

“Little Big Minds”
 First Unitarian Church
 Reverend Sharon Dittmar
 536 Linton Street
 Cincinnati, Ohio 45219
 513.281.1564
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Last spring I was listening to the Diane Rehm show, and was captivated by the guest, Marietta McCarty. McCarty is a teacher, philosopher, and educational consultant, and she has just published a new book, *Little Big Minds*. The premise of the book is that children, as young as five, benefit from age appropriate discussion on philosophy because they are naturally curious, open-minded, and already wondering about large issues in life. McCarty’s theory intrigued me because on a weekly basis I am challenged to answer the questions of my five year old son (and the questions became hard by the time he reached 3 ½).

Here are some of the questions my son has asked me in the last year: “What happened in WWI? Has there been a WWII? When was the first day a human was born? Do bullets go through skin? Did James Earl Ray go to heaven?” And it is not just my son. Now that I pay attention, I hear almost every child engaging in philosophy in an attempt to make meaning, just like McCarty heard when she listened to her campers look at awe upon the Blue Ridge Mountains or a pond. Here is a series of questions my friend’s six year old daughter recently asked her “Mommy, when do people die? Where do they go? Why do they die? Do they die on Saturday? If you and Daddy died in the front yard I would pick you up and carry you to your beds.”

There are several different definitions of philosophy, and those so inclined like to argue about them. Merriam Webster’s Dictionary defines philosophy in part as **1)** a discipline comprising as its core logic, aesthetics, ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology **2)** the pursuit of wisdom **3)** a search for a general understanding of values and reality by chiefly speculative rather than observational means and **4)** an analysis of the grounds of and concepts expressing fundamental beliefs. McCarty defines philosophy as a “love of wisdom.” The questions I shared with you from my son and my friend’s daughter certainly include speculative searches for meaning and the pursuit of wisdom.

What makes the philosophical questions of children so jarring is that they are often unexpected and they take several moral, value laden leaps. For example, “Did James Earl Ray go to heaven?” is a question about prejudice, justice, vengeance, murder, death, forgiveness, and salvation. I felt overwhelmed when my five year old son sincerely asked me if James Earl Ray, the man who murdered the great Martin Luther King, Jr., went to heaven. And my son asked me because he knows how much I respect Dr. King and his teachings. It’s a great question for which I do not have a great answer. That’s philosophy.

What’s so odd about children’s natural approach to philosophy is that the questions are often sandwiched between fart jokes and sibling fights. Sometimes I don’t realize the merit of what was asked until much later. And as a parent, I believe these questions deserve the best answers I give. They are not to be ignored. There is a small

human in my midst, in many of our midsts, with large questions about good and evil, life and death. We need to give good answers or they will find other answers we might not like as well.

The great Unitarian religious educator, Sophia Fahs, shaped 20th century Unitarian Universalist curriculums. Fahs, the daughter of evangelical missionaries, who wanted to continue in her parents' footsteps, ultimately converted to Unitarianism because her curiosity and continuing education got the better of her. By the time the American Unitarian Association hired her in 1937, Fahs had turned the religious education of her childhood on its head. Instead of inundating small children with Biblical stories they could not comprehend, Fahs believed "We cannot give our children a growing and creative religious life. A fine religion is a personal achievement" which Fahs attributed to a sense of wonder and a questioning mind. Her radical child-centered approach included an emphasis on the experience and insights of children as well as science. Her views were similar to those shared by the founder of Unitarianism; William Ellery Channing in the early 1800's who wrote

The great end in religious instruction is not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own; not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly and steadily with their own; not to give them a definite amount of knowledge, but to inspire a fervent love of truth; not to form an outward regularity, but to touch inward springs.

These words are echoed in the first source of our living tradition "Direct experience of the transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life." Fahs died in 1978 at the age of 101, but her work continues to shape our children today. Her influence, and that of Channing, is why I was so interested in the work of McCarty.

McCarty's book can be adjusted for children from 5 to 13. She has divided her book into sections on topics ranging from friendship, compassion and justice to time, God, and humanity. Each section introduces the thoughts of two philosophers (often of different genders, races, and time in history). McCarty follows up these brief synopses with questions and exercises such as journal writing, listening to music, and drawing. She includes poetry that develops themes and encourages children to write their own poetry on themes. Each section is meaningful, sustaining, respectful, and imaginative.

When McCarty spoke on Diane Rehm, several callers, especially with Montessori backgrounds, had questions about the appropriateness of her work for children. My understanding of their concern is that, as part of the Montessori framework, children are not introduced to subjects that do not interest them or are too complex or confusing. Parents called worried that children would be burdened or prematurely overworked by philosophy.

With all due respect to Montessori, and the many Montessori schools that do such a wonderful job educating our children in Cincinnati, I wondered if the word "philosophy" made adults nervous, reminding us of college courses we could not understand. There is the mistaken impression that philosophy is only for the educated and those with too much time on their hands.

Yet, my experience is that I drive past a graveyard and my son asks “Where do you go when you die.” I vaguely explained to my son why his preschool was closed on Martin Luther King, Jr.’s birthday and he wanted to know who King was and what happened to him, and then, why someone killed him. And then he wanted to know why white people didn’t like brown people (maybe if we had all had more examined lives earlier there wouldn’t be racism). So, I used this opportunity to tell my son that love is the greatest power in the world, greater than hate and that I don’t understand why anyone could hate someone who was brown and preached on love but that sometimes people are silly so he needs to make up his own mind and remember that the greatest freedom is the freedom to choose.

Is that too much information for my five year old son? I don’t know. But I want him to know about love and choice and that his opinion matters. I want him to have nice hands and nice words on the playground, in class, and at home. I want him to never be too old or boring to learn. I want him to know that everyone is special and difference makes us interesting and beautiful. I want him to learn to trust himself, and to politely question other children and adults. These are Unitarian Universalist values. Sometimes I see my faith most strongly when I interact with my son.

My experience is that I am not introducing unwanted information. My son is already there. He lives in this world and he has questions about it. And isn’t it my job to teach him my definition of good and bad, truth, love, family, friendship, hate, power, choice, and freedom? I want him to hear it from me, that love is the greatest power of all, that someone can die but that love remains.

The great founder of Western philosophy, Socrates, said “Education is the kindling of a flame, not the filling of a vessel.” According to Plato he also said that “the life which is unexamined is not worth living.” Ironic that he was executed for “corrupting the youth” of Athens by making them and the adults around them think too much. Our children are already examining their lives; how to live with bullies, how to do something that scares them (isn’t that the definition of courage), how to understand death. *Little Big Minds* helps adults explore these issues with their children.

McCarty is also sensitive to children’s needs. When working with a group of children she encourages adults to slowly and carefully explore the group’s sensitivity and maturity level, and to tailor lessons accordingly. She asks everyone to make eye contact when speaking (I’m still working on getting my son to look someone in the eye when he says “thank you” so this would be welcome support). Whoever speaks can not be interrupted and no one can ridicule what another student says. Even more she explains

Most children have participated in conversations that have been all about winning an argument and getting in the last word. I describe this unproductive form of communication to kids as “verbal tag,” and explain that while the game of tag can be great fun at recess, keeping everyone *in* the game is the true goal of philosophizing. The philosophical dialogue that is so dear to Socrates is not about proving your point or being “right.” I tell them we will learn to talk together. I compare philosophers to jugglers who, rather than keeping many balls in the air, instead hold many ideas in their minds during philosophical conversation.¹

¹ Marietta McCarty, *Little Big Minds* (2006), 12.

In the course of philosophy she is teaching civility, public speaking, and critical thinking, lessons that make good citizens.

Even more McCarty teaches the children to be (in the words of Mary Oliver) a “bride married to amazement . . . the bridegroom taking the world into my arms.” In her first section on philosophy, McCarty teaches the children about Socrates. She tells them Socrates said he was wise to the extent that “what I don’t know, I don’t think I know.” She writes

I suggest to the children that we get on Socrates’ side and admit that there are some things that we don’t know. Kids appreciate it when I begin with some of the things on my endless list. While something new that I don’t know occurs to me every time I work with children on philosophy, some of their favorite examples of things I have told them that I don’t know include the following: “What is lightening?” and “I wonder why my brain makes me a conscious person and my kneecap doesn’t . . .” What they don’t know can range from “why I’m alive” to “how to be happy like I used to be” to “why I don’t have two mouths and three eyes.” Admitting so many things that remain a mystery paves the way for a good discussion of the benefits of examining your life.²

In continuing her discussion of an examined life with the children she explains that if we understood responsibility better we might care for the earth better. She gives the example of one girl saying “I might not disappoint my friend over and over if I understood the idea of trust better.” An eight year old boy tells her “the reason for war is that everybody has forgotten what peace means.” There are a lot of mysteries out there, many questions, and even less answers. The benefit of philosophy is that the examination does lead us into deeper and truer relationship with ourselves, our friends and family, our neighbors, and our world.

Our worship theme for this year is world religion and views, something I will preach more about in two weeks on September 9th. Philosophy, an examined life, is a view, and a liberal religious value articulated by Channing and Fahs. As Unitarian Universalists our fourth principle is the “free and *responsible* search for truth and meaning.” A responsible search is an examined search. Our faith calls us to engage in our children’s philosophical questions when they occur. And as test scores determine school curricula and limit discussion time, our liberal religious emphasis on civility and critical thinking is a boon for the future generation of citizens we are raising.

More than this, our children are human, and humans want and need to understand love, suffering, death, justice, their place in the world. As McCarty notes “I learned in an intimate way that life for many children is neither easy nor fair. While they taught me firsthand that our social problems are many and serious, I also saw a bold display of endurance and the noble strength of the human spirit.” Our children want and need to examine their lives. We owe them support and encouragement in this journey. It is both our heritage and our legacy.

² McCarty, 9-10.