

PASSION AND COMMITMENT

A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene

Magic Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

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Call To Worship

The movement of the Spirit of God in the hearts of men often calls them to act against the spirit of their times or causes them to anticipate a spirit which is yet in the making. In a moment of dedication, they are given wisdom and courage to dare a deed that challenges and to kindle a hope that inspires. Howard Thurman, *Footprint of a Dream*
www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/howard_thurman.html

Sermon

In 1992, the novel *The Bridges of Madison County* was published. The book was one of the best-sellers of the 20th century, selling 50 million worldwide. It chronicles, in graphic and romantic detail, the overwhelmingly passionate four-day affair of an Iowa farm wife and a *National Geographic* photographer. They never see each other again, but, for the rest of her life she devotes one day a year to mooning over what happened.

In 1995, another international best seller rocketed to the top of the charts, with passages designed to match *Madison County's* intensity: *The Horse Whisperer*. Here's a passionate passage (one I can share from the pulpit, unlike many of them):

And as he held her..., he thought not that this was wrong but only concern that she might come to feel it so. But if this were wrong, then what in the whole of life was right? (338)

Both of these books swept the book-buying public. Neither is written

in deathless prose, nor is likely to become a classic. But we are drawn to them by the vicarious experience of passion.

We are fascinated by passion. In some part of our heart or soul, we long for the experience. However, few of us genuinely want—in real life—the home-wrecking, routine-overturning kind of liaison enjoyed by fictional lovers. Not to mention that such liaisons embody only one kind of passion, the loving lust of one human for another.

There is more to passion, involving us in that which is larger than we are. This other kind is more complicated, deeper and wider. In my experience, long-term passion—as opposed to the red-hot, sear-your-eyeballs affair or fling—involves commitment, generosity, give and take, patience and resilience.

Think about something for which you have a great passion: gardening, children, grandchildren, your church, music, art, walking, reading, friends, your vocation, cleaning, painting, spiritual practice, animals.

I'll tell you a story about one of my life's passions.

For a few years, I had a horse, Counsel—a kind-hearted and independent-minded Thoroughbred. Now, I am a farm girl but I am not a horsewoman. Nevertheless, when I met him at a friend's farm, we bonded. I spent several months taking riding lessons on him, getting to know him—

and conceiving, against most rational considerations, a genuine passion for him. I bought him, and proceeded on a course of several years of lessons and seeing him twice a week. It was a very hard time in my life—my 20-year marriage was taking its time about falling completely apart—and Counsel's big, generous presence comforted and challenged and inspired me. I really loved him.

We were together a few short years, and my passionate and committed relationship with Counsel was a lot different from a Madison-County/Horse Whisperer fling. Think about the subject of your passion/love. If it's anything like mine, it involves so much more than overwhelming experience—although those moments are definitely part of it. Oftener, there are those other things I mentioned: commitment, generosity, give and take, patience and resilience.

I was committed. I paid good money, regularly, to see that he was well housed, fed, and cared for. More importantly, I gave regularly of my time and attention, driving a half hour each way to see the big old dear. I kept learning to ride, never very good, but practicing patience, slowly improving. I tromped around in the poop and the mud, leading this very big animal to a place where he could run and romp. My generosity of time and love brought generosity from him, as he learned the give and take of our relationship.

At one point, as a result of misguided advice from my 20-year-old teacher—and bad riding on my part—I fell off him, cracked my ribs pretty

badly and injured my hip. Here's where the flexibility and resilience came in. I got a new teacher who patiently helped us take it really slow, learning new levels of give and take, of generosity toward each other, of our everyday bond of passion. I got back in the saddle again, and kept learning and loving. Counsel and I grew together.

Counsel died untimely a year and a half ago. I still grieve him, but he was a solid, trustworthy animal presence at a time when very little felt solid or trustworthy, and I am grateful beyond words for my several years with him. My passion and commitment for that lovely horse—my joyful giving of my time and energy and money—enriched my life, then and now.

Everyone's life is enriched by everything we have passion for, in this deep and wide sense. Let us be grateful for it, for the commitment that follows in its wake.

It's fairly easy to think about our individual passions. What about passion for a religious community? Like this one?

We of the Magic Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship—we few, we happy few, we band of sisters and brothers—deserve passion and commitment. This is a place that can make a difference, when we bring to it our commitment, our generosity, our give and take, our flexibility and our resilience. Here we nurture souls, and we help heal the world.

We are standing at an important crossroad in the life of this

Fellowship, and significant decisions will have to be made very soon, decisions that will shape this congregation in its faith and its identity. As you have heard, there will be a pivotally-important congregational meeting after church next week, in which you will be deciding on directions—on commitment.

At this point—with important exceptions, of course—I hear almost as much passion going into critique and disparaging remarks as into excitement and innovation. I am suggesting that we cut it out and look to new ways.

Before I remind us why this religious body is worth our time, talent and treasure—our passion and commitment—I want to remind you a little of your history. This church was founded in 1992. What an act of faith, of devotion to liberal religion—and of commitment to the incredibly difficult job of keeping a small congregation alive and well. Our founders here in the Magic Valley, and all of you who have come over the years, have done the day-in-and-day-out work of creating worship, making budgets, welcoming newcomers, opening your homes and hearts to those great potlucks, reaching out to each other.

At the same time, there have been stumbling blocks, which have had negative consequences. I want to quote myself, just to remind us that it hasn't always been easy in recent years, and that we are pulling out of a perhaps-depressed time. Here's what I said in January:

As I am gradually coming to feel a part of the Magic Valley UU home, I can feel the strains you have gone through in the past few years.... As I have heard about it, there was a fairly tense time several years ago, in which some folks who were experienced in larger churches sought to make big structural and organizational changes, pretty quickly. To get things shipshape, and not a moment too soon. Feelings were hurt, people felt unappreciated, communication faltered, and there was a kind of withdrawal of energy. This is very hard on a Fellowship's identity and enthusiasm. Not long after that, you had a ministerial situation that ended badly. I make no blame here; I am not in a position to do so. What I am in a position to do is to observe that there were strong feelings, a sense of deep disappointment at best, a sense of betrayal at worst. Another blow to identity and enthusiasm.

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This is the last time I'm going to look back into those harder times. And I am asking you to do the same, if you are still carrying conscious or unconscious resentment, apathy, impatience, or sighs of "what's the use." We remember so that we may understand our human responses; we remember so that we may forgive ourselves and each other for whatever part we played or did not play; we remember so that all folks new to our Fellowship will feel the enthusiasm and energy that comes with letting go. We remember so that we may all go forward with new hearts.

Here, we take care of each other, as best we can, nurturing each other's souls by respect born of long-term passion—which means assuming good will, the give and take of forgiving our own and others' trespasses. Here we understand how important our spiritual lives are, and we work ever and always to create fulfilling worship services. Here we generously send one whole Sunday's offering every month to a good cause outside of

ourselves, our commitment to helping heal the world. Here we love our kids, smiling as they come forward to talk and listen, then go to their own Sunday activities. Here, a surprisingly large number of people generously do the mundane work of the church—we got at least three more volunteers from last month's workshop! (Worship still needs more!) Here we hang in for the long term, flexible and resilient through the ups and down that human life brings. Here we represent liberal, embracing religion—we represent justice, equity and compassion—in a part of the world that often does not agree with us.

We are a small but saving remnant, a force for good, in our own lives and in the Magic Valley.

Do we appreciate that our healthy, dynamic presence makes a difference to a lot of people, in these rooms and outside? Do we have what it takes to kindle and re-kindle our passion for our faith? Can we be truly generous? Can we make a growing place for each other, for our kids, for joyful church work, for healing the world?

I look forward to finding out.

Closing Words

Let us take with us these words, and hold them in our hearts, reflecting on what they mean for us: passion, commitment, generosity, give and take, patience, resilience.

Sources consulted

Evans, Nicholas. *The Horse Whisperer*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1995.

Waller, Robert James. *The Bridges of Madison County*. New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1992.