

Our Children, Our World

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With inspiration and quotes from "When I Was a Child", a sermon by Jeanne Nieuwejaar, and editing by Nancy Martin

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ONE----- Personal comments and recollections of parenting -----

We all remember our childhood, right? If you were one of the lucky ones, you had a family that was gentle and loving. You were nourished in body and mind and spirit. You felt comfortable. You felt safe. Your extended family and community were supportive. I realize now that "I was one of the lucky ones". At the time, when I was a child, "I took that way of life for granted". How about you? Were you one of the lucky ones? I hope so.

How about the children now in our church? Are they the lucky ones? Do we provide, as their church community, the attention and support we lucky ones had when we were their age?

Several years ago, I attended my daughter's high school graduation. And the valedictorian told this story. There was a man and his 5 year old son who like to put jigsaw puzzles together. One day, the father wanted to give his son a challenge as well as a learning experience. He found a map of the world in a magazine. He cut it up like a jigsaw puzzle. He and his son started working on it, but it was clear the 5 year old was struggling. At one point, the father left for a few minutes, and when he came back, the puzzle was all put together. He was astonished. He asked his son, "How did you do that?" And the son replied, "Well, I turned over the pieces and put that picture together." The father looked at the picture on the reverse side, and saw a man. The son said, "I figured that if I got the man right, I would get the world right."

I base my service today on a modification of those profound words: If we get the child right, we get the world right.

When my children were growing up, I did what I could to set a good example. I tried to be a moral and ethical model.

For instance, when they had to leave school early to participate in a non-school volleyball tournament, they got an unexcused absence. Why? Because I wrote to the principal saying that the reason I was taking them out of school was because they were going to participate in a non-school volleyball tournament. I learned later that some other children got *excused* absences because their parent said their child had a dental appointment. Grades are affected by unexcused absences. So my actions affected their grades.

I knew that my own behavior would affect them. I hoped it was all good, even though I knew it wasn't. I was not attending any church at the time. I did not think about creeds or higher powers. I was just living my life, rearing my children, trying to do the best I could. And I had a certain way of looking at the world, and certain values that I wanted my children to have. When they were teenagers and would question my actions or decisions, I used to tell them that I did not get a

manual of parenthood when they were born. And their response was, “You’re winging it!” Yep, I was winging it.

Then, once they left home and were successful on their own, I felt my job was done. I could die happy. In fact, I actually told one of them that. She was horrified. But I was serious. I had had a good and successful life. If I had to go at that time, I’d be ok with it. I had no real interests outside my job, and I was really just marking time. Ah, but then, my first grandchild was born. And the world changed. I cannot even begin to describe all my feelings, but I knew I no longer would be comfortable dying. I wanted to be a part of her life. AND, I wanted to pass along to her those same values that are important to me.

I figured, if I get this child right, I would be making a contribution to getting the world right.

And so, that was all the motivation I needed to try to help get it right for the children of our church.

TWO----- Exercise and Purposes and Principles -----

I want you to participate in an exercise with me. If you have a grandchild or grandchildren, please stand up, if you are willing and able. Now, if you have a child or children, please stand up. If you have ever been a child, please stand up. Well, I see that everyone is now standing! Please be seated.

We all have something in common. The children in our lives or the child within us.

“There are as many stories of childhood in this room as there are people.” Your story is “the grounding of your individual life”. And if you were one of the lucky ones, your story is “a source of guidance” for you now. Now, as responsible adults, let us take on “our roles as spiritual shapers of our church children of today. It is from our stories, from our lived experience, from our dreams and hurts and hopes, our endurance, that we know what we know. It is by these meanings, these values, these loves, that everything of worth is handed on.”

We need to pass along our Unitarian Universalist values. These are summarized in our purposes and principles. They are not complicated, but we have a simpler version posted on the wall in the children’s room.

- We promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.
 - Simply put: Respect all people. *That’s a value worth passing along, isn’t it?*
- We promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations.
 - Simply put: Offer fair and kind treatment to everyone. *That sounds good.*
- We promote acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.
 - Simply put: Yearn to accept and learn about ourselves, others, and the mystery around us. *That’s something to strive for.*
- We promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.
 - Simply put: Grow by exploring what is true and right. *That’s good.*

- We promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large. *The right of conscience...*
 - Simply put: Believe in our ideas and act on them. *A challenge, but one worth striving for.*
- We promote the goal of world community with peace, justice, and liberty for all.
 - Simply put: Insist on freedom for all. *That's a value worth passing along, isn't it?*
- We promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.
 - Simply put: Value the earth, which is our home, and all living things on this planet. *That's a hard one, but worth passing along.*

“...only by transmitting the past to our children can we enable them to invent their future. This is particularly true of ethics, and it applies to values, both ancient... and modern.” Ancient: “those conceived by the great religions and the wise men of old---namely justice, compassion and love...” Modern: “those of the Enlightenment---namely democracy, the separation of church and state, human rights.... Let us not make a clean slate of the past! With few exceptions, there is no need to invent new values. What we need to invent, or rather reinvent, is a new fidelity to the values that have been handed down to us, which it is our responsibility to pass on. In effect, we have contracted a debt to the past that can repaid only to the future. The only way to be truly faithful to the values we have inherited is to pass them on to our children.” (From “*The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*” by André Comte-Sponville, p 27)

In our own religious community, let us all participate in doing that for our children.

If we can get the child right, we can get the world right.

Yes. We can.

THREE----- 3 strands in religious lives of children -----

There are three strands in the religious life of our children:

- the strand of “private spiritual experiences;”
Children experience moments of spiritual knowing. I hope they also experience an interconnected nurturing community of family and church, this church. And I hope they experience a culture that supports the feeding of their spirit. “Children ... feel moments of intense compassion and empathy, of heightened and delightful sensory awareness, of healing and renewal, of creativity, even of magic.” Remember Harry Potter? “This is a given of our human nature.”
- “the strand of a strong net of home and church, supporting and reinforcing one another;”.
“In some ways this may be the easiest part of the challenge of nurturing children's spiritual lives, because this, [our church community,] is within our personal control. We need to talk with our children about matters of the spirit,” about wonderment, about awe, about things we feel but cannot explain. Taking on our responsibility to create a strong net of support for our church children helps us and the children to pause and savor such moments of spiritual knowing, to nurture such moments, and to feel a sense of gratitude.

- the strand of the larger culture which [affects] the role [that] home and church [play] in [their] lives.” When you were a child, did you have an adult friend who was your favorite? Maybe a grandparent? Maybe a neighbor? Maybe a teacher? Why did you like them? Did you share favorite activities with them? Did they teach you things? Did they listen?

If we can get our children right, in this church community, we are helping to get the world right.

FOUR----- We must be there for our children-----

The conversations we have with our children may be difficult, because we may not yet have put our own thoughts and feelings into language. But we can support each other in this effort by sharing in a community where such conversations are encouraged and valued. Do we have such a church community?

But matters of the larger community and culture, outside our church, are even harder. Over these we have less control, yet we cannot simply abdicate, because what is at stake is too precious. It is the souls of children, children who have a right to feel “at home in the world,” to have the security of arms to lean into, to have the support of a tradition, our UU tradition, which can offer words and images and symbols to give definition to those yearnings and bondings, those affirmations they experience with such intensity. Our church children have a right to feel an encompassing love which births them and then holds them in a cushion of care throughout life and into death. The family is primary in providing this cushion of love, but it is not really enough. Something more is needed. Our church community is needed. You are needed.

“We must gather in our determination and gather together in community to support our children. We must be creative in motivating and supporting our families in their connections with our religious community, and in shaping ways for our families to link the meanings of our church community with their larger social context. In our segmented, disconnected, chaotic culture, where there is so much loneliness in the midst of crowds, and so much hope and faith that is unsupported and unreflected, our spiritual community, [this church community,] can make a profound difference in the lives of [our] children, and in the lives of [their] parents who will always remain the primary religious educators.”

We in our church community need to be there. We have so much to offer our children: the UU tradition of learning about all the world’s religions and learning from all the world’s religions. Not just the Abrahamic traditions, which most of us are more familiar with, but also earth-centered traditions, as well as humanist teachings, which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science. How rich and safe our whole world might be if every child, inside our church community, and outside our church community, could be so nourished in spirit and mind!

If we get the child right, we get the world right.

FIVE----- Numbers exercise -----

I'd like you to participate in another exercise with me. You can stay seated this time. It's a mental exercise. Now don't cheat. Don't talk to your neighbor, at least not yet. Pick a number between 1 and 50. Everyone got a number? OK. Now, keep that number in mind.

Did anyone pick 17? It's special. 17 is a prime number. The difference between the digits 1 and 7 is 6, and it's the sixth prime number!! How cool is that!

How about 6? Did anyone pick 6? It's special because it's Bert's favorite number. That's Bert, from Ernie and Bert on Sesame Street.

I could go through the whole list of numbers and tell you how special each one is. But I won't. Whew! I just want to assure you that the number you picked is special. So don't forget that number!

Now, do you have an extra hour in the next year? One hour in the next year. Can that one spare hour be at 10:00AM one Sunday morning? Just one hour? One hour in the next year. Can you spare one hour in the next year to share your values with the children in our church community?

Yes? You can? You have one hour to spare in the next year? Great!

Now for the other part of the mental exercise. Apply your special number to a Sunday in the next year. Start from next Sunday to count. My special number is 5, and August 30 is the 5th Sunday, starting from next Sunday. So my Sunday is August 30. So that's my hour to share my experience and values with the children of our church community. You can have your Sunday, based on your special number. That's your Sunday to help to get the children right.

I have a calendar here and the corresponding numbers from 1 to 50. Can someone tell me their special number?.....

I am grown now, but now and then, I still experience wonder and awe, just as I did when I was a child. Probably you do too. Now, as an adult, I share in the adult responsibility for shaping the religious nurturing of our children of today. What a gift and a privilege this is for me! What a gift and a privilege is before all of us! Let us be intentional and work together in carrying forth this work.

Let us pass along our UU values to our church children,
If we can get the children right, we can get the world right.
