

## Over the Rainbow: Towards a Different Kind of Family Values

A sermon by Rev. John Morehouse

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“This would never have happened,” flashed the angry aunt towards her grieving sister, “if you had instilled some good old-fashioned family values in that boy”. The mother, who had just lost her son to a car accident because he had been out late with the wrong kind of friends, stared, shocked at her sister. I, too, was mortified, not sure where to even begin to reprimand the woman for such a cruel comment. The tension was so thick I felt like I was going to choke.

I knew this boy. He was everything his parents had dreamed he would be; smart, athletic, attractive, outgoing. But he was also one thing that they, liberal as they professed to be, wished he weren't: He was gay. It took him many painful years to come to grips with his identity, that fact. Perhaps he never really did. He had been different from as long as he could remember. No, he didn't play with dolls or dress in dresses. Plenty of boys who become heterosexual do that, and plenty of girls play with trucks and sports. No, this was not a gender confusion, this was his sexual identity, as certain as the day is long. He had tried to date girls but it just didn't work, it always ended up being more friendship than

romance. He tried to be macho but hated it. He never had sex with a girl, he knew it wasn't right -- he was, undeniably gay, and, as is so often the case with young people, it was tearing him up inside. This was part of what led to the tragedy. Not that he was gay, but that he was hurt and angry about being ashamed of being gay. There had been a fight with his parents, he called some friends, they went out, someone bought some beer, someone drove too fast, and then someone was dead.

The mother, fully absorbing her sister's vehemence and anger, laced surely with her own homophobia and confusion over this family secret, finally just got up and walked out of the room. It was the boy's father who managed to say something: "We do have values, we loved him, we believed in him and we taught him to be kind and responsible." He reminded me of what should have been in more abundance, acceptance as a family value. Obviously not enough in this family.

In the classic film "The Wizard of Oz" Dorothy dreams of a place far from her home, a world of color, and acceptance, a place for her dreams, somewhere over the rainbow. For us here, celebrating as we are our first year of a renewed Interweave program, we are still dreaming of being over that rainbow. The rainbow, the symbol of diversity and acceptance, may be more abundantly clear here, but we have so far to go. I was thrilled

when Vox Femina sang their hearts out two weeks ago to raise funds for the South Bay Gay and Lesbian Center. That money will go a long way to promote understanding and support so that tragic stories like this one become, someday, a memory.

In the midst of our culture wars we see euphemisms for values, so often framed and hijacked by the religious right, as “family values”. Just this past week I saw a billboard on the East Coast promoting a “Family Expo: Where Family Values are Celebrated.” I yelled out (to myself) “whose idea of family? Whose idea of values?” If by values they mean the return of male dominated, paternalistic morality based on a very poor biblical exegesis that God intended us all to be married, heterosexual and obedient, then I say those aren’t my values. The Bible also says that we should love our neighbors, promote acceptance and hold dear all life. The Bible says a lot of things.

It’s an old refrain. Two hundred years ago another politician, Thomas Jefferson, was attacked in the election of 1800 for betraying family values. We face the same attack today with moral weariness. Everyone seems to want to get over the rainbow (some out of spite, others out of hope) to a return to simpler times. Why did the conservatives attack Jefferson? Why do we hear, even now over a year away from an election, the shrill cry of “returning to values”? Why? FEAR. We think that returning to some older

version of values will stabilize our world. But we can't decide on which version. The world is changing so fast, we can't even decide what is right anymore. In one conversation with a young lesbian woman she explained why many "Queer" (an inclusive label that means anyone not heterosexual) people are leery of marriage. "Why shouldn't any combination of loving people be extended the rights of domestic life?" Gay men and Lesbians, fine. Why not grandparents raising grandchildren? People who want to form a family of any kind. It's a valid concern. (Parametrically, it's why I want clergy to get out of the marriage license business: Marriage should be a civil right for all kinds of loving people; once they have the legal work out of the way, come to me and I will bless their love).

We want to know what to value again. We want to know which way is up. We want to do the right thing as liberal people. We want to believe that life is worth the effort. It's the same question that racked this poor family after they lost her son. We want to get over the rainbow and find that dream of harmony. We want our children, these children and their teachers we just celebrated to live in a world wherein the values of love and acceptance reign supreme.

I say we begin now by defining for ourselves what our UU Family Values are! First we have to ask what we mean by family.

A family is, as Shakespeare put it so eloquently in *Hamlet*, “a little more than kin, but not always kind”. He might have also said “not always the same kind,” other than human of course. It’s a bit sharp, but it serves us well. Families are not only Mom and Dad and the kids. Families are any group of people bonded by love to live together in the world. They come in all shapes and sizes. They are friends who live together, women, men, transgender people, children, adults, grandparents, uncles, or aunts who raise a child because someone else they love cannot. Some are inter-racial, some inter-generational. The truth of the matter is that most families in America are complex: step moms, step dads, step kids, half-siblings, stepping in and out of roles all the time. Almost all of them are blended. Families are powerful human institutions, genetically related to hunting and gathering. It’s nearly impossible to really disown your family, even if you never see them again; they live on through you in your habits, frustrations, likes and neurosis. You never really leave your family. You might outgrow them, but they haunt you. We light candles of unity during wedding services to recognize the depth of this connection. For some of you, this church is your family; and there is nothing wrong with that. So we begin with a wide open understanding of family. It may not be what you want, but it is where you belong, at least until you create a new family.

So if that is a family, what is a value? A value is an ascribed meaning. And, get this: it is completely subjective in human relationships. Society values certain relationships over others, but that does not give them intrinsic value. Forty years ago it was against the law for white and black people to marry. Now it's gay and lesbian people. Values are meant to change. Family values then are those meanings we take to be most important as they pertain to the families we share our lives with.

And just what are those meanings, those values? Well, as one of my daughters put to me, if you have to ask, "I really wonder about you Dad." But here I go. Our society values obedience, money, pleasure, youth, success and something called beauty. We think we value freedom as well, but that is up for debate, in my opinion. Our family values are a little different, obedience tempered by loving kindness; money for ends, not in of itself; pleasure which doesn't hurt another; youthful spirits but the wisdom of age; success in all its guises; beauty of the soul. I came across a story not too long ago about a young man who came from a difficult family. He was labeled all kinds of things: stupid, ADD, a failure. His father kept telling him he would never amount to much and he didn't (funny how that works). Until he started bringing home better and better grades. His father wanted to know if he was cheating. No, said the boy, I am talking to new guidance

counselor and she would like to meet you. So the parents went to meet the counselor and when the father started to speak, the counselor used her hands and spoke with difficulty but said, “please speak more slowly, I am deaf”. “She’s deaf,” said the father, “now I have seen it all. How can you learn anything from her?” “That’s why she is so great. She does more than hear, she listens.”

Preeminent in any family should be listening and respect. So often this is ignored, to the peril of all else. It was that lack of respect that led to the young man dying at the beginning of my sermon. Despite the courage it took him to admit to his parents that he was gay, they couldn’t respect that. Tolerance is never enough in any family, respect is required. As UUUs we are bound by 500 year old tradition to respect each other. Respect implies acceptance, even if you don’t agree (repeat). I rarely find criticism to be constructive. We have to speak and be sure that the other understands who we are and we have to reflect that this understanding is made.

Only with respect and acceptance will any of our families be able to get over the rainbow. Every family ought to be a sanctuary from the world. Sadly, when families are destructive or judgmental, we need to find sanctuaries elsewhere, not all of them safe. The world is a hard place. Let your family, let this church,

be a place of safety to be who we are, as we are. This is the meaning of a covenant. A covenant is a mutual promise, an understanding that we will accept each other as we are. We have a covenant here at PUC; it's in the library window. I suggest you read it. It protects us; it will help us get over the rainbow. And that covenantal relationship lies at the heart of our faith as spiritual seekers. We may not all agree on what matters most, on our values, but we will agree to shelter each other from the storm as we ponder that meaning and try to make ourselves and our world a better place. Families and churches are not businesses, they are loving communities. If not here, where? If not now, when? If not with the ones you love, than with whom?

When that young man lost his life, the family stopped going to church, ashamed and guilty. Attempts to heal were for naught. I lost track of these people until about a year later. I met the father of the boy downtown he had just come from the School Board office. I asked him how he was doing. His wife and he had gone into therapy, the recovery was so slow. But he was smiling. He handed me a piece of paper. "It took a long time" he said, but we did "we are finally going to have our own PFLAG chapter at the school." Over the rainbow for them at last. Amen.