
UCF Forum

1-20-2021

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STARS Citation

Joe, J. Richelle, "In Celebration of Aunts" (2021). *UCF Forum*. 441.

<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/ucf-forum/441>

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In Celebration of Aunts

By J. Richelle Joe
UCF Forum columnist
Wednesday, January 20, 2021

The guidance from my aunts — some biological and some not — sustained me and gave me what I didn't know I needed.



My Aunt Vickey and Aunt Margaret, along with all other aunts, are unsung heroes.

A few years ago my Aunt Vickey called me, and I answered. The answering part is important to the story because I have a reputation for sending calls to voicemail. But it was Aunt Vickey, and I have learned that when your aunt calls, you answer. So, I answered, and after exchanging pleasantries, our conversation went something like this:

Aunt Vickey: I Googled your name.

Me: Oh, yeah? [slight chuckle]

Aunt Vickey: Yeah, all these pages of information came up.

Me: [still chuckling] Oh, you must have found my CV.

Aunt Vickey: I guess so. I don't know what most of it means, but I'm proud of you.

And that is why you answer when your aunt calls.

I am fortunate to have been raised in an environment filled with amazing women who operated in the gift of aunthood. I spent weekends and summers at their homes where they made me clean and go to church, but also took me on vacation, showed me different ways of living, and taught me lessons about life that augmented those I had learned in my own home.

This othermothering sustained me and gave me what I didn't know I needed. Within African American communities, othermothering has historically existed as a means of supporting the proverbial village through women's provision of care to children not biologically their own. As a result, children often grow up among many women they call "Aunt" with no consideration of genetic connections.

Despite there being a National Aunt and Uncle Day on July 26, aunts somehow exist as unsung heroes deserving of celebration. I am compelled to celebrate mine, so here goes.

Aunt Margaret, my mother's older sister, is our family's matriarch. The archetypal othermother, Aunt Margaret has cared for her younger siblings, her nieces and nephews, her children, and her grandchildren with remarkable patience and generosity. I celebrate her for standing in the gap to ensure there is provision for all in need.

Aunt Vickey, my father's only sister, has always been the fun aunt. With her, I could eat junk food nearly unrestricted and laugh hysterically as she drove us around in a station wagon that felt like a roller coaster over the hilly roads of central Virginia. Aunt Vickey entertains us, and then unexpectedly, she extends pearls of wisdom that resonate. I celebrate her for the joy she brings into my life through humor and encouragement.

Despite the lack of biological ties, "Aunts" Ruby, Joan and Naomi will always be aunts to me. As close friends of my mother, these women showed me how powerful and nurturing friendships can be. It is because of their example that I have intentionally cultivated relationships with women, some of which have lasted more than three decades. I celebrate these three aunts for their connection to my mother, and I celebrate them each for who they are individually.

Aunt Ruby is calm and reasonable. I celebrate her steady presence that has always reminded me that things will be OK one day. Aunt Joan has the grace necessary for

anyone who assumes the role of godmother. I celebrate her for that grace and for instinctively knowing what you need to hear before you know you need to hear it. Aunt Naomi demonstrated selflessness and kindness in every interaction I observed with her daughter, who was the first person I knew with Down syndrome. I celebrate Aunt Naomi posthumously for challenging me to be a kinder, better human.

For Thanksgiving, I was able to video chat with Aunt Vickey. In the pre-pandemic days, I would have visited her, Aunt Margaret or Aunt Ruby, but we settled for a virtual connection instead. In true Aunt Vickey form, she cracked a few jokes, modeled thankfulness, and encouraged my friend and me to take more selfies. Although the exchange was brief, the effect, as always, was long-lasting, and I am grateful.

We don't celebrate aunts enough, and they deserve to be celebrated. Give them their flowers while you can.

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