

A General Theory of Love¹

Rev. Martha Niebanck

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First Parish in Brookline

Reading: "Anatomy of Love" Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon (from A General Theory of Love)

"A human being has dual hearts—the first, a pulsating fist of muscle in the chest; the second, a precious cabal of communicating neurons that create feeling, longing and love. ..The meticulously crafted core of a neural network..learns from experience and transforms itself. ..Love alters the structure of our brains.

All of us, when we engage in relatedness, fall under the gravitational influence of another's emotional world, at the same time that we are bending his emotional mind with ours.

...Ongoing exposure to one person's limbic (patterns) does not merely activate neural patterns in another—it also strengthens them. Long standing togetherness writes permanent changes into a brain's open book. In a relationship, on mind revises another; one heart changes its partner. This astounding legacy of our combined status as mammals and neural beings is limbic revision: the power to remodel emotional parts of the people we love...Who we are and who we become depends, in part, on whom we love.

Sermon

(Before we start, I want you to know that I love being the minister here....I love co-ministry with Rev. Jim and I don't mind at all that some of you call us Pooh Bear and Tigger.)

Ten years ago this week I was ordained to the Unitarian Universalist ministry at Old Ship Church in

Hingham, MA. I was the first woman ordained by the Unitarian side of that family and the second by

¹Used with permission "Hi Peter, I took the term "professional human being" from the sermon that Ken Read Brown preached on his 10th anniversary of his ordination and my first day as his intern. I've heard a sermon from John Westin (sp?) in which he used the same term. and in which he wrote a hymn to the tune of #106. Here's my sermon with quotes from KRB included, below, in the body. Enjoy!!!
Martha

the Universalists. The Universalists ordained the Reverend Phebe Hanaford in 1868 and Julia Ward Howe played the organ on that day of firsts in post Civil War Hingham.

As I have thought about this anniversary, I have revisited my first day as an intern minister. It was one of those September days that have the heat of Summer but the light and shadows of Fall. I was ready with a minister's robe and a stole and the readings for the day clutched in my hand as I drove away from home feeling remarkably calm. I felt competent about noticing that I needed gas and pulled into the gas station with plenty of time to spare for the longish drive to Hingham.

I looked to the front seat to grab my purse and discovered the seat was empty, no purse. I turned the car around toward home, realizing that my calm was not really calm but rather a form of forgetful numbness to the grand fear that was beginning to crawl up my spine. I 'came to' and noticed that I was stepping into a ritual of transformation in which I would be changed fundamentally—because all of my relationships would be changed *fundamentally*.

I got to Hingham a little late and breathlessly shared my insight with Ken Read-Brown, the minister who was to be my mentor for the next five years. He paused in our journey down the center aisle of the Meeting House, looked at me with a face that could have been carved on Mount Rushmore and said, "***It's not too late to change your mind.***"

My body understood the fullness of the question. I took a breath and felt myself saying "Yes"—"Yes" to the full catastrophe of learning to be a professional minister. We continued down the aisle. I followed Ken Read Brown like a duckling behind a mother duck. I noticed the strength in his stride as he ascended the two flights of stairs to the high pulpit like an athlete.

That Sunday of our beginning together was the 10th anniversary of *his* ordination. He marked the day, as I have, by using readings and hymns from that ritual occasion of his ordination, and by reflecting on the meaning of ministry—much as I will do today.

To summarize the Reverend Ken Read-Brown's sermon on that day of my beginning, he preached that ministry has two dimensions—one, to help people experience the primary wonder of existence in its goodness and *awe-full ness*, and two, to practice the presence of love in the midst of suffering and celebration. Hear his words: "A minister chooses love, chooses to help make love a more palpable and embracing presence in the world, and then chooses to be open to the miracles that may then blossom." Ken concluded, after ten years of pot luck suppers and sermons, that ordained ministry is being *a professional human being*. In a sense, he added, ordained ministry is an occupation in which one is paid for "simply showing up."

I sat behind Ken as he said those words and I connected with the notion of *professional human being*, and realized that even without a syllabus I'd been working on that project for some time. I had, for much of my forty or so years been learning the difference between "showing off" and "showing up."

I mused, in the spaces between Ken's words about the journey that had brought me to this odd place, a Puritan high pulpit. I remembered that for me this question of what it means to be a human being begins with what it means to be a body, a body with consciousness, a body and a mind that transforms over time in community. In the space between Ken's words about ministry I remembered the first public prayer I ever spoke in a UU church as a member of the worship committee:

The Body is the Landscape of the Mind by Mel Bucholtz

The body is the landscape of the mind;
where the dramas of our early life
are still happening
or have become a kind of
rich preparatory engendering compost-
the vastnesses remembered

as fruitful fields, valleys, marshes,
and deserts of wisdom
standing behind us as we are here now
present in this way
in the moment of our lives.
It is a land
where the placid and awesome features
of the yet undiscovered wilderness
are wildly flowering from within themselves
for our unexpected future explorations.

And as we grow
out of our more infantile and fearful selves,
we wander into these unknown landscapes,
transformed into those sleek, feathered, scaly and wooly animals
we really are,
the ones we are both able and needed to be
to live in those wilder, more ancient,
unknown future parts of that farther
uncharted dancing, tingling, glowing
purple thunderous, gentle
and softly rivered terrain of ourselves.

I first heard this poem when I was in the midst of an earlier transition, the space in time between work that engaged with infants to work that engaged with adults as a family therapist. For nearly twenty years I'd been coaching parents of difficult babies—babies who couldn't sleep or eat, who cried all day with colic. I was a “professional human being” who knew how to use my body in concert with another body-how to hold an [infant] at just the right angle to bring the fragile new being into a state of just enough alertness so that she might find my face, my eyes. I learned to keep my face still and my voice quiet as she looked away to gather herself to turn toward me again.

There is usually a moment when our eyes connected in mutual gaze, pupils opening wider, eyes becoming moist, with a palpable “buzz” of connection felt in the solar plexus—a whole moment of welcome. This was a moment of unity in which human beings—parents, me, the baby were alive in the midst of what the experts call, “reciprocal mutual influence.” As a professional human being I instinctively and reliably knew how to minimize distress while maximizing joy—ecstasy really. We were engaged in a graceful dance of what the neonatologists call “mutual regulation.”

The transition from a career that rested in non verbal, reliable grace with heart opened and opening infants to being a non-anxious presence with scary, heart clenched adults who expected conversation, not rocking or peek a boo, was not an easy transition for me. In the midst of that difficult moment, I discovered I had cancer. The words of Adrienne Rich became a mantra as I learned to soothe myself with meditation and visualization: “There come times, perhaps this is one of them, where you have to take yourself more seriously or die.”

Poetry saved my life and carried me gently to seminary and the company of others in the process of becoming professional human beings. It was there that I read the biography of Thomas Merton, whose words were read at my ordination. His experience of suddenly seeing other human beings on the corner of 4th and Walnut in the center of the shopping district “shining like the sun” was akin to my shining moments of greeting newborn life. I am grateful to his putting into words what I know how to do and be- a person who can see others shining like the sun, humans incarnating the energy that has been at the heart of the universe since the big bang.

So what might I mean now when I ask myself what it means to be a “professional human being?” Now that I have been an ordained minister for ten years, what can I tell you about the nature of being human in community, about being human in history. After delivering 300 or so sermons, marrying 40 couples, offering roses to more than hundred babies and high school graduates, mourning with nearly fifty grieving families, being present at the death of a child and at the passing of many

elders, witnessing the fall of the World Trade Center in the company of other ministers, watching with shock and awe the war we are making in Iraq, and attending to a buzzing in my ear about global warming and catastrophic climate change, what do I have to say about what it means to be a professional human being in history?

If we were to pick up some heavy theological or psychological or philosophical books about what it means to be a human being, we would probably speak about human consciousness and the capacity for rational thought. There was a time when I thought that being rational and objective was my aspiration as a professional human being. Today I have set my sights a bit lower on the evolutionary ladder, if you will. On most days I aspire to be an adequate mammal.

In my longstanding and ongoing interest in the relationship of mind and body I have been following brain research that looks the relationship of feelings to physiology. While orthodox ministers might turn to the Bible to discover the nature of human beings, I put my trust in flesh and bone, PET scans, brains waves, and hormones. So what does this have to do with being a mammal you ask?

As I understand it, we humans have three brains-each a product of evolution. The oldest brain, the reptilian brain is an elaboration of the spinal cord. It controls breathing, swallowing, heartbeat, and simple visual tracking. The reptilian brain has a startle reaction that gives a swift reaction to noise or abrupt movement.

Early mammals evolved from small lizardish reptiles and developed another brain, the limbic brain, which is draped over the reptilian core. The limbic brain transformed the mechanics of reproduction and the orientation toward offspring: "Detachment and disinterest mark the parental attitude of the typical reptile, while mammals can enter into subtle and elaborate interactions with their young...Mammals form close-knit mutually nurturant social groups,-families and clans and tribes-in which members spend time touching and caring for one another." (25) Reptiles abandon their eggs, unhatched. Newborn reptiles are silent lest the sound of their vulnerability invite the attention of their

carnivore parents. Vulnerability is no asset to a reptile.

Mammals, on the other hand, vocalize to each other, sing, and play. Mammals cry in distress when separated from a parent or the pack. Mammals sing and coo and reach out with their voices when reunited. Mammals live in a sea of social interchange. Our limbic brains are adjusting to each other continuously—your facial expression is taken in by my eyes, translated into a feeling, translated into a thought and a facial expression in response. This back and forth tuning is called "limbic resonance." If I meet you and you are frowning, I am more likely to frown with you. We share our moods and we change each other with our moods.

Individuals, families, communities can have a *vibe*, an emotional mood, that creates a particular limbic resonance when we enter their system. Perhaps you know what I mean from your own experience. I often hear about people who can only stand to be [with] their family of origin for three days— tops, because the limbic resonance there is too powerful to resist. That was certainly true of my family of origin who had a preference for skeptical despair over joyful exuberant enthusiasms.

The newest brain, evolutionarily speaking, is the neo-cortex (from the Greek for "new" and the Latin for "rind" or "bark"). The neocortex is the largest of the three brains. "Speaking, writing, planning, and reasoning originate in the cortex. Our conscious experience of our senses, awareness and conscious control are seated in the neocortex.

Intention and abstraction, the ability to imagine "what if" arises from the neo-cortex. The words to describe the feeling states of the mammalian limbic brain come from the neo-cortex. Poetry helps the verbal neo-cortex shake hands with the kinesthetic limbic brain.

I have learned through the ordinary work of showing up with ordinary human beings in this extraordinary time in history that the so called highest achievements of human beings rest in the long and slow lap of mammal intelligence. My fear and my observation is that culture of fear and speed invites us into [the] reptilian brain efficiency of fight or flight behavior. However, because I was raised

in a family that prized skeptical despair, I need the optimism of partners like “Tigger” my co-minister, and my musician husband, Josef, who breathes in despair and breathes out joy with his instrument, and my poet friends, and my meditating colleagues, and you—a worshipping congregation.

What we hope for in ourselves, in our church, in our minister is mammalian presence, to bathe in the hormonal waters of limbic “tend and befriend” instead of brain stem “fight or flight”-to practice living with an open heart, a big laugh, the wordless presence of “keep’n on keep’n on” together. What we offer each other here is not mere intellectual commodity but rather, a place to learn the discipline of love- — the long time mutual regulation that comes when people choose to synchronize the pulse of their lives, learning to rest, to work, to make love, to play in predictable cycles.

The discipline of being a mammal takes lots and lots of time to develop a pattern that is grooved into the electro-chemical patterns of the limbic system. Perhaps it even takes generations to perfect. I believe it is never too late to *change your mind*.

Perhaps you can be encouraged in this story: The Reverend Carl Scovel has been my spiritual friend for nearly twenty years. He offered the charge to the minister at my ordination. His advice to me was to “*remember joy*.” He told a story about his family to illustrate the meaning of joy, joy that is neither happiness nor even satisfaction. As Carl stood in front of me in the high pulpit of Hingham, he took my hands and looked in my eyes, and remembered his liberation from a Japanese concentration camp in China. For a moment his face was transformed as his body remembered his mother’s voice saying the words of the prophet Isaiah, words that his family had repeated often in the dark times of their internment, words that protected them from the de-humanizing forces of evil and fear that can take over the heart of those in exile:

For ye shall go out with joy and be led forth with peace the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands:

The energy of joy was in his posture, his gaze, in his tone of voice- the joy that was promised in his family's nightly prayer had been carried across thousand of years of history, was now fully present in his voice and body as he spoke to me. He invited me to remember this joy whenever I forgot why I had said "yes" to ministry and thought I was involved in meaningless folly. My heart was open to receive the joy he expressed with his presence because I had taken the time to acknowledge and prepare to receive a transmission from his heart to mine on that first day of my internship with Ken. That moment of mutual regulation took time and plenty of it.

And so, on this auspicious occasion of the tenth anniversary of my ordination, I pass along that gift of joy to you, not in words or material goods, *not as the world gives to you*, but as a fellow mammal— in my joyful presence over time and in our joyful mammalian singing to each other, here and now. May it ever be so and we sing, *Joyful, Joyful*.