

In Defense Of Kumbaya

Over the last several decades reference to the song Kumbaya has become a patronizing slur characterizing someone as unrealistic or naïve. The hymn Kumbaya used to be a camp favorite which was sometimes sung as a round. There is dispute about whether it was a traditional African American folk song or was composed by one Reverend Marvin V. Frey in the 1930's. Kumbaya Lord means – Come by here Lord. It took on its unfortunate connotation, in part, because the song was easy to teach and therefore was over used. By the 1970's a lot of people were sick of it. During this election cycle it has been used as an insult numerous times.

I'd like to speak in its defense because I've never been sick of it. I learned Kumbaya in Quaker Sunday School. One of my earliest memories is being at a very large summer gathering of Quakers (Friends General Conference in Cape May, New Jersey). I was probably about four or five, but I'll never forget that large tent and the beautiful harmony. I can honestly say it was one of the first times I felt connected to humanity beyond just a small child's world of family, church, and school. The power of prayer through that song for all people, stays with me still.

Now when I hear someone use it as a slight, I wince. I wonder: *"How would they feel if a hymn that was special to them was denigrated in this way? What if they heard someone putting down Amazing Grace or That Old Rugged Cross?"* It is usually more productive to ignore the remark and get back to the original topic at hand than to defend what will surely be called my naïve idealism.

I may be idealistic but I would contend that I am not unrealistic. Neither is Kumbaya. The song recognizes the good and bad we experience and asks that God be present in all those conditions. Its lyrics include verses: someone's crying, someone's laughing, someone's praying, and someone's singing. I have even heard dying, dancing, and marching. It can be used to reflect the experience of anyone singing it. It is not a song of self-righteous judgments or pleas for salvation. It gives a balanced and yet simplified view of the human condition and asks God for support.

It is hard to shake a characterization, once it becomes part of the common vocabulary. Kumbaya, the song, has long been associated with Sixties style activism which has been deemed silly and unrealistic by conservatives and anyone else trying to shake free from an association with bygone radicalism. Even if demonstrations in the Sixties' were marked by drug use, outrageous political theater, and free love, maybe the "Godless" hippies who sang Kumbaya weren't actually "Godless" after all. And, well, history has shown they were not so unrealistic or foolish to call for civil rights and an end to the Vietnam War. But that is not the point when Kumbaya is now used in a derogatory manner. It is often used to identify someone as being on the wrong side of the continuing "culture war."

It is also used to sow the seeds of distrust when someone uses hopeful rhetoric. They are accused of seeking a “Kumbaya moment.” In other words they are charged with trying to artificially manufacture a temporary experience of good will and cooperation when there is neither. The implication is that these ideals are a waste of everyone’s time, that their proponents are liars or just stupid. It is a snide assertion, not based on any fact, used like “*nyah-nyah*” on the play ground.

I am not alone in saying that I am sick and tired of the politics of sarcasm and disrespect. Sarcasm is the preferred language of liars and bullies. So why do we love it so? Why do we consider the cutting remark to be a sign of superior wit and intellect? Sure, sometimes it really is funny. But it is rarely helpful. All too often it is part of a strategy to conceal the truth or discourage opposing views. It can be a form of verbal violence. It is used when someone has run out of constructive things to say – or cannot win an argument on its merits.

I am all for sarcasm as it is used by humorists and comedians. That’s a tool of their trade which is to help us laugh while see the truth about ourselves. What I object to is the barrage of mean spirited sniping we are currently being subjected to by candidates and their surrogates. The last several elections have been won with the most divisive tactics. Sarcasm has been central. Anyone who objects is told to grow up and get over it, which is an interestingly childish response. We are supposed to accept that it is a ruthless business and just get over it. Most of us don’t put up with that attitude in our daily relationships. It is hard to understand why we do from politicians and pundits. The world will always be a changeable dangerous place. We need leaders who can actually be the grownups in the room. We need leaders who understand that listening and learning is more important than getting their digs in. A little Kumbaya might just be in order.

So, I would like to reintroduce Kumbaya as a concept. Kumbaya embodies mutual respect and faith in the best in people. Kumbaya is an invitation to inclusiveness and a common purpose. Even if you are not religious, it is important to believe in the inherent goodness of people. It isn’t something you accept once and then everything is hunky-dory. It requires a continuing commitment to seek out the best in others. Yes, there are times we must face evil behavior and tragic circumstances. But the best way to overcome these is to intentionally build and maintain relationships of trust. That requires just the opposite of naiveté. True Kumbaya requires a willingness to clearly see the world for better and worse, yet to have the faith to work toward something better.

There are people across the political spectrum who want not what is best for their side – but what is best for all. All of us want leaders with integrity and a willingness to find answers that serve the greater good. Wouldn’t it be great if the next President and his administration had enough faith in the American people to speak plainly about the unpredictable world we live in and respected us enough to invite us all to share the responsibility of meeting its challenges? Wouldn’t it be great if once elected, all our representatives sincerely tried to work with each

other and accomplished something that helped everyone not just a few? Wouldn't it be great if we did not leave all the responsibility to the government – but pitched in ourselves?
Kumbaya Lord Kumbaya.

What spiritual practices and skills should we develop which will help us to remain positive in the face of cynicism?