

2 19 23—Liberating Love UUFM—Rev. Rita Capezzi

Maybe you, too, remember that song from the 80s, when Tina Turner made a solo comeback after the Ike & Tina years, Ike a physical abuser. I am sorry to be making obscure cultural reference for those of you born after 1984. Tina's "What's Love Got to Do with It" was a "rest song," a slow song at all our dance parties back in the day. Tina famously sang "What's love but a second-hand emotion?" I tell you, I believed those words, I believed those words for a long time. I believed love was a second-hand emotion, restricted as my thinking was within the framework of heterosexual ROMANCE writ large. And romance, while pleasant enough, was rarely a sustaining love within the challenges of typical family life—with workloads and car repairs and leaking ceilings, with student loan payments and family drama and illness and fill-in-the-blank, you-all know what you have handled in your adult lives. I had a pinched understanding of love back then, for lots of reasons, and it is with deep gratitude, with profound joy that I have moved away from a notion of love as sad and bitter as the one Tina sings. But, oh the broken-heartedness, the pain. That rings true.

So, what is the love that is liberating? What is the Love loves us into liberation? Metaphorically, how can we give love and how can we receive love so that we unleash, without fear, the mermaid in all of us, that tender creature who longs to simply be and to be cared for just as they are? How can we put our own hearts in that holy place, that path through which we might feel the amazing grace of expansive and inclusive love, especially in a world and at a time powerfully urging us to belittle each other and to hate each other?

I once taught a course in comedy, and so I know well that what one person finds funny another will not. And then there is that whole business of "funny ha ha" and "funny strange." With that caveat, I offer you this joke, as it were, which a colleague posted on Facebook: "A priest, a minister, and a transgender woman were standing at the pearly gate in front of St. Peter. First the minister spoke up. 'I fed the hungry, clothed the poor, and spread the word of God throughout the land.' St. Peter said unto him 'you have done well on earth, but you have sinned against your [siblings]. You shall spend the next 7 years in purgatory to atone for those sins you did commit, then you shall enter heaven.'

"The priest spoke next. 'I have done as my brother the minister has, and I have lived a life of sacrifice, humility and chastity. I have served only God, kept only God's laws and I offer my unworthiness to God now.' St. Peter reviewed his notes and spoke unto the priest. 'You have indeed lived a pious life and yet you too, have sinned. You shall spend one year in purgatory to atone for your sins.'

"Next St. Peter turned to the transgender woman and spoke softly, 'Go in my dear, they are waiting for you.' The minister and the priest both protested to St. Peter. 'Why in all our piety have we been condemned to purgatory when that creature against whom we preached and whom we chastised, merely passes into heaven?' St. Peter simply glared at the two and said, 'Boys, thanks to you and the people like you, she has already been through hell.'"

I am going to say this story falls into the “Funny strange category.” Surely, this is a Catholic joke, as Protestants don’t typically hold with purgatory, and the priest was let off with a lighter sentence. And surely, we know that while all religious denominations do good in the world, they have certainly done harm as well. And rejecting queer people is one of those harms. But lest we Unitarian Universalists get on a high horse, let’s consider how we might inadvertently condemn queerness, how we might remain closed to queer love, how our love might be merely second-hand in this regard, how we might learn a more expansive love, a liberating love.

We watch now five minutes of a 17-minute TedWoman Talk presented in 2016 by Tiq Milan and Kim Katrin Milan:

https://www.ted.com/talks/tiq_milan_and_kim_katrin_milan_a_queer_vision_of_love_and_marriage?language=en

I hope you heard the definition Kim gave of “queer” using the words of Ottawa-based poet Brandon Wint: “Not queer like gay. Queer like escaping definition. Queer like some sort of fluidity and limitlessness at once. Queer like a freedom too strange to be conquered. Queer like the fearlessness to imagine what love can look like . . . and pursue it.” I love this definition of “queer” as liberation from a set definition. I understand this definition of “queer,” to take something familiar and turn it on its head, to take something one might take for granted and instead ask the why of it? Why do we put mustard on hot dogs? Why do we put unpackaged fresh vegetables into plastic bags and then into a plastic shopping bag? Why do we accept police violence as an act of “protecting and serving”? Why would we think only a man and a woman should legally wed? Why might love be greater than romance and most-assuredly more than second-hand?

And in the video, Kim asks us to question, to “queer,” of all things, the Golden Rule. Wow, that is a big ask. Is it not inherently good to treat others as we ourselves want to be treated? The Golden Rule appears in every major world religion, and surely that should make it self-evidently good. I have always thought so. Yet Kim has asked me to question that thought, that assumption, because the Golden Rule assumes that the way I want to be treated is the standard for all other people. That is a much bigger assumption than I had assumed. And it is bigger than me. It is an expression not uniquely my own but rather mindlessly absorbed as part of the cultural milieu I, and all of us, simply live within. But unquestioned adherence to ideals and mores leaves out listening to the desires of others. It leaves out curiosity about others. And it leads to a false “sameness” which can bleach out any other possibilities, making those other possibilities weird or wrong or sinful and even worthy of torment and death, given a suitably virulent context. In a country that thinks women should not drive, for example, publicly stoning a woman to death for doing so makes perfect sense. So does killing a man for loving other men, or killing a person for wearing a dress if the birth certificate says “male,” if we think only females should wear dresses. And I am not talking about Iran here anymore.

Rather than treat people the way we want to be treated, Kim and Tiq urge us to treat people the way those people want to be treated. And what, then, is required of me? Well, I have to ask them. I have to be compassionately curious about others. I have to be kind and open about what they will tell me. I have

to withhold judgement and resist feeling that what one person needs is a threat to what I need. And thus, we learn that queering the male-female binary is a reminder that the binary is a cultural construct, not an essential truth of human experience. The binary is one way to be and to love in this world, not the only way, not the norm naturally. When we are thus liberated from binary thinking, creativity is released. We know, maybe for the first time, that if we humans invented these frames, we can re-invent them and invent new ways. Queer ways of being and loving need not invalidate other people's experience. Rather, they enable more love, new ways more inclusive and less violent and anxious and unjust.

As Kim says, "the gift of queerness is options." Tiq says queerness offers "a future of multiplicity," "a kaleidoscope of possibility" for all of us, liberating for all of us. Queering something means to take a standard view of something and ask why we think it has to be that way. Queering is to interrogate the standard, in the name of hope, for the purpose of hoping that there is some way to open a new way of believing and of living and of loving. "Queering" means to make room for what already is, to allow ways of being and loving out into the open, so that we don't harm ourselves and each other anymore. "Queering" asks us to stop feeling so absolutely certain of and righteous about viewpoints we have not questioned, so that we might stop, for instance, putting a transgender woman through hell. And queering the binary of who can love whom means that more of us belong in the circle of what love is, expanding and deepening love for all of us.

Now, Tiq and Kim were married for five years and had a daughter together. And then they got a divorce and went through all of the things that divorced people of any gender do—child support, visitation, splitting assets. And they navigated family and friends and business arrangements. Just like any divorcing couple of any gender. And, their divorce does not invalidate their claims to love and be loved in the ways they need. If anything, their divorce shows how any kind of love between people can fall short. And how we must always reach for the larger, the encompassing love, the love that holds us in our pain and at our worst. The Love that sets us free. "To love a person is to learn the song /That is in their heart, And to sing it to them/ When they have forgotten." Queer people need that. Divorcing people need that. All people need that love—the love that sees us and knows us and reminds us of who we are and cares for us just as we are. This kind of love is very simple. Simply love, regardless of differences. Simply love, learning with open-hearted curiosity that there is more love and more ways of loving than we might have imagined through the lens of our own life experiences. Let us open ourselves to the call of Love to simply love, because living is a challenge for all of us, and may we be preserved from judging another's life and loving merely by the shape of our own. Love is simple, yes, it is. "Love is simple, but not easy."

Harsh and divisive voices in the wide world will tell us that somebody is not beautiful, somebody is not whole, somebody's way of loving is perverse or ugly. Harsh and divisive voices claim that we are not beautiful and whole, that our love is wrong. These voices are wrong, and they cause great harm. Harsh and divisive voices are calling, so let us instead live within, and let us call out proudly and loudly to, our profound affirmation of Love as a saving process, an all-encompassing generativity. Love is so much, so much more than "a second-hand emotion." Love "will not tolerate violence in its name. It does no harm.

It only sets free.” “Love embraces everyone, every creature, every creation. It knows us intimately. It holds us collectively. Love transcends every boundary that seeks to confine it.” May we know how deeply we are connected in the greater Love, every person, spirit to spirit, soul to soul, diverse and beautiful in our beingness, loving ourselves and each other in the ways that we each need, as you remember also, that *you* are loved, *you* are worthy, *you* are welcome, and *you* are needed. May you feel it so, may it be so, and may we say together “Amen.”