

February is a funny month. For starters, isn't it strange that the month has just 28 days – except every four years when it has 29 days? I've always wondered, why doesn't February have 30 days, and then take a day away from two of those months with 31 days to make up for it? I'd like a calendar where December, January and February each had 30 days. But that's just me.

But that's not the only thing that gets me about February. This is the month of – and please forgive me for saying so – this is the month of really lame holidays. Here we are, still in the cold and dark of winter... but unlike December with its yuletide traditions that are fun and truly distracting in a wonderful way, February offers holidays like... Presidents Day. Nothing against Washington and Lincoln, but Presidents Day has never inspired me in the way that, say, Martin Luther King Day does. But there are other holidays in February. How about... Groundhog Day? Ah, yes, Groundhog Day... a day where we look to a rodent for guidance.

But of course that brings us to today and the most famous holiday in February: Valentine's Day. My beef with Valentine's Day? It strikes me as a day designed to make virtually *everyone* feel inadequate. Really, how many of us feel truly good about Valentine's Day? There are those romantically unattached folks who might think of the day as sad – or literally as S.A.D., or Singles Awareness Day. Our culture, with its propaganda that everyone should be in a romantic relationship, can make Valentine's Day particularly painful for those who are presently single, or permanently single. Perhaps you've never been in a romantic relationship; or perhaps you've recently been through a break-up or divorce; perhaps you've been widowed. Valentine's Day can be a tough one.

But what about those who *are* presently romantically attached but who happen not to be straight? I can tell you, as a lesbian, Valentine's Day can sometimes be quite awkward when “the love that dare not speak its name” is forced to reckon with the celebration of romantic love that is, in most public settings, assumed to be between a man and a woman. It's awkward to go out for a romantic dinner with your Valentine and have the waitress assume that you're sisters, or – worse – to have the waiter flirt with your wife right under your nose. Clearly I need to step up my public displays of affection... not that that's always a safe option.

But beyond the special awkwardness of Valentine's day for the GLBT community... or for those who are single... what about those *are* presently romantically attached, whether to a man or a woman, but whose relationship is going through a difficult time? If your romance has hit a rough patch, Valentine's Day can be very painful, even cruel, like salt in the wounds. And what about those who are in relationships that seem to be going along quite nicely? Valentine's Day puts an unnatural pressure on these people, who might suddenly feel that their relationship is nice and nurturing, but where's the *passion*? Valentine's Day really works out best for those who are in relatively new romantic relationships, still in lust as well as in love – those who are still in the googley-eyed, ga-ga phase of a love affair. The rest of us? We can just look back on those days wistfully, if we were lucky enough to have had them.

The sermon title this morning is “Our Funny Valentines”, and of course that’s a paraphrasing of the Rodgers and Hart song “My Funny Valentine”, the song you heard minutes ago. “My Funny Valentine” was written by Rodgers and Hart in 1937, and the song has become a jazz standard even though it comes from a forgettable musical called *Babes in Arms*. I would argue, though this song has been recorded again and again, the definitive version is that of Chet Baker, the version you just heard. I remember the first time I heard this Chet Baker version of the song. I was probably about 10-years-old, and my grandmother was listening to a jazz record that included this track. I remember hearing it, and being mesmerized by the voice.... Was that a man or a woman singing in that throaty voice? It really is an androgynous vocal. Yes, the voice is fairly low, but the singer sounds so vulnerable – and that kind of vulnerability did not fit my childhood stereotype for men. And Chet Baker sings the song almost like it’s a dirge, not a love song. Of course, I now know that Baker had a tough life as a heroin addict – he was more in love with heroin than with any person when he recorded this song. No wonder it sounds like a dirge. No wonder it’s so haunting and eerie.

But you know, the fact is, our Valentines aren’t always our lovers or even our life-partners and spouses. Sometimes our *real* Valentines are something a little... different. A little... funny.

I remember as a teenager, in junior high and senior high, I never had a romantic Valentine. I never had a boyfriend in junior or senior high school as I felt, culturally, that I *should* have. (As it turns out, I wanted a boyfriend like a pigeon wants a puppy, but I digress.<sup>1</sup>) As a teenager, like so many young girls in our culture who don’t have a boyfriend, I felt unlovable, unattractive, unworthy, all those things. I’ll never forget what my mom would say to cheer me up. Oh, she meant well. But my mother would say, “*I’m* your Valentine, Lara.” Now, just a little tip for you parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles. The teenager in your life does *not* want to hear that you’re their Valentine....

Even if you *are* their Valentine! Because now that I’m 41, I realize that I really *was* my mother’s Valentine! Why not? I mean, she was “in love” with me. Let me explain. Do you remember that sad and telling moment when the reporters were snapping photos of a then-engaged Prince Charles and Lady Diana, and the reporters asked couple, “Are you in love?” And Diana quickly and quietly answered, “Of course!” And then Prince Charles added, almost under his breath, “Whatever ‘in love’ means.”

Charles might have been insensitive, but he asks a good question. What *does* “in love” mean? People usually use the phrase to talk about romantic love, and being “in lust”. They’re talking more about sexual chemistry and physical passion than anything else. But I think “in love” means something more broad than this.

I think you’re “in love” with any living creature that makes your heart melt when you think about him or her. I think you’re “in love” with any living creature for whom you’d rush from work or whatever you were doing in a heartbeat to help with the smallest thing. I think you’re “in love” when your mind keeps thinking about someone or something constantly, almost obsessively. By this way of thinking, many parents *are* in love with their children. And many pet owners are in love with their pets! And many business owners or non-profit directors are in

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<sup>1</sup> The story for all ages was *The Pigeon Wants a Puppy* by Mo Willems.

love with their business or organization! And yes, many ministers are in love with their congregations. And teachers are in love with their students. And so on. In fact, it's hard to be a good parent, a good pet owner, a good business owner or non-profit director or a good minister or teacher if you're not a little in love with your real (or metaphorical) child. Some relationships demand a little obsessiveness.

I think intimate friendships also involve being "in love", and again, I'm not talking about having secret crushes or secret attractions to friends. Nothing like that. I'm talking about being in love with Platonic friends. You know, "just friends", whatever *that* means. Have you ever had or do you now have the kind of friend that pops into your head all the time... "Oh, I have to tell so and so about this the next time I see her!" Or, "Oh, I have to buy this for so and so, he'll get such a kick out of it!" Maybe you even pick up your cell phone and call your friend when you're in a store and see something or overhear a conversation that reminds you of him or her. In my book, you're in love with your friend. And that's a wonderful thing.

Our culture just loves to celebrate romantic love and sexual chemistry, and so of course Valentine's Day is really focused on that. But as far as I'm concerned, there are other kinds of powerful chemistry between us. If you have a truly close friend that you just love to spend time with, if you have a relative that you just naturally click with every time you see him or her, *that's* chemistry too. When you get right down to it, over the course of a lifetime, if you're a pet owner, aren't there a few special pets that really stand out? Our culture doesn't celebrate these things too much. But I think it should. Sometimes in life, we experience a chemistry so special – so powerful – as to feel almost mystical at times. These people, friends, relatives – even pets – are perhaps what some call "soul mates". And why not? As Aristotle put it, "Love is composed of a single soul inhabiting two bodies." Valentine's Day should be about soul mates, whether they're also romantic partners or not. Why not celebrate them all?

There's something else, though, about being in love that I haven't really talked about. Again, I find myself remembering Chet Baker's vocal and its vulnerability... Being in love is being... vulnerable. If you're in love with someone – if you love your partner or friend or child or pet passionately, then you're vulnerable, aren't you? I hope you can stay with me for a steam-of-consciousness thought... but it reminds me of a line from the 1988 movie *The Accidental Tourist* (based on the book by Ann Tyler). William Hurt plays a character who has recently lost his young son to murder. He is living his life in a daze of grief, just going through the motions of living. He's a travel writer who specializes in writing for business professionals who are "accidental tourists" – business professionals who care nothing for travel *per se*, but who do it from professional necessity. Early in the movie, we hear the words of his advice to those packing for a business trip: "Most importantly," he writes, "never take along anything on your journey so valuable or dear that its loss would devastate you." That line has always stayed with me. "Never take along anything on your journey so valuable or dear that its loss would devastate you." That's his advice to travelers.

But being in love means ignoring his advice categorically. Being in love means journeying through life with companions so valuable, precious and dear that the loss of those companions will devastate you, at least for a time. You have to be brave, as well as vulnerable, to let yourself love someone that much. It reminds me of the famous lines from Mary Oliver: "To live in this

world, you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes, to let it go, to let it go.”<sup>2</sup> Loving someone with all our heart is one of the most courageous things any of us can do.

Though some people and some creatures will be particularly near and dear to us in life, there’s no reason to keep your love so small. Why not go for big love? And no, I don’t mean “big love” like the television show. I mean big love, as in being in love with existence itself? If you truly love the Divine, or the Interdependent Web of All Existence, then *all* humans, *all* living creatures, are your very own funny Valentines. Love and authentic spirituality go hand in hand. It’s like what Mohammad Iqbal wrote in the words we read together responsively: “The journey of love is a very long journey, but sometimes with a sigh you can cross that vast desert. Search and search again without losing hope; You may find sometime a treasure on your way. My heart and my eyes are all devoted to the vision.”<sup>3</sup> Big love. That’s what I wish Valentine’s Day were all about.

This year, our denomination, the Unitarian Universalist Association, wants us to focus on love beyond the usual romantic Valentine’s Day notions, too. They’re calling it “a larger love”, probably a better choice of words than “big love”. This year, the UUA’s “Standing on the Side of Love” public advocacy program is encouraging us to “re-imagine Valentine’s Day” by letting love inspire us to take a positive action for social justice today.

The President of the UUA, the Rev. Peter Morales, writes:

“Every religious tradition teaches us that love is sacred. Every major faith teaches us that every person is precious, that we are connected to one another and that we are to have compassion for everyone. The Christian scriptures teach that God is love... To be a person of faith is to stand on the side of love. We are especially called to love those who are despised, powerless and marginalized. This sacred love is not just an emotion. Love acts. Love cares for those in need. Love demands that we take a stand. Love requires us to stand with those whom others reject and vilify.... Today two groups especially bear the brunt of rejection: sexual minorities and undocumented immigrants. Standing on the side of love means standing at their side. Just look at the ugly battle over legalization of the marriage of gays and lesbians and our inability to reform a hopelessly outdated and dysfunctional immigration laws....”

[Morales continues:] “On the matter of immigration, our inability to reform our outdated laws is creating millions of human tragedies. A few weeks ago, visiting San Antonio, I heard the story of Benita. She is a 25 year-old young woman facing deportation to Mexico. Benita was brought to this country as a young child. She has no memory of Mexico and knows no one there. She was valedictorian of her high school class and graduated from college with a double major. Our laws say we should send her ‘home to Mexico.’ Mexico is not her

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Oliver, “In Blackwater Woods”.

<sup>3</sup> Mohammad Iqbal, “The Journey of Love”, in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), responsive reading 610.

home; America is her home. There are hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, like her. To throw her out of the country and send her to a place she has never been is madness... This Valentine's Day has been proclaimed Standing on the Side of Love Day. People of many faiths across America are worshipping, meeting, and taking action to stand with those who most need our love and compassion today. We are calling on our fellow citizens and elected officials at all levels to stand on the side of love as well... This Valentine's Day, as we cherish those closest to us and as we celebrate the divine gift of love, let us dare to embrace a larger love. Join with thousands across America who are standing on the side of love for all people."<sup>4</sup>

Along with many other UU congregations across the country, today we at the UUCiA can stand on the side of love with immigrant families. [*Note: UUMassActionNetwork's "Standing on the Side of Love" action in support of immigrant families was described at this point.*]

I'd like to close with the words of Unitarian Universalist minister and best-selling author Robert Fulghum: "Valentine's [Day]... is about loving something – not just one's self or one's family or one's neighbor. It's about loving life – about loving this world – and seeing this world as our own living room."<sup>5</sup> In the words of our weekly chalice lighting, let us feel both "the warmth of love" as well as "the energy of action". This Valentine's Day, and in all the days to come, let us know a larger love. May it be so. Blessed be, and amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Morales, <http://uua.org/news/newssubmissions/158319.shtml>.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Fulghum, "Valentine Christmas Tree", in *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten: 15<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition* (New York, NY: Ballentine Books, 2003), p. 180.