"Love and Art"
Rev. Lynn Harrison
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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Song: Intertwined

Everything is intertwined
Everything that’s yours and mine
How completely we’re combined
Everything is intertwined

Everything is interlaced
Every line upon your face
Tied to every time and place
Everything is interlaced

Everything is intertwined
And you’re always on my mind
Always in my heart and mind
Everything is intertwined

Everything’s all tangled up
From the moment we wake up
Every hair on every head
Landing on the unmade bed

(Chorus)

Everything is, all at once,
Ending as it’s just begun
Every light is brightly lit
And every love is infinite
Sermon: “Love and Art”

I hardly ever remember exactly how a song starts... and I definitely forget most of the writing process once it's over.

But "Intertwined" started out with one simple idea: that my husband's and my material possessions...

...that is, our "stuff"...

...was completely intermingled after many years of living together.

Our lives had become utterly intertwined.

That's what I thought the song was going to be about.

But as soon as I started writing the song, it started to take on a life of its own... touching on other, larger ideas of interrelationship.

The circle of the song continued to widen, as it was being written and then afterward.

Today, as we begin a month of reflection on the theme of "love,"
And as we celebrate our inter-connections within the wider Canadian Unitarian movement and as an evolving congregation, it seemed a good place to start.

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So, what does a song, or any form of creative expression, have to do with "love?"

Well, in my experience, it has everything to do with it.

I believe that love is at the heart of all creative activity...and that it reflects a divine love

A "big creativity" if you will...

That links us all together and invites us into new forms of recreating love, all the time.

I believe that we can trust this creative process--which is always ongoing within us and within the world.

Indeed, I see the "interdependent web of all existence" which we affirm and promote in our 7th Unitarian Principle, as a living, breathing and ever-creative entity...

In which each of us is the weaver and the loom:

Continually being formed, and re-formed, in love.

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So, how does it all start? How does any song begin...or any relationship spark?
Well, this beginning point, I believe, has a lot to do with what we call "eros"--

The powerful lure of attraction that pulls us forward toward the object of our fascination.

It could be a combination of chords, or a number of musical notes that align in harmony:

Something that brings us pleasure and joy and that we want to experience again and again.

It might be the appeal of light falling on the curtain in your living room, that you wonder if you could sketch or paint...

Or an idea that hooks you and drives you toward your computer to explore an idea in words...

Or even a powerful attraction to a community, a cause, or project...something that compels you to get closer to it... so that you might make a difference.

Back in the nineteen-thirties, a woman named Brenda Ueland led a creative writing class at her local YWCA.

She saw loving attraction to life as the starting-point for all good writing...and she found examples of that loving attraction in other art forms as well.

She wrote:

“If you read the letters of the painter Van Gogh, you will see what his creative impulse was.

It was just this: he loved something--the sky, say."
He loved human beings. He wanted to show human beings how beautiful the sky was. So he painted it for them. And that was all there was to it...

The moment I read Van Gogh’s letter[s] I knew what art was…it was a feeling of love and enthusiasm for something, and in a direct, simple, passionate and true way, you try to show this beauty in things to others."¹

This spark of creative fascination can take many forms.

It is exciting and seductive and uplifting and life-giving.

It mirrors, in so many ways, the experience we call "falling in love"...the initial infatuation we feel for another...and the urge to get closer to that person.

As many wise teachers have pointed out, this initial phase of romance has a lot to do with projection:

That is, seeing the beauty or divinity within ourselves in the image of another person.

I think that extends to places and things as well. We recognize beauty because it's within us.

We find the divine all around us because we're made of it ourselves.

Then we're drawn toward it, to participate in it, so we bring more love into being.

Back in the 13th Century, the Sufi poet Rumi wrote a poem that's familiar to many of us:

"Today, like every other day, we wake up empty and frightened.

Do not go into the study and begin reading. Take up the dulcimer.

Let the beauty we love be what we do.

There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground."²

Back then, this Sufi mystic was saying what creativity teachers are still saying today:

The beauty we love can become "what we do" and who we are.

It can be a living engagement with love itself... which is to say, a spiritual or religious experience.

Something that re-connects us to the larger wholeness from which we all began, and to which we will all return.

"There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground..."

That is, hundreds of ways to honour and revere the sacred beauty of our life...

To love it...and to make it the centre of our living.

As we do this, choice by choice,  
word by word, action by action, colour by colour...

We may find that the beauty we love lifts us up  
and generates more loving energy...  
as it is connected to all living things.

The poet Maya Angelou once said,  
"You can’t use up creativity. The more you use it, the more you have."

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Recently I attended a talk by Cynthia Bourgeault.

She's an Episcopal priest and wisdom teacher who  
recommends getting in touch with our physical selves  
in order to reconnect with what she calls "mystical hope."

Connecting with our senses in the most simple of ways...  
for instance, in the talk I attended, she recommended a practice  
of simply turning one's attention away from worrying thoughts  
And focusing instead upon the marvel of one's own hand:  
the way it looks, feels and moves.

In this, she's aligned with Rumi, who suggested that instead of trying to  
solve our anxiety with our intellect,  
we might try "picking up the dulcimer."

I don't think he meant specifically that we needed to play a dulcimer or  
even a musical instrument...it could be a paintbrush or a pen or a carving  
knife or your dancing shoes or a bunch of fresh ingredients for a new  
recipe.

Rumi's point was that when we're feeling sad or anxious
--and who isn't these days?--
one promising route toward well-being is any physical act
that puts us in touch with our innate creativity.

He said: "Every day we wake up angry and frightened."
How many of us can relate to that? I certainly can.

A healing response,
that connects us to the essence of life
that is our spiritual center,
is to get in touch with physical sensation:
the touch, taste, smell, image and sound of life
in this present moment.

That's what creative activity does.

It brings us right into the present moment,
where we're listening to our instrument,
breathing and singing with our voice,
experimenting with colour and light,
looking at a tree and trying to draw it,
or playing with language
and delighting in the intertwining of words on a page.

When we do any of these, and far more,
we discover the beauty of the intertwined connections between all things,
and we affirm how we ourselves are deeply connected to the beauty to
which we’re so powerfully attracted.

The beauty we love becomes the beauty we do.

We find ourselves more deeply in relationship with Life...

And relationship has a way of carrying us through all kinds of difficulties.
Through our open-hearted engagement 
with the beauty we love...

We no longer feel separate from each other... 
we no longer feel separate from the world... 
we no longer feel divided within ourselves.

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Now, so far, I've been talking about the energizing and enjoyable aspects of creativity...the ways in which we feel joyfully connected to life and love...

Those times when creative effort 
results in new beauty and joy 
it becomes its own reward.

Yet we all know, it's not always so simple.

There are many times when we might 
"pick up the dulcimer" 
and find that a string is broken!

Or we don't have the skill to "do the beauty" 
that we long for...

Or, the work may flow well for awhile... 
but then, it hits a roadblock...an impasse.

We might encounter a challenge in life that 
stops us or shakes our confidence.

We may lose the thread of meaning upon 
which we thought we had a very firm grip.

Here's how the painter Emily Carr 
described such an experience...when she was
working on a painting of a landscape.

"I thought my mountain was coming this morning," she wrote.

"It was near to speaking when suddenly it shifted, sulked, and returned to smallness.

It has eluded me again and sits there, puny and dull.

Why?"

Yes. Why?

It is so true that our intentions do not always lead to the beauty or harmony we wish to create, whether in a work of art or in any relationship.

The writer Ursula K. LeGuin translated this line from the ancient text called the Tao te Ching:

"Everybody on earth knowing that beauty is beautiful makes ugliness.

Everybody knowing that goodness is good makes wickedness."

That is to say: failure and disappointment is as much a part of the fabric of life as is fulfillment and joy.

The temptation, of course, is to reject our shortcomings and failures... our shadow sides...and all the areas in which our relationships seem to fall short.

But the work of love requires a willingness to sit, too, with that "puny and dull mountain"... wherever it may arise.
When there’s a gap between our hopes and expectations and our reality (whether we’re in the middle of writing a song, sustaining a congregation, or just living)…what happens next?

Do we tense up, resist, justify our position, try to control…or do we look for some way to release…to invite in other sources of wisdom perhaps beyond our own current awareness?

In the poem "The Weaver and the Loom" that Margaret shared earlier, Danna Faulds writes:

"...Take a moment to just be, and in the being, know the whole of this creation, mystery and madness, passion and profanity.

Sit still and the thin line between sacred and profane simply fades away.

There is nothing then to reconcile.

All the disparate threads are woven on the loom of life.

Sit here for a bit and your unique place in the pattern becomes clear."³

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Sit here for a bit.

How difficult it is to do that...
to simply sit in the discomfort of the unknowing...
until our "unique place in the pattern becomes clear."

Coming to know our unique place has to do with being in relationship...

Relationship with ourselves...
with each other...
with Life Itself and
with any Higher Power of our understanding.

Sometimes, the Great Creative Mystery makes itself known in ways that are amazing to fathom.

Whenever I write a song...or for that matter, a sermon...there almost always comes a point when I feel completely baffled.

When I think...well this is a big mess and I don't know if I have the skill to complete it.

Fortunately, the Interdependently Creative Web of All Existence is there to catch me and to say "have patience...stay present...it'll come."

One day, I was working on a song about my father in the weeks just after he died.

The song was almost finished except for one particular line that I couldn't solve. Nothing worked.

And then out of the blue, a close friend of my dad's emailed me to say he was suddenly thinking about a phrase my dad used to say all the time.
The phrase fit perfectly into the song, and it rhymed, and, so, the lyric was finished.

Not as a result of my own individual efforts but because of some much larger, more mysterious and profound process taking place:

The intertwined creative connection between all things. The interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.

Now, that was a particularly rare and awe-inspiring occurrence...and it certainly doesn't happen all the time.

More often, the creative process unfolds like any relationship, either with others, or ourselves.

With bursts of desire, attraction and excitement...

Followed by times of frustration and lack of understanding.

Followed by times of simple day-by-day showing up, with an open hand and an open heart.

Through all these phases something new is born.

Something that reflects in microcosm the macrocosm of the related world...

Something that reflects something of our own unique perspective on the mystery of life...

Something that creates a little more of that beauty that we are drawn to again and again, the kind that Rumi wrote about more than fifteen hundred years ago.

In the end, we are all, each of us, great artists...
And our medium, today and always, is love.

Amen.