

“Thirty Days of Love”
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I almost never talk about my kids in my sermons, but my son gave me permission to tell you about an incident that occurred several years ago, when he was about 16. He was at a friend’s house and had called me in the middle of my work day, asking me to pick him up and take him home. I had said, no, I couldn’t pick him up until after work. His friend lived about 10 miles from our house and he was imagining that he’d have to walk home. He spoke accusingly, “You don’t care about me! You wouldn’t even care if I got run over by a truck!”

He eventually did get a ride from his friend’s mother, but that night, he was still very upset with me, repeating, “I could have had to walk home and I could have been run hit by a truck!” I realized that he might really be feeling unloved at that moment. As he lay on the couch, watching TV, I came up behind the couch and whispered in his ear.

“I want to tell you something,” I said.

“What?”

“If you and I were both walking along a road together, and a truck was about to hit you, and I knew that if I pushed you out of the way, that I could save you, but I would be killed, that’s what I would do. That’s how much I love you.”

He didn’t say anything, but after that, he never mentioned another word about my not picking him up that day.

I thought through those words, before I said them. I said them in my head, and I knew before I said them out loud, I had to mean them. I asked myself, would I really do that? Yes. I would say those words, and I would mean it. I felt a calm sense of conviction as I made that decision.

I’ve often thought about the heroic acts of others. I’m inspired by the courage and caring of men and women every time I read the “Everyday Heroes” section of Reader’s Digest, people who took risks to help others. And there are the deaths of two incredibly gifted musicians that still haunt me. One died while pulling people

out of a plane that had caught fire, and the other died while trying to save a man who was drowning in rough surf.

And then there are people like Officer Richard Crittenden, who was killed in Minnesota while protecting a woman and her child as he escorted them into their apartment, where the woman's estranged husband was lying in wait with a burning rag. So often we hear stories of law enforcement protection orders failing to provide the protection that is desperately needed. In this case, Officer Crittenden and his colleague were helping to defend a mother and child's right to freedom and safety. Perhaps Officer Crittenden, known as "Crittter," would have said he was just doing his job, but in doing so, he chose to take a stand –to stand on the side of love, despite the potential danger and violence.

Love? Yes, love. "Thirty Days of Love," the title of this sermon, is the time between Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday, January 15th, through Valentine's Day. During this time, congregations are invited to stand on the side of love, both individually and as a group. The Unitarian Universalist Association has put forth various initiatives over the years, some more successful than others. The "Standing on the Side of Love" campaign is one I can really get behind. As one of my colleagues has said, "Big blue billboards and bumper stickers calling us the "Uncommon Denomination" are nice. But I feel it is a sign of growth and maturity for us to turn our main public voice from an attempt to explain who we are to one that focuses on what we do in and for the world." Amen to that!

I'm also inspired by the fact that "Standing on the Side of Love" expresses, at once, the core spiritual value of love and combines it with the intention to act in love. "Standing on the Side of Love" invites us to consciously make love an active force in our lives. Love is of course more than a romantic power that claims us. Or even of a parent's love for her child. As my colleague Lisa Friedman puts it, "It is also a power that we claim by choosing our response to the truths of our world.

"The love which inspires the courage and commitment of such choices is not a sweet or sentimental kind of love. Rather it is a love which recognizes the greater good and the bonds of kinship of which we are a part."

"Standing on the Side of Love" is not simply a UUA marketing idea. It came about as a response to something that happened 4 ½ years ago.

On July 27, 2008, some 200 people were gathered at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in Knoxville, Tennessee, watching a youth performance of the musical, “Annie,” when a man at the back of the room pulled a sawed-off shotgun out of a guitar case, stood up and began shooting. A long-time church member and usher named Greg McKendry deliberately stood in front of the gunman to protect others and was fatally shot. Four male church members and a visitor then tackled and restrained the shooter until police arrived. One other person died and seven others were wounded.

It’s interesting to note that the shooter, Jim David Adkisson, had written a suicide note, because he figured that he would just keep shooting until the police arrived and killed him. He obviously underestimated the courage of these people. In his affidavit, Adkisson said he had targeted the church because of its liberal teachings, particularly with regard to homosexuality, and stated his belief that “all liberals should be killed because they were ruining the country.”

In response to the shooting, many UU congregations throughout North America held special vigils. The Tennessee Valley congregation rededicated its sanctuary in a special ceremony. On August 10th, the Unitarian Universalist Association took out a full page ad in the New York Times. The ad carried the message, “Our Doors *and* Our Hearts Will Remain Open.”

And the doors and the hearts of the members of the Tennessee Valley congregation have remained open. The “Standing on the Side of Love” campaign was born out of the Tennessee Valley UU Church shooting and honors the courage and the conviction that are sometimes demanded of us in order to be true to our beliefs. The phrase, “standing on the side of love” first became a rallying cry during the struggle to legalize gay marriage in Massachusetts.

The UUA has launched the “Standing on the Side of Love” campaign to confront exclusion and violence based on identity, be it sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, race, class, religion, nationality, physical ability “or any other excuse for harassment.” (Fred Small)

Where should we draw the line when it comes to sacrificing our personal safety in order to help another human being? The answer has to be a very personal one; and no one can dictate to us what we should do in any given situation.

And if we choose not to act, if we choose self-preservation, that is never reason to feel guilty. For me, I tend to remember all the times I could have acted, but didn’t,

because I didn't know what to say, or I was afraid of the reaction, or afraid for my life. I have wasted time feeling guilty, feeling not good enough, or not brave enough. I've learned that feeling guilty is a waste of time. So if you have guilt – any kind of guilt–get rid of it.

Instead of asking where **SHOULD** we draw the line, we might ask, where **WOULD** we draw the line, if and when the opportunity were to present itself? The answer is, we don't know. We can't know until we are in it.

Some of us have never faced --and may never face --life or death decisions. But there are many moments of decision, opportunities for us to decide where we will stand, whether it's choosing to stay at the bedside of a dying loved one, to have a conversation with a homeless person, to stop a kid from bullying another child, to accompany a pregnant woman to an abortion clinic... Every time we act out of love, we take a risk. It could be an emotional risk, or it could be a physical risk. But stepping out of our comfort zone is always risky.

Maybe you've had a "Standing on the Side of Love" moment. A time when you said, "Yes, this is what I believe and therefore, this is what I must do." If you have ever stood on the side of love, what made you do it? Was it something that welled up inside you? Was there something that inspired you?

UU minister Thom Belote recalls his "standing on the side of love" moment. It came when he was in high school, marching in a Youth Pride parade for GLBT teens and their allies. It was a beautiful June day, and there were lots of friendly, supportive and encouraging faces on the sidelines. But at one part of the route, there stood a small group of counter-protesters, carrying signs that spewed ignorance and hate. He thought to himself, "We seem to be having a lot more fun than you're having." At that moment, he says, he felt in the core of his being "a deep peace" with where he stood. He stood with the marchers in the parade, not with the angry, scowling protesters. He stood on the side of love.

When it comes down to it, heroic acts are not ultimately about heroism. They are about love. I used to feel like I had missed the heroism boat. I would hear a colleague talk about his experience marching in Selma and having significant conversations with Martin Luther King, Jr. I wasn't there. I was, like, 8 years old. Or I'd hear a colleague preaching about what it was like to be in the immediate aftermath of 9-11. I wasn't there, either. It was my very first week as a minister, for a little congregation in Connecticut. I was at the DMV getting my Connecticut license. You know, I wasn't at Woodstock either, but, oh, well!

That's about my ego. I know that it doesn't matter that I wasn't a part of some of the "big" events in our history. And, it's not for me to judge, but I sometimes wonder if there might be some ego involved in my colleagues' telling of their stories. Maybe my stories aren't all that impressive, but, so what? I'm not here on this Earth to impress anybody. To be honest, for days now, I've been racking my brains, thinking, but what have I done? What have I done? And it was only yesterday that I began to remember, oh, yes, I did that, and I did that, oh and that, too. I don't really keep a mental list of my social justice achievements. But maybe I should, if only to acknowledge them for myself. They're important in my own spiritual journey, just as your stories of "being there" for others are important in your journeys. And I know that I have helped people, including children, who were not able to advocate for themselves. I'm quite sure that each of you has, too.

But the past is the past. What's on our social justice resume doesn't matter. What matters now is who we are becoming, every hour and every day. I'd like to suggest to each of us, that we try to be a bit more conscious, a bit more on the lookout, for opportunities to stand, not on the sidelines, but to stand on the side of love. To take risks. To get involved. Love is a choice. Love is a stand. Martin Luther King, Jr., once said, "I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear."

All of us Unitarian Universalists, collectively, have an opportunity to show the world how we live out our faith, which calls us to work for equal rights for all people. Wouldn't it be great to have people say, "Oh, you're a Unitarian Universalist? I've heard of you folks. You must be one of those "Standing on the Side of Love" people."

Let me be clear here. I'm not suggesting that we put our faith into action in order to gain recognition for our denomination. I'm not saying that at all. What I mean is, imagine if the work we do together is so visible, so prominent, that the general population can't help but take notice?

Until we become household words, though, we need to be prepared. So, when someone asks us what we Unitarian Universalists believe, or why we're involved with LGBT rights, or immigrant rights or any kind of human rights, for that matter, or why we come to this little fellowship on Ann Street on Sunday mornings, let's tell them: "We're standing on the side of love."