

LISTEN AND BEHOLD

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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Just in time for Valentine's Day, *Atlantic* magazine has published an article about the state of relationships in America. It rounds up somewhat confusing data suggesting that Americans are becoming more traditional in some ways and less so in others.

The article cites a 10-year comparison of surveys by the online dating site OkCupid, whose 12 million current users have a median age of 29. The results show a dramatic drop in willingness to sleep with someone on the first date: 69% said they would in 2005, but only 50% said they would in 2015. On the other hand, the percentage who said they would consider having a friendship based primarily on sex, with no intentions for love, romance, or long-term commitment, jumped from 50% in 2005 to 61% in 2015.

The statistic that's hardest to believe originally appeared in the journal *Archives of Sexual Behavior*. It compares the average number of lifetime sexual partners across generations. Americans born in the 1950s will have sex with 12 people on average during their lifetimes, the study says, while Millennials will average only eight partners. Among other perplexities, it's not clear to me how this figure could be known already.

Be that as it may, the statistic that's most interesting — at least, the most interesting to a preacher who finds himself on the pulpit on Valentine's Day — concerns the relationship between sex and love. When OkCupid asked respondents whether sex or love was more interesting to them at the moment, 75% of them said love — both in 2005 and in 2015. The overwhelming preference for love over sex remains unchanged.

With this preference in mind, advice columnist Heather Havrilesky, in a posting this week on the *New York Magazine* blog "The Cut," describes how committed relationships manage the transition from sex-obsessed romance to something more profound. In the early years of a relationship, she says, what we call romance is a thinly disguised search for proof. She says, "Our dumb culture tricks us into believing that romance is the suspense of not knowing whether someone loves you or not yet, the suspense of wanting to have sex but not being able to yet, the suspense of wanting all problems and puzzles to be solved by one person, without knowing if they have any time or affinity for your particular puzzles yet."

In a good relationship, Havrilesky goes on to say, the search for proof eventually comes to an end. She says, "After a decade of marriage, if things go well, you don't *need* any more proof. What you have instead — and what I would argue is the most deeply romantic thing of all — is this palpable, reassuring sense that it's okay to be a human being. Because until you feel absolutely sure that you won't eventually be

abandoned, it's maybe not 100 percent clear that any other human mortal can tolerate another human mortal."

On these terms, love is nothing more — and nothing less — than a durable commitment not to abandon someone. Put positively, it's the willingness to be present with another person, no matter what. As Shakespeare says in sonnet 116, love is "an ever-fixed mark / that looks on tempests and is never shaken."

Because constancy of this kind typically eludes human beings, love has often been described down through the ages as a divine quality. "God is love," says the Christian New Testament. In its ultimate divine form, love is a commitment to be attentively present always and everywhere — not just to human beings, but to all beings and, indeed, to everything whatsoever.

In one of her poems, the contemporary American poet Ellen Bass says, "If there is no God, then there's no one to love us indiscriminately." She describes the ebb and flow of life on this planet: sap gliding up and down, cells breathing through mitochondria, pythons ingesting gazelles, spiders enfolding dragonflies, polar ice caps cracking up, viruses budding, ivory-billed woodpeckers disappearing, and radioactive fallout circling. If there is no God, she wonders, who will notice all these things?

She writes:

Who will crouch beside the lichen as it wheedles into rock,
mark its single millimeter's growth like a father penciling tracks
up the back of the door? And when it dies —
a thousand, two thousand years old, this modest
leaf-like, shrub-like creature, poisoned,
who will mourn? Who will chant its elegy?

The quality of attentive presence that Bass longs for — and God in her poem stands for — requires a certain kind of universe and a certain kind of God. It requires a universe in which everything is related to everything else. And it requires a God that is part of everything, not apart from it.

On Thursday of this past week, I traveled to New Haven to meet with a Unitarian Universalist theology seminar at Yale Divinity School. On the train in the morning, I read the newsflash that scientists at the gravitational wave observatory in Louisiana and Washington State had confirmed predictions made a century ago by Albert Einstein. He had predicted that space and time are interwoven like fabric, which means that every change or movement anywhere in the universe ripples out at the speed of light to everywhere else. The existence of these ripples, known as gravitational waves, had never been confirmed by observation.

In the discovery announced on Thursday, gravitational waves were detected from the collision and merger of two massive black holes more than a billion light-years away. Since one light-year is about 6 trillion miles, a billion light-years is, well, a considerable

distance. The gravitational waves had become quite small by the time they reached us.” Physicist Lawrence Krauss explained in Friday’s *New York Times* that measuring them is equivalent to measuring the distance between the earth and the nearest star with an accuracy of the width of a human hair.

As it happens, I was traveling to Yale to discuss, among other things, process theology, which can usefully be described as the theological application of Einstein’s view that space and time are interwoven like fabric. Based on the groundbreaking work of the 20th century mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, process theology insists that everything is related to everything else without exception. Like gravitational waves in the fabric of space-time, the consequence of a change in an object or the action of an individual ripples outward, ultimately affecting everything.

By the same token, each object or individual is continually changed by the actions of everyone and everything else. Just as nothing can escape the fabric of space-time, nothing can escape the interrelated web that constitutes existence as we know it. In this interplay, everything is in the process of becoming what it will be – hence the name process theology.

In light of this inescapable reality, our religious challenge is to build a spiritual detector large enough and sensitive enough to perceive what’s really going on. We need somehow to detect the presence of everything. What do I mean by everything? I mean the experience of everything whatsoever: all that is present in our lives and our world, as well as all that is past and all that is possible. Many of you will recognize this experience as the one I refer to when I talk about the experience of God. For process theologians like me, who stand at the intersection of science and spirituality, the challenge of opening ourselves to the experience of everything, and the challenge of living responsibly in a universe where we are constituted by our relationships to everything, is a divine quest. It requires us to engage in spiritual practice.

One of the theologians we discussed at Yale on Thursday was Bernard Loomer, a 20th century process theologian who served a long tenure as Dean of the University of Chicago Divinity School, where I did my graduate work. Because the universe continues to grow in size and complexity, Loomer insisted, God continues to grow in size and complexity as well – and so must we.

After he retired from Chicago, Loomer moved to California, where he joined the First Unitarian Church of Berkeley. He would often convene discussions after church on Sunday afternoons. He talked about the expanding complexity of creation, and then he asked, “What is the size of your soul?” Does your soul have the ability to stretch and grow, to take in whatever magnificent complexities come your way, along with whatever difficult contradictions enter your experience?

When Loomer spoke about soul size, he typically wrote the word S-I-Z-E with capital letters and dashes in between to emphasize its importance. He explained S-I-Z-E in the following way:

By “S-I-Z-E” I mean the stature 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 and 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.

Love is a commitment to expand the size of our souls to include everyone and everything. It is a commitment to be attentively present always and everywhere. In its ultimate form, love is divine — the commitment to open ourselves to all that is present in our lives and our world, as well as all that is past and all that is possible.

On this Valentine’s Day, here’s the survey question each of us needs to answer: What is the size of your soul? What is your capacity to love this amazingly-wonderful yet deeply-flawed world, along with the amazingly-wonderful yet deeply-flawed people who call it home?

The invitation to love is an invitation to live in openness, come what may. It’s an invitation to experience the fullness of life. It’s an invitation to embrace all that is divine.

Ellen Bass closes her poem with the following lines:

There must be something you love: the cherry trees
on Storrow Drive bursting into bloom as you pass,
each tree releasing its pale buds like pastel fireworks.
Or driving back from Poipu Beach, the children slumped against you,
the moon flashing through the thousand palms.
When finches go crazy gorging and singing
in the last of the November pears, when Pavarotti sings,
or a mother sings to her baby, “I can’t give you anything but love,”
walking the stained carpet of the hallway,
when she falls back into bed and her new lover gathers
her up like honeycomb, someone
must pay attention. Open your window.
Listen, listen to them, and behold.