

## Imperfect Kindness

Sermon by Ilze Duarte delivered on May 12, 2019

As many of you know, I was born and raised in Brazil. My family of origin still lives there. My mother lived most of her life in São Paulo, and she died there four years ago. I have overwhelmingly positive memories of her. She was an extremely dedicated homemaker and mother. She was an elementary school teacher, very strict in the classroom, feared by some, admired by many. She was a strict mother too, but in her reserved way, she was kind and generous. She taught my sister and me to be kind and generous too.

Once, when I was ten years old, my best friend came to visit. We were playing in the backyard when my mom brought in another girl, who had just moved in next door. The girl stayed there in the backyard with us. At one point, my mother asked me to come into the kitchen, and when I did, she told me she had been watching me and the two other girls and didn't like what she was seeing. She said, "The new girl has been following you and your friend like a helpless puppy. You're ignoring her, and that's not right. I want you to include her in your play." I got the message loud and clear. My mother wanted me to be fair to this person that I barely knew but deserved my respect and attention just as my best friend did.

A few years later, I observed how my mother treated the ladies she hired occasionally to help clean the house. She spoke to them respectfully and always invited them to have lunch with her and whoever else happened to be home at the time. Some of the ladies would eat with us, some would not, depending on how comfortable they felt with the arrangement, but I felt proud of my mother for always extending the invitation.

My mother was not effusively affectionate, but I always felt loved by her. She supported me in my dreams and aspirations and appreciated my efforts and achievements. As a teenager, of

course I thought she was a bit backward, but I always respected and admired her for her determination, rectitude, and work ethic.

When I was a young adult, though, I started seeing something about my mother that I had not noticed before. It was something that puzzled and disturbed me. What I am going to relate to you has to do with prejudice. I have struggled with this and will share it because I think it is important for us to talk about it. But I understand that this is a difficult topic, and if I speak in ways that are insensitive or inappropriate or uninformed, please let me know after the service. I would very much like to start conversations about this.

So, going back to my story, I was in my early twenties, still living with my mother in Brazil, and had been dating a young man who was part Japanese. After a short while, he stopped contacting me. It was clear he didn't want to see me anymore. I told my mother I was saddened by it because I really liked him, to which she replied, "Just as well, I don't like Japanese people anyway." This was shocking to me. I had never heard my mother say anything of the kind before, maybe because my father wouldn't have had any of it. He had many faults, but being prejudiced against certain groups of people wasn't one of them. By the time of this incident, my father was no longer living with us. Perhaps my mother felt free to express her feelings towards people who looked different from her, who was of Italian descent and fair skinned.

My mother's comment was especially hurtful because my best friend from college, and my best friend to this day, is of Japanese descent. Did my mother look down on my best friend? I didn't have the nerve to ask my mother. I also wasn't used to talking to my mother about all matter of things. I wasn't used to questioning her. It was considered talking back, and that would have been disrespectful of her. As a dutiful daughter, I couldn't do that.

Many years later, when I was already living in the U.S., married with children, I went back to Brazil to visit my mother. I don't remember what we were talking about, but my mother made a disparaging comment about people of color. I will spare you the comment. I was so upset that that time I didn't care whether I was going to sound disrespectful or not. I protested. I told my mother her comment was unfair and unfounded. I said something to the effect that one cannot make generalizations about any group of people. What proof did she have that what she was saying was true? She did not reply. Maybe she was shocked by my reply. We both dropped the subject.

Again, this disturbed me deeply. How could my mother believe certain people were better than others? That white people like her were better than others. She had taught me to be kind and generous. The way she had talked about people of color was precisely the opposite of that. How was it possible that she didn't share with me a value that was so basic and so important to me--that we are all part of the human family?

Remember my best childhood friend, the one I was playing with when my mom told me I needed to pay attention to the new girl? My best friend then, and a good friend to this day, is biracial. Her mother is white, her father was black. Did my mother look down on my best friend back then too? The girl that I loved like a sister? This was very, very hurtful.

The anniversary of my mother's death was in early April. It was a bitter-sweet time. I still miss my mother every day. I still cherish every lesson she taught me, every kindness she showed me. But remembering her on her anniversary was, and remembering her today, is also a bit painful. You see, my daughter Julia, who's eighteen, is dating a black young man. And it pains me to know that, if my mother were alive, she would not be happy to hear it. I told Julia about it. I was embarrassed to say it. It hurt to have to say it.

How is it possible to be a kind person and a racist at the same time? How is it possible to be a good, ethical person, and believe in racial superiority? How could my mother, a person of such integrity, hold that belief? When I shared this with my husband Jay, he said, “We need to remember that your mother was a product of her upbringing and her environment. Didn’t she grow up with people who thought the same way? How has Brazilian society treated Blacks?” He is right. Brazil is notorious for its social disparities. Many, many people of color still find themselves in the lower socioeconomic classes. And generations of people in Brazil believe that the status quo is how things should be. Some people in my family other than my mother also believe that.

I have talked to some members of this congregation about my deep discomfort about racism in my family of origin. These friends have reminded me that a lot of people from our parents’ generation here in the U.S. felt the same way as my mother. These friends have asked me, what about all the people in our lives, the people we love, who hold beliefs that are contrary to our UU values? The people in our lives who believe that only heterosexual love is legitimate, or that people should hang out with people of “the same kind,” or that only Christian religions are good, or that atheists are evil people, and so on. Do you experience this in your family? In your circle of friends? How do you feel about these people? How do you relate to them?

As I think of how happy I am for Julia that she has found such a good person to be in a relationship with, and how unhappy some members of my family would be just because he isn’t white, I feel alone. I feel very alone. But the conversations I’ve had with my husband and my UU friends show me that I am not alone. I am part of this congregation, where people share my belief that we are all members of the human family and that there is worth and dignity in every

human being. I feel comforted by my belonging to this community and find some answers to my questions in the living tradition of our denomination.

I believe one way we can support each other in these times of division is by having the kinds of conversations I mentioned—conversations about difficult topics that are important to discuss. By sharing our experiences, we find we are not alone. By sharing our questions, we may hear answers from others, or perhaps different ways to frame the questions. It is part of our spiritual practice, I believe, to seek out each other, as I did my fellow UUs, to have conversations about how we live out our values—for example, what it means to be kind—because together we can arrive at meaningful, helpful answers.

Another way we can support each other in these times of division is by reaffirming our beliefs within these walls, and very importantly, without. As a wise man told me, some of us, in this very congregation, were raised by parents who were fundamentally good people but held prejudices. And yet, we, their children, turned out differently. He said that as UUs, we need to find ways to multiply ourselves. To me, this means that we need to disseminate our message of neighborly love and social justice. We need to live out our values, out there, out in the open, so we can be contagious in our desire to create a more just and peaceful world.

In many cases, this will involve engaging others who believe differently. If I had it to do over again, I would engage my mother differently. I would choose kindness. When she used racial stereotypes to refer to a fellow human being, I would ask her questions not as a challenge but as a genuine attempt to know her mind. I would listen to her answers attentively and respectfully. I would share my perspective only after she had a chance to explain hers. If I had it to do over, it would be a dialogue.

Here at Mission Peak we have had a few precious opportunities to learn more about effective communication. A few years ago, we offered a workshop in non-violent communication, which unfortunately I missed. A few months ago, we offered a workshop, led by Rev. Cat Cox, about communication for right relations, which I attended and found to be very helpful. Most recently, Mark Rahman held a discussion through our Adult Ed program on communicating with “difficult” people. I missed it, and I’m sorry I did. These are skills that we need to hone to do the important work of communicating better so we can live out our values more effectively. I vow, right here, to take advantage in the future of such learning opportunities.

So, again I ask, how is it possible for someone to be kind and prejudiced at the same time? I still don’t have the answer. I am still puzzled. But I choose to accept and love my mother in all of her humanity. I choose to honor her legacy by being the adult she had hoped I would be—a person of integrity—and that, paradoxically perhaps, means rejecting part of her belief system. I choose to honor her legacy by focusing on the kindness she taught me and showed me, imperfectly but indelibly too.

I strongly encourage you to focus on kindness in your difficult relations. Kindness toward that person in your life whom you love but with whom you cannot agree on an important issue. Kindness toward friends or even acquaintances who do not share your values but still deserve your respect as human beings. Kindness with yourself, when you fail to get through to someone who thinks differently. I missed my chance with my mother, but I intend to try again with other people in my life.

Kindness is imperfect because we are imperfect. But practice helps. Let’s practice kindness because we are all one family.