

At the Heart of Generosity

David R. Weiss – Sunday, November 19
For Michael Servetus Unitarian Society

NOTE: The readings I selected are appended at the end.

If you read my teaser in the Thursday email or watched the video, you already know where we're going. At the heart of generosity, in fact, *in the exact middle of the word itself*, sits Eros. The Greek word that we associate with sexual—erotic—love.

And, yes, I'm going to claim that Eros is at the heart of healthy, human, just generosity. But I can assure any of you starting to squirm in your seats that, NO, despite the past week's unseasonably warm weather, it's NOT going to get steamy in here during my message today.

STILL—my thoughts on Eros and its relationship to generosity didn't fall from the sky. They unfolded in my life. And since most of you don't know much about me yet, we'll get to the heart of generosity, but we'll get there by way of the classroom ... and the bedroom.

I have been nothing in my life if not an excellent student. Indeed, recovering from that "excellence" has been the focus of my therapy for some time now. But that's another story.

This story—about generosity—begins with Agape. The highest love. Self-giving love. Unconditional. Non-preferential. Sacrificial. Perfect love. Reserved for God, as I learned about it in my teens. And yet, paradoxically, held up as the measure of human love. By which human love inevitably fell short.

It was almost as though Agape got center stage for the precise purpose of showing us up.

Don't get me wrong. *Philia* (literally, "brotherly love," but more broadly, love between friends) had its own legitimate nobility. And Eros (at least in its "cleaned up" expression of rather sexless romantic love) had its place. Although, Eros was more casually recognized as "love gone wild," lust, insatiable desire, self-centered longing. Best give Eros a wide berth. And parents, at least, got a temporary gift pass to Agape (in their better moments)—on account of taking care of helpless little ones.

But Agape—at least as I learned, excellent student that I was—*Agape was perfect love*. Did I say unconditional, self-giving love, sacrificial, holy love? Beyond reach of all but

saints. So, of course, excellent student that I was, I took a big gulp and said, "Hold my beer."

Sadly, I think it's fair to say that the wreckage of my first two marriages, both of which ended in divorce, accompanied by differing degrees of harm to those involved, is indebted in no small part to my persistent and persistently unsuccessful emulation of Agape.

I only began to see that years later, when Eros stole my heart. Well, Margaret stole my heart. But Eros came along for the ride. Thank God for that. But we're not done in the classroom yet. Because after two decades as an excellent student, with two master's degrees completed, I became a professor of religion.

What happens next is a little like origami artwork. A whole bunch of creases get made, and all of sudden those individual folds rather unexpectedly allow a flat sheet of paper to become a three-dimensional something entirely new.

These are the creases.

I had a fifth grade Sunday school teacher who, in essence, taught me to pray. Not long after he went off to seminary ... only to be kicked out for being gay. Years later, after a couple decades of drowning the sorrow of a ruptured vocation in food and drink, he suffered a massive stroke. I spent many hours over the last months of his life at his bedside until he died at age 46.

In seminary, I counted at least half-a-dozen gay or lesbian classmates among my close friends. They were pursuing ministry in a church that demanded a sort of self-sacrificial secrecy of them in exchange permitting them to declare good news to virtually everyone except themselves.

A decade later, early in my grad studies at Notre Dame, the national ELCA Lutheran church decided to talk about sexuality. Having just used a Ph.D. seminar in Christian Ethics to clarify my views and sharpen my voice, I found myself nervous but driven to speak up in my congregation on behalf of those seminary friendships.

A couple years later, still at Notre Dame, I found myself weeping over a poem written by an anonymous gay senior and published in a campus magazine. I wrote a response that lit my own soul on fire. Published a week later in the same magazine, it became the first of a series of pieces I wrote as an Ally while at Notre Dame.

Those are all—or at least most—of the creases in place when I showed up at Luther College, fresh out of Notre Dame, in the fall of 1998.

Now the “all-of-a-sudden” folding.

That October, the college Pride group’s “National Coming Out Day” celebration sparked some ugly backlash on campus. In my classes I addressed it in a way that made clear I was an Ally. One thing led to another and before I’d even been on campus for two months, I found myself speaking at a campus-wide convocation. After that quite a few LGBTQ students started emailing me and I freely shared the handful of essays I’d written at Notre Dame affirming LGBTQ persons from a theological perspective.

The following spring one of my colleagues in Religion taught a course on “Religion, Sex, and Power.” To his surprise (and mine, too) several of his gay and lesbian students wrote final papers citing my unpublished essays in their references. Years before Facebook came along, my words had gone viral, and I didn’t even know it. Until that colleague told me, and suggested that I approach our department chair about teaching a course focused on Homosexuality and Christian Theology since the students were clearly hungry to learn. I asked, and the chair said yes.

So, all of a sudden, or so it seemed, as summer 1999 began I was educating myself to teach a course titled “LGBT Voices in Theology” the following spring. We’d be reading Christian theology written by gay and lesbian theologians to hear how their theology was shaped by their sexuality. And I was about to meet Eros on her own terms. Center stage. With Agape nowhere in sight.

That *same* summer I was *also* about to meet Margaret. Well, that’s a whole other story in itself. We’d actually dated quite seriously twenty years earlier in college. Went our separate ways. Married. Became parents. Divorced. And here we were, reconnecting at 39, happily surprised when romance began to blossom again despite the 150 miles between us. Old enough to have known real heartbreak—and to recognize the gift of new love on the cusp of forty. And young enough to still feel like mischievous teenagers as that new love unfolded.

AND—*this is the crucial thing*—as we were navigating the wonder of our intimacy, I was *also* reading lesbian and gay theology, and Margaret and I were talking about it together. Well, we did more than just talk, but I’ve promised you a PG-rated message. Let’s just say, we talked

and “talked” and “talked” some more. As I said earlier, Margaret stole my heart. Eros came along for the ride.

Let me tell you about that.

Many of us my age and older—if we grew up Christian and straight—grew up learning that Eros was not “proper love.” Eros was about desire, lust, pleasure, and satisfaction, which we unfortunately—and inaccurately—paired exclusively with *sexual* desire, lust, pleasure, and satisfaction. And then framed it as *selfish* sexual desire, lust, pleasure, and satisfaction. Still, being straight comes with privileges. So, because our straight sexuality was affirmed by church and society, if a little Eros crept into *our* bedrooms, we could just be discreet. Eros could be kept in the shadows.

But if you were gay or lesbian, as far as church and society were concerned, your sexuality *was defined* by Eros—and moreover condemned as perverse and selfish. And if you were gay or lesbian and determined not only to stay in the church, but even to write theology—well, *because your sexuality was the very grounds for your condemnation, keeping Eros in the shadows was not an option.* You needed to make a vigorous defense of why Eros was not some fatal flaw in your character, but an essential part of the created goodness you carried. If you were gay or lesbian, you needed to *redeem Eros* in a way that no straight person had to. And these theologians, writing out of their own experience—including the profound goodness they knew within their sexuality—they redeemed Eros and then some.

For me and Margaret, that redemption of Eros was life-giving. Tutored, as it were, by gay and lesbian theologians sitting (metaphorically, of course!) on our nightstand, we learned to savor our longing and our touching in ways the discrete affirmation of our straight sexuality had never dreamed of. *We were blessed.*

But ALSO, my understanding of generosity was transformed. So, NOW we’re ready to talk about the heart of generosity: EROS

Eros is *love grounded in the blessing of finitude.* Yes, within sexuality, Eros guides the love that carries me beyond myself and gifts me with an exquisite completion that lies in another. *But Eros is so much more than that.* Eros is the viscerally felt, the sensually known satisfying connection between us and the world. From physical need to emotional hope to intellectual excitement and aesthetic aspiration, eros is the human being fully inhabiting its embodied humanity.

Eros is in the thirst that longs for—and relishes cool water. Eros is in the quiet glee of curling up with a good book. Eros is in the aroma of fresh baked bread or that first brewed cup of coffee in the morning. It's in the symphony of birdsong at the break of dawn—or the symphony of an orchestra. Eros is in the purr of a cat or the contented sigh of a dog when you rub it in that special place. It's in the beauty of the sunset—or the twinkling of stars on a dark night. Eros is even in the sweat and sore muscles after a long hike or a hard day of work. Eros is love *grounded in the blessing of finitude*.

Eros is love drenched in the wonder of what is. It is the love—the joy-gratitude-awe—that we know at the many places where our senses join us to the world around us. Eros is the bridge to the other (whether person, pet, or other planetary wonder)—whose company we might savor in a multitude of ways.

What a tragedy then that we have so narrowed Eros down to sex! And yet further to the *selfish* side of sexuality that, in truth, contradicts the rich meaning of Eros itself. One almost wonders whether Eros was so twisted and diminished ... in order to prevent us from accessing its power.

I mentioned at the start that my relationship with Agape has been checkered at best. There is no doubt: expressions of self-giving love *are* a good thing. Every parent, friend, sibling, and lover knows that the relationships we prize most require the occasional gift of selfless love to really flourish. I have known this, too. But as the singular ideal, as the defining pattern of Love, Agape has serious flaws. Dislodged from its proper place—as surprising grace *within* the life of Eros—Agape tempts us to believe we are only optionally members of a community larger than ourself.

In fact, I have come to suspect that Agape love—at least when made the pinnacle of love, the measure by which other loves are found wanting—when that happens Agape is the mirror ... of patriarchal love. When cast as pure, perfect love, Agape expects and needs nothing in return. It is always and only self-giving. *It is a view of love that says it is both possible and even desirable to have no need of others.* And this is a notion of love ideal for perpetuating patterns of domination. What Agape offers in its spirit of generosity is always charity, never justice. And as my friend Colin says, “Charity *requires* disparity.” It *requires* a situation in which some have extra, while others are desperately in need. *Agape is rooted in disparity.*

Eros, however, because it is rooted in honest human need, knows something about vulnerability from the inside. Hence, Eros is the love that powers healthy, human, just generosity that *responds to needs without waiting for disparity to spur it into action*.

This is love that relishes the humble awareness that both need and gift are universal—and move (circulate!) universally among us. In one moment, my need receives its completion from another—person, creature, or element of the world. And in the next moment my gift completes the need of another—person, creature, or element of the world. But wait, the mystery is that *sometimes, fairly often, almost always if we attend to it*—need and gift overlap in the miracle of Mutuality. And Mutuality, born of Eros, is truly at the heart of generosity fit for finitude.

Indeed, mutuality is the presence and practice of *justice* because it is life *erotically* reflecting the truth of an interdependent reality. And mutuality is *also* the presence and practice of *love* because in its rich diversity this interdependent reality longs *erotically* to feel Itself folded into embrace upon embrace upon embrace. And from the perspective of this erotic interdependent Mutuality, it becomes clear that finitude is not simply our lot in life, as though it were bad fortune. It is our *luck*, our *extraordinary good fortune* to be given lives that lure us into other lives, human and nonhuman.

Eros aims to restore authentic intimacy as the very ground of our relationships, from self to other to Earth. And in a world beset by systems and structures of power, whose survival and profit depend on our disconnection, this is yet more than good fortune. In such a world, to make Mutuality the heartfelt measure of our humanity is, in fact, an act of holy resistance.

For mutuality is the fulness of Eros manifest *in vibrant community*. It is the seed of “the forces deep within that call us to become more than we have been up to now.” As the mundane-yet-sacred mode of our creaturely existence, it is the way we bear “witness to all that we must hold the world in our hands.” In the face of adversity and oppression, Mutuality becomes solidarity. On a finite planet, across diverse ecosystems, up and down food chains, from wilderness to urban settings, Mutuality is both the pursuit and the practice of harmony and humility, justice and joy, care and compassion.

At the heart of our generosity is not the abundance of what we have—for in the realm of finitude what we *ought*

to have is simply *enough*. At the heart of our generosity is not the desperate need of others. That need is a cry for justice, to which we respond not with charity but with solidarity.

No, finally, at the heart of our generosity is Eros, love that links us—indeed *lures* us—into Mutuality with other lives, into that symphony where need and gift blend seamlessly as notes of the same song, in which this chorus rises again and again to declare with knowing delight: “Nothing belongs to any of us ... except as we belong to one another.”

Generosity is *that chorus* sung out in the whole of our lives.

May it be so. And Blessed be.

The opening reading, to go with the Chalice Lighting—

Let us be mindful of the forces deep within which call us to become more than we are. May this hour bring rest and renewal, comfort and challenge. May we be reminded here of our highest aspirations and inspired to bring our gifts of love and service to the altar of humanity. May we know once again that we are not isolated beings, but that we are connected – in mystery and in wonder to each other, to this community and to the universe.

—Anonymous, from the UUA website, a slightly expanded version of Reading #434 in *Singing the Living Tradition*

The message reading—

Our reading is from Audre Lorde, who identified herself as a “black, lesbian, feminist, socialist, mother, warrior, poet”:

There are many kinds of power, used and unused, acknowledged or otherwise. The erotic is a resource that lies deep within each of us, firmly rooted in the power of our feeling.

The erotic connects the spiritual and communal and political dimensions of our lives—at the sensual level. Here we touch and are touched by the physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us.

The erotic moves in the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person, forming a bridge of shared joy. The erotic is the open and fearless underlining of my own capacity for joy—

experienced in the way my body stretches to music or dancing, or when building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea, or moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love.

In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, resignation, despair, self-effacement, or self-denial.

This is one reason why the erotic is so feared, and so often relegated to the bedroom alone, when it is recognized at all. For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of.

When we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense.

—Audre Lorde, excerpts from the short essay, “Use of the Erotic”

The closing reading, before the Extinguishing of the Chalice—

This is the mission of our faith: to teach the fragile art of hospitality; to revere both the critical mind and the generous heart; to prove that diversity need not mean divisiveness; and to witness to all that we must hold the world in our hands.

—William F. Schultz, UUA minister and former president of the UUA, Reading #459 in *Singing the Living Tradition*

David Weiss is a theologian, writer, poet and hymnist, “writing into the whirlwind” of contemporary challenges, joys, and sorrows around climate crisis, sexuality, justice, peace, and family. Reach him at drw59mn@gmail.com. Read more at www.davidrweiss.com where he blogs under the theme, “Full Frontal Faith: Erring on the Edge of Honest.” Support him in *Writing into the Whirlwind* at www.patreon.com/fullfrontalfaith.