

## Liberating Love

Rev. Stephen Atkinson  
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To talk about liberating love we have to first figure out in what sense 'liberating' and in what sense 'love.'

Given my histrionic, narcissistic personality structure, my first understanding of love is, "Does anyone or no one love *me*?" In fact, an overwhelming question in my life has been, "Am I loveable at all?" From this vantage point, being liberated by love was at least a far-fetched concept. Until it wasn't anymore because the answers became "Yes!" Maybe more on that later, maybe not.

My earlier obsession was romantic, erotic love. I had taken for granted the kind of love I'd always been surrounded by; love from family, yes, but that kind of love is almost always a bit complicated. But being loved by friends is always reliable, solid and oh-so-comforting. Yet, still, I took it for granted until a realization came that is something like the poem that was the Call to Worship today. Let me read it again:

Oh, the comfort –

the inexpressible comfort  
of feeling safe with a person –  
having neither to weigh thoughts  
nor measure words,  
but pouring them all right out,  
just as they are,  
chaff and grain together;  
certain that a faithful hand will take  
and sift them,  
keep what is worth keeping,  
and then with the breath of kindness  
blow the rest away.

~ Dinah Maria Mulock Craik, adapted; *Lifting Our Voices*, #188

It's the realization that I am entirely accepted, acceptable; understood, understandable; enjoyed, enjoyable; and yes loved, loveable. No matter whether I put my foot in my mouth up to my ankles, which is not an uncommon feature of knowing me. No matter if, despite my conscious desire, I always seem to leave it up to them to keep in touch with me. No matter if I'm down, or grumpy, or torn up with heartache. My friends listen to it all, valuing the grain, the core, and letting the chaff, the temporary ripples of angst, blow away. With these people, I'm liberated: free to be the raw, unexpurgated me.

I hope that everyone has at least a period of time in our lives when this is true for each of us. And that, if it's something that changes or departs, we can hold onto and treasure it not just for what it was, but what it did for us, and can keep doing for us: to offer "inexpressible comfort." The sort of love that has so much *kindness* in it.

And don't we need more kindness these days? I looked up 'kindness' so we could be clear about it. Dictionary.com says it means the state of having "a good or benevolent disposition." That sounds a bit pale, doesn't it? To be kind can be gracious; welcoming; open-hearted; generous. It allows a story like the one Maya read today. I won't read it again but let's look at parts of it because small moments in the story go by so quickly.

Many of you are likely familiar with Naomi Shahib Nye, an Arab American writer often of distinctly spiritual material. Her father is a Palestinian who left there as a boy during the armed struggle arising upon the creation of the state of Israel; his family settled in the US. Her mother is American, and Naomi was actually born in 1952 in Ferguson, Missouri—yes, *that* Ferguson where there was so much violence, my goodness, all of 10 years ago! It was predominantly a white suburb of St. Louis when she was born. But I tell you this because, as the reading says, Shahib Nye is ethnically part Arab and speaks Arabic... and admits that she hesitates momentarily to respond to a request for an Arabic speaker. She says, "Well... one pauses these days." And she wrote that in 2008, so even then she'd

experienced enough anti-Arab prejudice that she paused. And then chose to respond.

Not to repeat the whole story, she doesn't just translate, she engages with the older woman beyond just reassuring her that she'll get to El Paso. They call her son, and then her other sons, and then Naomi's Arabic-speaking dad, and then Palestinian poets. Shahib Nye takes full-hearted and creative care of this woman, a stranger in a strange land. The previously-upset woman is now "laughing a lot" and shares some Arab sweets with everyone at the gate. The first kindness leads to the next. Soon, conversations between strangers are happening all around. Kindness breeding kindness. Don't you think people later go their separate ways feeling uplifted, reassured, even safer in the world on that day at least? From whatever inward-turned state of mind each was in, whatever self-containment or even isolation, they are liberated by kind love. Freed to be *with* each other as human beings. Free to allow otherness in, and to feel at home with it.

As Shahib Nye puts it, "... I looked around that gate of late and weary ones and thought, this is the world I want to live in. The shared world. Not a single person in that gate—once the crying of confusion stopped—seemed apprehensive about any other person. They took the cookies. I wanted to hug all those other women, too. This can still happen anywhere. Not everything is lost."

That was in 2008, and now one can understandably fear that almost everything *is* lost. I'll be honest about something: A sorrow is sent in this week that I just. Can. Not. Read. I'm given permission to adapt it somehow and I just cannot do *that* either. It's about the horrible situation in the Middle East. To cut to the chase, I feel I can't read something concise and very pointed because in my mind and heart there is so much more going on, so many more points to make, so much more to feel woeful about, and so much more danger around the world that isn't being taken into account, or not enough anyway. For me it would have to be given a larger context, maybe in a full service... and I don't want to do *that* either, certainly not as a guest preacher.

How can what we say and do have any effect on this polarization and demonization, this rejection of peace-making and communication, and this disregard of humanity that is upwelling from every direction at seemingly all levels in almost all places? Even, according to the Globe and Mail, among schoolchildren right here in Toronto.

Well, I say, and call me hopelessly naïve, I think we can say and do small but consistent things that bring love and kindness into our presentation to the world, especially as Unitarian Universalists. I've often noticed how rarely we speak about love; because it's not written into our Principles? Maybe we think it's held within words like dignity, acceptance and compassion. Maybe we're embarrassed to show our feelings. If we prefer, say, the goal of justice, let's recognize that too often justice is a single line going in only one direction.

We must not leave love out of the equation when we consider current events, let alone when we carry ourselves through our lives. We must liberate ourselves to bring love into our minds and hearts when we consider engaging with the big issues. We must remember that love is what liberates us to be fully human, and to see others as equally human. And clearly the dehumanization of others is a rampant plague of our times.

May we kindly and lovingly make ourselves an antidote to that plague.