

“Learning to Love”

At the end of January, I learned a lesson in what it means to love. My four nieces and nephew were my teachers. Their mother, my sister, was hospitalized with pneumonia and a heart attack. By the time I arrived, she was still in the intensive care unit, but off the ventilator. Her daughters had been put in the difficult position of opting for the ventilator, an intervention their mother would never have wanted. But the doctor assured them that it was only to stabilize her.

Once my sister was moved from ICU to a hospital room, either one or two of her children were by her side in four-hour shifts around the clock, despite hospital rules that didn't allow visitors after hours.

For one of my nieces this was her only vacation from her work as a nurse manager in a nursing home in North Carolina. My sister's emergency occurred two days into the annual family reunion. As much as I would have wanted to spare my nieces and nephew the stress and anxiety, at the same time I felt privileged to be a witness to the beauty and strength of their relatedness with each other and with their mother. In the week after I returned from my two-day visit with my sister, I participated in the memorial for Jan Abbott's mother, Anne Timmerman, and met with Diana Morgan's family in preparation for Diana's memorial. In both instances, I was inspired by how family members tended their loved ones and companioned them throughout the dying process. They reminded me of a line from a “Prayer for Lovers”: “Grace us with hearts for love's entire journey from mysterious sunrise to mysterious sunset.” I experienced this grace in the presence of these families.

Some might consider this kind of love as separate from erotic love, as not part of love's entire journey. Greek philosophers like Aristotle made a classic distinction between Eros and Agape. Eros was all about sexual attraction, whereas Agape was more associated with a self-sacrificing, unconditional love, the kind that generates compassion and being in solidarity with the most vulnerable.

In our times, the separation between Eros and Agape has been challenged by philosophers like Dorothee Soelle. She illustrates the connection between these two ways of loving by referencing a scene from Bertholt Brecht's drama “The Caucasian Chalk Circle.” This is a popular play on college campuses. In many of his works, Brecht dramatized the way in which unjust economic structures brutalize the poor and corrupt the rich. Chalk Circle was recently performed by students at St. Michael's.

In the scene which Dorothee Soelle chose to illustrate the interdependence between Eros and Agape there is a kitchen maid called Grusha. She is the play's heroine and is forced to escape together with the other inhabitants of the provincial governor's palace because of an enemy invasion. In the confusion, the governor's wife deserts her infant son. The baby is left alone in the palace all except for the housemaid Grusha. Meanwhile, the enemy is coming closer. Once Grusha finds the infant she hesitates to abandon him. Her co-workers warn her that anyone who is discovered with the

governor's heir is certain to be slaughtered by the enemy, known as Ironshirts. The poor kitchen maid is paralyzed by indecision, unable to move. The situation becomes more and more dangerous as time passes. While she waits, something strange happens. The narrator in the play describes it as follows:

“As she was standing between courtyard and gate, she heard or thought she heard a low voice calling. The child called to her, ‘woman,’ it said, ‘help me.’ And it went on, not whining, but saying quite sensibly, ‘woman, he who hears not a cry for help, but passes by with troubled ears, will never hear the gentle call of a lover, nor the blackbird at dawn, nor the happy sigh of the tired grape pickers as the Angelus rings.’” So she takes the child and that constitutes the drama of the play.

What Brecht makes clear is that by closing our ears to the cries of the poor, we not only kill Agape, the ability to love selflessly, to feel compassion for the helpless, but we kill Eros as well, our ability to make love. Dorothee Soelle applies this insight on a broader scale. She suggests that the way in which first world people devote the majority of their resources, both intellectual and financial, in building weapons and conducting war, takes a decided toll on our psycho-sexual lives, on our emotional vigor.

We cannot help but suffer the consequences of our country's war in Iraq costing more than \$463 billion, an amount that could have provided health care for 277 million children, Head Start places for 61 million children, paid for over eight million elementary school teachers and over four million affordable housing units.

Besides an economy devoted to the building of weapons and conducting war, another factor that demoralizes our society is consumerism. Our needs are distorted by advertising, which in turn clouds our value system. Who hasn't been overwhelmed by all the glossy inserts in Sunday's newspaper, advertising sweet deals at Circuit City and best brands at Best Buy. Then there's the full page ad in the *New Yorker* with a man and a woman looking out to sea from the deck of a luxury liner, claiming that: “Somewhere between continents, you feel something stirring and realize it's your soul.” The sub caption reads: “Experience the majesty of the sea from a perch of equal grandeur.” I might question just how accessible the majesty of the sea is from a perch of grandeur and, even more, how equal one is to the other.

But I don't mean to moralize. I'm as vulnerable to a good sale as anyone. And I don't mean to eschew the joy of a trip on an ocean liner, even though Megan Epler Wood, a promoter of eco-tourism and sustainable development, opened my eyes to the exploitation of workers on these ships. I'd have to deal with an “uneasy conscience” once I stepped on board.

Our consumer culture would have us believe that love is engendered by cruises on luxury liners and pajama grams. The truth is, genuine love heightens our awareness of the suffering and struggles of other people. It's more about the impulse, the magnetism, that draws us into community. Part of the mystery of love is that it's multidimensional. It draws us into ever larger circles of human connections and concerns. That's why I might not be able to enjoy a cruise ship experience if I knew that those serving me were

not being fairly compensated for their labor or were living in cramped and less than adequate quarters.

Love is not separable from justice. In a society where the needs for livable wages, adequate housing and health care are not being addressed, the emotional vigor of the more fortunate suffers. Given the growing inequity within our own country, we might envision our entire population being on a luxury liner. To the extent that those who are traveling comfortably, whether on 1st or 2nd class are oblivious to the living standard of those below deck, they risk in the words of Bertholt Brecht, "...not hearing the lover's call or the song of the blackbird at dawn."

What Brecht and Dorthee Soelle are saying is that being numb or deaf to the cry of the poor seriously impairs our ability to love. They both maintain an intimate connection between Eros and Agape.

I was surprised and pleased to hear this connection made once on Vermont Public Radio or more possibly on North Country Public Radio. Public Radio was having their semi-annual fund-raising week, or as many days as it takes them to make their goal. They promise to cut the time short if you give generously enough for Public Radio to reach its goal. I'm always intrigued by their different strategies, everything from cajoling to a serious appeal to the listeners' sense of justice. Like how long have you listened to your favorite programs and commentators and not contributed to Public Radio? Like how long have you been sponging? When else in your life do you get something so valuable for nothing?

The connection between Eros and Agape was suggested when a couple of NPR celebrities were cajoling the listeners, at least this is how I heard it. The two might have been Ira Glass of "This America, Live" and Garrison Keillor of "Prairie Home Companion." They made the claim that giving generously to NPR had been known to increase a person's oxytocin, the "feel good" hormone secreted in love-making and when a mother nurses her child. The connection was made between giving for a public cause and feeling good, getting erotic pleasure, between Agape and Eros.

This afternoon, we all have an opportunity to increase our oxytocin and at the same time affirm and promote a principle of our faith: "Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations." Vermont Interfaith Action, a coalition of seven congregations of which we are a member is sponsoring an event, an action from 3:00 to 4:15 p.m. at St. Paul's Cathedral. The action is to promote an area of utmost concern to VIA, affordable housing. A number of our members have been doing extensive research on why the development on the corner of Battery and Cherry Streets known as Westlake has been able to proceed without building the affordable units that were originally planned for this project. Since 1985, Burlington has had a proud history of inclusionary zoning, which mandates that developers are required to include a number of affordable units in their buildings. The 2006 Municipal or City Development Plan states that "Burlington's downtown must be more than a cultural, retail and commercial center—it must be a neighborhood...To really become a neighborhood will require additional housing in

order to achieve a balance in the income levels served.”

VIA’s research discovered that the Westlake site was originally Urban Renewal land and, without affordable housing, is providing housing for the wealthy rather than the middle and low-income people who were displaced from this location. This past Monday a group of us met with the Mayor and his advisors, encouraging them to attend the gathering this afternoon. Our meeting was not adversarial. Both sides listened. Questions remained.

The meeting this afternoon will be in the same spirit. It is well located. St. Paul’s overlooks the Westlake property. Members of the research team will share their findings and will ask for a recommitment to affordable housing from the Mayor and city officials. Your presence at this action will signify that you are part of a community that puts its faith into action, that believes you cannot separate religion or spirituality from justice.

This was the message of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah writing in 800 BCE. When the people complained that their God was absent from the temple despite their keeping of the law and their righteous fasting, Isaiah tells them what Yahweh really cares about is not their sacrifices or adherence to the law. Only when they feed the hungry and house the homeless, when they bear the burden of the oppressed, will they hear God’s voice saying: “Here I am.” Only then will they experience the divine presence, the presence of love among them.

The same message echoes throughout Judeo-Christian scripture as it does in all the great wisdom traditions: “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” In the words of the Islamic prophet Muhammad: “What actions are most excellent? To gladden the heart of a human being. To feed the hungry. To help the afflicted. To lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful... That person is the most beloved of God who does most good to Her creatures.”

My own feeling is that it takes a lifetime to learn how to love, to learn that love in dreams is different from love in action, as the novelist Dostoevsky tells us in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Love in action isn’t always easy; it’s often very costly. Like grace, it’s not cheap. It takes time and patience. This afternoon it could take an hour and a quarter of your time. It will take patience to be part of the process, to listen to what it takes to promote justice and equity in the City of Burlington.

What’s in it for you and me? We may be drawn closer together as a community, made more responsive to the needs of our neighbor, and best of all, become better lovers.