

The Great Big Love Story  
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*[The reading for this service was from a chapter entitled “Love” in the book “Soul Stories” by Gary Zukov. The following is from that reading and is part of a larger description of the interconnectivity in nature, which Zukov describes as a love story.]*

The love story of a redwood tree: *“It loved the earth and the sky...it loved the birds that nested in its branches, the animals that sheltered beneath it, and the insects that fed from its bark. They were one family, full and complete.”*

That’s nice. But it’s much easier for a tree to love everything it is connected to, than for a human to love *all* the other humans we’re connected to, isn’t it? As someone once said, and I know you’ve all heard this quote a million times: “I love humanity, it’s people I can’t stand”.

Ain’t that the truth.

In other words its easy to love the big picture. Is there anyone here who would say they do *not* want the best, most loving, world for all humanity? We want peace. We want justice, equity and compassion in human relations. It says so right here (front of order of service). And we

want an end to evils like hunger, homelessness, racism and war. It says that right here. (back of order of service)

Actually, is there any congregation in this country where you would find people who would say they *don't* want those things? I doubt it. In any case, the majority, at least, actively pray and each in their own way, speak out for the Good, and for an end to those societal dis-eases. And also try to do their part, some more than others.

We spiritual or religious people, we people in community, *love* humanity. But most of us can't stand a good number of the people we've run into, even a good number of the people who have been close to us. At times.

Recently I have had occasion to make a list of all of the people I have ever been angry at, or had resentments toward. I am in a women's spirituality study group in which we are looking at this. We're evaluating our lists, and unpacking the experiences attached to the names.

There are 212 people on my list.

The list begins with my first conscious memory at the age of 3, with Betsy Warren. Betsy is standing before me, and in the sweetest of voices, is offering me a large, silver spoon full of sparkling sugar, like some kind of sweet communion. I open my mouth, in goes the spoon, my mouth closes over it. And my teeth crunch down... on sand. I spit.

Ahh the arrival of consciousness. Gritty, surprising, very real, and at first bite, rarely sweet.

I am not actively angry with Betsy Warren today, but that's probably because others have replaced her, just like the leaves on a tree. They may not have been there at the beginning but others have carried on her work.

For me this first memory has turned out to be a prototype. Someone did me wrong. Something that should have been good, turned out to be bad. Life was supposed to be sweet, it's bitter. I was duped. *Stupid me.*

At the end of the anger and resentment list is finally, and perhaps most importantly, the self. At the end of any run of anger (and anger does get on a roll doesn't it?) when we are being honest we usually find we are angriest at ourselves, because that's who we're left with, especially if we've kicked all the people on our lists out of our circle of love.

At those times of self loathing it is perhaps wise to say this prayer, once spotted on a bumper sticker: "Lord, help me to see myself the way my dog sees me."

We all know it is only the dogs of the world that love unconditionally. And some cats. And now we can add to the list, the trees.

It's much easier to picture a tree as part of a big love story. I mean trees don't hurt each other. They don't disinherit each other, or suddenly stop talking to one another. They don't call each other names, or judge each others wardrobe, or kick each other out of the forest. They don't lie, cheat, steal, or abandon each other in times of adversity. Neither do they beat up on the smaller, weaker ones. They don't make wars, and they don't hate each other for the color of their bark.

Trees have it easy really, despite having to stand around in the middle of winter naked to the wind. They know who they are and they know how to be with each other and work together within all of the elements of nature. This is their job, and they do it beautifully.

I think this should be our job as humans, as well. Don't you? Why can't we all just work together for the common good?

My guess is you at least have your times when you're just as disappointed in the great human love story as I am. To my resentment list I could, and did, add not just individuals but whole quantities like: the church I grew up in, the government, the Republican party, the Democratic party, people who...

And yet we don't give up do we? On that big love story? Not if we're here. We have a dream of that great love, that great interconnectivity, in our hearts or we wouldn't be here, right here in this room.

Religion it seems to me is the place where we get to dream the biggest dreams for humankind. And a religious home is a place we come into hopeful that it will be a place of belonging. A place where we are loved, where love is present in the air, and where we are accepted for who we are.

And then maybe, at its best, if we can make a little ecosystem of love here, maybe we can take it on the road, show it to the world, affect the world, that big bad world that is far from a workable love story.

So what happens when this, one's spiritual home becomes part of the Great Disappointment. When betrayal, and abandonment, and meanness, and anger happen, even here?

Well it hurts, really really deeply.

But I would say that it is all part of the big human love story. Our work is different from the trees. May be our work, here in spiritual community is to uncover our interconnectedness and learn to appreciate it. For us maybe our interconnectivity cannot be fully taken advantage of it until it becomes conscious.

Maybe our job is to learn how to work, and love, within our imperfections. Maybe our work is simply to learn how to better love each other, love ourselves, and love the world.

I told you about my list of 212, and growing. I said that we in my group are unpacking the ways our anger is connected to experiences with these people on the list. What I didn't say was that after that the next step was to look at ourselves. To see what part we ourselves have had in keeping the energy of ill-will alive. And then from there, and we haven't gotten here yet, we will look at the topic of forgiveness. Yikes.

I'm going to tell you a little bit about what we're noticing so far. And I say "we" because in the group we seem to be noticing that no one is totally unique in their humanness. The pattern might be arranged a little differently but the threads seem to be the same. Usually someone, like Betsy, hurts me. Often it feels like a betrayal or an abandonment to me. At root I felt alone, unloved, sometimes invisible or feeling worthless.

I never called it these things. For one I didn't want to admit any of that. So, I didn't know that I felt all those things. It was part of the root system I have uncovered in this process.

Then I've discovered, by looking at this root system, that this character in the world, called me, has built a case against each of these 212

people. “That should never have happened, it was wrong. They were wrong. Here are all the reasons why”.

And you know what? Some of them were wrong. Not all of them. Some things have happened, a lot worse than sand in the mouth, to me, as I’m sure to you, that never should have happened. I was innocent. I was a child. So what was my part? How am *I* to blame? Well I’m not to *blame*, but I had a part in what you could call the ongoing war. I set up a kind of Berlin wall in my mind and they’re on one side and I’m on the other. And I would tell my story of woe, and build a case against them to others. The bad, and the good. I was triumphantly the one in the right. And this felt good because I felt so wrong much of the time. They “*made me feel*” so wrong.

The problem is the kind of feeling good that comes from seeing others as the bad guy is like a drug. The initial satisfaction wears off and then you need another hit. And then what would happen is someone in my present life would start mysteriously to take on an awful lot of the qualities of someone in my past. And the cycle begins all over again.

I protected myself through anger, and most especially self righteous thinking.

I could not move for a long time past the point of: this was wrong and it never should have happened. Because it shouldn’t have! And many a

friend and counselor has validated that. But I worked on letting go. I said this was wrong what they did, but I don't want it to run my life, so I'll move on.

Some of these people on my list are of course family members. With them I took the high road. The internal monologue turned to something like this: This person will probably never change. But I can do the right thing around him or her. Be cool, calm and collected on the phone, hold a part of myself back, to protect myself. After all they are not capable of seeing their own actions or ever admitting to them.

What I did not see until last week is that the high road is a very cold place. Up there I have been withholding real warmth and love from the people who are part of my "tree". I have spent years questioning their ability to love me, and it is I who have been withholding love from them.

And how might that have affected our little spiritual ecosystem? For now I'm just sitting with that knowledge. I don't know what I'm going to do with it yet. It's enough to have to see it.

The reason I continue on with this gritty work is that I have a glimpse of the inner freedom waiting at the end of the road. I realized that I, who have always thought of my self as strong, and I am, as outspoken, and I am,

as no one's lackey, and I'm not, have in fact lived behind the identity of victim.

When you think about it, whenever any one of us lives in that world of good guys and bad guys, or the world of: *I was hurt and he's the reason why*, or of *xy or z happened to me and that is why I will live like so*, we've created the edifice of victim. We might be the strongest, angriest, most articulate, even successful person in the world but we're still living behind that definition.

And, I see that I'm playing God in that role, oddly enough. Not the kind of God I actually believe in today, but the kind that seems to persist out there in the collective consciousness: the one that pulls the strings and manipulates the players on the stage. When I am in the victim mode I am determined that I must make my world look and act the way I need it to look and act.

But as we come to see it, just to see it, as we come to consciousness, the whole edifice starts to crumble. And I have noticed that life then becomes very sweet. And every day, for at least a good part of the day I feel good. Truly good.

Speaking of feeling good. I want to tell you a story of a memory that came back to me in doing this work. The last time I talked about myself in here I told you that I spent my twenties as a radical political activist. Activism was my religion. Then I burned out. Politics for me was not spiritual enough, it did not feed my soul. My soul needed feeding badly.

Everything I've described to you about good guys and bad guys in my personal life was of course present in relationships in my activist life, and that was painful. So I turned inward, took a break.

My journey inward began with yoga. I started working with a woman named Hannah, in Chapel Hill N.C. where I was then living. She had the softest, sweetest voice. It's embarrassing to admit this now, actually it's painful to admit, that I found her soft loving voice repellant.

It sounded so sugary sweet to me. I didn't trust it. So I'd lie there in the semi darkness as she led us through a meditation, trying to overlook how nice she was, and telling myself, I suppose, that I was doing this yoga thing just to learn how to relax a bit so I could go back out into the fray a stronger and more centered person.

Nowadays I can look back and feel horribly sad that a (26 year old) person would have to belittle someone for being soft and loving.

In the end it was Hannah's voice that kept me there, and in fact it was her voice that drew me in to a whole new way of life, whether I wanted to acknowledge it or not. I understand now that it was her voice that promised me something I had always wanted so much but had become certain by the age of 26 was not real. And so when I heard it I was ready to devalue it, and see it as "less than" voices out there in the world that were powerful and commanding.

Hannah the yoga teacher was the first person in my life to actually, actively, physically lift up into my consciousness the "big love story". She was teaching love. In her voice was the sound of the most elemental of knowledge, the positive force which underlies our existence.

She made love visible to me, and yet she never had to use the word once. When we thought we were learning shoulder stands and head stands we were learning how to gentle ourselves, how to listen to ourselves, how to love ourselves.

And, when I began to gentle toward myself, to love myself, I began to grieve and mourn. I would get into a posture and just weep. My life cracked open. I didn't understand it then. And sometimes it felt like hell. But I kept going back. I knew I needed this more than anything I'd ever had before. And gradually, actually right away, for brief moments. I began to feel good.

*I felt good.* I felt better than I had in years, maybe ever. Love, quite simply, feels good.

I think this might be the core of my message to you today: There's no getting around it. If we're going to learn to love each other, and ourselves, and this world, and I hope we're after the creation of a more *loving* world, in our search for justice and peace and an end to social ills, then let's face it, we're gonna have to learn how to feel good. The good kind of feeling good. We're gonna have to be able to handle it. I know it's a tough assignment folks.

There's good and bad news about this "feelin' good stuff".

The bad news is that feeling good, really good, I mean deeply, unconditionally good is hard work. Of course people like me who think anything worthwhile needs to be REALLY really difficult might think this is good news.

People like me, and I suspect there are more of me out there, don't seem to trust feeling good. Not after feeding on sand sandwiches much of our lives. Not after so much disappointment.

And when it comes to the world situation. Well! Many of us would rather feel bad. Because when we feel bad we know at least we are serious,

and determined and we care about the world. Because the world is a pretty bad place and it needs us to feel bad for it.

I mean if I run around like a happy idiot I'm forgetting the grave seriousness of what condition our condition is in. Someone might think that I'm uncaring, thoughtless, mindless. Worse, saccharine.

But the really good news is: Unconditional love, love without conditions, love that doesn't give itself only if the other person meets our requirements, that kind of love, the love that just IS, is the meta condition of life. It is the underlying truth. And we discover it, get a glimpse of it, feel, in fact, the amazingly sweet taste of it as soon as we work through just one core resentment toward another. I'm sure I'm not the only one who knows this.

It's not enough to know it though. It really takes constant awareness and work. Because that list has a weird way of growing otherwise as those doppelgangers take their place in the world. The past becomes the present very easily.

But let me get back to the good news, I keep trying to make this harder.

Love is just there. It just is. We can't change that. It's the hard drive of our existence. No, it's more than that it's the creative energy that wired

the hard drive. No matter what we do, no matter how distrustful of it, we can't change that fact. We *are* part of the Great Love Story.

Do you know the words to this gospel tune? I won't try to sing it for you: "*Feeling good, feeling good, I've got love in my heart and my soul and I feel good. I've got joy down in my heart I can't explain, oh I got to tell everybody,(clap, clap) I got to tell everybody (clap, clap) I feel good, good, good. Feelin' good.( One clap).*" The phrases each end emphatically, sometime with two hard claps, finally one. As if to say: And that's it. Those words have been running through my head all week as I write.

Would we really want to try to change the world, or anyone around us out of any other place than that of feeling good? Out of anything but a deep joy down in our hearts? As a matter of fact, who am I to even THINK OF wanting to change anyone *else* when I've got 212 resentments I've still got to finish unpacking.

So what if we can't explain why there's joy when there's still so much that's wrong in our world. That's the mystery of life! That's the great love story running through our veins. And we can't change that, hard as we do try.

So let us take, eat, be in conscious communion, *conscious*  
communion, with that great unconditional love that I believe is what gives us  
the renewed energy day after day to keep hoping for true community.

-end-