

## Sharing

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Sibling relationships are complicated. Bible stories portray a whole range of sibling relationships. Rachel and Leah, Cain and Abel—sibling rivalry goes way back. We are one human family, which doesn't mean we are without our differences, it means the task of working for peace is urgent, even as we come to understand our differences.

This morning's Time for All Ages story was about the siblings of Exodus: Moses, Aaron, and especially Miriam. Something I find interesting about this story is that the family stretches. Moses has connections to both his Egyptian family and his Hebrew family. Pharaoh's daughter is part of Moses' family. Moses's Midianite wife, Zipporah, and his father-in-law, Yitro, are important in the story. Kinship, in the Exodus story, is about people who look out for each other's safety and freedom.

My point here is that family is, in many ways, about people who choose to be connected. I would suggest that our choices about who we share with, and what we share in terms of destiny, communication, and resources, shows something important about how we understand ourselves in the world. People do not survive as individuals. We have to ask, not only who we are, but whose we are. Some of us see ourselves as belonging to the universe, or the interdependent web, or to the God of our understanding. We also belong to each other. We choose relatedness, and we express that relatedness in what we share.

I want to acknowledge that being from the same family doesn't automatically mean that people will all get along, have the same goals, or treat each other well. Siblinghood is going to be a tough topic for some of us, maybe because of loss or missed opportunity, or because of real harm. Some of us don't have siblings from our families of origin, although we may have other people in our lives who can console or irritate us in a similar way. Some of us have great relationships with our siblings, but even these families go through ups and downs.

Miriam, Aaron, and Moses are on my mind because Passover begins on Saturday. As you may know, I celebrate Jewish holidays with my family. Today is also Palm Sunday. My sermon today does not focus closely on either Passover or Palm Sunday, but on relationships. My one timely note for Palm Sunday goes back to the joys and sorrows of siblinghood. Keeping in mind that Jesus was speaking of his faith community when he said, "here are my mother and brothers," Palm Sunday reminds us that sometimes the people who are our biggest supporters and cheerleaders can also disappoint us or even

betray us. Sometimes stories about siblings teach us how to share life and love and resources, sometimes sibling stories remind us what not to do.

For better or for worse, stories about compassion, loyalty, or sacrifice, often use siblings as metaphors. Through the lens of family drama, we reflect on what it means to share a past and a future. We weigh the consequences of being kind and being honest with the people who know us best. We consider the scope of our responsibilities to care for one another. All of these themes have to do with sharing. Let's think some more about shared destiny, shared truth, and shared resources using the language of family relationships.

### **Shared Destiny**

Siblings are said to share a past and a future. Some say that siblings know better than anyone else what the world was like in your earliest years, and they are the ones whose lives continue to be intertwined with yours into adulthood. Well, maybe. That's true in some families and not others. Rather than assuming that having the same parent or parents causes people to overcome their divisions and work together to improve their shared futures, maybe we should reverse the equation. Overcoming what divides us and working together to improve our shared future is how we choose kinship, whether or not the people we choose as our siblings are related to us in the usual way.

Human beings, all of us on this planet, have a destiny in common. What happens to one affects us all. We can be fooled into focusing on rivalries between ideologies and cultures. Those would be mistakes of alienation. When we dismantle oppression and bridge our divisions in order to create a better destiny for everyone, that is a triumph of intentional kinship. Rather than assuming that siblings (as they are usually defined) will work together, let's imagine that working together and recognizing our shared destiny forges sibling relationships. We are all related. We can choose to act out of the best qualities of our siblinghood.

Writing from the Christian perspective, one of my seminary professors co-wrote a book about a more global, spiritual vision that interprets siblinghood in the best possible sense. Archie Smith, Jr., and Ursula Riedel-Pfaefflin (2004) write:

“The role and work of followers (siblings) is to do the work of reconciliation, the overcoming of estrangement. Lifting the yoke of oppression, not pointing the finger of blame, and not engaging in evil speak but instead offering forgiveness and food to the hungry and satisfying the needs of the afflicted are among the signal acts of redemption in a world marked by estrangement. Followers, or siblings by choice, are called to

interrupt and disrupt the powers of estrangement, and to dethrone them.” (*Siblings By Choice*, pp. 129-130; So ends the reading)

For Unitarian Universalists, we can imagine human siblinghood as a religious concept to include connections with the Spirit of Love, our capacity to hope, and our commitment to promoting the health and wellbeing of the whole human and non-human family. Because we affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of which we are a part, we understand that collective liberation is a religious and spiritual issue.

May we forge sibling relationships by choice across the world, lifting up the best we have to offer as members of the interdependent web of life.

### **Shared Truth**

The shared destiny of the siblinghood of humanity is part of the big picture, but sharing on a smaller scale is relevant, too. Individually, we can share truth differently with people once we have forged a kinship with them. Ideally, siblings are honest and loving in speaking with one another. Again, this is not everybody’s experience, but sibling relationships still somehow got picked as the abstract model for compassion and accountability in the way we communicate.

Deborah Tannen, who is a linguist at Georgetown University, has written several books that I have found extremely helpful in understanding everyday communication, including *I Only Say This Because I Love You: Talking to Your Parents, Partner, Sibs, and Kids When You're All Adults* (2002).

Tannen says that people who are talking to each other usually have different kinds of messages that they are broadcasting at the same time. We don’t always send and receive on the same wavelength. Within families, Tannen says that the metamessage, or heart meaning, intended by a family member is often very different from the literal meaning of what someone says and from the received meaning given the lifelong context of the statement.

For instance, unsolicited advice is intended as an expression of love and concern, but can be received as an attempt to squash someone’s autonomy or disregard their choices. “You should change your haircut” from a parent to an adult child may be intended with the metamessage, “I want you to be successful,” but it might be received as meaning, “I am the expert on your life.” The speaker is trying to make a connection. The listener is sensitive to the issue of control. Among the people who knew us as

children and who remain significant as we become adults, we are constantly balancing our needs for connection and control.

In the story of Miriam, Aaron, and Moses, we hear about a couple of miscommunications and conflicts among the siblings. In one story that happens after their escape from Egypt and during the people's time in the wilderness (Numbers 12), Aaron and Miriam are arguing with Moses. Miriam points out that she and Aaron are both prophets, trying to pull rank on their little brother. God calls them all into the tent of meeting and affirms Moses' leadership, without denying the prophethood of Miriam and Aaron. Miriam was struck with a curse that turned her skin white, and she was cast out of the encampment for seven days. The thing is, the nomadic community wouldn't move on without her. They waited until she was healed and allowed back in before they continued their journey. The people didn't abandon her. Moses may have thought he was going to take the people and leave his sister behind, but he didn't have that kind of control. The lesson for all of them was that staying together and working things out is important, and so is recognizing leadership and speaking with respect. As a family, they had to continue to balance connection and control in their communication.

Speak the truth in love, in families, with your best friends, and with people who share the covenant of this congregation. We are always balancing our connections with each other and our different ideas about how to share power. We're going to have disagreements and mishaps. Return again in love.

### **Shared Resources**

The third kind of sharing we might view through a sibling lens is sharing resources. By resources, I mean the stuff we need to live and thrive, like food, shelter, safety, and access to opportunity. Siblings, either by upbringing or by choice, will sometimes enthusiastically with each other. We can't assume this is true for any actual family, yet I think sharing and sacrifice is part of what is meant when someone says, "They are like a sibling to me." Giving and receiving among siblings-by-choice is something we practice until it is second nature.

This is what I have found in activist circles when people are at their best. Hospitality is a skill that is crucial to effective organizing. Nobody gets it right all the time, but the aspiration is there.

Last summer, I went to DC with other clergy and an organization called Repairers of the Breach to speak to Senators about health care. Some of my colleagues went through civil disobedience training and put themselves at risk for arrest outside of Paul Ryan's

office. I wasn't ready to risk arrest that day, so my job was to help marshal activists who were there as public witnesses, keeping our group safe and together.

The leaders from Repairers of the Breach had supported people through civil disobedience many times. They knew the process, they had a strategy for figuring out where our friends were going to be held across town until they were processed and released on bail about five hours later. As we waited in the sun for those who had been arrested to come out, the Repairers of the Breach leaders had backpacks full of water bottles and granola bars. They ordered sandwiches to have waiting for our friends. As soon as we saw each person walking out of the building, we shouted together, "Thank you! We love you!" We shared a picnic lunch on the sidewalk, sharing food and water and information, not out of a sense of charity, but out of a sense of mutual care and collective liberation.

When people are united in spirit, the gifts of strength and encouragement become resources for all to share. Food is a good ingredient for a party, but let's not forget that we also need each other.

## **Conclusion**

Sibling relationships are often used to symbolize open-hearted sharing. It's hard to generalize about the sibling relationships we may already have (because people are highly variable), but we can create a vision of what our sibling by choice relationships might become.

We share a destiny. All of us in the human family, not to mention the other living beings on earth, will find ourselves facing the future of this planet together. Our histories are intertwined. May we heal from divisions of geography, gender, race, culture, sexuality, class, and age to overthrow the powers of estrangement.

We share truth. Siblings-by-choice operate with acceptance and trust. The way we practice honesty is important, too. Consider the context and the unspoken messages. Kindness is not the opposite of sincerity. Communication is a skill. May we speak the truth and listen in love.

We share resources. Siblings-by-choice give and receive out of mutual concern. May we forge relationships of generosity and respect with all of those around us.

May we expand our circle of siblings-by-choice as we build a future grounded in justice, honesty, abundance, and love.

So be it. Blessed be. Amen.