

# “The Size of Our Souls”

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So, do we mean it?

Do we really hold to be true  
the words that have just rolled off our tongues—  
that there is to be found—  
out there, in here, surely somewhere—  
more love and more hope, more peace and more joy?<sup>1</sup>

That is the question the season of Advent invites us to answer.

In defiance of shopping malls bedecked with lights  
and Hallelujah Choruses blasted through speakers overhead,  
these four weeks of waiting are, in the Christian calendar, a call to quietly  
contemplate  
our capacity to find more of the things this world so desperately needs.

Such a season might be a helpful thing for all of us, right about now.

As December days grow shorter,  
as we light candles in the darkness,  
this season of invites us to find and to hold  
the still point at the centre of our lives,  
as we look again, or for the very first time,  
into the heart of who we are.

A story is told of the theologian Bernard Loomer,  
who in his later years was a member  
of the UU congregation in Berkeley, California,  
where he hosted discussions of theology each week  
following Sunday services.<sup>2</sup>

Somewhere along the way, he would routinely ask those gathered:  
“What is the size of your soul?”

This wasn't an idle question, or one to be answered for all time.

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<sup>1</sup> The hymn just before the sermon was “There’s More Love Somewhere,” and goes on to say there is more peace, hope, and joy somewhere, as well.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Hardies, “Love the Contradictions,” *UU World Magazine*, Summer 2007.

It was, though, his central concern  
and the key to his theology.

To make his point—  
to show the spaciousness he intended with the word—  
he would scribble out S-I-Z-E,  
with grand, capital letters and generous dashes.

When called on to explain himself, he would say:

By S-I-Z-E I mean the capacity of a person's soul,  
the range and depth of [your] love,  
[your] capacity for relationships.

I mean the volume of life you can take into your being  
and still maintain your integrity and individuality,  
the intensity and variety of outlook you can entertain  
in the unity of your being  
without feeling defensive or insecure.

I mean the strength of your spirit  
to encourage others to become freer  
in the development of their diversity and uniqueness.

I mean the power to sustain more complex and enriching tensions.

I mean the magnanimity of concern  
to provide conditions that enable others to increase in stature.

What is the size of our souls, indeed.

How do we even begin to measure the depth of our love,  
the strength of our spirit, or the volume of life we can take in?

How are we to gauge the capacity of our hearts  
to hold more than they already do?

Now, these are, of course, spiritual considerations.

Matters of the heart that are the real work of being human,  
the day-in-and-day-out work required  
for living well and loving well in human community.

Yet, these are not concerns that can be tacked on to the end of one's to-do list—  
the kinds of things we get around to,  
once our chores are checked off and our errands done.

Expanding and increasing our capacity for love  
is our true work in this world, and, at the end of the day—  
and more importantly, at the end of our lives—  
it will be the most enduring measure  
of how we have spent our time on this earth.

Regardless of the details and demands on our time,  
whether we answer phones, teach calculus, or clean washrooms,  
our great task in this life is to move through our day  
seeing these things as the sacred opportunities they are  
to bring more peace, love, hope, and joy into this world.

Don't be fooled. It's hard work.

But it is work that is real and worthy of all that we give to it.

Fortunately, as A. Powell Davies reminded us, over half a century ago,  
this “life is just a chance to grow a soul.”

And that's what this is really all about—  
about our capacity to develop our spiritual core—  
to cultivate in our very human hearts  
ever-deepening bonds with the world around us.

To grow a soul is to grow in love.

Yet, I do wonder, at times, about the limits of love,  
and despair that perhaps the heart can only handle so much, after all.

I often wonder at our actual capacity for love and for life,  
and question whether we—you, and most certainly I—  
adequately yearn, with all our being,  
to see more love and peace, and hope and joy on this earth.

I wonder because, it just seems,  
by now that, maybe...,  
we should have so much more to show for our efforts.

Yet, even in my moments of greatest despair,  
in the face of what seems endless violence and calculated rage in the world,

in view of our sometimes willful neglect  
of the covenant we share with all of life,  
I still trust that there is a surplus of love to be found  
if we're willing to open our hearts and learn from each other.

This is exactly what Robert Fulghum did  
when writing his book *True Love*.

He searched high and low for tales of love lost and found,  
and then teased out their meaning for us all.

His approach was simple and direct.

He made his way through the coffee bars and public markets of Seattle  
with a bright, cheery sign that read: "Tell me a love story  
and I'll buy you a cup of coffee and make you famous."

He asked that the stories not be ones people had heard or read,  
but ones that they had actually lived through themselves.

People were, understandably, reluctant, at first.

They'd "roll their eyes and laugh and say they had a love story all right,  
but [that] it wasn't short and it [certainly] wasn't sweet."

With a little encouragement, a bit of time, and a jolt of caffeine, though,  
folks opened their hearts, and their stories poured forth.

Curious about his little sign,  
crowds would gather round and listen to one another's tales,  
sometimes with applause, and sometimes with standing ovations.

The shortest of the stories on love belonged to a waifish little girl,  
who was sucking her thumb and holding a yellow blanket to her face.

When Fulghum asked, "Do you love your blanket?"  
the little girl nodded her head, "yes."

When he asked, "Does your blanket love you?"  
the little girl shook her head and impatiently said, "No, of course not."

Fulghum tells the story of a Sicilian restaurant in his neighbourhood—  
a place that is always packed—in no small part  
because of a simple sign on its wall that reads:

“We reserve the right to serve only those in love,  
those who have been in love, or those who want to be in love.”

He reports that, “It’s hard to feel alone in the atmosphere created by this sign. . . .  
Service has never been refused [to anyone],  
the sign is inclusive.

Sometimes, I think that maybe we could use a sign like for the congregation,  
one tacked up near the entrance for all to see—  
a word of welcome  
to all who have wrestled with the wonders and the woes of love,  
a universal invitation to the weary and the worn out,  
to those drunk on love’s bliss  
and those sobered by its bittersweet end.

The truth is that we need all the love stories we can find.

To make sense of our very being,  
to grow our own souls,  
to heal hearts broken by the hard realities of our days,  
we need to be reminded of the complexities of life and of love.

This is one of the greatest gifts we offer to one another  
in a community such as this: stories—  
stories of the one that got away,  
the one that makes our hearts sing,  
the ones that have made us to be more than we could ever be alone.

Stories of our surprise that we could ever love our children or students the way we  
do.

Stories about the people who have loved us into wholeness,  
even when, and especially when, our world was falling apart.

Stories of our despair, our loneliness, and our loss.

Stories that teach us that we are connected  
in our struggle and our suffering,  
in our joy and in our hopes.

Stories that help heal our world.

Fulghum reminds us that:

“The only thing constant about love is its universality.  
[And] the only thing universal about love is its inconsistency.”

Love causes pain, cures pain, and, sometimes, is a pain.

The two eventually go together.  
As he puts it: “. . . every love story has an unhappy ending, sooner or later.”

And, that—that bittersweet reality at the heart of our existence—  
that our lives and all that we love are fragile—  
is what binds us together more than we often acknowledge.

The dual reality that we live and love,  
and that we will, in time, almost certainly lose what is most precious to us,  
can lead us into despair or can lead us more deeply into love.

So, choose love.

When I conduct memorial services,  
I often turn to the ancient words of Helveti of Rome, who wrote:

‘Tis a fearful thing to love what death can touch.  
To love, to hope, to dream, and oh to lose!  
A thing for fools, this Love,  
But a holy thing, to love what death can touch.

In the face of so much fragility,  
it is a wonder to me that we endure as much as we do.

That, somehow, our hearts, so often,  
find the capacity to open anew after a great loss  
to what we know will, one day, almost certainly bring us pain.

The poet Louise Gluck captures this quandary by wondering:  
“Why we love what we will lose?”

Her answer: “Because there is nothing else to love.”<sup>3</sup>

The late UU minister Forrest Church,  
spent the last few months of his life writing on his two key themes of love and  
death.

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<sup>3</sup> Gregg Levoy, *Callings: Finding and Following an Authentic Life*, p. 282.

He writes:

When I was young, I thought death took courage.  
I was wrong. Dying may take courage,  
but death requires little courage at all.

It is love that requires courage,  
because the people we love most may die before we do.

Dare to love and we instantly become vulnerable. . .

At such moments the courage to love is nothing less  
than the courage to lose everything we hold most dear.

Love another with all our heart  
and we place our hearts in jeopardy,  
one so great that the world as we know it can disappear  
between the time we pick up the telephone and when we put it down. . .

Every time we give our heart away,  
we risk having it dashed to pieces.

Fear promises a safer path:  
refuse to give away your heart and it will never be broken.  
. . . armored hearts are invulnerable.

We can eliminate a world of trouble from our lives  
simply by closing our hearts.

We do not and cannot possess the ones we love,  
for we hold them on loan.

This hard truth makes the courage to love  
also the courage to lose.

And, I would add, that it makes it all the more astounding  
that we open our hearts, as often and as well as we do,  
especially when we already have some idea  
of what we're getting ourselves into.

That's what most moved me in the story about the turtle

that I shared with you earlier.<sup>4</sup>

Fully aware that she would likely be required to care for Lilly the Turtle for the better part of the next two decades, and long after Emilie had gone off to university, the mother still decided that she was up for the adventure, one-way love and all.

Over thirty-eight years, she had lost and learned and grown her own soul just big enough to take a second chance.

Friends, there is more love to be found.

There is more hope, and peace, and joy, as well.

There is more to be found than our hearts can possibly hold.

So, let us give ourselves to growing our hearts, that when we're asked the size of our soul, we can point to our legacy of love.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup>The story was of a woman looking back to when she, as a child, wanted a turtle as a pet, but didn't do enough to care for it—or appreciate that it would live a very long life. As an adult, when her own child wanted a turtle for a pet, she was willing to embrace the long-term commitment required to take care of the turtle.