

Spring Equinox: Equal Days, Equal Nights, Equal Rights

by David S. Hall, PhD (An exploration of family structures from the traditional family to polyamory and group marriages in the light of UU Principles.)

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I want to begin with a quote from Wayne Dyer in his book "Gifts from Eykis"

"Your love is located within you. It is yours to nurture and savor, to give to others in any way you choose. Love must be without qualifications or demands. You must learn to find ecstasy in other peoples happiness. Once you feel love for yourself, it is quite normal to give it away."

Today is the Spring Equinox, when the Day and the Night are of equal length. It is a day of rejoicing that from now til Fall the days will be longer than the nights. The air will be warmer, the sun brighter, and the dark days will be behind us, at least for most of us. It is a time of cleaning, spring cleaning, getting rid of the junk we have accumulated and the dust that has settled around us, and starting out fresh. It is a time of planting seeds and shoots and flowers, enriching the soil, brightening the space around us. It is a time of celebration and joy.

But we see in the world around us a lot of confusion. We heard last week about the movement toward equal rights for people of all sexual orientations, about marriage benefits being a right that should be available to all couples, regardless of gender composition. We are in the midst of a cultural war, one that has already been fought over slavery, interracial marriage, women's right to vote and right to own property, among others. These are not new battles, and the usual lines are drawn, between those who want nothing to change (usually those who already have what they want) and those who want change (usually those who are oppressed).

We can see our church and our denominational organization taking its place on the side of liberal religious belief in the equality of all people, a place where oppression is fought with reason and courage. Our own Sofia is deeply involved in the UUA's efforts to fight racism and oppression within the denomination, serving on national committees to lead these efforts. She has helped provide the UUA trustees with the information and recommendations they need to keep moving our churches in the liberal direction. She is helping us to see the direction this church needs to move.

On the surface, it is hard for UU's to see any reason not to support equal rights. Our principles support the inherent worth and dignity of each individual. We believe in justice, equity and compassion in human relations. Yet we seem to run up against some barriers when the status quo is seen to change. Certainly the issue of marriage, full legal marriage, for same-sex couples is a justice and equity challenge. Why should Beth have to pay taxes on the insurance benefits Sarah gets from UOP when my wife Rosie does

not have to pay them on the benefits I get? These are not little issues for gay couples. So we take on the challenge and work for equal rights.

There is another area that is coming to the attention of the UUA, and that is the family relationship structure called Polyamory.

Polyamory is about loving more than one person as a chosen partner within a given period of time. Here I'll define "love" as a serious, intimate, romantic, stable, sexual and affectional bond which a person has with another person or group of people. Another term for polyamory is responsible non-monogamy, and it is used to distinguish polyamory from "cheating." Polyamory is a general term covering a wide variety of relationship styles, including the group marriage, open marriage, expanded family, intimate network, and some kinds of intentional community. In general, these vary based on the kinds and scope of agreements between the people involved.

Polyamory is a committed bond between more than two people, to share significant parts of their lives together. We all know that monogamy is a commitment between two people based on both known and often unstated expectations. Polyamory is a committed relationship between more than two people based, usually, on explicitly stated expectations and honesty. Sometimes these take the form of a group marriage (called polyfidelity), with all the usual expectations that go with marriage, including no partners outside the relationship. Sometimes these take the form of secondary levels of commitment between people who may have a primary partner. In some cases, a larger group of poly folk band together in a Tribe or family, where there are various levels of connection among the individuals and couples. In all cases, the basic principles of honesty, openness, and agreement form the basis of the relationships. In the larger cities, there are support groups for poly folk to meet and share their ideas and experiences. The Internet has brought many of these folk together.

Polyamory is a relationship choice available to people of any sexual orientation. Sometimes language familiar to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people is used to describe aspects of living as a polyamorous person (such as "in the closet" or "coming out" as polyamorous). However, there are polyamorous people of all sexual orientations, just as there are monogamous people of all sexual orientations.

In the past few years there have been UU ministerial candidates who identify as polyamorous or are in other alternate family structures. The Ministerial Fellowship Committee of the UUA and its regional subcommittees have been struggling with how to deal with these new identities. In January of last year, I met with the Western Regional subcommittee to explain to them what polyamory is, and answer questions from them on how to deal with this subject. The text of that presentation, which was developed from an earlier message by a UU minister, Derek McCullough, has now been expanded into an article available on the Internet.

You may wonder why I was asked to meet with the Western Regional Sub-Committee. I was known to the administrator of this committee, Rev. Leslie Heyboer, one of our former Interim ministers, and by Rev. David Pettee, Director of Ministerial Credentialing for the UUA, who had attended one of my OWL sexuality trainings. Rosie and I were also friends of one of the polyamorous candidates because we were part of the group of UU's who founded a new organization, Unitarian Universalists for Polyamory

Awareness, called UUPA, back in 2000. This occurred as a result of discovering that a large number of people on an Internet polyamory list were UUs. We set up our own list and it now has about 350 members.

The mission statement of the UUPA is “to serve the Unitarian Universalist Association and the community of polyamorous people within and outside the UUA by providing support, promoting education, and encouraging spiritual wholeness regarding polyamory.” That is why I am here today. As a trustee of UUPA, my role is to serve this mission statement, and I want to serve it in my own church as well as elsewhere.

Please note that UUPA is not advocating polyamory, or any other family structure, for any individual. We are only trying to provide support for the growing number of people who are finding in polyamory a way to understand what is happening in their lives when they find they are genuinely in love with two or more adults at the same time. We all know we can love more than one child at a time, and more than one parent or relative at a time, but we learn from our society and culture that it is not OK to have more than one lover at a time. I use the term “lover” in the full sexual sense, because if sex were not involved, most people would have few or no problems with polyamory.

When a married or committed person falls in love with another, our culture expects us to either deny the love of the new person and cut off all contact, or leave the first person and begin a relationship with the new person. Often these events overlap, what I call “overlapping serial monogamy”. Others call it cheating, or adultery, and find it grounds for divorce, lots of pain, and a breakup of their family structure.

UUPA defines polyamory as the philosophy and practice of loving or relating intimately to more than one other person at a time with honesty and integrity. UUPA advocates for any form of relationship or family structure -- whether monogamous or multi-partner -- which is characterized by free and responsible choice, mutual consent of all involved, and sincere adherence to personal philosophical values.

I use the term “family structure” because that term has now been incorporated into the standards of the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. Candidates can be accepted “regardless of family structure”. I’m proud to add that Sofia was on the committee that wrote that change into their process. I am sure it was based on more than polyamory.

When this change of terminology was reported to the UUA Board of Trustees in their winter meeting, they accepted it, and suggested that it was time the Board addressed polyamory within the context of the UUA. Not surprisingly, there are ministers of UU churches who are very opposed to polyamory. It is an issue being discussed on the ministerial Internet, I understand, with some strong feelings. Many UU churches across the country have members who are in openly polyamorous family structures, and others have polyamorous folks still in the closet, afraid of the reception they might find.

The President and Vice-President of the UUPA met with Rev. Sinkford in February of this year for a brief discussion, and the board is prepared to continue any discussion the Trustees request. There are now several ministers within the Fellowship of the UUA whose alternate family structure is polyamory or group marriage. There will be two sessions at GA in Long Beach by the UUPA.

So let me make some observation which will, hopefully, answer a few questions about polyamory and other family structures that are often asked.

This is not some new thing. There have been multi-partner relationships all through history, Mostly polygamous ones, that is, one man and multiple wives and concubines. (This is, of course, the true Biblical model of marriage.) Mormon polygamy survives today in parts of Utah and Arizona, although it is under increasing attack. Families of one wife and multiple husbands are also not uncommon in history, and exist today in some parts of the world.

Intentional communities with what was often called "free love" existed as well. One of the most famous was the Onedia Community in New York in the 1800's. They did not allow monogamy and if a couple became committed only to each other, they were banned from the community.

Polyamorists say that their philosophy is nothing more than a straightforward acceptance and celebration of the realities of human nature. Polyamorists say that sex is not the enemy, that the real enemy is the deceit and betrayal of trust that results from trying to shoehorn our natural selves into a rigid, unnatural social system that demands heterosexual monogamy. Polyamorists say that sex is a positive force if approached with honesty, responsibility and trust.

Polyamorists do not have to individually meet every need of each partner; they have help. If your husband loves opera and you dislike it, maybe one of his lovers will enjoy taking him to hear it. If your other partner is also a computer whiz, and helps fix your computers when they don't behave, you are a very lucky person.

Polyamorists believe that love is an infinite, not a finite commodity. An example of this is with children. When my oldest daughter was born, I loved her with every ounce of my being. When my son was born, I found that I didn't have to give them half a love each, I could love them both fully. My third child is loved as much, if not more, than the other two. This also applies to friends, when you meet someone new, you don't have to think about who you are going to drop off to make them fit into your life.

Polyamorists know that loving someone does not give you the right to control that person's behavior. Polyamorists say that jealousy is not innate, inevitable and impossible to overcome. But they deal with jealousy often, usually successfully. They have developed a new term for the opposite of jealousy. "Compersion" is the feeling of joy that comes from knowing that the one you love is well loved by someone else. What is so surprising when the person you think is the most wonderful person in the world, is thought to be wonderful by someone else??

Polyamorists say that love should be unconditional, rather than the monogamous proposition that "I will love you on the condition that you will not love anyone else" - "forsaking all others" is how it usually is put. And as shown by history, monogamy and marriage are no safeguards against falling in love with someone else. Poly folk believe in long term emotional investment in relationships, and while the goal is not always achieved in poly, it is also not always achieved in monogamy either.

Polyamorists believe they also represent true "family values". They have the courage to live an alternative lifestyle that, while condemned by society, is satisfying and rewarding, and can provide increased security for their children and their partners. Children having multiple parents are more likely to be better cared for, and less likely to feel abandoned if someone leaves the family. If one partner dies, the other partners are there to share the grief and support each other.

Some people argue we are just lustful wicked people. I like Oscar Wilde's response to that. "*Wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others.*"

In our culture, heterosexual monogamy has been the only approved family structure for so long that we have confused heterosexual monogamy with morality. We are seeing the results of that confusion in the gay marriage debate right now. We will see the same argument when people try to obtain legal rights to partnerships greater than two. For example, if you live with two partners, why should only one be able to be involved in your medical care? One family of four adults we know has spent over \$9000 on legal fees to insure that some of their rights, and those of their children, are protected. This kind of legal work can only cover inheritance and property ownership, no such agreements can provide tax benefits, insurance benefits, or any of the over 1000 federal and 400 state marriage benefits.

At this point in time, all a polyamorous person who is a UU wants to do is to be able to say to their UU friends, "I'd like you to meet my partners." But the same fears that the GLBT community finds are there for the poly person. Loss of a job, exclusion from a community or a family, accusations of immoral behavior, loss of custody of children, and so on.

How do the beliefs of people in alternate family structures fit with the UU principles? Here I draw upon the work of Jasmine Walston, the President of the UUPA.

The first two principles are:

The inherent worth and dignity of every person;

and

Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;

UUPA believes that honesty, integrity, and consent in personal relationships are essential to the affirmation of the inherent worth and dignity of one's partners. We believe that the affirmation of a partner's inherent worth and dignity necessitates respect for that partner's choices in his/her own relationships, including freedom to feel and openly express love for others, including romantic love. We further believe that justice, equity and compassion in human relations are promoted by the presence of honesty, integrity, and consent in personal relationships.

A word about choice: These words of Mark W. Harris appear on the UUA website, on the UU origins page. "Unitarians and Universalists have always been heretics. We are heretics because we want to choose our faith, not because we desire to be rebellious.

'Heresy' in Greek means 'choice.' " Choice of faith is at the core of UUism; our faith has meaning to us because we come to it through free choice. Choice in relationships is no less important.

The third principle:

Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;

Spiritual growth requires integration of one's relationships and one's religion, and Polyamory Awareness within UUism promotes this integration for UUs in alternate family structures. The closet can be a difficult place to live, and leaving a part of oneself behind when crossing the threshold of one's church can interfere significantly with one's spiritual search. I know this has been true for me. While I have discussed my views on polyamory over the years with Nancy, Sean, Joy and Sofia, and shown one poly related movie here at the church on a Friday night, I have been reluctant to speak publically on the subject in this church, although I am fairly well known on the Internet and in the UUA as a spokesperson for poly. Polyamorists need to bring our entire beings, including our relationships, into our religious homes, in order to pursue spiritual growth.

The fourth principle:

A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;

Healthy relationships, whether monogamous or multi-partner, require thoughtful, informed consideration. Non-traditional relationships have fewer role models and little societal support, and therefore require even more careful consideration. Polyamory Awareness encourages us to study and search the life choices we have made or are contemplating. It encourages us to wrestle with difficult relationship questions, and to examine carefully which relationship style best suits our own and our partners' needs.

The fifth principle:

The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;

UUPA affirms the right of conscience for members to choose monogamy for themselves and to visibly bring monogamous relationships into their churches; and we assert the right of conscience for ourselves to choose other structures and to visibly bring these other forms of relationship into our churches.

The sixth principle:

The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;

We believe that world community, peace, liberty, and justice are all supported and strengthened by increasing education and familiarity with non-traditional life choices, and by opening the closet doors.

The seventh principle:

Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Personal relationships, whether monogamous or multi-partner, must be integrated into our spirituality, as part of the interdependent web. Polyamory Awareness promotes this integration for polyamorous individuals, who have few other resources available to them for linking their lifestyle with their spirituality.

I close with the words of John Stuart Mill

"Eccentricity has always abounded where and when strength of character has abounded: and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigor and moral courage it contained. That so few dare to be eccentric marks the chief danger of the time"

If you have any questions, Rosie and I would be happy to talk with you about them. I have a handout from the UUPA that will be available after the service in Jackson Hall. I encourage you to view polyamory the same way you do any other family choice, that a free and responsible search for truth and meaning can lead people to different conclusions, and we should respect these choices.

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