

Love Me Like A Rock:
A Sermon Towards Devotion
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker
Beacon UU Congregation
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"Twelve feet or so off the east edge of State Road 103, which runs north-south through the town of Newbury, New Hampshire (population 1,500 or so), there sits a square-ish brown-gray slab of rock roughly the height of a man. Its southern face is flat, nearly smooth, at a billboard angle toward the traffic, coming north.

About 30 years ago, across from the rock on the west side of the road, there sat a tidy white cedar-shingled house in whose backyard, as it is remembered, a dozen chickens pecked about. Their eggs made breakfasts (and a tiny sideline business) for a family named the Rules -- whose daughter Gretchen was pretty, smart, wistful, and 16.

There was a boy -- a shy boy, also wistful, also a farmer, whose name is forgotten today -- who pined for Gretchen Rule. He cast about for ways to tell her or show her -- without telling or showing himself -- then he hit upon the rock.

"CHICKEN FARMER, I LOVE YOU," he wrote on it, in eight-inch high, spray-painted letters, one moonlit, high-starred night -- or so the story goes. And the girl saw and guessed the author (though it was only, really, a guess) -- and the town and the passing motorists smiled, made their own guesses, and went on about their ways. The message endured for years, though brambles grew up to obscure it, and the letters, once so bold and white, began to fade. Gretchen Rule went away to Harvard, then on to life. The boy, whoever he was -- or is -- became a man. The rock grew into a relic, a love note out of time.

One night -15, perhaps 17 years ago (no one saw it happen, and no one today can say for sure) -- the brambles were cut away. And the message was repainted and renewed: "CHICKEN FARMER, I *STILL* LOVE YOU." The rock became a landmark. "It's your first left past Chicken Rock," the locals were wont to say. "Chicken," "love," and "farmer," were the first words one Newbury kindergartner -- today a teenager -- learned to read. And every two years or so, barely noticed, the letters would be freshened and the brambles cut away.

Then, late one April night, an unknown caller complained of "graffiti" to the New Hampshire Dept. of Transportation (or DOT). By nightfall the same day, a three-foot square of rust-colored primer was all that was left of a shy boy's long-ago love. The *Concord Monitor* offered its requiem: "Love Message to Chicken

Farmer No More." A week passed. Then with the coming of dawn on April 30, the new sun rose on New Hampshire's stubbornest love: "CHICKEN FARMER, I STILL LOVE YOU." The same message, the same eight-inch letters. But bolder this time: thicker-lettered, almost crude, and painted rather than sprayed. As though written by an angry and defiant hand.

In Newbury, the townspeople, inspired now as never before, took steps to assure that their landmark would live on. "A Petition for the Status Quo" they called it and filled it with 192 signatures in the space of a day. The DOT responded with a letter. The Chicken Rock's message would be forever safe. And somewhere, surely, a shy, middle-aged man must have smiled. " And, So ends our tale. [retold from "The Best Love Story of 1997, Yankee Magazine, Geoffrey Douglas]

To be sure, a veritable wellspring of sermons could erupt from the legend of the Chicken Rock...such as the penalty for defacing public property, the disappearing New England farm culture, the power of the petition, or the dilemma of kindergarten reading readiness! Yet, the theme that has emerged most clearly for me, like broad white paint strokes on granite, has mainly to do with the old love we've already experienced and known; and how this old love, defiant and resilient, even in the face of loss, can carry us forward along the twisting roadway ahead onto a path of devoted love now and in the future.

First, I'll tell you that one unromantic skeptic with whom I've shared the story of the Chicken Rock suggests that the farmer was downright pathetic to pine endlessly like he did for Gretchen Rule. To counter his grumblings, I propose that despite the Chicken Rock, or perhaps in light of it, we have no idea whether the farmer went on to love again. Most likely, he proceeded to marry and have a family. In my view, it is just too simplistic and cynical to presume that because he continues to defiantly affirm a love that has shaped him..."Chicken Farmer, I Still Love You"... that he is stuck in some pitiful time warp of unrequited affection.

I don't think he is pathetic. I believe he's brave. Because I believe it requires remarkable courage and faith to remember and affirm love, especially when it is embodied by someone beloved who has died or from whom we've become estranged in a broken or thwarted relationship. Reconnecting with old love often means reconnecting with old pain, loss, grief, disappointment, or anger, and this is a tough expedition over rough terrain.

Yet, by taking this journey, we discover that there is really no way to avoid loss and the resulting grief, just as Judith Viorst has made clear in her excellent book, Necessary Losses. She tells us, "The only way to avoid loss is to avoid attachments, but to do that is to avoid life, or at least a truly human life. The person who shuns close relationships, who never lets himself or herself care deeply about another, may succeed in avoiding the pain of disappointment, parting and loss.

But such a person also misses out on some of the deepest joys of life and love." The shy farmer with his devoted paintbrush reminds us of this, doesn't he?

In an increasingly fragmented world of wounded people (myself included), detachment is an ideal I don't easily trust, especially when its confused with enlightenment. Like the journalist Mark Matousek, many of us have spent years learning how to *attach* in a healthy way -- to root, embrace, abide, and join. And we'd likely concur with him when he writes, "Although this attachment does bring pain, I prefer it to disengagement."

In his essay exploring the emotional terrain of relationships, Matousek continues, "Sometimes you walk a mile with someone and that's all you get. A single mile, not five, and not the lifelong journey you'd hoped for; just a bounded stretch of road to share before it forks. We wish this didn't have to be, but since it does, what can we do but savor the mile, remember it well, and leave it with grace?" Surely, not all people in our pasts have loved us the way we deserve to be loved. Not everyone is full of reasons to delight in another. Truly, I don't expect that we'll all wish to travel back nostalgically along certain bumpy roads pitted by the crushed rock of neglect, ambivalence, or abuse. Sometimes, disengagement equals self-care and right relationship means no visible bond at all.

Yet, when it's safe for us to summon our courage to remember both the love and the sorrow, we unlock the meaning of the beatitude: "Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted." When we conjure up the face of someone we've loved (and perhaps, continue to love) or someone who has loved us (and perhaps, continues to love us) - a parent or grandparent, a partner, a wise teacher, a child, a sibling, the one who got away, or a friend -- we're given the opportunity to ponder what the other has meant to us - what she taught us; what he saw in us and hoped for us; why they forgave us; how he loved us or loves us still. And over time, we can experience deeper awareness, healing and comfort.

Let's consider Gretchen Rule, from our story, for a moment. We have no clue really how she might have been affected by the farmer's persistent and public declaration of love. For all we know, she considered her suitor an unnerving pest. On the other hand, if she's anything like many of us, Gretchen was uplifted by the recognition that she is lovable. And, aren't we all? By the same token, think of those people who are depending on each of us, right now, to reassure them that *they* are lovable; who are depending on each of us as a rock-solid landmark of devotion in their lives; those who might experience healing and comfort in this enduring love and in the knowledge that *we* still love *them* in spite of their failings, no matter what.

This Valentine's Day, as we approach the year mark of when we began to quarantine, self-isolate, and socially distance, our need to connect is still crucial,

precious, and necessary. Sheltering with loved ones has offered fresh challenges, perhaps new riches of connection or perhaps, an over-abundance of intimacy in a stressful time. Yet, when we do feel safe enough to invest or reinvest in our partnerships, despite past disappointments, challenges or irritants, we practice devotion at its truest and fullest expression.

In a fable from the Hasidic tradition, a discouraged man tells his Rabbi, "The feeling of love I have for my wife comes and goes. I used to love her more. What should I do?"

"Love her," responds the Rabbi.

"But you don't understand," pleads the man, "the feeling of love just isn't there sometimes."

"Yes, I understand," says the Rabbi, "if the feeling isn't there, that's a good reason to love her."

"But, how do you love when you don't love? When you're angry or resentful?"

"Love is a verb," answers the Rabbi. "It is choice. So, love her. Listen to her. Affirm her. Are you willing to do that?"

"I want to," admits the man, "but I am so afraid."

The Rabbi hits the proverbial nail on the head. Devotion, unlike duty, is a *choice* we make. Even more than that, it is path we can choose to walk, when possible; a path of abiding love beyond the personality of our partner or the circumstances of a particular day. In my work with couples, I drive this point home. I advise them: Be committed to the path of your relationship, to the growth. I tell them – you will experience the ecstasy of twilight AND the dull heat of noon – its all part of the path...walk the path, be partners ON the path, be devoted to the path itself.

David Deida, a popular teacher of spiritual intimacy, agrees. He encourages us to go wide and deep in our devotion and to focus on the path, not the human trappings of the person who walks alongside us. He echoes many of the sentiments in the reading "Sufficiency" you heard earlier by Rev. Elizabeth Tarbox when he writes: "Always surrender to the largest love you can. Don't get lost in pleasure. Surrendering to less than devoted love will ultimately lead to pain. He reminds us: There will be times your partner adores you and others when he or she, for one reason or another, doesn't like you very much. Neither acceptance or rejection lasts for long, but the path remains. Only love itself, the openness of being, is always true of your deepest heart, alive at your core. In any moment you can remember to feel it, embody it and offer it. But this takes practice."

Ah, practice...you knew there was a catch! Thich Nhat Hanh, the revered Zen Buddhist monk, has written the most touching and inspiring little book about

this subject called True Love, A Practice of Awakening the Heart. Of the many uplifting and illuminating ideas in this book, the one that has helped me the most on the devotional path is the four mantras. A mantra is a spoken affirmation that must be said in a state of grounded and centered concentration.

These mantras are so honest and intimate they may make you squirm, but they are powerful tools for devotion.

Mantra #1: Dear one, I am here for you. Hanh asks his readers: Do you have enough time to love?

Mantra #2: Dear one, I know you are here and it makes me very happy . Hanh asks: Do you consciously acknowledge your partner?

Mantra #3: Dear one, I know that you are suffering, that is why I am here for you. Hanh asks us: Are you willing to be present to your partner's pain?

Mantra #4: Dear one, I am suffering, please help." Hanh reminds us: In true love, there is no room for pride.

These mantras pierce my heart and they wake me up and I surely want to be awake in my most important relationships.

You may be wondering if I'm setting you up to believe in the ability for us humans to manifest the sacred love known in the religious vernacular as *agape*, a quality of unconditional love that persists even when no love is reciprocated. Not to worry....that's for valentines and storybooks. Although, we can move in that general direction on the path. Whether we are humanists or theists or pagans, whether we perceive the sacred as a transcendent deity, an indwelling Spirit, a fractal, a brisk wind, or something less definable, from time to time we encounter *agape*, and we are humbled precisely because we instinctively know its rarity, and that in its transforming presence, we come as near to wholeness as we're likely to get in this life.

In the words of theologian Paul Tillich: Agape accepts the other in spite of resistance; it suffers and forgives. It seeks the personal fulfillment of the other... And when despair threatens joy and courage, a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying, "You are accepted. You are accepted." I'd like to believe that on the byways of our imperfect lives, a soulful presence marks the route at regular intervals with that boldly painted legacy, "You are accepted...I Still Love You...and I always will, infinitely."

In *agape*, we are accepted by a universal sacred love. But what about unconditional love of self? Perhaps. How can we practice devotion if we do not love ourselves? Or, at least not loathe ourselves. Yet, consider how often our attempts at *self-love* are unrequited. We beat ourselves up for frailties, and the brambles of unworthiness can grow to obscure a healthy self-acceptance.

So, this Valentine's Day morning, let's resolve further to establish the rock-solid monuments to *self-care* we each deserve. With the message, "I am worthy and lovable" in eight-inch high letters, painted, not sprayed. And then, let's slow down a bit in order to catch more than quick glimpses of that monument, as we race along the speedways of modern life. Perhaps, more than any other vow we make, the pledge to love ourselves will require the most maintenance and faith, so that the empowering message..."I Still Love You"... remains fresh and legible.

The Rev. Elizabeth Tarbox, in her piece, *Legacy*, wrote these words while grappling with her own terminal cancer diagnosis: "Maybe love does not die," she wonders," is not obliterated by hurts or anger. Maybe love does not dissipate, or sink like silt to dry out in the sun. Maybe love is not wasted or silly, or found to be something other than love...Oh, my dear, do not despair. Although we are broken, the love that spills out of us has joined the love that circles the world and makes it blessed."

This morning, may we pause long enough to remember old love that spills over from the past and blesses us. And may we feel the power, the challenge, and the nourishment of love, both human and divine; May we be grateful for devotion that proclaims itself stubbornly in rustproof paint and endures rock solid by the roadside, new love full of fresh promise, even love that is merely a memory, or love obscured by the brambles of pain.

And, in doing so, may we each hear these soul-nurturing words in the voices of our individual choosing, and may we return them in kind, "Oh my dear, do not despair...I Still Love You."

So may it be. Blessed be and Amen.

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