

Creating Family, Celebrating Diversity  
Sunday, November 27, 2022  
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists  
Summerfield, FL  
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavelly

(Kayla Rene) Cortes called the city's LGBTQ community "a family. We don't have much support here in Colorado Springs," she said. "That (Club Q) was a place you could go, a home. And to ruin that, to ruin our family, is just rough." [How the Colorado Springs shooting unfolded — and ended — inside Club Q - The Washington Post](#). The hero was Richard Fierro, who went to Club Q with his family to celebrate a friend's birthday and watch the drag show, which included a performance by his 22-year-old daughter's best friend... "I ran across the bar, grabbed the guy from the back and pulled him down and pinned him against the stairs," Fierro told The Washington Post on Monday... 'I had to do something,' Fierro said. 'He was not going to kill my family.'" [How the Colorado Springs shooting unfolded — and ended — inside Club Q - The Washington Post](#). A family ruined. A family saved. Cortes referred to the whole club community. Fierro referred to his wife and daughter. Neither way of describing family is wrong. We each create our own family.

For me a part of that statement is very literal. I turned forty and was unmarried and had no children. It was not the number that struck me as much as the fact that my grandmother was 40 when I was born. I had reached my grandmother's age childless. I did not have the funds or the time to adopt and begin to raise an infant. I began the process of adopting a school age child through the local foster care agency. I had to fill out a form. Would I take on a child of any gender, of any race? What possible physical disabilities could I handle and what could I not? What ages would I consider? I said any gender, any race. I could handle blindness or deafness but a disability that meant I would need to lift and move the child for the rest of their life I didn't think I could do. Intellectual disability, I didn't think so. I wanted to eventually be done with child raising. Ages 6-10. Of course, I know that people birthing children don't get to make many of those choices. The social worker pressed a bit on the age range. How about a 12-year-old? Ok. Also, this child has two sisters. They have been with a foster family with 8 children. The social workers wanted to put the sisters in separate homes to give them more one on one attention, but they wanted them to be homes that would maintain the connection between them. Ok. Oh, and in Maryland a child over the age of 11 gets to choose for themselves whether or not they want to be adopted. Ok. One African American 12-year-old girl was brought to my home on Mother's Day. I had prepared a special meal. She didn't eat it. She went to her new room and cried.

Becoming a family was not so easy. My daughter hated going to Pennsylvania to see my family. She did not feel accepted, and years later I realized by some she was not. I would take my daughter to her grandfather's house for her family's holiday meals. I was invited to stay, but I never really felt accepted into her family either. Both my daughter and I lost some of the fullness of our connections with our birth families as we became family together.

Sometimes people would make comments about what a noble thing I was doing raising this child putting me in "white savior" mode, which I hated. I just wanted a child to raise not to "save."

Neither of my daughter's sisters were in pre-adoptive homes. Out of loyalty to them and for other reasons as well, my daughter for many years chose not to be adopted. She was 17 before we went to court to make our family legally official. By then it seemed anticlimactic.

Among Unitarian Universalists a wide diversity of families seems normal, but each iteration of family must face its own unique challenges. I remember the Christian Hindu couple. They decorated their Christmas tree with images of Hindu gods. The husband's mother was aghast to find an image of Kali on the couple's Christmas tree. She was sure they were calling down the goddess's wrath on their heads. A young couple included a wife with a heart condition who desired very much to birth a child. Her husband and parents knew how much she wanted this, and they knew the risks. They buried her. A divorced Jewish man with two adopted Korean children, one blind married a divorced Jamaican woman with three grown sons, one with Down's Syndrome. A gay couple met in seminary when they were both studying to be priests. They dropped out of seminary and began a life with each other, but it was with old seminary friends that they celebrated their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary together. A grandmother moved in with her daughter to be of help with her grandson who has Fragile X Syndrome. A man made sure his father received the care in old age that he needed despite the fact that his father had abused him in his childhood. Most families are neither fully ruined nor fully saved but almost all families are both a bit ruined and a bit saved.

No matter what iteration our family comes in it needs to be continuously created and recreated. I put down on my foster-adoptive family form that I was open to a child of any race. I was required to take classes on both parenting and parenting in a multicultural home, but I didn't know what I was getting into. My daughter was embarrassed that I didn't look like her. She understood that she was not accepted by all my family even though I was blind to it. I remember years ago being at an antiracism training. The group was to be put into a white affinity group and a people of color affinity group. Some white participants with spouses and/or children who were people of color insisted on a third group for them and asked me to join them. At the time I did but I realize now that having a spouse or a child who is a person of color does not necessarily unblind us from our white privilege.

For many years I have dated a black man. Once we were going to a wedding reception in rural Maryland. I was driving. We got lost. I blithely pulled into a driveway where a man was standing and smoking and asked for directions. It was only afterward that I realized my companion thought that my actions could have gotten us killed. Once at a frozen yogurt shop in Virginia he pointed out that someone at a nearby table was staring at us. I hadn't noticed. I have not needed to be attuned to the racism in society and so I have needed to be taught in my adulthood how to see it.

To celebrate the diversity in our families while we are constantly creating and recreating them means listening when your child says they are transgender, hearing your spouse when they say they need to change jobs, listening to yourself when something isn't feeling right and working to put it into words.

Holidays may celebrate family, or they may try family. One of my favorite hymns in our grey hymnal is "The Peace Not Past Our Understanding."

"The peace not past our understanding  
falls like light upon the soft white tablecloth  
at winter supper warm between four walls,  
a thing too simple to be tried as truth.

“Not scholar’s calm, nor gift of church or state,  
nor everlasting date of death’s release;  
but careless noon, the houses lighted late,  
harvest and holiday: the people’s peace.”

But... I have seen and also understand the holiday ad for Uber in which a young woman has booked her ride for a certain time in order to make her escape from the traditional family gathering. The comedian George Burns said, “Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city.”

My aunt with Alzheimer’s for many years attended a church of a very conservative variety that didn’t believe women should be ministers. We didn’t break off contact with each other, although I hadn’t been in much contact with her until I moved to Gloucester, Virginia. Then I was attending services at the UU congregation in Newport News and some Sundays after the services I would drive across the bridge to Chesapeake to visit her. The conversation at that point in my aunt’s illness was almost all between my cousin’s wife, my aunt’s primary caregiver, and me, but my aunt seemed to enjoy the company. That they consider themselves evangelical Christians and I am a Unitarian Universalist does not mean that we are not family.

Since I have moved from Virginia, I have not been in touch much. Early this month I called to tell Gail, my cousin’s wife, that Mom had died, and my sister, brother and I thought that she should decide whether or not to tell our Aunt Mary. I contacted Gail again on Wednesday after hearing about the mass shooting in Chesapeake to make sure they were all okay.

It struck me when I heard that one of the victims of the Chesapeake Walmart shooting was a minor. Work and family have always been intimately connected in my life. My father would take my brother, sister or I along in the oil delivery truck he drove if he was going out to a dairy farm or somewhere else he thought we might find interesting. My grandfather’s insurance office was in the front of my grandparents’ home. My grandmother would let us play with her outdated notary seals. I was the substitute for my sister and brother on their paper route. At 15 I began working at the sandwich and ice cream shop where my grandmother was then the night manager. As a minister I am with families when children are born, when people marry, and when they die. I wondered if some family member had helped get the young person who was killed their job at the Chesapeake Walmart and what, if they did, they must feel now. Of course, they could not know this would happen, but what we know in our head is not always what we feel in our hearts.

All members of the families of shooting victims are confronted with a need to recreate their families with a missing person taken by violence. Some will build shrines. Some will become activists. Each will mourn in their own way. When those reactions are diverse within one family that diversity of response can stress the remaining family ties. That kind of diversity can be some of the hardest to overcome. Creating and recreating family is work, sometimes hard work, but it is love that calls us to that work.

I end with a prayer adapted from words by Gwen Matthews.

Today, we're thankful for you and what you bring to family, to congregation, to workplace, to wider community.

Your spirit, talents, generosity, imagination, and dedication create Beloved Community. Our heartfelt thanks to you on this day and for all days to come.

For those who embrace Thanksgiving as a day to honor the gifts of family, friendship, abundance, security, we celebrate with you and join our voices to hold aloft all sacred blessings.

For those who hold Thanksgiving as a day of sadness, who mourn for the hurt and loss of native peoples, who are lonely, who grieve the loss of those dear and beloved, we hold your heartache and sorrow so you do not have to carry the burden alone.

Blessings be upon you here or wherever you may be in this world. Amen.