

Tis the season of the heart. Going into almost any store will tell you it's true. There are hearts everywhere, as decorations; items for sale all seem to have a heart on them. And then, there are Valentine's Day cards, from cheap and child-like to grown-up, racy and expensive. Those that sell jewelry and diamonds love the holiday too. God bless the husband who fails to remember Valentines Day with a card, flowers, candy or some other gift. Thanks to the women's movement, men can now be the happy recipient of flowers and gifts too.

A quick surf through the web tells us that St. Valentine's Day contains vestiges of both Christian and ancient Roman tradition. It's celebrated in the United States, Canada, Mexico, the United Kingdom, France and Australia.

There are stories of three different St Valentines, all of whom were martyrs. One legend tells us St Valentine was a priest serving during the third century in Rome, at the time Emperor Claudius II decided that single men made better soldiers than those with wives and families. Claudius made it illegal for young men to marry. Believing Claudius's decree to be unjust, Valentine continued to marry young lovers in secret. When discovered, Claudius ordered that he be put to death.

Some believe Valentine's Day is celebrated in the middle of February because the Christian church created a St Valentine's feast day, in order to Christianize the pagans who celebrated Lupercalia, a fertility festival in honor of the god of agriculture.

Wikipedia tells us about 1 billion Valentine's day cards are exchanged in the United States alone. Most go to teachers in classrooms where the kids give cards to each other. We're also told that women purchase approximately 85 percent of all valentines.

Valentine's day provides us a wonderful opportunity to talk about Heart Stuff, stuff of the heart; that which is associated with a heart or the heart. Hearts, in our culture, are largely associated with romance and mushy emotionality. But that seems to do hearts an injustice.

It's said that love is found in the heart. That statement just might be more true than we realize, it might be literally true. I was telling a friend about the sermon I was going to deliver today. He said, "you need to go read about neurocardiology." This guy is an author, psychotherapist, teacher and a Buddhist, so I paid attention.

Neurocardiology is fascinating. It's the study of the brain in the heart, yes, the brain in the heart. The discipline of neurocardiology has generated important insights into the nervous system WITHIN the heart and how the brain and heart communicate with each other via the nervous system.

In 1991, after extensive research, one of the early pioneers in neurocardiology, Dr. J. Andrew Armour, introduced the concept of a functional "heart brain". His work revealed that the heart has a complex, intrinsic nervous system that is sufficiently sophisticated to qualify as a

"little brain" in its own right. The heart's brain is an intricate network of several types of neurons, neurotransmitters, proteins and support cells like those found in the brain itself. This elaborate circuitry enables it to act independently of the cranial brain – to learn, remember, and even feel and sense.

The heart's nervous system, then, is able to send neurological impulses to the brain. It also sends pain signals and other feeling sensations to the brain. The heart has its own nervous system that operates and processes information independently of the brain or nervous system. This is what allows a heart transplant to work: Normally, the heart communicates with the brain via nerve fibers running through the vagus nerve and the spinal column. In a heart transplant, these nerve connections do not reconnect for an extended period of time, if at all; however, the transplanted heart is able to function in its new host through the capacity of its intact, intrinsic nervous system.

This type of scientific discovery excites me. I get excited when science “discovers” what humans have known for a long time. For example, science discovered that plants do in fact have healing powers. The medicine men, shamans, animals and “ole wives” have known this for eons. Perhaps neurocardiology will prove that love does indeed live in the heart.

I hope that science will also discover what those who work with chakras and energy already know. I can't wait for the day when bio-chemical science or quantum physics can document that the heart has a particular energetic force different from the rest of the body.

My experience tells me, and I believe, that the heart space, whether our literal heart or not, our heart space is where we find our true selves, our deepest desires. I would not at all be surprised if someday we come to discover that our soul, if it lives in our bodies, resides in the heart.

I've come to really appreciate those folks who are involved in mindfulness work. I believe if we can learn to quiet the mind, it opens the door to gaining an awareness of what our bodies know. If we can learn to not let the mind and all its beliefs, thoughts and ego needs dominate our senses, we can experience a different reality.

I believe the body, as it has developed and evolved over the years, in interplay with its environment, has a particular relationship with the world. I think the body has a relationship with the world that is different from our mental images and our beliefs. As neurocardiology has found, the heart has its own neurological system, separate from the brain and its connection with our autonomic nervous system. If the heart has its own information processing system, why not other parts of the body as well?

If the heart is where our authentic self, our true self, can be found, and if the heart is where we find our deepest desires, then we would be well served to pay close attention to our hearts. If we are truly an interconnected web of life, then our true selves, our deepest desires would align with and sustain that with which we were connected. If we learned to better listen

to our authentic selves, I suspect, life's decisions would be much less complicated. Perhaps we would simply live according to what we already know.

Perhaps the Universalist of old, determined by dint of their intellect, that God was too good to banish most of us to damnation. Perhaps it was philosophical inquiry that allowed them to deduce the goodness of God. But I wonder if the Universalist merely found a compelling way to verbalize what they, and probably many others, already knew. God is love.

You and I have often heard those three words put together. You can even find them on bumper stickers. God is love. I remember being at Ferry Beach, a UU camp and conference center in Saco Me., and hearing that phrase. For some reason, it really caught my attention. Maybe it was when I was actively grappling with what I believed about God. But those three words grabbed me.

I remember sitting and really thinking about that phrase. God is love. I began to wonder, what if, those three words put together is not just a phrase. What if those words were literally true? What if God is love? If it were true, I'd need to change my personal definition of God. If it is true, then this thing called love is bigger, more powerful, more important than I ever knew.

I wonder if Unitarian Universalists of old, decided its true, God is love. And I wonder if Unitarian Universalists, because of our transcendentalist and humanist influence, didn't simply decide to not fight over the term God. If God is love, then lets just use the word love. One could decide the word is a synonym for God, and another could decide it means something that has to do with the heart.

Maybe it didn't happen that way, but somehow, love has become a powerful symbol of who we are as Unitarian Universalists. I don't know how widespread it is outside of New England congregations, but love plays a central role in the self- definition of many of our churches. Love plays a prominent role in affirmations that are said in unison by the entire congregation every week. Dare I say, it's not unlike churches saying the Nicene Creed every week? A version of it is in the back of our hymnal,

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“Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our great covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, and to help one another.”

Love is a foundational concept in many of our congregations, however you define the term. Love has become a unifying force across our denomination. I hope you saw the big, new, bright banner on the side of our building. If you didn't see it when you came in this morning, make it a point to go look at it. It say “Standing on the side of Love.” Love is the biggest word on the banner and it has a big heart next to it.

As I mentioned in this month's newsletter, this banner, and the campaign it represents, originated in response to the shootings at the Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church in

Knoxville, Tenn., in 2009. The church was targeted because they are welcoming to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people and have a liberal stance on many issues.

The Knoxville Community responded with an outpouring of love that inspired the leadership of the Unitarian Universalist Association to launch a campaign that would harness love's power to challenge exclusion, oppression and violence based on sexual orientation, gender identity, immigration status, race, religion, or any other identity.

The "standing on the side of love" message was a rallying point for people of faith in Massachusetts, as they marshaled their resources in support of same sex marriage, and again during the fight against Proposition 8 in California. It will yet again be a foundational rallying point when the UUA's General Assembly meets in Phoenix this year.

The usual business at GA this year, our annual gathering of congregations, will be cut short in response to the oppressive and discriminatory laws enacted in Arizona of late. Last year, the assembly voted not to conduct business as usual if we were to hold our General Assembly in Phoenix, as planned. There was much heated debate about whether to boycott Arizona.

The denomination committed to stand in solidarity with those groups in Arizona who are opposing these draconian laws and with immigrants and the marginalized in the state. A priority will be placed on educating ourselves on the issues and on public witness in opposition to the new laws.

Our President, Peter Morales says "There's no difference between spiritual values and social action. When we experience our connection with that which transcends us and with other people, we become compassionate. We suffer *with*, not separated from the other. That's a deeply spiritual experience."

Peter says: "There's no difference between spiritual values and social action. We suffer *with*, not separated from the other." This heart stuff, this stuff of love, is not the romantic, namby-pamby, mushy, stuff of Valentine's Day. The embodiment of love, the faithful manifestation of love is anything but mushy.

Standing on the side of love, where hard stances are required, where friends may be lost, where being jailed or worse is a real possibility, requires courage and true commitment. Standing on the side of love can not be supported by a belief in the niceness of love. To truly stand on the side of love, requires love to be heart-felt, and to have faith in the extraordinary power of love.

May we all be so blessed as to know the stuff of heart-felt love.

Amen