

First Unitarian Church

January 21, 2024

I am almost done with the coursework for a second master's degree: a "Master of Arts in Counseling." I started working on it a few years ago.

There have been so many times in ministry when I've wished I had a background in counseling. Times when I wished I had known more about how to help someone who was going through a crisis, or relationship challenges, or facing a big question in life, or even that I could just better identify what kind of help they needed. Then the pandemic happened, and all the worsening wildfires and storms, and I saw that those things were linked with climate change, which is also linked with political turmoil, the erosion of democracy, a rise in fascism and violence, and displaced people. The hard things keep coming. Some of them set more in motion. We can see it. And we feel it in our bones.

I realized we need more. We need more help. We need help being resilient. We- UUs, and everyone—need help processing our grief. Our anxiety. Our feelings of helplessness. We need help with intergenerational trauma, and new traumas. We need help connecting when there are forces driving us, manipulating us, toward polarization all the time. Toward viewing one another as enemies or existential threats, instead of fellow humans just trying to make it and make sense in this world, with our relatively short, fragile, precious lives. I'm not even talking about battlefields here. I'm talking about social media and the internet, and its impact on our ability to talk with each other. (Right here in this church!)

So, I've been working on a new skill set, one or two classes at a time. A minister who is a mental health professional can do something different than either a minister or counselor alone. I can offer support for a whole congregation's resilience and mental health, while holding the existential questions, too, and knowing where to look for the wisdom of our ancestors.

Psychotherapy and church. Psychochurch. Just kidding. It's still just church. I'm just bringing some new knowledge to my role in it.

Couples and Family Counseling, Child and Adolescent Counseling, Community Mental Health, Crisis and Trauma Intervention, Substance Abuse, Group Therapy, Clinical Assessment... I've learned about helping people make a change, or connect with each other better, or sort themselves out. I've learned how to help someone identify when they are using an old way of thinking in a new situation and need to adapt. I've learned how to help someone adapt, naming their losses and unmet needs, and finding new ways to thrive. But you know what we haven't talked much about in the counseling program? Love. That's so curious because love plays a big role in our mental health. For sure.

We need *love* to thrive, and in many cases, we need it to survive. Love is an intimate need.

Love also influences the way the world looks- or doesn't. It inspires movements, and big changes. Love is a big, ambitious thing.

Our theological theme this month is "liberating love." Love is hard to define. It means different things and does different things.

Every year at this time, Martin Luther King Jr Day reminds us of how muscular love can be. He said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness. Only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate. Only love can do that."

MLK also said, "Love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend."

Love is intimate and tender, and it's a big, powerful force. When we love another person, we see – or at least allow ourselves to imagine- their wholeness. Not just the admirable and objectionable parts, but the vulnerability beneath those. Seeing them in this way, we recognize how much we have in common. We begin to see our interdependence- we see how much the person who seems to be our enemy has been shaped by forces beyond their control—everything from where they were born and what they were taught, to whether they had enough mental and physical other resources to get by in life. We see how those forces set things in motion that have rippling effects... how ultimately what touches one, touches all.

In the mental health field, instead of talking about love directly, we talk about fostering the ingredients in loving relationships.

Sometimes counselors do this for more than one person at a time, like when two or more people in a relationship or a family come together to therapy. More often though, counselors foster the ingredients of love within an individual.

They help people with identifying harmful thoughts and beliefs, and reframing things; quieting the voices of self-criticism; and checking self-expectations – are the expectations realistic? Are they kind? Whose goals do they reflect? And they help people with self-acceptance. That's hard for many of us.

There's a TED talk by former ABC news anchor Dan Harris. He's the guy who had a panic attack live on air while he was delivering some otherwise typical headlines. His "nationally televised freakout" as he calls it, led him to meditation (something he previously had disregarded as fluffy nonsense), which led him to inquire about how others experienced him. He had some good qualities but acted like kind of a jerk. The people who knew him best called him angry and self-centered. This led him to a LovingKindness meditation retreat. A lovingkindness retreat sounded, he says, like valentine's day at gunpoint. But he wanted to learn to be more loving and kind. So, he went to a whole retreat based on the practice we experienced in our meditation this morning.¹

¹ Here's an explanation of Lovingkindness meditation, and an example you can try at home: <https://www.mindful.org/this-loving-kindness-meditation-is-a-radical-act-of-love/>

At the beginning of the retreat, the instructor told Harris that whenever he noticed any personal demons coming up while he was meditating, he should touch his heart area and say to himself, "It's okay sweetie, I'm here for you." Oh hell no. There was no flipping way he was going to say that. But as he meditated, here are the thoughts that repeatedly tormented him:

First, there was the self-centeredness and the rage... He found himself fantasizing about promoting himself online, like posting fake positive reviews of himself. Then he imagined yelling and fighting with his boss about the promotions he deserves... That self-centeredness and rage was then followed by the thought, *I'm such a jerk... Even my thoughts are jerk thoughts...* Disappointment in himself, and harsh criticism. Which was followed by more self-centeredness or rage... and then more scathing self-criticism and hate. Those were the "demons."

I want to pause here for a second... and invite you to see if you know what your demons are ...

Thoughts... or a pattern of thoughts... that make you miserable... or keep you stuck... beliefs that allow you to accept less than a more worthy person would, or sacrifice too much of yourself... thoughts that keep you from being truly known by others...

I've struggled with anxiety since I was a little kid. As a child, I used to have nervous tics, like scrunching my eyes. Sometimes I did compulsive behaviors that seemed odd to others like tapping in a certain way or mouthing words back to myself. As an adult, I'm beginning to understand that this is partly due to being neurodivergent. I'm wired differently. But one of my demons is the thought that if I were better at managing anxiety, I could do *more*. More [fill in the blank]. Notice the underlying thought: *You're not doing enough.*

What are yours?

Everyone has their "demons." The question is how much power we let them have over us.

Back to Dan Harris. After five days of cycling through self-centeredness, rage, self-criticism, and self-hate, he finally softened... just enough... to put his hand on his heart and... he did *not* call himself sweetie. He said, "It's all good dude. I know this sucks but I've got you." He noticed that in that moment, when he stopped fighting those demons, they settled down. His self-acceptance, an expression of self-love, disarmed them.

It was embarrassing.

At its best, love is unconditional, but it isn't free. It costs us something. What I mean is at times we have to let go of something, something that may be valuable to us, in order to make ourselves available to receive that love. This is true of self-love, too. The first price of self-love is often our ego.

For Dan Harris it was embarrassing. It was humbling. He wanted to be better than someone who would have those demons- that's where the self-flagellation came from. He had to let that ideal go and accept himself in order to get free. In order to get unstuck

and move forward. So it cost some of his ego. But it was worth that price. (That's why he did a TED talk later). Notice that self-acceptance didn't mean he didn't still want to change. Quite the opposite. Beginning with gentle acceptance of where he really is helped make change more possible.

What can you say when you face your demons? "It's okay, sweetie, I'm here for you," might actually feel pretty good. We really can give ourselves a tender, sweet love. Especially if we didn't get enough of it as kids. "It's all good dude, I've got you," is also fine.

Here's another option: "Even though I struggle with _____, I completely accept myself."

If we feel resistance within ourselves to that acceptance, it may be because our ego is still protesting, still demanding that we be some other person than who we are. Lay down your weapons. You cannot hate yourself into wellness or peace. Only love can do that.

James Baldwin said, "Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within."

Here's something else love might cost: the way things are. Self-love may cause us to give up something else, like a relationship that depends on our self-diminishment. Self-love may lead us to remove a mask that made others comfortable. Masks of gender and sexuality are common ones. But how about masks of toughness, invulnerability, earning potential, or productivity? Or masks of "low worth." "You think you're better than us," someone might say, if you act as though you are just *good enough*. Or "you don't care about us," if you don't spend yourself down to nothing in the service of others.

As a gay man in the mid twentieth century, Baldwin knew it isn't always safe to remove certain kinds of masks. It's something each person has to discern for themselves.

When we feel able to stop wearing a mask that made others comfortable, here are two things that can happen. 1) They can reject us. Either by leaving or becoming hostile, which pushes us away. That's painful. Or, 2) they can adapt, possibly by taking responsibility for themselves, and growing in their own happiness. Family systems theory is the branch of counseling—and ministry studies!—that deals with that.

Self-love- the kind that is humble and caring and real- can be contagious. That's why I'm talking about it. That's why I want you to do it.

This is not just fluff. It's one of the antidotes we need in these times. It makes us kinder, more resilient, and better at healing.

It is also ancient wisdom. From Psalm 139, to *The One Who Spoke the World Into Being*:²

You created my innermost parts,
wove me in my mother's womb.

² One of the dozens of names of God in the Hebrew tradition. The psalm was originally written in Hebrew.

I acclaim You, for fearsomely I am set apart,
wondrous are Your acts,
and my being deeply knows it.

Proverbs 19:8:

A person who is wise loves their own soul.

Why on earth would it be written, "Love your neighbor as yourself," if it were not important to love one's self?

And of course, there's the Buddhist practice of Lovingkindness. Just to name a few examples. Humankind's spiritual ancestors knew the wisdom and power of this kind of love.

I'm thinking now of our call to worship this morning; those words of Gretchen Haley's:

"May we claim here a resilient freedom; the choice for love, for light, to live with joy and gratitude and praise as a form of resistance..."

May it be so.