

White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

Thicker Than Blood

Ashley Horan, Guest Speaker

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White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

"Grow Your Soul & Serve the World"

328 Maple Street | Mahtomedi, Minnesota | 55115

651.426.2369 | www.wbuuc.org

READING

Today's reading is excerpted from a TED Talk given by Andrew Solomon, a writer and lecturer on psychology, politics, and the arts; winner of the National Book Award; and an activist in LGBT rights, mental health, and the arts. In his talk, he describes what he has learned from being a gay man in America, as well as from researching the relationships between so-called "normal" parents and children with disabilities.

There are really two kinds of identities. There are vertical identities that are passed on generationally from parent to child. Those are things like ethnicity, frequently nationality, language, often religion... Those are things you have in common with your parents, and with your children. And while some of them can be difficult, there's no attempt to "cure" them. [...]

There are these other identities which you have to learn from a peer group. I call them horizontal identities because the peer group is the horizontal experience. These are identities that are alien to your parents and that you have to discover when you see them in peers. Those identities--those horizontal identities--people have almost always tried to "cure."

I wanted to look at how people who have those identities come to a good relationship with them, and it seemed to me that there were three levels of acceptance that needed to take place: there's self-acceptance, there's family acceptance, and there's social acceptance. And they don't always coincide. And a lot of the time, people who have these conditions are very angry because they feel as though their parents don't love them, when what has actually happened is that their parents don't accept them. Love is something that ideally is there unconditionally throughout the relationship between a parent and a child, but acceptance is something that takes time. It always takes time. [...]

There are people who think that the existence of *my* family somehow undermines or weakens or damages their family. And there are people who think that families like mine shouldn't be allowed to exist. [But] I don't accept subtractive models of love--only additive ones. I believe that in the same way we need species diversity to ensure that the planet can go on, so we need this diversity of affection and diversity of family in order to strengthen the ecosphere of kindness.

SERMON

We are standing--my mom and dad and brother and me--in my parents' kitchen on a chilly November afternoon, chopping onions and toasting breadcrumbs for the Thanksgiving dinner we are hosting the following afternoon. I am home for the holiday from Chicago, where I have recently started my second year of seminary, and although I am glad to be back among my family, my stomach is in knots. The conversation carries on among us--which cousins and aunts and uncles will be coming for the Thanksgiving meal, what movies or books have recently captured our interest. Finally, during a lull in

the conversation, I swallow hard and wipe the little chunks of minced celery off my hands and say: “So.... Mom and Dad... I met someone.”

They glance at each other, eyebrows slightly raised and slow smiles threatening to break at the corners of their mouths.

“Well... that’s wonderful, honey! Who is he? What’s his name?” “Uh... *Her* name is Karen.”

Eyebrows ratchet a little higher. Knives and whisks are set down.

“Oh... really!” Pause. “Well, that’s great. Tell us about her.” “Well, she’s a chaplain at the hospital I worked at over the summer.”

“Oh, so she’s a minister? Is she a Unitarian Universalist, too?” “Yep.” “A seminarian?” “No... she’s actually been a minister for a while. She’s quite a bit older than me...” Pause.

“How much older?” “Uh... she’s actually only five years younger than you.”

In the stunned silence, all four parental eyebrows seem to be making a collective dash for the safety of the hairlines above. Both parents are making valiant efforts to coax them back into place and maintain some semblance of openness and curiosity, but the unruly little guys seem to be entirely out of their control and running for the hills. At this point, and with an encouraging glance from my younger brother, who already knows the whole story, I decide that I might as well just get it all out there at once, and so I say:

“And she’s Black and she has a nine-year-old daughter and we’ve been together since July and I wasn’t going to tell you until I was sure this was something worth telling but now we’re this far along and it seems like this is going somewhere and I’m really nervous because I don’t know what you’re going to think about all of this and I know it’s a lot to take in but I just thought it was about time to let you know.”

Silence. All eyebrows have left the building. Finally... “Oh. Well. Wow.”

And that, my friends, is the story of my very awkward and--to be completely honest--slightly traumatic first efforts at bringing the circles of my biological family and my chosen family into a Venn diagram of intersection. Let’s just say that 2009 will always be known as “*that* Thanksgiving.”

But before I tell you more about that day, and the six year journey all of the members of the broad constellation of people I have come to call family have been on since that first conversation, let’s take a moment to define some important terms. I started this story using the word “family” in the conventional sense, meaning my parents and my brother. Usually, we use that word to refer to our relatives--

the people who conceived and birthed us, and to whom we are related by blood.

But even that theoretically-straightforward definition of family is more complicated than it appears. For our purposes today, I want to offer the term “family of origin,” which includes biological relatives but also children adopted at birth or conceived from unrelated sperm or egg donors. The point is, when we say “family” in U.S. culture, we’re usually talking about people with titles like “mom” or “grandpa” or “brother” or “auntie,” who have been a part of our upbringing since we were born, whether or not they share our DNA. These are what Andrew Solomon refers to in our reading today as “vertical relationships,” or “vertical family.”

Now, “horizontal family” is even more complicated. Maybe it’s the little girl you grew up with since you were a toddler and who is still the kind of almost-sister you would trust to raise your children if you died tomorrow. Or maybe it’s that college roommate who was the best man at your wedding and would give you his last ten dollars if you showed up at his doorstep broke and in need at three in the morning.

Or perhaps it’s your teenager’s best friend, the one who hangs around in your kitchen after school and eats all your cheese and calls you to pick him up when that party gets out of control and he’s had too much to drink because his own parents are absent or abusive or in prison. Solomon refers to these as “horizontal relationships,” because we build them out from ourselves, laterally.

In queer communities, these kinds of horizontal relationships are often affectionately referred to as “chosen family.” For some of us, these relationships are in addition to strong ties with our families of origin.

But for too many LGBTQ people, these horizontal families have been created to replace social networks and safety nets that have disintegrated after people are rejected by families of origin because of sexuality or gender identity--families that have seen their children’s identities as something to “cure,” as Andrew Solomon suggests. In these cases, the cultivation of lifelong, binding ties with people who are not biologically related is not simply a way to belong--it is a mechanism for survival.

Of course, LGBTQ people are not the only group that regularly nurtures horizontal, chosen families. It is said that it is impossible to be human alone, and so any person--any group--that is told they do not have access to the life-sustaining, life-saving forms of kinship recognized by society will inevitably find a way to create their own. For many Unitarian Universalists, especially those among us who came to our faith after a traumatic rupture with our *religions* of origin, our congregations are often the places we create chosen families. Unitarian Universalism’s free, inclusive principles and practices have long aspired to invite those people whose vertical relationships have been severed into horizontal--what we call *covenantal*--relationships, as full members of the Beloved Community.

Our Universalist and Unitarian histories are full of these stories. There were our Puritan and Pilgrim forebears who left their families in Europe to establish a City on a Hill with like-minded friends in the so-called “New World”... The Transcendentalists who abandoned the Boston establishment to live together at Brook Farm... and, perhaps less

widely remembered, there was the Iowa Sisterhood--a short-lived but incredibly influential group of women ministers who founded and pastored Unitarian churches across the plains at a time when women were anything but welcomed into the ranks of the professional clergy.

Imagine with me, if you will, the prairies of the Midwest at the end of the 19th century. To European Americans at that time, this was the wildest of frontiers. Indigenous peoples were resisting the theft and colonization of their land, often with force... disease and natural predators threatened migrating easterners at every turn... and the harsh climates made life excruciatingly difficult. And so it was no wonder that young Unitarian clergymen, educated in Boston and accustomed to comfortable, upper-class lifestyles, were not keen on bringing their pastoral skills to serve churches in what they considered the “uncivilized West.”

Out on the prairie, less-citified evangelists from the Methodist, Baptist and Calvinist traditions were planting churches left and right.

But anyone who rejected orthodox Christianity had a much more difficult time finding a church home. It was in the context of that vacuum that two young women named Mary Safford and Eleanor Gordon found themselves yearning for something more. They been friends since childhood--kindred spirits with keenly curious minds. In their early 20s, the two made a promise that they would never marry, and they would “spend their lives together serving the world as a team” (Tucker 18).

Together, Safford and Gordon devoured the writings of famous Unitarians like William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker, and clamored to hear Unitarian ministers speak when they passed sporadically through town. Before either woman had seen her 30th birthday, the pair decided to found their own Unitarian congregation in Hamilton, Illinois. Mary Safford would serve as pastor and preacher, and Eleanor Gordon would be her parish assistant and Sunday School superintendent.

The story of Safford and Gordon’s long, innovative ministries and their many battles with the Unitarian bureaucracy is fascinating, and if you are interested in learning more about how they were instrumental in spreading Unitarianism in this region of the country, I commend to you Cynthia Grant Tucker’s seminal book, *The Prophetic Sisterhood: Liberal Women Ministers of the Frontier, 1880-1930*.

But today, I want to look less at their professional accomplishments than at how for Safford and Gordon, and for the dozens of women ministers they helped to train, the concept of chosen family was the most central organizing principle of their lives.

In 1870, there were 5 liberal women ministers in the whole country. Twenty years later, largely due to Safford and Gordon, there were more than 70 Universalist and Unitarian clergywomen serving congregations, mostly in the Midwest. Given the demands of their jobs and their unconventional gender roles, it’s easy to understand why many of members of the Iowa Sisterhood created horizontal families instead of vertical, biological ones.

Safford and Gordon had both rejected marriage at an early age, believing that female clergy could not fully serve both the sacred callings of ministry and family life. But their yearning for community and relationship was still strong: they saw each other as life partners, and while neither ever gave birth, they loved and cared for the young women they took in and mentored as if they were their own daughters. As Cynthia Grant Tucker notes in *The Prophetic Sisterhood*, “women like Safford and Gordon had no illusions about biological motherhood being the only or ultimate avenue to a woman’s salvation” (Tucker 80).

The two clearly passed on their practices of chosen family, and it seems that many of the female pastors who followed them also established similar partnerships with other women--some of which might now be called lesbian relationships, others of which were simply deep platonic connections. As Tucker notes, “these women frankly regarded the deep emotional bonding of females as the most sustaining of any relationships” (Tucker 81).

For these sisters in ministry, horizontal relationships were the cornerstones of both their private *and* their professional lives. Theologically and ecclesologically, the Iowa Sisterhood was deeply rooted in Unitarianism--a faith that grew out of the Congregational tradition in which membership was voluntary and covenantal, inclusive of all people of good will and like mind. They viewed their congregations as their extended families, and thought of themselves as the benevolent matriarchs of their clans of kinfolk. Beyond the parish walls, they practiced what they called “public housekeeping” through education, philanthropy, and social justice work (Tucker 189). The Iowa Sisterhood felt called to make “every place on this rounded earth... Home-like,” and “thought of the ideal church as an intimate congregational residence [...], the neighborhood house as a home for a yet more inclusive family... [and] the municipality as a larger home still” (Tucker 189).

It’s tempting to look back at this period and idealize the personal and congregational lives of these pioneering women of faith. But as any of us who have ever hit a rough patch with our partners or closest friends knows, chosen family can have as many complexities and challenges as any family of origin. After decades together in co- ministry, Eleanor Gordon and Mary Safford parted ways in the wake of several very public explosions. Each pursued her own ministry and other special female relationships.

The congregations the Sisterhood served during the peak of women’s ministry on the frontier either died out after their pastors retired, or called the male clergymen that the Unitarian bureaucracy pushed so strongly upon them. 50 years after Gordon and Safford founded the little church in Hamilton, ordained women’s ministry on the frontier had all but disappeared.

So what are we supposed to take away from this history? Certainly not a promise that chosen family is any easier or less demanding than blood kinship. But the stories of these women ministers and their unique relationships to one another and to their congregations *do* assure us, first and foremost, that family and kinship are available to every person. Biological or chosen, our families make us human-- hold us accountable--keep us in relationship with our histories, our identities, and the wider world.

Whether or not our jobs, our attractions, our identities are deemed acceptable in the eyes of the broader society, each and every one of us deserves family. And we have the right and the power to create it.

Secondly, looking at the rifts and heartbreak that some of the Iowa Sisterhood eventually faced with their chosen families reminds us that whether it's your aunt or your dad or your best friend of fifty years, if you're close enough to call them family, it's going to be complex and messy and a lifelong challenge to stay in relationship.

Whenever bonds are that tightly-knit, we are by definition close enough to one another to see our beloveds in their full complexity and with all their faults--and they can see ours right back.

Finally, I think these stories remind us that family, in both its original and chosen forms, is not a zero-sum game. If we are lucky, we can maintain and repair and recreate over and over again our ties with both our families of origin and the people we name as kinfolk as we journey through life. The congregational families that the Iowa sisterhood nurtured were composed of biological units as well as a wider range of kindred people who freely and lovingly entered into covenant with one another. The women ministers may have rejected traditional marriage and motherhood for themselves, but they saw those institutions, alongside their own forms of chosen family, as equally valid and sacred relationships that, as Andrew Solomon says, contributed to a "diversity of affection and diversity of family [that] strengthen the ecosphere of kindness."

That ecosphere of kindness, blessedly, is a place I can say I have finally come to know well after the long familial journey I embarked upon at *that* Thanksgiving back in 2009. I will not say that my family of origin and my chosen family merged seamlessly or painlessly-- there were many tears, painful fights, and plenty of moments along the way when I feared that I would have to choose between the two. But now, six years later, I can report that my partner and our 15 year old have become expected participants at the loving, infuriating madness that is holidays with my extended family. My parents and Karen hang out without me now, and have come to enjoy reminiscing about the 1970s with alarming frequency. As we were moving to the Twin Cities from Chicago last summer, Karen spent three months living with my folks before Lisa, our older child, and I came to join her. And, last December, my parents and my brother and his partner and Karen and Lisa were all in the room when I gave birth to our baby, Aspen, who has somehow charmed all of us into forgetting that there was ever any sort of distinction between biological and horizontal family at all.

My friends, if you are lucky enough to be in loving relationship with your family of origin, or to have created a vertical family of your own, blessings to you. May the blood and the history that you share bind you tenderly together for all of your days.

If you have nurtured around you a network of beloveds that you name as chosen family without a single strand of common DNA, blessings to you. May the experiences and identities that you share hold you fiercely and tenderly for all of your days.

And if you find yourself still yearning for that deeper connection--a firmer sense that, in spite of all your idiosyncrasies and your isolation, you, too, are a cherished member of the Beloved Community, blessings to you. May you know--may we each know-- that we are all bound together, kindred spirits strengthening the ecosphere of kindness, each and all full members in the Great Family of All Souls.

May it be so. Blessed Be, Ashé and Amen.

BENEDICTION

Our closing words are adapted from the poet John O'Donohue:

May the frames of your belonging be generous enough for your dreams. May you arise each day with a voice of blessing whispering in your heart. And may you allow the wild beauty of the invisible world to gather you, mind you, and embrace you in belonging.

Go in peace, my friends, to love and to serve the world.