Making Sure There Is a There There

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A page of editorial cartoons in the magazine, *The Nation*, caught my eye a few years ago. The collection of images was entitled, "Oxymorons." An oxymoron is, of course, an apparent contradiction in terms, such as jumbo shrimp or deafening silence. Not surprisingly, these oxymoronic cartoons betrayed a certain editorial bias: the first sketch depicted "military intelligence," the second, "political integrity," the third, "people's government." The fourth was "religious education," and it depicted a young man whose head was open at the top like a trash receptacle. On his out-stretched hand stood a cleric pouring garbage – banana peels, apple cores, tin cans – into the young man's skull. I bristled at this image. Surely, I thought, this indictment is directed at orthodox religions with dogmatic religious instruction, but, surely, our liberal religious education practices are exempt from such a characterization. If anything, we are more often accused of not pouring *anything* into the heads of our children and youth, that is, not giving them specific theological answers or beliefs. Surely, *liberal* religious education is not an oxymoron?

There is an inherent contradiction in religious education. The word religion is most likely derived from the Latin, *religare*, "to bind tightly" from *ligare*, "to bind." Education, on the other hand, is from the Latin *duca*, "to take or to lead." To *e*ducate is to take or lead *away*. Thus, the apparent paradox of religious education: simultaneously to bind together and lead out. It poses a pedagogical dilemma for religious educators: how to "teach" Unitarian Universalism without "stamping our minds" on others, particularly defenseless children. This is not a semantic issue, but a philosophic one. What is the nature and purpose of *liberal* religious education for the twenty-first century? In what ways should it bind us together, and in what ways should it lead us out or liberate us?

One image that helps us with this seeming contradiction is the familiar metaphor of roots and wings. In her hauntingly beautiful song, "Spirit of Life," Unitarian Universalist songwriter and activist Carolyn McDade writes, "Roots hold me close; wings set me free." The roots refer to the religious community which binds us gently together, companions and comforts us in our life journeys, and assures us that we are not alone. Psychologist and faith educator Sharon Parks calls this a "holding community." Wings represent the free intellectual inquiry of liberal religion, the freedom to discover and be who we truly are, and the liberation of the human spirit. Liberal religious education is not an oxymoron, but it is a paradox that we continue to trip over, and that continues to challenge us to bring our hearts, minds and spirits to make meaning of life. And meaning-making is the essential purpose of religious education.

There is no there there.
Gertrude Stein (describing Oakland, CA, 1937)

Of course, to make meaning of our lives in religious community, we have to show up. I am often asked what to tell parents when they ask, "Why should we go to church? We are so busy and our kids are so busy..." The simple answer is, "Because you're so busy!" We should go to church precisely because of soccer practice and violin lessons and hockey and gymnastics; precisely because more of us are working longer hours, traveling more, and commuting further; precisely because our lives are compartmentalized, structured, task-filled and goal-focused; because the pressures that drive us, and the busyness that fills our days, act as a centrifugal force that pulls us away from family, friends, and other human connection, and distracts us from our deep human need to reflect, renew, commit, and make meaning of our lives. The competition for our time is very real, but we are not really too busy. A recent study on how people use their leisure time confirms that people who do more, do even more. People who work more, also spend more time with their families and have more sex.

Let's accept busyness as a given, and in a paradigm shift, see it as a well-disguised gift--an opportunity to identify the essential purpose of the religious community. People have many needs--intellectual, physical, emotional, spiritual--but the faith community must keep uppermost in its mind the religious gifts that are no other institution's primary responsibility or intent. The potential for meaning-making is so great, and our time together so short, that we must constantly ask ourselves, what religious needs can we serve that secular schools, challenging careers, loving families, and political and social organizations do not fully satisfy? Helping people develop spiritually and act religiously is our unique responsibility. Facilitating this religious growth and learning is what we as liberal religious educators can uniquely offer. Together, making meaning of life and living a life of meaning, constitute the *there* we must make sure is there.

There are many ways to make sure there is a *there* in our congregational life. I will address three which together offer opportunities unique to liberal religious education:

- Lifespan religious growth and learning in an intergenerational community
- Ethical and spiritual grounding in social justice
- A liberating pedagogy.

These visions for the twenty-first century are not new; they are the not-fully-realized visions we have held for a generation or more.

There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love, the only survival, the only meaning. Thornton Wilder, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, 1927.

We call it *lifespan* religious education, a term that evokes an image of a seamless continuum, of a graceful bridge spanning the river of life from shore to shore, from birth to death. And yes, we hope that bridge is love, the beloved community.

Since the RE Futures Committee report of 1981, I and most religious educators have been preaching and teaching the gospel of lifespan religious growth and learning throughout our Association. The rhetoric of "lifespan RE" permeates our publications,

brochures and mission statements. Yet I am struck with the almost utter failure of the concept to be realized in our denomination. We offer not a solid span that can be safely crossed, but a series of bobbing rafts that allow travelers, if they are sufficiently adventurous or persistent, to leap from one to another. Whoops! Sometimes there is no raft at all for your age group. Welcoming children into the first ten minutes of adult worship, having the youth group clean up after the potluck, and publishing an adult ed brochure do not collectively constitute lifespan religious education. Even congregations that have rafts for each age group too often are programming for *each* age group, inadvertently maintaining discrete, segregated communities within the community, missing an opportunity to enjoy the benefits of truly intergenerational life.

What would a congregation engaged in lifespan religious growth and learning look like? It would be the ultimate committee of the whole: a multigenerational community in which everyone is seen as both teacher and learner; in which every age and stage of life is equally valued and equally supported by whatever tangible and intangible resources the community has to offer; in which every age and stage of life is allowed to *contribute* whatever tangible and intangible resources they have to offer; a community in which no decision is made about the life of the community – whether in the areas of worship, physical plant, fundraising, budgeting, social action, the arts, education, or any other – without consideration of its impact on and opportunities for every member of the community.

If this vision seems ambitious, it is no more than a restatement of the goals espoused throughout our ranks. But as a religious organization we are culturally and institutionally resistant to realizing those ideals. Part of our resistance is the persistence of nineteenth century understandings of what a church is, what worship is, and what education is. To the extent that church is Sunday morning worship-centered, and worship is pulpit-centered, and education is classroom-centered, much of the life of the congregation will be characterized by parallel play. If everyone were content to play in their traditional space – adults in the living room, children in the (basement) playroom – we wouldn't be asking ourselves, Where are the young adults? Why can't we keep a youth group going? Why don't our eleven-year-olds want to come to church? Why do our elders feel isolated?

These questions suggest that we have a strong, institutionalized middle-age bias, and it is therefore not surprising that we best serve that age group. I am often surprised that people are surprised when a child says something profound ("From the mouth of babes!"), or a youth demonstrates skilled leadership ("He'll be running for president one day!"), or an elder does anything ("Seventy-eight and still...). Ageism, and the patronizing attitudes it produces, work against lifelong faith development and the beloved community. When we remember that the gifts of wisdom, love and service are human capacities found in people of all ages, we will restructure our institutions to change the way we relate to each other religiously. We have examples of the possibilities in our congregations today. Youth and young adults are teaching older adults new ways to worship; participants in *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven* programs are finding that

seventeen- and seventy-four-year-old women have much in common and much to teach each other; children, youth and adults are actively engaged together in social action service projects. We can learn from these and many other models. And we can learn from our religious educators who are particularly aware that people of all ages are more alike than different. We can resist our tendencies to compartmentalize people by age and instead nurture the connections among all ages in what may be the last presence of multi-generational life – the religious community.

But genuine respect for all ages and truly multigenerational communities are counter-cultural prospects that will require institutional transformation to be fully realized. To the extent that "RE" is synonymous with "kids," and "religious educator" is associated with "childcare," and children, youth and those who serve them are marginalized, we are not achieving the depth and vitality we could as a faith community and a teaching and learning community. Yet creating this lifespan bridge is one of the most valuable gifts a religious community can offer.

To attain individual morality in an age demanding social morality…is utterly to fail to apprehend the situation. Jane Addams

On Racial Justice Day at General Assembly in Charlotte, we all broke into small groups to discuss the morning's program. A young woman in my circle was just graduating from high school and about to attend a prestigious university. She was bright and liberal and born and raised Unitarian Universalist. And she was angry. She had been listening to Mark Morrison-Reed and Bill Jones describe their experiences with racism in society and within the UUA. And she was shocked. She said she had been taught that the Civil Rights Movement of the sixties had basically eliminated racism. That it was ancient history; that we had moved beyond it. She said she was angry because she felt she had been lied to. Why, she asked, didn't my church tell me about the reality of racism?

At the 1984 Unitarian Universalist National Workshop on Social Justice, the Revs. Richard S. Gilbert and Roberta Nelson spoke on the theme, "Religious Education and Social Action: Branches of the Same Tree." The 'Compleat' Church, Gilbert wrote, links religious education and social action. "It is a linkage that should not be necessary to makeit seems self-evident." In his address and in many other works, he has described a doctrine of the church as a prophetic, learning, caring and celebrating community, one that is "insufficient, inadequate, unless all parts are complete and healthy." Gilbert and the First Unitarian Church of Rochester, NY, continue to model this vision.

In her remarks, Roberta Nelson emphasized that social justice is “caught” not “taught.” When we model the risks and rewards of justice seeking, and when people of all ages are engaged together in social action, we make meaning of our lives. Nelson quotes Victor Frankl: “We are doomed to failure if our goal is to find meaning in being happy. Happiness is the side effect of fulfilling the search for meaning.” “The work of

meaning-making is hard," writes Nelson. "Part of the quest for meaning for me is to put that which I value, prize and cherish into action."

A primary goal of religious education is to build community. Education breaks down the dichotomy between self and others, developing the human capacity to feel identity with and empathy for all other people, increasing our ability to draw from and contribute to ever-widening circles of human communities. As we learn about others, our sense of interdependence, of responsibility to and connectedness with, others grow. When we feel that our welfare is linked to the welfare of the world and that taking care of self is really taking care of community, we are moved to act. Unless and until the world knows perfect justice, education with integrity--religious education that makes meaning--must not only inspire but also equip us to change the world. Rooted in ethical community, we are freed to live ethically.

Unitarian Universalism, including our religious education practices, has a long and strong history of justice seeking. We have used our classrooms and pulpits, our sanctuaries and General Assemblies, our finances and talents, our music and arts, our political and organizing skills, our energies, our lives, to promote a more just world. We should pause to acknowledge our heritage and appreciate our efforts. But not pause too long, because we are increasingly aware of how much could be done. If we can resist our cultural tendency to compartmentalize our religious life into worship, religious education, and social justice boxes; if we can engage all ages in the praxis of reflection and action, we could insure that religious education and social action are indeed two branches of the same tree and that social justice is inseparable from meaning-making in our faith. In doing so, we would raise children who are much better equipped than we were to engage in and contribute to their multi-cultural world. In the process, we ourselves would be transformed into a more diverse multi-cultural denomination, not because of what we preach, but because of what we do.

The very word "curriculum" conjures up images of boxes piled on top of each other in out-of-the-way places, packed with dull workbooks for children to fill out endlessly in Sunday School. Maria Harris, *Fashion Me A People*

As a person responsible for developing some of those boxes (piled on top of each other in my office), I agree. When we hear the word "curriculum," our minds do an automatic word association with "classroom" – the classrooms of our childhood. Those classrooms grew out of the nineteenth century pedagogy that sought to prepare a labor force for an emerging industrial society and to "Americanize" an increasingly diverse population. That legacy is so strong in our larger culture that it intrudes on our lifespan religious education programs despite our strong history of progressive educational philosophy and practice; despite the voices of Channing, Fahs, Dewey, Knowles, Freire, hooks and others we have listened to; and despite the many creative, engaging, and experiential RE programs throughout our denomination. We need to expand our understanding of "curriculum" beyond the books, boxes, and classrooms in order to fully realize the transforming power available to us as liberal religious communities.

In *Fashion Me A People*, Maria Harris contends that the curriculum is "the entire course of the church's life," the mobilizing of the creative and educative process of the entire religious community. I take that as a warning. All churches teach the same three curricula, Harris continues, referring to Elliot Eisner's model in *The Educational Imagination.* The *explicit* curriculum is what we actually present with conscious intent. The *implicit* curriculum includes the patterns of organization, the procedures, and the attitudes that frame the explicit curriculum. The implicit can reinforce or contradict the explicit curriculum. The null curriculum is a paradox; it is what is *not* said and *not* done, but it is *not* neutral. Silence can be deafening, and destructive.

If we explicitly state in our church literature that we value our youth, but have a $200 youth budget, no adults to work with youth, or no willingness to hold a district youth conference in our building, one might conclude from Harris's analysis that the implicit curriculum contradicts and undermines the explicit curriculum. Both "curricula" teach. This view of curriculum is a powerful reminder that we need to pay attention to what the entire community is teaching the entire community. Using this understanding as a new lens would not only help us see more clearly our counterproductive practices, it would necessarily enlist the entire congregation in creating lifespan learning.

If implemented, the-church-is-the-curriculum philosophy would be transforming, but it is not the only useful concept of "curriculum." When Directors of Religious Education ask me if we have a curriculum to address racism or to explore Buddhism, I can't say, "Why no, your *church* is the curriculum!" Bigger than a box, but smaller than the entire course of the church, (Would you want to be the Director of the Entire Course of the Church?), is curriculum as "planned learning opportunities for intentional outcomes." In other words, creating experiences that give people an opportunity to learn something worth learning. Those experiences need not be bound by a classroom, by age group, or by any form of pedagogy, although they can be. The outcomes, too, need not be limited to traditional cognitive goals and measurable objectives, and hopefully, are not. In fact, we can be proud of our history of eclectic, progressive approaches to education while also recognizing how we are culture-bound in ways that work against our goals.

Curriculum includes intent and process as well as content. "The medium is the message," said Marshall McLuhan. Point taken, but it is not strictly true. The medium is *a* message; content is a message; action is a message; and silence or inaction is a message. In implementing programs that facilitate lifespan faith development, we need to attend to each of these components. Because we value the worth of each individual, we strive to treat each other with love and respect. This not only models our religious principles; it nurtures a sense of self-respect and self-acceptance that is the basis of love for others. Because we value the use of reason and intellect, we provide factual and conceptual information and encourage critical inquiry. Because our sense of right and wrong are central to the meaning we make of our lives, we act. We articulate our values, we witness them, and we try to live them. And because we don't know everything and can't control everything, we make room for mystery; for awe and wonder; for oneness

with a universe greater than the human constellation; for the unknowable and unexplainable. We try to nurture a spiritually meaningful life, that is, a life examined, mysterious, and dedicated – a life examined by the dual standards of reason and morality, a life open to the mystery within and between human spirits, a life dedicated to purposes greater than the interests of the individual. My hope is that we do not lose any dimension of our heritage – spiritual, intellectual or ethical, because together they define what a liberal religious education offers; together they put a *there* there.

We grow forward when the delights of growth and the anxieties of safety are greater than the anxieties of growth and the delights of safety.

To thrive and not merely survive in the twenty-first century, we need to grow forward with our strengths as a liberal religious community, offering lifespan religious growth and learning in an intergenerational community; educating for social action; and providing the freedom to search for truth and meaning. Unitarian Universalism has undergone significant transformation in the past and we face an opportunity to grow forward again by transforming those aspects of our institutional culture that clip our wings.

We need to expand our concept of "RE," and we need to change our relationship with our religious educators. Too often, directors and ministers of religious education learn the gospel of lifespan religious education only to return to institutions uncommitted to putting the concept into practice. Religious educators educate for social justice in the classroom only to see the implicit church curriculum contradict the explicit--in the ways children, youth and those who serve them are treated; in the level of institutional resources committed to social action. Religious educators – important facilitators of meaning-making in the faith community – are too often excluded from, or severely underrepresented on, the committees, boards and task forces that make decisions, set priorities, and allocate resources for our religious life. Those engaged in religious education need to be at all the tables, be included in educational opportunities, and be welcomed in partnership with parish ministers if we are to be the beloved communities which offer, in James Luther Adams' words, intimacy (community) and ultimacy (meaning) throughout the lifespan; if we are to make sure there is a *there* there for all ages.