

# “Passionate Kisses”

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9 February 2014

N.B. These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship, supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

The subject line of the email was brief yet tantalizing.  
“Stan Rogers Folk Festival.”

My heart quickened in anticipation as I began reading the message.  
It was indeed an invitation to play at that event.

I felt as if a wonderful Valentine’s card had arrived in the mail...a card from the faraway object of my affection...someone I desired but whom I didn’t dare hope might desire me, too.

I thought perhaps the email was some kind of mistake.

But several weeks later my family and I found ourselves driving to Canso—which, at the far eastern tip of Nova Scotia, feels like the edge of the earth.

Our kids were seven and nine years old at the time. Too young to really understand why Mom wanted to drive out to this strange little village in the fog and rain.

A “festival” sounded like fun, but so far it just looked like camping in miserable weather...which wasn’t something my family enjoyed doing.

We pitched a tent in the performers’ area of the grounds—grounds that were lumpy, uneven and chock-full of jagged stones we pretended to ignore.

Cold, wet and contorted, we might have been able to sleep had it not been for the performers’ bunkhouse that was only a dozen meters away.

That’s where a six-man funk band from Miami was staying.

In addition to singing in booming voices that needed no amplification, several of them apparently played the saxophone.

We knew this because they were playing passionately at four in the morning...

Until my husband crawled out of our tent and begged them to stop.

The next day, exhausted...with pain building up in my lower back...

And my entire family mad at me...

I played three songs on a remote workshop stage, beside a young singer named Joel Plaskett, who would go on to do very well.

That night in the dining hall, a friend introduced me to Bruce Cockburn.

He shook my hand and smiled politely as I awkwardly, painfully told him how much he'd influenced my life.

I bought the t-shirt that listed my name along with his and Joel's.

I may not be wearing that t-shirt today,  
But in some ways, I think I'm wearing it all the time.

When the folk festival ended, we got back in the car to return to Toronto. My back pain continued for months.

But even so, I hadn't gone as far as a folksinger can go for her passion—not by a long shot.

The friend who introduced me to Bruce Cockburn once found herself praying out loud while driving through a mountain pass during a snowstorm, on her way to a small house concert.

That was scary enough, but the extreme financial hardship she has weathered throughout her career has been far worse.

Lucinda Williams writes, “shouldn't I have a comfortable bed and passionate kisses?”

On the surface level, the question seems to be about keeping passion alive in a committed relationship.

It's a challenging question that I think is embraced by an even bigger one:

Shouldn't I have security and order in my life *and* the freedom to follow my passions? How can both of those things co-exist?

One of the things I love about songs—and art in so many forms—is that they open up questions that aren't easily answered.

Questions that sometimes seem unsolvable in the day-to-day struggle called human life.

In my story, my deep desire to have a musicians' career ran smack dab up against my desire to have a conventional family life.

Thankfully, my interest in UU ministry is leading to some creative solutions.

But in fact, I think that spiritual growth or a “religious” life, in the deepest sense of that word, can help all people who wrestle with competing desires.

After all, one meaning of the word “religion” is “to re-join” or “re-connect.”

To reconcile things that on the surface don't seem to go together.

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Now, the UU fourth principle may not sound very sexy, but I think it belongs in today's talk about passion. It reads:

“As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm and promote the free and responsible search for truth and meaning.”

This sounds completely manageable doesn't it?  
It just rolls off the tongue for most of us.

But hang on a second.  
Freedom and responsibility can make rather uncomfortable bedfellows.

Whether we're talking about passion in romantic relationships  
or passion for other deep loves of our lives,

one of the challenges we face in human life is to honour our deep desires...

While at the same time making sure that our passions don't burn down our  
house...or run aground on a rocky Nova Scotia shore.

Anybody who tells you this is easy is lying.

But the good news is: just seeing how passion and discipline edge up against  
each other—as they do in the months of January and February here at First—  
invites us into thinking in a new way.

A way that's less about "either/or." And more like "yes/and."

A way that's more about wholeness.

This is a creative way of thinking—which brings us to the idea of *eros*, the root  
word of "erotic."

Admit it. With a sermon called "Passionate Kisses," you were hoping I'd get  
around to that, right?

Let's go in that direction, then, with a story about two Zen Buddhist monks  
walking along a road.

They come to a river. And beside it stands a beautiful woman who wants to  
get across.

The senior monk picks her up, carries her across the river and lets her down on  
the other side.

The two monks walk on together for several miles, until finally the junior monk  
says to the other: "I thought we weren't supposed to have contact with  
women."

The senior monk responds, "I put the woman down long ago, but you're still  
carrying her."

Thomas Moore, the author of “Care of the Soul,” writes about this story in his new book, “A Religion of One’s Own.”<sup>1</sup>

He says that the conventional take on the story is that it’s best to simply acknowledge one’s desires and let them go as quickly as possible. No fuss, no muss.

That seems to be the responsible thing to do—especially if you’re a monk. And Thomas Moore was a monk, for 12 years, by the way.

But Moore suggests that there is also great wisdom in the action of the younger monk, who continues to “carry” or hold the beautiful woman and perhaps his attraction to her.

By giving voice to his passion, so to speak, he creates a life for himself that is more soulful and rich. More full of vitality.

He doesn’t run back for the woman...he continues along the path he has chosen.

But as Moore points out, he carries his passion with him, in a way we might say is both “free” and “responsible.”

Again, this is unconventional wisdom...creative thinking.

Creativity calls us to be aware of our desires, our hopes, our plans...while also being receptive to whatever arises.

Often those things rub up against each other in a paradoxical or challenging way.

And when things rub up against each other...well, who knows what could happen.

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The poet Kahlil Gibran once described children as the result of “life’s longing for itself.”

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Moore, *A Religion of One’s Own: A Guide to Creating a Personal Spirituality in a Secular World* (New York: Gotham, 2014), 115-116.

Whether or not children are part of the equation, “life’s longing for itself” is a wonderful way to describe not only human sexuality—but all forms of creative interchange.

The ancient Greeks saw Eros as one of the original creator-gods—literally at the heart of life itself.

And even now, an appreciation of eros can help us get at the meaning of our existence.

Catherine Keller is a process theologian—someone who sees divine activity in the world as an ongoing creative process that includes us.

According to this way of thinking, divine passion or creative desire is exactly the Something that got us here in the first place: “the Eros of the Universe.”<sup>2</sup>

Keller writes that we are “called forth, born—natured, nurtured—at every moment. That call, that invitation is the creative Eros: the amorous desire [of God] for life, and more life.

Life not for the sake of my life alone, but for the sake of the evolving network of relations in which my life is worth living.”<sup>3</sup>

She emphasizes the word “worth”—saying that living is an act of being worthy—an echo of the “inherent worth” we enshrine in our First Principle.

That said, the entire network of inherently worthy relations is extremely difficult to manage.

All of our conflicting desires can make quite a mess—a mess well-understood by any songwriter, painter, poet, sermon-writer or person engaged in relationships of any kind.

And yet, that mess holds almost limitless, one might even say divine, potential.

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<sup>2</sup> Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 99.

<sup>3</sup> Keller, 100.

Catherine Keller writes, “Amidst the array of [conflicting] influences from which you are becoming—you might sense the mysterious magnetism of possibility.”

“In your heart’s desire, is there an echo of the larger love-life of the world?”<sup>4</sup>

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If we are participating in the “love-life” of the world...the romance of the interdependent Web...

Perhaps our passion isn’t just one-way.

Perhaps, as wise teachers have told us, “our deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger” are destined to meet.<sup>5</sup>

Moving toward each other, as “deep calls to deep.”<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the place they come together—the rendezvous-point if you will—is the intersecting space between freedom and responsibility...

Expectation and reality...  
Desire and fulfillment,  
Give and take.

Maybe that place—which can seem scary or uncomfortable—is where our lives really start to take shape.

More than cool “responsibility,” and more than frenzied “freedom”...maybe our lives of truth and meaning can embrace both.

Shouldn’t we have this...shouldn’t we have all of this?

Maybe the larger “love-life of the world” is calling us.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 100-101.

<sup>5</sup> “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Fred Buechner, American Presbyterian minister and writer.

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 42:7

We can hear it through the songs of our own passionate desires...and the poetry of lovers throughout history.

We heard the Sufi poet Jallaluddin Rumi early in the service.

He wrote love poems both to God and to his human lover.  
In his poems, sometimes it's hard to tell which is which.

He urges the reader:

“Make everything in you an ear,  
each atom of your being,  
and you will hear at every moment what the Source  
is whispering to you,  
just to you and for you,  
without any need for my words or anyone else’s.

You are—we all are—the beloved of the Beloved,  
and in every moment,  
in every event of your life,  
the Beloved is whispering to you  
exactly what you need to hear and know.

Who can ever explain this miracle? It simply is.

Listen and you will discover it every passing moment.  
Listen, and your whole life will become a conversation  
in thought and act between you and the Beloved,  
directly, wordlessly, now and always.”<sup>7</sup>



After I received that love letter from the Stan Rogers Folk Festival, the relationship did not turn out quite as I'd hoped.

Like many romances, it didn't last long and it kind of fizzled.

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<sup>7</sup> Jalaluddin Rumi, quoted in Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee, *The Circle of Love* (Inverness, The Golden Sufi Center, 1999), 20.



But for all the ways it didn't measure up to my expectations or meet my desires...it contained a richness that I carry with me.

There was Richness in the fog...in the stony ground...  
in the soon-to-be-famous young man onstage with me...  
and in my teacher's hand.

There was Richness in my husband's annoyance...  
and my children's bewilderment.  
There was so much Richness in those saxophones.

Life's passion for itself—the Creative Process, capitalized—  
was everywhere if I could only but see it.

It was, and is, so much bigger than any particular career ambition  
I had at the time.

It encompasses my passion...and yet, is so much more.

Whatever desire you carry today,  
may your Call meet Response,  
as deep calls to deep.

May the space between our desires and our experience  
be filled with Loving Presence—

Renewing and sustaining  
the eternal song of life.

Amen.