



A Minister's State of the Union

Reverend Sharon K. Dittmar
First Unitarian Church
536 Linton Street
Cincinnati, OH 45219
(513) 281-1564
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Dear Americans,

Who are you, we? Really? I don't understand us. I am beginning to think that the richest country in the world has a poverty of self love.

Recently I wondered how the residents of the liberal bastion of Massachusetts could elect a Republican Senator to the seat held by Edward M. Kennedy. Actually, I was not concerned whether he was a Democrat or Republican, but I could not believe that you, of all states, elected someone who campaigned on putting the knife through current health care legislation. How badly I want to drive to the cold ocean fronts and rolling snowy hills of Massachusetts and ask regular folks "What's up?" I lived in your fair state when a Republican, William Weld, was governor, and we mostly liked him. But electing someone who made his number one issue the end of health care legislation in its current form? I don't understand.

I don't understand because I look at, work for, and live with people without health insurance. I just read that over 111,000 children are uninsured in the state of Ohio. 111,000 children in the State of Ohio. Multiply that by 49 other states and we have over a million uninsured children (just a guess). That's with CHIP and every other current federal, state, and local program. I have not even counted the adults.

I can't call us the richest country in the world anymore if we continue in this poverty of love. What's up and who are we?

Is the proposed health care legislation perfect? No, I am certain that it is not. I am unclear if we can fund it, or any other health care plan that might be currently proposed. Do we still need to try? YES. American friends, we have uninsured children and adults, unemployed adults, an increasing number of children (1 in 4) and adults (1 and 8) on food stamps, people refused health insurance due to prior conditions. Due to our poverty of love we are growing an underclass of disenfranchised, unemployed, poor people.

We need to raise taxes. Really. We all need taxed more, and the richest Americans need taxed the most. There, I said it. How else are we supposed to do this? Thirty years ago, when there were less rich Americans and more average Americans had a stable financial livelihood, we were all fine, so what is the fuss about, now? When did we get so narcissistic, so unloving towards ourselves and others?

During the recession Americans spiraled into anxiety. Why so scared? Many people think that narcissism, excessive focus on oneself, comes from too much self love. Actually, according to Thomas Moore, it is just the opposite. Narcissism comes from too little self love. We are overly self-focused because we are afraid we are loveless or unlovable, and because we do not love, do not have compassion for ourselves, and by extension others. Moore insists that without love for the self we can not love another person, we can not care for another person.

To follow Moore's train of thought – why is that new tower in Dubai so tall? Only narcissism, masking a lack of love and self respect would make such an excessive show. When we create gaudy, spectacles it is because we don't feel like you have much (think Trump Towers, Mall of the Americas).

Why do we undermine health care reform that could help the poor and disenfranchised (and sometimes that is us), a lack of self love and self respect. We seem to be operating from the scarcity model on love, that there is not enough, could not be enough. How can the “richest” country in the world be so loveless? I don't know, I really don't know on this one. I just know that a truly rich country would not rest at night with 1 in 4 children on food stamps. A country rich in love, beginning in self love, would storm the streets and wade through the tough battles of policy reform to make this country a real land of the free and home of the brave, employed and well fed.

In the last 18 months I watched my fiancée lose his job without the possibility of collecting unemployment. Then I watched him survive a year without employment, sustaining two children and a mortgage. In that year I watched him cash out his pension and I watched him lose his health insurance and scramble to find more. He

survived one agonizing day at a time and now has a part-time job and attends school full-time. Watching this up close and personal changed me. I have a personal foot in two worlds at all times, the have and the have-nots.

You don't want taxes? I don't want my fiancée, and the many people like him that I know through living with him, suffer without health insurance and a pension. Friends, it's a lack of self love. Americans, it is time for choices. The stock markets tumbled this week when President Obama announced he would like Congress to restrict the size of banks and their riskiest practices. News reports frame him as careless or responsible for the end of capitalism. I don't get it. Why didn't the stock market expand 500 points in joy that more regulation would prevent future financial collapses and we could all make more money in the future without secretly cheating and taking advantage of one another. Why did a cry not go up "Yeah! The end of Ponzi schemes in the market in my lifetime!" Not enough love. Only people without enough self love would live in such fear.

Those without jobs and insurance need our help (and it may well be you and me personally). It's not just someone else. It is us. We also need to accept that suffering is part of life and take responsibility for our lives (and I know this is a tall order). And I know I am asking for something big here, but with enough love we will be OK.

If you ever thought of finding the Buddhist within you, now is the time. The first Noble Truth is that life is full of suffering. Why yes, yes it is. It absolutely is and it will come to you and me and all of us not because we have failed or are doomed or are bad people, but because this is life. Personally, I would rather suffer with more taxes and a stalled and then slowly growing stock market than not enough health care, but rarely do we get to choose our suffering. It tends to find us.

We have a small window in America now where we get to choose the suffering for ourselves and our descendents, before it is foisted upon us by time (the collapse of Social Security, Medicare, health insurance as a whole, and gas prices). This is a privilege. A privilege. We have a window on the environment and health care as well as fuel sources. I wish we had enough self love to bear the pain and do it. But, I am so sad to say, we are not currently those Americans.

I have a working theory that America will not be undone by terrorism or an import/export imbalance. We will be undone by our inability to love ourselves and then others. We lift our personal needs over the needs of the whole, the fabric of society as a whole, because we do not have enough self love and in the process we trample one another. Rahm Emmanuel recently said that "A crisis is a terrible opportunity to waste."

Two years after this recession officially began, I can not believe that we are not talking about this. Our American Achilles heel, our tragic (I mean “tragic” in the literary sense that without it greatness and health would be possible) flaw (I mean “flaw” as in epic enough for Shakespearean tragedy), our tragic flaw is our over-emphasis on individualism, which must mask a lack of self love. People who uplift the image of the cowboys and idolize pop stars must secretly fear they are weak, dependent, and unattractive. Actually we are dependent, interdependent, and this is a good thing. And frankly, we are only as weak and unattractive as our lack of self love makes us. Why yes, it is weak and unattractive when rap and pop stars pretend that bling will make you a man and sex with a man will make you a woman.

What I hear in our American conversations and images is our anxiety and inability to bear suffering, ours or that of anyone else, and a definite lack of love. We, as the Dalai Lama has said, lack compassion, and this weakens us (he actually said this about the West – our lack of compassion weakens us). We lack compassion for ourselves and for others. We want to fix or turn away instead of walking and waiting and helping in love and covenant. We can not bear to see the suffering here or the suffering elsewhere. We don’t have enough love for to bear it and this limits our ability to truly help ourselves and others.

After the recent earthquake in Haiti I could not turn on the radio or television without hearing questions from Americans assuming we had not done enough, or were doing the wrong thing. Few people stopped to learn the relevant facts.

There was a 7.0 earthquake in the center of Haiti’s capital. It took down government, army, and relief offices. It killed leaders and managers. It cut off telephone, cell phone, and electronic communication. I heard one gentleman say “I have worked with aid organizations on natural disasters for 20 years and I have never seen one that destroyed the government and all communication.” It cut water lines and blocked roads, harbors, and the airport. Port au Prince has one passable docking area for ships, and one truck at a time can drive to the ship past the fifteen foot crack to unload supplies. In the future, naval teams will need to reconstruct parts of the harbor underwater in order to repair the damage.

The suffering and disaster is that big. Let’s hold that. It’s this big, and we feel pain, which is a healthy human response in this situation. Let’s hold that too. Life is suffering. Here it is. The best way we can help is to love ourselves so that we love our Haitian friends in need, and hold onto this pain in its reality without descending into defeat, blame, shame, or guilt. Only love can help us hold this pain with hope, or

it becomes unbearable, we drop it, and turn away, unable to truly help when needed. Only love can bear this pain.

So what can we do? First look around you – do you have a home, a car, a job, someone who loves you, food to eat tonight – if you have some combination of this, life is good, if you have all this, your life is great. Ah, perhaps it does not feel great to you. You are in pain. I am sorry, really sorry.

So, you must find the source of this pain, this lack of love and peace. You must ask for help, visit a therapist, grief counselor, attend a support group, take doctor prescribed medication. America needs you to take care of yourself in this way. Perhaps your pain is temporary, or situational, or you have lived with it a lifetime. If you can not love and care for yourself, you can not love and take care of others. Please, please, please find ways to love yourself, care for yourself, forgive yourself, help yourself. Please. If you do not help yourself, you will harm yourself and others, especially your children who will not learn to love themselves. You want to do successful social justice work, you want to help people in Haiti? When you leave this sanctuary get help for your addiction, mental illness, depression, anger. Ask for help, use help, make a change. Move towards love and acceptance of suffering.

Third, be careful. Do not confuse a full portfolio with a full life. Do not confuse a six figure income or second home with love. You will know that miraculous moment when you do love yourself, because you will begin to love another, really love another, and you will be happy even if there is no vacation this year, even if you just put on ten pounds.

Four, you will be blessed with loving and caring for a stranger and this will become a miracle in your life. It will change you and save you. You will become like Steve Lopez, the self focused columnist from the LA Times who went looking for a column, and found his life in the form of a trying relationship with an amazing musician, Nathaniel Anthony Ayers who also happens to be homeless and schizophrenic. This story is chronicled in the book and movie, *The Soloist*.

What the world needs now is really love.

Love sweet love

It's the only thing

That there's just too little of

What the world needs now

Is love, sweet love

No, not just for some, but for everyone.

And this begins with you. You want to make a difference? Work to love yourself.
And when you reach that great getting' up morning when you feel the love, let it flow.