

“Loving the Hell Out of the World”

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Thought for Contemplation:

If we agree in love, there is no disagreement that can do us any injury, but if we do not, no other agreement can do us any good.

Let us endeavor to keep the unity of the spirit in the bonds of peace.

- Hosea Ballou

Loving the Hell Out of the World

Seven years ago, Ginger and I had just moved to Iowa from Denver, Colorado. It was an autumn of beautiful days and cool nights full of cricket song. I was especially appreciative of the beauty around me that fall, because a college professor introduced me to the wonders of the Midwestern natural environment.

I hadn't wanted to take the class. But I was told by my advisor that the Biology course I took, my first time in college, was too long ago to count. I had to take a science class – with a lab – in order to graduate. “I think you'll like this one,” he said. OK, I had to admit, Environmental Education looked a bit more interesting than the other sciences. I certainly didn't want to take anatomy! Or dissect things!

As is often the way of such things, Environmental Education with Professor Emily Neal turned out to be one of my favorite classes of all time. The first thing she asked us to do was to find a spot in the out of doors and to sit there quietly for half an hour, two times each week, and observe. And then write or draw what we observed, each time we were there. This was our lab portion of the class. Right?

And all semester, we learned to identify flora and fauna, to tell a burr oak from a red oak, to identify fungi (one classmate found a chicken of the woods mushroom that weighed 7 pounds – it was this big!) We learned to traipse through the native prairie habitat and ask questions; to identify tracks and spoor by the watering spots at the river; to look at everything through the wondering eyes of a child. Because more than a science class, this was an education class for future teachers. We explored, designed games and activities for children – and tried them out. I had not reveled in the out-of-doors like that since I was a kid.

Emily Neal was a passionate environmental activist. But she waited until long into the semester before she introduced anything about Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, or the evidence of global warming, or how the fertilizer used on corn farms were making Iowa rivers so high in nitrates the fish were dying. She only brought these things up *after* we had spent time with,

played in, named, communed with, and learned to love the environment around us. “This is how you teach kids to take care of the environment,” she said. “You don’t scare them and discourage them and make them feel like nature is toxic for them. People don’t become passionate about protecting the environment unless they have first learned to love it. You can’t save what you don’t love.”

You can’t save what you don’t love.

E. B. White is rumored to have said that he wakes up in the morning torn between a desire to save the world, or to savor it. He was a man who deeply loved the world, including those parts that are in desperate need of saving.

Because you don’t have to look far to see that, as beautiful and wonderful as the world can be, so can it also be hell. A hell of poisoned water, dying coral reefs, galloping global warming. A hell that imprisons people in poverty, oppression, injustice. A hell of alienation, isolation and distrust. A hell of grief, loss, and despair. A hell of inner critics telling us we are never good enough, strong enough, disciplined enough, thin enough, working hard enough – never, ever enough.

We all have some hell here on earth, don’t we?

Love alone will not, of course, change any of these things. But whatever remedy we work toward, my friends, must be shot through with love. Love for others, love for the web of life, love for self. Because, and this I truly believe: you can only save what you love. I can only save what I love.

Unitarian Universalists have a long history of commitment to try to change the things that make life hell. Often, Unitarians and Universalists have been at the forefront of movements that addressed some of those things: schools for the blind; voting rights for women and, later, for Americans of African descent; sanitation leagues to make cities more healthful places to live; protests for peace, for nuclear disarmament, for clean water, for fair labor practices, for marriage equality, for fair policing practices, for separation of church and state – we have worked on all of these, and more.

Their watchword has always been love. Instead of threatening people with the fear of a hell – tell me please how a loving God could sentence *ANY* of God’s children to eternal suffering! – instead of the threat of hell, we have focused on love. The kind of love that led Clara Barton to minister to wounded soldiers during the Civil War, and get to know them, to listen to them, to learn what they really needed, first hand. So that when she founded the Red Cross, she knew how to help them. She loved them enough to know them.

The fact that our faith nurtures this kind of love, inspires me. In any UU congregation, you will find the majority of the members engaged in at least one social justice or environmental cause, often several. Because our faith challenges us to find the worth and dignity of every person, no matter their skin color, their legal status, their past, their flaws. Because our faith challenges us to recognize the web of all existence, notice and rejoice in our place within that web, and love it enough to save it. From the old Universalist slogan, “Go love the hell out of the world,” to our social justice slogan today, Standing on the Side of Love, UUs have been the love people.

In the 19th century Universalist preacher Hosea Ballou travelled all over the newly settled states of what we now call the Midwest. He was a master preacher, and drew crowds wherever he spoke. Ballou maintained that fear of punishment is a poor motivator. He also felt that focusing on the state of one’s inner life – am I good enough to avoid hell and achieve heaven in the next life – tended to make people more selfish: one is motivated by one's own conception of his reward and not out of true love for God and fellowman. Universalists took seriously Jesus’ admonition to love your neighbor as yourself.

The story goes that a theologically conservative skeptic claimed that Universalism would lead to the moral corruption of society. He said: “Brother Ballou, if I were a Universalist and feared not the fires of hell, I could hit you over the head, steal your horse and saddle, and ride away, and I’d still go to heaven.” Hosea Ballou looked over at him and said, **“If you were a Universalist, the idea would never occur to you.”**

A century later, humanists took the idea one step farther, holding the opinion that one does not need the promise of heaven or the threat of hell in order to be good. Cyrus Bartol quipped in his 1872 book *Radical Problems*, **“I spell my God with two o’s and my devil without a d.”**

Because what you know and love, you are motivated to nurture and to save.

Martin Luther King, Jr, once said “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.” To love the hell out of the world is to drive out hate with love. It is to create salvation – not in some other world, but in this one, right now. To work to create the beloved community, where the inherent worth and dignity of each person is respected and where all have access to peace and justice. You can’t save what you don’t love.

Loving the hell out of the world means you don’t have to be torn between a desire to save the world, or to savor it – it means that both go hand in hand. Loving the Hell out of the world means fighting the forces of fear, not with anger or frustration, not with name-calling and ridicule, but with love. Martin Luther King, Jr, said that “Hatred and bitterness can never cure the disease of fear, only love can do that.”

I've been thinking about how we learn to love that deeply. And the picture that keeps coming back to me is me, sitting on that bench under the pines and the oaks, half an hour two times a week, rain or shine or wind or snow. Sitting there long enough to discover that the strange noise I kept hearing over and over wasn't the call of a bird, it was a young squirrel calling for its mother. Sitting there long enough to see a squirrel busy, busy, busy stuffing oak leaves in its mouth, until he just bristled with leaves, and running with them up into the pine tree, and come back again and again for another mouth full. I began to know that squirrel, and to love it. I drew a sketch of it in my notebook. I love that spot, those trees, the squirrels and birds who make it their home, in a much deeper way than I love almost any other spot on earth – so far – because I stuck around until I knew it well, in all its moods, and was drawn into the surprise and delight of the natural world – in that place.

Loving the hell out of the world means being in relationship. It means exposure over time to what is different and unfamiliar. It means challenging ourselves to not turn away from the pain within ourselves and within others. Loving the hell out of the world means loving each other out of hell. It means listening to one another, learning from one another, helping each other. It does not mean we will always agree – we won't – but it means we will stay in conversation because our mission is the same, even if our politics or theology are different. Loving the hell out of the world means overcoming fear, bitterness, and hatred, with abounding and embodied love.

You can only save what you love.

Rev. Joanna Fontaine Crawford writes: To love the hell out of the world means to see with our hearts, fragile and unprotected. To accept that life is shattering and excruciating. To see the hell in a world, in a group, in a person, in a tear. To know that it is the experience of both the oppressor and the oppressed, as we are both. To wade in to it, armored for battle but leaving our heart completely exposed because that is what we follow, it is our night goggles in a dark world of smoke, falling beams, and faint cries from over ... there.

We love emphatically, actively, with our hands and feet; pushing the wreckage aside, reaching down, stretching until we fear our arms can go no further, but they do, we touch fingers with others, then grab on for dear life, pulling them out to safety, then going back in to remove the hell itself, before it traps someone else. We round a corner only to find hands waiting for us, to pull *us* to safety, to warmth, for we are both the savior and the saved.

Our faith **calls us out of ourselves and into the world to love the hell out of this world** — into a world filled with far too much hell that desperately needs the life-saving message that we are part of one another, part one human family.

Rev. Kendall Gibbons, We are all, at some level, homesick for the future – for the larger and more loving community that we are working to build; for the more just and sustainable world

that we envision together; for the difference that we might make as a force for good in our own lives and the lives of others. That homesickness testifies that our most important and exhilarating days lie ahead of us, and that it is in our power, through our investment of hope and determination and resources, to bring them to life.

We hope and work for what we love and envision together.

And so, in the coming days, I invite you to allow the historic spirit of Universalist's call to love ring in your ear and potentially change the way you might otherwise interact with everyone you will encounter. May we **give everyone we meet "not hell, but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into their despair, but give them kindness and love."** Together, may we individually and collectively do our part to love the hell out of the world.