

# Centered on Love

by James Anderson

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As a centering value of religious thought, love has a long history.

*“‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” - Mark 12: 28-34*

It is a fine sentiment, and it is good to remember the importance of love in any religious community. But it is also important to remember the demonstrable difference between what a religion preaches and how members of that religion practice that preaching. All religions created by humanity exhibit the amazing ability of humans to create rhetoric that far surpasses their ability to embody it; the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.

When the UUA Board delivered its charge to the Article 2 Study Commission<sup>1</sup> they said they believed *“that one core theological value, shared widely among UUs, is love.”* Given the extremely broad nature of the word ‘love’ and the huge variations found in its meanings, it is only natural to be curious about what the UUA Board of Trustees had in mind when they spoke of it. On what kind of love is this new radical restructuring of the foundational Principles of the UU faith centered? How will it be put into practice?

Is it the kind of “love” UU leadership showed, in practice, towards “dissidents” like Rev. Dr. Todd Eklof or Rev. Dr. Richard Trudeau or Rev. Dr. Kate Rohde? Ask yourself what kind of “love” this represents,

from a fellow UU minister regarding Rev. Eklof: *“a Euro-American man who lacks self-awareness, and has far more patriarchal and white supremacist notions in his subconscious mind than he realizes or will ever admit.”*<sup>2</sup>

Is it the kind of “love” that GA attendees showed, in practice, toward Board of Trustees candidates Jay Kiskel, Rev. Beverly Seese, or Rebecca Mattis? What kind of “love” did Rebecca Mattis experience at GA 2022, when she describes it this way: *“I expected to feel like a new seedling, heading into a rainforest for the first time – a great crowd of unfamiliar beings, some competitive, some cooperative. The challenge before me was to find enough light in which to grow, and I planned to find that light by connecting with others. Instead, what happened was that I was sprayed with Round-up. At least, that’s what it felt like.”*<sup>3</sup>

It is important to realize that what many of us understand as “love” may not be the same as the “core theological value” the Commission expects congregations and individuals to be accountable for. These examples inform us about how “love” may be put into practice, but we can also understand the Commission's meaning from its charge:

*“Our commitment to personal, institutional and cultural change rooted in anti-oppression, anti-racism, and multiculturalism values and practices is love in action.”*

This is a particular kind of “love” - an accountable, disciplined love:

*“We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love.”*

How this “accountability” will look in practice should give us pause when we observe how it has been applied to those who have been judged to be “out of covenant,” as was Rev. Dr. Todd Eklof, who was condemned from

pulpits, expelled from the ministers association and disfellowshipped from ministry, for merely expressing disagreement with the UUA. So it is fair to wonder how this “love in action” would interact with the free agency of the community of “beloveds.”

There is a progression here involving this particular definition of “love.” It is defined as the “core theological value” of UUism. This central, unifying value of UUism requires accountable “anti-oppression, anti-racism, and multiculturalism” in action. Therefore, UUism is redefined from a religion of aspirational principles affirming the “inherent worth and dignity of every person,” into an activist social justice political organization. This particular definition of “love” has become a powerful tool for redefining the entire structure of UUism and for the dismantling of the 7 Principles.

I remember a religious group back in the 70’s popularly known as the “Love Family.” Their kind of “love” was all-encompassing; you gave up all individuality and agency to join — all your worldly possessions, your friends and family and even your name, resulting in names like “Temperance Israel,” “Patience Israel,” etc... Of course, the name of the leader of this strongly covenantal community was “Love Israel.” What you got in return was being enveloped in a very, very tight knit community where you no longer had to use your critical thinking skills or make any difficult decisions about your life.

So, yes, ‘love’ is a word used, and misused, by many religious groups and is expressed in many ways in many kinds of relationships, some of which can be quite dysfunctional. It is sadly the case that some human relationships can devolve into an asymmetric kind of “love” that is often characterized by the “centering” in the relationship of a dominant partner and the “de-centering” of a submissive partner. The dominant partner

believes they define “love” for the relationship and expects the submissive partner to be obedient. Neither can be considered to be expressing or experiencing any kind of “love” that aligns with any of the 7 Principles.

It is beginning to seem that, given the punishment and excommunication of those who dare to question the general direction of the UUA, the word ‘love’ doesn’t really belong in the center of their diagram of values. Their intention in framing a “core theological value” is more apparent if we look to the Commission on Institutional Change’s study guide. They assert “anti-oppression work as a theological mandate of our faith.” A “theological mandate” expresses an “authoritarian/obedient” kind of relationship more than any kind of “love” that affirms and promotes the free agency of the “beloved.”

Actually I think a better “core theological value” than what the UUA is proposing is *compassion*. As Karen Armstrong says:

*“The one and only test of a valid religious idea, doctrinal statement, spiritual experience, or devotional practice was that it must lead directly to practical compassion. If your understanding of the divine made you kinder, more empathetic, and impelled you to express this sympathy in concrete acts of loving-kindness, this was good theology. But if your notion of God made you unkind, belligerent, cruel, or self-righteous, or if it led you to kill in God’s name, it was bad theology. Compassion was the litmus test for the prophets of Israel, for the rabbis of the Talmud, for Jesus, for Paul, and for Muhammad, not to mention Confucius, Lao-tsu, the Buddha, or the sages of the Upanishads.” - from The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness (2004)*

Compassion is a much better centering concept for a religious system based upon freedom, reason and tolerance. Especially, as the Dalai Lama expresses it, a compassion informed by “wise discernment:”

*“Skillful means can be understood in terms of the efforts we make to ensure that our deeds are motivated by compassion. Insight refers to our critical faculties and how, in response to the different factors involved, we adjust the ideal of non-harming to the context of the situation. We could call it the faculty of wise discernment.”*

This suggestion of compassion as a core theological value is in no way intended to support replacing the 7 Principles and 6 Sources with the set of “values” as proposed. It is rather intended to suggest that a core theological value, if we are going to determine one, for a religion based upon freedom, reason and tolerance, is much better illuminated by compassion as the Dalai Lama expresses it; a compassion deeply informed by “the faculty of wise discernment” that affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/article-ii-study-commission/charge>

<sup>2</sup> <https://philosophicalpenguins.files.wordpress.com/2019/10/mccartygadflyreview.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://fifthprincipleproject.org/2022/07/12/reflection-on-general-assembly-2022-by-rebecca-mattis/>