

## What Do I Love? Gifts 2<sup>©</sup>

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### Elephant Sculptor Story (as told by Easwaran Esnath )

In ancient India, there lived a sculptor renowned for his life-size statues of elephants. With trunks curled high, tusks thrust forward, thick legs trampling the earth, these carved beasts seemed to trumpet to the sky. One day, a king came to see these magnificent works and to commission statuary for his palace. "What is the secret of your artistry?"

The sculptor quietly took measure of the monarch and replied, "Great King, when with the aid of many men I quarry a gigantic piece of granite from the banks of the river, I have it set here in my courtyard. For a long time, I do nothing but observe this block of stone and study it from every angle. I focus all my concentration on this task and won't allow anyone or anything to disturb me. At first, I see nothing but a huge and shapeless rock sitting there, meaningless, indifferent to my purposes, utterly out of place. It seems faintly resentful at having been dragged from its cool place by the rushing waters."

"Then slowly, very slowly, I begin to notice something in the substance of the rock. I feel a pre-sentiment ... An outline, scarcely discernible, shows itself to me, though others, I suspect, would perceive nothing. I watch with an open and a joyous, eager heart. The outline grows stronger. Oh, yes, I can see it! An elephant is stirring in there!"

"Only then do I start to work. For days flowing into weeks I use my chisel and mallet, always clinging to my sense of that outline, which grows ever stronger. How the big fellow strains! How he yearns to be out! How he wants to live! It seems so clear now, for I know the one thing I must do: with utter singleness of purpose, I must chip away every last bit of stone that is not elephant. What then remains will be, must be, elephant."

What do I love? This is the second in a sermon series examining a spiritually mature way to live as a Unitarian Universalist. The first sermon, examined the topic

*Who am I*, reminding us the importance of truly knowing ourselves, as well as being open to the transient nature of who we are. The second aspect of living mature spiritual life is exploring what we truly love.

The Chinese love tea. They are tea aficionados perhaps in the same way that Seattleites love coffee and Wisconsinites love cheese. The Chinese have a saying about teapots. After 100 years of daily use, the pot becomes thoroughly seasoned. You need only pour hot water into the pot, and the pot itself will make tea.

There is a truth in this for us. When we do what we love, again and again, our life comes to hold the fragrance of that thing. When we hold something in our hands day after day our hands conform to the shape of what we have held. We become what we have cared for; our lives are shaped by what we love. Because of this we can say that all we are is a result of what we have loved.

Self-awareness and being alert on the spiritual journey, the journey of life, is crucial. Anything we encounter in our lives that we have not named as sacred or useful, we simply ignore. As a result we may spend a great deal of our lives asleep, oblivious to most of the universe. This is why all great spiritual teachers have at least one story about remaining awake and alert, and the importance of paying attention. It is hard to stay awake and alert and open to life's possibilities when we are engaged in mind or soul numbing activities.

But when we encountered those things that we truly love, we become awake, alive. We open ourselves to the gifts of wisdom and beauty of these things, because of our deep love for them. So then we ask ourselves what do we open up to? What do I open up to, what am I vulnerable to receiving the grace of blessing from? What are the things that I find sacred in life? If I were to make a list of those things, what would they be?

For some of us it might be a simple task to list the things we love, and to list the things we find sacred and pay attention to in our lives. But for others it is not this straightforward. Some of us have been taught, and programmed to like the things that other people like, and to love the things we are "supposed" to love. For instance when I was a little girl, I was expected to like dresses and lacey things and Barbie dolls. There was pressure in the family, as well as from school, society and the media to reward me for liking the things I was supposed to like. Somehow I resisted. Then as now I preferred pants to dresses. Then as now I preferred 100% cotton to lace. It turns out I did have one doll that I liked. She was an orphan doll. I found her in the alley. Most of her hair had been torn out. What remained were very short tufts of hair. And she was grubby. Some of the dirt had become permanent and there were smudges

that my cleaning couldn't remove. But I did love that doll and took her everywhere. Somehow I knew that because there was a place for her in my heart, I in my own scruffiness would find a place in someone else's heart. Which I did, thank you Maren Outwater.

Finding out what we truly love, not what we've been told to love or conditioned to love or rewarded for loving is important work. Some of us come from families where the truth was not always told fully, or certain things weren't discussed. These situations provide roadblocks, not insurmountable, but roadblocks nonetheless towards finding what we truly love. Sometimes we cannot get to what we really love because our eyes and thus our hearts are misdirected.

Janelle grew up with an alcoholic father. Now with five children and a demanding career, she often feels overwhelmed and exhausted by her life. She is always taking care of something or someone, and she resents that she has to work so hard for so little emotional reward. Just as she did with her alcoholic father, she is always watching for what needs to be done, what tasks are required, how to make sure everything and everyone is taken care of. Eventually Jan's feelings that she was missing something important, led her to seek out a spiritual director.

She worked on issues in her childhood and noticed how the pain of alcoholism in her family of origin contributed to both her compulsions and her weariness. But something else also began to emerge in Janelle. She began to show signs of being a playful, creative woman. She realized just how rarely she allowed herself to nurture her artistic spirit or impulses. She had always thought of her father as the artist in the family. It was her job to clean up the messes that he left behind.

Jan began to entertain the possibility of listening more closely to her own creative impulses, but she was skeptical of finding the time to do anything about it because she was so darn busy. And yet, a funny thing happened. About a month later she began taking a watercolor class two evenings a week at a community college. When she talked to her spiritual director about this her eyes lit up and she had a glow about her. She said, "When I'm painting, I feel something deep in my body, a joy, a happiness I didn't know I had. These may not be great paintings - I just love doing them so much. I lock myself in my room for hours, and no one is allowed to bother me. I'm just letting myself go. I'm having so much fun."

The more Janelle painted, the more she shifted her awareness. She no longer watched like the child of an alcoholic. Now she saw with the eyes of a painter. Instead of always watching for responsibilities, now she also watched for colors, lines, textures, and shapes. She had shifted her inner language; she was now seeking what

she loved. If you shift attention in your life, how will you see differently? How will you hear differently?

The center of gravity unifies everything. In our daily lives, whatever we love becomes our center of gravity. When we love something, we feel the truth of it we touch its deepest nature. Our love breaks it open and reveals its secrets. What we choose to love is very important, for what we love leads our eyes, ears, and hearts on a pilgrimage that shapes the texture of our lives.

Think back to when you were a kid, what were you supposed to like? What were you pressured to love? Is that really who you are and what you love? When we do this work we encounter what we were supposed to love, what we were supposed to do, how we are supposed to be perfect and more spiritual and more successful and on and on.

Sometimes we may have said we loved something in order to fit in, impress friends, be part of a group, but that will not help us now. When, knowing who we truly are, we are able to truly discern what we love and choose those things that we truly love we will grow in our spiritual maturity.

Not only that, when we find what we truly love, we find not just our center of gravity, our center of unity, that which hold us together, we also find courage. I think of that young woman, Malala Yousefzi, who was shot by the Taliban because of her belief that women and girls should be educated. She loves to learn. She loves knowledge. This love has given her the conviction and courage to continue to proclaim her belief that despite being shot, she and all her sisters deserve to learn and be educated.

Sometimes it is difficult to find and do what we truly love because there is too much stuff in the way. Think back to the story that Betty shared with us. The story about the big block of stone hewed from the earth. Something inside that stone was teeming with possibility, waiting to come forth, but first there needed to be silence and then there needed to be patience, and then there needed to be skill and finally, the pieces of rock that were not elephant needed to be removed.

The love of our hearts is the elephant in the stone. Sadly, we populate our lives with too many things that are "not elephant." When we grab things on the run, we may not choose carefully or accurately. Then somehow, we find ourselves suffocated in a whirlwind of things that do not belong in our life. Perhaps we may begin to uncover what we love by first noticing, and then gently eliminating, those things that do not spring from the center of our heart.

And often when we try to move ourselves along the road to healing and spiritual health, we focus on our wounds and those things that pain us. And if we focus the lion's share of our energy on ferreting out what we believe is wrong inside of us, we can grow into people who are good only at seeing what is wrong. Instead of creating a life of beauty and meaning, we risk becoming better and better at seeing only what is broken in ourselves and the world. So, the time comes when you must chip away, let go of your brokenness so that the elephant love in your heart can be released.

To move forward into a more spiritually rewarding way of living, and to receive the gift of courage, we must remove the untruths that have collected like stones in our hearts, all the times we were told, little lies like, "that didn't hurt," or "you don't want to do or study that or be that kind of person." It means letting go of old patterns; patterns that solidified around us in our families of origin, but prevent us from seeing all the possibilities in our hearts. It also means developing a language. Each of us has a language that expresses most thoroughly our relationship with our life and with the hidden things of this world. Let what we love becomes our language.

Any language whether it be spiritual, emotional, artistic, or political - forms a paradigm that shows us where to look, teaches us what to listen for, helps us to decide what is most important. Our language affects our orientation, our alliances, and our assumptions. It directs all our senses to watch especially carefully for those things that our language hold dear.

So we come to church to learn, the language of the spirit. We come to church to be encouraged to move toward the spirit hidden in our lives. And then, we become like those Chinese teapots - steeped in knowing who we truly are and what we truly love; so that our lives become seasoned in a ceaseless River of love.

When we do what we love, again and again, our life comes to hold the fragrance of that thing. When we hold something in our hands day after day our hands conform to the shape of what we have held. We become what we have cared for; our lives are shaped by what we love. Because of this we can say that all we are is a result of what we have loved.

May it be so. Blessed be. Amen.

Note: This sermon is based on the work of Wayne Muller *How Then Shall We Live?: Four Questions that Reveal the Beauty and Meaning of Our Lives*.

## References

- Ekmath, E. (2009). *The Elephant Sculptor*. In God makes the rivers to flow: an anthology of the world's sacred poetry and prose. Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press. (Also available at: <https://www.bmcm.org/inspiration/easwaran/elephant-sculptor/>)
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