

Don't be Afraid of Sweetness
~ with Chocolate Communion ~

Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship ~ www.buf.org
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Rev. Paul Beckel

*Don't be afraid of sweetness.
With us or without us,
Sweetness will go on living
And is infinitely alive,
Forever being revived,
For it's in our mouths,
Whether eating or singing
That sweetness has its place*
Pablo Neruda

WELCOME

Communion is a ritual in which people come together to feast on the bounty of the earth, to give thanks, and to reconfirm the ideals that their communion symbolizes. But communion is not just symbolism, a nod toward some abstract creed. Communion can be a *deed*, an act of mindfulness. Today I invite you to engage in this communion feast as an act of mindfulness.

Now this may seem silly or even bizarre. So I want to be clear: neither mindfulness nor ritual need to be solemn or silent.

At BUF we celebrate a water communion in the fall and a flower communion in the spring. These are variations on communion rituals that have been practiced for millennia across a wide range of religious traditions. For those of you who are new, no we do not drink the water or eat the flowers. Although now that I think of it....

Today we share the sweetness of chocolate. It is, of course, a symbol of love. But like any symbol that has survived through time, chocolate has adapted to mean many different things. It has gone from being known as the food of the gods, to a sign of luxury and wealth, to aphrodisiac, to tonic prescribed by doctors for good health.

It remains all of these things. And so today, with joy, we share chocolate communion: an opportunity to savor a sweet and pungent gift of life... an opportunity to pause and mindfully re-direct our attention *to only that which is immediately present* here and now. Do not be afraid of this sweetness.

Hopefully each of you now have a bit of chocolate, or for those of you who don't do chocolate, a bit of cranberry. [These were available as people came in today.] Any of these will suit our purposes today with their complex combination of taste sensations. Dark chocolate of course

being both sweet and bitter. Cranberries both sweet and sour. And with white chocolate, well, maybe this is only me but I get a taste of sweet and soapy! But hey I love it anyway!

OK this might be a little tricky now, I'd like you to open your hymnbooks to #296... then set it on your lap or set it aside.

Take a moment now to consider what you have in your hand. See the shape, the texture, the color... and if you find yourself thinking about whether you got the biggest piece, gently redirect your attention. Close your eyes and be aware of where you are in this room full of curious, willing, and comfortably uncertain people. And if you find yourself thinking about how silly we look together right now, remember that in our moments of mindfulness we let go of judgment and simply observe, and accept, our immediate reality.

Breathe slowly and simply know that you are breathing. If you are anticipating how the chocolate or cranberry is going to taste, gently redirect your attention to *this* very moment, not before, not after. And now let's sing together song #296. We'll stop after the first two verses, but keep your book open as we'll sing verse 3 later.

*O ye who taste that love is sweet, set waymarks
for the doubtful feet that stumble on in search of it. Alleluia*

*Sing hymns of love; that some who hear far off, in pain may lend an ear.
Rise up and wonder and draw near. Alleluia*

And now slowly, and with full awareness, taste. Do not hurry.

[bell] For the last time now, I invite you to notice your breath as you breathe in. And sigh, if that feels natural, as you breathe out. Let's sing verse 3:

*Lead lives of love, that others who behold your lives may kindle too with love,
and cast their lot with you. Alleluia*

ERACISM MINUTE

Rev Barbara Davenport

READING & MEDITATION

In some forms of meditation, the goal is to clear your mind completely. In other forms we don't try to completely clear our minds, but to limit our focus to here and now, with no memory, no anticipation, no judgment, just awareness — without reaction or analysis.

But thoughts are not always the enemy. In some forms of meditation, thoughtful introspection can be a valuable way to gain clarity about who we are.

Sometime this week, I encourage you to experiment with these or other forms of meditation. See what works for you in one setting or another. It's the latter form, introspection, into which I invite you now. In part of this meditation I'm going to invite you to reflect on how you are with yourself. And in another part, to reflect on how you are in a particular relationship. So to begin I want to acknowledge that we come here with and without Valentines. Or perhaps not on the best

of terms with our Valentines. So choose any relationship. But we'll begin with our relationship with ourselves.

Here's a simple line from Dao de Jing:

*If you want to become whole,
let yourself be partial.*

Let's take a minute now to reflect on what that can mean for you as an individual. If you want to become whole, let yourself be partial. What does this mean for you as an individual?

[bell] And now, for how you are within an important relationship: what does this mean? If you want to become whole, let yourself be partial. ...within an important relationship... if you want to become whole, let yourself be partial...

[bell] And finally, for the relationship itself, what can this mean? If you want the *relationship to become whole*, let *the relationship be partial*...

[bell]

REFLECTIONS, Part 1

I was once at a wedding reception when the DJ played "Love Stinks." (I may be dating myself here.) Boy did that get people off their feet — even the bride and groom! Who can't relate? We have probably all been burned by love. Some have been torched by betrayal, others have felt the searing pain of the loss of love through death... or the smoldering of love's atrophy.

Our attitudes toward love vary greatly. We have among us as we approach Valentine's Day those who are feeling acute sadness. Others are in a state of bliss. Some are angry or cynical about love. Some are happy to be alone. And some who are alone — and some who are coupled — are feeling pretty ambivalent about the whole thing. Many of us feel 2 or 3 of these feelings at the same time.

In her novel, *A Map of The World*, Jane Hamilton writes, "*I wasn't always sure that Howard and I would weather the storm, and I often tried to think what it was that went deep enough to hold us.... Emma had been conceived shortly after we met, we bought the farm, and then Claire came along. His parents had a strong union, and Howard believed, with a kind of fervor that seemed nearly Christian, that there was a sanctity in marriage to uphold.... My passion for Howard was soon replaced by something stronger than respect, or habit, or maybe even need. It wasn't a simple connection like affinity, because there had been periods when I felt as if I was living with a stranger, that I didn't know or particularly like the man asleep beside me.... I recalled my affection, my admiration, the attraction, and the way he could take me by surprise and amuse me. Those feelings were on the side of what I called love. On the other side there was rage, irritation, disappointment, boredom. Somewhere in the middle was endurance....*"

Complex feelings like this are to be expected in any relationship. And still, we are drawn to love. We are drawn outward. We are drawn inward. We are drawn to casual relationships. We are

drawn to special relationships. Toward which — of all of these draws, toward which should we turn?

Our Unitarian tradition stresses the primacy of the individual — self-reliance. Love is good. Partners are good. But beneath it all, and in the end, I'm alone. So I've got to be content with myself.

Our Universalist tradition stresses relationship. Technically you might think of Universalism being about the salvation of the individual who could never be removed from love of god — which is why the notion of hell was inconceivable. But when we get less literal about it, Universalism is not about salvation for each individual, it's about love-itself being-a-relationship within which we are inextricably joined.

As both our Unitarian and Universalist traditions have evolved over the centuries, eventually to become one, our language has expanded — such that whether we understand that all-encompassing love as momentary or eternal, whether we understand love as natural or supernatural, whether we use or reject traditional theological language, we can still understand ourselves both as individuals, full of joy and grief ... and as intimately interdependent with the joy and the grief of the entire global community.

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The father of gospel music, Tommy Dorsey, was a prophet and a poet of love. He wrote the hymn, *Precious Lord Take My Hand*, in the 1930's, when he was on the road, performing, and learned of the death of his wife, his sweetheart. Regardless of our theology, or lack thereof, we can understand the longing and the loss embodied within this song, the grievous need for something to hold onto in a moment of inexpressible sorrow. As we sing it together now I suggest: Don't be afraid of its sweet sadness or its theology... but simply enter its humanity, its humility, its cry of love.

INTERLUDE

Precious Lord Take My Hand #199

REFLECTIONS, Part 2

According to Aztec legend, a long time ago, Quetzalcoatl (ket-sahl-ko-AH-tul), the god of wisdom and knowledge, came down from his land of gold, where the sun rests at night, to be the people's priest king. He taught the people how to paint and how to work silver and wood. He gave the people their calendar and showed them how to grow corn. And he brought them the seeds of the cacao tree.

The bearded, white-skinned Quetzalcoatl taught the Aztecs how to grow the cacao tree, harvest its seedpods, and prepare a delicious drink, chocolatl. Before he left, Quetzalcoatl promised to return on a "one reed" year, which occurs every 52 years on the Aztec calendar.

In 1519, a bearded, white skinned explorer named Cortez encountered the Aztec kingdom ruled by Montezuma. Since this happened to be a "one reed" year, instead of treating Cortez like an enemy, the Aztecs welcomed him as their returning god -- with great feasts that concluded with the serving of chocolatl in golden cups.

Cortez, however, was not the god that the Aztecs had hoped for. He responded to the people's generous welcome by imprisoning Montezuma, seizing large amounts of gold, destroying Aztec temples, and converting the flourishing civilization into an enslaved Spanish colony.

For many of us, our experience with similarly perverse powers posing as God has led us to mistrust *anything* that comes from the *outside* in the name of love. So emotionally, and/or theologically, we have turned inward.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk and peace activist, is an excellent representative of the love-filled *inward* journey.

He writes, "During a conference on religion and peace, a Protestant minister came up to me toward the end of one of our meals together and said, "Are you a grateful person?" I was surprised. I was eating slowly, and I thought to myself, Yes, I am a grateful person. The minister continued, "If you are really grateful, how can you not believe in God? God has created everything we enjoy, including the food we eat. Since you do not believe in God, you are not grateful for anything."

Thich Nhat Hanh was surprised by this comment because his daily spiritual practice was one of mindfulness. Awareness, paying attention to what lay before him, whether he was eating or breathing or engaging in conversation... living every moment with appreciation for *the way of understanding and love*.

Being fully alive to the presence of love is certainly not a matter of rejecting god. But the person whose spiritual focus is upon a god-out-there may have difficulty relating to the person whose journey is directed inward.

Still, in his book *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, Thich Nhat Hanh proposes that Christians and Buddhists can share *a communion* — a First Supper, out of which everything becomes fresh and new as we sit side by side, savoring the simple gifts of life.

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And so through our communion today, in our recognition of the bitter and the sweet, the sour and the sweet, the soapy and the sweet... Through our communion today, and also in the walking and talking communions, the working and playing communions, in which we engage throughout the week, may we celebrate *both* the love of God longed for by Tommy Dorsey — the God beyond ourselves and beyond our understanding... *and* the Spirit of Love, known from within, as described by Thich Nhat Hanh — may we celebrate these two, together, side by side, and intertwined.

SHARING OUR GIFTS

SENDING SONG

#346 *Come Sing a Song with Me*

CIRCLE 'ROUND