



Soul Matters
September 2013

*What Does It Mean To Live
A Life Of Kinship?*

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Some religious traditions emphasize “going deeper.” Others stress becoming pure or disciplined. In contrast, the Unitarian Universalist instinct leans in the direction of “going wider” or “becoming more.” Theologians refer to this as the horizontal dimension of the spiritual life. Not meaning to belittle the vertical dimension that focuses on one’s relationship with the transcendent, we’ve most often looked sideways to the relationships around us to find the divine.

All of which leads us to kinship as a spiritual practice. Indeed, UUism is arguably all about extending our circle of kin. Whenever we feel the temptation to limit that circle, our faith challenges us to open further. Reaching back to our Christian beginnings, we treasure Jesus’ reminder that “you must lose your life in order to find it.” UU sermons constantly re-visit the mystical truth that who we are does not end at the barrier of our own skin but is found most fully as we experience interdependence with others.

And, yes, this opening and extending of self comes with sacrifice and the weight of greater responsibility. As nationally known author, Rabbi Laurence Kushner puts it, “If everything is connected to everything else, then everyone is ultimately responsible for everything. The more we comprehend our mutual interdependence, the more we fathom the implications of our most trivial acts. We find ourselves within a luminous organism of sacred responsibility.” This can seem a burden. But it is a burden that quickly dissolves into grace.

This idea of grace and giftedness is what this month is all about. Living a life of kinship is ultimately about discovering we are not alone. We are more alike than we often imagine. Trusting and depending on one another is not nearly as risky as we tell ourselves. We truly are one family that is better off together than we can ever be alone. In a winner-take-all culture that promotes the myth of pulling oneself up by one’s own bootstraps and is comfortable writing off 99% or 47% or even 1% of our brothers and sisters, the message of spiritual kinship is a saving one. Recommitting ourselves to continually expanding the circle is not just something we do for others, it is also something we do for ourselves. Even something we do to *find* ourselves.

Our Spiritual Exercise:

Wake Up To Wider Kinship

This month's spiritual exercise is reflective and invites us to engage empathy as a spiritual path to kinship. Below are two links--one to a video and another to a photo exhibition. Set aside some time to meditate on the one that moves you most. Here is one way to engage them, but feel free to find your own way:

1. Look over them both and **choose one** that moves you most.
2. **Set aside an hour** to meditate on the one you've chosen.
3. **Savor it**. Watch the video or look over the pictures 2-3 times, spending enough time with it to let it "speak to you."
4. **Ask** yourself, "What is the challenge in this for me?" and "What is this piece inviting me to understand better or do more of?"
5. **Make a commitment**. Based on your engagement with the piece, identify one action or change of behavior you want to make. (For some inspiration, see the right hand column on the karmatube site called "Be The Change/Recent Pledges.")
6. Come to your group prepared to **share your experience**.

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A Lesson in Empathy (Empathy as the Blood of Kinship)

Our lives intersect with others all day, everyday. Sometimes we know these other lives well; frequently, though, the points of connection are brief and transient. Who are these people? How might they tell their own stories?

What thoughts preoccupy their minds? What joys and troubles are coursing through their feelings?

This short film, produced by the Cleveland Clinic, reminds us that empathy is our tool for beginning to know these things. It asks the question: If we could catch a glimpse of others' stories, would we treat them differently?

<http://www.karmatube.org/videos.php?id=3918>

(Not-So) Complete Strangers

In a world where the act of touch is reserved to those that people are comfortable with, this exhibit breaks through the stereotype and creates images that suggest that these complete strangers are close – like friends or family. In the artist's words: "Touching Strangers encourages viewers to think about how we relate physically to one another, and to entertain the possibility that there is unlimited potential for new relationships with almost everybody."

<http://www.visualnews.com/2013/07/18/complete-strangers-pose-together-for-portraits/>

A Question To Live With:

*Don't treat these questions like "homework." You do not need to engage every single one. Instead, simply look them over and find **the one** that "hooks" you most. Then let it take you on a ride. Allow it to regularly break into--and break open--your ordinary thoughts. Then come to your Soul Matters meeting prepared to share that journey with your group.*

1. **Who is your most surprising kin?** Who is now in your circle of intimacy and interdependence that would have seemed unimaginable 10 years ago? **How has this changed your understanding of kin?** Is the distinction between a family of choice and a family of blood relevant to you?
2. **What's keeping you from your kin?** What spiritual hurdle (secrets, jealousy, unresolved conflict, addiction, different choices, favoritism, not fitting in, etc) is getting in the way of you having the relationship you want with your immediate family? Have you given up on repairing that relationship? Are you sure you don't want to try again?
3. **Is kinship truly central to your spiritual practice? How is your spiritual life/practice about extending your circle of kinship?** How would making it a core practice alter your understanding of the spiritual life?
4. **Has it ever been dangerous to expand your circle of kin?** When has welcoming someone into your circle of kinship required courage? Or sacrifice? What has been the cost of kinship for you?
5. **Do you ever struggle with the call to extend your circle of kinship?** UUs talk of interdependence with all. That's easier to do intellectually than emotionally. Does "all of humanity" really feel like kin to you? Do animals? Do the generations that have come before or yet to come? Are you ok with that? Why or why not?
6. **Have the responsibilities of kinship ever been too much for you?** Rabbi Laurence Kushner writes, "If everything is connected to everything else, then everyone is ultimately responsible for everything." Eugene V. Debs wrote, "While there is a lower class, I am in it; while there is a criminal element, I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free." What do you make of these challenging visions? Do they ask too much?
7. **Has kinship ever saved you? Who offered you kinship at an unexpected moment?** And how did that "save" or "transform" you? How has that altered or enriched your life?
8. **Are there kinships you need to let go of?** Not all kinships nourish. Is letting go or walking away from kin part of your current spiritual journey? Does it need to be?
9. **Do you want a different role in your kinship circle?** Do you feel constrained or misunderstood in your family, friend or spiritual circles?
10. **What role does place play in creating kin? Where have your deepest kinships been formed?** In the midst of family events? At church? In college? At work? While serving or working for justice along side others? During service in the armed forces or in the Peace Corps? Do you need to pay more attention to the role of place and context in your work of kinship?
11. **Other?** As always, if none of the above questions connect with you, identify your own.

Recommended Resources:

As always, this is not required reading. We will not analyze or dissect these pieces in our group. They are simply meant to get your thinking started, and maybe to open you to new ways of thinking about what it means to “live a life of kinship.”

First Thoughts:

kin·ship *n.*

1. Connection by blood, marriage, or adoption; family relationship.
2. Relationship by nature or character; affinity.

Synonyms: relation, affinity, kindred

Wise Words:

“If everything is connected to everything else, then everyone is ultimately responsible for everything. We can blame nothing on anyone else. The more we comprehend our mutual interdependence, the more we fathom the implications of our most trivial acts. We find ourselves within a luminous organism of sacred responsibility.”

— Laurence Kushner

“Years ago I recognized my kinship with all living things, and I made up my mind that I was not one bit better than the meanest on the earth. I said then and I say now, that while there is a lower class, I am in it; while there is a criminal element, I am of it; while there is a soul in prison, I am not free.”

— Eugene V. Debs

“You don’t love someone for their looks, or their clothes, or their fancy car, but because they sing a song only you can hear.”

— Oscar Wilde

“Loving [kinship] is giving someone the power to destroy you but trusting them not to.”

— Anonymous

“Kinship is the connection that says, ‘I get you. My husband & I witnessed a lady take a tumble on the sidewalk and as we hustled to help her to her feet & gather her belongings, she began to weep. As I hugged her, I told her we should call an ambulance, but she insisted she wasn’t hurt, just embarrassed. ‘I have MS,’ she whispered. As I comforted & reassured her, I struggled with my own tears. My sister-in-law has MS, too.”

— *Soul Matters facilitator*

“I went off to college and started finding new friends- but it wasn’t easy for me, and I spent a lot of time feeling alone. While expressing my frustrations to my mother, she calmly said, ‘Do the things you like to do---and you will find people interested in the same things.’ At first I thought she was nuts...you meet people in class or parties and bars, not doing things you like. After college I followed her guidance. I joined a ski club, a hiking group, a living history group...she was right!”

— *Soul Matters facilitator*

“In deaf culture, one is often ranked by how many generations of deaf members one’s family has. Why is kinship something to use to claim seniority over others? I myself can claim seven generations of deaf family members, so... I can assert seniority over any second generation deaf person even if they are heavily involved in the deaf culture. [Makes me wonder about] how other members of minority groups make one person better than another.”

— *Soul Matters facilitator*

“When it comes to my step sisters, I usually just call them my sisters. They are, after all, the only sisters I’ve known... My sister and I share a birthday but are definitely not twins. Although we’ve celebrated our birthdays together since we were toddlers - we were neighbors and best friends before we were sisters!

— *Soul Matters facilitator*

I try to remember that everyone we interact with offers us an opportunity to learn something about ourselves, other people, & the human common denominators & condition that we share. These interactions also offer us the experience to rise to difficult occasions & become the finest vision of Who We Are & Who We Want To

Be. In this sense, we are all kin.”

— *Soul Matters facilitator*

“You must teach your children that the ground beneath their feet is the ashes of our grandfathers. So that they will respect the land, tell your children that the earth is rich with the lives of our kin. Teach your children what we have taught our children--that the earth is our mother. Whatever befalls the earth, befalls the sons of the earth. If men spit upon the ground, they spit upon themselves. This we know. The earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites one family. All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth befalls the sons of the earth. Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself...”

— Chief Seattle, credited in *The Earth Speaks*, by Steve Van Matre and Bill Weiler.

“Spiritual practice among Lakota peoples is grounded in the expression ‘All my relations,’ which proclaims that spiritual activity is not only for those immediately participating in it but for all beings everywhere.”

— Joan Halifax, *The Fruitful Darkness*

“There is on the earth no institution which Friendship has established; it is not taught by any religion; no scripture contains its maxims. It has no temple nor even a solitary column...However, our fates at least are social. Our courses do not diverge; but as the web of destiny is woven it is filled, and we are cast more and more into the centre. Men naturally, though feebly, seek this alliance, and their actions faintly foretell it. We are inclined to lay the chief stress on likeness and not on difference, and in foreign bodies we admit that there are many degrees of warmth below blood heat, but none of cold above it.”

— Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

"At This Party" - Hafiz

I don't want to be the only one here
Telling all the secrets--

Filling up all the bowls at this party,
Taking all the laughs.

I would like you
To start putting things on the table
That can also feed the soul
The way I do.

That way
We can invite

A hell of a lot more
Friends.

Articles:

“Elaine Newkirk: No TYME Like the Present”

<http://www.dailygood.org/story/494/elaine-newkirk-no-tyme-like-the-present-audrey-lin/>

An article about Elaine Newkirk’s organization, TYME (Teach Youth, Motivate and Empower).

“The History of Everything, Including You”

<http://hannahhartbeat.blogspot.com/2013/06/a-history-of-everything-including-you.html>

This is a short story about the similar story all humans have had throughout history.

UU Assembly adopts immigration Statement of Conscience

<http://blogs.uuworld.org/ga/2013/06/21/delegates-pass-immigration-as-a-moral-issue-statement-of-conscience/>

<http://www.uua.org/immigration/re/moral/>

Videos & Podcasts:

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Compassion and Kinship: Fr Gregory Boyle
Father Gregory Boyle, founder and executive director of Homeboy Industries, is an acknowledged expert on gangs, intervention and re-entry and today serves on the U.S. Attorney General's Defending Childhood Task Force.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipR0kWt1Fkc>

World Peace and Other 4th-Grade Achievements
(Extended Trailer)

Interweaves the story of John Hunter, a teacher in Charlottesville, Virginia, with his students' participation in an exercise called the World Peace Game. The game triggers an eight-week transformation of the children from students of a neighborhood public school to citizens of the world. The film reveals how a wise, loving teacher can unleash students' full potential.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICq8V2EhYs0&feature=youtu.be>

Books:

Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice: How Women are Choosing Parenthood without Marriage and Creating the New American Family, By Rosanna Hertz

This is a book about women (mostly middle-class) that are choosing to have children on their own (i.e. sperm bank, adoption, etc.), and how they balance their families and careers as they take care of their children on their own.

Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion, Gregory Boyle

As a pastor working in a neighborhood with the highest concentration of murderous gang activity in Los Angeles, Gregory Boyle created an organization to provide jobs, job training, and encouragement so that young people could work together and learn the mutual respect that comes from collaboration. Tattoos on the Heart is a breathtaking series of parables distilled from his twenty years in the barrio. Arranged by theme and filled with sparkling humor and glowing generosity, these essays offer a stirring look at how full our lives could be if we could find the joy in loving others and in being loved unconditionally.

Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship; By Kath Weston

"This classic text, originally published in 1991 and now revised and updated to include a new preface, draws upon fieldwork and interviews to explore the ways gay men and lesbians are constructing their own notions of

kinship by drawing on the symbolism of love, friendship, and biology."

A Stronger Kinship: One Town's Extraordinary Story of Hope and Faith, By Anna-Lisa Cox

"In the heartland of the United States 150 years ago, where racism and hatred were common, a community decided there could be a different America. Here schools and churches were completely integrated, blacks and whites intermarried, and power and wealth were shared by both races. But for this to happen, the town's citizens had to keep secrets, break the laws of the world outside, and sweep aside fear and embrace hope."

The Story of Edgar Sawtelle

A story of family both human and canine, Born mute, speaking only in sign, Edgar Sawtelle leads an idyllic life with his parents on their farm in remote northern Wisconsin. For generations, the Sawtelles have raised and trained a fictional breed of dog whose remarkable gift for companionship is epitomized by Almondine, Edgar's lifelong friend and ally. Edgar seems poised to carry on his family's traditions, but when catastrophe strikes, he finds his once-peaceful home engulfed in turmoil. Forced to flee into the vast wilderness lying beyond the Sawtelle farm, Edgar comes of age in the wild, fighting for his survival and that of the three yearling dogs who accompany him, until the day he is forced to choose between leaving forever or returning home to confront the mysteries he has left unsolved.

The Bond: Our Kinship with Animals, Our Call to Defend Them, By Wayne Pacelle

"In countless fascinating ways, our relationship with animals is an essential part of the human experience. Wayne Pacelle explores the many ways animals contribute to our happiness and well-being, and he reveals scientists' newfound understanding of their remarkable emotional and cognitive capacities. An instant classic, The Bond reminds us that animals are at the center of our lives, not just a backdrop, and how we treat them is one of the great themes of the human story."

The Death of Josseline: Immigration Stories from the Arizona-Mexico Borderlands
by Margaret Regan.

The 2010 UUA Common Read

Movies & TV:

Modern Family

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Modern_Family

<http://abc.go.com/shows/modern-family>

Born Free

“Joy Adamson and her husband, Kenya game warden George Adamson, raise Elsa, a lion cub. When Elsa approaches maturity, Joy determines she must re-educate Elsa to living in the wild so that the lioness can return to a free life.”

Band of Brothers

“An impressively rigorous, unsentimental, and harrowing look at combat during World War II, Band of Brothers follows a company of airborne infantry--Easy Company--from boot camp through the end of the war.”

The Visitor

In this fictional drama, an American college professor and a young immigrant couple grapple with the treatment of immigrants and the legal process post-9/11. The film makers are using the film to call attention to issues of due process, detention and deportation.

Join our Soul Matters Facebook page to engage in the theme with participants from all around the US and Canada:
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/soulmatters/>

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