

Putting the “Fun” Back in Dysfunctional
Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska
UU Church of Minnetonka
December 6, 2009

READING

***From Care of the Soul*¹**

By Thomas Moore

The soul prospers in an environment that is concrete, particular, and vernacular. It feeds on the details of life, its variety, its quirks, and its idiosyncrasies. Therefore, nothing is more suitable for the care of the soul than the family, because the experience of family includes so much of the particulars of life. In a family you live close to people that otherwise you might not even want to talk to. Over time you get to know them intimately. You learn their most miniscule, most private habits and characteristics. Family life is full of major and minor crises...and all kinds of characters. It is tied to places and events and histories. With all of those felt details, life etches itself into memory and personality. It is difficult to imagine anything more nourishing to the soul.

...Looked at coldly [however], the family...is both good and bad, offering both support and threat. That is why adults are so often ambivalent about visiting their families and spending time with them: they want the emotional rewards of the sense of connection, but they also want the distance from painful memories and difficult relationships.

Today professionals are preoccupied with the “dysfunctional family.” But to some extent all families are dysfunctional. No family is perfect, and most have serious problems... We may be tempted at times to imagine the family as full of innocence and good will, but actual family life resists such romanticism. Usually it represents the full range of human potential, including evil, hatred, violence, sexual confusion, and insanity. In other words, the dynamics of actual family life reveal the soul’s complexity and unpredictability, and any attempts to place a veil of simplistic sentimentality over the family image will break down.

CHOIR ANTHEM

Calling My Children Home

(Doyle Lawson/Charles Waller/Robert Yates)

Those lives were mine to love and cherish.
To guard and guide along life's way.
Oh God forbid that one should perish.
That one alas should go astray.

Back in the years with all together,
Around the place we'd romp and play.
So lonely now and oft' times wonder,
Oh will they come back home some day.

¹ *Care of the Soul*, Thomas Moore, 1995, pages 25-26

I'm lonesome for my precious children,
 They live so far away.
 Oh may they hear my calling...calling...
 and come back home some day.

I gave my all for my dear children,
 Their problems still with love I share,
 I'd brave life's storm, defy the tempest
 To bring them home from anywhere.

I lived my life my love I gave them,
 to guide them through this world of strife,
 I hope and pray we'll live together,
 In that great glad hereafter life.

I'm lonesome for my precious children,
 They live so far away.
 Oh may they hear my calling...calling...
 and come back home some day.

SERMON

Putting the "Fun" Back in Dysfunctional **Reverend Kent Hemmen Saleska**

Oh what a joy that the holiday season is here. The weather has finally turned colder. The snow is beginning to fall. Wood smoke from real fireplaces floats over the neighborhood. Holiday music fills the air. Family traditions are hauled up from the basement or out of the closet along with ornaments and decorations. Lights of the season have gone up in our neighborhoods: white icicle lights dangling from the gutters, colored lights outlining the contours and angles of the house, a lighted crèche of Jesus, Mary and Joseph in the front yard...next to the traditional manger animals – flying reindeer and a glowing pink flamingo – all visited by the customary three wise men standing guard: a plastic Frosty the Snowman, a lighted Santa Claus, and a giant blow-up penguin.

Then there's the music. Handel's *Messiah* at Orchestra Hall, *VocalEssence* at the Plymouth Congregational Church, Windham Hill musicians on the stereo at home, *Beauty and the Beast* at the Ordway, Carrie Underwood on TV, Burl Ives and Elvis Presley and Amy Grant in every restaurant and store in every mall in every city and village and hamlet...and Johnny Cash and Garth Brooks and David Archuleta and Miley Cyrus...

Oh, but then there are the parties. The brownies and cookies and chocolate covered mint-things in the office every day, a gift exchange in the board room or a night out on the town with co-workers, and then the series of gatherings with various friends at their house – or your house, which you may have cleaned for only the second time this year so that the guests can get it dirty again.

And then there are the family gatherings. The dazzling decorated trees, the first time seeing snow for the babies, the hugs, the gifts, the greetings and games with cousins, the

daughter returned home from college, the son bringing home a new partner, the big meals...Uncle Joe drinking a little too much, the argument about who is supposed to host next year, the fight about why the dinner wasn't ready on time because someone left work later than they were supposed to, the brother who makes a joke about your weight just because he knows it irritates you, the mother who cries every Christmas and says if you really loved her you would make it home more often during the year...

Whew. This is supposed to be a time of joy and tenderness, a time of sacred illumination in the darkness, a time of peace, a time of quiet contemplation, a time of birth and rebirth, a time like what happens in *It's a Wonderful Life* when all our hard work and sacrifice pays off and we get recognized for the good people we really are. We like to believe this is a time of year for comfort and joy, for reconnecting with family – and thinking that this year, really, will be the time we will be honest and tell our family, in an earnest and loving way, how we really feel and how those things they say really hurt us...and this time they will listen, this time they will hear, and we will hug and smile and know things will be different from this point on.

Now...who told us it was going to be like this? Who ever gave us a guarantee that our families – the ones we come from or the ones we create – would be a source of unconditional love, with kindness and exactly the right words every time we interact? And why do we expect that the holidays will bring about a change we don't see the rest of the year?

In his book *Care of the Soul*, Thomas Moore says that, to some extent, all families are dysfunctional. He says, "we may be tempted at times to imagine the family as full of innocence and good will, but actual family life resists such romanticism." And for some reason, apparently just because it is the holiday season, we hope or expect the holidays to be different from the rest of the year. I've heard it said, and maybe you've heard this, too, that one definition of insanity is "doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

So if we come from these dysfunctional families, what in the name of all that is holy compels us to start new families of our own? And more than that, how is it that any of this dysfunction can be fun?

Dysfunction is not easy to address, and sometimes it is difficult to even figure out what it is. Each one of us grows up in a family, and for most of our early lives, maybe even until high school or college, what we experience in our families of origin seems normal. Of course, this begs the question of how define "normal" or what an "average" family might be, though it often seems we define a "normal" family as one that doesn't have the same problems as our own family! But it seems that dysfunction mostly includes the things that encourage unhealthy, manipulative or destructive behavior.

During the offering, our choir sang "Calling My Children Home," which I first heard sung by Emmylou Harris. It is a beautiful song, and it could be describing the pure, genuine and heartfelt love we feel for our children. But if we go with Thomas Moore's notion that actual family life resists the romanticism of a family completely full of innocence and good will, then – especially from the perspective of the child – it might be that the parental voice in this song is just a bit manipulative or controlling.

Without a doubt the parental voice in this piece of music expresses a deep love: "I gave my all for my dear children, / Their problems still with love I share, / I'd brave life's storm, defy the tempest / To bring them home from anywhere."

And yet, the piece ends with the words, “I’m lonesome for my precious children, / They live so far away. / Oh may they hear my calling...calling... / and come back home some day.” This seems to suggest that is not OK for a child to move away from home, or that if the child really loved the parent they would come home simply because the parent is lonesome. In addition, the song begins with the words “those lives were mine to love and cherish.” I don’t know about you, but that line makes me cringe. Parents give life to a child, but a child’s life never belongs to the parent. In the words of the poet Mary Oliver, words we often use at our child dedications here, “To live in this world, you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.”

Though I have reservations about some of the words in the song, “Calling my Children Home,” I still think it is a beautiful song, and I think our choir did a very beautiful job singing it! The challenge of the words and the beauty of the emotion and music hold us in paradox. Part of putting the “fun” back in dysfunctional, I think, has to do with whether we desire a life filled with soul, and whether – or how much – we have the ability to live in the midst of paradox.

Thomas Moore says, “The soul prospers in an environment that is concrete, particular and vernacular. It feeds on the details of life, its variety, its quirks, and its idiosyncracies. Therefore, nothing is more suitable for care of the soul than family, because the experience of family includes so much of the particulars of life.” And yet, paradoxically, Thomas Moore is not talking about just the healthy or joyful parts of family life, because in the very next sentence he says, “In a family you live close to people that otherwise you might not even want to talk to.”

I recently had the chance to hear Thomas Moore in person, as the keynote speaker at “Convocation,” a conference in November for Unitarian Universalist ministers. Convocation occurs only once every seven years, and this year it took place in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, and there were over 400 UU ministers in attendance. Thomas Moore lived as a monk in a Catholic religious order for 12 years, but later left the order and has written some 16 books on the soul, mythology and the imagination.

At Convocation, Thomas Moore talked a lot about the soul, and the difference between spirit and soul. I struggled to understand the difference he was making between the two until he used the analogy of going on a road trip. The spirit loves to travel and move, to explore and discover. The soul, on the other hand, is nourished by stopping, by observing, and by reflecting. He said if you are on a road trip, that is feeding the spirit, but when you stop the car and pull over to watch a sunset, then you are feeding the soul.

Like many spiritual teachers throughout history, Thomas Moore writes and teaches with the notion of paradox as a central component – the virus that gets us sick is also part of the vaccine that makes us well. Also like the great teachers, he charges us to not simply seek the wisdom that he or others discovered, but to explore our own soul with our own lifelong work, to discover – and uncover – the deep wisdom and meaning we find there.

This exploration and discovery is at the very heart of what it means to have fun discovering our soul within the nooks and cracks of our dysfunction. It may be that our families are the sources of some of our deepest personal pain, but it is also the case that many of our strengths come from our families as well. In his book, *Care of the Soul*, Thomas Moore entices us to enter more deeply into our soul by entering into and honoring our own dysfunction.

Moore writes, “When I see those three letters “dys-” in “dysfunctional,” I think of “Dis,” the old Roman name for the mythological underworld. Soul enters life from below, through the cracks, finding an opening into life at the points where smooth functioning breaks down. We

bring the Dis-functions of family into the therapy room as problems to be solved...But care of the soul doesn't require fixing the family or becoming free of it or interpreting its pathology. We may need simply to recover soul by reflecting deeply on the soul events that have taken place in the crucible of the family.”

As some philosophers and mystics have noted, the soul is deep and mysterious, and even an entire lifetime is not enough to explore it all. To nourish the soul, to care for the soul in the context of family is to become aware – not to be ashamed or angry – but simply more deeply aware, of the deep cracks in our lives where smooth functioning breaks down. As difficult as it is, this means paying attention to our families, paying attention to the times we react the most, paying attention to the role we play and the dysfunction we ourselves contribute and in which we participate. It means sitting in the paradox that some of the people who might cause us the most pain may become our most important guides.

Especially during this holiday season, when expectations are so high, and disappointments sometimes come so easily, it is important to remember that the work of the soul is not a problem to be solved, but more of a journey to travel, and more like sunsets to watch. It is important to remember that our lives were formed in the fiery crucible of family life, and that the crucible is a dynamic which in itself is part of a larger dynamic of our parents' lives and the times and places they grew up in, and part of the human world that holds us all.

The journey of exploration and discovery of the soul is sometimes like walking through the valley of the shadow. Carl Jung wrote about how each good quality we humans have also has a shadow side – and we do not walk through the valley of the shadow alone. The walk with the soul is often a walk through – and with – these shadows. The journey of exploration and discovery of the soul is a walk with ourselves, a walk with darkness, a walk with shadows, a walk with pauses to observe the sunrises and sunsets. It is no less than a walk with God. It is a sacred journey.

The 23rd Psalm

Revised by Bobby McFerrin

The Lord is my Shepard, I have all I need,
She makes me lie down in green meadows,
Beside the still waters, She will lead.

She restores my soul, She rights my wrongs,
She leads me in a path of good things,
And fills my heart with songs.

Even though I walk, through a dark and dreary land,
There is nothing that can shake me,
She has said She won't forsake me,
I'm in her hand.

She sets a table before me,
in the presence of my foes,
She anoints my head with oil,
And my cup overflows.

Surely, surely goodness
and kindness will follow me,
All the days of my life,
And I will live in her house,
Forever, forever and ever.

Glory be to our Mother, and Daughter,
And to the Holy of Holies,
As it was in the beginning, is now
and ever shall be,
World, without end. Amen.