

February Theme
Love: The Practice of Risk
“Great love and great achievements involve great risk.”
~Dalai Lama

Introduction

When most people think of the word “love,” they think of a feeling of strong attraction and emotional attachment, but there are many different types of love. The love one feels for her spouse differs from the love one feels for her mother, which differs from the love we feel for ourselves (or our love of a hot cup of tea). Love features prominently in all world religions, and is often spoken as a virtue representing human kindness and compassion. Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh wrote that “understanding is love’s other name,” meaning that loving others is all about understanding their suffering. He teaches that “when our hearts are small, our understanding and compassion are limited, and we suffer...but when our hearts expand, these same things don’t make us suffer anymore. We have a lot of understanding and compassion and can embrace others.”

Unitarian Universalism emphasizes the concept of love: we begin our covenant by saying “Love is the spirit of this church” and end it by saying that our promise is to “find truth in love and help one another; we end our service by saying that we will “go forth into the world to act with works of love.” The “Standing on the Side of Love” campaign (now called “Side with Love”) promotes respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and confronts issues of exclusion, oppression, and violence based on identity with the goal of creating beloved community; although it is an interfaith campaign, it is most closely associated with Unitarian Universalism.

For most, the word “love” has positive connotations, but to love is to risk. When we love someone, we risk rejection, or that they will be taken from us prematurely. When we “love our enemy,” and find compassion, we risk that we will be seen as weak and taken advantage of. When we follow the occupation that we feel passionate about, we risk failure and may risk financial struggle. Individuals who have difficulty loving themselves risk letting go of damaging, yet comfortably familiar messages they have received that have told them that they are not worthy of love; they may have to create self-love without any roadmaps or models for it. Those who believe in and love a God whom they feel protects them or provides them with a loving presence risk potential spiritual crisis when disaster strikes, and they may feel abandoned.

When UUs side with love and harness its power to challenge exclusion, oppression, and violence based on identity (sexual orientation, immigration status, race, etc.), we risk alienating ourselves from friends who make a sexist joke or say something offensive towards another minority group. Indeed, some even risk their very lives when they side with love. The original slogan “Standing on the Side of Love”, was launched after the 2008 shooting at Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville, which was targeted because they celebrate LGBTQ people and have a liberal position on many issues. Or it may be that we want to side with oppressed groups to which we do not belong, but risk confronting our own feelings of discomfort with those groups, that those groups will not be welcoming of us, or that we will “say the wrong thing” when trying to be an ally and fight the violence of white supremacy, patriarchy, ableism and heterosexism. But as Brene Brown writes, while “embracing our vulnerabilities is risky, it is not nearly as dangerous as giving up on love, belonging, and joy.” Love expands, heals, joins, and brings life back to places and relationships that were dead. We owe it to ourselves and each other to create beloved community with brave and inclusive love.

Questions, for reflection and discussion

1. When have you sided with love?
2. When have you shirked siding with love? When have you chosen the side of comfort, apathy, despair, and acquiescence instead of the side of faith, risk, sacrifice, and resistance?
3. Describe a time when you experienced love that felt risky in some way.
4. Have you ever risked something for love?

This month’s theme was composed by Jess Jonas and the Worship Associates.

5. “Radical love” means challenging ourselves to “side with love” in ways that take intentional courage. There are ways that each of us can push past our “comfort zone” and learn more about how to be more inclusively open and loving- what are some of the ways you could do this?
6. What is your reaction to the biblical phrase “love thy enemy”?
7. Do you think that everyone is deserving of love?
8. What is the opposite of love? Hate? Indifference? Something else?
9. What do you risk and what is required to love someone that you find difficult to love?
10. “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always perseveres.” (1 Cor. 13:4-7) Do you agree with these ideas?
11. Can we only love others as much as we love ourselves?

Quotes

At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that a true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love. It is impossible to think of a genuine revolutionary lacking this quality.

~ *Bob Marley*

The practice of love offers no place of safety. We risk loss, hurt, pain. We risk being acted upon by forces outside our control.

~ *bell hooks*

‘Sometimes, there’s too much risk in loving’, the young boy said. ‘No,’ said the old man. ‘There’s too much risk in not.’

~ *Atticus*

If love were the central practice of a new generation of organizers and spiritual leaders, it would have a massive impact...If the goal was to increase the love, rather than winning or dominating a constant opponent, I think we could actually imagine liberation from constant oppression.

~ *adrienne maree brown*

Vulnerability is the birthplace of love...If we want greater clarity in our purpose or deeper and more meaningful spiritual lives, vulnerability is the path.

~ *Brene Brown*

And then the day came,
when the risk
to remain tight
in a bud
was more painful
than the risk
it took
to Blossom.

~*Anais Nin*

For more on this month’s theme go to: <http://uuac.org/worship/themes-for-spiritual-practice/>

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There is no intensity of love or feeling that does not involve the risk of crippling hurt. It is a duty to take this risk, to love and feel without defense or reserve.

~*William S. Burroughs*

Waking up every day and loving someone who may or may not love us back, whose safety we can't ensure, who may stay in our lives or may leave without a moment's notice, who may be loyal to the day they die or betray us tomorrow- that's vulnerability. Love is uncertain. It's incredibly risky. And loving someone leaves us emotionally exposed. Yes, it's scary, and yes, we're open to being hurt, but can you imagine your life without loving or being loved? We cultivate love when we allow our most vulnerable and powerful selves to be deeply seen and known, and when we honor the spiritual connection that grows from that offering with trust, respect, kindness and affection.

Love is not something we give or get; it is something that we nurture and grow, a connection that can only be cultivated between two people when it exists within each one of them – we can only love others as much as we love ourselves.

Shame, blame, disrespect, betrayal, and the withholding of affection damage the roots from which love grows. Love can only survive these injuries if they are acknowledged, healed and rare.

~*Brene Brown, The Gifts of Imperfection*

Do you want me to tell you something really subversive? Love is everything it's cracked up to be. That's why people are so cynical about it. It really is worth fighting for, being brave for, risking everything for. And the trouble is, if you don't risk anything, you risk even more.

~*Erica Jong, Fear of Flying*

It is a risk to love. What if it doesn't work out? Ah, but what if it does?

~*Peter McWilliams*

True love is taking the risk that it won't be a happily-ever-after. True love is joining hands with the person who loves you for who you are, and saying, "I'm not afraid to believe in you."

~*Cara Lockwood, I Do, But I Don't*

We need people in our lives with whom we can be as open as possible. To have real conversations with people may seem like such a simple, obvious suggestion, but it involves courage and risk.

~*T.Moore, Care of the Soul: A Guide for Cultivating Depth and Sacredness*

It's impossible,' said pride. 'It's risky,' said experience. 'It's pointless,' said reason. 'Give it a try,' whispered the heart.

~*Unknown*

Humans' Core Function is Love:

When we are engaged in acts of love, we humans are at our best and most resilient. The love in romance that makes us want to be better people, the love of children that makes us change our

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whole lives to meet their needs, the love of family that makes us drop everything to take care of them, the love of community that makes us work tirelessly with broken hearts.

Perhaps humans' core function is love. Love leads us to observe in a much deeper way than any other emotion...

If love were the central practice of a new generation of organizers and spiritual leaders, it would have a massive impact... If the goal was to increase the love, rather than winning or dominating a constant opponent, I think we could actually imagine liberation from constant oppression. We would suddenly be seeing everything we do, everyone we meet, not through the tactical eyes of war, but through eyes of love.

~ adrienne maree brown

When we practice radical love, we push past our comfort zone and strive to practice a love that truly encompasses all. That's the great thing about radical love – it's not just your challenge, it provides the same challenge to everyone whose lives you touch. I never considered myself that way, because I was just busy knowing that there was something to love in everyone and then looking for it, but by doing that I challenged those around me, essentially saying: "This person is important and you are going to open your heart and find that out."

Challenging ourselves to engage in greater radical love takes a lot of intentional courage. I know there are ways I could push past my own "comfort zone" and learn more about how to be more inclusively open and loving, and I'll be talking about that today with the people in my life.

~Rev. Sarah Gibbs Millspaugh

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