

Why 21st Families Need Faith Communities

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Gleanings from the Liberal Religious Tradition

From Clinton Lee Scott's *Parish Parables*

There was a certain man that had a son whom he greatly loved. And he thought within himself, saying: "None is wise enough to instruct my son in the mysteries of the eternal—neither priest nor Levite shall tell him what is good and what is evil, lest his mind be corrupted with error."

And he saith, "This shall my son do: he shall wait until he is a man, then he shall know of himself what to believe."

But it was not as the father thought. For the son did grow and wax strong. Keepeth he his eyes open for seeing, and his ears for hearing. And his teachers were neither priests nor Levites. Neither did he come to the Temple for instruction. But his teachers were them that speaketh into the air, and them that were seen in the pictures of Babylon, and messengers in bright colors that were brought into the household on the Sabbath Day.

And when the father was old he understood that the mind of his son had not been as an empty vessel that waiteth for a day to be filled. Rather, it was like unto a parched field that drinketh of that which falls upon it.

From Barbara Merritt's *Amethyst Beach*

Rumi, the thirteenth-century Persian poet wrote, "If you believe that your needs can be met and your wanting satisfied from the outside, you are really a tiger or a cougar."

Well! Rumi had some nerve. Calling us animals of prey. Just because what we want from other people or from our work makes us demanding, aggressive, and manipulative?

The image is a startling one. On soft paws we slowly and stealthily circle our spouse, our partner, our child, our friend. Our hunger is immense. When we pounce we growl, "Make me happy! Make me believe my world is purposeful, well-ordered, and rewarding! Meet my needs!"

We don't just ask the people closest to us to fill us up. We also go to the movies, expecting that the entertainment industry will make us laugh, cry, and feel whole. We haunt the video store, scanning the shelves with the hope that we can locate a great film that can nourish us at home. We watch the TV, desperately wanting to see something "good." We go to the mall, pursuing the wonderful new gadget, out-

fit, or piece of sports equipment that will bring us fulfillment. Our closets are filled. Our shelves are crowded. We keep plenty busy, trying new recipes, restaurants, and vacation destinations.

How strange it is that our hunger continues to gnaw at us. No matter how much we bring into our lives, we are soon out on the road again, looking for something better. Some tigers and cougars are especially talented at bringing in "big game." Others only go after those targets that are smaller and slower. Nevertheless, all tigers and cougars are soon outside hunting again. Always outside; over there, somewhere else. Someone else to ease the pain, the emptiness. . . .

Tigers and cougars are solitary, predatory creatures. My thesaurus tells me that "predatory" means to plunder, to be rapacious, to take, to clutch, to steal, to extort. Harsh words to describe a simple request that the world ought to be responsive to our special demands. . . .

Someone said to me recently, "Barbara, it occurs to me that [simple soulfulness] can take better care of what I need than all the external players put together."

Talk about heresy! What you genuinely seek can best be found inside your own heart and mind and soul? Give up the hunt? But I've gotten to be such an excellent cougar. I know the paths, the watering holes, the lookouts with the best vantage points.

What would an unemployed cougar do with his or her time? Possibly become the rarest of animals—a human being who is open, curious, connected, and, to a remarkable degree, content.

Reflections

In his perceptive survey of early 19th century American life entitled *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville identified three essential components of a stable, high functioning civilization: family, religion, and democratic political participation. These forces serve as a corrective to the individualistic, self-centered, and competitive tendencies that would otherwise dominate society and inhibit the development of any sense of common purpose and collective responsibility.

Whatever might be said about the role of religion and citizenship in society, it is clear that almost two centuries later the family continues to

be held in high regard, at least in theory. In recent years entire political campaigns have been built around the theme of “family values,” and although people often differ with respect to the specific nature of those values, few would dispute the primacy of the family unit.

However, the American family—and increasingly families throughout the world—has been undergoing a transformation and significant differentiation. In our own Unitarian Universalist faith communities here in Madison, many types of family are now represented: same-sex couples with and without children, unmarried cohabitating couples, singles, “blended” families comprised of re-married adults and their respective children, persons involved in polyamorous relationships (three or more consenting adults living intimately together), elders sharing living quarters with their adult children, and, of course, a preponderance of families who conform to the traditional image. What I find rather remarkable and inspiring is the ease with which all these people interact at the First Unitarian Society of Madison and how solicitous they try to be toward one another.

Granted, a dwindling number of people, primarily religious conservatives, still cling to the notion that the only “proper” or “legitimate” family consists of a duly married heterosexual couple engaged in parenting. But more and more of us are learning to accept that family is just about anything one or more individuals want and choose it to be.

If residual disapproval of some domestic arrangements still exists here at First Unitarian Society, it isn’t obvious. Whatever prejudice or impediments they might still encounter in society at large, the families in this faith community do, one hopes, feel affirmed and accepted by their co-religionists.

This is one way in which progressive religious communities in the 21st century can render invaluable service in this new social environment. For much of history, religion has functioned as a profoundly conservative social force, seeking to protect ancient mores and established institutions from being dissolved by the acids of modernity.

In this capacity, religion has often withheld moral and spiritual approval from relational and familial arrangements that deviated from the norm. It didn’t make much difference how *decently* any given family conducted its affairs; what mattered most was its composition. Indeed, religion quite often tolerated highly dysfunctional families of the

preferred type over warm and nurturing families that were improperly constituted.

In many religious cultures—Roman Catholic, Christian Evangelical, Muslim, Hindu-Buddhist, Orthodox Judaism—this remains the case: family is narrowly defined and deviations summarily disapproved. Even the Dalai Lama, known for his open-mindedness, has used the term “sexual misconduct” to describe gay and lesbian relationships, in keeping with traditional Tibetan Buddhist teachings.

Our own perspective is quite different. One aspect of First Unitarian Society’s mission is to provide a safe and welcoming environment for families of all descriptions, and then provide moral and spiritual resources to help them thrive on their own terms. The fact is, whatever form

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they might take, families today need support. Recent research strongly suggests that religious communities can help them navigate an increasingly competitive, calculating and unstable social environment. As former Vice President Al Gore and his wife Tipper write in their book *Joined at the Heart*, “The odds of achieving stability, success and happiness seem to be very much in favor of families that invest their children with a strong moral and tolerant faith tradition.”

Today’s families are incredibly stretched and strained. Financially, it has become more difficult every year to make ends meet. Two incomes are a necessity rather than an option, and today’s parents have less time and energy than their predecessors for their children and each other.

Then too, generational differences and antagonisms seem to have become more pronounced. Fashions, styles, fads, and even speech conventions appear and are discarded so rapidly that old and young share fewer common interests and are less able to communicate. Children and elders alike often feel misunderstood and under-appreciated by each other.

In a hyper-individualistic, consumer-oriented culture community values also have become much murkier and more difficult to maintain. Tocqueville believed that the family should be a “locus of morality higher than that of the world” and that its

ultimate purpose is to inculcate the sort of “unselfish love” that undergirds and sustains public morality itself.

But you won’t hear that last point being made very often by celebrities in today’s market-driven mass media. The stabilizing and integrating virtues of commitment, mutual assistance, compromise, forgiveness, and generosity don’t get much airtime in the electronic media to which our families are constantly exposed.

While some people do realize that responsible and responsive faith communities can be a significant asset to today’s families, many do not. Particularly in the more secular sector of modern society, the impression lingers that religion has more to do with “faith” than with “community” and that its objective is to impose arbitrary, oppressive rules rather than promote reverence and rational, life-affirming values.

Anne Lamott, who was raised in a secular household, is a convert in this respect. In an essay entitled “Why I make Sam Go to Church” she writes, “the main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say, a path and a little light to see by.”

Lamott reports that among the many people she has encountered, the ones who have left the deepest impression have been, as a general rule, religiously active. These, she writes, are folks who “have what I want: purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy.” Although Lamott is a Protestant Christian, she acknowledges that no one religious tradition enjoys a monopoly on such upright and admirable people. Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Muslims, humanists who join together to work on themselves and create a better world are all “following a brighter path than the glimmer of their own candle,” she writes.

More specifically, then, in what ways might spiritually grounded communities make a meaningful contribution to the welfare of twenty-first century families?

In the first place, institutions that provide regular opportunities for cross-generational contact have become increasingly rare. Much of the time popular entertainment teaches young and old that there is very little we can learn from each other, little we can do and enjoy together. A faith community cannot by itself cure this cultural affliction, but it can counter the message and expose its fallacy.

An institution like ours is one of the few venues in contemporary society where casual interchange

between young and old routinely occur. Whether in the choir or in one of our classrooms, at a potluck or serving at the homeless shelter, burning our prairie or sharing the experience of flower and water communion, our generations are drawn together by activities that are meaningful and rewarding to all. In my experience, these contacts help reduce suspicion, soften stereotypes, and produce mutual appreciation.

This is advantageous not just for young people for whom the pressure to hang out with their own peers is intense. A faith community can also pull “empty-nesters” and other older adults out of isolation and temper the natural drift toward age-based segregation—a development exacerbated by the gravitation of elders toward retirement communities.

All too often adults who no longer have to consider the interests of their children curtail their participation in faith communities. This is precisely what a dour old Scotsman, a widower, did. Having noted the man’s absence from church for a number of weeks, his pastor decided to call on him at his small cottage off a country road. The pastor came up to the door, knocked, and the old Scotsman opened it. Without a word, he motioned the pastor inside. He indicated a rocking chair in front of the coal fire and drew up second one for himself. The two men sat in quiet and watched the coals burning brightly.

After a time the pastor stood up, took a pair of tongs, lifted one of the burning coals out of the fire, put it on the side of the hearth, sat back down in his chair and began to rock. Both men watched the lone coal as it grew ashen and cold.

After a time the pastor again took up the tongs, picked up the now-dead coal, put it back in the fire, sat down, and both men watched as once again it burned brightly with the rest. Without speaking a single word, the pastor left. The next Sunday the old Scotsman was back in church and never missed from that time forward.

In our highly mobile, uprooted culture not just isolated elders but families of all types need support systems to replace or supplement those that formerly were provided by relatives or friends of long standing. Either by choice or economic necessity, a high percentage of young adults ends up living far from the community in which they were reared. Often as not, they choose life partners and produce children in places at a distance from their own siblings and parents.

I can attest from my own three decades of min-

istry that faith communities are in a position to assist members who make a sustained effort to cultivate connection and stay actively involved. Parents of infants and young children find peers with whom to share childcare. Couples planning their wedding can avail themselves to pre-nuptial counseling. For singles, congregational programs provide a safe environment in which to make new friends or find a partner with compatible values. When illness or injury strikes anxious and overstretched families can receive meals, transportation to medical appointments, and other small but helpful services from organized caring committees. Widows and widowers often receive invaluable emotional support from those who have suffered a similar loss.

A few years ago one of our older members was asked to present a public testimonial in conjunction with our annual pledge campaign. Please tell the congregation what First Unitarian Society has meant to you, we asked her.

Now this woman had enjoyed a long career in public service, was a well-known advocate and social activist and had been very involved in our own outreach programs. Given this track record, I fully expected her to commend First Unitarian Society for its many contributions to the larger community. But instead she spoke enthusiastically of her early years as a parent and church school teacher, and then, tearfully, of the support she and her family had received when first her son and then her husband had died. This was what mattered most—how her church had served and supported her in a way that no other organization she belonged to had or could.

Between the intimate world of blood-ties and the fee-for-service professionals to whom people today often turn for assistance we find religious associations—communities of succor and support that too often are underappreciated and thus underutilized. This was the message our distinguished member wanted to share.

Another point: in an environment that tempts us to spend all of our waking hours dealing with the mundane—getting and spending, performing chores, and seeking immediate gratification—making room in our busy schedules to address questions of ultimate concern isn't a high priority. But it ought to be because those who experience a dearth of meaning, and for whom a larger sense of purpose is missing, tend to be less happy and more anxious than people who have taken the time to work on

these issues.

In my experience, people who are involved in faith communities are often better able to come to terms with the life-and-death questions that nibble at their own souls than those who rely exclusively on their own resources. It's often not enough merely to read about and to ponder such matters. We also need feedback, which comes when we compare our own life experience and ideas with others in a safe, non-judgmental environment. People who have devoted time and energy to this enterprise tend to be, I think, more secure in themselves, less self-absorbed and thus more sensitive and responsive to others. As a result, their relationships are healthier and their presence more welcome.

Finally, and related to the foregoing, a faith community is in an excellent position to help its members assess their priorities. For instance, it is a grave mistake to believe the oft-repeated claim of free market capitalism that greater purchasing power will automatically produce the good life. For decades now, a highly sophisticated advertising industry has been working overtime to convince us that the true sources of human happiness are easily procured on Amazon.com or in the shopping mall, even as numerous polls show that Americans today are far less satisfied with their lives than were their grandparents.

The past few decades have witnessed the worldwide promulgation of materialistic values and yet what was true a hundred years ago is still true today: Not things, but other people make us glad. Material consumption delivers far less fulfillment than healthy interactions and positive, non-exploitive relationships with others. When we pay attention to and persistently pursue activities that really matter and that reliably produce feelings of well-being, we will feel better about ourselves and more secure amidst the truculence and turbulence of the modern world.

It is the responsibility of religion and of faith communities to expose each generation's cultural fallacies, lift up and promote more life-affirming values, and provide regular opportunities for persons of all ages to experience life as part of a loving community. However glamorous it might seem, the life of a cougar or a tiger really isn't meant for us. Human beings crave connection—participation in circles where our unique presence is recognized, our gifts are celebrated, and our sorrows and struggles generate a sympathetic response. This is such a circle. I invite you to come inside.