

Religious Education Sunday
June 6, 2010
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
Boiling Springs, PA

Opening Words
(Willa Jessee, Religious Education Coordinator)

It has been my experience that education is going to happen regardless of what we do or do not do. The trick is to make sure that what children are learning is what we want them to learn. When Judy tasked me with writing a brief statement about Religious Education, I began as I begin most writing tasks—doing research on the internet. I knew what my thoughts were about the topic, but I wanted to see what others were saying.

I found these statements, one on the website of the Unitarian Church in Westport, CT, and the rest from the blog “Putting Religious Education in its Place.”

Religious Education is in the noticing and the appreciating.

Religious Education is found in the simple acts that bind us closer together

Religious Education nurtures intergenerational relationships and cross learning.

Religious Education builds community where we can contribute our unique gifts.

Religious Education happens when we connect to people and things larger than ourselves and fly against all odds.

Religious Education is implicit in the decisions we make as a congregation, including fiscal decisions. Religious Education is nestled in those leaps of faith and small actions that say, “We see you. We need you. You are worthy.”

When, where does religious education take place? Religious education takes place on Sunday morning, holy days of the year, at workshops, or youth conferences. It takes place when we rise in the morning. It takes place when we choose how to live today, and when we reflect upon our choices. A religious education emerges out of a relationship. It sneaks up on us when we reflect on joy and sadness or speak deep hopes and fears. Religious education takes place anytime, anywhere, and can be found in everything. We are all religious educators on Sunday and every day. We are always in the midst of realizing our faith for ourselves, and with those we love.

Unitarian Universalist Religious Education is too powerful, too raucous, too exhilaratingly vibrant to be confined to that one hour on Sunday when we sing the kids downstairs. Or wherever it is that they go. Wake up, people! Religious Education is all around!

I couldn't have said it better myself.

The R.E. Program 2009 – 2010
Faithful Journeys, Grades K-2
(Rev. Judy Welles)

Sometimes people ask us where the money goes that we send to the UUA as our Fair Share Annual Program Fund contribution. What do we get for it?

Today is a perfect day to answer that question, because we get a lot of support for our children's religious education from the UUA. For example, over the past few years they have been developing an entirely new set of lifespan learning programs and resources called "A Tapestry of Faith."

Tapestry of Faith nurtures Unitarian Universalist identity, spiritual growth, a transforming faith, and vital communities of justice and love. The series offers a variety of resources — downloadable, printed, viewable, interactive, and more. It's a religious growth and learning program for the twenty-first century.

We have been using Tapestry of Faith curricula for the past two years, and because they keep adding new ones at all age levels, we will probably continue using them for years to come. Not only are they free, thus saving us from constantly needing to purchase materials, they are also rich with resources and very easy to use — obviously designed for volunteer teachers in our children's programs who don't necessarily have experience in teaching.

Today you're going to hear about the three curricula we've used this year. Our youngest children, together in a classroom for Kindergarten through grade 2, have experienced a program called "Faithful Journeys," with Tara Renault as their lead teacher.

In this class the children embark on a pilgrimage of faith, exploring how Unitarian Universalism translates into life choices and everyday actions. Each week at the start of class, children share some good deeds or faithful actions they undertook in the previous week; these are written on paper "footprints" which march around the classroom walls. Be sure to look at the pathway these children have created with their good deeds, part of which is out in the Social Hall. The footprint bookmarks in your bulletins give a few examples of what our children have said this year.

In each session, stories about real people model how our children can act faithfully as Unitarian Universalists in their own lives. They have learned about Unitarian Universalists such as Superman — that is Christopher Reeve, the actor who played Superman and worked on behalf of people with spinal cord injuries and other disabilities. They learned about other Unitarians or Universalists such as Beatrix Potter, Hosea Ballou, and a boy named Ray who had the idea to start a sports equipment fund through his church, the UU Church of Rochester, NY, for children whose families couldn't afford to pay for their children to participate in sports.

The K-2 class are helping today as greeters, and they will take the collection after we hear what Clara and Holly have to say.

Windows and Mirrors

Grades 3-5

“Windows and Mirrors” is the name of the curriculum that our 3rd through 5th grade class experienced, with Andy Pettit and Margaret Light as the primary teachers. This curriculum nurtures children's ability to identify their own experiences and perspectives and to seek out, care about and respect the experiences and perspectives of others. The sessions unpack topics that lend themselves to diverse experiences and perspectives — for example, faith heritage, anti-racism and prayer. The program teaches that there are always multiple viewpoints and everyone's viewpoint matters.

The metaphor of windows and mirrors represents the dynamic relationship among our awareness of self, our perceptions of others, and others' perceptions of us. One of the ongoing activities of the class was to create self-portraits (mirrors) which they augmented each week as their self-awareness grew. Several of the children's mirror self-portraits are displayed in the Social Hall.

Margaret described to me some of the strong points of the curriculum.

UU history and principles are included, demonstrated, and acted out through stories, games and activities, and through structured discussions. The activities invite personal reflection. This format also creates community among the children. The on-line curriculum is inclusive of all resources (handouts, activities, stories, etc.) and provides multiple activities for the teacher to choose from.

Then she gave an example: One session was on "Building a Community of Forgiveness." This is the kind of thing we hope our children will learn at church. To teach this, we went through a story and several activities and games to see the concepts of right and wrong from multiple perspectives. We ended with an exercise that walked them through writing a letter of forgiveness. This gave them a tool they may use in the future.

In another class, they were invited to write an elevator speech — a response to the question “What is a Unitarian Universalist?” short enough to be given in an elevator before you reach your floor.

Amazing Grace

Middle School – Grades 6-8

Our middle schoolers have had a terrific year, with high attendance and a lot of enthusiasm. Their primary teachers were Nancy Bittinger for the first part of the year, and Heather Flaherty for the second part. Their curriculum, titled “Amazing Grace,” is designed to help young people determine right from wrong using their U.U. values, hopefully enabling them to navigate the tricky waters of ethical dilemmas as they move through the middle- and high school years, when they will be continually tugged toward both ends of the ethics continuum.

I'm going to turn things over to them to share with you the kind of experiences they have had in their class.

“The Friend and the Dog in Trouble” Middle School class

YoUUth Group Grades 9-12

It’s also been a great year for our Youth Group, led by Val Campbell for the first part of the year and Nancy Bittinger for the second part. Friendships have developed among these 9th through 12th grade teens as they have discussed life issues pertinent to them and put their efforts into several creative fundraisers. Their successful fundraising allowed them to make a weekend trip to New York City in April, in what we envision as the first major trip in a four-year cycle of youth group excursions to interesting places of learning.

Whew! A lot has been going on downstairs this past year! What a blessing for our kids, and what a powerful invitation to reflect for a moment on the grace that this religious community brings into all of our lives. [*Silence.*]

The R.E. Program 2010-2011

Today marks the end of the “regular church year” curriculum; next week we begin our summer series. Willa designed it for children of all ages, together in one group, to learn more about our seven principles in the format of a medieval quest for the Holy Grail (that would be our chalice). We’re looking for people to commit to being part of a team for one Sunday this summer — that’s one of the options on the signup sheet in your Bulletin.

After Labor Day, we’ll start up with our separate classes again, using curricula similar to the ones you’ve learned about today, taken from the Tapestry of Faith. And again, this is where you come in.

We need you to teach. And please don’t think that I must be talking to someone else. I’m talking to *you*. This past year has seen a disappointing drop in congregational involvement in our children’s program; the wonderful volunteers whom we just thanked with Willa’s hand-made garden flags have been carrying the program with great dedication and commitment, and much has been asked of them. They could use some help.

The goal of the RE Committee is to have a team of five teachers for each of the three classes you’ve heard about this morning: grades K-2, 3-5, and middle school. With two teachers in the classroom and a team of five, each person would be teaching only two weeks out of five — this translates to roughly once a month when you figure in FunDays and Story Sundays.

We talk a lot about being a community where people really care about each other and where everyone pitches in for the greater good. We experience this in a variety of ways here, but there is no clearer example of people looking out for each other than in our children’s RE program. Of course, interacting with and learning with our children is an obvious way for us to show that our circle of care extends beyond ourselves and our immediate families. But there’s more.

I hear people demur from making a teaching commitment because they don't want to miss the worship services when they teach. That's somewhat flattering, but it's not helpful to those who have to miss *all* of the worship services because others are reluctant to miss *some* of them. A team effort would spread the joy of teaching to a wider circle, and would enable everyone to participate in adult worship more often as well.

At the beginning of the service, Willa said, "It has been my experience that education is going to happen regardless of what we do or do not do. The trick is to make sure that what children are learning is what we want them to learn." Just think what our children will learn about the religious community they belong to if they see lots of adults with a strong commitment to walk with them, spend time with them, teach them, and help them on their faithful journeys toward adulthood. Isn't that what you want them to know about us?

So as you listen to the inspiring song with words by Willa Jessee, see which blank space on your insert is just begging for your name to fill it. You'll have plenty of support for your efforts, and I can almost guarantee that you will have plenty of fun as well.

Anthem

"Who Will Teach?"
Willa Jessee//Lionel Bart

Choir Members

Minister's Prayer

(adapted from a prayer written by Rev. Katie Kandarian-Morris)

Gracious and loving spirit whom we call by many names, we celebrate your presence within us, among us and beyond us this day and every day.

Today is a day when we feel pulled in many different directions. There is much to celebrate: it is a beautiful day in a series of beautiful days; school is almost out, and the promise of summer joys tantalizes us; we are reminded again how much we love the children of this community, and how fervent are our hopes and aspirations for them.

Yet we grieve as well, especially for the people and creatures of the Gulf Coast who suffer under an ugly devastation of oil that is destroying their homelands and their livelihoods.

Our tradition covenants to affirm respect for the interdependent web of existence; amid that diversity are the four-legged, the flying, the swimming creatures, and today our compassion turns toward those in the gulf, those affected by the oil.

Let us remember the brown pelicans and other seabirds, the plankton, sea turtles, dolphins, shrimp and shellfish, blue fin tuna and other fish; the sperm whale.

Let us pray too, for people; for wisdom for our leaders as they respond to this crisis; for strength, health and perseverance to those who are working and cleaning what can only be described as massive and overwhelming.

May our prayers bring hope to those who suffer, who make their living by the sea, through the sharing of its beauty and gifts. May we be granted

forgiveness for our own complicity as we struggle with our own needs; the many uses of oil and fuel in our lives.

Let us work together to develop new ways of being both frugal and resourceful in our consumption of nature's costly resources.

Spirit of Life, give us strength for the journey and hope for the difficult days ahead.

And in this time of seeking hope for the journey, we turn our thoughts again to those in our own community who need our prayers and our support as they move forward on their own journeys. *[ad lib from book]*

With hearts full of both love and consternation, we turn toward that greater spirit of love that animates all our lives, and ask for compassion and forgiveness.

Amen.

Closing Words

Excerpted from the writings of Antoine de St. Exupéry

In a house which becomes a home, one hands down and another takes up the heritage of mind and heart, laughter and tears, musings and deeds. Love, like a carefully loaded ship, crosses the gulf between the generations.... Let us bring up our children. It is not the place of some official to hand to them their heritage. If others impart to our children our knowledge and ideals, they will lose all of us that is wordless and full of wonder. Let us build memories in our children, lest they drag out joyless lives, lest they allow treasures to be lost because they have not been given the keys.