

Nurturing Children's Spirits, Denise Konen, SERMON- January 25, 2009

Opening Words: # 644 "Give Us The Spirit of the Child" in Singing the Living Tradition Hymnal (Caren Stelson)

First Reading: A Child Is Born page 29, Reverend Michael Lindvall from Chicken Soup for the Mothers Soul

Second Reading: Poem by Charlotte Knopp

This poem was written by Charlotte Knopp at age 11. She attends this church.

**Walking through the woods.
Bursting the capillaries of leaves with my feet.
Smelling the crisp autumn air.
I thought about the wonders of life and death.
How the leaves had been just a bud then grow and strove as a healthy leaf.
Then slowly starting to drift away in body and in spirit as they turned.
Beauty, the first sign of death.
But then fear starts to overtake the leaves as they watch friends and family drift away.
Avoiding death, clinging to the tree.
Then relaxing and letting go.
Twirling down to their family and friends on the frost covered ground.
Had everything I had been walking on, once been alive?
Had everything gone through the same experiences as the leaves?
Were they alive even after death?
Then the lake gleaming and glimmering following me
Reflecting all the wonderful images nature had produced
Fish, ducks, birds, foxes, squirrels, and deer all dancing on the surface of the lake.
Performing a dance on the leaves.
Spiraling up through the trees into the sky.
Pirouetting and dancing - as night falls they continue to perform
Free and gliding through the cool night air.**

SERMON Denise

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Were they alive even after death?"**

Death is a difficult spiritual passage for any of us to understand; yet it is clear that Charlotte Knopp gave death and the process of dying, deep reflection. How did she come to these beliefs and questions at eleven years old?

This poem was written a year after Charlotte grandpa died. A year after the family floated his ashes from a boat on a misty Lake of the Woods, while his favorite loon song played and a majestic eagle flew overhead.

Charlotte's grandfather asked to die with his family near him in his final days. They talked and sang around his bed, massaged his arms and legs and told stories. Charlotte cuddled with Grandma, seven-year-old Phillip played near the bed and Louisa, just four years old, curled up and slept with her grandpa, even as he became comatose. Charlotte's mother told her that they were giving Grandpa a gift – a chance to die with dignity, surrounded by the people who loved him.

Like Charlotte - all children want to make meaning out of the small and significant events and experiences of their lives-losing a loved one, the changing seasons, getting sick, having something wonderful happen. The responses of the people around them as they seek to make meaning can expand or constrict their spiritual growth. Many of us have come to this religion because we did not receive the care our developing spirits needed. As adults in this church - both parents, and people without children -we are given the unique opportunity to nurture and embrace the spirits of the children in our UU faith community. We can help them not to close down in ways we may have closed down. If we provide them with the spiritual guidance they need, our children will flourish and share their innate sacred gifts, opening us to spiritual deepening and renewal.

Children challenge adults to grow in their understanding of life's wonders and difficulties. They want to know what we believe and what we stand for. They force us to clarify our deepest beliefs. It is what we love and sometimes can't handle in children. Charlotte's parents knew enough about how they felt about death to share their thoughts and feelings with their children. They realized that Charlotte's church attendance, although resisted at times, influenced the way their daughter integrated her feelings and beliefs of life and death that she explored in her poem. This helped give her the language to interpret and claim her spiritual experiences.

Wouldn't we all have loved to have an experience like this when we were young? Some of us did, but unfortunately many did not. Children and adults need each other to make sense of life's mysteries. Each person here can help the children of this church make meaning of our Unitarian Universalist faith through personal connections, community rituals and support of their religious education. Their spiritual grounding is our hope for the future.

A portion of your church's mission statement says, "Our purpose is to nurture our quest for knowledge, truth, and spiritual growth at every stage of life. How will you help the children of your community grow in knowledge, truth and spirit at each stage of their childhood? How can you nurture their spirits with love and openness? What gets in the way?"

I want to share three specific barriers to their spiritual growth that became apparent to me after teaching a class series, called Nurturing Children's Spirits, twice at First Universalist Church in Mpls and once here last year. I will again be offering a six-week class that starts here this Thursday, using the UUA curriculum, Parents as Spiritual Guides. I invite you to register after the service. Much of what I talk about today is an introduction to that class. The reason the class I developed was called Nurturing Children's Spirits was because I don't believe that parents can do this alone. Church members of all age levels must mentor children in their search for meaning to support families in raising thoughtful, compassionate children who are accepted for their beliefs at each stage of their childhood.

Let me tell you how we as Unitarian Universalist's can sometimes get in the way of children's spiritual growth. First, we sometimes find it difficult to share our spiritual values with children because we are not sufficiently grounded in our own spiritual and religious beliefs; secondly, many of us have religious wounds that create an unwillingness to explore spiritual discoveries and questions, and lastly, we lack an understanding of children's spiritual needs at different ages.

The first barrier to sharing our spiritual lives with children is related to a lack of awareness of our own beliefs. To be ready to partner with children we need to develop our own personal theology within the context of the UU principles. We'll each do it in different ways that fit our spirits: meditating, ritual groups, creating, reading, social action, prayer, movement, or attending small discussion groups.

If you came to this religion from another, do you know what this one means to you? Are you interested in exploring the history, teachings, prophets and leaders of Unitarian Universalism? Have you explored your beliefs about death, prayer, God, evil, miracles, and forgiveness? What does compassion, service, and justice mean to you? How do you express it in your life? We show our children what we have faith in by our commitments and how we live. This is a boundless process that will unfold throughout our lives, just like the UU principle expressed by the children's Rainbow Path yellow "yearning

to learn.” Can we welcome the evolution of our faith and the evolution of children’s beliefs at each stage of their growth?

The second barrier relates to previous negative religious experiences that discourage us from exploring our spiritual selves. One theme repeated by parents in the spirituality classes I held was a deep desire to provide spiritual comfort and ritual to their children. They wanted to provide some religious structure, but did not want the rigidity that can sometimes come with organized religion. What a dilemma we have! It is hard to give structure and ritual to children’s religious education and calm responses to their spiritual questions if we are running from our religious history. Many of us, and I include myself, came to this religion, at least in part, because of the betrayals we faced in our growing years. I’ve got a nun right back here in my emotional brain and it still scares me when I think of Sister Margaruite.

Think about yourself as a growing child. Do you remember an experience that damaged your sense of the sacred? If we have not healed these spiritual wounds, they will stay with us and influence the children in our care.

One father from the class related an incident that illustrates this. He arrived home with his son from First Universalist one Sunday, when a neighbor child shouted, “Where have you been? His son joyfully called out, “I was at church!” This simple word – church - sent a shiver of discomfort through the father’s body. In that instant, he forgot he was not at that church of his childhood. Do you recognize that shiver? Our bodies are windows to our souls and signal us to heal old wounds. This father had the courage to see this shiver as a signal of something deeper, something he needed to take a look at.

Reverend Rebecca Parker, is someone I see as a present day UU prophet. In her book, Blessing the World, she writes that one thing needed for us to begin to ‘bless the world’ is a new theology that turns inward as well as outward and assists in a healing of the fragmented self. Spiritual engagement with children gives us the opportunity to go deeper to recognize and heal these wounds. By caring for ourselves in this way, we care for our children as we become a clear channel for our message of love and hope.

The last barrier I mentioned was the challenge we face in partnering with children if we don’t understand how they see the world and develop their faith at different ages. James Fowler, outlined how faith develops in his book, The Stages of Faith. For Fowler, faith is a universal quality of human life. Here is my very, very, condensed version.

New babies develop trust and faith in the world by receiving consistent love and care from their parents and other important people in their lives. Preschoolers are affirmed and blossom when adults accept and join in their intuitive and magical way of looking at the world. School-age children develop their faith by learning and telling the stories and songs of their community. Teens align with other teens to work at integrating their identity and personal ideals with inconsistencies in the teachings of adults in their faith community.

When we don't pay attention and respond to what children need at each stage and teach them in adult like ways, we can short circuit a child's spiritual discoveries. Graphic video games and movies, cynicism or forcing adult logic on them can harm a child's sense of wonder and possibility. Younger children build faith in themselves and others by physically experiencing it through open-ended questions, stories, and playful activities- not lectures. Teens while resisting it, need the protection and support of spiritually grounded adults as they explore culturally taboo topics of sex, race, death, and religion. They need adults to push up against and keep them safe through their explorations.

Children require a world where optimism and love reign. If we give them that, they give us hope and faith in endless possibilities. I'd like to tell you two stories of children and their parents who have enriched First U's faith community with their spiritual partnerships.

The first story is about five-year-old Jason and three-year-old Katelyn, who are often seen in our social hall laughing and playing. Along with their mom and dad, Pam and Umesh, they occasionally drive past homeless people holding signs on street corners on their way to church Sunday mornings. One day, Jason, just beginning to read, asked, "Mommy, what does homeless mean?" The simple answer, "*It means he doesn't have a home,*" just was not sufficient, and this conversation would recur every week. Either Jason or Katelyn would say "*Well, why doesn't he get a house?*" "*Perhaps he cannot afford to pay for it*" "*Well, he can stay with us in the basement.*" It became difficult for Pam and Umesh to share the words on the signs: "Absolute Desperation!" "Anything Helps!" What do you say to children this young? A conversation began about what homeless people might need. Jason suggested, "*Maybe we could give them food.*" Katelyn added, "*Yeah, like macaroni and cheese!*" The family talked about how their favorite food would get cold or spill if it was handed to someone on the street corner. Jason and Katelyn suggested just giving them a box of mac and cheese. Their mother wondered with them, "*Do you think a person without a home would*

have a pot and a stove top, some butter and milk?" Ultimately, the discussion led to a small list of items that could be bagged up, kept in the car, and given to someone whose sign begged for help. Now, on Sunday mornings, three-year-old Katelyn would shout *"Remember Mommy, the homeless bags!"* The discovery of something they could do filled them with optimism and led to a social justice project at our church one evening last year. Over 100 teens, parents, young children, single people, and elders joined together to make 'homeless bags' just like this one, with granola bars, socks, apples, and other things, and pictures drawn by the children with messages of love and hope. I am so proud to say that this is the work of my church! We did it together by listening to two very wise young children. Any of us can have this kind of conversation with UU children as an RE teacher, mentor, or playmate at church events.

The second story is about a friend of mine, Jamie Meyer, leader of the Drumming the Soul Awake community that's sponsored by the Association of Universalist Women. One day after drumming, I mentioned the positive impact of sharing our spiritual lives with our children. Jamie said he didn't want to put his 'weird stuff' on his kids.

By 'weird stuff,' I think he meant Nordic chanting, drumming and communing with the reindeer goddess. That 'weird stuff' that Jamie shares openly and awesomely with the drumming community was hard to imagine sharing with his own children because of our cultural religious taboos.

Recently, Jamie included his son in his spiritual practice while preparing for a solstice ceremony for Wisdom Ways at St. Kate's college. In turn his son helped him develop some reindeer symbols used in the ritual. Participants were enriched by his son's contributions to the ceremony. Father and son have a fuller spiritual partnership.

When has a child been a spiritual teacher to you? When have you been a spiritual teacher to a child, whether your own or a child in your circle of caring? If you are not a parent or your children are grown, can you find a way to positively connect with a child in our community?

We develop a partnership with children when we listen to and acknowledge their wisdom and share with them our beliefs and spiritual practices through words and actions. What a gift to let them know that as adults our spiritual life is not static, but ever changing, and we have much to discover with them. We show them commitment to spiritual growth by attending and participating in the life of our church community. We can build on the traditions and rituals of our Unitarian Universalist faith. We have the flaming chalice, flower communion, peace and justice activities, our closing

songs and other traditions, that give children and adults a strong place to anchor. We have a rich heritage and loving faith that we can be proud to share with the children of this church.

How many of us have the same needs as the children of our faith community? Don't we, too, want to be surrounded with love and hope to help us build a spirit of optimism and faith in the future? Can we benefit from developing an appreciation of the mystery of life through imagination and ritual? Would it be gratifying to integrate our faith by writing poems, painting pictures, singing songs, and telling stories of what this faith means to us? How would this community benefit if each person explored his or her beliefs more thoroughly and presented a faith statement to the congregation, as we ask the teens to do in the Coming of Age ritual?

Gandhi made a statement that many UU's treasure; we must "be the change we want to see." Let's travel this road of change together with the children in our care. This community can come to a new place of compassion and commitment and the children of The Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka can bring you there if you join them in spiritual partnership.

Benediction:

The toddlers and young children in your church begin their RE class by placing their own fabric felt flame on the chalice - a concrete way of expressing each child's belonging to our faith and this community. The words they say have actions, a way to experience our faith in our brains and bones. They are in your order of service. I will demonstrate it first and then I invite you to do it with me.

"This is the church of the open mind. This is the church of the loving heart. This is the church of the helping hands."* Would you join me now? *"This is the church of the open mind. This is the church of the loving heart. This is the church of the helping hands."

May we greet and share our spirit with each child we meet today with an open mind, loving heart and gentle, helping hands.