

“Where Have All The Children Gone?”
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley
Boiling Springs, PA • May 24, 2009
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As a second-generation UU raising three once and hopefully future UU sons, I’m deeply committed to our faith community. I’m concerned that our children drift from the fold in rather alarming numbers. And while some eventually rejoin UU congregations, far too few ever return.

Many of us share these concerns—enough that a two-year study of how UU youth view our congregations was completed in 2007. In a nutshell, the survey, which polled 1,400 UU youth, concluded that “A high percentage of Unitarian Universalist youth say they feel welcome at UU worship services and that their congregations value their opinions. Yet only about half feel that their congregation is their spiritual home.”

This begs the question, why would someone who feels welcome and valued at home leave? Well, now, herein lies the conundrum.

We raise our children to think for themselves, to actively engage in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We raise them to become independent adults able to make reasoned choices and to commit themselves to a life of service. We raise them to value others, to forge healthy relationships, to respect the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part—but one part only. In short, we raise them to leave.

And while we welcome them back with open arms, refrigerators, and washing machines, we fully encourage them to find their own way in life. Rather than focus on why our kids leave the fold, perhaps we might instead congratulate ourselves for raising independent, free-thinking young adults willing to turn radically toward others.

As a denomination, we profess to welcome all people into our congregations—even those who vote for or pray to that “other guy.” We profess to draw our principles from all of the major world religions. We profess to welcome diversity. But the simple reality is that our congregations consist primarily of educated, white, economically comfortable members. And while that’s another sermon in itself, it gives me pause.

Do we walk the walk or simply talk?

I’d argue that most of us go above and beyond the proverbial call of duty to live our UU principles. On the report card of life, I’d graduate us all *magna cum laude* or above. I especially admire the outstanding parenting skills I see around me here. I think we’re doing, well, a damn fine job raising kids to be just like us—and better!

So, where have all the children gone?

They’ve gone where grown children go—into adulthood. Wherever that may lead. And while we as committed UUs fervently hope that their faith journey will lead them home, we as committed UUs really need to consider that there are many healthy paths on that journey.

And let’s consider this—UU youth aren’t alone in leaving the fold. Every faith community experiences this attrition among its youth and young adults. Catholic

offspring leave Catholicism; Jewish kids are bar-mitzvahed and in years to come throw off their yarmulkes like graduation hats hurled aloft; young Methodists find new methods outside the faith, and so on. We are not alone. Kids rebel against, well, just about everything. It's what they do.

When you think about it, we may even be exacerbating their rebelliousness by giving them so many ideas against which to rebel. How does one rebel against openmindedness?

[I asked the children earlier if they would choose a smorgasbord of "health foods" or a banana split with all the toppings. Every one picked the banana split.] We offer them a smorgasbord of healthy food. How many teen-agers do you see scarfing down salads at McDonalds? C'mon, now. What kid *doesn't* opt for the banana split with all the toppings—at least for a while? Offer them milk; they heap in chocolate syrup. Offer them water, they want the fruity, bubbly kind. Offer them brie, and it's mac 'n cheese for sure.

How does one rebel against a smorgasbord? By refusing to eat.

Let's cut ourselves some slack to go with that Big Mac. Kids rebel. It's part of how they find their own way. Look around you. How many UUs started out that way? Most of us are grown kids who rebelled against our family's religion of choice. We're recovering Catholics or Jews or Lutherans or Baptists. We're good people raising good, strong, healthy, independent-thinkers. Perhaps the best way we can encourage them to stay in the fold is to let them go.

Now, back to that survey. Of the fourteen hundred youth polled, "91 percent said they feel welcome at worship services, 89 percent said they were treated respectfully, and 87 percent said their opinions were valued. But only 53 percent felt that the congregation was their spiritual home." The end result was the recent deconstruction of YRUU, following recommendations of the Youth Ministry Working Group and the Mosaic Project. Reports from both groups "call for a culture change in UU congregations that would put serving the religious needs of teenagers and young adults at the heart of each congregation's mission." "The fact they feel welcome," the survey noted, "does not necessarily mean they are being fed."

I can tell you this—when my grown kids come home to visit, they head for the refrigerator. But when I ask them what they want for dinner, nine times out of ten, they say, "Oh, I think I'll just go to Quiznos." Or the local Chinese buffet. Or they sit in their rooms munching on whatever junk food they can find, then have little appetite for what I prepare.

But I can also tell you this—every one of my three boys "dropped out" of church at about the same point—when they graduated from RE. Thrown into the fold of a hit-or-miss batch of young adults, they seemed to lose their footing. Members of the youth group at that time were several years older, and had grown up together. And while I'm certain they never intended to intimidate 14-year-olds coming into their midst, those 14-year-olds just didn't feel they belonged.

They weren't particularly enamored of adult services yet, and given the choice of healthy smorgasbord or an unending diet of prepackaged banana splits, they chose to fast, for the moment.

But the good news is that each of them cogently expresses Unitarian Universalist ideals, most of the time. The good news is that Stephen, my 23-year-old, has joined a UU congregation where he attends graduate school; David, my 22-year-old, often attends services when home for a visit; and Michael is still firmly footed in this faith community. And while Michael, at nearly 16, far prefers the company of youth over the smorgasbord in the sanctuary, the youth whose company he prefers are all Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley.

We live in an uncertain world. War, poverty, avarice, prejudice, global warming — all these horrors lie beneath the stainless steel lids covering the array of dishes set out before us. Kids need guidance to navigate the often-treacherous passage to adulthood. Kids need consistency and boundaries. In psychological terms, kids without limits don't feel safe. Kids with inconsistent or absent household routines flounder. They can drown in a sea of bad selections before they ever have a chance to find their own way.

We offer our youth an abundance of sophisticated choices. Perhaps a bit too abundant, a bit too sophisticated for such young palettes. And, fearful that forcing them to attend on Sunday will drive them away, all too often we allow them to fall behind.

In a world of uncertainty, kids need to feel safe. In a world bombarded with instant gratification, instant communication, and a truncated babble of initials and code words, kids need more than knowing how to translate ROTFLMAO, LOL, B4N, OMG, POS, 4COL, KPC, and IMHO. They need healthy limits. They need to feel held in love.

And while they may never be exposed to the Sutras, Vedas, Upanishads, Quran, Mishnah, Tao te Ching, Chuang Tzu, Yoruba, or Shinto in a fundamentalist church, there's a certain safety in "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

And there is something to be said for "making" our kids attend on Sunday. As Rachel pointed out in her invitation to worship, attending Sunday services as a child was obligatory. And while she eventually chose a different spiritual path, her commitment to filling her spiritual belly remained strong. She found us.

I was particularly impressed that Rachel's mother, despite being married to a Methodist minister, encouraged her young adult daughter to seek elsewhere, when Dad's church wasn't feeding Rachel. It must have required an incredible leap of faith to show her own daughter the door — a door which led to Unitarian Universalism.

I'm a second-generation UU. My parents were both ancestrally Jewish. My mother's father died when she was a child, and she was sent to boarding school, where no one religious practice prevailed. My father was bar-mitzvahed at 13 and, in his words, promptly forgot everything he learned about Judaism. It wasn't until they were expecting

their first child that they decided to seek a faith community, believing that children need some sort of solid spiritual footing. Feeling that Judaism lacked modern application in their lives, they turned to Unitarianism.

I don't recall ever being given a choice to stay home on Sundays, nor do I recall resenting going to church. It was a family event, and that's what we did. My mother was director of religious education for several years, and my father was board president. I grew up in that congregation, graduating to LRY—Liberal Religious Youth, the precursor of the erstwhile YRUU—Young Religious Unitarian Universalists. And although I can't claim to recall much of the RE curriculum I imbibed all those years ago, I remember with fondness my LRY years—in particular, a ski trip and that first surreptitious teen kiss.

Even *I* went through an exploratory stage when I briefly considered rebirth as a “Jesus freak”—mostly owing to the cute born-again boy in the next sleeping bag during a camping trip in Big Sur. I ran into some problems—no matter how hard I tried to open my heart to Jesus, Jesus must have been off eating banana splits, because he never took up residence in here.

It didn't take me many years of wandering from the fold before I found my way back to the familiar hearth and home of Unitarian Universalism. And while my memory of world religions isn't as sharp as it once was, I have tried my best to live my life according to the principles and purposes of our UU faith, just as my parents taught me. My parents taught me to think for myself, to value diversity, to make reasoned choices, and to turn radically toward others. My parents raised me to leave, and to come back whenever and to whatever felt most like home.

So take heart—our kids may leave, but they'll find their way home. It may not always be this home, but they will find or make a home for themselves. A home where they are free to devise and practice the rituals that satisfy their individual hunger for truth and meaning.

Let us firmly resolve to hold our children in love—tightly enough that they feel safe and secure, but not so tight that they can't breathe. Let us resolve to accept our growing and grown children for who they are, and for who they are becoming. Let us resolve to teach our children well, with taste buds hungry for new flavors and textures, but with a deep yearning for those comfort foods of childhood. Let us resolve to show up in our children's lives, to pay attention to their needs and desires, to tell them the truth that there are many paths in the world, and then let us detach from the outcome. Let us resolve to let go when the time comes, knowing that we've done our level best to prepare them to live their own lives. And if they leave—WHEN they leave—let us respect them for who they have become. Let us always leave the porch light on and the fridge full.