

Discussion Questions/Journaling Prompts for

Tending the Flame: The Art of Unitarian Universalist Parenting

by Michelle Richards
(Skinner House Books, 2010)

Questions created by Michelle Richards

Chapter One: Know Thyself

Although parents are the primary religious educators of their children, they often do not know what they believe. The first step in teaching children about moral, ethical and spiritual values is knowing what you hold sacred and determining what is of ultimate value to you.

1. Which of the seven Unitarian Universalist Principles is the most important to you?
2. Are there any Principles you disagree with? Which one(s) and why?
3. Where do you look for answers on questions of faith and belief?
4. What are the forces that create and uphold life? Is there a guiding force to the universe?
5. What wisdom (if any) does the Bible hold for you?
6. Do you find the teachings of Jesus meaningful?
7. What do you believe about the nature of God/Goddess/The Divine/Great Spirit?
8. What do you think happens after a person dies?
9. What keeps you going when life gets tough?
10. What does it mean to be religious?
11. What (if any) is a sacred text for you?
12. What ideas most closely resemble your personal theology? (Christian, Buddhist, Atheist, Agnostic, Humanist, Pantheist, Pagan, etc.)
13. When do you act on faith?

14. What is of ultimate value for you?
15. When do you live consistently with your values and beliefs? When might you not?
16. What do you communicate to your children about making mistakes and making amends?
17. What are some of the ways you express your spirituality?
18. How do you make time for your spiritual needs during your day and how could you nurture yourself even more?
19. How could you appreciate your children more each day?

Chapter Two: Teachable Moments

Sometimes children will create opportunities for us to encourage spiritual enrichment. Sometimes we parents must orchestrate these “teachable moments.” Either way, making the most of such times is the focus of Chapter Two.

1. Have you ever tried to “teach” a child who was out of control? How did that work?
2. How do you handle the times when your child pushes you to the point of “losing it”? How would you like to handle them?
3. In what places do your children ask the most questions?
4. How do you deal with questions that are asked under less than ideal circumstances, like when you are driving?
5. Do you know what moral stage your children are in? What motivates them to do good and make good decisions?
6. Does knowing what moral stage your children are in help you give them reasons why their behavior should be different?
7. How do you encourage creative expression in your children?
8. How do you orchestrate teachable moments with your children?
9. What are the shared experiences you engage in to enrich your child’s spirituality? What shared experiences would you like to have?

10. What are your favorite stories to read to your children? Why?
11. Do you tell your children stories? What kinds of stories?
12. How do you (or might you) encourage your children to tell their own stories?

Chapter Three: Family Rituals

There is real value in creating unique family rituals and carrying on ones from previous generations. This chapter details ways you can establish effective rituals for your family that are consistent with your values and beliefs.

1. What does the word “ritual” mean to you?
2. What do think is the difference between “ritual” and “tradition”?
3. What rituals did you engage in as a child with your family of origin?
4. What meaning did you find in them? Are they still meaningful to you?
5. What rituals do you engage in as a family today?
6. What happens at mealtimes? How would you like them to be different?
7. What happens at bedtime?
8. What happens in the morning?
9. Does your family have a weekly together time? What does it involve?
10. If you were to create a weekly ritual for your family, what would you like it to be?
11. What rites of passage has your family experienced? What others might you like to participate in?

Chapter Four: Holidays

Celebrating holidays together as a family helps us pass on traditions from one generation to the next and honors our family’s religious beliefs. However, when two (or more) families join together or theological beliefs change, celebrating traditional holidays can be a challenge.

1. What holidays did you celebrate with your family in childhood? How were they celebrated? What was the most meaningful about these celebrations for you?

2. What holidays do you celebrate with your current family? What is the most meaningful part of it for you?
3. What holidays would you like to celebrate with your current family and how would you celebrate them?
4. What (if anything) do you dislike about your current holiday celebrations? What might you let go of to make them more enjoyable?
5. What are the guiding values that motivate you to celebrate these holidays? How could you make these values even more a part of your celebration?
6. Do you question the stereotypes perpetuated by holidays such as Halloween and Thanksgiving?
7. How might you deal with your child wanting to wear what you consider to be an inappropriate costume for Halloween?
8. How might you deal with your child's school teaching stereotypes?
9. Does your family celebrate holidays that reflect your Unitarian Universalist faith? How could you take (or have you taken) these celebrations from the secular to the sacred?
10. What special holidays does your religious community celebrate? What (if anything) is particularly meaningful in them to you and your family?
11. How might your religious community develop new holiday traditions or special celebrations that are uniquely Unitarian Universalist?
12. Who are some of the people in our Unitarian Universalist heritage you could honor? What are the values and principles you most want honored? How could your family or religious community create celebrations around these people and values?

Chapter Five: Spiritual Practices

Expressing your spirituality is a way of connecting with your soul, your innermost spark, the deepest part of yourself. Since the spiritual practices we introduce to our children influence their lifelong faith, it is important to be intentional about what we share and encourage.

1. What spiritual practices do you engage in to enrich your life?

2. What (if any) spiritual practices do you engage in together as a family?
3. Are there any new spiritual practices you would like to experience as a family?
4. Were prayer and meditation part of your spiritual life in childhood?
5. Do you pray at this time of your life? If so, what do you find meaningful in it?
6. Do you have a meditation practice? How is it meaningful?
7. If you don't already engage in these practices, would you like to add prayer or meditation (or both) to your daily life? How might you do it?
8. Are you considering introducing prayer, meditation, or other spiritual practices to your children? How?
9. What kinds of spiritual practices would be most meaningful to you?
10. What kinds of spiritual practices would be most meaningful to your children?
11. Have you ever engaged in mindfulness as a spiritual practice? How did that work for you?
12. How often do you spend time just being totally present with your children? How might you build in more time to do this?

Chapter Six: Inherent Worth and Dignity

The first of the Unitarian Universalist Principles has been identified as one of the cornerstones of our faith. This chapter presents ways in which parents can explore the ideas behind this concept and challenge older children to consider the ethical and moral issues involved.

1. What does the phrase “inherent worth and dignity” mean to you? How could you express your ideas about this to your children?
2. Has a situation ever arisen that caused you or your children to question “the inherent worth and dignity of all people”?
3. How have you addressed these issues with them?
4. How have you handled questions of compassion and empathy with your children? Were you satisfied with how you handled them? How might you do it differently in the future?

5. Do your children see you showing respect toward people you disagree with? If not, how might you change this?
6. What are some ways you can practice radical hospitality (being open and welcoming to people very different from you)?
7. When and how do your children witness your generosity toward others?
8. What are some ways you could express generosity together as a family?
9. Do you regularly show respect toward your children through your language and attitude? If not, how might you change this?
10. Do you express affection toward your older children or youth as you did when they were younger? What are the ways you have altered your behavior to show you care about them?

Chapter Seven: Justice, Equity and Compassion

Teaching our children about justice, equity, and fairness while so many of them inhabit a world of consumerism and a culture of entitlement can be a challenge. In addition, some parents are concerned that discussing inequality could instill fear or distrust.

1. Have you had to address issues of fairness and justice with your children? How did that work out? What (if anything) would you do differently?
2. How do your children perceive what is fair and just? If their interpretation seems shallow to you, how might you help them expand their ideas?
3. Are you aware of how the language you use may perpetuate racist, sexist, or homophobic attitudes? How could you (or do you) communicate this understanding to your children and teens?
4. How does your home celebrate diversity? What toys, books, and videos do you have that reflect it?
5. What have you done to communicate intentionally about diversity and privilege to your children?
6. Have you or your children ever experienced racism, classism, homophobia, or other oppression?
7. If your family has not been directly affected by any of these, what are some ways you could encourage your children to become effective allies to help others?

8. What social justice projects do you engage in together as a family? How do these projects communicate compassion?
9. How have you supported your youth in their efforts to recognize indignities and injustices inconsistent with their personal values? How might you do so in the future?
10. If your children are relatively sheltered and privileged, what are your thoughts on exposing them to tragedy, disaster and other troubling parts of life? At what age and in what ways should children be exposed to real injustice?

Chapter Eight: Spiritual Growth in Our Congregations

Participation in a religious community can sustain families throughout the week. However, difficulties may arise if families do not feel adequately supported by their religious community or children express a desire not to attend.

1. Do you feel that you have a spiritual home in a religious community? What makes you feel this way?
2. What does your religious community do to support you as a parent?
3. What could your religious community do to make you feel more supported?
4. What is your personal involvement in your religious community?
5. Are your children aware of your personal involvement in your religious community? How do they see you help out?
6. What opportunities does your religious community provide for you to worship together as a family?
7. What more could your religious community do to help your family worship together?
8. In what ways do you feel you benefit from participation in a religious community? Your children? Your family as a whole?
9. Do you feel as if your congregation is family-friendly? What does it do to make children and youth feel wanted?
10. Are there ways for youth to contribute to your church community? How are they encouraged to do so?
11. What reasons do you communicate to your children for why you attend church?

For why they should attend?

12. What (if any) value do your children find in attending your congregation? How might that change?

Chapter Nine: The Search for Truth and Meaning

Unlike those of many other religious traditions, Unitarian Universalists believe in seeking our own personal truths when it comes to questions about life. This lifelong journey does not mean we believe “anything we want” but that we are on a continuous search for answers from a variety of sources, both intellectual and intuitive.

1. How does an absence of definite answers challenge you in raising your children as Unitarian Universalists?
2. How could this absence be turned around and recognized as one of the greatest rewards of raising Unitarian Universalist children?
3. What are some of the ways you could (or do) encourage free-thinking in your young people?
4. What are some of the ways you could nurture curiosity and critical thinking?
5. How do you (or might you) take time to appreciate your child’s innate spirituality and intuitive thought?
6. What are some particular sources that you look toward in your search for what is true and right?
7. How do you (or might you) communicate to your children the reasons you value these sources?
8. What are the sources you encourage your children to use in seeking answers to the questions of life?
9. Do you encourage them to seek you out as a valuable source on these questions? How about your religious community? Why or why not?
10. What do you think is the meaning of life? How did you arrive at this view? How might you explain this process to your children?
11. How has your family dealt with opposing points of view when it comes to theological matters?
12. When do you encourage your children to share their beliefs and when might you

not?

13. How do you support your children when they run into conflicts over their religious ideas?
14. How do your extended family's religious beliefs help or hinder you in raising free-thinking, open-minded children? How have you responded to any challenges?

Chapter Ten: The Right of Conscience

Once we know what is true and right for us, we may need to explore ways to express it while still respecting others' rights to their own beliefs. This chapter presents strategies for teaching children to stand up for their convictions and confront injustice around them.

1. Have you ever reflected on the phrase "the right of conscience" from the fifth Principle? What does it say to you?
2. Have you ever faced a situation with your children that caused you to examine your right of conscience?
3. Has your family had any conflicts with public schools or private institutions over values? How did they turn out?
4. Are you prepared to give your young people support as they stand up for their beliefs? How might you do that?
5. Has your family ever faced oppression because of your theological beliefs?
6. Have your children ever faced oppression because of your theological beliefs?
7. Do you have any sources of support to back you up when you actively engage oppressive policies or ideas?
8. When do you teach your children to take a stand, and when do you advise them to accept a situation without condoning behavior and policies?
9. What is your family's opinion on participation in organizations, such as the Boy Scouts of America, that openly discriminate against atheists and non-heterosexual leaders?
10. How far are you and your children prepared to go to combat injustice?

Chapter Eleven: Peace, Liberty and Justice for All

Many people have the mistaken impression that to live in a peaceful world we must be free of conflict. We need to teach our children how to engage positively with conflict and interact constructively with those they disagree with.

1. How do you deal with conflict in your family?
2. How was it addressed in your family of origin?
3. How do you handle sibling rivalry when it arises?
4. How do you teach your children about peace and violence?
5. What is your philosophy toward violent movies, games, and toys? Does it agree with your spouse's or partner's philosophy?
6. How do you evaluate what are appropriate toys, stories, and games for your family?
7. Have your evaluations come into conflict with what your children want? If so, how have you responded?
8. How could you seize opportunities to teach your children about interacting peacefully with others?
9. When do you think children are ready to understand the more complex issues of violence such as genocide and terrorism?
10. What social justice projects have you engaged in as a family to help your children work toward creating a more peaceful world?

Chapter Twelve: The Interdependent Web

Appreciating the wonders of nature, the mystery of the world, and the concept of the ripple effect are all part of exploring the seventh Principle—"the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part."

1. What are some of the ways you and your family work to improve our environment?
2. How could you do more to make a difference?
3. How do you and your family explore and appreciate nature?

4. What is your favorite place in nature? The mountains? The desert? The forest? The ocean? Other?
5. Can you think of additional ways to share your love of nature and favorite places with your children?
6. How might you incorporate an element of environmental clean-up or improvement into your next family vacation, get-away, or even weekend at home?
7. Have you taken any steps to reduce your carbon footprint or move toward a more sustainable lifestyle?
8. What opportunities have you had as a family to celebrate or explore the interdependent web of all existence?
9. What new ways to explore nature with children would you like to try? Camping? Gardening? Environmental clean-up? Other?
10. What are some of the ways you have kept your children interested during nature hikes or camping adventures?

Chapter Thirteen: God and the Bible

Given the current religious and political climate in the United States, the question for parents is: From whom do you want your children to learn about God, and what kind of God do you want them to learn about? Even non-theist parents will face questions about divinity and may need to assist their children through this part of the journey.

1. What did you think about God/Goddess/Great Spirit/Divine Presence when you were the age that your children are now?
2. Have your views and beliefs changed since then? How?
3. What (if anything) caused them to change?
4. What questions have your children asked about the divine?
5. What inspired these questions?
6. Were you satisfied with your answers? If not, how do you wish you had answered?
7. Have you noticed any changes in your children's views of the divine as they mature?

8. Have you and your child been exposed to the religious beliefs of others? How did that work out?
9. Have your children ever experienced conflict with friends, teachers, or others about their religious leanings? How was it resolved?
10. Does your child have a supportive community of peers who affirm his or her views of the divine? If not, how might he or she find one?
11. What is your attitude toward teaching children stories from the Jewish and Christian Bibles?
12. What (if any) Bible stories do you think are most important for children to learn? Why?

Chapter Fourteen: The Interfaith Family

When parents disagree about theological issues, it can complicate the process of raising children in any faith tradition. However, with cooperation and intentionality parents who have different beliefs can raise religiously healthy children who respect diversity.

1. Do you have any conflicts with your spouse or partner when it comes to theological beliefs or spiritual practices?
2. How have you resolved any such conflicts between the two of you?
3. What are you and your spouse communicating to your children about beliefs and spiritual practices?
4. What spiritual practices do your children see you and your partner engage in?
5. What agreements have you reached about parenting your children religiously?
6. How do you handle any conflicts about beliefs or spiritual practices with your own extended family?
7. How do you handle any conflicts with your spouse or partner's family?
8. How might you and your spouse handle a change in belief of one of you?
9. How would this affect your relationship?
10. How would this affect your ability to parent your children?

Chapter Fifteen: Death and Grief

What we tell our children about death will depend mostly on their age and life experience. Our own life experience, beliefs, feelings, and understanding of the meaning of life will also make a difference in what we say. Regardless, there are no easy answers.

1. What questions have your children asked about death?
2. What prompted those questions?
3. Has your child experienced the death of a loved one? What was that experience like?
4. What grief responses have your children had and how did you react to them?
5. What support did you receive from your religious community?
6. What experiences with the natural world have you used as a way to teach your children about the cycle of life?
7. What are your own personal views about what occurs after the death of the body?
8. How might you communicate those views to your children?
9. Have your ideas about what happens after death changed over the years? How?
10. How have you dealt with the grief and loss you have experienced over your lifetime?
11. How might you share some of these experiences with your children?
12. What are some ways you could encourage your children to open up to you about their loss and grief?

Chapter Sixteen: Sexuality and Love

Mixed messages about sexuality, love, and gender are everywhere in our culture. Yet positive values are crucial for developing a healthy sexuality. Usually the life-long process of forming attitudes about identity, intimacy, and relationships begins and ends at home.

1. What are some of the sexual messages your children have received from you?
2. What questions have your children asked you about sexuality and gender?

3. What teachable moments have you used to introduce the subject of sexuality or start a conversation about sexual issues?
4. What everyday situations might you use to start a conversation?
5. Do you remember the questions you had about sexuality when you were a child or teenager? How were those questions answered?
6. What resources do you (or could you) make available for your children to learn more about sexuality?
7. At what age do you think young people are ready to have sexual experiences?
8. At what age do you think young people are ready for dating?
9. Looking back, did you become sexually active before you were fully ready and emotionally mature? Without sharing specific details, how might you communicate to your child the way you would have done things differently?
10. How might you discuss birth control options with your youth?
11. What are some ways you could share information about STDs with them?
12. How could you share positive messages about sexuality and relationships?
13. What images of families are present in your home as part of books, videos, television shows, and toys?
14. How could you expand the idea of what makes up a family through books, toys, and media?
15. How have you handled any gender-nonconformity in your children?
16. How have you handled any stereotypical labeling or categorizing by your children?
17. Have you noticed how the words you use may perpetuate a heterosexual bias? How could you try to overcome this bias in your interactions with children?
18. In what ways are you personally consistent with societal expectations of your gender? In what ways are you not? How could this insight help you in interactions with others?
19. How might you be supportive of your BGLTQ youth as they form their sexual identities?

20. How might you avoid assumptions about behavior, interests, and gender?

Chapter Seventeen: Letting Go

In a real sense, parenting is a long process of letting go. How we give children the roots they need to thrive and the wings to soar off on their own is the focus of this final chapter.

1. What roots have you given (or will you give) your children?
2. How will these roots lead to the wings they need to strike out on their own?
3. Do you see parenting as a process of letting go? Why or why not?
4. What are some of the ways in which you have “let go” with your children?
5. How do you provide guidance when your children must make decisions?
6. How do you (or will you) prepare your children for their ultimate independence?
7. How do you anticipate your relationship changing once your child has grown?
8. How will you accept their ideas and values that are different from yours?
9. What is the legacy that you pass on to your children?
10. How have you helped your children discover their own identities?