



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

**Tenderness**

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My mother is an elementary school librarian, and therefore has a deep love of children's books. She read often to me as a child and cultivated a love of reading. Recently she was reminding me of her love of Frog and Toad books, and how she thinks they should be required reading for everyone.

So I knew when I read an article called, "Frog and Toad: An Amphibious Celebration of Same Sex Love" by Colin Stokes, published in *The New Yorker* last year, that I had to share it with my mother. In this article, Stokes remarks on the emotional depth and wisdom to be found in these seemingly simple children's books. I found out that the author of Frog and Toad, Arnold Lobel, was born in 1933, in Los Angeles. He began his career as an illustrator for advertisements, with a specialization in animals, often in humorous situations. In 1974, four years after the first Frog and Toad book was published, Arnold Lobel came out to his family as a gay man. His daughter Adrienne said afterwards in an interview, "I think 'Frog and Toad' really was the beginning of him coming out." Lobel never publicly discussed a connection between the series and his sexuality, but he did comment on the ways in which personal material made its way into his stories. Lobel died in 1987, an early victim of the AIDS crisis, at the age of 54. Over his career he was the author and/or illustrator of over 100 books, winning numerous awards and recognitions, often known for truly elevating the genre of early reader books.

Frog and Toad stories cover a number of subjects, and throughout them exhibit a profoundly tender and kind-hearted, affectionate love between two same-gender animals. The Wikipedia entry on Frog and Toad includes this hilarious line about how to distinguish between the two: "Frog is taller with a green shade, and is more cheery and relaxed than Toad; Toad is shorter and stout with a brown shade, and while just as caring and friendly as Frog, is also the more serious and uptight of the duo." Frog and Toad bake and eat too many cookies together, do household chores together, tell one another scary stories, celebrate birthdays and holidays together, and go to great lengths to express their care and empathy. I expect that many of you have your own favorite Frog and Toad story, and I look forward to hearing about it.

Why did I pick "The Hat" and "Alone" to read this morning? To teach us that amphibians can't be trusted to buy gifts of clothing? Or that sometimes when a friend says, "I need to be alone," it's not about you? In a way, each Frog and Toad story contains the range of human emotions—sadness, happiness, isolation, connection—all with a sense of humor. Moreover, they demonstrate the type of relationship that creates space for the other with appreciation, tenderness, and love.

When asked about writing these books, Lobel simply said, "Frog and Toad are really two aspects of myself." I love this idea, that not only do Frog and Toad remind us of deep partnership, love, and devotion, but also that Frog and Toad can represent two aspects of one person. In "The Hat," we may each be that person, one who lies in bed hoping and thinking big thoughts, the other practically shrinking a hat to make his friend feel happier. Frog and Toad are two parts of ourselves in "Alone"—the part that seeks out solitude, contentment and gratitude, and the part that runs around wondering what's wrong and how to fix it. Part of the magic of Frog and Toad, is that they accept one another's faults and strengths, with tenderness. Can you imagine that? Accepting your own faults and your strengths, with tenderness?

In Derek Walcott's poem, "Love after Love," he writes, "The time will come, when with elation, you will greet yourself arriving at your own door, in your own mirror, and each will smile at the other's welcome,

and say, sit here.” I think of the many times Frog and Toad articulate their love of one another and their welcome of one another, warts and all. In my re-reading of Frog and Toad stories, I can imagine my own heart expanding with tenderness, and empathy, and delight in simple pleasures, and I believe when we turn this tenderness towards ourselves and others, it is transformative.

In my work as a healthcare chaplain, I’m often asked to explain what it is that I do. Do I only perform Last Rites? No. Do I come to scold people for not going to church enough? No. Do I come to answer big questions that have no answer, such as “Why do bad things happen to good people?” or “What happens after death?” No. I do think of myself as providing unconditional compassion, of providing tenderness, of meeting the other person wherever they are, validating their inherent worth and dignity, their wholeness, even if their physical bodies are broken.

Buddhist teacher, Sharon Salzberg writes, “To reteach a thing its loveliness is the nature of metta. Through lovingkindness, everyone & everything can flower again from within.” Sometimes, healing takes place through lifting up another person’s wholeness, their loveliness, so that they can access their own strengths and gifts in a new way.

When I tell people that I’m a chaplain, after the question, “what do you do?” I frequently receive a comment like, “that must be very sad,” or, “how do you do it?” Often times people imagine that the work must be very sad and heart-breaking. And the truth is that sometimes it is, and sometimes it’s joyful, but that being able to be with suffering and witness life’s tragedies of loss, debility and death, is a great privilege and something you can build the capacity to do with an open and tender heart. I sometimes say, I want to work with an open heart, but not a broken one. I can neither be closed off, nor can I be such a mess that I cannot care for others. A tender heart, is one that can be authentically vulnerable, to share laughter and tears, the small miracles and mundane complexities of the human experience.

In the past month or so, the healthcare debate in America has reached new heights of anxiety, desperation, and passion. To work in a hospital at this time is both frightening and surreal. As a patient once asked me while watching the daily news, “How can these politicians debate taking away my healthcare, when they do not have to worry about their own?” For two weeks we’ve had a reprieve, thanks to the dedicated resistance by disability rights activists, clergy, parents, and so many courageous ordinary people who have called out efforts to restrict and limit health coverage as death bills, not life bills. But I imagine that there are many here in this community, myself included, who wonder when this debate will spring again to the forefront and who worry about losing their own coverage.

This is a little bit of what I wish was said openly in the healthcare debate—that we will all experience illness in our lives, be sick ourselves, be a caregiver to another person, and be a recipient of care. We are all fragile and vulnerable mortals. That illness does not discriminate by location, class or education, race or ethnicity, gender identity or sexual orientation, or political party. However, our access to healthcare is often determined by those things, and that is deeply unfair, and I would add, immoral. Our highest religious values, include care for the sick and the most vulnerable amongst us, and that makes healthcare a moral and spiritual responsibility.

There actually is a Frog and Toad story about being sick. In it, Frog is in bed sick, and he asks Toad to tell him a story, hoping that the story will make him feel better. Storytelling has a powerful quality—stories can comfort or inspire, they can fan the flames of fear or hatred, but they can also create courage and empathy. We’re facing so many challenges today, not only in healthcare, but immigration, and addressing

racial justice and the scourge of white nationalism, and international safety and peace—today is a good time to tell stories that call to our deepest values as human beings.

In April Pope Francis delivered a rare Ted Talk, in which he called for a revolution in *tenderness*. He defines tenderness as, “love that comes close and becomes real.” He said, “Tenderness is not weakness; it is fortitude.” He continued, “It is the path of solidarity, the path of humility.... The more powerful you are, the more your actions will have an impact on people, the more responsible you are to act humbly. If you don't, your power will ruin you, and you will ruin the other.”

Cornel West is often quoted as saying “Never forget, justice is what love looks like in public, just like tenderness is what love feels like in private.” Both Cornel West and Pope Francis point to a truth about the connection between the inner spiritual life, in which tenderness, love and empathy feed us and our relationships, and the outer public life, in which love must be actualized through justice, equity and equality in our institutions.

Quaker educator and author Parker Palmer echoes this connection between the inner life of the spirit, and the outer world. He writes: “The spiritual traditions do not deny the reality of the outer world. They simply claim that we help make that world by projecting our spirit on it, for better or for worse. If our institutions are rigid, it is because our hearts fear change; if they set us in mindless competition with each other, it is because we value victory over all else; if they are heedless of human well-being, it is because something in us is heartless as well....Our complicity in world-making is a source of awesome and sometimes painful responsibility—and a source of profound hope for change.”

I share Parker Palmer’s hope that we can use our spiritual traditions to influence our institutions, to create more compassionate, just and equitable systems. That we are both complicit and responsible for the world we live in, and that give us great power, that used with humility, can create positive change. So what places in your life, and the community around you, could use more tenderness?

Spiritual communities, like we find at Neighborhood, are vital to nurturing the inner work of the soul and the outer work of creating more justice. Again Parker Palmer writes, “The key to this form of community involves holding a paradox—the paradox of having relationships in which we protect each other’s aloneness. We must come together in ways that respect the solitude of the soul, that avoid the unconscious violence we do when we try to save each other, that evoke our capacity to hold another life in ways that honor its mystery, never trying to coerce the other into meeting our own needs.”

This brings us back to Frog and Toad in our story today. Spiritual friendships and spiritual communities allow space for the soul to show up. They respect the need for solitude, and the need for companionship. I hope that each one of us, can think of a friend who cares about us, just as Frog and Toad care for one another. And in our spiritual communities, like Frog and Toad, we hope to be sad together, to be happy together, to even be happy being alone together, and in this way, honor the unique and mysterious quality of each person’s soul.

My prayer for us this morning, is that we take our “scriptural” lesson from Frog and Toad, dedicated to an ever-renewing commitment to love one another with tenderness and compassion. That our spiritual practice of opening our hearts on Sundays, will fuel us for our work for the rest of the week, our work to bring a revolution of tenderness to our communities, nation, and the world.

Amen and blessed be.

