

## “For Better or For Worse”

**The Rev. Laura Horton-Ludwig, Minister**  
First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton  
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Years ago I went to the wedding of two dear friends of mine.  
They were and are a wonderful couple, devoted to one another.  
Their wedding service was in the back yard of her parents' home  
right on the coast of Rhode Island.  
We sat on the green grass and faced the Atlantic Ocean  
as they said their vows to one another.  
They looked into each other's eyes  
as they promised to take one another,  
no matter what the future held,  
and as I watched I started crying and I couldn't stop.  
I didn't know what was wrong with me.  
I've always been someone who cries easily,  
but this was beyond a few happy wedding sniffles.  
I was sobbing, and I had no idea why.  
A few days after the wedding, I finally understood,  
when my friend told me he had been diagnosed with cancer  
just days before the wedding.  
They didn't tell most people until afterwards,  
but somehow it was in the air that day.

Talk about for better or for worse, in sickness and in health.  
Never have those words been more alive for me  
than in that moment of watching two people  
promise themselves to one another in the face of a future  
that was in danger of being cut terrifyingly short.  
I'm very glad to say my friend made a full recovery,  
and today the two of them are doing great.  
But on that day there was no guarantee.  
There was only love, and hope.

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And so it is with all of us, really,  
all of us who dare to love another human being.  
Because all of us, if we are awake, know all too well  
that life is not always going to give us what we want.  
We know that nothing is certain in this life.  
The future is hidden from our eyes.  
Illness and injury and death can come to us at any time.  
Things we thought were stable and certain and sure  
can come crashing down around our heads.

And yet we dare to love!  
We don't spend our lives hunkered down in a corner,  
arms covering our head, fearing the worst at every moment.  
There's something within us that will not let us hide ourselves away,  
something that wells up and demands that we *live* while we are here,  
calls us to take the terrible, wonderful risk  
of loving another person in another body,  
with another heart that is sure to stop beating one day,  
*but not today*, we hope, we hope,  
and even so, it doesn't matter—we still have to love  
though we know it's going to bring us pain one day.  
Though on that faraway distant day—  
*may it be far away*, we pray, we pray—  
it may drop us to our knees in agony,  
still we have to love.  
It's what we were born to do.

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Now, I have to say, the kind of love that I'm trying to speak of today  
is not romantic love, necessarily, though often it's born out of that.  
The love that I want to praise today

is not the wild excitement of falling in love,  
romantic whirlwinds, getting swept off your feet—  
though that is a beautiful and holy thing  
and I wish it for everyone here at *least* once in your lives!

The love that is on my mind and heart today is a quieter love,  
love that has had time to settle and deepen,  
love that persists, love that commits,  
an active, hard-working love that hangs in there  
and honors promises,  
a love that knows giving and receiving have to be in balance,  
a love that asks, “How can I serve?” just as often as it asks,  
“How can I get what *I* need?”—  
a love that has been tested and weathered,  
love that has come to know the meaning of  
“for better or for worse” and still sings out: *yes*.

True lovers and spouses know this love for one another, we hope,  
but not only them. True friends know it too.  
Many of us have found it  
with the beloved animals we let into our lives.  
Parents know this kind of love for their children, we hope.  
Children come to know this love for their parents, we hope,  
though I’m sorry to say it may be long after they’ve left home!  
Because this kind of love takes practice.  
It’s a skill we have to learn.  
Anyone can feel that tug of the heart,  
the mysterious attraction that draws us one to another.  
But mature love, love that seeks to give as well as receive,  
love that knows how to endure through good and bad—  
this is something we all have to learn by doing.

For me, the reading we shared today by Wendell Berry  
has been a touchstone as I walk this path right along with all of you.  
He’s speaking of marriage, but I think his words speak just as deeply

about what happens in any relationship that really matters.  
He tells us, when we commit to a relationship,

in joining ourselves to one another  
we join ourselves to the unknown.

We can join one another only by joining the unknown....<sup>1</sup>

And isn't that the truth?

None of us know what the future is going to bring.

But this is the life we've been born into.

This is how it is.

I remember when my husband John and I got engaged.

He and I had been together for about four years.

We met my first year of seminary,

and he hung in there with me all through those years of school

and a year of unsuccessful job-hunting before we finally realized

we had to be open to leaving our home in Chicago

if I was going to be able to find a job.

This was a really huge decision for us.

And right in the middle of this second year of job-hunting,

exactly at the moment when we had no idea

where we were going to be next year,

John asked me to marry him.

I can't tell you how meaningful, how deeply touching it was to me

that he was willing to commit to our relationship

at the moment of the greatest uncertainty

we had ever experienced together.

I'm not telling you this because I want to brag.

On the contrary:

we are *all* called to take a leap of faith when we commit ourselves.

There's no other way. We have to,

because no one knows what's coming, ever, not really.

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<sup>1</sup> This and all subsequent quotations are from Wendell Berry, "Poetry and Marriage."

*Everyone* who is paying attention at all to all the uncertainty of life and still dares to commit themselves wholeheartedly to another person—I say *everyone* who dares to really love is making a heroic leap of faith—  
faith in our loved ones, faith in life itself.  
And that faith is going to be tested, time and time again,  
in ways both small and great.

Wendell Berry reminds us:

Because the condition of marriage is worldly  
and its meaning communal,  
no one party to it can be solely in charge.  
What you alone think it ought to be, it is not going to be.  
Where you alone think you want it to go, it is not going to go.

Let me ask you to pause for a moment  
and call to mind your closest relationships,  
and think about whether Berry's words feel true to you:  
*What you alone think it ought to be, it is not going to be.*  
*Where you alone think you want it to go, it is not going to go.*

Those words sure feel true to me.  
I'm thinking of dear friends who have gone through divorce  
and how painful it was to realize  
that where they alone wished their marriage would go,  
it was not going to go.

I want to say something else important too. In our reading,  
Wendell Berry says we have to give ourselves unconditionally,  
we have to be ready to hang in there whatever comes.  
And mostly I think he's right.  
But in one way I think he's very wrong.  
I do not hold sacred any vow  
when one party abuses the other.

If someone is hitting you or abusing you in any way,  
with words or actions,  
you are *not* called to hang in there and take the abuse.  
I hope you will protect yourself and get out.  
That's the one condition I put on unconditional love.  
There has to be that ground of safety and a basic level of respect.  
Nobody gets to abuse anyone else. That's my bottom line.

But when that ground of safety is there,  
when there is a basic level of love and respect,  
those words of Berry's take on a life-giving meaning:  
*What you alone think it ought to be, it is not going to be.*  
*Where you alone think you want it to go, it is not going to go.*

Even those relationships that last a lifetime  
are going to have to work out the stresses and strains  
that are inevitable whenever people try to make a life together.  
I don't think it's any accident  
that the longest-running off-Broadway musical in New York City  
is called "I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change"!  
Has anyone here ever gotten even just a little bit frustrated  
that someone you love doesn't want what you want?  
Has anyone here ever wished someone you love  
could just borrow your brain for a few hours  
so they could learn to see things the way you do?  
I'm pretty sure everyone here is no stranger to those feelings  
of confusion, frustration, irritation, even disappointment.  
But those feelings are how we learn.  
They're how we grow.

I'm thinking also of a different kind of love relationship—  
the way we fall in love with a church or a religious community.  
Some of us have grown up in the church  
where we have chosen to be today.  
But others find it as adults,

and so very often there are those same feelings of falling in love, feeling miraculously understood, feeling at home in a deep way, which are so wonderful and precious. That is a beautiful time in our relationship with a faith community. *And*, just as in any serious relationship, we don't get to stay there forever. If we decide to stick around with any degree of seriousness, we eventually find out that the church isn't perfect, shocking as that may seem! We go through that disillusionment of realizing the church is made up of human beings too, people who don't always see things as we do, people who say and do things we don't understand, even things we find hurtful.

Again I want to say, there are some faith communities that are abusive, and no one should ever feel like they have to suffer and take that. Absolutely not. But even the healthiest church is full of people who *aren't* going to agree, who aren't going to want the same things all the time, and I think we can see even more clearly when we look at our churches, this is a *good* thing. It teaches us that our perspective is just that—one perspective. It teaches us that the many who are gathered have more wisdom than any one of us alone. It invites us to trust that something good will come out of this bewildering, challenging mixture of human beings, seeking to love one another as best we can.

Wendell Berry continues:

The Zen student, the poet, the husband, the wife—none knows with certainty what he or she is staying for, but all know the

likelihood that they will be staying “awhile”: to find out what they are staying for. And it is the faith of all of these disciplines that they will not stay to find that they should not have stayed.

That faith has nothing to do with what is usually called optimism. As the traditional marriage ceremony insists, not everything that we stay to find out will make us happy. The faith, rather, is that by staying, and only by staying, we will learn something of the truth, that the truth is good to know, and that it is always both different and larger than we thought.

When we commit to staying for better or for worse,  
truth is revealed, in time.

I’m reminded of the words of affirmation we speak here every week:

*Love is the doctrine of this church.*

*The quest for truth is its sacrament.*

As I think on these familiar words  
in the light of Wendell Berry’s words,  
I hear them in a new way.

I’ve always heard them as two separate things.

Yes, we believe in love. We also believe in truth. Separate things.

But, today, I’m coming to realize that love and truth  
are intimately connected.

They cannot be pursued in isolation.

Love gives us the courage to stay with the truth.

Practicing active love, hanging in there for better or for worse,  
cannot help but teach us truths we need to learn.

We cannot help but learn that we alone are not all-wise.

Our way is not always the best way.

Our truth is not the only truth.

We learn to challenge and gently resist our selfishness,  
our wanting things the way *we* want them,  
rather than what’s best for the whole.

At the same time we learn to stand up for what's really important.  
To be able to live with another person with integrity,  
we also learn how to gently insist on what we need,  
what we know to be true,  
what we know to be right.

And gradually we learn to love far more deeply than we did at first.  
That first flush of romantic love is all about,  
“Wow, I’ve found someone who meets *my* needs  
and makes *me* feel good!”  
But, as our love deepens, more and more  
we are given the precious chance to practice  
boundless love for the other person as they are,  
foibles and failures and faults and all—  
not for what they can do for us or how they make us feel,  
but for themselves alone.  
We learn to love as we all long to be loved,  
as our ancestors in faith promised us we have always been loved,  
if we could only see it.

And so our love becomes a living laboratory that teaches us,  
in the words of the Buddhist scriptures,  
boundless love for all the world.<sup>2</sup>  
As we practice love deeply,  
may we grow into harmony with the truth and with all things.  
In deeply loving one person,  
may we learn to love all people and all things.  
May compassion infuse our every breath,  
shaping us into the people we are meant to be.

Happy Valentine’s Day!  
So may it be.  
Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Khuddaka Patha, *Fifth Nikaya*, quoted in *Singing the Living Tradition* #598.