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What Love Looks Like Today.mp3

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START OF TRANSCRIPT**[00:00:04]**

You might have noticed yourself or seen the means on social media about how these weeks of being under a stay at home order have been the best ever. For some of our pets, we just want to be with us. In my case, it's our dogs. My family has two dogs at the moment. A middle aged miniature poodle and a one year old standard poodle. And I can say from experience that it's very clear that having people at home every day, all day is very much to their liking. I watched an episode of NOVA on PBS recently called Dog Tails. It explored the science of how we know dogs were desk domesticated over tens of thousands of years from wolves and why dogs are such indispensable and ideally matched companions to humans. Today, the partnership of dogs and humans is unique in the natural world, and humanity has trained dogs to be of service in astounding and varied ways, well beyond the function that any other animal on earth is assigned by our species. The show caught my interest right away by teasing out the answer to that age old question that any dog owner with any anxiety or insecurity will recognize is a dog loyal because I feed it or because he loves me. You'll be very relieved to learn the science is clear on this. Yes, indeed. Dogs love us. Dogs are intelligent and reward driven. And yes, food is a reward that lights up part of the brain and imaging machine.

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But most breeds of dogs show at least as much, if not more, brain activity in anticipation of praise than they do in anticipation of food. The scientists conducting the study was quoted as saying These results show that the social bond is as strong as the food that we're providing to dogs, and then it's intrinsically rewarding, in and of itself. And to me, that's about as close as you can say that a dog loves you. Well, that's a real relief when my dogs follow me around the house, when they bark at everything that passes the house, when they sleep with me and my family members, when they show enthusiasm, when we return from a brief absence. And when they're happy just to do something that they see makes us happy. Now we know that's all because of love. Now, have you seen the movie up? It's got a character that's a dog named Doug who's pretty much the main thing I remember from this movie. The main character's an old man and a young boy discovered dog out in the wilderness. And they find immediately that dog's been very well trained to follow commands. First, they tell him to sit and he sits and they tell him to shake and he offers his paw shakes. And finally they say, speak. And boy, does he speak. You see, Doug's got a special collar that translates his thoughts into spoken words. And his first words to the old man are.

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Hi there. My name is Doug. I just met you and I love you.

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Our message series, Love the Hell Out of this World. It's all about love like that. Universal love, the kind of love that's just met you and it already loves you.

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The kind of love that so special. You don't have to be special to be loved. Now, we Unitarian Universalist share a set of moral principles that we embrace as a guide to living our lives. And the first principle is that we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We don't believe that we are broken and in need of salvation or that any person needs to do anything to deserve or earn love, respect or kindness. We insist in our first principle that all people, every individual person is worthy of love based on nothing more than their own humanness. But humans actually aren't necessarily like dogs, and most humans aren't universally loving automatically. Most of us have to work at it, don't we? It comes pretty naturally for most dogs, but freewill is part of the deal of being human. We have lots of feelings other than love, and we don't get born knowing automatically. How to give and receive love and kindness. Some of us are fortunate to have grown up in environments and among people we're giving and receiving love and kindness was as natural as the air we breathe. If you're one of those as I am, it's a real blessing to develop into a fully formed human with kindness in the air. But many others, unfortunately, weren't gifted that privilege.

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Some of us have to work harder at this, have to develop our own ability to choose kindness and choose love as mature adults, despite a lack of love in the air of our upbringing or life under threat or subject to trauma. No matter what our individual stories are. We do get to choose how we behave. We get to choose how we act towards others and how we receive the actions of others and how to respond. There's another thing, Doug. The dog from UP is remembered for. He's very easily distracted by the appearance of a squirrel. Doug was in the middle of telling his new friend that he'd just met them and that he loved them when his head spun to the side. And he said. And he stares off for a few seconds at the squirrel that's off camera. Before he returns his gaze to the conversation at hand. Now, Doug is not long on impulse control. He doesn't have the benefit of that pause that Viktor Frankl refers to in man's search for meaning. Frankl wrote that between stimulus and response, there is a space. And that space is our power to choose our response. And in our response lies our growth and our freedom. I think that cultivating that pause is what helps us as humans with free will to choose to expand beyond being simply worthy of grace and love.

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We have the power to choose to live in loving kindness, to give love. Yes. And also to be in receipt of love. We've seen this week and too many weeks. Entirely too many examples. The harm that can be done when people chase their squirrels and react instead of pausing to access. The power to choose a reason or even a loving response. It's a painful time in our world. And I'm aware that me talking about dogs and kindness might touch some nerves today. I myself can be remarkably self-centered and inconsiderate of the people around me when I'm not cultivating that pause. Left to my own devices without any spiritual practice, without adequate rest, without self care and medication and counseling, I can become highly distracted by my own anxiety and completely lose touch with the feelings and needs of the people around me. Although I'd like to hope that I'd never respond in a truly harmful way to a harmless stimulus in this time of quarantine and stay at home and social distancing. I know I can easily collapse into my own thoughts and worries. Eat like there's no tomorrow, go days on end without changing clothes for separate on work or money or fear or social media or politics or television. And completely failed to notice how the people around me are doing.

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At my worst, I might be found screaming into a pillow just for a change of scenery when I'm tired of looking at the same four walls and the same three other people and the same two dogs who love me even when I'm like this. It helps, even in my self-centered spin, to remind myself of all I have to be grateful for. I'm still working, as is my husband. And there's been no serious illness among my family or close relatives, including among the three octogenarians we call mom and dad. Our home is a comfortable place to be sheltering, working and doing school work. And since we've experienced the unplanned loss of a home, we definitely appreciate our safe and sound house every day. Within our extended family, there have been job losses and extended periods of financial instability, but there has also been a new and repeating practice of connecting online by video with relatives and friends that we can't visit in person.

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All in all, my family and extended family is faring relatively well through this crisis. Gratitude is helpful, but gratitude alone doesn't tend to get me far enough out of my own head. To be sure that I'm practicing love with my family. Sometimes I have to ask questions that give us an uncomfortable. Instead of relying on gratitude alone. When I make the choice to pay attention not only to how I myself am feeling and acting, but also to how the people around me are feeling and acting. It can make a big difference in our house. We've started a practice lately of asking each other what's going on between your ears. With this simple question, we each force ourselves out of our assumptions about each other, away from our knee-jerk impulse reactions to each other, and we start to listen. When we ask this question, another person gets to answer while we sit quietly and breathe and listen to them. Process outloud, whatever has been running around inside their head, whatever squirrels they've been chasing and exhausting themselves over emotionally or cognitively. When I asked someone in my family that question, it comes along with an unspoken promise that I will stop Schupp my own mouth and listen to their response. That question and that promise is a choice I make to act from a place of love toward that person for a few minutes. When someone asked me that question, I feel immediately loved.

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I feel noticed.

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I don't expect that whatever comes out of my mouth and answer will be brilliant or meaningful or that they can help me solve the irreconcilable quandary that's currently running around between my ears.

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They don't ask me because they're offering to fix it and I don't ask them with any expectation I can fix their quandary either. We ask each other this question purely as an act of love and of service, of kindness and attention. A promise that for the next few minutes, I notice you and I will listen to you. And I love you no matter what you say. When I started asking my family this question, what's going on between your ears? I didn't know it might become something of a spiritual practice. I started asking mostly because I was afraid of what I didn't know. I have two

teenagers and they'll they're now wrapping up their senior year and freshman year in high school. It's been tough all over for a lot of people for a lot of reasons this spring. With our communities and businesses and schools and families and health care providers have had to adapt to the coronavirus and the shifting responses as we've learned more and more over the last three months. And naturally, I've been very concerned about how this situation has affected my teenagers, both of whom were essentially instantly cut off. On Friday, the 13th of March, from all of their friends and their own beloved communities, and one of whom is graduating high school this week and pondering starting college this fall in a world that's completely upside down from everything. They spent the last 13 years of education anticipating that the spring of senior year would look and feel like I've been really proud of how they've both been coping. And our family and how well we've been. Getting along while we're cooped up together at home.

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But I've also been afraid of what I don't know. I knew it was a little too easy to survive this time without diving beneath the surface of what I could see in the people around me. I started asking what's going on between your ears? Because I knew I needed to take an action of love in order for my kids and my husband to know I'm paying attention to them and not just to the space between my own ears. I've got a couple of questions I've asked myself as a spiritual practice for years. What does love look like today? And what would love look like in this situation? The first question helps me to identify when I've been on the receiving end of acts of love for me, love from my husband has often looked like checks on a honey do list. It's looked like a hose spigot installed in the back of my hand on the back of my house so that I can water my garden more easily. It's like a Web cam setup in my chicken coop and run so that I can check on our backyard pets from my phone without going out in the cold rain or dark. But love looks like smaller, simpler things too. It looks like my cup of coffee started on the curry while I'm still descending the stairs in the morning. It's looked like dinner cooked without my help for countless evenings at home since March. While I've been focused in my home office on work. It's looked like a dad playing video or board games for the teenager. We're talking about science fiction or anime or fantasy movies or shows.

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Well, past the point of my own patience.

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This past weekend, three of us took a walk on the trail by the Brandywine Creek and love looked like the strangers approaching us on the trail, wearing their facemasks or pulling them up from their necks. As we got close, one of our kids recognized love in our action of letting that kid set the pace for all three of us on the trail. Another of my kids said luck looked like their own feelings of being proud of himself, for not having let the stay at home routine lead to an increase in unhealthy habits, and that they're starting to handle their own medical care independently.

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Well, it sounds like my dad, who's going on eighty five, telling me on the phone the other day how lucky and blessed he feels every morning when he looks in the mirror and sees and stuff self still alive and kicking and how blessed and lucky he feels when he sees the most beautiful woman in the world. My mother, his wife of 60 years. They're with him for yet another day.

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My family and I might never have noticed any of these acts of love if we didn't ask ourselves the simple question, what does love look like today?

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I also fall back frequently on the second question, especially when I'm worried or anxious or feeling completely powerless. I asked myself what would love look like in this situation? Powerlessness can be a crippling feeling, but when I feel it, I still have the option to pause and make a choice. When I choose to ask myself how I might act out of love in whatever the current situation might be.

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I usually can find something I can do that looks like love in that situation. Sometimes for me, love looks like service. Sometimes it looks like boundaries. Sometimes it looks like political action. Sometimes it looks like humor. Sometimes it looks like distance. Sometimes it looks like prayer. Sometimes it looks like duty. And sometimes it looks like closeness. But often lately, love just looks like patients. Patients. And listening and acceptance of uncertainty. Often lately, love just looks like patience

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Often lately, love just looks like patience and listening and acceptance of uncertainty.

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Acceptance is so often the only kind and loving action I can take when I'm powerless to change an uncertain situation.

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Acceptance of uncertainty.

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Often lately for me. Love just looks like patience. Patience and listening and acceptance of uncertainty. Oftentimes, acceptance is the only action that I can take in the face of uncertainty. Acceptance of the emotions that provokes, acceptance of the actions and words of others.

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And even acceptance of my own disgust and self rejection. Love looks like acceptance because before I can possibly influence anything about myself or about any situation, I need to notice it and recognize it exactly as it is. Instead of focusing on the squirm of what I think it should be instead. Only when I accept something as it really is in this present moment, can I pause and make a choice.

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As to my own next right action, my own version of what love would look like in this situation.

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So as we all face an uncertain future, I invite us all to ponder, what does love look like today for you? What would love look like in this situation?

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If these are easy questions to answer, I'd love to hear what emerges for you if they're more difficult to consider. I embrace you and I offer your patients this universal love doesn't come automatically. Remember, it's a choice we get to make.

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We all have to find our own ways to cultivate that pause between stimulus and response, that pause that gives us the power of choice. Acting in loving kindness is a choice. Love is an action verb and we have to give it space and time to grow, especially when we're facing circumstances that stretch and snap the elastic of what we used to know as our comfort zone.

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Whether your way to cultivate the space that helps you to give love and receive love is meditation or prayer or walking or biking or running or bird watching or playing with your pet or listening to music or journaling or Zoom meeting or face timing or phone calling with a distant person or whatever works for you.

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I invite you to give it time. Keep asking yourself, what does love look like today? What would love look like in this situation? And then listen, because the space between your ears does have answers to those questions. I know it does. It just needs you to stop chasing squirrels and to pause long enough to listen to it. Will you join me in prayer? God of our understanding. Author of Love Universal. Be with us today. To listen to the people and the world that surround us. Help us to listen for what is unsaid and to be patient and curious. To inquire of ourselves, our people and our world. Help us to ask ourselves and others what love looks like today and give us inspiration always to choose and to do what love looks like in any given situation.

END OF TRANSCRIPT



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