

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“Cultivating Healthy Desire”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore February 21, 2016

Call to Celebration

I'm so glad that you had the desire to be here today and be part of this community. I'm really glad you overcame the desire to sit in your recliner or a comfortable spot on your couch and spend this time reading the New York Times Book Review or the Magazine or the Week in Review, my favorite sections.

I start out with a confession. I struggle with the word desire.

When it was chosen as the Soul Matters, (the source for our Meaning Matters program) theme for the month of February, I wasn't at all sure I could work with it. That is partly because of my Buddhist orientation to see attachment and aversion as something to be avoided. Chasing after desires looks, sounds and feels like dukkha and tanha, like the experience of suffering that is the result of craving for what isn't present. What is good about being smitten by some celebrity, craving for a steaming pizza slice with cheese strings lengthen and narrow as it is pulled from the pie, or wanting the latest electronic gadget or shiny new car model?

What has reoriented my thinking (and the genesis of this service today) is putting my attention on healthy desires. Desires for the health and happiness of our members, friends and family fall into this category. The desire to make a difference in the lives of those who are suffering and the joy that comes from making generous donations doesn't quite fit the model of desire as craving that generates misery. In fact the Buddha did talk about desire that leads to the end of suffering. The desire to offer loving kindness to others; The desire to join with others in celebrating their success and joys; The desire to offer compassion to those who are suffering and in need; The desire to be open, receptive and responsive to whatever arises in each moment without attachment, aversion or ignorance; these desires are what the Buddha called the Four Heavenly Abodes or the Brahma Viharas. Not only are these approved desires for the Buddha, they are desires that can be practiced without limit for the benefit of all beings.

So let us bring an open mind to the topic of desire and see what we discover as we join together in the celebration of life.

Meditation

What should be done to cultivate goodness and peace?

Let them be able and upright,
 Straightforward and gentle in speech.
 Humble and not conceited,
 Contented and easily satisfied.

Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways.
 Peaceful and calm, and wise and skillful,
 Not proud and demanding in nature.

Let them not do the slightest thing
 That the wise would later reprove.

Wishing: In gladness and in safety,
 May all beings be at ease.

Whatever living beings there may be;
 Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
 The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,
 The seen and the unseen,
 Those living near and far away,
 Those born and to-be-born,
 May all beings be at ease!

Let none deceive another,
 Or despise any being in any state.
 Let none through anger or ill-will
 Wish harm upon another.

Even as a mother protects with her life
 Her child, her only child,
 So with a boundless heart

Should one cherish all living beings:
 Radiating kindness over the entire world
 Spreading upwards to the skies,
 And downwards to the depths;
 Outwards and unbounded,
 Freed from hatred and ill-will.

Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down
 Free from drowsiness,
 One should sustain this recollection.

This is said to be the sublime abiding.

Sermon

Most of us can recognize an unhealthy desire fairly quickly. In 2009, New York was the first state to pass a law requiring restaurant chains to display the number of calories for each menu offering. Those numbers have been a wakeup call. Who knew that the foods that look so delicious pictured on the menu could have so many calories in them. Seeing a double bacon and cheese burger with grilled mushrooms and onions coming in at 2500 calories is a bit of a shocker. One sandwich can give a man all the calories he needs for one day. But we don't need the calorie count to question whether it would be good for our liver to order of 32 ounce soda with that burger ... Or fries with cheese sauce ... Or have a hot fudge sundae for dessert to seal our digestive fate.

And that is just the beginning of unhealthy desire. Airbrushed and photo-shopped images of young women in advertising create unrealistic, unhealthy desires for what women's bodies should look like and how women should dress. Pharmaceutical companies encourage us to believe we can solve just about any problem we have with some chemical product we can swallow, apply to our skin or inject. Beer and wine vendors tell us we can't have a good time without an alcoholic beverage in our hand. And Joe Camel and the Marlboro Man still lurk where our young gather hoping to offer them a cigarette. Maybe they will be offering them a joint in a few years if drugs get decriminalized.

Although most of us will recognize unhealthy desires fairly easily, there are edges. Leah Purcell, our director of religious education, and I, considering our philosophy of sexual

education here, have an ongoing discussion about whether and what kind of erotic material might be an acceptable part of a healthy sex life. My favorite test for an unhealthy desire is to ask, "Would I encourage this sort of desire in my first grade daughter or son? Would I encourage my mother to have this desire? How about my grandmother?" That usually sorts things out pretty quickly for me.

There are plenty of desires that do pass that test. These are the desires that society promotes and to a large degree our congregation does too. Most of us are going to support and encourage ourselves and our children's desire to go to school, get a good education, and develop a love of learning. Every parent wants and hopefully models for their children becoming a contributing member of society, hopefully finding meaningful and fulfilling employment. We want for ourselves and our children to find loving partnerships ... and if that means children or grandchildren, that desire would be just fine too. We'd like them to fly the nest and begin a home of their own, become active socially, civically and religiously, preferably in a UU congregation. We'd hope they would want to volunteer their time and donate money to worthy causes as we do. We'd want them to be good citizens, follow the law and restrain their anti-social drives.

Not all of society's desires for us might be good and right for everyone though. Ways our society is complicit with sexism, racism, ableism, homophobia and economic injustice need to be resisted and reformed. The encouragement to consume more and more to stimulate the growth of material wealth is having a devastating effect on our environment. A more insidious effect of being shaped into a consumer is to undermine our creative potential for self-expression. More and more we experience life as an audience rather than an active participant. Our political leaders would prefer passive, compliant citizens who do what their told and conform to the social norms.

If you fit into society's norms and expectations I suppose that's fine. If you prefer to sit in your recliner, watch all the entertainment Hollywood can generate, and play video games, today's world is your oyster. We could pretty easily be entertained for the rest of our lives with meal breaks and maybe a trip to the gym once in a while.

I suspect, though, there are a number of people here this morning who have other healthy desires that may not be promoted by the mainstream society. And because they may be counter-cultural, we might have some doubts about whether they are appropriate desires for us or not. And some of them are on the cutting edge of

reshaping our culture in new ways that may become the new norm, or at least part of the spectrum of society's acceptable normal.

One such desire we've seen transformed in the last thirty some years is the movement to accept those who desire same sex partners. In the last fifteen or so years, we are seeing a lot of movement for those whose sexual assignment at birth doesn't match their gender identity. Transgender awareness is spreading out quickly through society as we move away from the concept of binary gender. There is a spectrum of gender expression besides man and woman, the queering of gender identity, that is slowly moving toward acceptance.

Desire may also deeply affect our willingness to stay in difficult relationships as well as to seek to end them. One good thing about the reduction in the social stigma of divorce is permitting people in unhealthy, toxic relationships to bring them to an end if their partner is unwilling to address their concerns and make healthy changes. From the outside, a relationship may look like it is working. But from the inside, the story might be quite different.

Yet, sometimes desires in relationships can be misunderstood and misdirected. This can happen when needs are not being met that could be met if effective communication can be established and maintained.

Nonviolent or compassionate Communication was a revelation to me about this. Marshall Rosenberg teaches that experiences of dissatisfaction in relationships often come from unmet needs. In a similar way, enjoyment and satisfaction in life comes from getting our needs met. Our emotional state is basically controlled by what needs are getting met and not getting met. The challenge is the lack of a one to one correspondence with our more complex needs. Feeling cold, hungry, or thirsty easily translate into universal human needs for temperature regulation, nutrition and hydration. But mapping sadness, restlessness and irritation to the unmet needs that drive them isn't obvious. Rosenberg identified dozens of needs that might not be being met, like the universal human need for autonomy, connection, recognition, intimacy, and others including temperature regulation, nutrition and hydration. And finding a mutually agreeable way to resolve that need may not be obvious either. There are many different ways a need can be met satisfactorily.

Desires often arise out of a search for a way to satisfy an unmet need usually hidden behind an emotion. But without connecting to the need driving the feeling, the desire may not be directed appropriately to what might satisfy us. Thus people go to a bar for a few drinks to resolve feelings of stress after a hard day of work. A feeling of disappointment drives the desire to consume a carton of ice cream or a bag of cookies looking for comfort. Or someone other than one's spouse begins to look like an attractive alternative if there has been a lack of commitment to compassionate communication at home.

So desires are important revelations about the state of our inner life but not necessarily the truth about what will make us happy. As I noted in my column for our newsletter, *Windows*, I have a very unhealthy desire for sugar that probably comes from some imbalance in my biological makeup. But attentiveness to my reluctance to accept a job offer that would have been my dream job five years earlier helped me recognize a deeper calling to go to seminary and change careers to ministry. Desires can be really important signals to us, especially when it comes to our spiritual life.

Because our desires are real human experiences, they are pointers to what is true in the moment they are experienced. But because they are ephemeral and transient, they are not demarcations of absolute truth. Thus they must be handled with respect and care.

Parker Palmer has some wise guidance for us on this. He writes:

My working definition of truth is simple, though practicing it is anything but: "Truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline." Truth cannot not possibly be found in the conclusions of the conversation, because the conclusions keep changing. So if we want to live "in the truth," it is not enough to live in the conclusions of the moment. We must find a way to live in the continuing conversation, with all its conflicts and complexities, while staying in close touch with our own inner teacher.

Parker J. Palmer. *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*

St. Ignatius, founder of the Catholic Jesuit order, in his classic text, "The Spiritual Exercises" points out that our deepest desires are a way that God communicates with us and directs us. This is the way God moves us to find wholeness in life. Thus our attentiveness to our desires, praying to understand them and be guided by them are a way for us to be in communion with the holy. That desire doesn't just operate in a

spiritual mode, but also in a physical and an emotional one as well. That desire could operate at the mundane level of wanting to be a better lover or friend, find meaningful and satisfying work. It could also operate at more selfless and altruistic levels as well.

One need not believe in God or that God operates in a personal way to recognize desire can still serve noble human purposes. God need not be our driving motivation to serve others or the wellbeing of our planet and the flourishing of life, to seek mathematical and scientific truth, or to move us toward a more just society. Our work toward serving those noble purposes can be guided internally through an intuitive connection that inspires and sustains it without claiming a divine source for it. Even the most committed rationalist is unlikely to turn away a great inspiration that appears in a dream.

This is the genius of Unitarian Universalism. We are open to every creative, wholesome channel of inspiration and guidance that all the world's religions have discovered. And we are open to what comes out of the academy and what comes from the pen, paintbrush or chisel of the artist. Jesus, through the St. Ignatius spiritual discipline can guide our spiritual growth and development. So can reading the philosophy of Spinoza and Kant, the movements of Tai Chi, or the silence of deep absorption in meditation. What I'm appreciating and honoring today is desire as a source that motivates our growth and development, knowing that the desire itself is a pointer toward truth not the actual truth itself.

Though, I do hesitate when I say that. One of the sources I consulted in my research this week is [Daniel Odier](#), an amazing French pioneer and practitioner of Eastern spirituality. At the age of 22, in 1968, he headed to Nepal where he encountered and mastered spiritual practices from the traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, Zen and Kashmiri Shaivism. He is best known for his work translating some of their sacred texts but also for his writing about tantric practices and the place of desire.

He describes the tingling shiver of desire as a "sacred tremor." This sacred tremor actually does not have a beginning or an end but is an animating principle of existence. Thus desire as an experience of consciousness, witnessed as a process itself, a living force beyond any object it might have. Desire is fundamental to consciousness itself. One way one might recognize it might be as the Spirit of Life acting through us. In another way, one might know it as the divine experiencing itself through us.

Thus, desire is not a problem to be fixed or eliminated, but a human experience that may open us to truth beyond all knowing. We will not ultimately find the satisfaction of desire in a chocolate éclair or a porterhouse steak. We will not bring desire to an end through a great sexual encounter or an intense moment of intimacy.

What we really seek is the source of desire. Desire may actually be the source of being itself.

May seeking that source be the healthy desire we cultivate.

So be it.

Benediction

I close with civil rights activist Bayard Rustin's wise words about what I would call healthy desires:

If we desire a society of peace, then we cannot achieve such a society through violence. If we desire a society without discrimination, then we must not discriminate against anyone in the process of building this society. If we desire a society that is democratic, then democracy must become a means as well as an end.

May we cultivate healthy desires
 as our means
 to serve the good of all beings
 as our end.