

## Loving Life, Again and Again

Rev. Jane Bennett Smith, Channing Memorial Church, UU, Ellicott City, MD February 19, 2023

A Jewish wisdom tale elaborates that there was once a young boy who anxiously divulged that he did not know how to love God. He inquired of his rabbi, “How can I love God if I have never seen God? I love my parents and I cherish my friends, but I do not know how to love God.”

The rabbi looked down at the fearful face and shared his wisdom. “First,” he instructed, “find a stone – try to love a stone. In this most basic and simple of things, observe and appreciate its goodness and beauty – let this speak to you; let it enter you.” The rabbi continued, “Once you have done this, find a flower. Be present with the flower and let its beauty wash over you. See if you can let the goodness and life of the flower come into you, and gift this to yourself. Stay present with that flower in the garden and love it.” The young child smiled and nodded, perhaps he understood, perhaps he did not. So that rabbi continued, “Next, go and find your pet dog, feel the love for your dog and let this speak to you. Then, observe and find love for the sky and the mountains, the birds, and the deer. Be present to the beauty and the love in these myriad forms. Listen to this, and let it seep into you.” The young boy nodded in rapt attention. “Then,” the rabbi offered, “love a person. Once you have loved a stone and a flower, your dog, the mountain, the sky, and a friend, you will be ready to love God.” Once you have loved a stone, the sky and a friend, you will be ready to love God. <sup>1</sup>

We use the word God for the sacred because this is the word in the Jewish faith, but I invite you to connect to and name your sacred in whatever way rings true to you. These teachings are simple and yet profound and universal in many ways, as theists and agnostics and humanists alike – those who have faith in a deity and those whose sacred is solely found in the beauty of swaying trees – as all these people find meaning, comfort, inspiration and love in the rocks, trees, and scurrying ants.

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<sup>1</sup> From *What the Mystics Know* by Richard Rohr found at <https://philipchircop.wordpress.com/2021/11/04/try-to-love-a-stone/>

I think of the panentheists, theists who see God in all things and all things in God; those who understand that each thing on earth is held within the sacred – a divine being; that God and all of creation are held together in sacred ways. Or the religious naturalists, to whom nature is the ultimate sacred, to whom there is no divine being at all, whether transcendent or imminent – those who see nature in all of its glory as the focus of faith and prayer and religious attention. Or those who are indigenous and see nature as a gift--each wild raspberry, each humming bee, each cloud in the sky and each blade of grass as an offering, a present, from the mysterious beyond.<sup>2</sup> Or the transcendentalists, grounded in the goodness of both people and nature, who see the divine in the everyday, appreciating heaven here, in this realm, not beyond.

This rabbi teaches us to love all things, just as do panentheists and transcendentalists alike. No matter what ills, hardships, or travesties befall us, there are two constants – there is nature, and there is love – whether for the animate or the inanimate – and, as such, there is the consistent presence of something sacred, something greater than all of humanity.

Beauty surrounds us – and in noticing, we enter a sacred act of what I call prayer – connecting what we hold within to all of that which is beyond. We pray to pebbles, to dandelions, to the irises simply by pausing in appreciation, by offering an intentional moment of gratitude, by allowing a space for the love and the wonder and the awe of nature to saturate us. No matter who you are, no matter how lonely you may be – there is a beauty and an essence calling you back over and over again – announcing that you have a place in all that is, all that was, and all that ever will be.

I offer another story of Jewish descent. Before there was anything else, there was God, angels, and a chaotic mess of rock and water. The angels inquired, “God, why don’t you clean all of this up?” God collected rocks and stones, creating planets and stars and mountains. God collected the swirling waters, creating oceans and clouds and cascading waterfalls. The angels asked, “Is the world finished?” In response, God continued, creating things that grew and crept and

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<sup>2</sup> *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* Robin Wall Kimmerer  
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crawled. Next, God created humans from stardust, and lamented to these new creatures “I’m tired. Please finish what I have begun.” But the people replied, “We cannot do this alone, we are too little, too small, too insignificant.” God encouraged that they were big enough and capable, and yet agreed to be their partner and help if they so needed. The people responded, “What is a partner?” This response is taken directly from Rabbi Marc Gelman, “A partner is someone you work with on a big thing that neither of you can do alone. If you have a partner, it means that you can never give up, because your partner is depending on you. On the days you think I am not doing enough and on the days I think you are not doing enough, even on those days we are still partners and we must not stop trying to finish the world. That’s the deal.” So, the humans and God agreed. The angels then asked of God, again, “Is the world finished?” to which God replied, “I do not know. Ask my partners.”<sup>3</sup>

This story tells us that we are consistently co-creating the world with all that is sacred and holy – engaging in blessed partnership with all that is greater than ourselves. Is this a deity or deities? Is this simply the grandeur and awe of nature? Each one of us cherishes and builds upon our own beliefs and theologies of all that is holy. Yet what is universal is this idea of something beyond us, something greater than each individual life – something that, this story tells us, we are called to partner with to shape and form all that is. Something we can never give up on, and which will never give up on us. Something which helps us to do something we could never do on our own.

I am reminded of the words of Leslie Takahashi we heard earlier – a reflection of the yearnings to create peace, love, hope, generosity, and joy<sup>4</sup> – all of which we would be hard pressed to create and shape and mold on our own, and all of which are necessary for a fulfilled and nourished life. Can we co-create with the redwood forests? With our God of many names? We each have moments, big and small, of co-creation. I share with you a few of my own.

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<sup>3</sup> *Does God Have a Big Toe?* By Marc Gelman, found at <https://revgretchenhaley.wordpress.com/2012/02/20/top-10-stories-that-all-unitarian-universalists-should-know-stories-1-3/?fbclid=IwAROG-51unmULFD-iX7sGuxR4A6-CiQYu5GzDI543o-7w7OwR6GiLuL-slyc>

<sup>4</sup> “On the Brink” Leslie Takahashi

I remember holding in embrace a cherished friend whose partner of many years had left her, listening to her laments, and offering the gift of platonic, loving touch. Her heart was broken and, in connecting with a greater love, a greater source of strength and wisdom, as well as with me, her dear friend – through co-creating she healed from this pain – this pain of heartbreak that each one of us will have to endure. Or as a small child, pulling a green and purple annual out of its plastic shell to place it lovingly and excitedly in a budding garden – soon to blossom and create colorful harmony with the plants around it. In my innocence I worked with the sacred blessings of nature to co-create even more beauty, awe, and wonder in this world. Or each of the prayers I offered as a chaplain at the bedsides of those in anguish, suffering from physical or emotional maladies. While we did not share the same sacred, we shared a belief in something greater, and through whatever this greater thing was, together, those of us in the room and that which was beyond, co-created healing.

This story, too, speaks to me of justice. We live in an imperfect world – a world of systemic injustice, of oppressions of many forms, of a multitude of society ills and -isms – a world that is not finished because it is not yet fully good. And it can be easy for some of us to fall into idleness or detachment and yet we cannot. These are places where love is not – and yet these are the places where love heals – where we join together to co-create a better world. These are places where we create partners for those things far too substantial and immense to do on our own – feats we can only accomplish if we partner as strangers and friends and faith communities with something greater than ourselves. We co-create beloved community – is this not the core of our Unitarian Universalist faith?

Why do I bring these two wisdom tales to you? That of loving God by loving a rock, flower, and friend alike? That of co-creating the world – one act at a time – with each other and with whatever it is we hold sacred? I do this because we will each fall out of love with life – some more often than others – immersed in the pain of heartbreak or grief or a myriad of ailments of the heart, body, and mind. And yet we can enter back into loving covenant – back into the promise of love – with all that is greater than ourselves; and we can heal. We can see love in each and every thing that surrounds us – in rocks and clouds and dogs and friends – and, in seeing love, engage with whatever it is we hold most sacred in our hearts. With this held tightly

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and firmly within, we are called to co-create. To heal from whatever ailment our bodies and minds are grappling with – or perhaps from that which society is struggling to work through. This greater thing mends and remedies ourselves and our beloveds if only we work alongside it. This is how we find the ability to love life, over and over and over again. The world is not yet finished and never will be. We can look backwards at this unfinished life, or we can look forward – we need both in order to heal, to connect with love again and again.

Looking backwards we see all those places where ill-deeds hold us in bondage, and we must offer the gift of forgiveness, for forgiveness is a gift. Forgiveness is fundamentally a relinquishment of pain. Sometimes, it is an invitation to start anew. At other times, it is an opportunity to say farewell for the final time without malice, as we recognize the next best step. Often, we are called to forgive others, and yet, more often, I think, we are called to forgive ourselves, which can be even harder. In forgiving ourselves we accept our own imperfections, shortcomings, and mistakes, and admit to others our misdeeds, honoring whatever our next best step may be. In moving forward, we are called to forgive.

Looking forward, we are met with hope. Hope is a great paradox, for we can only hope when things are hopeless. Hope, indeed, is the impossible.<sup>5</sup> And where does the impossible happen? Within the sacred, within universal love – that is where the unfeasible becomes a reality— where a broken heart becomes a stronger heart, where grief and death makes a relationship with a deceased beloved deeper and more sincere than it ever was in this realm, where a miserable concoction of hate and anger and fear becomes beloved community, where a broken past creates a beautiful future – that is when desperation and despondency are transformed into the impossible – when met with hope. Again, and again, and again.

Time. Forgiveness when we meet with the past and hope as we look ahead. And in this moment – in each moment – simple presence. We each need time to be with our beloveds and to be with all of that which is greater – with the sun or the stars or a deity of our own understanding. For love is expressed moment by moment, reconciling a broken past with a

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<sup>5</sup> *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* John D. Caputo pg. 249

beautiful future. We cultivate a wordless companionship with all that is, was, and ever will be. We pray through simple presence and gratitude with and for the beauty that surrounds us, and in doing so connect with something grand. We observe the presence and beauty of a simple stone – the most basic of things – and through that inanimate mass find a connection with all we hold sacred. And we find love. And may we hold that love dearly, tightly, and eternally, for this is our companion – our partner – on the rough and beautiful road ahead.

This is when, as written by poet Ellen Bass,

you hold life like a face  
between your palms, a plain face,  
No charming smile, no violet eyes,  
And you say, yes, I will take you  
I will love you, again.<sup>6</sup>

May it be so, and Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> “The Thing Is” by Ellen Bass