

Claiming the Side of Love – Rev. Doug McCusker

Four years ago, I got lost in Chicago. I was in town to attend classes at Meadville Lombard Theological School. My normal itinerary was to fly into O'Hare Airport and take the "EL", that's what they call the subway, into downtown where the seminary is located. On this occasion, I was so engrossed in a book, that when I looked up, I thought that we had arrived at my station. Without hesitating, I jumped out with my luggage, only to discover that I was in the wrong place. There I was in the dead of winter with a big suitcase, on a Sunday night in a part of town that seemed to be completely closed. It was mostly dark. Nothing seemed familiar. I pulled out my cell phone and the battery was dead.

I could see a person approaching me in the distance. He was headed right for me. It was almost as if he was waiting for me. He was an African-American fellow about my height but about half my age. He was bundled up in a coat with a hoodie protecting his head from the cold. I froze, literally. This is Chicago in January that I'm talking about. But I will admit I was afraid. Would I have been afraid if it had been a woman, or a child, or a white man? Probably not. Implicit bias lives deep in the psyche.

When he got to me, he could see that I was fiddling with my cell phone with a troubled look on my face. He correctly assumed that I was lost. He asked me where I was heading. And then he started to give me directions, but all that did was make me more confused. I was supposed to walk over a bridge that crossed the Chicago River and make a bunch of lefts and rights. I had to go about 10 blocks, but it was a circuitous route. There was no way that I could remember all that.

He was reading my face and he could see that I was still lost, so he offered to take me there. All kinds of things went through my mind. Was he making it sound more complicated than it needed to be so he could take me somewhere else. Could I trust this guy? What alternatives did I have?

I agreed to go with him. Part of me was relieved to get moving. I can't explain it, but I felt safer with him beside me than if I had tried to go it alone. He asked me about my seminary, and before long we engaged in a conversation about the apostle Paul. This guy knew his scripture. Then he started telling me about his current problems. He was recently divorced, lost his job and was homeless. He was staying in a shelter, but it was temporary and he needed to pay a certain amount to stay there for the week. He was dreading being out on the street in the dead of winter in Chicago.

Eventually, I started recognizing where I was. I was back on familiar ground. The place was well lit, and more people were walking around. Then I saw the lights of the Hostel where I was staying. Before he could ask, I took out my wallet, and paid him what I thought a taxi would have cost. And then I threw in another \$20. He accepted it with a smile and then went on his way.

To me it was money well spent. It was payment for services rendered, not charity. It was my way of expressing appreciation for helping me cross the bridge. Not just the one across the river, but the one that separated us as humans. It was the bridge of love that crossed over my implicit prejudice. The one that moved me from being a vulnerable stranger in a strange place to a comrade on common ground. I don't even remember crossing the Chicago River because I was so engaged with his company. I'll probably never see him again, but I always think about him.

He exemplified that larger Love that Suzelle Lynch talks about when describing the lay-led UU Fellowship of her youth. She said, "I see the Holy ever present in their love for me. God was a larger Love holding us all, present in our relationships with one another and with all living things, reminding us that we belonged to each other, calling us to ever-greater hospitality, responsibility and joy."

The humanists in her Fellowship probably wouldn't have agreed that their love was from God, but that's just semantics. That love that they found in their community gave them something to believe in with ultimate meaning. Unitarian Theologian James Luther Adams says that whatever you call it, that love is a universal concern found everywhere there are humans. Strip away all doctrines and scriptures, and that's what you will find at the heart of every religion. Unless you are a nihilist who has lost all meaning to life, you have something that is worthy of your devotion. That's your God, whether you call it that or not.

The larger Love is the giving of oneself to the power that holds the world together. And even when we are tearing it apart, it persuades us to come back to our true selves and begin again. This love is reliable because it engenders respect for the necessary diversity of humanity. We see ourselves in the other no matter how different we may be.

My Chicago companion recognized in me, through his eyes of homelessness, that feeling of being lost. That feeling of utter vulnerability. We found common ground, and together we helped each other.

Back in August of 2013, a crazed gunman entered the McNair Discovery Learning Academy in Atlanta, Georgia. He was packing an assault rifle and over 500 rounds of ammunition. He had come there because he felt that he had nothing to live for. In his emotionally troubled mind he imagined going out in a blaze of gunfire with the police. But instead he met Antoinette Tuff, the bookkeeper at the school who connected his humanity with hers.

She saved him, the children, the police and herself with love. She and the gunman, Michael Brandon Hill, would seem to be very different from each other. She's black, he's white. She's middle-aged, he's in his 20's. She's a woman, he's a man. No one would have blamed her if she saw Hill as an evil monster. But instead she saw a scared young man with inherent worth and dignity with whom she could communicate.

She was not trained in hostage negotiation. She had never had a gun pointed at her in her life. She was frightened and anxious, but also aware that the young man was lost. She recognized that feeling. She had recently gone through a painful divorce and was barely making it on her own. But she had a loving church community that helped her get back on her feet. She knew about the power of that larger Love and without even thinking, she talked to Michael Brandon Hill as a companion.

She persuaded him to put down his weapons and giving himself up to live another day. He trusted her because she saw him at his worst and still loved him. On the 911 recording you can hear her saying "Don't you worry; we're all going through something in life. It's going to be alright, sweetie. I just want you to know that I love you, I'm proud of you for giving yourself up." Antoinette Tuff remembered that she and Michael Brandon Hill belonged to each other. Antoinette was willing to cross that bridge with all her vulnerability and love someone on the other side.

None of us is immune to being lost. It happens. But we are never alone. We are all held by that larger Love even if it is hard to see at times. When we open ourselves to our vulnerability, we are humbled and utterly human. When we take away the mask and claim our own weakness we become stronger. It is then, that we can see the other as a reflection of ourselves. It is then that we can see the hand reaching out to help us and our own reaching out to hold them. Our own sorrows and scars make us the perfect guide for others who are suffering or scared. When we claim our share of the larger Love, we can cross any border that separates us from others.

I'll never forget the day after I passed the standards board for ministry that we call the Ministerial Fellowship Committee or MFC for short. Ever since I entered seminary, that committee of the Unitarian Universalist Association seemed like a scary bridge that I had to cross. But I wouldn't be able to fake it. In addition to learning the craft of ministry, I had to do the inner work to understand who I am.

The MFC meets a couple of times a year in Boston. The panel is made up of lay leaders, UUA officials and other ministers. After graduation, every candidate must schedule an interview with them to deliver a sermon and answer any questions they want to ask for about an hour. Before the meeting they have read all about us from our career assessments, internship evaluations, school records and our essays. Our professional future lies in their hands. On the day of my appointment, all they wanted to see was the real minister in me. Not some super-hero, but a genuine human being with frailties and strengths. I guess they found it and I passed. It was as if I released a breath that I had been holding for 4 years. After the exhale, pure joy rushed in.

The next day, I was flying out of Logan International Airport to come back home. As I walked through the corridors, everyone was smiling at me and most people said "hello!" These were complete strangers. They must have picked up on my inner peace. They were seeing the larger Love reflected back to them through my joy. It was contagious.

This Tuesday on Valentine's day, give a stranger the gift of yourself. I'm asking you to broaden your perspective and see the larger Love around you. Don't force it, and impose yourself on someone else. Just open your heart to everyone with an inner peace. Even if you are going through things, let that be your ticket to cross the bridge. You will be totally amazed at what happens. You will see things that normally you would miss. You will notice people in a different way. Be the Love that you seek and it will be the greatest gift that you could ever give.