

2 12 23—Sacrificial Love UUFM—Rev. Rita Capezzi

Sacrificial love might seem a bit too close to martyrdom. But is there really nothing worth making a sacrifice for? Not sacrificing self to death, necessarily, but sacrificing something of ourselves that can be given for the benefit of someone else. Maybe even to someone we don't know. Something that can be given in order to uphold those values held most dear and most sacred. If "Love is the volunteer in you that raises its hand and steps forward without needing to be rewarded," how can we learn to more freely and joyfully volunteer such love?

When I was a Catholic, when I spent time with the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Scripture, I did not understand the stories of martyrdom. I did not like hearing that God asked Abraham to sacrifice to him his son Isaac. I did not accept the idea that a loving Father sacrificed his only begotten son, Jesus, for the sake of the sins of all the world and of all time. I confess, I *was* drawn to the stories of bloody saints, riding to glory full of arrows or disemboweled or with skin flayed away or eyes gorged out. Surely that has fed my enduring interest in zombie films and horror movies. But all of *that* did not seem like a good foundation for belief in an all-powerful and all-knowing god who loved me. I just could not make all that make sense.

The book, *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us* by Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, provided a confirmation of my rejection of martyrdom as a path to a loving god. They ask these questions: "What if the consequence of sacrifice is simply pain, the diminishment of life, fragmentation of the soul, abasement, shame? What if the severing of life is merely destructive of life and is not the path of love, courage, trust, and faith? What if the performance of sacrifice is a ritual in which some human beings bear loss and others are protected from accountability or moral expectations?" Brock and Parker beg another question: What if martyrdom and self-sacrifice simply don't make any difference in our individual and collective human lives?

Sacrificial love as martyrdom insists that someone suffer and die for the sake of others, with no reward that binds humans more strongly and responsibly to each other. That kind of love just makes you weak, powerless, in a world where the weak and powerless are destroyed by the powerful with hardly a bat of the eye. Sure, go ahead and cut Social Security benefits, modify who can qualify for Medicaid. It won't hurt me much, with my 401K, with my private health insurance. But how about for those without that savings, those unable to work, those who did physically crushing labor and need to retire from it as soon as possible? Is their suffering redemptive? And of whom? How do we get beyond both martyrdom and indifference to suffering other than our own, on to a thriving generativity for humans and the all the planet?

I am confident that most of us have acted from within a sacrificial love that means a giving of ourselves to family and friends in need, a big love that meant we felt the pinch, felt the constraint upon our own lives, and we acted anyway. It wasn't easy. My mother gave up a job she loved because her earnings

pushed the family income just over the amount where I qualifies for financial aid for college, and my parents just had never been able to save anything for that. She still speaks fondly of her three years working in the mental health ward at the VA hospital, and I also know that she was willing to sacrifice for me because she loves me. All my degrees later, my start, my possibilities emerged through my mother's generous, sacrificing act. I am confident you have such a story, where someone in your intimate circle—maybe not your parents but someone—gave of themselves for you. I encourage you to make a note of that on your little slip of paper.

And I am equally confident that each of you have sacrificed because of the love you feel for a family member or friend. And even though you were giving something up, you were sacrificing for that person, you felt like you were receiving something in return. For “Love is a currency that functions in reverse, because the only way to be wealthy with it is to give more of it away.” You were not debased, you were not destroyed in this giving. By giving you gained. I encourage you to make a note of that on your little slip of paper, a second memory of sacrificing something important to you because you love.

I am not saying such sacrifice for family and friends is easy. It might be, but it is not necessarily easy. Yet it is understandable—to open your heart, to open your home or your wallet for someone you care about, for someone in your keeping, for someone you have a clear responsibility toward. You may feel exposed in such giving, but it does not make you weak in so doing. It is not a threat to your being or integrity. “Know that love is a vulnerability but not a weakness.” It means you are good, that you are humane, that you feel beyond your own selfish limits.

I think, though, a challenge comes for many of us when we know we need to give beyond the circle of comfortable responsibility, but we feel a risk in doing so. We don't want to be martyrs to a cause. We don't want killing sacrifice, but we do want to express the kind of love that gives, that makes the world better, that makes us better. We want to love more expansively, but, and here's the rub, we feel that more than we *can* comfortably give will be required of us, even taken from us, by people or groups with whom we do not feel immediate kinship. In a land of plenty, like those three loud frogs from Macey's story this morning, we find ourselves croaking a desire to claim and to own, to withhold from others. Insisting on owning the land, water, and air, the very food, that we all rely on. Selfishness and greediness and rivalry, we don't like it, necessarily when we find ourselves thinking in those terms about other people, but we do, sometimes. It's scarcity thinking: Will there be enough for me and mine?

But sometimes, the lovely, unexpected sacrifice of the ugly toad holds up a mirror. We act from sacrifice for those closest to us, for those most like us, and sometimes we don't even do *that*. But we might also act from our values of acceptance and inclusion and curiosity and respect. When the disaster comes, when we share the same hopes and fears, it is sometimes that ugly toad—the truth-teller, the confronter—who shows us the way, loving enough to offer refuge and safety. It's the love of small kindnesses, the caring for strangers, wishing goodness for them, wanting them not to die. “God bless you.” Even when, as the poet says, “So far from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange. What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these fleeting temples we make together when we say, ‘Here, have my seat,’ ‘Go ahead — you first,’ ‘I like your hat.’”

Sacrificial love means giving up something to get something more worthy. It means giving outside of our own experience and comfort. It means risking the disrespect of your neighbors for the Moms Demand Action or the Black Lives Matter sign in your yard. It means risking being yelled at or spit on. It means giving time or talent or treasure to people or causes that don't connect directly to *you* as a way to express, to live out your values. What values do you hold that, in fact, require you to sacrifice? What intention might you make, to love a little more sacrificially, for what is worth it to you? Maybe make a note of it on that little slip of paper in your hand. What do you intend to do?

Why do we need to put more love into the world? Because not loving means it only gets worse. Researchers point to oxytocin as the brain chemical that floods our brains and bodies when we love . . . and also when we trust. Where there is a lack of trust, there is a lack of oxytocin and a lack of love, creating a loop of diminishing returns. We live in such a state right now, manifest in our politics and those who pit us against each other in the culture wars. It is a hard time to live through, a hard time to imagine looking for the truth in movements like defunding the police or recognizing the truth that capitalism is a system that hurts more of us than it helps or acknowledging that racism and sexism are not simply personal viewpoints of the ugly-minded but structures conditioning all the systems and institutions through which we live. It can be a stretch to grow our love while admitting that we may benefit from circumstances that literally kill other people, and the planet, too.

In her book, *See No Stranger: A Memoir and Manifesto of Revolutionary Love*, Valerie Kaur calls us to a sacrificing love that is joy, grief, anger, and wonder all at once, acknowledging the complexity of our reality. And activist Skeena Rathor says of Kaur's vision, "This is how we see no stranger. We commit ourselves to wonder by dedicating time to listen *with* wonder to those we know least. We listen with a heart of surrender and seek to become easier when we speak to one another about what we don't know. We respect our anger and act upon its wellspring of wisdom for the protection of life we love. We mourn and grieve in solidarity – we actively feel one another's losses and show up in physical presence for this is activism in action, and we nourish ourselves with what brings us joy in body, heart and soul." This is how we make a durable future together, regardless of our intimacy or our relatability and wholly because, as individuals in community, we fight for life.

I think the main thing in all of this is how we keep ourselves open when we might feel like closing in and not loving at all. Through his "Blessing for Presence," John O'Donohue asks us to be aware of the mystery at the center of our being and our living, to be aware and to rejoice in it, to feel that we are immense within, full of gifts. The poet-priest reminds us that we are guided by our senses into new frontiers, where we can test truth and recognize the call of our values. Where, if we seek the courage to follow its path, the flame of righteous anger frees us from falsity and fear. Where each day is a sacred gift, woven around the heart of wonder, when we willingly sacrifice a narrow view of life and love and move instead toward one abundant and fruitful for all. This is how we get beyond martyrdom that destroys us, to a love that binds us and builds us.

[In-sermon activity] You've had that slip of paper in your hand. Have you recorded one memory when you *were* loved in a sacrificial way? Have you recorded one more memory when *you* loved in a sacrificial

way? Have you imagined a way you might love *more* intentionally? And have you contemplated that stretch, that situation in which you might struggle to love but you want to try? Take a minute with this imaginative intention, of giving more of yourself. Think a bit, and then share now with someone you trust, or maybe someone you would like to build trust with—Does sacrificial love feel right, good, and possible for you? [5minutes]. Type into the Zoom chat if you are willing to share with others now.

Maybe you'll take this conversation downstairs to the Fellowship Hall with you, so that companionship might deepen into expanded community. I pray you will.

[In-sermon singing] Let's take a pause, a moment to reflect that our efforts to love—to give to our families and friends, to our neighbors, and even to our supposed enemies—all our efforts are upheld and affirmed and enriched by our Unitarian Universalist faith. Unitarian Universalism calls for us to be one in offering and receiving love, our birthright as individuals born on this interconnected web of relationship, whole and worthy as we are *and* as we tread new paths, find new ways to be humans faithful to the love within us, among us, and beyond us. The Rev. Theodore Parker wrote the following words #1058 "Be Ours a Religion." Let this version of our faith tradition hold us as we imagine live-giving sacrificial love. Nancy will play the song three times—once through so we can catch the tune, once singing melody, once singing with full accompaniment.

There is a more love somewhere, a love that calls us to act with generosity and consideration of those close to us, those we might not know well or at all, and those with whom we might struggle to be in relationship. Our faith tradition is calling us to this love, calling us to bask in the sunlight of all-encompassing love—good heartedness rather than selfishness, the truth of our interconnectedness rather than the lie of us vs them, the enactment of thriving and generative life for us all.

There is more love somewhere, and it is calling our name, it is calling our name and calling us into a life of love more hopeful, more peaceful, more joyful than how we live now. In the words of theologian Martin Buber, "Love is responsibility of an I for a Thou," love is the gift we offer to those we care for, those we *might* care for, those we have to *work* to care for. In this love, there is no stranger, there is no other. This love is the gift Unitarian Universalism promises, calling us to give to ourselves, to each other, and to the world. Because we are all connected, because we are all together in this web of living. Because, as Martin Luther King, Jr. reminds us, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly." May you willingly gift your gift of love—stretching always to more love—as you remember, today and every day, 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!"

<http://www.beacon.org/Proverbs-of-Ashes-P365.aspx>

https://www.berkeley.edu/news/berkeleyan/2008/02/13_love.shtml

<https://www.resurgence.org/magazine/article5678-the-warrior-saint.html>