

The Soul Only Avails: Teaching as a Spiritual Act

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I would like to share a few thoughts with you about teaching—and I mean especially religious education—as a spiritual practice. In my twenty years as a religious educator I have recruited hundreds of church schoolteachers. I am deeply grateful to them for volunteering. The lives of our children and youth have been tremendously enriched by the contribution of these men and women. The fact is, the congregations I have served simply couldn't have had a religious education program without them. Some of those who volunteered were teachers in the public schools, but the overwhelming majority were not. I would say that about ninety percent of them had no previous experience as teachers. Most were simply well-intentioned parents who had relatively little experience working with children in groups. I don't mean for a moment to suggest that any of these people were lesser Sunday school teachers for not having a background in education. Far from it. Nor do I wish to slight professional teachers who love children and teaching so much that they are willing to give an extra day of the week to R.E.

But I do mean to say that what is important in religious education is not how much you know about children, teaching or even Unitarian Universalism, but how much you are willing to give of yourself, of your soul. Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, "In dealing with my child, my Latin and Greek, my accomplishments and my money stead me nothing; but as much soul as I have avails." I would say that this is true of religious education as well. We do try to equip Sunday school teachers with the basics with training and advice about teaching, curriculum, and the Unitarian Universalist philosophy of religious education. We try to pair new teachers with more experienced ones. We encourage teachers to attend workshops and classes. But there is only so much we can do with the time we have. The fact of the matter is that the best education our volunteers can receive about managing a classroom or what it means to be a practicing Unitarian Universalist is through the experience of teaching itself. I would be the last to suggest that knowledge doesn't count; but it is not the most important asset in religious education. The essential qualities of a good church schoolteacher are a love of children, a sense of wonder about life, empathy and the ability to listen, and a willingness more to share who you are than what you know. Above all, teachers are mentors and companions of the children as they undertake their religious journeys in life.

Compared to other churches and religious traditions, Unitarian Universalism is not strongly identified. Despite our inclusiveness and generosity of spirit, Unitarian Universalism is hardly a household word. Unitarian Universalist children and youth can feel isolated among their peers and family relatives. Our intellectual thrust is hard for young children to grasp. It can be difficult even for our youth to

explain to others what a Unitarian Universalist is or believes. Our heritage is distinguished, but it is not rich with tradition the way Catholicism and Judaism are. We have only recently begun to develop distinct rituals, traditions and symbols, which are important building blocks of a child's religious identity. Without a sense of tradition, being a Unitarian Universalist can resemble being a Democrat or Republican. It may be what a child thinks or even stands for, but it is not necessarily who he or she is.

Having a Unitarian Universalist religious identity is not necessarily the same thing as knowing our history and heritage, although it includes them. Our heritage is made up of our values and ideals, our art, architecture, music and poetry, our summer camps and sacred sites, our traditions and folklore. Our history includes all the facts about us—people, places and events, not only "from long ago and many lands," but also here and now at our own churches and fellowships. Fundamentally, religious identity is a feeling that, "This is my church. People know me here. And I know them." As much as a knowledge of their history and heritage, children need experiences of common worship, intergenerational activities, and "at-homeness" in the church, including familiar faces and spaces. This is a tall order. Helping to nurture a sense of religious identity is primarily a parental responsibility. But those of us in religious education have made a commitment to aid and abet the parents of our congregation's children in this important effort. We guarantee, as parents or teachers, that our children will remain Unitarian Universalists. We do believe, after all, that at some point our children will make their own decisions about religion, as well as other matters. But as long as they are with us we can foster their sense of identity as Unitarian Universalists, and, in this way, at least increase the odds that they will continue to find a religious home here.

I put the emphasis on religious identity because it involves more than knowing about our Unitarian Universalist history and heritage, even our principles. Religion is not, fundamentally, *about* anything. Religion is life. Or as Emerson put it, religion is neither doctrines nor rituals; "it is not something else *to be got*, to be *added*, but it is a new life of those faculties which you have." If it is *about* anything, religion is about being alive and engaged in the world. It is about enchantment and compassion. And it is about transformation and self-renewal. For William Ellery Channing, "The great end in religious instruction is to awaken the soul, to excite and cherish spiritual life." As religious educators, our task "is not to stamp our minds on the young, but to stir up 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." In all the years since Channing wrote these words, no one has said anything wiser and more profound on the subject of religious education. Teaching the young, then, is not about filling their heads, but expanding their horizons; it is not about charting a course for them, but about being companions with them on their own journey in life. I am convinced that in religious education "the soul only avails," and that teaching is a spiritual practice requiring a certain discipline or adherence to fundamental principles. Perhaps you have others to add to the list, but here are the seven principles I would suggest as essential to the spiritual practice of religious education.

The first principle is *respect the children*. Our program is not centered on the curriculum, but on the child. If I may, I would like to offer yet another bit of advice from Emerson, who had this to say: "Our own experience with children instructs us that the secret of education is in respecting the children. It is not for us to choose what they shall know, what they shall do. By our tampering and thwarting and too much governing they may be hindered from their end. Respect the children. Be not too much their parent. But we hear the outcry which replies to this suggestion—Would you throw up the reins of discipline? Would you leave the young to the mad career of their own passions and whimsies and call this anarchy a respect for children's nature? We answer, Respect the children, respect them to the end, but also respect yourselves. Be the companions of their thoughts, the lovers of their virtue. Let them find us so true to our own selves, that they will be true to theirs."

My second principle, then, is *be true to yourself*. Confront the children, as Sidney Harris suggests, with your own humanhood. By being exposed to a variety of adults, children and youth learn more about the possibilities of being human. This includes sharing your own faith and religious identity. Unitarian Universalism is not a normative religion. There is no one way of being Unitarian Universalist, and children benefit from being exposed to a multiplicity of perspectives. What is important is that we embody our faith, that we are an example to children and youth of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. And when you talk with children, speak from the heart; answer for yourself as a living, breathing Unitarian Universalist, and not as a spokesperson for an official Unitarian Universalist point-of-view.

My third principle is *promote community*. One of the basic rights of children, recognized by the United Nations, is the right to a religious identity. We all experience a need to belong and to be accepted. A good community, in the words of TV's Mr. Rogers, "likes you just the way you are." A good community leaves no child behind—not the shy, the handicapped, the infrequent attendee, not even the disruptive or the hard-to-reach. It is in community, when we gather together in a special place, that our faith and values take on a visible shape, where our Unitarian Universalist principles are promoted and reinforced. And, truth be told, in providing a place for children and youth, we are developing a valuable sense of community for ourselves, too.

My fourth principle is *make it sacred*. As a minister of religious education I am painfully aware of how difficult it is to be spiritual amidst the welter of activities in the RE wing on Sunday mornings. Nevertheless, the primary reason people come to churches and bring their children is to develop a spiritual life. Spirituality has many facets, of course, including social outreach and teaching in the church school. But whatever we do as teachers, consultants and committee members needs to be performed in light of our Unitarian Universalist principles and with the intention of touching inward springs, as Channing suggests. This is why worship is so important, not only in the Chapel and the Worship Hall, but in the classroom as well.

My fifth principle is *cultivate your soul*. As much as children and youth need a spiritual life, teachers need one, too. We all lead busy, stressful lives, juggling jobs,

personal needs and family obligations. But, the fact is, we can only give out of a fullness of the soul, never out of an emptiness. To be effective teachers we need to awaken and excite our slumbering souls, to rediscover a sense of wonder. As Dag Hammarskjöld once said, "We die on the day when our lives cease to be illuminated by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond reason." The good news is that the children, according to Swiss psychologist Alice Miller, are "messengers from a world we once deeply knew, but have long since forgotten." As we walk the spiritual path with them, they help us to remember.

My sixth principle is grow in *your faith*. Embrace your own spiritual identity as a Unitarian Universalist. Discover the richness of your religious history and heritage. By immersing yourself in your faith you will find that you will grow, as your children have done, by a process of enlargement, leading to new vistas of understanding and appreciation. There are many opportunities for growth as a Unitarian Universalist. There are district retreats, summer conferences, Renaissance Modules, the annual General Assembly, and workshops and classes in local congregations. And, of course, there are many books you might wish to read as well.

My seventh and last principle is *put down roots*. Thomas Jefferson once said that he was content to be a Unitarian by himself. If we all felt that way, Unitarian Universalism would be a one-generation phenomenon. If we feel grateful for the fact that this congregation was here for us when we needed it, we must take responsibility for making it a sanctuary for others. Our work as religious educators is a vital part of the life of the congregation as a whole, and what we do for children and youth cannot be done in isolation. Therefore, I would urge all of you to take an active interest in the affairs of the congregation-its meetings, committees, and fund-raising efforts. Get involved in the issues facing your congregation. Make your voice heard, and be an advocate for the needs of the children and youth. The reason why I love my work as a religious educator is that in the course of a few short years I can see the results of my efforts coming to fruition right in front of me. I witness the wide-eyed innocence of the very young and the growing self-assurance of youth. Working with children and youth renews my sense of wonder and hope. And I am a better Unitarian Universalist for what they have taught me. It may be heresy to say so, but I could exist without the church. So could our children. But I do not come here just to exist; I come here to find out what it means to be a spiritual person. And the children have taught me as much about this as anyone.