



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK  
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## Chocolate for Lent

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Each year in the late spring, I plan our Sunday service topics for the next year. Among the many factors I consider are the timing of various religious and secular holidays. In planning our current year, we noticed that this Sunday was in between Valentine's Day and Ash Wednesday, which this year will be on February 18th. So we wanted to explore the ways the themes of those holidays might mutually inform and illuminate one another.

We heard earlier from Danielle about the "Love Drug," and how love is much more complicated than could ever be contained by a wonderful, terrible, or indifferent Valentine's Day. Regarding longterm commitment once the "Love Drug" wears off, Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote in *The Brothers Karamazov* that, "**Love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams. Active love is labor and fortitude.**" That's the sort of love, as Danielle said, that doesn't quickly wilt like cut flowers, but rather cultivates a garden.

For those of you familiar with Christian tradition of Lent, the "Love Drug" would be akin to what many experience on Mardi Gras (that final night of feasting and partying) before the forty days of preparation for Easter, which are traditionally seen, like Dostoyevsky's idea of love, as a "harsh and dreadful thing" of "labor and fortitude."

For those not raised in a tradition that celebrated Lent, we're not talking about "l-i-n-t" that you find in your bellybutton or dryer, but "L-e-n-t" from the Old English

word for “springtime,” related to the Anglo-Saxon word for “lengthen,” referring to the *lengthening* of daylight as we move toward the spring equinox. The 40-day period of Lent is traditionally a time of self-discipline, self-denial, and self-examination in preparation for Easter and in imitation of the forty days that Jesus spent in the wilderness being tempted and tested prior to his baptism and the beginning of his public ministry.

But given this year’s proximity of Valentine’s Day and Ash Wednesday, I would like to invite you to consider a different perspective on Lent. During my years as a Progressive Christian minister, I emphasized to members of the congregations I served that Lent did not need to be a negative, dour time. The point of Lent was not only an invitation to *give up* a bad habit (to loosen attachment to the aspects of our lives that unduly occupy our attention), but also an invitation to *take on* a spiritual practice to refocus ourselves on something positive and healthy such as taking time each day to slowly and contemplatively read from a sacred scripture, to practice yoga or *Tai Chi* — or to engage in any of the traditional acts of mercy: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the imprisoned. Lent can be just as much about experimenting with forty days of *taking on positive, healthy practices* as spending forty days giving something up. You can also do both!

But inspired by the tradition of eating chocolate on Valentine’s Day, I also wanted to invite you to reflect on what it might mean to celebrate “Chocolate for Lent,” a notion I borrow from Roman Catholic Bible study of the same name. Accordingly, how many of you have seen the film from more than a decade ago titled *Chocolat*, starring Juliette Binoche?

Binoche plays a mysterious stranger, who in the mid-twentieth century moves into a small, repressed, religiously-conservative French town and opens a *chocolaterie* — a chocolate shop filled with an abundance of gourmet sweets — at the beginning of Lent, a time that the town’s traditional mayor feels should be for austerity and abstinence.

Adding to the scandal, Binoche’s character has a young child (but has never been married) and is not interested in attending the town’s church. Now I promise not

to spoil all the twists of the film for those who haven't seen it — which includes a band of gypsies (or better, Romani people) visiting the town, including one played by Johnny Depp. Suffice it to say that the conflict with the more conservative townspeople heats up further when a relationship develops between the unmarried chocolate shop owner and the visiting Romani — and all during Lent!

Even without giving you all the details, you can perhaps guess that the female chocolatier is the Christ-figure in this film, whose kindness, generosity, and compassion transform the lives of the townspeople much more than Lent than the harsh severity and self-denial of past Lenten seasons ever had.

I do encourage you to see the film for yourself. But to share with you just one scene toward the end, there is a delicious moment when the mayor of the town — who has been the leader of the opposition against Binoche's *chocolaterie* and who has been practicing extreme self-denial and fasting during Lent — breaks into her chocolate shop on the Saturday before Easter with a plan to destroy all the delicious confections she has made to share with the town for Easter. The mayor's concern is that her sweets will distract people from what he thinks is the proper way to commemorate Easter through solemn ceremony and traditional theology. Instead, after repressing his hunger for many weeks during Lent, when he goes to destroy her chocolates and accidentally tastes just the smallest amount, he ends up gorging himself.

I won't spoil what happens when he is discovered Easter morning passed out in the window display of the *chocolaterie* covered in chocolate. But I will share with you one passage of the Easter sermon the priest of that small town preached in the wake of witnessing this weeks-long battle among his parishioners about the meaning of Christianity, Lent, and Easter.

According to the author of *Chocolate for Lent*, the film *Chocolat* is about more than “Lent versus Chocolate,” “self-denial versus self-indulgence,” or “traditional Christianity versus vaguely spiritual remedies.” Rather, at a deeper level, **“this movie is about control”** (31). Along these lines, when I first watched this film, I was in my early twenties and still negotiating my transition from the conservative Christianity of my childhood to the more Progressive Christianity of my early adulthood, which eventually

led me to Unitarian Universalism. And during that time, these words from that priest in the film *Chocolat* particularly stood out to me. He said on that fateful Easter Sunday,

I'm not sure what the theme of my homily today ought to be. Do I want to speak of the miracle of Our Lord's divine transformation? Not really, no. I don't want to talk about his divinity. I'd rather talk about his humanity... how he lived His life, here on Earth. His kindness, his tolerance. Listen, here's what I think. I think that we can't go around measuring our goodness by what we don't do, by what we deny ourselves, what we resist, and whom we exclude. I think we've got to measure goodness by what we embrace, what we create and whom we include.

May we here at UUCF be known not for what we deny ourselves, what we resist, and whom we exclude. May we be known for what we *embrace*, what we *create*, and whom we *include*.