourself forever on the outside,
your differentness once and for all revealed, dangerous.*

The names you give to yourself will become epithets.

Your happiness will be called bravery, denial.

Your sadness will justify their pity.

Your fear will magnify their fears.

Everything you say will prove something about their god, or their economic system.

*Your feelings, that change day to day, kaleidoscopic,
will freeze in place, brand you forever,
justify anything they decide to do with you.*

Those with power can afford to tell their story or not.

Those without power risk everything to tell their story and must.

*Someone, somewhere will hear your story
and decide to fight, to live and refuse compromise.
Someone else will tell her own story, risking everything.*

It is time, perhaps, to tell some stories, and to listen even more.

What history, what poetry or truth might you seek out this month- this Black History month?

What story might you risk sharing— with a counselor, a minister, a friend?

What story might you share in a small group here at church or in worship,
and turn into a ministry?

What story might you share with a colleague or a neighbor,
with the readership of a newspaper or with a Senator?

What is your sacred mission?

Whose sparkly soul- who despite all their struggles- do you continue to love?

There are those who no doubt underestimate the resilience of those who love.
There are those who underestimate the resilience of those
who believe in telling the truth, naming pain and loss and survival,
and turning it into the golden thread of compassion.

What they don't understand is that our love and truth
is not just a theology or ideology,
not just something we say to sound pious, not just a spiritual practice.
It is rooted in our stories, in our lived and generational experience.
We cannot be separated from this love, this truth.
It is part of our very beings, our souls. It is who we are.

As we say here, "love makes a family",
and families- both given and chosen- make up our nation.
And so I pray that the stories and the love of families
will one day change and heal this nation.

May the ears of our nation hear, may its eyes be opened,
may understanding and compassion flood its heart.
And may the cup of our own hearts overflow with love-
each resilient, sparkly soul at a time. Amen

Readings:

Opening words: two poems by Langston Hughes: *Words Like Freedom* and *History*

There are words like Freedom
Sweet and wonderful to say.
On my heartstrings freedom sings
All day everyday.

There are words like Liberty
That almost make me cry.
If you had known what I know
You would know why.

The past has been a mint
Of blood and sorrow
That must not be
True of tomorrow.

Soul Lifts by the Rev. Tess Baumberger

Wouldn't it be great if you could take a picture of your soul?
Then when your mother wanted to brag about you
she could show people the picture and say,
"That's my daughter, doesn't she have a beautiful soul,
all sparkly and many-colored and flowing all around her?"

Wouldn't it be great if we walked around
surrounded by our souls,
so that they were the first things people saw
instead of the last things?
Then people would judge us by who we really are
instead of how we look.
Imagine no more racism, ageism, sexism, fatism, shortism, homophobia.

Imagine falling in love with who a person is,
just by looking at them.

It would be a kind of cloaking device,
hiding physical faults, defects or even perfections.
I'd want it to be mandatory.

Then people would work at making their souls more attractive
instead of their bodies and faces.

Imagine people knowing by your soul that you really need a hug.
Imagine people helping each other and their souls changing colors or growing.

Imagine soul gyms
with exercises to get your sagging soul in shape.
Imagine the long lines forming for soul-lifts
at churches, temples, mosques, synagogues
or nature's grand cathedrals.