

“Family Circles”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull

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Before I marry a couple, usually at the wedding rehearsal, I remind them that no marriage is perfect, so no wedding should be perfect. “Just let go of perfection and be in the moment. Relish it. Savor it! What you’ll remember most is not what went well, but the unexpected, usually funny slips amid readings or vows, or the flower girl skipping down the aisle, or fumbling for the rings.” The glitches set the tone for what follows. Almost always, the wedding party smiles, relieved, though there are some who look worried

There’s another piece of counsel that I’m reminding myself to offer more frequently: “Don’t isolate yourselves! You’re becoming a family, not an institution worthy of a silo. Open your windows; open your doors; open your home to friends and maybe to some strangers. Extend!” My notion of a functional family, a happy family even, is an extended family. We need space beyond a marital dyad; and we can’t raise children alone – at least I couldn’t, either as a single Mom for eight years or as a married Mom/step mom. My daughters, then two in number, now three, thanks to our blended family of 23+ years – treasure those times when we pooled dinners with friends, vacationed with friends, and celebrated holidays and more with those we called friends and family – our extended family.

There’s an irony here. An extended family tends to work well more often than not; a blended family tends to hit some brick walls before the gears start to function in ways that we might call healthy; and for many blended families, as for many so-called nuclear families, the vehicle breaks down altogether. My guess is that we get invested in the notion of “MY Mom,” “MY Dad,” “MY room,” “MY house;” and as a Mom and a Step mom, I’ve heard those claims and more – clamoring little voices that grate with the particulars of “MY turkey platter,” “OUR silverware,” or upping the ante to “my REAL Mom,” “my REAL Dad.” Any clues here about how family therapists stay in business? I can speak for myself. Our blended family invested more than our share in the livelihoods of such processionalists. We probably put a few of their kids through college.

It’s tough to move beyond the needs of our easily bruised egos, let alone the needs of those in of our immediate family, let alone the needs of those in a family with whom we’re supposedly blending. “Curdling” is the operative word. Yet extended families commonly work and work wondrously. Family circles that stretch beyond silo-size are like pools into which a chosen pebble is cast. At the point of entry, circles form concentrically, gracefully, fluidly. Why? Well, members of extended families usually don’t all live under the same roof. Sometimes we live in the same neighborhood, sometimes not. Sometimes we even get into spats and stand-offs over a claim of what is yours, what is mine, or alliances form and harden. But in the close-knit structure of the so-called nuclear family, what I call the “one circle family,” jealousies and hostilities seem to more readily escalate, in the absence of external forces to diffuse them.

This is nothing new. A birthright was the fodder over which those ancient brothers, Jacob and Esau, contended. They were twins, but not identical, and brotherly love was not their strong suit. Told in the biblical Book of Genesis, the story goes that Jacob was favored by his mother, Rebekah; and Esau was favored by his father, Isaac. Jacob was slight, contemplative, and inclined to indoor activities; Esau was strong and physical and a natural outdoorsman. Esau came in from the field one day completely famished to find Jacob cooking some stew. Attuned to nuance and wile, Jacob struck a deal with Esau. In exchange for Esau's birthright, Jacob would give him something to eat. Fearing he would die without food, Esau agreed. The seeds of alienation took root. Many years later, Jacob obtained their father's blessing in the same wily way. Disguising himself as his brother, he counted on the blindness of their father to secure Isaac's blessing, a blessing which once given, could not be revoked. Yes, this was a family that could have used a family therapist, maybe even a few cousins and aunts and uncles to lend a wider perspective.

Is it any different when family members now contend with one another for a parent's love or legacy? Who gets what? Who's loved more or less? Who really belongs? Family circles turn so easily into shapes angular and jagged.

Earlier this morning, I shared with you the claim of one of our specifically Unitarian prophets. Millennia after the account of familial dysfunction in the family of Isaac and Rebekah and the misjudgment of Isaac as father, William Ellery Channing contemplated the "Father's Love for Person's," referring to the common understanding of God, the Father. Channing's bottom line was that God doesn't play favorites. We all belong.

"I am a living member of the great Family of All Souls," he proclaimed.

And because we belong, we're challenged to get along. Why? Because whatever we do, whatever any of us does, reaps a consequence like that of a pebble dropped into a pond, setting into motion circles, widening circles, "spheres of influence."

"I am a living member of the great Family of All Souls and I cannot improve or suffer myself, without diffusing good or evil around me through an ever-enlarging sphere."

Each of us matters; each of us belongs. We are family, for better and worse, just as a couple becomes family with vows that they will be devoted and faithful through good times and, as my daughter, Sarah, improvised in her wedding vows this summer, "through not so good times," the emphasis being on the good ones!

How does this work in a congregation? How do we belong? I commonly refer to us as a blended family, curdling from time to time, stuck periodically in remembered slights and bruised egos. Yet we've draped a banner across the front of our Parish House, proclaiming the invitation of so many of our Unitarian Universalist congregations, "Nurture Your Spirit, Help Heal Our World."

Are we making good on that invitation with one another? Are we making good on that invitation with the ever shifting "one another" who form the ever widening circles of this faith family, this blended and extended faith family?

A story of how this works came to me from this month's *UU Peacemakers Newsletter*, issued as part of our denominational attention to Peacemaking as a Congregational Study/Action Issue. An anonymous congregant from an unidentified Unitarian Universalist congregation writes that his congregation, which he describes as a small congregation, has potlucks. As a self-described bachelor who also doesn't care much for cooking, he's especially grateful for such events and the sumptuous food that shows up on those potluck tables and the fine chefs who prepare it and share it.

Think Trueblood Hall, and recall the times that you've enjoyed the culinary talents of folks here. In fact, imagine a potluck in our Parish House as I move through the rest of this fellow's story.

Like ours, this other congregation's potluck had a lot of kids running around, whooping it up. Delicious chaos we might call it. Then someone walked in, a guy named Alex. Many recognized him as the same fellow who had been riding his bike in the church parking lot as some of the church men were grilling hamburgers and hotdogs as part of the feast. Alex was known, but unknown. We might call him a familiar stranger. A few of the chefs at the grills invited the apparently 20-something Alex to come on in and join the rest of the folks for dinner. He timidly accepted their invitation. In the words of our anonymous narrator:

"I sat with him and so did one of the other guys and we just talked with him. He said he'd been living on the street for about five weeks and the reason he was scoping us out was because he didn't know if we'd call the cops on him or not. He said he really appreciated the food but even more just the human contact....

I've been torn about how we treated Al. Except for me and a few of the guys, no one else would talk to him.... On one hand I can't blame them...I mean, he looked a little shifty. He smelled. He looked of ill character and with what happened in Knoxville a couple of weeks prior I can see how some might be suspicious."

But others did talk with him, and slowly the young man relaxed and shared some of his life situation. After he ate, Alex got up and wandered around, pausing at the wall décor and reading some quotes by, as our writer notes, "a few famous people we have hanging on our walls." (the quotes, I trust, not the people) Our narrator took him for a tour and explained that

"...our faith is a little different from what most people in the U.S. grow up learning about church.

I told him 'we believe there is some Truth in all the world's great religions so we try to learn from all of them and live our lives as best we can from those teachings.'

'wow...right on man. That's good stuff,' [came the reply].

A few moments later Al got on his bike and rode away.

And the account concludes with:

“Shalom, Amen, Salaam Alaikum, Blessed Be, Namaste.”

Who belongs? Who belongs there or here or in any of our congregations? Who belongs to our family? How insular or extended is our family?

“Home,” writes the 20th-century New England poet Robert Frost, “is the place, where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” followed by, “I should have called it something you somehow haven’t to deserve.”

Might we not say the same of family, even as we’re caught short by the painful knowledge that so often home and family are not so honored, nor is the one seeking entrance? Might we not say the same of church family, even as we’re caught short by the painful knowledge that we’re so easily reluctant to welcome the Alex just outside the door?

Who belongs? Today, September 21st, is the International Day of Peace. It was established 27 years ago, in 1981, by a United Nations resolution upon the opening of the General Assembly. First celebrated in September 1982, the need for such a day continues to our own day. We can mark it by asking, “Who belongs?” Who belongs to our family? Whom do we welcome? Whom do we shut out? Yes, there are issues of safety, but we know that each of us was at one time “the stranger” in our midst, maybe not as a homeless bicyclist, hungry and afraid that we First Parishioners would call the police, but then again, maybe so.

What are the possibilities if we drop the proverbial pebble into the family pool of First Parish Unitarian Universalist in Cohasset? Might our circle stretch into circles beyond our imagining, even into the far and embracing reaches of “the great Family of All Souls?” Who is family? Who belongs? Peacemaking in belief and practice calls us to ask this question again and again. Again and again, we answer it.

“Shalom, Amen, Salaam Alaikum, Blessed Be, Namaste.”

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International Day of Peace, September 21,

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