

DO YOU DESERVE UNCONDITIONAL LOVE?
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My wife gave me food for thought a while ago. Over twenty-seven years I have communicated my love for her. I try to show by action and word that even when I am angry with her I still love her, value her, and remain devoted to her. So, one Valentine's Day I asked her if she thought I loved her unconditionally. Without much of a pause she said "Yes" and I was happy. I said I hoped that made her feel good about herself and she nodded. But then after a moment of thought she looked at me and asked, "Do *you* love *yourself* unconditionally?" I had to pause and think. I wasn't sure. I criticize myself all the time. I know that, like any human, I am not perfect and fail often to be as good as I wish. As one Bible writer said, "None are righteous, no not one". I began to wonder if anyone deserves unconditional love.

Then I noted that this is a self-contradicting statement. You cannot *deserve* unconditional love, because it is granted without *ANY conditions*. To deserve something implies that you have met certain stipulations, accomplished particular goals. But with unconditional love, what you do, who you are, where you live, who you love, none of that matters. In the ancient Greek of Christian scriptures there were four words that we translate as the word love, *philia*, *storge*, *eros* and *agape*. It is *agape* I am talking about today. It is the high, the perfect, the divine and unconditional Love that Christians ascribe to God: the Christian version of the Buddhist's 'metta'. Some say it only exists with God and some people argue there is really no such thing. Some say that such ideals are mere dreams to comfort us in a harsh world. In fact some, such as those that visited Clayton a week back, use Bible passages to say not only is God's love conditional, but in fact "God Hates" and that hate is eternal. But I insist that *agape*, *metta*, unconditional loving-kindness is not a high ideal for saints and dreams, but is the very foundation on which all else stands; law, civilization, hope, the beauty of every person.

I know that there is much to make us feel bad about ourselves. There is much to make us doubt the value of others. This past week, I heard a Catholic comic give these definitions: "If you feel bad about something you did that is *guilt*. If you feel bad about what you *are* that is shame. If you feel shame about your lack of guilt, well, that is *Catholic*." I must point out that Catholics, nor Jews have a corner on guilt. My experience is that even atheists feel shame at times. I saw someone with a shirt that said, "My mother is a travel agent. She is always sending me on guilt trips." Religion couples basic human anxiety about our worth with ideas of hells and karma, or the Day of Judgment, sin and salvation, causing us to wonder if anyone could ever gain perfect love.

In a conditional world one thing causes another. We set up expectations about how this works. We expect to get a raise for doing our best. We expect that murder should be punished. The soldier or sailor, or airman or marine should be honored for their noble sacrifice. Evildoers should be destroyed. Terrorists must be stopped. Criminals should be punished. Way back in the 1300s the poet Dante Alighieri stated that divine love, *agape*, made the gates of Hell and all the punishments therein.

But underneath all this is another message. Buddhists meditate on "metta" or loving-kindness. They make concrete the desire that all beings be happy, safe, free from

suffering: peaceful and at ease. Likewise, Christians and Jews, say that God loves *everyone*. Jesus, in Luke's Gospel explains what agape means 6:27-31. "But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other, also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And [here is the key point] as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them". Most people think this can't be literally true, it is rather extreme. "You can't live like that" they protest. But I don't think Jesus was saying do this and everything works out OK. Of course if *everyone* acted like this then people would stop stealing or striking people on the cheek. But more importantly he was saying "move in this direction, be more forgiving and loving because love is the foundation of the Kingdom of God, the power on which everything else depends. Practicing this love does not change all the world all at once, but it changes us. It opens us up, as Dante put it, to "the love that moves the sun and other stars".

Years ago, after a sermon in which I condemned "judgmental people" a member of my congregation asked me, "Can one make Judgments without being Judgmental?" Some people, when they hear of Christian Universalism, the idea that God could save every single soul, they get it immediately. "That makes sense," they say. But others ask What about Adolf Hitler and Charles Manson, torturers, those who deny the worth of other individuals? We should judge them as bad shouldn't we? How do we love those who hurt us? What does unconditional love really mean? I say that good religion is not about getting rid of judgment, but about taking responsibility and seeking reconciliation. The idea is not that everyone is good, but that everyone is better off if we act as though we all have goodness in us somewhere. We must judge actions but treat everyone with a basic respect for their rights and dignity as persons. We may say that love is grounded in our common humanity, or in the Dharma, or in God's undying love for each soul, but it is the foundation of universal rights and common decency.

As Unitarian Universalists we do speak of love 'to God and Neighbor', but we also have words about *inherent* worth and dignity of every person. Inherent, means "permanent, essential, or constantly characteristic". We offer a welcome table, affirming universal human community and the interconnectedness of all living things. It is because of this that we grant the highest religious authority in your life to you. It is why we affirm democracy and universal human rights and global dignity because that is how we affirm the worth and dignity of every person.

It all begins with a desire and expectation that we be loved there at our birth. As infants we experience a world of unconditional love. "Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, with a boundless heart" as the Buddhist scriptures put it. As infants, Love is unconditional; it is ours just for being. If infants are not held and nurtured, even if they receive adequate food and water and medicine, they will not thrive and will fade and die. Those who get incomplete or inconsistent nurture will often not develop essential human features like empathy or a conscience. And this is the foundation of all relationships. Some of us need to learn more about expressing empathy, but we all hunger for it, for some sense of enduring connection to others.

You must believe in your own worth and dignity before you can seek to nurture it in others. As the golden rule states, "Love another, as you would want to be loved," or as

the Chinese philosopher put it, “Don’t do to others what we don’t want done to ourselves.” What this means is that we love ourselves first.

For example, we should never accept abuse under the excuse that we are offering love to the one who abuses us. Just as we would want to be kept from abusing another, so we should keep others from the same fate. To understand the motivations of terrorists is to understand our own motivations, our desire to be part of a realm of love and justice, and the fear that we may be kept out by conditions and judgment. Begin by offering love to yourself. Then extending it out as far as possible. You can understand it as a gift from the great Mother and Father God, or as Mary Oliver did, listen to the geese, the sky, and the faithful trees, proclaiming “your place in the family of things.” Only if loved do we love truly. With this love we can overcome any obstacle. If we create a society where there are outcasts, those who do not deserve love, dignity or rights, then the well-being of the rest is put at danger. So it was with slavery in America, it spawned a whole system of racism so as to identify those we wanted to put outside of care and rights and dignity.

A fine example of agape and metta put into living is that of Rev. Charles Spear, (May 1, 1803-April 13, 1863). He began his career as a Universalist Minister who, like Rev. W.G. Eliot visited prisoners as part of his ministry. He knew firsthand the injustice of the world. Then one day he read the words of the Marquis de Lafayette: "I shall ask for the abolition of the Penalty of Death until I have the infallibility of human judgment demonstrated to me." Spear made prison reform the center of his ministry. Through his writings and speaking articulated the arguments still used by opponents of capital punishment today. “I want our prisons to be more like hospitals” he said. In the words of historian John Buescher, “Spear argued that because human life is sacred and capital punishment irremediable, execution is a blasphemous appropriation of divine power. He said a spirit of revenge is unworthy. He considered the horrifying and brutalizing effects upon everyone concerned with an execution—the prisoner, the prisoner's family, and the spectators. "Spare the criminal," Spear pleaded. "The taking of his life will not bring back his victim; it will not prevent others from the commission of crime." Furthermore he declared capital punishment an unjust and arbitrary exercise of power, an instrument not fit for the Republic”. Finally he noted how its injustice was multiplied by inequalities of racism and was used as a tool of slavery. He lived his whole life to uphold the worth of those who many in society had decided were worthless.

He became known by the title of his journal "the prisoner's friend". The application of love was not to rid the world of prisons but to into places of repair as well as retribution. This is what unconditional love does, transform prisons into hospitals, lost souls into people with dignity, illness into the requirement for wholeness and healing. With this love our need for judgment moves from being vindictive to redemptive. Or, to quote the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Junior, “I refuse to accept the idea that the “isness” of man’s present nature makes him morally incapable of reaching up for the “oughtness” that forever confronts him. I refuse to accept the cynical notion that nation after nation must spiral down a militaristic stairway into the hell of nuclear destruction. I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality.” So may it be. May unconditional love, agape, or loving kindness, guide us through the hard night.