

## SPIRITUAL GUIDES: WHAT DO WE WANT FOR OUR CHILDREN?

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In the world of religious education, we spend an amazing amount of time asking this question, just as we do in the world of parenting. For those of us who have spent time in public education (or for some of us, at least), that question was not on the agenda. Curriculum, content, method, results...those were the important components of a teacher's work. The children were almost an afterthought, or at least that's how it has seemed in the culture of SOL's. Religious education, thankfully, is different. That's my good news this morning, or at least the beginning of it.

As a Director of Religious Education, I have been spending quite a bit of time over the past months researching curriculum for all ages, including adults...Unitarian Universalist religious educations do advocate lifespan religious education. This task is not as easy as it would be in a mainline denomination, where there's a centralized location for reviewing and ordering the suggested curricula for specific age levels. There's some centralizing, but the material is being created and written by talented people all over the country, often in response to some need they have discovered in their own work as religious educators, and it sometimes takes a while for the word to get out. One of my tasks at General Assembly this year was to go around and look at all the curriculum I could find, see what was new, look for anything I hadn't heard about, talk to the people who created various material, review material I had read about but had not seen. It's a huge task, choosing what to teach in a religious context.

What we often fail to realize is that once we find our top choices, plan what should follow what, and order the appropriate material, our curriculum is only a fragment of what we teach. In Essex Conversations, a book of essays about lifespan religious education, Judith Frediani writes about the famous religious educator Maria Harris, who said that, in fact, the curriculum is "the entire course of the church's life". Harris writes about the three curricula that are taught by all congregations. "The *explicit* curriculum is what we actually present with conscious intent. The *implicit* curriculum includes the patterns of organization, the procedures, and the attitudes that frame the explicit curriculum. The *null* curriculum is a paradox; it is what is *not* said and *not* done, but it is *not* neutral. Silence can be deafening, and destructive." (Frediani, Essex Conversations, p. 60)

What does a congregation teach their children on Sunday mornings? Speaking from my experience in Williamsburg and Glen Allen, I can offer these examples: explicitly, we teach them that when they come in, they can put on their name tags. Then anybody can speak to them by name, just as we expect that adults will speak to each other by name. We teach them that as Unitarian Universalists, we come together in the light of a chalice. By presenting a story designed for children, we teach them that they are expected and welcomed in Sunday morning worship.

What do we teach our children implicitly...what do our procedures and patterns or organization teach? In both congregations that I participate in, our children leave Sunday morning worship soon after it begins. We sing them out, and they go to their own classes. Where are those classes? Is the place where we send them inviting? Are the furnishings and decorations appropriate for their ages? Is it as clean as our sanctuary? Is it as comfortable? What do we teach implicitly outside of Sunday morning? Do we talk about our UU faith at home during the week? Do our children hear us telling friends about our religious community?

And what about the null curriculum: what do we teach by not teaching it? What affects our life as a congregation, but never gets talked about? This is a powerful question to ask in every aspect of our lives, not simply in our religious community. At work, in personal relationships, the most destructive influences can be those which never get named. One of my pastoral care professors used to tell us that when we are walking the path with people in difficulty, our task is to help them make things speakable...we can not heal what we do not name. What DO we teach by not teaching it?

It may take courage to ask these demanding and challenging questions, and yet we know we can ask them in the safe context of a religious community that affirms the principles of Unitarian Universalism. We have the wisdom and the power to be intentional about what we teach, in all three areas of curriculum: explicit, implicit, and null. We have the wisdom, and the power, to make life better for those whom we teach. When we decide as a *religious* community to offer *religious* education, that is our responsibility.

I'd like to share with you, and leave with you, two statements about religious education this morning. The first is by Reverend Lowell Brooks:

### What Do Our Children Need on Sunday Morning?

- They need to light a candle, and have a quiet moment to enjoy its mystery.
- They need to sing a song, to hear their own voice and other voices joined together, and to feel the feelings that are stirred by music.
- They need to hear a story and have a chance to share their own, remembering that we are each different and also very alike.
- They need to create something. Expressing themselves, whether using words or materials, helps them bind the different parts of themselves and life together. That's what religion is.
- They need to be with an adult who is interested in the world and who feels the privilege and responsibility of their trust—one who is glad to be with them, and regards them positively.

Into this safe and encouraging context, we may weave the content of our religious traditions. The history and common threads of our identity are important to be sure, but without this essential loving embrace the education will not be religious.

The next is by Mary Marsh, Director of Religious Education in a congregation in Washington state:

What I would like to see kids get on Sunday morning:

- I would like to know that every week, when a child walks out the door, she is at least a little glad she came.
- I would like an adult who is not a child's parent to ask him how his week has been. I would like him to have a little something to eat with a friend.
- I would like each child who comes to walk out with one little spark of thought she didn't have when she came in.
- I would like her to be called by her name by someone outside her immediate family.
- I would like him to hear the words "Unitarian Universalist" at least once.
- I would like them to see at least one candle lit and hear at least one song sung.

If all these things happen every week for every child, we will have succeeded. When we spend our time teaching, our goals should be focused on these simple things. If we plan engaging, enjoyable classes, with a lot of room for enjoying the fact that we are in this community, most of these things will be accomplished.

And so may it be.