

“What We Can Give the Children”
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There’s a story from the Jewish tradition about an old man who was planting young fig seedlings. An observer asked, “Old man, why do you plant these trees? Truly, you, a man of great age and wisdom, do not expect to live long enough to reap a harvest; it will take many years for them to bear fruit.” The old man answered, “I am not planting them for myself, but for the generations to come.”

I like this story, because it serves as a reminder. Of course we need to pay attention to what we’re doing with our lives and our plans for our personal futures, but this teaching story asks us to reflect for a moment. To reflect on what kind of legacy we want to leave. What can we do in our lifetimes that will continue to benefit others after we are gone?

I want to talk today specifically about the children. The children who are in our midst in this congregation, and the children in the community around us. Children of parents who actively support the values we uphold, which are summarized in our seven principles and purposes.

Values like: the inherent worth and dignity of every person; acceptance; justice, equity and compassion; peace; the search for truth and meaning; respect for the earth and the interdependence of everything.

We have an excellent program serving ages 5-12, and we are very fortunate to have Cynthia Miller as the religious education teacher for this age group. They learn about these values. They learn about kindness and about solving problems in peaceful ways. They learn something about what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist and about other religions.

But what these kids learn is only part of it. It’s the WAYS in which UU children are taught that are remarkable.

Sophia Lyon Fahs, UU religious educator in the first half of the 20th century, said, “Always the child’s own thoughts should be encouraged.” She believed deeply in

engaging children where they are, in the daily world they experience. “One’s faith,” Fahs wrote, “is the philosophy of life that gathers up into one...whole...all the specific beliefs one holds about many kinds of things in many areas of life.”

Her teaching philosophy was based on stimulating young people’s sense of wonder and curiosity about life. Instead of telling children what they should believe, Fahs encouraged them to ponder for themselves the mysteries of the universe and human destiny. She insisted that there is no special knowledge that is specifically “religious.” She said that instead of trying to teach children to think about ‘religious things,’ “we need to learn how to help children think about ordinary things until insights and feelings are found which have a religious quality.”

Helping children discover, through doing, through asking questions and exploring, our religious education teachers engage in the process of equipping them to deal with everyday problems. They also grapple with life’s bigger questions. Through modeling, too, our youth learn how to “bring and find meaning, harmony, peace, joy, and justice in the world.” (Susan Suchocki Brown)

One UU adult, now a minister, recalls some of the things she learned as a youth in her congregation. She says she learned “to question, to listen to my doubts, to search for verification, and to know that life is good and has meaning in spite of turmoil, pain and struggle. I learned the difference between right and wrong. I learned the value of community, the pride of selfhood, and the pain of being out of right relationship with others. All this,” she says, “I saw mirrored through the lives of the adults who were my teachers.”

Kids don’t get all this anywhere else. I believe that all children can benefit from this kind of learning environment. And all children need the guidance to navigate our modern world. The growing-up process has never been easy, but today we have some challenges that earlier generations may not have had to deal with.

We live in a world that is increasingly diverse, and with a culture in which death is often the operative value, says the Rev. Dr. Susan Harlow. Our dominant culture fosters physical violence, war as the response to global conflicts, and the “numbing of the soul” through over-consumption, substance abuse or solitary TV viewing and internet surfing.

On the internet, young people encounter both accurate information and misinformation. Online social media leads many kids to be afraid to try out new thoughts and ideas with their peers, to share uncomfortable things, to have difficult conversations. They've gotten used to being able to present their cleaned-up, edited version of themselves in their posts and tweets.

For kids whose ability to think critically is still forming, how do they navigate and sort out all this? It's difficult for parents and schools alone to address these challenges and help them develop the knowledge, the values, and the skills that will equip young people. We want our children to grow up to be independent-thinking, caring and creative adults who are committed to making the world a better place.

One thing that our Unitarian Universalist curricula for teens does is to model a coherence and continuity between our beliefs and our actions in the world. As someone who was raised UU, the idea that I had an ethical obligation to make the world a better place is something that really stayed with me. Rev. Susan Suchocki Brown describes our RE programs as providing "pathways to full realization of the gift of self."

Younger teens have the opportunity to participate in a Coming of Age program, in which they learn what it means to be part of a covenanted group, and to explore and learn to articulate their personal beliefs. The program culminates in their writing and presenting to the congregation a personal credo statement.

Our teen sexuality program, "Our Whole Lives," provides accurate information on all matters sexual, and about sex in the context of respectful, loving relationships.

Another youth curriculum explores what it means to be a justice-maker, and looks in-depth at the qualities such as empathy and courage that are needed to engage in anti-racism, anti-oppression and multiculturalism work, challenging unjust power structures and resisting environmental degradation.

We have young people in this congregation who are aging out of their current RE class. They are ready for a youth group in which they can explore topics

appropriate to their developmental stage. If we don't provide that for them, we will lose them.

Over the past few months, we've had several families with young children visit. If we want them to come back, we need to have a program in place for their children; a nursery for infants and a class for toddlers and pre-schoolers. I told one young couple that we would find a way to provide a program for their 3-year-old. I felt strongly that we have a moral obligation to support this family. I have faith that we can make this happen.

We have an opportunity today, and I believe we have a moral obligation. We have an obligation to create an expanded RE program that meets the needs of our emerging teens. We also have the opportunity and an obligation to the community around us. NO ONE ELSE OFFERS WHAT WE DO. I am certain that there are liberal-minded parents of younger children and teens in our community who would absolutely welcome the chance to have their kids be part of a program that provides the kinds of learning, support and gentle guidance I've been talking about this morning.

Expanding our RE program is one of the items on our long range plan. Because of our preteens and young teens and the young families who are considering joining us, I am feeling a certain sense of urgency about getting on this sooner rather than later. Our draft budget includes no increase for RE. That could be a stumbling block, but I don't think it has to be. Most congregations rely on volunteers to teach kids and lead youth groups. Where will we find these volunteers? Right now, I don't know. But first we need to make a commitment to these children, both our current children and the potential ones, and then we can figure out the resources.

So, let's talk.

DISCUSSION

What an opportunity we have to give a huge gift to our children. We recommit ourselves each week to our mission, to promote love and justice in the world. One way we can help spread our message is to give children the opportunity to immerse themselves in an environment where they can be nurtured and grow

into the kind of adults this world needs more of. Like the old man and his little fig trees, what we plant today will become our legacy for years to come. May it be so.