A COMPLICATED KINDNESS - A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich, All Souls Unitarian Church. New York City, May 22, 2005.

I was born on a dairy farm in a small Mennonite community in central Delaware.
I remained a Mennonite through my mid-twenties, when I finally realized that the faith of my upbringing no longer had a place for me. I was a student at Princeton Theological Seminary at the time, ostensibly preparing to become a Mennonite minister. The minister part came as no surprise to anyone. My father is a Mennonite minister, my maternal grandfather was a Mennonite minister, and six of my eleven uncles are Mennonite ministers, as are twenty of my fifty-six first cousins, at last count. The surprise was that I would attend Princeton, which is anything but a Mennonite school. Some of my relatives feared that I would lose my faith. This did not happen. What I lost was someone else's faith; what I found was a faith of my own.

Prompted by a recent book written by another former Mennonite, I wish to say more about why I left. This is more than a simple exercise in ministerial memoir. I believe that the issues I wrestled with as a Mennonite also impel much of the turmoil in our world today.

Present-day Mennonites range from the Amish, who shun almost all the insights and conveniences of the modern world, to mainstream Mennonites, whose appearance and lifestyle are virtually indistinguishable from those of other Bible-centered, pacifist Christians. The middle ground between these extremes is occupied by the Conservative Mennonites, who try to meet the modern world half-way. This was the faith of my initial upbringing. We had electricity, for example, but no television. We dressed in a manner that was two decades behind the times, not a century behind like the Amish. Our lifestyle was austere without being reactionary.

Historically, the Mennonite tradition began in the wake of the Reformation, a brutal conflict in the sixteenth century that split the Christians of Western Europe into two opposing camps: Protestants—initially made up mainly of what became Lutherans and Presbyterians—and Catholics. Of course, when the Protestants weren't busy fighting Catholics, they were busy disagreeing among themselves. For example, most early Protestants believed a person's eternal fate had been predestined by God before creation, while Mennonites believed an individual could choose whether or not to believe. For this reason, Mennonites baptized only adult believers, not infants whose fate had already been sealed. Mennonites became known as Anabaptists, which means to baptize again. Also unlike most other Protestants, Mennonites believed in the separation of church and state, which for them meant not going to war on behalf of the government.

Pacifism and adult baptism were not popular beliefs in sixteenth-century Europe, however. In 1525, the Protestant-controlled City Council of Zurich, where the Anabaptist movement began, issued a decree that parents who failed to have their infants baptized within eight days after birth were to be arrested and banished. Within several years, belief in Anabaptism was made a capital crime throughout much of Europe, in both Catholic and Protestant regions. I have a thick book at home—it's more than eleven hundred pages long—titled The Bloody Theatre or the Martyrs' Mirror, which contains countless stories of how early Mennonites suffered and died for their faith. My grandmother told me stories from The Martyrs' Mirror when I was a young boy. Some I heard so often that I can almost quote them verbatim.

For almost two hundred years, the Mennonites, in the words of one historian, "lived the life of hunted beasts, not knowing whither to flee for refuge, in constant dread of losing possessions, liberty, even life itself." Several countries sent out soldiers and executioners—numbering a thousand strong in one case—whose sole task was to ferret out Anabaptists and put them to death. On the whole, this persecution accomplished its deadly purpose.

Eventually, most of the surviving Mennonites came to the U.S. or Canada in search of religious liberty. Not surprisingly, the decades of relentless persecution had forged a community that was cloistered and set apart. The people had grown accustomed to living in the equivalent of a storm

shelter: a tightly controlled environment designed to be impervious to danger from without, but that felt claustrophobic within. As long as the storm was raging, everyone knew why the rigid constraints on life were necessary. No one minded the regimentation, because their survival was at stake. But once the sun began to shine, people developed a hankering to wander outside once again. In most Amish and Conservative Mennonites communities, the strictness has long outlived the siege.

The most recent novel by the Canadian writer Miriam Toews describes this hankering for freedom. Nomi Nickel is a sixteen-year-old Mennonite girl trapped in a small Mennonite town in western Canada called East Village. Nomi is tough and wry. Her mother and sister—the better looking half of her family, she says—have fled, leaving Nomi with her father Ray, a hapless schoolteacher.

The main employer in town is Happy Family Farms, a chicken processing plant where chickens go to meet their maker and Mennonites go to work while awaiting the same eventual fate. At one point, Nomi tries to explain what the Mennonites are waiting for. "The idea is that if we can successfully deny ourselves the pleasures of this world, we'll be first in line to enjoy the pleasures of the next world, forever. But I've never really understood what those pleasures will be. Nobody's ever come right out and told me."

For Nomi, who yearns to go to the East Village in New York and hang out with Lou Reed and Marianne Faithfull, the situation is bleak indeed. The problem is that Nomi's church, led by an uncle she calls "The Mouth of Darkness," tries to keep her on the path of righteousness by stifling her.

We're Mennonites. As far as I know, we are the most embarrassing sub-sect of people to belong to if you're a teenager. Five hundred years ago in Europe a man named Menno Simons set off to do his own peculiar religious thing ... Imagine the least well-adjusted kid in your school starting a breakaway clique of people whose manifesto includes a ban on the media, dancing, smoking, temperate climates, movies, drinking, rock 'n' roll, having sex for fun, swimming, make-up, jewelry, playing pool, going to cities, or staying up past nine o'clock. That was Menno all over.

Thanks a lot, Menno.

The issue for Nomi as a teenager is not what will happen after she dies, but rather how to endure the absence of life before death. She quips that "the town office building has a giant filing cabinet full of death certificates that say choked to death on his own anger or suffocated from unexpressed feelings of unhappiness." As to life after death, Nomi describes a conversation she once had with her typing teacher about eternal life.

He wanted me to define specifically what it was about the world that I wanted to experience. Smoking, drinking, writhing on the dance floor to the Rolling Stones? Not exactly, I told him, although I did think highly of Exile On Main Street. Then what, he kept asking me. Crime, drugs, promiscuity? No, I said, that wasn't it either. I couldn't put my finger on it. I ended up saying stupid stuff like I just want to be myself, I just want to do things without wondering if they're a sin or not. I want to be free. I want to know what it's like to be forgiven by another human being and not have to wait around all my life anxiously wondering if I'm an okay person or not and having to die to find out.

For myself, I found Nomi's story both hilarious and painful. I know the feeling of almost suffocating in the narrow confines of a theological storm cellar, which is why twenty years ago I left the Mennonite church and headed out on my own. I too wanted freedom. I wanted to be myself. But I discovered that freedom, while necessary, is not sufficient. Freedom is simply the absence of necessity, coercion, or constraint. It does not signify the presence of the good things for which we long. Positive things come to us, ironically, at the largesse of the world and the people around us. But other people and things constrain on our behavior and require us to do certain things. Hence the conundrum: free people need to have a world in which to express their freedom, but the world, with its attendant human population, inevitably constrains freedom.

The title of Miriam Toews' book about growing up Mennonite is A Complicated Kindness (Counterpoint Press, 2004). She uses the phrase to describe the challenge of treating people as individuals in a community where individuality is seen as destructive, even demonic. The phrase also has a larger meaning.

The word "kind" has to do with the nature or essence of things. In the creation story in the book of Genesis, we read that God said, "Let the earth put forth vegetation, plants yielding seeds according to their own kinds, and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, each according to its kind, upon the earth. And it was so." The same thing happened with the great fishes, the beasts, and even man and woman. Each was created to reproduce after its own kind.

In a world where everything is known by its kind-ness, two forces compete. The first is a centripetal force that tends toward unity. Each member of a kind has at least one trait or quality in common with all the others. This is true not only of trees and bugs, but of other groups as well, like Unitarians or Americans. We have something in common that makes us a kind. But the second force is a centrifugal force that drives toward diversity. Each member of a kind is a unique instance; its identity is based on its difference from others. This is why kind-ness is complicated.

The presence of these competing forces calls for a complicated kindness as Miriam Toews uses the term: an approach to each other that honors what we share and celebrates what we do not. What we have in common with others of our kind—whether as mammals, humans, women, men, people of faith, Unitarian Universalists, New Yorkers, Americans, or earth dwellers, for example—defines who we are as a community; what we do not share with others of our kind gives us our identity as individuals. This situation requires a complicated kindness: a kindness attuned to complexity.

Instead of grappling with this challenge, most people opt for one of two easier approaches. Some retreat to the shelter of the storm cellar and insist that everyone think and act the same. Only what we have in common matters; differences should be annihilated. They maintain that there is but one god, one bible, one set of commandments, one nation of destiny, one way to interpret the Constitution, one approach to freedom, one way to live, one way to die, and one way to set the table for dinner. Others insist that kind doesn't matter at all. Everyone is different; when it comes to making decisions about our lives, we might as well have nothing in common.

Neither of these approaches will stop the natural progression of unity into diversity, any more than the sun will stop rising or water will stop flowing down hill. No amount of effort can ultimately stop the course of biological development or the unfolding of human history. The multiplying of distinctive individuals according to their kind is part of the nature of things. Even so, some kind-challenged souls today are trying. They are feverishly working to stop genetic research, stamp out religious diversity, and deny rights to women and minorities.

We need to ensure that they fail. Our task is to defend the principle of honoring what we as individuals share with our various kinds and taking seriously what we do not. This is Unitarian Universalist territory, because it calls for a complicated kindness—a kindness undaunted by complexity. It requires the ability to look at another person and see how deeply we are alike, yet how significantly we are different.

How do we begin this challenging task? By being kind. It's as straightforward as that. The primary meaning of kindness as an adjective is sympathy, which means to feel as one. Sympathy is a shared sense between two people, a feeling that whatever affects you affects me. Look for what you have in common with the people you meet. Treat them with appropriate esteem as one of your kind. What you have in common with them will give you somewhere to begin. Your differences will enable you to develop a relationship that is worthwhile, even important. This process begins when we treat other people with courtesy, friendliness and respect. To adapt the line from Genesis, our lives will be fruitful and our rewards will multiply—to each of us, according to our kindness.