



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

### Love Is The Master

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The following public statement may ring a bell:

"This is a very difficult time for us. We ask the media to respect our privacy. There are no words that can possibly express how we feel. We wish that there were so we can make you feel better. We don't understand why this happened. It may not make any difference. But we wish we could change the heinous events of Saturday. We care very deeply about the victims and their families. We are so very sorry for their loss. Thank you. The Loughner family."

It's a popular conclusion that the Tucson shootings of January 8 were a lethal result of mental illness combined with poor gun control. But if I did a sermon about gun control, I would be preaching to the choir, and that's boring. So I want to challenge us this morning by marrying two topics that are harder for religious liberals: mental illness and surrender.

At first they may seem unrelated, but whether we're talking about mental illness or mental distress, which we all face at one time or another, the first step in finding relief is *surrender*. In order to do something about our suffering, we have to surrender to the reality of it, and admit that it's happening. This can be so difficult in a culture that stigmatizes mental illness to the extent that ours does. It's hard enough to be physically ill in our society, but recognition and compassion is in much greater supply for physical illness than it is for mental illness.

When it comes to mental illness, there are two parties who need to surrender: the ones who suffer, and the loved ones who suffer from their loved one suffering. These days it seems the most common forms of mental illness are depression, bi-polar disorder, anxiety, alcohol abuse and addiction, and personality disorders. I'd like to see a show of hands – how many of us suffer with a mental disorder of some kind, or love someone who does?

Thank you. It took courage to raise your hand, and those of you who couldn't find that courage, you have my compassion. I have no way of knowing if this is true, but maybe it's akin to how the Loughner parents feel, Amy and Randy. This line of their statement haunts me: "We don't understand why this happened." And their next line breaks my heart: "It may not make any difference." Maybe they're referring to what they say next, to how they wish they could change what happened, but I wonder if what they're actually saying is that they do have an inkling of why it happened, and felt they were powerless to do anything about it.

Powerlessness is the terrifying reality of mental illness, and yet, it is only through acknowledging that powerlessness head-on that at last we find some power in the situation. Surrender works through paradox: by surrendering to our powerlessness, we are empowered. We are empowered to seek help, and then, usually with a lot of trial and error and hard work, if we are fortunate, we discover the solutions that work. It's not that different from how physically ill people experience the journey of treatment, and getting better.

We'll never know if Amy and Randy could have prevented their son's actions with greater psychological intervention; it appears they did very little. And while it's risky to infer blame, I want to testify that I have seen this happen: I have seen parents deny their child's mental dysfunction or suffering to the point that there is never a diagnosis, let alone treatment, and tragically, the life ends prematurely, in some form of self-destruction. And, I have seen parents do *everything possible* to get the best help available, and their child's life still ends prematurely in tragedy. So even if Amy and Randy had done everything possible at every opportunity, all their efforts may still have been for naught. If that doesn't describe powerlessness, I don't know what does.

The key issue here is social stigma around mental illness – the shame of it that fuels denial. Because studies show that mental illness is undeniably on the rise, I think it's starting to get talked about more. Perhaps this

offers hope: for both we who suffer ourselves, and those who love people who struggle with depression, or perhaps alcoholism, but refuse to do anything about it. Perhaps we are coming closer to a day when it is easier to see alternatives to quiet desperation. There are encouraging new laws afoot that ensure equal health coverage for physical and mental ailments.

The words 'mental and physical' refer to the mind and the body. What's missing here is the heart, so let us return to the spiritual law of surrender, which has everything to do with our hearts. Religious liberals tend to wrinkle their nose at surrender, because a lot of us tend to live in our heads more than our hearts – for this reason, mental illness is perhaps even harder for religious liberals to reckon with, because beginning with our earliest American roots, we take great pride in our self-reliance and mental strength. The Unitarians of the early 19th century didn't merely take issue with the trinity, their main theological deviance was to say that they had faith in their own moral agency - in other words, that an individual was born with the capacity to determine right from wrong, and so could live a good and righteous life, with or without dogma, Jesus, the holy spirit, or any of that stuff. Their new theology was self-sufficiency distilled, and we are still influenced by this tradition today. We are suspect of anything that would get in the way of a life well lived. Social injustice and oppression we make allowance for, but mental illness? Buck up! The typical response to mental and emotional struggle that comes to mind is, 'you're not trying hard enough!'

So what's our answer to when all trying has failed? Rather than 'try some more', our answer needs to be, 'then, surrender.' Maybe it's because I was raised UU that I feel comfortable pointing out the ways that religious liberals miss out on the more conventional spiritual concepts, but surrender is definitely one of them. While it may have been Emerson who set us on the path of rigorous self-reliance, it was his contemporary Thoreau who pointed out that "most men live lives of quiet desperation."

When we rely on self-sufficiency alone, we deny ourselves a higher wisdom. What's most important about surrender is that it is the means to opening ourselves to the higher knowledge of love and compassion. You've heard a lot of Rumi today because Sufism (and I would add, Christianity at its best), says we open ourselves to wisdom by surrendering to God, who gives us the understanding and strength to act on love and compassion. But just like in the poem, *Love is the Master*, the way of surrender and love is no easy street! "In the hand of Love I am like a cat in a sack; Sometimes love hoists me in the air, Sometimes love flings me in the air, Love swings me round and round His head; I have no peace, in this world or any other"! Similar to this, the Bells played one of the most beautiful songs in the world about love, *The Rose*:

"Some say love it is a river that drowns the tender reed. Some say love it is a razor that leaves your soul to bleed . . . It's the heart afraid of breaking that never learns to dance. It's the dream afraid of waking that never takes the chance. It's the one who won't be taken who cannot seem to give and the soul afraid of dying that never learns to live."

To me those are poetically described examples of how mental illness can rob us of genuine contentment in life, and yet, despite all this, with surrender and perseverance, love can become a rose. But that even when love becomes something beautiful, it's fragile, it's fleeting, and it takes great nurturing to protect it. John Lennon agrees, "love is a flower," he sings in *Mind Games*, "you gotta let it grow!"

As I was writing this sermon, the cynic in me interjected, 'this is starting to get cheesy, waxing about love and flowers!' But the point I'm trying to make is that the very heart of spirituality is that simple: while it's not easy to do, we surrender so we can know what it is to love. One of my favorite lines by musician Conor Oberst is this: "We have a problem with no solution, but to love, and be loved."

Lennon's song *Mind Games* has entranced me of late. Of course I've assigned my own meaning to that song, probably far and away from whatever meaning Lennon intended when he wrote it. I've noticed sermons can be like that! Depending on what our needs are on a given Sunday, sometimes we hear what we need to hear, regardless of the intentions of the preacher. After some research, I discovered Lennon named that song after a book he especially liked that year, *Mind Games*, by Jean Huston. So perhaps he

was coming from some kind of new age point of view, trying to master his 'inner space.' Perhaps he was making fun of it. We know that Lennon was an atheist who believed in very little, and that he often suffered from depression.

My take on the meaning of Mind Games is this: humanity attempts to address human suffering in myriad ways, especially through religion: he offers us all these spiritual images, 'chanting mantras . . . the search for the grail . . . doing the ritual dance in the sun . . . putting their soul power to the karmic wheel' – and we make it a complicated affair, with these elaborate rituals and spiritual practices and belief systems. But then Lennon just cuts through the chase, and says, look the answer is simple, it's about love and surrender, it's about saying yes by letting go. What are we letting go of? We're letting go of our false notions of self-sufficiency, we're letting go of the mind games that keep us isolated and alone.

The other paradox in mental illness and surrender is that we recognize where our self-reliance falls short, in order to return to a self-reliance that is authentic and workable. Healthy self-reliance is one of balance, one that acknowledges how we function interdependently as an individual and in relationship with others. It's the ability to self-monitor when we need more support and be accountable to that need.

I mentioned an element of Sufism's take on surrender, and I want to offer another faith tradition's take, one that isn't so theistic.

Buddhism says we access a higher wisdom by living in the moment, by surrendering to the present moment. If we can do this, we are much better equipped to see what is needed around us *now*, and have a more compassionate and helpful response. Much of the stigma that surrounds mental illness lives in the past and the future – we get stuck in judging ourselves and judging others about what *ought* to be the case, what people ought to be able to do. Past and future are the realms of the 'shoulds' and the judging. Basically, we surrender our notion of 'this is how it should be', and wake up to reality, and experience the present moment.\* The Buddhists say over and over, the present moment is all we really have, in all its glorious uncertainty, pain, and fear. But again, if we acknowledge discomfort head-on, and don't run away, we can do something about it.

Pema Chodron, the American Buddhist nun and author of When Things Fall Apart, says this:

"No one ever tells us to stop running away from fear. We are very rarely told to move closer, to just be there, to become familiar with fear . . . the advice we usually get is to sweeten it up, smooth it over, take a pill, or distract ourselves, but by all means make it go away. We don't need that kind of encouragement, because dissociating from fear is what we do naturally . . . We feel it coming and we check out. It's good to know we do that – not as a way to beat ourselves up, but as a way to develop unconditional compassion. The most heartbreaking thing of all," she says, "it how we cheat ourselves of the present moment."

Chodron's teacher, the Venerable Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, sums it up like this: "Chaos should be regarded as extremely good news."

It's strange but it's true: chaos leads to surrender, and surrender leads to love and compassion. May each of us make our way to this compassion, beginning with compassion for ourselves. Learning to love ourselves unconditionally is one of the first lessons of surrender. I am one of the proud, and not one of the few, who *navigate* the wild and wooly waters of depression. I'm proud of how I work on honing my navigation skills. I'm in a unique position to do so, because I'm a minister. Being a wounded healer is one of the badges of pride we can choose to wear, because it helps us do our jobs better. But I want to acknowledge all the quiet desperation out there. By economic necessity, we live in a tough world, where we have to be silent. And it's only getting tougher.

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\* Special thanks to Nancy Holland, who helped me develop some of these ideas.

So let us surrender. Love is the master. Let love teach our heart how to dance, and how to wake up. Let love teach us to give, and not fear dying so we can live. Love is the master – if we surrender.