

# Creating a Niche

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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

August 3, 2014

When I attended Union Presbyterian Seminary over a decade ago, my tuition and books were paid for through a generous scholarship awarded to me by the Presbyterians, who knew that I would never serve a Presbyterian church. They gave me a theological education anyway, and that gift influenced the development of my spiritual identity as much as the learning that was made possible by the gift. There's no way that I could call myself poor during the time I was in school; I was blessed with this excellent, free theological education. From a practical perspective, though, it would be accurate to say that I faced some disheartening economic challenges. I took out a student loan to pay my rent for the three years that I was in seminary, and I worked at night teaching English as a Second Language in adult night school to earn money to pay my bills and buy food. Beyond that, I lived hand to mouth.

The adult ESL night school where I taught took place in the elementary school I had worked in before I started seminary, so I felt at home there. The daytime principal and many of the staff were my friends, and some of my adult ESL students were parents of children I had known when I worked at the school during the day. There was a Methodist church down the street, and they were familiar, of course, with the large ESL population that we served. It was their custom to go to the principal every fall and ask for suggestions of families in need, so that they could prepare and deliver to those families generous Thanksgiving baskets.

One November afternoon I was startled out of my studying by the harsh buzz of the doorbell, and I opened the door to find two people I didn't know standing on my stoop with a big box. They introduced themselves, said they were from the Methodist church down the street from the elementary school, and told me they had spoken to the principal. They knew I was in seminary and had limited income, and they had chosen

me, at the principal's suggestion, as someone who should receive a Thanksgiving basket that year. Needless to say, I was dumbfounded. The box was filled with staples like peanut butter, applesauce, tea...not just ingredients for a Thanksgiving meal, but food I could use for weeks. I confess to feeling embarrassed that I was chosen to receive a Thanksgiving basket, but it was a huge help to me, and I accepted it gratefully, knowing that the people who offered the gift didn't think I needed to be embarrassed.

The money that basket saved me at the grocery store meant a lot, but far more important to me was the profound comfort of knowing that I was on the minds of these people. My friend the principal wanted to help me. These strangers from the church wanted to help me. My private struggles were not invisible. These people outside of my immediate circle *valued* me. I needed that knowledge as much as I needed food.

You have studied and considered and researched and conferred for a long time about what it means to be Unitarian Universalists in the Middle Peninsula. I'm not sure you would have framed your effort that way while you were doing it; in fact, I imagine you looked at your research through the lens of action: what can we *do* to improve circumstances in our community rather than how can we *be* Unitarian Universalists in our community. But what caused you to believe that you needed *do* anything? Because you are privileged, skilled, and capable, because you love the land and water that drew you to this place, because you see people around you who have much less than you do, and yet are just as worthy as you are. Another way of saying that is to say you believe you have to do something because you are Unitarian Universalists and people of faith. You believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person; you believe in justice, equity, and compassion in all relationships. You have the skills and resources to increase opportunities for early childhood education and to support children and families who are dealing with food insecurity—that's the practical perspective. You have an ethical and theological obligation to serve, to connect with others, and to live your principles—that's the spiritual perspective.

One of the many valuable lessons I learned during my years teaching ESL was that the classes themselves were not the only important thing we were able to provide for our students. In fact, they may not have even been the most important thing; there are plenty of ways to learn English other than coming to night school. What happened at school was that we were able to create a space where people could come and feel comfortable with other people who spoke their native language, meet people who didn't speak the same language, and find a community that understood their needs and circumstances. In my class, we began each night with joys and concerns, but it was public school so I knew not to call it that. We called it the news: good news, bad news, news about yourself, news about your family, news about your country—the only rule was you had to speak English, and you had to listen to other people speak English. Students gave each other suggestions, affirmed each other's triumphs, and sympathized with each other's setbacks...just as Unitarian Universalists do all over the country on Sunday mornings when we light candles. The students looked out for each other, and that support often meant as much to them as their improved English skills.

I predict that when you begin to establish increased opportunities for pre-school education and programs to help with early childhood nutrition, you are going to find that your work will take place in layers. The entry layer, so to speak, will be the fund raising and the meetings with officials and the organizing and the establishment of appropriate relationships with existing organizations. Once you become involved with those efforts, you will experience face to face encounters with children and families whose circumstances are very different from yours. I expect they will confound you, frustrate you, and move you in ways that will come as a surprise. I have a feeling you will be sharing stories with each other about the children that you'll come to know, and I believe you'll be changed by those children. When you begin to be invited to enter into the lives of these people that you're going to support, you will find abundant blessings. You will learn so much, and you will be strengthened in your faith.

I'd like to invite Shannon now to tell you something about what you might expect, and why, as you begin this journey with people whose lives are shaped by poverty.

Shannon Reaves:

As Sara said, I work at a non-profit in Richmond called Family Lifeline. At Family Lifeline we serve the Greater Richmond area and Petersburg by partnering with individuals in their homes to promote health, hope, and well-being. I'm going to talk a bit about the varied experiences I've had working with folks living in poverty.

I have always known I would only be satisfied with a career that allowed me to feel as if I was making some type of positive impact on my community. That knowledge coupled with my interest in child development lead me to become a teacher. I taught second grade in the city of Richmond at a school in which 98% of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch. This was the first experience I had working with individuals living in poverty.

I was filled with a desire to Help these children. I began making lists in my head of all the tangible things I could procure to help them; winter coats, book bags, shoes that fit, school supplies. I was even successful in obtaining many of these items.

However, as the year progressed I began to realize that although shoes that fit and a warm winter coat are items that all children deserve, these items were not enough to make a lasting impact on my students. They needed something more, something that, at the time, I couldn't identify.

A few years later I was escorting a group of children who lived in one of Richmond's Public Housing developments to a baseball game. We loaded the children in the bus to head home before the game ended because it was getting late. As we pulled out of the parking lot, the end of game fireworks began. At the sound of the first thunderous bomb, every single child on that bus threw themselves to the ground and covered their heads. They all moved in unison and it happened instantaneously. They thought the fireworks were gun shots. As I reflected on that experience I began to understand a small piece of what it means to live in poverty.

The dictionary defines poverty as the state of one who lacks a certain amount of money or material possessions. What that definition does not address is what I have come to think of as a poverty of the soul. Every child on that bus had been conditioned to know that they were not safe. When individuals spend the majority of their lives experiencing toxic stress, the always present stress of not knowing if you are safe, not knowing if you have shelter, not knowing where the next meal will come from, not feeling a secure attachment with other humans, it impacts the way they navigate through life and form relationships with others. This means that providing people with the items money can buy cannot “fix” or “solve” the problems of those individuals living in poverty.

Two years ago I began a job at Family Lifeline in which I was to go into the homes of pregnant women and mothers of young children to provide education around topics varying from healthy pregnancies and infant care to the stages of child development and school readiness. I again began thinking about how I was going to Help. Then I paused to think and reflect on what I had learned over the years. I thought about how offended I would be if a stranger, a stranger who came from a completely different background than me came into my home to tell me what to do and to Help me. It was at that moment that I realized my mission should not be about helping, it should be about forming relationships and partnering with people to bring about change. It feels much better to partner with a person than to be helped by a person. Partnering indicates that both parties are bringing something to the table and that both parties have something of worth to contribute.

I have had the privilege of partnering with many families to provide education, support, and encouragement. I have witnessed families becoming empowered and learning to advocate for themselves and their families. I have also learned the important lesson of meeting each individual where they are. Some families are ready and willing to partner with me, others take more time. I have learned to be patient and understand that just because I think a family should act or react to information or

resources I provide in a certain way, I have an obligation to value where they are in the change process. I have an obligation to honor the spirit of our partnership.

I am so excited to see where this congregations' partnership with families living in the middle peninsula will lead.