

Families & Politics
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
November 23, 2025

Reflection on the Theme - Jeff Coleman Payne

This Thanksgiving, I'm grateful for many things. First, I'm grateful for my Canadian upbringing that taught me how to be kind, respectful, and to recognize and value the differences that we share and that we're greater together than as individuals. I'm grateful for my family and friends in Canada that have supported me and helped me to become who I am.

For the last few years, I've been working my way through the immigration system and will become an American in a few weeks. As I assimilate myself into this big, complex and sometimes bewildering country, I'm grateful that I've landed in Vancouver, WA, and although it's not perfect, it's a place where I can find many people, including the people in this room today and online, that work towards kindness, peace and love and share similar beliefs to what I grew up in. I'm grateful for Sarah, Lucy and Natalie and the life that we're building together.

I'm also grateful for my extended American family who have welcomed me with open arms. They are wonderful people with a wide range of political beliefs, and we have some very interesting discussions when we're together. This year has been more challenging than ever as it can be very hard to find a middle ground when it comes to the issues at hand. Thankfully, when it comes to my American family, we are able to recognize the importance of setting aside political beliefs and focus on being together and seem to have an understanding of no politics at family gatherings which is usually strictly enforced when broken.

Families & Politics© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

"If enough of us approach conversations with the goal of learning rather than winning, maybe we can start to knit our great country back together."

This applies not only to our country – or our continent, to include Jeff's native Canada, but to our families and even our congregation. Our families of origin, our congregations and other groups we belong to, and even our countries, continents, and world communities – any human community functions as an emotional unit or emotional units with complex interactions best understood through systems thinking. This is family systems theory, a theory of human behavior that I've used throughout my career as a minister, to understand the complex interactions that make up the life of a congregation.

This theory assumes the interdependence of our lives – the complicated give and take of human relationships, that defies the myth of our autonomy and independence. We are more dependent on others than mainstream American culture would have us believe. At the same time, we can control many aspects of our own behavior, and by increasing our awareness of the influences that affect our own behavior, we gain more autonomy and independence – though it is never complete.

In family systems theory, we talk about *self-differentiation* and *staying connected*. That is, maintaining the emotional connection to others while staying true to our own beliefs, values, and understandings. In trauma theory, it is talked about as *authenticity* and *belonging*. Authenticity is that self-differentiation, where we are authentic to our own beliefs, values and understandings. Belonging is about staying connected to others. But these are the same drives – human animal biological drives we have which allowed us to survive by remaining in community and pooling our resources.

In my first year here, the governing board of this church was already reading – at least that’s my memory – that they had chosen to read the classic, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* by Edwin Friedman. I don’t remember it as my suggestion, but something that was already in process when I arrived. It is a leadership book based on family systems theory. Friedman asserts in this book that the real problem of leadership is *a failure of nerve*. Leaders fail not because they lack information, skill, or technique, but because they lack the nerve and presence to stand firm in the midst of other people’s emotional anxiety and reactivity.

Edwin Friedman who died in 1996 had served for 20 years as a congregational rabbi and for 25 years as an organizational consultant & family therapist in the DC area. He also served in the Lyndon Johnson administration. His experience allowed him to observe leadership – and its problems – in the family, the congregation, and the political sphere. This book was published posthumously, but it’s stunning to me, how much he predicted the emotional regression of our society, before Donald Trump was ever in our political orbit.

Before the turn of this last century, Friedman suggested that chronic anxiety was a defining characteristic of our whole culture. “The climate of contemporary America has become so chronically anxious that our society has gone into an emotional regression that is toxic to well-defined leadership.”

He was applying family systems theory to leadership, but it first applies in our families of origin. I got into the research on trauma when we were faced with the COVID 19 pandemic, and the world shut down. It was a traumatic event, which affected everyone, and everyone responded differently. It took me some time before I connected trauma researcher, Gabor Maté’s terms “*authenticity* and *belonging*” with Friedman and Bowen family system’s terms “*self-differentiation* and *staying connected*” but once I did, it felt like a world of understanding opened up to me. Of course, understanding the forces and drives upon and within us is one thing, acting upon them is entirely different.

There’s an Amazon commercial I’ve seen a few times recently. It depicts a family Thanksgiving dinner, with the long table that has attached to it a card table – you know, the kids’ table – and the narration is from the younger adult stuck at the kid’s table – at the intersection between the two tables, and this narrator puts us in the position of watching the kids goofing off, playing with the food, and the adults letting uncle Bob regale them his tale of a recent colonoscopy – and it’s a picture of Thanksgiving chaos: a more realistic than idealized depiction of a big family dinner. It’s the depiction of a human community that functions as an emotional unit or emotional units with complex interactions best understood through systems thinking. You have to guess that Uncle Bob may be the only adult actually interested in his colonoscopy, but the adults let him talk. You’ve got the young adult interacting with the kids by buying toys on Amazon, which is the point of the commercial but also, not really reinforcing what I think of as the value of a big family dinner.

I decided to preach on this topic today because I know many of us will be gathering with our extended families. Some will not. Some will gather with friends instead, and I imagine there are those sitting the whole thing out, though I hope that all those who spend Thursday alone are doing it by choice. Some of you, I know, will be volunteering to help others have a Thanksgiving feast. In any case, and regardless of the origins of the holiday, this day is a common day for families in the U.S. to come together and share a meal. Though I reject the fiction of the story, the notion of settlers and native peoples peacefully sharing a meal as if one group hadn't violently invaded the territory of the other, I can't reject the holiday altogether. It is a holiday that, at its best, nurtures gratitude and celebrates family.

I love gathering with family, expressing gratitude, and I love food. I especially love food that has been carefully and ritually prepared, honoring recipes of my ancestors – my grandmother's chocolate pie, for example, which I'll make this week for my family. There'll be 24 of us this year.

I'm also aware that the divisions in our nation have divided many families, and that many are apprehensive about the topic of politics coming up on Thursday. How do we nurture gratitude for our families while remaining true to our own beliefs, values, and understandings? ...If indeed you'll be sharing a table with those with whom you disagree strongly on politics.

I loved the story for all ages this morning, even down to the illustrations. The mouse character who asks about figs favors the color blue – blue polka dots, blue skies. The squirrel character prefers red and wears a red cap. These colors – like blue for the political left and red for the political right – have come to symbolize such a divide in this country. We even use those colors to teach children about disagreeing. They harken back to the Revolutionary War uniforms – redcoats and bluecoats.

I'm curious. How many of you will be sharing a table on Thursday with those with whom you disagree? How many of you are avoiding sharing a table with your family because of disagreements?

I think Julian Adorney's advice to ask, "Why is this issue so important to you?" is a good place to start. I found that reading on the Builder's website whose stated mission "is to overcome 'us vs. them' thinking and solve problems together. We equip people to uncover hidden common ground and build on it - with lasting solutions that reflect the will of the people." I signed up for the Polarization Detox Challenge years ago – I think it began in January of 2023, and since then I've received texts and emails from them with little articles debunking myths of the far right and the left, and suggesting exercises and activities to help us grow in understanding. The content is based on research in the field of conflict resolution and sustainable peace. It's research-based.

Adorney also said this in this essay, about asking the question, "Why is this issue so important to you?"

"And sometimes, the person will refuse to answer this question. Every so often, I've asked this question and my interlocutor has brushed me off with vague generalities. What this tells me is that, for whatever reason (whether it's their anxiety, or the fact that we barely know each other, or something that I said or did that offended them), they don't feel safe enough with me to open up. That's valuable knowledge too. It tells me that the support structures of our relationship are weak, and that maybe we need to shore those up before we start a political conversation that might shatter too-weak supports. If I get into an argument with someone who doesn't fully trust me, we both might leave feeling hurt; and it might even mean that the relationship gets ruptured beyond immediate repair." End quote

Here he is acknowledging that anxiety can interfere with our ability to communicate, and that we need to attend to the emotional relationship as well as the content of the conversation. Charles Duhigg, author of *Supercommunicators*, agrees. Many of you attended the workshops offered here helping learn how to loop for understanding. These basic skills, that we *think* are easy, prove to be surprisingly hard to remember in real life, and incredibly successful when we do. I heard reports that people got into deep conversations in a short amount of time during those workshops, and really appreciated the activity. I've started adding to our staff agenda one of the 36 questions first developed by Elaine and Arthur Aron, a wife-and husband team of research psychologists who wanted to see if it was possible to make strangers into friends. If you read the book, you'll know about this *Fast Friends Procedure* developed as a "a practical methodology for creating closeness," a technique that might generate connection.

The point I'm trying to make here is that our relationships aren't always strong enough to handle the question about why an issue is so important to us. And if that's the case, focusing on strengthening the relationship must come first, before trying to understand our differences.

Friedman says that families, groups, and institutions have "emotional fields" (like magnetic fields or gravitational fields). We all influence the emotional field. We either take on the chronic anxiety of the system, or we can transform that anxiety with our calm, steady, well-defined presence.

I've thought a lot about that in recent years, as our political leaders seem to foment high intensity emotion, scapegoating segments of the population as targets for their anger, and otherwise creating a highly anxious political system that does not seem grounded in any consistent beliefs, values or understandings. If we're paying attention at all to the world at large, the anxiety seeps into our smaller worlds, and makes it even more difficult to identify our own beliefs, values and understandings. It makes it harder for us to self-differentiate, to be authentic.

In a family system, people solicit each other's attention, approval, and support, and they react to each other's needs, expectations, and upsets. This connectedness and reactivity make the functioning of family members interdependent. A change in one person's functioning is predictably followed by reciprocal changes in the functioning of others. We can see these patterns in our families, in our congregation, in our country, in our world.

I'm grateful for this framework and this understanding. It helps me feel less like that odd person out – the adult seated at the kids' table. It helps me navigate the complicated functioning of this congregation, of my own family, it helps me understand the outlandish politics of the day. Understanding and noticing, as I think I said last week, is the first step toward gratitude. We can't express gratitude for something we don't notice, that we don't know is there. Noticing is the first step, and then we're able to feel gratitude for those important things we notice. It's how we nurture feelings of gratitude which, as I reminded you last week, then changes the experiences we subsequently have.

If we approach our conversations with the idea of learning rather than winning, we might learn something to be grateful for. It really comes down to love. If you believe that connecting energy, that feeling of belonging, stems from an emotional field we could call love, as I do, then our path is clear. As we connect, we help others belong. As we self-differentiate and share of our authentic selves, we help others do the same. Our mutual curiosity and gratitude can move us forward. The thing about families – they are the environment in which we first learned about the world. Because that learning is so

integral to who we have become, we are always – for the rest of our lives – unpacking those first relationships – so that we might grow and heal and pass on the love to those who follow, leaving behind the hurt, healing the wounds, and connecting to our authentic selves in relationship with trusted others. May love continue long and lead us on our way.