Family Values
Monthly Theme, January 2022

“In truth a family is what you make it. It is made strong, not by number of heads counted at the
dinner table, but by the rituals you help family members create, by the memories you share, by
the commitment of time, caring, and love you show to one another, and by the hopes for the
future you have as individuals and as a unit.”

-Marge Kennedy

If the phrase “family values” sends a shiver down your spine, you wouldn’t be the first Unitarian
Universalist (UU) who finds the term cringeworthy. Although “family values” are defined as
“traditional or cultural values that pertain to the family’s structure, function, roles, beliefs,
attitudes, and ideals,” there have been those, who over many decades, have systematically
hijacked this notion. Under the banner of “family values,” some have argued their opposition of
feminism to a women’s right to choose, to who can marry whom or who can raise children.
Unfortunately, their campaign to articulate what constitutes family values, has constricted the
definition so much that many are excluded and even alienated in what it means to be a family,
to be worthy, with their values dismissed or found wanting.

Fortunately, we, as Unitarian Universalists, have the freedom to choose the ways in which we
view family values and to explore what that can mean for us in the best sense of the
expression. We discover ways that broaden the lens of ‘cultural’ values so that the tent of family
is wide and inclusive, ever expanding. The very process of articulating which values we hold
dear and how we want to show up in the world embodying them is a worthwhile exercise. And,
as always, love is the foundation for our families, in all of their various forms.

Naming your family values provides identity and perspective on life.. Our first UU principle, “to
affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” reminds us of the
sacredness of each one of us. This can show up in a variety of ways in our family
encounters. We may come together with family members whose values differ from our own, yet
we temper the conflicting opinions (political or otherwise) with care and restraint if the family
code of conduct is to honor family members with love and mutual respect even if their values
are vastly different from one’s own. This first principle has a variety of practical applications in
our interactions with others every day.

Some families place great emphasis on the second principle (“justice, equity, and compassion in
human relations”). This is a beautiful way to live in harmony with one another and has far
reaching benefits for ourselves and the communities in which we live. Our UU principles act as
scaffolding for how we live if we value fairness, justice, deep listening and compassion. These
principles connect us more deeply with those we care about, including not just our nuclear
family, but extending to our human family, the earth’s plant and animal inhabitants, and the
earth itself. Practicing these principles will indeed help to facilitate peace within the home. That
could be reason enough for practicing them! Yet our belief and justice and equity ask us to
move out of our comfort zone from time to time. We become a living example to our kids and
those whose lives we come into contact with. It’s good to remember we have support in our
congregation and in our community to assist us.

Our 7th principle, “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part”,
leaves itself to a common family value, which is caring for oneself and one another. For
instance, this may include teaching children to care for their possessions (and being grateful for
these gifts), treating other family members’ possessions with respect, caring for a family pet,
planting and tending a garden, etc. Each life touches another and it’s vital to be mindful of the
interdependence that is as true in family life as it is in the wider world. This may be reflected in having regular outings with the kids where you help clean up areas of your community or out in nature. The possibilities are endless. It is also comforting to remind our children and each other that we ALL belong and that we are not alone.

Living our values can provide both boundaries AND flexibility. The virtues that spring from our covenant together are many, supporting healthier and happier families. Honesty with ourselves and others allows us to trust and depend on one another. Humility and forgiveness are important and common family values: the reality is that we all miss the mark sometimes and these virtues help us to heal, let go and move on without resentments. Our UU commitment to a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” encourages us to keep asking questions, continuing to learn and grow and discover meaning in our lives.

These principles are not prescriptive in the sense that they feel binding or obligatory, rather they provide us with helpful reminders as who we want to be as a person and as a part of a family. This can mean the family that we are born into or the families that we create along life’s path. Your family may only have a few members in it, or it could be large. What matters is that we find the blessings in them and embrace the challenges as part of growth. We remember that no one gets left out or ostracized. We know challenges and difficulties within families are part of life. We can learn and love our way through that.

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Questions to Consider:

1. What is your reaction to the word “family?” What is your reaction to the word “family values?”
2. How did your family of origin shape your family values? What things have you done differently and what have you kept the same?
3. Are the values in your family dynamic? Have the values in your family of origin changed over time?
4. When pondering the concept of “family values”, you may find yourself wondering how ‘family’ is defined. Your chosen family may be different than your family of origin, for example. You may belong to several different families (your ‘work family’, for example, or your ‘church family’). Do your family values change based on which family you are considering?
5. What does ‘family’ mean to you? Do you feel as though you belong to several families? Do you have a “chosen family” that you belong to?
6. What are some family values that are important to you, and why?
7. Many Americans cite “religion” as one of their family values. Is “having faith” one of your family values? Why or why not?
8. Do you have a covenant in your family?
9. How do you live your family values? For example, if you value spending time together as a family, do you practice this?
10. Are there any family values that you feel that are “missing” in your family or values that you could practice more or differently?
Readings and Quotations:

Indigenous Human Value Systems:
The Babemba tribe of Africa believes that each human being comes into the world as good. Each one of us only desiring safety, love, peace and happiness.

But sometimes, in the pursuit of these things, people make mistakes.

When a person acts irresponsibly or unjustly, he/she is placed in the center of the village, alone, unfettered. All work ceases. All gather around the accused individual. Then each person of every age begins to talk out loud to the accused. One at a time, each person tells all the good things the one in the center ever did in his/her lifetime.

Every incident, every experience that can be recalled with any detail and accuracy, is recounted. All positive attributes, good deeds, strengths, and kindnesses are recited carefully and at length.

The tribal ceremony often lasts several days, not ceasing until everyone is drained of every positive comment that can be mustered. At the end, the tribal circle is broken, a joyous celebration takes place, and the person is symbolically and literally welcomed back into the tribe. Necessity for such ceremonies is rare!

This story is originally from the book, Contact, The First Four Minutes by Leonard Sunin. The Babemba or Bemba people make their home in an area of Africa that includes Zambia and the Congo

“Family will not agree on everything, nor will a family unit conform to one standard, but love is the common denominator that will bond a family.”— Wayne Chirisa

“It is that fundamental belief, I am my brother’s keeper that makes this country work. It’s what allows us to pursue our individual dreams and yet still come together as one American family. E pluribus unum. Out of many, one.”—Barack Obama

“The family is the corner stone of our society. More than any other force, it shapes the attitude, the hopes, the ambitions, and the values of the child. And when the family collapses, it is the children that are usually damaged. When it happens on a massive scale, the community itself is crippled.”—Lyndon B. Johnson

“And it is time for those who talk about family values to start valuing families.”—Senator John Kerry
“The dilemma for society is how to preserve personal and family values in a nation of diverse tastes.” —Tipper Gore

“To us, family means putting your arms around each other and being there.” —Barbara Bush

“In family life, love is the oil that eases friction, the cement that binds closer together, and the music that brings harmony.” —Friedrich Nietzsche

“Other things may change us, but we start and end with the family.” —Anthony Brand

“Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city.” —George Burns

“The informality of family life is a blessed condition that allows us all to become our best while looking our worst.” —Marge Kennedy

“The family is one of nature’s masterpieces.” —George Santayana

“In time of test, family is best.” —Burmese Proverb

“The family is the first essential cell of human society.” —Pope John XXIII

“Treat your family like friends and your friends like family.”

“There is no doubt that it is around the family and the home that all the greatest virtues… are created, strengthened and maintained.” —Winston Churchill
“Family isn’t always blood. It’s the people in your life who want you in theirs; the ones who accept you for who you are. The ones that would do anything to see you smile and who love you no matter what.”

“Family is not defined by our genes, it is built and maintained through love.”

“Ohana means family and family means nobody gets left behind or forgotten.”

—Stitch (from Walt Disney’s “Lilo and Stitch”)

“It didn’t matter how big our house was; it mattered that there was love in it.”—Peter Buffett

“As I entered this world, I would leave behind the nurturing of my family and my home, but in another sense I would take their protection with me. The lessons I had learned, the feelings of groundedness and belonging that have been woven into my character there, would be my companions on the journey.”—Sidney Poitier, The Measure of a Man: A Spiritual Autobiography