

“Seasoned Love”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
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About a year ago my cousin Terry, now, my late cousin Terry, sent me a series of family photos. One bore the image of an elderly gentleman, clad in a grey cardigan, white shirt and blue tie. He was bending over the back of a chair, his arms folded, his eyes gazing intently at the music propped on a piano. On the chair sat an elderly woman, clad in a dignified black and white dress, her eyes gazing intently at the music propped on the piano, her fingers on the keys. I have no doubt that my Grandfather was singing, but softer than usual, accompanied by my Grandmother, who had accompanied him for a half century as they threaded their way through married life.

Fifty-seven years earlier James Pendry Edwards had landed at Ellis Island, an emigrant from his native Wales. He headed west, stopping mid-point in Illinois. There he found the rich black soil that he worked most of his life as a farmer. There he met my Grandmother, Hilda Marie Carlson. The point of intersection was church, a common and easy gathering point for the two of them, for Granddad took great pleasure in the singing of hymns, which rocked with his booming bass and took on his strong Welsh accent, and Grandmother tuned her talents to the organ. They married in 1901. Granddad was 26; Grandmother, 21. She wore a dress that she had made. It was the softest blue with ivory trim, floor-length, and flattering to her diminutive figure. At their 50th wedding anniversary, my cousin Virginia modeled it. She was the only cousin who could, for my Grandmother on her wedding day boasted an 18-inch waist.

I wonder what their hopes were as they stood there on the threshold of their shared lives. He would farm; she would be a housewife, a loyal mate. They would have children. They would go to church, where she would play the organ, and he would sing. They would make friends. Surely they were as hopeful as any young couple could be starting out with just enough – enough roof, enough food, enough faith that life would be good, good enough. It wasn't easy though. They would have six children. Their firstborn, Violet, would succumb to influenza at 18 months. My Mother tells me that Grandmother never got over Violet's death. Of course not, of course not, but while she grieved, she also lived. They had five more children: Wilmot, then Thelma, then my Mother, Lillian, born in 1909, my Mother whose 99th birthday we just celebrated. Then came Vernon, and finally Raymond. Mom is the only survivor of this family, not counting my intrepid Aunt Harriet, Wilmot's wife, who turns 101 this June.

But back to that photograph. There they are, Hilda and James, my grandparents, making music together with Granddad leaning over my Grandmother's shoulder and Grandmother with her fingers on the keys of the piano where she found such respite, such joy, and such love in the assurance of my Grandfather's voice. Much as she could hear it, that is. Word is that Grandmother became deaf because my Granddad didn't know how to talk; he only bellowed. He wasn't an angry man; he just wanted to make sure he was heard, so Grandmother adapted.

I wondered sometimes as I followed them as a child about their farmhouse, the one they moved to in northern Iowa right after my Mother was born. What kind of joy did they claim with such a life? Both worked incessantly. Yet I remember those holidays, Christmas especially, when they may as well have been Joseph and Mary welcoming our clan to Bethlehem, aka, “the farm.” I stare again at that photograph, burnished into the eyes of my own ripening heart. My Grandmother plays; my Grandfather sings. For me, this is love, seasoned.

A few years later my Grandmother slipped on the stairs to the cellar and broke her hip. It was just too much for her. As for my Granddad, this bellowing basso profundo was lost without his soul mate. Within a year he too was gone. Their love – textured, ripe, wise, and dedicated lives on. So does their music.

Love is young for a perilously brief time. The weather of life's stuff lets loose with its seductive blossoms and its eager shoots, its sunlit days and its amber afternoons, its star-studded nights and its wildly hued autumns. Inevitably winter comes, and we seek warm fires – some head to the slopes, but you know I'm not talking literally here. Our branches grow more fragile, our limbs more precarious. Yet when we gaze heavenward on a chill night, Orion gazes back, Sirius lends perspective, and we take stock of how it has been for us, specks in an unimaginable vastness.

If we have any sense at all, we love with an outpouring of thanks for each passing day and a growing humility that while we matter, it's not all about us. It's about what passes through us, what lends meaning to our days, and what transcends us through the legacy of love and caring.

Last November you may have read in the *Globe* about what former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor faces daily in her marriage of 55 years. There's another woman, but it's not quite what one would expect. If he can sit on the porch swing of his assisted living center, hand in hand with his newfound sweetheart, so much the better. The former Justice sits nearby, talking amiably with both of them. She finds reassurance in the knowledge that her husband has found some happiness amid the relentless reality of Alzheimer's.

O'Connor lends credibility to the biblical claim that humility is the beginning of wisdom. Wisdom is what we aspire to as we ripen. Humility is what surfaces when we know we're no longer in control – if we ever were – again, when we know it's not all about us. Perspective ripens if we don't fight it. Sandra Day O'Connor lets it ripen with grace.

“Young love,” writes psychologist Mary Pipher, “is about wanting to be happy. Old love is about wanting someone else to be happy.” So it is with Sandra Day O'Connor as she breathes a sigh on an afternoon shared with her beloved husband and another woman who makes him happy for the time being, a time O'Connor knows is fragile and fleeting for all of us.

So it is with my friend, Forrest, Rev. Dr. Forrest Church. Many of you met Forrest when he delivered the charge to me at my installation in this Meeting House three years ago last November. Some of you know him as the Senior Minister of the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City, as a prolific author, and as a compelling voice throughout our denomination.

Lest we confine our conversation of seasoned love to romantic or marital love, let's consider for awhile the love that matures within a congregation. You heard earlier Forrest's recent letter to his congregation. Thirty years is a long time for a minister and a congregation to be in relationship. I know it hasn't always been easy for Forrest; it hasn't always been easy for his congregants; it hasn't always been easy for Forrest's family. This language of shared ministry that some of us are still getting used to is so apt as we walk the walk together and so poignant when one among us looks upon a path that diverts from that walk altogether.

Those among you who have been at First Parish for a number of years have been through this. You've known your own losses – in your family, in this community, and in this congregation. Ed Atkinson was here for almost as long as Forrest has been at All Souls. Then, with no warning, he was gone – “in the twinkling of an eye” as the Scripture says. You mourned. Many still mourn Ed. His spirit resides in this church and this community through children and grandchildren and through the love that you shared – seasoned love, textured love. Then you were buoyed by the arrival of Elizabeth Tarbox. Perhaps she would be here as long as Ed, at least as long as Ed. For

the brief time that she was here, a profound love surfaced. Yet there was no time to build a complex root structure. Each day was precious; each week, a gift of time that was running out. The tenure was brief, but the love lingers. It is love that is heartfelt by so many of you.

As I grow to know you, I'm learning how hard it is to let be what is, how much some of you struggle with allegiances and yes, with some longstanding rifts with one another. It's not easy to be in community. It's not easy to grow old as a congregation together. If it were a marriage, there would be quarrels about money and kids. We quarrel about money and religious education, about ministry and how to realize it, about the spiritual and how to name it and live it. It's because we're connected and connecting, seasoned with some spices we could never count on, and seasoning with the gift of deepening connection. We're all challenged to remember it's not all about us. We matter, but we gather and gather again to remind ourselves what it is about and what it takes to be in caring community, to serve a larger love, to open our hearts to what is holy, and to understand that we recognize the holy through various lenses of searching and seeing. Seasoned love is not easy love.

Seasoned love. I close my eyes and imagine that transcendent force that Genesis tells us moved across the face of the water's at Creation's birth. The Big Bang, a mysterious force moving out of the void and across the waters, Creation's first breath – all evoke wonder that it happened, that we are here, that we are living, that we will have lived.

There is love intimate and love sublime, love immediate and love transcendent, love known and love beyond mystery. As we wake every morning, it is as if a mysterious force moves across the face of the day bidding us to be awake, to pay attention, to relish and cherish it all as “a common day” that by its very commonness is extraordinary. Imagine each day – today – as a lifetime. We're born into the dawn, we rise into the sun at high noon, we lean into the twilight, and we move gently and otherwise into the darkness.

Love as possibility greets us each day we're here, bidding us to open our hearts to one another, to open our minds to what is, and to love the Great and Ultimate Mystery of Being with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and to love each and every creature as ourselves. Without love, we are nothing. With it, we join arms with the living and the dead, connecting across the boundaries of this side and the other side through love's legacy that goes on and on and on. May it be so. Amen.

Sources

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