

Love, Fierce and Tender
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February 14, 2021
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There is an alchemy in *Love Me Tender* – especially when Elvis sings it – that captures an ideal of love that (to quote the song itself) “makes my life complete;” love that fulfills all my dreams; love that lasts and that carries us “through all the years ‘til the end of time.” Growing up in middle class White America, I know this ideal; I was steeped in it from the time I was old enough to read poetry and romance, to listen to popular music and watch popular movies. In truth, that ideal of love that “longs to quiet every fear, and seeks to set things right; that “comes to heal the broken heart and ease the troubled mind;” that “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” – is older than the Bible, older yet than Greek mythology.

From the ancient Greeks, we get the story of Eros – reinterpreted by the Romans as Cupid – the God of love (and lust, and sex – but that is an entirely different sermon!). And Cupid is – to this very day – a part of the mythology of love, when we see hearts pierced by Cupid’s arrows on sentimental Valentine cards (and emojis!)

Hearts pierced by Cupid’s arrows because love pierces the heart – sometimes to wound it, sometimes to break it, sometimes to break it open, always to change it irrevocably. Because when love enters our hearts, we are transformed - for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer – from a solitary person living only for ourselves into a person who is connected to another – or to others – in relationship.

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In truth, few if any human beings live as solitary people, caring only for themselves. For love is so much larger than romantic love, and love is the foundation of human health and well-being. Love is wide enough to include parents and children; siblings and extended family; friends and communities; strangers and even enemies – if we would heed the teachings of Jesus.

Love is deep enough to fathom the experience of *being* loved: unconditionally as a child may be loved by a parent, and a parent by a child; tenderly as Elvis would be loved by his darling; patiently as the hymnodist and the psalmist and St. Paul would portray a love that waits for us to hear, to open and invite.

Love is demanding enough to include the experience of *loving*: of fulfilling all dreams, enduring all things; healing and easing and embodying that eternal patience; opening our hearts to connect to another, to some others, in a way that parents sometimes describe as “forever [having] your heart go walking around outside your body; [<https://www.goodnet.org/articles/9-quotes-about-what-means-to-be-parent>]; that writer and educator Parker Palmer experiences as “transform[ing] my clenched fist of a heart into an open hand.” [*On the Brink of Everything*, p. 162.]

Love is life-giving enough to hold open space for growth. The poet Rainer Maria Rilke, in a letter to a young poet, wrote, “... love is difficult. For one human being to love another human being: that is perhaps the most difficult task that has been entrusted to us, the ultimate task, the final test and proof,

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the work for which all other work is merely preparation.” The challenge, Rilke explained, is not to lose oneself in the other, or in the relationship, but rather to learn a love that holds and challenges and ultimately fulfills both lover and beloved; in Rilke’s words, “the love that consists in this: that two solitudes protect and border and greet each other.”

[<https://www.carrothers.com/rilke7.htm>].

Love is tender. Love connects one with another, and enlarges both.

But never forget that love is fierce. Love thwarted or love disappointed can wound us like an arrow through the heart; can leave us broken or aching or emptied out or looking for love in all the wrong places. A loved one deployed away from us, a beloved child growing up and going off to school or out into the world, a parent or a spouse disappearing into dementia or into illness can hurt so fiercely – for each takes with them some of *our* memories, *our* hopes, *our* dreams, *our* identity, *our* life, woven through as it is with the presence of the beloved. A loved one in danger can arouse in us a fierceness we never knew we had, as we wade into conflict, into confrontation, into intervention, into fire or flood, into peril that threatens our own lives to protect or defend, to rescue or to advocate. Some of us who are parents have spent – are spending, will spend – sleepless nights and fearful hours worrying, fiercely praying, practicing tough love, holding the line – fiercely, in the face of every tender instinct – for our children, that they will be safe, grow wise and kind and compassionate, live courageously, know truth and joy and resilience. Some who have watched loved ones drawn into despair

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or addiction or mental illness; into risk-taking or defiance, into law-breaking or into violence know love braided inextricably with fear, fierce in its intensity. Love is fierce, and fierce love makes us fierce, too.

I have recently learned of the work of Valarie Kaur. She is an American activist, documentary film maker, lawyer, educator, and faith leader. Today is her 40th birthday. She is the founder and director of the Revolutionary Love Project, a non-profit that produces tools, curricula and mass mobilizations aimed at reclaiming love as a force for justice.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Valarie_Kaur]. (A footnote: The Unitarian Universalist Association and the Unitarian Universalist College of Social Justice, Side With Love and Repairers of the Breach are among more than 50 partners with the Revolutionary Love Project in this work).

“Love,” says Valarie Kaur, “is more than a rush of feeling that happens to us if we are lucky. Love is sweet labor: fierce, bloody, imperfect, life-giving. A choice we make over and over again. ... Revolutionary love is the choice to enter into labor – for others, who do not look like us. For our opponents, who hurt us. And for ourselves.”

In a powerful and moving TED Talk, Valarie Kaur drew me into her experience as the child of an Indian Sikh family who faced rejection and ridicule in her elementary school in California, in a community where her family has farmed since 1913. She drew me into her response to the attacks of 9-11, and soon after when a family friend was the first person killed in a hate crime after the attacks – a turban-wearing Sikh, perceived as an Arab

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Muslim, shot in retaliation for the attacks. She drew me into her transformation as a mother who labored to bring new life – her son – into the world. She drew me into her multi-dimensional view of love in a world that demands more than tenderness; love that is sweet and all-embracing labor, chosen freely and intentionally, over and over again.

I commend to you that TED talk, and Valarie Kaur's invitation to rise up in Revolutionary Love: love for all who are in harm's way; love even for our opponents; love for ourselves. Love that knows, in Valarie Kaur's words, that "Our humanity binds us together, and we vow to fight for a world where all of us can flourish." Love that undertakes – not fearlessly but courageously, even in the face of fear, to "challenge our opponents through the ethic of love." Love that pledges, "We will protect our capacity for joy. We will rise and dance. We will honor our ancestors whose bodies, breath, and blood call us to a life of courage. In their name, we choose to see this darkness not as the darkness of the tomb – but of the womb. We will breathe and push through the pain of this era to birth a new future."

[\[https://revolutionaryloveproject.com/\]](https://revolutionaryloveproject.com/)

Love is tender, and it makes us tender. Love is fierce, and it makes us fierce. Love moves us to comfort and to courage, to compassion and to action. Love can change the world and can change us – in ways small and intimate, in ways large and revolutionary. Love calls nurses and doctors in to work – in COVID wards, in cancer wards, in trauma bays and emergency rooms – work that places *their* lives at risk to safeguard the lives of others.

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Love calls first responders and military personnel to move *in* to danger, to protect and defend people and places and values that transcend their own local, personal, immediate interests. Love calls organizers and advocates, activists and policy makers into speaking up and speaking out for those who are disempowered, disenfranchised, devalued and marginalized. Love works to make connections when connections have been broken, to build community when community has been torn asunder, to mitigate harm, to cultivate self-respect, to confer dignity. Love that is fierce, bloody, imperfect, life-giving.

Love, because we are human, may be the only thing we can ever know:
“now and forever / The only answer to everything / And everyone / In every moment.” [from this morning’s chalice lighting:

<https://www.uua.org/worship/words/chalice-lighting/sacred-unknowing>].

Let love touch your heart fiercely, tenderly. Our music for meditation invokes our loved ones and our ancestors, whose bodies, breath, and blood call us to a life of courage. “*All My Memories of Love*” sets poetry of Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, translated into English by UU Rev. Mark Belletini, to a French Plainsong melody. It is sung here by the chancel choir of the First Unitarian Church of Oakland, Ca. *All My Memories of Love...*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O93JzWnVvqA>

Tom shares screen

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May it be so.