

## STORIES ABOUT "OUR" KIDS

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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

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**The inspiration of changing lives with an 80 year impact--a genocide in the making.**

### Bulletin Quotes:

"The best means of forming a ...virtuous, and happy people will be found in the right education of youth. Without this foundation, every other means, in my opinion, must fail." --George Washington, December 15, 1784.

On preschool, "You put all that together (academics, controlling emotions, getting along with each other) and these things can put kids on a much more successful life path than if they don't have them." --Dr. Steve Barnett, Rutgers's National Institute of Early Education Research, April 1, 2014

### Reading:

Surprise!! Me, someone not usually into poetry, would like to open with a poem by John Paul

Moore, slightly modified.

I've never made a million  
And it's probably too late now.  
But I don't worry about that much,  
I'm happy anyhow.  
And as I go along life's way,  
I'm reaping better than I sowed.  
I'm drinking from my saucer,  
'Cause my cup has overflowed.

I don't have lots of riches,  
And at times it has been tough.  
But I've got loved ones around me,  
And that makes me rich enough.  
I'm thankful for my blessings,  
And the mercy that's bestowed.  
I'm drinking from my saucer,  
'Cause my cup has overflowed.

I remember times when things went wrong,  
My faith wore somewhat thin.

But all at once the dark clouds broke,  
And the sun peeped through again.  
So please help me not to gripe  
About the tough rows that I've hoed.  
I'm drinking from my saucer,  
'Cause my cup has overflowed.

If friends give me strength and courage  
When the way grows steep and rough,  
I'll not ask for other blessings,  
I'm already blessed enough.  
And may I never be too busy  
To help others bear their loads.  
Then I'll keep drinking from my saucer,  
'Cause my cup has overflowed.

When we think of the troubles and challenges others face around the world and here at home, I hope we have room to be thankful that we are drinking from our saucers because, compared to many, our cups HAVE overflowed.

**Main Talk:**

We are going to be mostly telling stories this morning. Stories about toddlers that have little chance of having to drink from their saucer because their cup is unlikely to ever overflow.

These are not happy stories but stories about kindergartners that are in trouble. They are stories of little ones of the four counties where our members live, our community. In that sense, they are "our" kids.

Now we are NOT talking about the well-covered, nation-wide subject of juveniles that have run afoul of the law, pregnant high school girls or those who have made them pregnant, or even children who are so disruptive in school that they interfere with the learning of others let alone

not able to learn themselves, problems that we have here as well. In fact, others are telling stories about “our” kids that we don’t like to hear. This note from another group I’m with came across my desk last month. It is part of a report on a meeting with the president of a Tidewater area university. The purpose of the meeting is to set up a Science and Technology promotional and interactive relationship between Lancaster High School and that university. Our own Dr. Richard Cutler plays a key part in leading that effort. Now quoting a portion of that report, “He (meaning the University President) has followed the Lancaster Public Schools problems closely through the Rappahannock Record. He told me that he had been invited to make the Commencement Address at LHS in the late 1990's, shortly after becoming the university president. He has bad memories of the event. He said that the audience was "completely out of control" and disrespectful of the speakers, other than him. He said he felt so sorry for the Valedictorian, whose speech could hardly be heard over the talking, laughter and jeering. He said that it was so bad that he would have stopped the proceedings!” We don’t like to read such things about “our” kids. Thankfully, the situation has improved since then.

Such reports heighten our concerns because we know the correlation between juveniles that have run afoul of the law, pregnant high school girls or those who have made them pregnant, and other activities such as drugs, alcohol, and criminal behavior that can lead to tragic lives. There has been plenty written about these kids, adolescents and teens, that find themselves in trouble and plenty of passionate organizations and a multitude of government agencies here

and across the country applying billions of dollars to counter these decades-old problems with various levels of success.

However, today we will be telling stories about the youngest children, mostly “our” children because they live in our four counties, who are only on their way to such troubles as these. Toddlers that have been set on this difficult path through no fault of their own.

How do we know this? We have listened to experts, made an effort, and some of us, a career, of understanding this and related problems in our society. High quality Kindergarten teachers report they can identify children in the first week of class, sometimes the first day, or even the first hour or two, that are so far behind their peers in learning development, social capabilities, or emotional control that they can't even approach the performance of the other youngsters. Scientific studies show these children rarely close that gap sufficiently to avoid future problems. The correlation studies between children who cannot by third grade read close to grade level show they are also the ones that are highly vulnerable to not completing high school and at risk of falling into the troubles I mentioned previously. For all too many, the impact of these youthful failures to succeed can and do extend a lifetime. Put in blunt terms, these toddlers of our stories this morning may have missed their opportunity to succeed, missed beyond repair, before they have even started kindergarten. This deprivation is not intentional, it is not exclusive to but does correlate with generational poverty, and is a challenge.

Statistics make some folks yawn so we decided to share stories instead.

How many here have provided a book to their young preschool child, a grandchild, or some other toddler? Like you, Christmas in our family frequently means books from Uncle Tom and Aunt Shirley.

Mike Knez brought Lisa Howard to the Niche team's attention. Lisa Howard, for many years a kindergarten teacher, tells of one child arriving in her kindergarten class. At an early opportunity, the class was given books and told to open the book to the front. This particular child did not know how to open a book let alone identify the front. Lisa became so angry at the deprivation of these youngsters coming into her classes that she decided to do something about it. She is now the President of an organization called E3 in Norfolk, which stands for Elevate Early Education, that is setting up very professionally run early preschools for 3-year-olds to address the challenge. You may have heard her interviewed on NPR or have read about her activities to stop this damage. Yes, her word "damaged" is a harsh word and raises the hackles on a lot of us. But if a child is deprived of the exposure to what is needed for that child to develop and have the opportunity for a successful life free of the troubles mentioned previously, is that not damage even though it is unintentional?

Please allow us to give some more examples of children in our community that missed out in their early years as reported by another Kindergarten teacher. Keep in mind that we are not talking about kids with genetic defects or serious physical problems like uncorrected poor vision. Mike has another story that we'll call Student #1:

*Mike: Student #1 – A boy did not know the color of a banana nor was he able to point to a “blue” circle. Nor could he count to “5” or identify a single number or letter making it impossible for him to identify his own name tag. The child had minimum vocabulary and was unable to identify common objects and animals from pictures. His lack of support as a toddler made it necessary for him to spend two years in Kindergarten to be ready for first grade. The professional assessment is that it is unlikely he will catch up as he has missed that critical phase in a toddler’s life when that learning foundation comes fast and furious before the chemistry of the brain begins to change at about age five or six.*

Barbara will tell us about this Lancaster County youngster.

*Barbara: Student #2 – This student could identify some colors but could not count to “10” correctly. Identifying any basic shapes, letters or numbers was only in his hoped for future. He knew very few words and could not express himself. This child was not able to catch up in preparation for third grade and is still struggling by repeating 2<sup>nd</sup> grade.*

Terri, our newest member as of today is a career teacher about to retire. She will need a stiff upper lip to share the next story.

*Terri: Student #3 brings tears to your eyes as it did to this teacher with 31 years experience as the teacher had to acknowledge the child as the most ill prepared she has encountered. This little girl knew no colors, could hardly speak or understand because of a lack of vocabulary, could not identify a picture of a dog or a cat, and was very developmentally delayed. This very compassionate teacher kept this child for a second year in Kindergarten but the child was*

*moved to a different county by the end of October of that second year. Where she is today and who is able to help her is unknown.*

Dave Dustin and I have met with teachers, principals, Head Start folks, and many others. Here's another story:

*Dave: Student #4 is from a teacher with 30 years experience, the last six in kindergarten. She says each year we seem to have more children who come to school extremely delayed in their cognitive development. This year, I have a student who still cannot write his own first name (after 6 months of kindergarten, a year of preschool, and twice daily with a reading specialist and twice weekly with a speech specialist). He cannot even copy his name from a provided template. A child in a similar situation last year was forced on to first grade and is still struggling.*

That could be a nutritional deficit problem, the area Dave is working hard on to improve.

Our own Sue Adriance writes of her work in the Northumberland School system, "First, I'd ask each Kindergartener who worked with me about reading materials in the home and I often heard that there were none.....no children's books, no magazines. Obviously, no one read to them at home. Secondly, one of the Kindergarten teachers whose students worked with me told me of bringing her own children's outgrown clothing to some of the poorest in her class. The winter months were the most difficult for these children. How can a child learn when cold and/or hungry?"

Kids learn fast in their years between one and four due to brain chemistry, the presence of a temporarily high amount of synapses for one, and for other biological reasons. If that window of opportunity to learn is missed, the kids miss out. And, as recognized experts like Dr. Ruby Payne report, missing that opportunity is a major problem for those locked in generational poverty. Yet only 4% of the nation's 3-year-olds are in preschool where their learning can be focused. Only Oklahoma provides pre-school to all of those kids in need and has since the 1990's. Private funds made it possible for Lancaster schools to provide expert instruction for one class of early preschool. Another is needed to meet the demand and we are told qualified and fully degreed teachers are available.

Imagine for a moment that what steps we take changes the direction of a 36 month old child from a life of troubles repeating the generational poverty that played a part in that child's need for us. That child could be gifted with 80 years or more of a more wholesome life as a result. Now imagine if we and our succeeding generations of our Fellowship could reach all of those 36 month olds threatened with perpetuating generational poverty. Over time, is that not a good genocide, a substantial reduction of generation to generation poverty, not by killing off anyone of course, but providing the youngsters the tools, the ability to CHOOSE a better future.

The collective wisdom of this Fellowship has decided that we wish to take action to help these at-risk children, and the sooner the better. There is an action plan developed to address both of the areas you voted to pursue 18 months ago; improved nutrition and early preschool. In

anticipation of financial needs to make these two things happen, a total of over \$17,000 has already been donated specifically for your Niche program. We have indications that more is on its way. Now how do we UU's get such things done?

You all have probably heard the series of jokes "How many (whatevers) does it take to screw in a light bulb?" Some are hilarious. Whether you're blonde or not, ya just gotta laugh. They all poke good natured fun at the peculiarities and stereotypes of all of our loved segments of society. And there is a whole series on the various religious sects. Here's a couple on UU's from the UU website and elsewhere:

How many Unitarian Universalists does it take to change a light bulb?

Doesn't matter - they'll discuss it so long that they'll never get it screwed in!

How many Unitarian Universalists does it take to change a light bulb?

Six. Keep track not to make sure I don't miss any of the six. One to make sure all feel how the light bulb feels about having failed. One to ask all to rephrase the observation that the light bulb had failed to not use the word "failed" but seek a deeper understanding and empathy as there are certainly reasons it went dark that are beyond its control. One to demonstrate for government action for support and understanding for light bulbs so fewer will be faced with failure in the future (being jailed for one's part in the demonstration is always a plus). One to head the building committee to just go change the light bulb. And one to critique the one taking action as being premature since it had not been discussed sufficiently.

Identifying a Faith In Action Niche has been a part of our Fellowship's dreams since 2002. Our Founder's envisioned making a permanent change for the better in our community and having UUFR be known as the "go to" organization for all those willing to help make that change. But we first had to securely found this church and assure its future. That's nearly done. The upcoming Legacy Bequest Society campaign will help secure the Fellowship's future. In anticipation, the Fellowship voted in November of 2012 that targeting wiping out generational poverty through early high quality preschool and quality nutrition for the youngest at-risk children would be that Niche. Eliminating generational poverty in our four counties might be too much to hope for but we would all be happy with a drastic reduction.

Now, obviously, we don't just choose a niche and go out and do it. The last 18 months has been devoted to research, listening to national experts and local individuals, learning all that is pertinent to pursuing this Niche. What has evolved is two action plans, one for early preschool and one for hunger / nutrition. They may meld together in the future. As those plans approach their final form in the next few weeks, they will be emailed to all members.

The Sunday morning service on June 1 will be devoted to presenting those action plans and discussing the issues involved. Then the members attending will be asked to vote on acceptance of those action plans and kicking off the Niche program, putting our Faith In Action. So try really hard to be there June 1. Establishing our Niche will not only impact all of the children we are trying to help but will likely impact us and the next generation of UUFR

members and possibly beyond. The goal of eliminating generational poverty, not to be confused with situational poverty, ... eliminating generational poverty is not a sprint but will be a relay race where our generation will pass that baton on to the next generation of UUFR members until the job is done.