

Response to Rev. Dr. Matthew Johnson's paper "Love is a teacher" Preaching and Pastoring Within the Climate Catastrophe, A Paper for Prairie Group, Nov. 2022

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I write my response to our colleague's beautiful invitation to consider love as a teacher from a cabin on Lake Champlain in Vermont. The brown and golden leaves fall like gentle snow during this most resplendent fall. I find it easy to love the earth and to access both gratitude for the beauty we are offered in each moment and grief for the callous destruction of the climate catastrophe. It's more difficult, however, to fully absorb and accept that I am loved in return by the earth. I am grateful for Matthew's reverent and worshipful reflection and appreciate his skillful interweaving of intellect and ritual to open our time together. I heard in his paper and our readings, whatever possibilities exist to save the planet and our relations, our efforts must be rooted in life-sustaining and transforming love. And as we strive, we are called to embrace and embody all our emotions – joy and gratitude for the beauty of the earth, as well as rage, sorrow, and grief for what befalls her. Rather than hiding in denial or wallowing in despair, we must courageously mourn what we love.

The UUA's Article II Study Commission, in their first official draft, offers Love as our central Unitarian Universalist value:

"Love is the enduring force that holds us together... Love inspires and powers the passion with which we embody our values."¹

¹ From the full draft of Article II, from the Study Commission: https://www.uua.org/files/2022-10/article2_draft_language_102022.pdf

This is a bold statement I hope our whole movement can fully claim. For some, love may seem too amorphous a value, but there is no more powerful force and no more solid theological grounding than love. Love builds our resistance and empowers us to fight for what we value. To love the earth, is to grieve all that has been lost and all that has been done by humanity to harm her. And as we love her, we must concurrently struggle to love one another, even amidst the sorrow and rage we feel at our collectively destructive behaviors.

It is a challenge to remain compassionate toward those who display maddening and willful ignorance, those who look for simple answers, or profit from planetary destruction. Being alive in this time of collapse contributes to our collective trauma, emotional shut down, and civic disengagement. Matthew names the reality that to organize for action and build coalitions of possibility, equity, and repair, we and our people must experience the many emotions which accompany full comprehension of climate catastrophe. To care for our people, to accompany them through their trauma, we must process and metabolize our own, as this gathering discussed last year and was taught by Rezma Menakim in his book, *My Grandmother's Hands*. Processing trauma means being present in our bodies to what is happening in this moment. Rituals of lament that connect us through our senses to the earth, keep us present to what we love, help us process our grief and trauma, and remain committed to our values.

Roger S. Gottlieb in his essay, *Living With Environmental Despair*², says “avoidance and denial are psychological states that are emotionally exhausting and a betrayal of any serious moral identity.” He names the uselessness of giving in to despair as well as the self-defeating hubris in thinking we can imagine every possibility and determine there is no way to contribute

² Gotlieb, Roger S., *Rooted and Rising*, “Living With Environmental Despair” pg. 170

to positive change. “Given the limitations on what we can know about the future, such anxiety... is a permanent feature of our collective predicament. What is called for, then, is perhaps neither hope nor hopelessness – but courage to live with the fear.”³ Gottlieb also presents a useful metaphor for pastors. What would we do if we were visiting our dying mother (or a beloved congregant) in the hospital? Would we wallow in despair or rage that she is at the end of her life, or hide in denial, claiming foolishly that she’ll get better? Most of us, as pastors, would strive to remain as fully present as we can, with her in love and gratitude for the life she was given and the ways she enhanced our own. Similarly, a life-giving response to climate catastrophe is to remain lovingly present to our range of feelings and grateful as we grieve.

Matthew also asked us to think of the places toward which we experience solastalgia, “the homesickness you have when you are still at home⁴.” I thought of the creek by my childhood home in Palatine, Illinois, where I had my first kiss and where my siblings and I caught crayfish. I thought of the place where I spent summers as a kid, the magical land of Pepper Pike, Ohio, with inviting forests, rolling hills, and green pond. I thought of the cool refreshing waters of the North Woods where I have spent replenishing times with my family kayaking and spotting eagles, turtles, and fish. I feel a profound and abiding sense of love for these places, which is inextricably linked to the memories I co-created in each with people I love. I grieve for the impact of destructive capitalism upon these places of beauty and feel frustration that so many, including members of my family, see only evidence of America’s greatness in stolen land and

³ Ibid., 168

⁴ Albrecht, Glenn A., *Earth Emotions: New Words for a New World*, pg. 200

sprawling industry. I pray for the resilience of the land and clarity of human minds and spirits to imagine love's possibility of resilience and equity for all of us.

In a recent gathering among our Central Midwest District colleagues, Indigenous leader Johnnie M. of the Lakota Nation, representing the InterNātional Indigenous Initiative for Transformative Collaboration (INITC), reminded us repeatedly that, in every moment, there are infinite possibilities. To be present to those possibilities we must face unflinchingly the realities of the present, to stay in our grief for what has been lost, attentive to our rage for the destruction that remains in the name of profit and colonization, and in mutual relationship with each other and all our relations as we resist. These are the values of INITC:

1. Everything is done by agreement
2. Every voice has a right to be heard
3. Every voice has a commitment/responsibility to listen
4. We help Co-define and Co-create Cultural Safety
5. We help Establish agreements for what comprises Decolonizing Conversations
6. We help Define and develop Inter-Cultural and Inter-Faith Relationships
7. We help Engender Well -Being / Wellness (Emotional, Mental, Physical, Spiritual)

The culture of white supremacy opposes the values of mutual well-being and collective liberation. Decisions are made through hierarchical power structures, rather than mutual agreement. Every voice is not heard nor does every voice listen. Cultural safety is ignored or belittled, and conversations are colonized and polarized. Relationships are rarely inter-cultural or inter-faith and we do not often engender well-being amongst ourselves, the planet, or our kin. I

observed among our colleagues at the retreat the challenges of breaking out of these dominant structures. Beyond our faith, this way of relating is even more scarce. But, as we began each day in a circle of prayer, connecting with the earth and her creatures, hearing blue jays, chickadees, and the wind through the trees, feeling the ground beneath us, I found a deeper sense of kinship to “All Our Relations,” profound gratitude, and an openness to possibilities.

There are many responses to the human-made climate catastrophe – sadness, despair, fear, rage, hopelessness, and denial. Each of these feelings is understandable and necessary to move through as we reach toward a more abiding love. To remain resilient and present to our “longing for mutual flourishing,”⁵ we must also be able to receive the truth that we are loved in return by the earth.

As we live on the brink of collapse, the lure of denial, rage, and despair is strong. I want to claim a Unitarian Universalist theology of resilience and possibility, one that builds upon a fundamental “longing for mutual flourishing,” and embodies the value of love as the Article II Commission is inviting us. We are called to courageously love and be loved by the beauty and brokenness of this time and this place. Matthew reminded us that to love and redeem the world, to expand and live into the possibilities of wholeness, we must cultivate faith in our universal BE-Loved-ness. The essence of BE-loved Community includes loving the earth and being loved by the earth and all our relations. The love we feel when we are sad, when we shake with rage, when we fear for our lives and our children’s lives is a powerful and redemptive love in response to the indomitable urge for mutual flourishing. May we cultivate within ourselves, each other,

⁵ Johnson, Matthew, “Love is a Teacher,” page 9

and our communities the courage to fully grieve and love, and may we embody that love through collective action.