

KISSING COUSINS
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS

Welcome

~ Naomi Shihab Nye

The Arabs used to say,
When a stranger appears at your door,
feed him for three days
before asking who he is,
where he's come from,
where he's headed.
That way, he'll have strength enough to answer.
Or, by then you'll be such good friends you don't care.

Let's go back to that.
Rice? Pine nuts?
Here, take the red brocade pillow.
My child will serve water to your horse.

No, I was not busy when you came!
I was not preparing to be busy.
That's the armor everyone put on at the end of the century
to pretend they had a purpose in the world.
I refuse to be claimed.
Your plate is waiting.
We will snip fresh mint into your tea.

Your plate is waiting. We will snip fresh mint into your tea. You are welcome here.

STORY FOR ALL *The Other Side* ~ Jacqueline Woodson

(In this story, two girls live on opposite sides of a fence which divides a town based on race. They become friends, in spite of, perhaps because of, the fence.)

READING *I Am a Unitarian Universalist* (adapted for our context) ~ John Corrado

I am a man and I am a woman; I am gender fluid, I am transgender, I
am none of these.

 And I am a Unitarian Universalist
I am young and I am old and I am middle-aged.

 And I am a Unitarian Universalist
I am black and white and I am yellow, red and brown.

 And I am a Unitarian Universalist
I am married and I am single and I am divorced. I am bisexual and heterosexual and I
am lesbian and I am gay.

 And I am a Unitarian Universalist
I am a college graduate and I am a high school drop-out. I am a white collar worker and
a blue collar worker. I am retired and I am unemployed.

And I am a Unitarian Universalist
 I am an atheist and I am a Christian and a humanist and a Jew and a mystic.
 And I am a Unitarian Universalist
 I am healthy and I am ailing. I am a child with autism, a person with a learning disability, a person with ADHD.
 And I am a Unitarian Universalist
 I am a vegetarian and I love a good steak. I drive a hybrid, I drive an SUV, I ride the bus, and walking is my main transportation.
 And I am a Unitarian Universalist
 I am a law abiding citizen who has never received anything more than a parking ticket, and I am a murderer waiting on death row.
 And I am a Unitarian Universalist
 I vote NDP and Liberal and Conservative and Green. I supported Elizabeth May, Stephen Harper and Justin Trudeau.
 And I am a Unitarian Universalist
 I am a soldier and I am a pacifist; I am a peace activist and I support a strong defense policy.
 And I am a Unitarian Universalist
 I smoke and I am a non-smoker. I drink socially and I am an alcoholic. I abstain from drugs. I am an addict. I smoke pot, and I choose not to.
 And I am a Unitarian Universalist
 I am many other things, some by choice and some by chance. And I am part of a common human destiny. I am part of humanity's family.
 And I am a Unitarian Universalist

MESSAGE *Kissing Cousins* ~ Rev. Stoneberg

I come from reserved and stoic Swedish stock. While we easily, readily, maybe even with relish, hug one another, my family rarely, if ever, kisses in greeting. Occasionally, when one of us forgets who they're with, and absentmindedly plants a wet one, there's an awkward moment...did that just happen? What am I supposed to do now?

Living in Canada, or maybe it's just being outside of the 'little Scandinavia' of Minnesota, I find that I'm still not completely comfortable with kisses exchanged in greeting, and am doubly confounded by the continental-style kiss upon each cheek. Not on principle, mind you...I like kissing. I think my discomfort is more about not really knowing what's expected of me, or how I should respond. Some of us have laughed together about this at the doors; I usually wait to get a sense of whether you want to shake hands or hug, and I fear my hesitancy can make the exchange feel awkward. I assure you that I want to make a sincere and heartfelt connection; I'm just not always sure of how to do that.

While the term "kissing cousin" has come to be used derogatorily to describe a romantic relationship between relatives, my understanding is that its appropriate usage refers to relatives who know one another well enough to offer a kiss in greeting. This implies that kissing is discriminatory. Kissing cousins might say to one another, "I don't really know you, but since we're related, I offer a kiss."

How we greet and welcome one another is a distinctly cultural thing. I came across a blog¹ written by an American wine professional who moved to Spain, expressing her utter confusion about when and how many times to kiss, when to air kiss, when to make a smooching sound without actual skin contact. She articulates the factors one needs to sort through...gender, country of origin, age, language. But ultimately, she concluded that it is not an exact science, and that as much as one should be sensitive to cultural norms, it doesn't really matter as long as you smile and view the exchange, however awkward, as the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

But social practices are not what I want to talk about this morning. My first interest in the idea of 'kissing cousins' is in its implications for how we determine who qualifies as our cousin, our relation. And second, I'm interested in who we choose to 'kiss', that is, to welcome warmly into our homes and hearts...the kiss being a signal that we are open to one another, that we are putting aside a bit of our reservation and willing to be vulnerable, that we offer and expect friendship and mutual regard.

So, what does it mean to be people of relationship using the lens of 'kissing cousins?'

Remember how last week we used the metaphor of a mosaic, to consider how we might 'fit together', and fill the space between us with the grout of relationship? Consider a similar image as I now put before you several concepts and ideas which may not come together easily or with a perfect fit.

The first I've already presented...that is...the idea that most of us do not readily see, or greet, all others as 'kissing cousins.' We have, each of us, somehow and likely unconsciously, determined who we will kiss in greeting, and who we will not.

The non-fiction book club has just begun a new read for January: *Unlikely Utopia: The Surprising Triumph of Canadian Pluralism* by Michael Adams. I haven't read the whole book, yet found the first chapter on Canadian identity to be provocative. Adams says that the ground work for multiculturalism is laid in our history, being the only "place on earth that has [all three of] a national minority group, an Aboriginal population, and a substantial immigrant population."² He quotes Will Kymlicka in saying that "Canadians are distinctive in the way that they have incorporated [a] policy of accommodating diversity into their sense of national identity."³ Canada has never been a unitary entity,⁴ and consequently has neither crafted, nor imposed, a single national narrative.

Adams goes on to suggest that the lack of consensus on our national identity may not be an Achilles heel but rather our foot in the door, when it comes to multiculturalism. There's no one

¹ http://catavino.net/to-kiss-or-not-to-kiss-top-10-tips-for-greeting-fellow-europeans/?doing_wp_cron=1452353421.7823328971862792968750

² Adams, Michael, *Unlikely Utopia: The Surprising Triumph of Canadian Pluralism* (Viking Canada:Toronto,2007) p. 9

³ Ibid, p. 21

⁴ Ibid, p. 30

special quality, inherited or otherwise, that makes one fully Canadian.⁵ If you can handle our laws and our Charter of Rights and Freedoms, then you can live here and get along.

It occurs to me that this description of Canada bears striking resemblance to Unitarian Universalism. We have no single historical source, no one faith narrative, and have taken in innumerable religious immigrants. We have incorporated diversity, or at least its ideal, into our religious identity, and we evolve, theologically and spiritually, thanks to the input from diverse peoples with whom we merge and interact. If you can handle our principles and our covenant, then you can live here and get along.

So this is the second piece...the recognition that, at least on paper, Unitarian Universalism proudly claims a willingness to 'kiss all' in cousin-like welcome. We welcome all who enter in friendship, in freedom, and in peace.

But, long before picking up Adams' book, long before knowing that this would be a New Member Sunday, this sermon was inspired by an article found on the opinion pages of The New York Times,⁶ an article that also speaks of identity and how it is affected by interactions with difference. The author maintains that change comes from the margins, and in making his case, gives quite a bit of ink to describing the center...that place of identity and belonging to which we are attracted in some way or another. That center has both wealth and anxiety, both power and a fear of losing that power. The center spends a lot of energy regulating itself. The center is what is mainstream, the center is what is acceptable. Cultures have centers. Communities have centers. Our tradition has a center. And, centers need significant challenges from the outside in order not to be undermined by atrophy.

The irony, says the author, is that all difference...all subversion and derision...that comes from the margins make the center stronger...the margins are like antibodies. Our center, our identity, is strengthened and expanded by challenge from, and interaction with, difference. And, eventually, what was at the margins moves to become an integral part of the center, and only to be replaced by something new on the margins.

This is the third piece. We are changed, strengthened, and enlivened, by engaging with difference, by opening our hearts and doors to others.

Let me return to Adams. In an almost off-hand way, he says, speaking of Canada: "We do suspect, deep down, that we're superior to other countries - precisely because we don't think we're superior." If you will allow me to use 'we' to refer to the broad swath of Unitarian Universalism, I believe that this often describes us. We tend to be a bit smug about our inclusivity (as real or imagined as it may be!) and this sense of superiority is, in my opinion, a great weakness at our center. **It**, our smugness, is the antithesis of inclusivity, the bane of open-mindedness. For this reason, I believe we should embrace, or at least explore, most humbly, those moments we come up against difference...whether they be of culture, of theology, of language, of life-style. These are the times when our sense of self - individually and institutionally - is strengthened and deepened.

⁵ Ibid, p. 37

⁶ http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/06/30/change-comes-from-the-margins/?_r=0

So accept this as the fourth piece of today's unlikely puzzle, that is, the fact that any trace of superiority, of having gotten it right, will hamper us in attaining our vision of inclusivity and diversity.

How does all this fit together? Look at it again. First, each of us has, individually and communally, determined who we will accept as 'related,' and who we will not. Second, there is our claim, as a faith, to welcome all who enter in friendship, in freedom, and in peace, something of which we are most proud. Third, a warning that feelings of superiority do not serve the broadening of our circle of relations. And finally, the hard-won truth that we are changed, strengthened, and enlivened, by opening our hearts and doors to others.

It's like a push-me-pull-you. We long for similarity, like-mindedness, belonging...and we are all around healthier and stronger amid difference and not-quite-fitting-in-ness. We are proud of who we are, and that pride can be debilitating. When you look at these four things together, what do you see? How might their juxtaposition, and their interconnection, inform your choices about your interactions? And where do you see yourself in this jumble of tensions? At the center? At the margins? Mired in superiority or righteousness? Challenged by difference? And, can you see how important your voice is, no matter where you stand, or sit, or speak?

As I skipped through webpages about 'kissing cousins,' I found a CBC article⁷ about a smartphone app available in Iceland. An isolated country with a population of 320,000, most everyone there is distantly related, making the inadvertent dating of a cousin a real risk. The app lets users 'bump' phones, and purportedly emits a warning alarm if the phone owners are closely related. It's slogan? "Bump the app before you bump in bed."

Humorous as that may be, perhaps we could use an app for Unitarian Universalists, one that emits not a warning alarm, but a voice of inspiration, a boost of courage, so that when we bump up against one another, we are reminded of our deep aspirations for interconnection and inclusivity, ensuring us that 'all' are our relations. As a bonus, maybe it could give us a shot of pleasure each time we intentionally enter into an encounter with difference, however awkwardly, that we might embrace such interactions as our greatest strength, our greatest blessing. May we welcome and embrace all as beloved cousins.

May it be so. Blessed be. Amen.

READING *Marginal Wisdom* ~ Leslie Takahashi Morris

They teach us to read in black and white.

Truth is this – the rest false.

You are whole – or broken.

Who you love is acceptable – or not.

Life tells its truth in many hues.

We are taught to think in either/or.

To believe the teachings of Jesus – OR Buddha.

To believe in human potential – OR a power beyond a single will.

I am broken OR I am powerful.

⁷ <http://www.cbc.ca/news/business/kissing-cousins-icelandic-app-warns-if-your-date-is-a-relative-1.1390256>

Life embraces multiple truths, speaks of both, and of and.
We are taught to see in absolutes.
Good versus evil.
Male versus female,
Old versus young,
Gay versus straight.
Let us see the fractions, the spectrum, the margins.
Let us open our hearts to the complexity of our worlds.
Let us make our lives sanctuaries, to nurture our many identities.
The day is coming when all will know
That the rainbow world is more gorgeous than monochrome,
That a river of identities can ebb and flow over the static, stubborn rocks in its course,
That the margins hold the center.

***CLOSING WORDS** *We Are All More Human Than Otherwise (excerpt)* ~Richard Gilbert

The human race is a vast rainbow bursting into view
of white and black, red, yellow and brown.
Yet...in tongue we are a tower of babel, a great jumble of voices grasping for words,
groping for ways to say love, peace, pity, and hope.
We are united only by our urge to search.
Boundaries divide us, lines drawn to mark our diversity,
maps charted to separate the human race from itself.
Yet a mother's grief, a father's love, a child's happy cry,
a musician's sound, an artist's stroke, batter the boundaries and shatter the walls.
Strength and weakness, arrogance and humility, confidence and fear, live together in
each one, reminding us that we share our common humanity.
We are all more human than otherwise.

And you are all more filled with love than otherwise. Go and be the blessing that you are.
Amen.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME