

Family is Hard  
Sunday, May 5, 2024  
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists  
Summerfield, FL  
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County  
Eustis, FL  
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavely

Reading: [Home Burial by Robert Frost | Poetry Foundation](#)

The poet Robert Frost, whose poem I read earlier, said, “The greatest thing in family life is to take a hint when a hint is intended-and not to take a hint when a hint isn't intended.” But how does one know? Communication is not easy, especially with family where so much that touches up deeply takes place.

In my own family I remember rules around my grandfather that, looking back at them now, don't seem healthy. My grandfather had had what was called back then a nervous breakdown. We children were to be as quiet as church mice when he had Lawrence Welk on the television. And we were to be very, very careful to say or do nothing that would upset him. In my teens when he was diagnosed with lung cancer, we were again carefully instructed. We were never, ever to say the word cancer in front of my grandfather. Thinking back on it now, I doubt if my grandfather was helped much by the rest of us treating him as though he was so fragile. I expect he was stronger than the family gave him credit for being.

Of all my parents' children, my brother, my sister and me, I am probably the one who caused my mother the most pain. When I moved from being a United Methodist to a Unitarian Universalist my mother sent me many long, teary letters about the state of my soul and about how she couldn't bear to not see me in heaven with her after we died. I wrote back a few times, but it became obvious that this was a difference that was never going to be resolved. Eventually, my mother and I just didn't talk about it.

My father, ever the more practical of my parents, just asked me if the Unitarian Universalists had a pension fund.

I would say that despite the struggles I had a happy childhood and a loving family. No family is easy. Mine was not as hard as many I have come to know.

Starting my own family wasn't easy either. I got engaged in college to the only man I had ever dated because that is what one did. My friends were getting married. It was the expected thing to do. Fortunately for me, he graduated from college a year ahead of me and without his friends around I began to see warning signs. I broke the engagement. I began getting hate mail in my school mailbox from him, which confirmed my decision, but was not easy.

When I wasn't married at 40, the age my grandmother was when I was born, I began the process of adopting. I would look for a school age child and adopt through the foster care system. That would solve some of the problems of being a single parent and of the cost of other forms of adoption. But 12-year-olds who have been in the foster care system for five years come with

some history. I may have thought I was ready to be a mother, but it was going to take some time to convince my daughter of that.

Family is hard. But it is worth it. Family, however you define it, includes the people you love most and the people who love you most. I have a book of prayers in my home library that includes one from a New England sampler. “God bless all those that I love; God bless all those that love me; God bless all those that love those that I love and all those that love those that love me.”

Who makes up your family is yours to decide. Who do you love? Who loves you? You may still love your spouse even after dementia means they no longer remember who you are. Your aunt in France may love you even though you can’t remember ever having been taken to see her or even talking to her on the phone.

Today is Mother’s Day which is why I chose family as today’s theme. Unitarian Universalist minister Lindasusan Ulrich wrote this prayer.

“For all the mothers and mother figures  
The grandmothers, aunts, and extended family members who mother  
The soon-to-be mothers, the wish-they-were mothers, the never-wanted-to-be mothers, the “it’s complicated” mothers  
The birth mothers, foster mothers, adoptive mothers, stepmothers  
The “used to be Dad” mothers and “more than one Mom” mothers  
The single mothers, separated mothers, stay-at-home mothers, unhoused mothers  
The grieving mothers, those who grieve their mothers, and those whose grief is complex  
For all the communities that mother  
And for all who depend on the Great Mother  
You are held — and beloved.”

But I don’t think today should be just about mothers. UU minister Kirk Loadman-Copeland wrote this prayer.

“Let us praise those fathers who have striven to balance the demands of work, marriage, and children with an honest awareness of both joy and sacrifice.

“Let us praise those fathers who, lacking a good model for a father, have worked to become a good father.

“Let us praise those fathers who by their own account were not always there for their children, but who continue to offer those children, now grown, their love and support.

“Let us pray for those fathers who have been wounded by the neglect and hostility of their children.

“Let us praise those fathers who, despite divorce, have remained in their children's lives.

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“Let us praise those fathers who, as stepfathers, freely choose the obligation of fatherhood and earned their stepchildren's love and respect.

“Let us praise those fathers who have lost a child to death and continue to hold the child in their heart.

“Let us praise those men who have no children but cherish the next generation as if they were their own.

“Let us praise those men who have ‘fathered’ us in their role as mentors and guides.

“Let us praise those men who are about to become fathers; may they openly delight in their children.

And let us praise those fathers who have died but live on in our memory and whose love continues to nurture us.”

Rev. Dr. Sheri Prud'homme said of our faith, “The patchwork quilt of our theological heritage is torn and fraying in places, and it is stunningly vibrant in others. Some sections have been mended or wholly replaced... As we mature spiritually as a tradition and as people, we develop our capacities to be with the broken and the beautiful, the contradictions, and the complexities.” I think that is an appropriate quote for our families as well as our faith. To love them fully we need to “develop our capacities to be with the broken and the beautiful, the contradictions, and the complexities.” Family is hard, but it is worth the difficulties.

Ministers get to be with you through much of it. I have been with the family that lost their young adult daughter to a drug overdose. I have been with the 90-year-old as she sat by the deathbed of her 70-year-old daughter. I have been with the mother who visited her son in prison. And I have been with the mother who prayed that her son's severe depression wouldn't be his end, including being with her after it was his end.

I said ministers get to be with you through much of it. But you get to be with each other through even more of it. I get to go in and out of your lives. Many of you remain there for each other through years. You are the ones who drive each other to services and doctor's appointments, know each other's stories, support the caregiver as well as the sick or injured, pet sit, feed each other, listen to each other, and keep developing your “capacities to be with the broken and the beautiful, the contradictions, and the complexities.”

Family, whether we identify it by blood or by law or by love, is hard, but it is worth it.

As I have said before my favorite UU email is the Braver/Wiser stories. This Tuesday Unitarian Universalist Sarah Pirtle wrote, “I washed my hands carefully before entering the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit where my newborn son fought for his life. He weighed only two pounds and was born three months early. I kept vigil by spending the whole day alongside him. He rested inside an isolette, but I could extend my arms and contact him through two small holes. When I arrived and paused to wash my hands, I used that moment to pray and notice I was entering sacred ground.

“Machines whirred and brought air through tubes. The first day I'd watched parents trying to stroke their child's arm through the opening. It was too much. The baby flared in self-protection, and they felt pushed away. How could I do this differently?”

“As I extended my hands into his isolate, I sensed what kind of touch he could receive. It changed from moment to moment. Could I cradle his head? Or was that too much? Could I offer a pinky finger for him to grip? Would it be helpful to scoop my hand and gently cup his feet? That kept his legs flexed. Some days any touch at all felt invasive so I listened closely to what he needed.

“There was a phrase that I repeated to orient me: ‘What will say love to you today?’”

“One night he developed a raging infection. In grief, I waited for a new strong medicine to arrive at the hospital by truck from the airport. Standing helpless, I asked what would say love. Right then it meant to stay by his side late into the night. I spoke to him through the glass, ‘If you can, please choose to stay here. The medicine is coming soon.’ He swiveled his head, and our eyes met.

“That was back in 1984. Today he's a strong man in his thirties. Throughout his childhood, and still today, that same phrase travels with us. I've used it as a compass when I want to come through with real support—when he was a toddler in tears, during rocky times, even bringing him to college. It also comes up now in day to day living. If we're preparing to take a walk because there's something pressing on his mind, I want to get the right balance of listening while giving space. So I ask inwardly beforehand, ‘What will say love to you today?’”

Family is hard, but it is so worth it. “What will say love to you today?” Happy Mother's Day.