

Festivals and Families
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet
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Thanksgiving Day 2018 has come and gone. It remains with us in memory and possibly in an extra pound or two. While we may not typically refer to Thanksgiving Day as a festival, it clearly qualifies as one according to Webster's definition; a day of feasting or celebration. The Thanksgiving meal is probably the most commonly recognizable element associated with the day. I say this recognizing that some may argue that football may have become a more significant symbol than the meal. I believe, however, that such a view is a minority opinion held by those who still partake of the feast while finding a way to keep an eye on the score of the game.

For many people, another important focus for the day centers on family. Thanksgiving Day is a time when families often gather and share a meal. The family that gathers may be only the parent, or parents and their children, or it may involve what is referred to as the extended family. Extended family gatherings can include grandparents, siblings, uncles, aunts, cousins, and in-laws. For a significant portion of the population getting the family together on Thanksgiving Day is very important.

It can be difficult for some family members to be physically present at a given family gathering. When that is the case, people may make contact with family members through telephone calls, emails, FaceBook, text messages, snapchat or some other communication medium. Connecting with family can be at least as important as the meal. For many people, connecting with family may be the most important aspect of the day. Interacting with family on a special day such as Thanksgiving is a way of reconnecting to and reaffirming where we have come from, who we are, and what we value in life. Families are where most of us have been provided with what has sustained us in our lives. We have been fed in our families, sometimes to our liking and benefit, and sometimes not. From the reading by Erma Bombeck, it was clear that her mother didn't understand Erma's taste preferences. But when I talk about being fed I am not talking just about the food we have consumed. We have also been fed mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Some families are better at providing what is needed in certain areas than in others. It would seem that Bombeck's mother was not feeding Erma what she wanted or needed emotionally. Erma wanted acceptance and emotional support.

My own experience of being fed in certain areas and not so much in others offers another example for us to consider. Growing up I was encouraged to learn all I could in school because education was valued by my parents. Neither of them completed high school and both of them wanted their children to get a diploma. They fed my curiosity and my desire to learn. In regards to my spiritual development however, neither of my parents attended church or talked about their religious beliefs. My spiritual growth needed to be nourished by people outside of my family. Thankfully my parents didn't impose their ideas about religion on me. While they may not have actively nourished my spiritual growth, they didn't actively hinder it either.

The influence the family has on a person is immense. The connections we have with our families affect us from our first breath to our last. Festival days and holidays can be times when we may have intensified experiences of how family impacts our life.

It would be wonderful if all family gatherings on days such as Thanksgiving were joyful, enriching and up-lifting. From my decades of experience as a psychotherapist however, I know that such is not the case. One of the patterns I noticed was that my busiest time of the year began just before Thanksgiving, and extended through the first part of the New Year. The period of the year that is often referred to commercially as “the holiday season.” I noticed that for a significant number of people I was working with around the holiday season, difficult issues involving family would become much more pronounced. It seemed there was a correlation between the holiday season, a heightened focus on the family, and personal distress.

Long ago I came to recognize that not all festive days that involve families are experienced as positive or beneficial by everyone. As is my tendency, I tried to find some way of identifying or naming, at least in a general way, the various types of experiences one might have related to festive family gatherings. I have found that it is often best to keep such conceptualizations rather simple. Keeping it simple is important for a couple of reasons. First it helps me to remember the system. This is especially important as I age. Second, it allows others to expand on or clarify the system if it is helpful for them. So one of the naming systems that eventually arose is the title of an old Clint Eastwood movie. Some of you may be familiar with the movie; “The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly.” As I mentioned earlier, it would be wonderful if all family gatherings on festive days like Thanksgiving were joyful, enriching and uplifting experiences. I think we can agree that when we feel generally positive about a festive day with family the day belongs in the first of the categories mentioned above, “The Good.” These are the days we tend to remember fondly. We likely cherish those memories. We would all like as many of our festive family days to fit in “The Good” category as possible.

For one reason or another however, we sometimes experience unpleasant or unwanted feelings that overshadow the pleasant and desired feelings. It may be that something disturbing or distressing occurs with another family member or possibly between other family members; something that seems to overwhelm the positive feelings that may have also occurred that day. It could be that some exchange of ideas went from a rational discussion to an emotionally charged disagreement. Or maybe some old hurt from childhood got opened up again by a sibling or family member. Even though we think we have gotten over our hurts from long ago, family members have a way to reopen wounds—wounds that we thought had long ago been healed but had only become hidden. Whatever the cause, when we emerge from a family gathering recalling the emotional bumps and bruises and having difficulty remembering the hugs and love, such a day fits into “The Bad” category. Frequently these are the times we wish hadn’t happened and that we could somehow just forget.

Finally, there is the category that any sensible person would wish didn’t exist at all; the category of “The Ugly.” In my work as a Social Worker there were many people I encountered who had experienced overwhelmingly hurtful or harmful experiences that involved family members. Let me give you a couple of examples. In my psychotherapy practice I worked with a significant number of people who had lost family members they loved deeply.

I also worked with people who were abused or neglected by family members. The reading from Genesis involves both types of situations. Joseph is abused by his brothers as he is sold into slavery. Later in the chapter, when his father is tricked into

believing that Joseph had been killed, he is deeply grieved. In both types of situations just mentioned, it is typical for a person to feel an overwhelming sense of loss. For some people the loss may be the result of the physical death of someone they loved. Such a loss can leave an ache in one's heart that may never completely subside. For people who have been abused or neglected the loss is different but just as powerful. What has been lost is a sense of safety and security, or even a sense of self worth. Whether the pain that overwhelms a person is the result of the loss of a beloved family member, the mistreatment by a family member, or some other incident or situation involving family, the emotional distress that is experienced can become pervasive and overwhelming. Often the person who has had such experiences seems to be able to cope with life reasonably well. The powerful memories and feelings are kept in check most of the time. It is as if they have been locked away in a secure location. No conscious thought is given to the ugly memories. But these memories and feelings sometimes reemerge into conscious awareness, and when they do, they can be very distressing and overwhelming. Special days such as Thanksgiving or Christmas, or any number of other festive days when families are expected to gather together, can trigger the arousal of powerful memories and feelings. When this occurs, the days that are supposed to be joyful, enriching, and uplifting may instead be depressing, threatening, terrifying, or absolutely awful. I wouldn't even attempt to say how many times words such as "dread" and "hate" were used by someone who was telling me how they felt about these days. Often the person would say they just wanted to "make it through the day" or wondered how they would "survive." For them, such a day wasn't just "bad," it was downright "ugly." More times than I can count a person would tell me they wished they could avoid having contact with family members or that the day would somehow just disappear from the calendar.

While most of us generally feel positive regarding festive days when families gather, for some people, certain of these days may be troubling or even terrifying. For some people, the family, that collection of people that is so important to all of us, is not able to offer the support, comfort, or safety that is needed. When these festivals are experienced by a person as fitting into either "The Bad" or "The Ugly" category, they often need people who are outside of their family to support them through a difficult time. This is when another community of people may be an important resource for the person who is struggling. The group I am referring to is the person's church community, sometimes referred to as the "church family." In this larger community, this larger family, a person may be able to find the understanding, the acceptance, the safety, the comfort, and the compassion that they need. I believe at least four of our Seven Principles speak directly to the issue of our religious communities caring for those who are struggling and suffering. In our first Principle "we covenant to affirm and promote: the inherent worth and dignity of every person." Worth and dignity are often needed by those who are having difficulty coping with trauma or loss. Our second Principle seeks "justice, equity and compassion in human relations." In order to heal from powerful hurts or wounds that relate to one's family, a person needs people who will treat them justly, as an equal, and exhibit compassion with them. The sixth of our Seven Principles refers to "the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all." If we are to ever accomplish the goal for the world community that is set forth in this principle, we must first be able to accomplish and demonstrate it in our church communities. People who suffer and

struggle as a result of family related occurrences need places where they can seek and find peace; where they can feel liberated from the memories and emotional chains that bind them. And the last of our Principles encourages “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” According to the spiritual teachings of many Native American cultures, we are not only interdependent, we are all interrelated. We are all family. Science is now confirming what these ancient peoples knew centuries ago. In our culture, we don’t often think of the person sitting next to us in a worship service as a brother, a sister, an uncle, a grandmother, or some other relative or family member. But if we are in fact all related, then we could benefit from beginning to consider that person in just such a fashion. We **are both** interdependent **and** interrelated. As a member of the Unitarian Universalist faith tradition we are called to reach out to those both within and beyond the walls of our church buildings who need a larger family for support. I would ask you to consider the possibility that the brother, the sister, the uncle, the niece or nephew, the grandmother or grandfather sitting next to you might just be the family member that could lighten your burden, could cheer your spirit, or could bring a glimmer of joy to the festivals that are yet to come. Or maybe you could brighten that person’s day when thoughts of family seem to cast a shadow on some particular festive day. Whether they assist you or you assist them, as family, we are all called to work together for the benefit of one another.

And so may it be.