

A Parent's View of Unitarian Universalist Children's Religious Education

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When we came home from church last September their dad said to the boys, "How was church?" my son said "We don't know if we are going to Heaven or Hell."

As the parent of two third-generation UU children, I have been asking myself: "What is a UU Religious Education and how can we teach it in our small fellowship?"

I'm also a step-grandparent of my husband's two grandchildren; I would like the children to know that they can find answers to their questions not only in school and at home and on the internet, but at church. Although I am a member of the RE committee, today I am speaking to you as a parent and a grandparent, not as an RE committee member. We grandparents here at UUFR have a wonderful opportunity to introduce our grandchildren to UUism.

My hope is that the parents and grandparents here might be able to talk more easily to their children and grandchildren about what we offer here at the UUFR children's RE program. We can tell our children and young grandchildren that we often sing child-friendly hymns. We have a story or reading just for the children during the intergenerational time. About once a month, we have "All Church Sundays" in which children stay for the whole service with a child-friendly sermon. We may also let our families know what they might be learning in the RE classroom and that we light the chalice in our classroom and say chalice lighting and chalice extinguishing words. We greet the children by name, and we smile. We will always have two adults in the classroom, when there are other children besides the children of the teacher. And although it is not an official policy, we encourage people to "Ask permission before giving a child a hug at church."

We may also be better able to explain the goals of religious education. Cheryl Gibbs Brinkley, author of a curriculum on the historical Jesus, titled Jesus and A Kingdom of Equals asks: "Are the goals of religious education...to inculcate in our children our own values and beliefs, to educate them to the history of human faith and religion that came before us, or to facilitate their own individual search for truth and meaning? It may be that our goals have elements of all of the above."

In 2005, my two boys and I attended Mt. Vernon UU Church in Alexandria. One was in the preschool, and one was in a forth grade class on World Religions, which I taught as part of a team: Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam. The boys enjoyed Sunday school and it was not difficult to get them to go. There was an Intergenerational Time at the beginning of the service.

“Come and sit on the red carpet,” the RE director would announce, and she would read a story, illustrating one of the seven principals from one of our six sources. It was not the stories or the curriculum that the children liked about going to church. It was all about seeing their friends. Since my older son had one good year in UU RE studying World Religions when we attended Mt. Vernon, I asked our RE committee to use a Judeo Christian Heritage curriculum for our first year. We acquired a curriculum titled Timeless Themes, which is an exploration of Biblical themes such as loneliness, loyalty, sibling rivalry, deception, jealousy and others. The song this morning, *Jacob’s Ladder*, is from the Timeless Themes Songbook. A few weeks ago, we were listening a bit on the intercom in the classroom to David Tetrault’s talk, and a child said, “The man is talking about Abraham.” You all were discussing the psychoanalytic literature on Abraham, and I was pleased that my children will be able to participate in future discussions on Judaism as all of you do so beautifully.

As a parent, it is important for me that my children learn bible literacy in a UU setting, rather than from their Christian classmates. Before the election, a classmate of my first grader said that Obama says that “It is OK to kill babies.”

The simplest approach to teaching an RE class is to read a story, ask questions about the story to generate a discussion, and then do an art project or something else like drama or music. Our curriculum, Timeless Themes, discussion questions include: “Have you ever done things you were ordered to do and others made fun of you? “How can we communicate with others without using words?” “Were there dinosaurs in the Garden of Eden?” “Is it possible that somebody you trust may try to hurt you?”

The Fourth UU Principle is "A Free and Responsible Search for Truth and Meaning." In our RE class, we have been asking: "What truths can we learn from these stories to make us better people?" My older child is able to address the issue of whether the stories are literally true, but my younger child isn't ready for this idea.

The quote that was selected for the inside of today’s program is from a 2003 book, Adapting Small Group Ministry for Children’s Religious Education, by Gail Forsyth-Vail. She describes the tasks of the UU RE educator for the first through eighth grade.

“The task for 4-8 year olds is to learn how UUs ‘do’ religion, experience a caring community and a covenant. The task for 8-12 year olds is to learn UU stories and lore, UU heritage, God (the Divine/Mystery), and learn about our UU covenant. The task for 12-15 year olds is to discern who one is as a religious individual, as part of faith community, and as a religious person in a wider world.”

Mt. Vernon UU church’s Religious Education Council states, “We are committed to the timeless themes of Unitarian Universalism, Jewish and Christian heritages, world religions and prophetic visions and actions.”

It is now easy to look up websites of UU churches and see what is taught in their RE programs.

Williamsburg UU Church teaches a curriculum called Spirit Play to grades pre-K through second. The curriculum on the historical Jesus, titled Jesus and His Kingdom of Equals, is taught to grades 3-5.

Why teach the historical Jesus to children? The curriculum author states: “By teaching students about what we really do and do not know about Jesus the person, we can create a base line from which they can decide which metaphors, stories and interpretations are worthy of consideration and inclusion within their own belief system....”

Last year Williamsburg used the curriculum Spirit of Adventure with grades 3-5. Like many churches with RE programs that include several grades, Williamsburg alternates curriculums so that some kids don't end up having the same curriculum year after year. In larger churches where there is an RE class for every grade level, the same curriculum may be taught to the same grade every year. The curriculum for Middle School at Williamsburg this year is Popcorn Theology.

Newport News UU Church teaches Spirit Play for ages 3-11 and Our Whole Lives (OWL) for Middle School. (More on OWL in a minute.) High school at Newport News is a once-a-month gathering with food, group games, bowling, laser-tag, etc.

Spirit Play addresses the existential questions for the elementary school child: “Where did we come from?” “What are we doing here?” “How do we choose to live our lives?” “What happens when we die?”

A Montessori-based curriculum, Spirit Play requires training and Montessori specific wooden toys and materials. Spirit Play stories include “The Flaming Chalice,” “Abram and Sari,” “Exodus,” “The Great Mystery of Creation,” “Jonah the Backwards Prophet,” and “Buddha and the Mustard Seed Medicine.”

Back to Spirit of Adventure, which is billed as a curriculum for “active” children. The lesson titles include “Bridges: Amazing Structures to Design, Build and Test,” and “Architects Make Zigzags: Looking at Architecture from A to Z,” and Beatrix Potter (a Unitarian) and the Web of Life.”

The Jell-O lesson, from Spirit of Adventure, is about Peter Cooper, someone who truly lived out the Principles. He was a UU philanthropist and inventor of Jell-O, as well as other things. He endowed and built Cooper-Union as a free educational institution for the New Yorkers who couldn't afford to pay tuition: Building with Jell-O blocks is the activity part of the lesson.

I enjoy the titles of the wide range of UU RE curricula: How Can I Know What to Believe? for ages 11-15, covers the Bible, God, death, and UUism. It Starts With Me also for older children on Community Service, Social Activism and the Spirit of Giving. In The Lessons of Loss, about death and dying, students visit a cemetery and a funeral home. In Neighboring Faiths, children visit other churches in the community, such as Quakers and Catholics, study Humanism, cults and fundamentalism and world religions.

Messages in Music, for middle school, is about the UU principles in music and images and includes Eastern music and guided imagery.

An intriguing title is Maidens and Mothers: A Journey into Womanhood, for girls ages 10-14 and their mothers. Girls and mothers read books together, about goddesses and powerful women, and make things together like a felt wall hanging and collages of female images. They discuss body images in women's magazines and make a menses bracelet. The daughters interview the mothers, and finish with a "Celebration of Womanhood" ceremony.

I haven't come across a father-son UU curriculum, but I have heard that there is one.

Last spring our committee tried to acquire a curricula titled, God Images--about the different meanings of God across religions and cultures. God Images was used at the two UU churches where I taught RE in the past. Last summer I contacted the writer, Mary Anne Moore. She wrote back and said God Images was out-of-date. (I don't understand how God can be outdated, but that's what she said.) She has written other curricula titled God Power and Stories about God and books for children on God, including Hide-and-Seek with God. Our opening story, this morning was a Mary Anne Moore story. (Hold up book) We will tell more stories from this book. My child is fascinated with the idea of God, so I would like to introduce him to the different ways that God could exist. (His mom is may be a secular humanist.) I was happy to note that Mary Anne Moore is a co-author of our curriculum, Timeless Themes.

Actually, Timeless Themes is a bit gentle for my all-boy class. You may have noticed that we recently constructed a baby in a basket concealed with cattails, for our study of Moses. Wouldn't it be interesting, if you were a little boy in Sunday School studying Moses, to toss a match on a bush that has been pretreated with an accelerant, by somebody like Tom Kinney? Tom and I have the bush ready to go for late March. (You all need to go out and take a look at what Tom has rigged up out in the fire pit.) Timeless Themes would have us decorate some tree branches with yellow, orange, and red tissue paper to illustrate the story of the Burning Bush. At Arlington when I taught the Old Testament for a semester, it seemed like we were lighting something every other week. We put meat on a Hibachi when we discussed animal sacrifice and we lit a lot of incense.

A middle school curriculum, widely taught in UU churches, is Our Whole Lives: Sexuality Education or "OWL." A few years ago, I sat in on the parent's orientation for this curriculum. I can still picture the slides in my mind 15 years later. At Arlington UU Church, the person who taught it was dynamite. Some of you here could also do an excellent job of teaching this class to teenagers. OWL is a lifespan sexuality program and the Middle School component is the largest one and takes an entire year. OWL teaches healthy ethical and healthy decision making around sexuality. The slides can be a powerful component of the Middle School Program but the curriculum can be taught with or without them and the slides are not the main component of the curriculum.

Popcorn Theology, currently taught to middle schoolers at the Williamsburg UU church, is built around popular movies on issues of theological and ethical relevance to UU youth. The videos are one hour long, but the full-length versions can be used for movie nights. One recent lesson at Williamsburg was *Life Is Like a Box of Chocolates*. For me, as a parent, I have to say, that I would rather not bring my child to church so that he can get more screen time. But that's just me.

I am intrigued by the titles of the curricula for middle school and high school written by Jeff Liebmann, of the First UU Church of Pittsburgh. Jeff is also in the provost's office at the University of Pittsburgh, one of my alma maters, but when I said I was a Pitt Alumni, as he is, he wasn't impressed. In Pittsburgh, many people are Pitt alumni, but outside of Pittsburgh, it is hard to find Pitt alumni who are also UUs.

One of his works, titled Heresy Apparent, is about the theological and historical roots of UUism. The program component of Heresy Apparent includes:

- (pre-1800) The Nature of God -- The Heresies of Anti-Trinitarianism and Universalism
- (1800-1900) Liberal Christianity -- The Heresies of Religious Questioning and Faith in Action
- (1900-1950) Free thought and New Ideas -- The Heresies of Reason and Resistance
- (1950-2000) Diverse Voices -- The Heresies of Antidiscrimination and Inclusion
- (post-2000) The Future of Unitarian Universalism -- The Heresies Challenging Assumptions and the Questing Mind.

Another curriculum of Jeff Liebmann that I like is Sacred Threads: An Asian Religions Curriculum for High School Youth. Students first identify basic characteristics common to religions of primitive cultures and the nature of thinking that generally leads people to establish religions. Students then discuss the religions of India (Hinduism, Hinayana Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism), the religions of China Mahayana Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, and Chinese Folk Religions), and the religions of Japan (Shintoism and Zen).

Jeff Liebmann also has another curriculum on humanism, called Dare to Know. He states: "Material covered in Dare to Know is extremely challenging and the scope is very comprehensive. In my work with teens over the years, however, I have never failed to find them ready and willing to take on such challenges. In fact, UU youth generally attack complex subjects . . . with an exuberance and intelligence that only better prepares them as adults and helps them assimilate UU values into their daily lives."

So, these are some of my favorite curricula.

Coming of Age programs for middle schoolers are a way for congregations to mark the Middle school passage and keep youth engaged. A Coming of Age Program for middle

schoolers would involve the young teenagers mentoring with members of our UU community and writing and sharing a personal theology statement.

Since we finished this building, our RE program has been developing very quickly, hasn't it? I enjoy seeing how the children have already made this building their home, don't you? The kids have found the secret hiding places, and the toys that some of you have left for them. They love your cooking. Having Frank and Cliff play with the two boys today is a wonderful treat for us, I am sure that you will agree.

If I could say one more thing about this building: it is really nice to have a room to teach RE in that isn't also used as a classroom during the week. There is a curricula called A World of New Friends, on World Religions, for elementary school, where in each unit, the kids trace themselves to make life-size figures on large sheets of paper, so that there is a Hindu child, an Islamic child, etc.....so that there is a representative "friend" from each of the world religions that are studied. You have these figures which the children have created, and you keep adding them over the year, you put them up in the room on the walls, and then of course you can put them in the hallway of the church. This didn't work well for us at Mt. Vernon, because we had a preschool renting our classroom during the week, so we had to clear out of the space after every lesson, so the figures could not be left up on the wall. Anyway, my point is that it is much better to teach RE in a space that is not rented out to a preschool during the week.

I hope that after today's talk that more of you will be able to let your children and grandchildren know what a UU RE children's RE program is like.