

“Parents as Spiritual Guides”

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Two weeks ago I began teaching a class, *Parents as Spiritual Guides*, with our Director of Religious Education, Carly Wise. *Parents as Spiritual Guides* is a UUA curriculum designed to help parents teach their children about faith, ritual, wonder, courage, and spirituality in a Unitarian Universalist context. Over twenty parents, mostly new members and visitors, registered for the class and attendance was high at the first session. What I learned in one two hour class is that our new members and visitors are starved for in-depth education on Unitarian Universalism. The course Carly and I are teaching will only scratch the surface for many of them. We have a deep need for more information. I think that many of our long term members have similar yearnings. It is doubly hard to know what to tell our children about Unitarian Universalism when we ourselves can barely explain it. And it is needful to transmit the passwords from generation to generation.

Yet we have unique challenges and responsibilities in order to transmit our Unitarian Universalist passwords such as love, respect, curiosity, freedom, responsibility, fairness, and kindness. To begin with, we don't have a central creed or faith statement that appears to tell ourselves and others what we believe. There is no “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth” to appease the curious or skeptical. So what DO we tell our family, friends, and neighbors when they ask? One of the members of the Spiritual Guides class quickly and briefly defined Unitarian Universalism as a faith that “respects the worth and dignity of each person.” Other class members paused and looked uncomfortable, which is a common experience among UUs. How do we explain what we believe?

A few years ago I taught another UU curriculum “Articulating Your Faith,” in which the class took six sessions to learn and create both a synopsis of Unitarian Universalism (the elevator speech) and faith statements. Here is one such “elevator speech” from the class:

[Unitarian Universalism] is a religion whose origins date back centuries to Christianity and Judaism. The word *religion* actually comes from the same root as *ligament*, meaning that which ties us together. For UUs, what ties us together is our attitude toward life, the universe, and humankind. As for a religious text or source that we look to for inspiration, “the book is open.” We value many of the beautiful stories in the bible, but we also learn from the writings of others’ experiences throughout the centuries as well as our own experiences. We are a religious people committed to learning, seeking, and accepting new revelations The UU religion is about the freedom to choose. It offers strong principles and tools that guide us and allow each of us to choose the spiritual path that is right for us as individuals.

This is a very good “elevator speech.” I am not sure that it will satisfy people who are religiously conservative, religiously uneducated, or who rely on one scripture or faith statement. It is important to understand this. A family member may look at you in shock because Jesus is not the source of your salvation, but that does not mean that you have not given a thoughtful, clear explanation of your faith. It’s taken me years to understand this, but for folks used to a creedal explanation of faith, our assertion that “revelation is continuous” and that there are many important scriptures just baffles people. We lose them as soon as we say this, but that does not mean either your faith is invalid or that you gave a bad explanation. Do you understand this? You can not find justification for your faith as a Unitarian Universalist in the understanding of others. It will not happen.

And I want to return to Stephen Prothero, author of *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – And Doesn’t*, for an explanation. In my first sermon this fall, that started our worship theme of world religions and views I quoted Prothero who writes

A few years ago I was standing around the photocopier in Boston University’s Department of Religion when a visiting professor from Austria offered a passing observation about American undergraduates. They are very religious, he told me, but they know next to nothing about religion. Thanks to compulsory religious education (which in Austria begins in elementary schools), European students can name the twelve apostles and the Seven Deadly Sins, but they wouldn’t be caught dead going to church or synagogue themselves. American students are just the opposite. Here faith without understanding is the standard; here religious ignorance is bliss.¹

I agree with Prothero. Scratch the surface of American faith, and you will find emptiness. Certainly a conviction in Jesus or salvation (given that most Americans self-identify as Christian), or even “explanations” about why homosexuality is a sin, but they often just go back to “because the Bible says so.” Can they even tell you where in the Bible it says so? Many Americans can’t even tell you the four *New Testament* gospels let alone the four Noble Truths of Buddhism. Please stop believing your neighbors and family members have a deep religious education. They may be certain and equally ignorant.

I remember when I first gave my father the *UU Pocket Guide*, still a great source of brief information on Unitarian Universalism that we give to all members who join. My father is a life-long Presbyterian, a deacon, elder, and former Sunday school teacher. He is also religiously conservative. But he is a thoughtful person as well. When he finished the *UU Pocket Guide* he said to me, “Well, I can see why you like this, but I could never do it because there isn’t enough structure.” This is the response of someone who listened and considered and I don’t always find this.

With that said, I don’t believe that we offer enough adult education to our members or that our members take religious education as seriously as we should. First Church needs to offer more adult education. Currently our children receive much more education than our adults, yet the vast majority of our adult members and visitors did not

¹ Stephen Prothero, *What Every American Needs to Know – And Doesn’t* (2007), 1.

grow up in this faith. (If you grew up as a UU please raise your hand.) I apologize for falling short here, and there is no one person responsible for this. We are a volunteer organization and without paid staff to attend to adult programming, we get the best efforts of those who volunteer. My long term vision for this congregation is to have a paid staff person responsible for adult education programming.

We are trying to make improvements and I want to thank the current adult education, or Odyssey, committee members for their efforts and Reverend Annie Foerster for her ideas and efforts to strengthen our adult education programming. It is a work in progress, hampered by the fact that many of our members don't have a good vision for what we could offer in adult programming, because it has never been offered here before. And this makes it hard for parents. What are you supposed to tell your children about God, death, prayer, Islam, or Christmas at Grandmas, when you yourself are not certain?

After the first session of *Parents as Spiritual Guides* both Carly and I noted the concerns that our parents have that their answers to their children are not good enough, that they can't counter a barrage of Christian explanations or family pressures, that they are too vague to comfort children. These are serious concerns and it is our mission here to address them. I also noted that our parents fear that UU answers are not good enough, a problem complicated by the fact that our adult members have a variety of theologies from atheist to Christian. In a Jewish congregation we would teach a Jewish answer, but here we need to offer tools for atheist, agnostic, theistic, humanist, Christian, and pagan answers to death, birth, suffering, God, faith, prayer, and salvation. Because of this, we have more, not less adult education needs.

Our parents also have good reason to wonder if they are giving good answers because children need different kinds of answers at different ages. James Fowler has written extensively on faith development. He notes seven stages that humans can go through, beginning with the "undifferentiated faith" of infancy (where children learn the basics of trust and love) ranging to "universalizing faith" (inclusive of all being). Fowler believes that most adults contain elements of all seven stages. My guess is that most adults in this congregation are heavily influenced by Fowler's stage known as "individuating-reflective faith," where individuals question the relation of the individual to the group, the relative to the absolute.

The curriculum for *Parents as Spiritual Guides* explains

Fowler believes that the faith element (or stage) or the parenting figures in a family is important in creating or negating the possibilities for faith growth in the child later in life. Sometimes parents who are engaged in less reflective or autonomous stages may inadvertently cause their offspring to rebel religiously in order to seek greater freedom of thought and spirit . . . Patterns of faith nurturing that develop from the Individuating-Reflective faith element offer children the permission to discuss, question, clarify, and evaluate. This does tend to leave the way open for fuller faith development. However, parents operating from this element need to remember that children still need visible and tangible images and rituals of faith as they develop through various emotional, cognitive, and faith

stages. Children need guidance and feedback as well as the freedom to question and clarify.²

It's that "however" that our parents feel. Our parents are painfully aware that children need visible and tangible images and rituals of faith. Entering a non-creedal religion in a cultural unsupportive religious climate, and without enough First Church sponsored education for the parents, our parents feel unequipped to answer the basics of "Where did Pepe the dog go when he died?" and "Am I going to hell because I don't believe in Jesus?" and "Why don't I have a first communion?"

Having taught adult education in Unitarian Universalist settings for almost fifteen years, I also have another experience. Our adults, as much as they are intellectually curious, are also (and I say this with GREAT love) sometimes religiously distracted. We want knowledge and action without the reflection and study it takes. Your tennis swing will never improve without disciplined practice; same with your faith. I have been studying religion for fifteen years and I am still learning. Remember Tariq Ramadan saying "No one gets a degree in spirituality." It is almost as if we want to apply the superficial American religious experience to our faith lives here and it doesn't work within Unitarian Universalism.

Without a creed we need more information, which is why I take the time to footnote all my sermons (unusual among my colleagues), so you can read the sources I quote and come to your own opinion. In a faith with freedom we must exercise more responsibility to learn and challenge ourselves. In a faith that traces the history of ideas we need to pay attention more, listen rather than talk. We are doers, and yet a deep faith takes reflection. So as annoying as it is to write in a journal or struggle to define the word "spirituality" there is a purpose. Only you can come up with your definition. I can give you my definition, but it is not yours, and definition will only be deeply satisfying if you study and reflect and challenge it and start all over again (which is why I like Torah study). I wonder how many of our new members actually read the *UU Pocket Guide*.

We have a responsibility to teach you here and you have a responsibility to learn. Just this week I listened to a guest on the NPR Diane Rehm show discuss the devolution of religious discourse in America. He maintained that during the 1950's and 1960's we heard great theologians like Heschel, King, Tillich, and Neibuhr in the public square. Remember Abraham Joshua Heschel? I quoted him just last week when he spoke of the scars on his heart that he brings to God in prayer. But today we do not hear the great theological voices in the public square - they exist, we just don't hear them. We hear Rick Warren and the *Purpose Driven Life* and Joel Osteen. They are great preachers, but they are not great theologians struggling with the deep meaning and truth of life. Do you remember also from my sermon last week, James Cone lamenting "prosperity preachers?" Prothero is correct about religious illiteracy in America.

I believe that Unitarian Universalism offers a great religious education for children. Here our children learn about UU history, world religions, and the Judeo-Christian tradition interspersed with continual social justice while using critical thinking skills. I am so proud of so many of our children who have graduated from our religious education program. Yet I think our parents need more religious information so they can

²Makanah Elizabeth Morriss "The Family and Faith Development" in *Parents as Spiritual Guides*, (2001) 3.

speak with more confidence to their children, as well as the comfort of knowing that no one has answers to the greatest religious questions. It is humbling to struggle with religious questions that contain some of the greatest mysteries of all.

For example, “What happens when we die?” There are many people who will give you a certain answer to this, but no one has yet returned to report the facts. So when my son asked me, with all humility I said something like “Well, the truth is that no one knows for sure, and people believe different things. I think that the soul, that part of you that is special goes back to God - just like before you were born you were with God - and then goes onward. I know that the body dies and this is very sad for all the people still alive. What do you think happens?”

It is a very Unitarian Universalist answer – no one person has all truth, people believe different things, I as your parent think this, but since your opinion is really important, what do you think?” And I need to respect that my son will give me lots of changing answers through the years to what he thinks and that someday he may give me his “final” answer, and it might not agree with mine at all. But as a Unitarian Universalist what I am really going for is not the answer, but the process, so my greater hope is that my son, regardless of his answer, will respect differences of opinion and understand that he knows but a small part of truth, just like his mother. That is the password I hope to transmit.

There is a benefit to teaching, and that is learning. In just one class I have learned how much our adults need and want tools for religious education. After the first class I pulled out another UUA curriculum, *Parents as Resident Theologian*, which offers more conversation on theological concepts and I considered teaching it next year. Then I considered offering a course where participants could read the essays of Abraham Joshua Heschel. Then I considered paying a liberal Christian colleague to teach several sessions on either “Biblical Basics” or “Controversy in the Bible” or both.

I want to thank the parents who signed up for *Parents as Spiritual Guides*, for being willing to learn, for struggling with the material and for teaching Carly and I. Through your efforts I have an increased commitment to improving adult education at First Church. If anyone here (member or visitor) wants to know more about Unitarian Universalism, please sign up for the orientation class offered on Saturday, March 1. Also, I want you to know that the UUA bookstore offers some tremendous books on Unitarian Universalism (stories, activity books, books on history and the principles) for children of all ages as well as adults. Check out the website and buy some books for your household. I will offer a selected bibliography of books for children with this sermon, or just go to www.uuabookstore.org and look for yourself.

Parents please believe that you are worthy spiritual guides. No one gets a degree in this. Like much of parenting it is a continual, humbling education. Do your best to come to classes and sermons. Struggle with religious questions, and remain open to the opinion of others without rushing to conclusion. When your children ask you what you believe, tell them, even if it is “I am not sure.” Fowler also suggests that the real purpose of religion is not theology, but meaning and this gets back to the passwords. “In the child’s country there are no foreigners.” “We live not by things but by the meaning of things.” So when your children ask, expand their country with your passwords and remember that love, respect, curiosity, fairness, freedom, responsibility, and kindness

(which are the passwords of our UU principles) are worthy, and some of the greatest that I know.

Selected Bibliography for UU Children’s Books (available through the UUA bookstore at www.uuabookstore.org or 1.800.215.9076). This is just a few books of the many listed. The UUA bookstore website has a “Children’s Book” section divided into categories such as Bible stories, Nature and Science, Social Justice, UU Principles, etc.

Faith Without a Creed, Julie Parker Amery

Family Prayers, Irene Prager (listed in the “Family” section)

How to Bury a Goldfish: And Other Ceremonies and Celebrations for Everyday Life, Louise Nayer and Virginia Lang (This was listed in the “Family” section)

Humanism, What’s That?: A Book for Curious Kids, Helen Bennett

A Lamp in Every Corner: Our UU Storybook, Janeen K. Grohsmeyer

My Seven Principles: A Child’s Booklet

My Seven Principles Stickers

My UU ABC’s: Info and Fun for Kids of All Ages, Dorry Clay

Unitarian Universalism is a Really Long Name, Jennifer Dant

UU Kids Book, Anne Fields

Selected Bibliography for UU Books for Adults. Just a few of many, many . . .

Faith Without Certainty: Liberal Theology in the 21st Century, Paul Rasor (This book is brand new, sitting on my desk, and as of yet, unread. The author was one of my teacher’s in seminary and I am guessing he has something of merit to say).

The Larger Faith: A Short History of American Universalism, Charles Howe

A Stream of Light: A Short History of American Unitarianism, Conrad Wright

The Unitarians and the Universalists, David Robinson (I know it is \$61, but this is still the text book that I return to in order to understand Unitarian and Universalist thought and deed over a 300 year context within religion and American history. It also has an index of famous UU’s at the end – very useful)

