

LIFELONG LEARNING for UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS

Religious Education Leader Dedication

Not long ago, I saw the results of a survey reporting a large percentage of people never read another book after they graduated from High School. Since this report was on Facebook, I am sure it wasn't Fake News, but what if that were true? We already know that the percentage of people who read Newspapers has dwindled over the years. Even a college education apparently does not guarantee that people will keep reading or learning after they reach the point required for their work.

I'm not sure any Unitarian Universalist would admit to not reading or not trying to keep learning at any point in life, that is how important education is to UUs. When I was a United Methodist Minister, the churches usually had some opportunities for adult learning each year, but every UU church I have served has offered many choices of classes and studies.

In this church, we have many opportunities for adults to engage in further education, but due to the small numbers and sporadic attendance of children and youth we have fewer opportunities in those age levels. Hopefully as we attract more families with children we will be able to increase the size of our program for children and to offer some opportunities for teenagers.

The world we live in is rapidly changing and requires that people who want to stay current and aware are flexible and knowledgeable over a broad swath of areas. People who don't read to discover what is really happening in the world are likely to be influenced by loud voices who will tell them what to believe. Until the current White House began removing evidence and information from scientific websites there were lots of sources of information about the current situation in the world.

Now it is harder to know what is going on, but much of the information on climate change and the sciences generally has been protected and posted by other sites. The information is out there for those who look. Nobody in the developed world should be ignorant to the risks and possibilities of our time. There are too many books, too many articles, too many videos, too much information available to remain uneducated about the state of the world.

Our Principles call us to keep learning, to pay attention to the injustices in the world, to care for people and to work to balance the needs of all persons. Our Principles and Sources challenge us to respect all persons and to honor the various beliefs of persons so long as their actions do not harm others. At the barest level, this requires us to understand the core beliefs and practices of many religious traditions, to learn about those which may be foreign to us. There remains enough of rugged individualism, or perhaps better, personal individuation in our tradition to encourage us to search out and discover what is good and right and true rather than accepting anyone else's interpretation of reality or claims of false news.

Most of us value lifelong learning just because it is interesting, fulfilling, exciting. But it is also important to be able to make sense of the times in which we live. I have always been a strong skeptic, but even if I weren't, I would want to see the evidence and evaluate for myself rather than taking the word of almost anyone else. I really have a hard time believing that millions of people believe anything that Trump says. How can they be so ignorant? Anyway, my point is that we need to keep learning, to seek out that which makes sense, to test theories and explore until we are convinced on the weight of evidence rather than on the basis of what anyone just tells us.

Many Unitarian Universalists are teachers, working at every level from pre-school to post-graduate education. Our valuing of education attracts and encourages educational endeavors. Even though we have a hard time agreeing on many things, we have an almost unanimous commitment to

support public education and make it better. Participating in Reading Programs for elementary schools and providing and maintaining the little free library out front were pretty easy to support. We can find commonality on many social justice issues, but support for education at every level is easy among Unitarian Universalists.

For years I thought I would go back to get either a Th.D. a Ph.D. or a Doctor of Ministry. I was accepted into the Th.D. program at Iliff in Denver a long time ago, but then the birth of my daughter, marital discord, and a move to Montana put an end to that. Several times in recent years I have looked at distance learning Doctor of Ministry programs at Meadville Lombard and Starr King, but the costs and the workload as I get closer to retirement are harder to justify! I pretty much always enjoyed school, even Jr. High and High School, but I have pretty well decided to be happy with the degrees I have! I have not, however, stopped learning, reading, studying, exploring and discovering!

Among those of you with or without advanced degrees, I know that the love of learning, the commitment to education, and the hope of encouraging young people to excel in school are pretty widespread. Many of you have devoted your careers to education, and even among the retired there seems to always be interest in learning more about religion, spirituality, history, psychology, and a variety of other areas. I greatly enjoy sharing book studies and classes with you! The exploration and discovery process is as important within the church as within society at large.

It is unfortunate that the current administration is not committed to supporting public education or helping citizens to be aware of what is going on in the world. It is sad to see the current leader of our nation so easily manipulated by his own political slogans and manufactured facts. We need to return to a commitment to an educated populace and a commitment to making the world better for all people rather than just for the wealthy and powerful.

With all that said about education, I also need to say some things about our lifespan religious education program. We need more than your encouragement and more than your commitment to financially support the program. We need families to engage enough in the program to build a regular attendance base, maybe not every Sunday, but more frequently. We need volunteers without children at home to agree to help out on a more regular basis, again not necessarily every Sunday but often enough to build a schedule of volunteers. We have several people who have volunteered to help on-call at the last minute, but we need more people who will make a commitment to help at least one regular Sunday a month. We have had several people help out with the Story for All Ages, and I particularly appreciate your willingness to help in that way. The strength of our program really depends on our volunteers, so we are currently pretty limited in what we can offer. We are reconstituting a Religious Education Committee with the first meeting October 8th.

Some of us have been talking about building a youth program, perhaps starting with watching and discussing a group of movies possibly one Thursday evening a month or maybe in conjunction with UU Thursdays. In previous years we have struggled to get things going with a small group of youth with irregular commitment to the effort.

With public education currently at risk, we need to work to insure that there will be an educational system. We also need to strengthen our own religious education program to encourage exploration and discovery. Exploration and discovery through our religious education program can help to encourage greater commitment to exploration and discovery in all aspects of life, including the public education system. Hopefully what we do here also extends to the rest of our lives!

The best of education has never been about rote learning, not about memorizing Presidents any more than memorizing Bible verses. Education is about inspiring a desire to learn by exploration that leads to meaningful discoveries about ourselves, others, the world, and the universe. If we can inspire that kind of learning, we will benefit all!

Today, as we have dedicated the leaders of Religious Education for this year, I hope we can show our appreciation of the program by offering more of our time and effort. There are opportunities for leadership at every age level and we would be glad to talk with anyone about possibilities!

As Unitarian Universalists we know the importance of education far better than many in our society. There is a long tradition of Public Education in the United States which I hope will continue beyond the current administration. An educated populace is just too important to the future of our planet.

As time allows, I would like to invite you to share a few thoughts about the importance of education in your life and your thoughts about how we as a congregation can help to insure that quality education will continue to be available. Please also share any thoughts about strengthening our Religious Education program!

Thanks for sharing!

I am concerned about the future of our society with the gridlock in Washington and the tearing down of progressive segments of the government under the current administration. I believe that education is a key to many of the problems we currently face. I hope that we can work together to support the best in educational programs here and throughout society. May the force and the wisdom of all religious and philosophical traditions be with us!

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!