

September Theme 2019

Family: The Practice of Expansiveness

Family not only need to consist of merely those who we share blood, but also for whom we'd give blood. - Charles Dickens

We all crave connection, a sense of belonging, and places to go and people to go to, in our moments of joy and when life gets rough. For some, our biological family has been a source of support, love and unconditional acceptance. Yet for too many, families of origin connote criticism, neglect or abuse. As we reflect, for most of us, it's complicated. Hawaiians define family as *ohana*, exemplified by broad notions of what or who family is. They cast a wide net among a sea of characters that includes, but is not limited to, close relatives, distant cousins, in-laws, friends and neighbors, near and far. Embedded in their understanding is a living reminder that in order to survive, to fully thrive, we all need flexible and pliable ideas of family that contain a village, a tribe, and ever evolving communities for lifting us up and holding us together.

Our western culture has historically embraced a more parochial view of what it means to be family. Books, movies, TV and advertisers (aka our culture) have long promoted a myth of what the ideal family looks like. The meta narrative consists of variations on *A Leave it to Beaver* theme with mom, dad, and two kids in tow. And whatever the particulars might be in a story or portrayal, each are grounded in heteronormativity and patriarchy. As writer Minna Salami notes, "...in modern society, we oscillate between contradictory ideas about family as a place of comfort and an institution of tradition and dogma, where repressive and outmoded views are upheld." The result leaves many, including those who identify as LGBTQ and those who live their lives in a way that rubs up against roles deemed gender specific, feeling unwelcome and outside the fold.

By practicing expansiveness, we begin to widen the lens of who is viewed as family. It's a versatile tool for opening our mind and our heart. Individually and collectively, our circumstances are continuously changing - we move away, we get older, we experience gain and loss. When the circle of who can be a part of our family/tribe/community is widened, we discover that we can be surrogate grandparents, that new neighbors and friends can co-celebrate a Thanksgiving feast and we feel the gift of growing connections. We may be surprised at how this stance leads us to discover bonds that bind us in love in the least likely places.

And we can *choose* who feeds us emotionally and spiritually *and who we can feed*. Interestingly, but perhaps not coincidentally, the word family (*famulus*) comes from the Latin word meaning *servant*. Perhaps, we can expand too our notions of what we're getting (or not getting) from family and begin to approach our relationship with those we live with, work and interact with, as one who serves. "How may I serve you?" may not only be an antidote to an epidemic loneliness but a way to reframe what family does/what it's for.

This month's theme was composed by Katherine McHugh and the Worship Associates.

Unitarian Universalists have a rich history as outspoken trailblazers for social justice, for equality in its many forms and for the inclusion of all people as worthy, without exception. Conversations around what it means to be family in the wider society often feel more like heated conflicts. Remembering how there is fear and resistance in change and discomfort in releasing long-held myths. We can reply with compassion, ‘interrupt injustice without mirroring injustice’ and liberally apply love. In our family, there are infinite ways to embody being human.

Questions to Explore:

1. How do you define family?
2. Given your definition, who is included in your family?
3. Who do you exclude? Why?
4. What might it mean for you to practice expansiveness?
5. Can you name experiences of being excluded, in your family, in community? Perhaps writing down what happened and where you find yourself now with this experience.
6. What do you think still needs to be done in our society to facilitate transformative change around ideas of family?
7. Where in your life may there be people, communities, places where you have discovered or may discover an experience of family?

Quotes:

“Love comes in far more shapes and sizes than what the family-values crowd condones, of course.” ~ Wally Lamb

"Two parents can't do it (raise a child). I have women friends who ... use each other as a kind of life-support system. You need a tribe. I don't care what you call it, extended family, large family. That's what one needs." ~ *Toni Morrison*

“This is my family. I found it all on my own, it’s small and broken, but still good. Yeah, still good.” ~ *Lilo and Stitch*

“An emotionally supportive network of adults and children, some of whom live together or have lived together.” ~ *The Church of England’s Children Society*

“Family values” talk mobilizes voters. It identifies an enemy — that allows citizens to channel frustration about the state of today’s world. Imagine: a room of people all wishing for the good ol’ days. Men worked, women cleaned, children obeyed and “everyone knew each other and we all got along.” They fail to notice obvious things like racial tension, gender discrimination and gay bashing. Much like forgetting the awkwardness of junior high, selective memory edits the incongruous and unpleasant, shaping a collective memory of the family based on a sepia-toned vision of Mom, America and apple pie. Supposedly, everything was better in the past. ...

Embracing the reality of a perpetually evolving culture is much harder than clinging to a retro ideal.” ~ *Kevin Noble Maillard*

“I do not see my family life in any way, shape or form as an opportunity for a photo.” ~ *Shania Twain*

“Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in. ~ *Robert Frost*

“All men are children, and of one family. The same tale sends them all to bed and wakes them in the morning.” ~ *Henry David Thoreau*

“Since that night I have come to understand that sometimes the best families of all are those we create ourselves, the people we choose to be with.” ~ *Silas House*

“The story of my family. . .changes with the teller.” ~ *Jennifer Haigh*

“I grew up in a household where we didn't really talk about our feelings, and where the only reason you went to a doctor was because you'd accidentally cut off a limb with a chain saw.” ~ *Jodi Picoult*

“Ohana means family. Family means nobody gets left behind or forgotten.” ~ *Lilo & Stitch*

“I know for sure: Family should be the place where you can be your most complete self. Where you're accepted and appreciated, seen and valued, even in moments of disagreement. It should be your soft place to fall, the place where you're reminded that no matter what happens to you, in the face of your deepest challenges, you are loved.” ~ *Oprah Winfrey*

“The family is the test of freedom; because the family is the only thing that the free man makes for himself and by himself.” ~ *Gilbert K. Chesterton*

“All happy families resemble each other; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” ~ *Leo Tolstoy*

“In dwelling, live close to the ground. In thinking, keep to the simple. In conflict, be fair and generous. In governing, don't try to control. In work, do what you enjoy. In family life, be completely present.” ~ *Lao Tzu*

For more on this month's theme go to: <http://uuac.org/worship/themes-for-spiritual-practice/>

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