

OUR JOURNEYS: COMMITTED TO LIFELONG LEARNING?

We gather in this community to discover and share the light of truth and wisdom. We who seek deeper understanding of the meaning of our lives and our world find encouragement for our journeys here. In our gathering we strive to offer each other respect and acceptance without regard for age or ability, gender identity or shade of skin. We learn from and with each person and we each have wisdom to share!

Our philosophical and religious beliefs are quite diverse for a group that has such a high percentage of mature white middle and upper class members. By level of educational achievement and income, we Unitarian Universalists are not nearly so diverse. We tend to support a wide array of programs, projects, and efforts to increase social justice and generally make the world better. We have a much harder time agreeing on which programs, projects, and efforts should receive our mutual support. Over the years I have been a Unitarian Universalist, I have seen General Assembly and congregations take up issues around education and actually agree to support resolutions and programs more frequently than in most other areas. We are not all in support of every educational endeavor, but we strongly support the idea of education and will go into after school programs, library reading programs, and even into the prisons to help educate others of every age.

In most UU congregations, there are forums, discussion groups, studies, and classes for adults as well as religious education programs for children. We take the idea of lifelong learning seriously! This also fits our belief that revelation is not sealed or closed, that things continue to be revealed, that we continue to learn about new realities.

How many of you have been on an Elderhostel or Road Scholar trip? Over the years, I have heard more UUs talk about such trips than anyone else. How many of you are continuing to take courses or classes somewhere to learn something you don't know or don't know how to do? How many of you watch educational programming on TV? How many of you have ordered something from the Teaching Company?

How many of you actively try to learn something new once a month? Once a week? Every day? How many of you believe in lifelong learning?

When I was a United Methodist Minister, there were always a few folks who wanted to have a Bible Study or some other religious study group, and some of those old liberal Methodists could really get into it! In UU congregations, it is pretty much sacrilegious to not frequently offer some kind of class or study group, though attendance may still be sparse! (I hope you will help me choose what kind of studies to offer this year!)

Lifelong learning is what keeps many of us young and vital. To exercise our minds is perhaps even more important than to exercise our bodies! Jane's father read and did cross-word puzzles until he just couldn't see any more and his mind was still sharp soon before he died--well into his 90s. I already forget appointments and must put them into my calendar or write a note to have any chance of remembering!

Unitarian Universalist religious education programs have long been defined in terms of discovery and exploration. Often they have focused more on other religions than on Unitarian Universalism and frequently they have provided even very young learners with more questions than answers. Sophia Lyon Fahs helped develop many of the curriculums and ideas that have energized our children's religious education program for more than half a century, even before the Unitarians and Universalists merged in 1961. The lack of a doctrine, dogma or catechism, of certain answers and an understanding of those things that Unitarian Universalists believe is sometimes cited as one of the reasons that we do not retain our children as they grow up. Another reason often suggested for losing so many of our children from the movement is that children are not included nor often welcomed into adult worship, and that the experiential circle worship of children and youth programs is so dissimilar from UU adult worship.

As I was preparing this sermon I looked back at some writings about Religious and Theological Education by other UU Ministers before the end of the millennium. Some of their perspectives have long held sway and to a large extent remain valid, including projections about the changing demands of ministry in the 21st Century. And yet, it also strikes me that the world in which we live is indeed different from the world we knew before 9/11. That left me wondering what changes we have made and perhaps should make in Religious Education at all age-levels to respond to this post 9/11 world?

The most obvious change in Religious Education programs of which I am aware is that we have taken more time to learn about Islam where previously we were spending far more time on Buddhism and Judaism and perhaps earth-centered religions. I suspect we have also increased our interest in interfaith connections generally over the last dozen years. I know I certainly have become more engaged in interfaith efforts since 9/11 and I suspect many other ministers have as well.

I expect that some of the changes wrought by 9/11 are yet to be fully realized in our congregations a dozen years later. For a time most American churches saw their attendance increase at least briefly, but longer term I am uncertain what demographics can be attributed to that attack. Since Unitarian Universalism has no single unified image of a divine being to offer, neither saving nor punishing, our response to 9/11 must always seem more complicated and nuanced.

In many ways the uncertainties of this time compare to the uncertainties of the World Wars and the Cold War, but in a somewhat starker psychological landscape resulting from the horrible impact of terrorism on American soil. Also, as in the Vietnam era the damage of war and terrorism is replayed frequently on network TV, though the audiences of news shows have surely declined as a percentage of population. With all the forms of mobile media now available, the full sound bites of any event are immediately available, though the depth of reporting and the amount of information provided have decreased.

In such a chaotic time, what lessons should we teach our children? What questions should we address as adults? Are there still timeless archetypal truths worth sharing or has the chaos of this time negated the meaning of all previous history? Certainly the importance of some of the past has been changed by the attack on 9/11 and by the wars that followed. Timeless archetypal truths are mostly still of immense value. Our national self-understanding changed on 9/11, our sense of invulnerability disappeared along with some of our hope that society was continuing to progress onward and upward. Time of course heals many wounds and it has been a dozen years, but we have not regained all of the lost optimism of the 1990s, nor has the economy improved as quickly as we hoped after the recession. We live in a different world, one with many of the fears of 1984 realized. What words of hope and love can we offer in our religious education programs to counter the uncertainty of these times?

It seems to me that the ongoing effort to create the beloved community must be a high priority. As a small congregation, the relationship between members is always an important facet of congregational life, but the intentional effort to create a community that is open, accepting, and welcoming to newcomers while also meeting the needs of long time members is always at the core of what we need to be doing. This is as true of our Religious Education program as it is of the rest of church life. If we fail to create that kind of community, nothing else will really matter, but if we are successful at building that kind of community, everything else we do will be built on top of that solid foundation.

In our religious education program, we encourage members to bring friends, we seek to be aware of the needs, expectations, and hopes of families as well as individuals and we make every effort to create an environment that is friendly and inviting rather than sterile and institutional. In our youth group we strive to create a safe space where youth can share their concerns about life and discuss their beliefs and their questions. We include various kinds of experiences, recognizing that people learn in different ways. Our youth programs are a kind of storm shelter from all the winds that assail youth today.

In our adult groups and studies, we also provide a safe space where anyone can share beliefs and dreams. Too often beliefs on certain issues have become litmus tests for acceptability in our society, and many UUs have alternative perspectives that need to be shared without fear of reprisal. UUs may want to learn about religious views that are unacceptable to some mainstream or evangelical religious groups. We can offer that opportunity and we can learn about things that some other groups might not consider religious.

Our beliefs that there will always be more to learn, that the universe is still unfolding, that human knowledge and wisdom continue to grow inspire us to continue our journeys of life and faith. Even if we were to repeat a class or curriculum, we would see from a different perspective, learn new layers of meaning. Even if we feel comfortable where we are, we retain open minds to hear new ideas and understand in new ways. UUs are as likely as anyone else to tell newcomers that we've always done things a certain way, resisting change. By the time we've done something once it will be an annual event next year. Our memory of past events and experiences is not entirely trustworthy especially in regard to the good old days. Even so, we can usually laugh at our own foibles and eventually be convinced to try something new or with a new approach. We recognize that life is a journey, not a destination and we are more inclined to enjoy the journey than many other groups.

At core, we are optimistic about the human condition, believing that our efforts make a difference and that our acceptance of others may bring healing. We recognize that we do not have all the answers, that other people's beliefs are as valid as ours, that we each may learn from the other if we keep an open mind and heart. We love discussion so much it has been said that UUs would rather go to a discussion of heaven than to heaven. Our approach to religion is quite a bit different from most other religions. Our approach to education is never to learn things by rote, but always to seek to learn more about things, to grow and expand our awareness as we progress on our journeys. Discovery and exploration remain keys to UU Religious Education programs.

Today as we think about Religious Education and Lifelong Learning, we have an opportunity to consider ways that we could make our RE program stronger. There is a continuing need for leaders to help occasionally or weekly. There are opportunities to facilitate or assist in leading classes and groups. There are opportunities to join classes and groups to explore and discover and learn about yourself and the universe as you continue your own journey. Let Lisa or me know what interests you and we will work with you to engage in the learning process!

There are galaxies yet to discover, places yet to explore, wisdom yet to uncover. May we all continue to seek wisdom and knowledge as we continue on our journeys!

So May it Be!