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## **Parable for All Ages**

*by Rev. Mary Higgins*

There is a story I want to tell you of a little boy. He was a little boy who knew the world to be a hostile place... a place where even the simplest tasks were difficult and the difficult tasks seemed impossible and frustrating. When it was easy for others to play baseball; he would get so anxious that he almost always struck out. When it was easy for others to read, this little fellow got all the letters mixed up in his head and the words he sounded out were not words that he or anyone else knew. He seemed to have enough energy to run a big car on just the motion he generated. He had a hard time even sitting still long enough to eat his own breakfast. He sometimes would forget to get dressed even!

One day when he was just ten years old his Mom and Dad told him they were moving to a new state and that when they moved they were moving to a house that was next to a big farm. They told him that there were chickens at their new house but since they were all from the city, they would probably give the chickens to the farmer next door. They were not sure they could care for the chickens well enough. The little boy got excited when he heard about the chickens and begged his mother and father to keep them.

He promised PROMISED, that he would take care of the chickens and they would never be sorry.. if only...if only... they would let him try. The parents said, they would try it but that the little boy needed to join 4-H so he could learn to care for these egg producers. The little boy agreed and join 4-H, he did.

At first it was new... how to feed the chickens; how much straw to put in their laying boxes each day. When they moved it was getting cold and the little boy added heat to the henhouse to keep his new charges warm. He stopped each day on his way home from school at Hank's Country Store in the little town where they lived and picked up all the discarded vegetables and fruits they were going to throw away and carried the carrots, cabbages and slightly rotting apples home from the store in a box on his shoulder to feed his flock.

There was just one thing that troubled the boy about his feathered charges, though and that was the way they treated one of their own. It seemed to the little boy that seventeen of his chickens had organized their days around the destruction of the little chicken at the end of the pecking order. The little boy named the chicken at the end of the line Featherless, for the constant pecking on her by the others had caused her to loose almost all of her feathers and her skin was exposed and raw.

The little boy was outraged, and as he learned to care for these chickens, he decided he needed to not only change the pecking order, but eliminate it all together. The boy's mother would stand on the porch of their house and listen for the boy to return from school. She would know he was close when she heard him singing down their long driveway these familiar words: "Old McDonald had a farm, eeeeeeeeeiooo..... he would sing as he carried his basket of vegetables to the end of the drive where the chicken coop

was located.

There were eighteen chickens...eighteen Rhode Island Red chickens. Their color was so beautiful... all mixed up with blues, auburn brown and reddish colored feathers. They were quite the sight to behold. When they heard the little brown haired boy, they acted like a group of girls in the dorm a half hour before their dates arrived, you could feel the excitement in the air and hear the sounds of these hens running to the fence of their enclosure and waiting for the snack train to arrive with all the vegetables.

One day the mother heard the strangest thing... it sounded like the little boy was lecturing the chickens..... and it was all about Featherless, the chicken at the bottom of the pecking order. The conversation went something like this.....

“I can’t tell you how disappointed I am in you... here you all are, living a pretty good life... none of you deserving more than the others, but some of you have decided that you are going to make life for this little chicken Featherless, just miserable. I am so ashamed of you and I want you to stop right now. After all, what has she ever done to you... any of you? How dare you hurt her. I am going to talk to you every day until this ceases. I don’t want any talking back now... you just need to do this.

The little boy had struck up a friendship with the man next door and told him of his concern for Featherless, and the farmer told him there was an old farmers tale that you could not teach a chicken to do anything, but, he told the boy, if you possess the magic touch and were able to teach the chicken just one thing, then you could teach anybody anything. The little boy listened and kept up his strategy.

He talked to the chickens about love; he talked to the chickens about bullies, for he knew a lot of bullies who had come after him in his day. He talked about peace and he talked about what their chicken coop could look like if only they would stop picking on Featherless.

Time passed; the little boy lectured the chickens and sang to them. He changed their straw every day and made sure their coop got insulated. One day the mother was carrying her laundry to the clothesline near the coop and she saw the chickens running out to the fence in eager anticipation that the little boy was home with the daily stash of vegetables. They did not seem overly sad to see it was the mother, but the mother noticed the most astonishing thing. There were no chickens without feathers in the brood. All of them were preening and glistening in the sun... not a one was raw... not one was hurt. The mother got tears in her eyes. She knew the little boy was so passionate about justice for his chickens because of the suffering he had endured with other children as he struggled to grow up.... she knew that every time he looked at his chickens and saw them with feathers, he knew there was hope for him because if you can teach a chicken to do one thing only, you can teach anybody else anything. Justice for the chickens just might become justice for the little boy.

## **Interfaith Values**

*by Rev. Phillip Lund*

Once upon a time I thought I'd marry another Unitarian Universalist. I didn't, of course. I married Julia, a Mennonite—a very liberal Mennonite—and now all sorts of questions about how to raise our children have appeared. Which tradition, Unitarian Universalist or Mennonite, will be the primary religious home for our family? How can we stay connected to both traditions? Will we be able to stay active in two different congregations where we both have so felt welcomed?

It turns out that these questions were relatively easy to sort out once we shifted our focus to what really matters—finding the values from each of our traditions that we wanted to pass on to our children. So, for example, the Mennonites are an historic peace church, something neither the Unitarians nor the Universalists were. Since this is a core value from Julia's tradition, and since it's a stance that I'm extremely sympathetic to, we've decided our family is going to be an historic peace family!

For my part, I'm very proud of the way Unitarian Universalists have dealt with issues of sexuality and sexual orientation. Both *Our Whole Lives* (or *OWL*—the UUA's lifespan comprehensive sexuality education program) and the Association's position on civil marriage as a civil right go straight to the heart of our commitment to the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Julia understands that this is an important part of my religious heritage, and we hope to provide a family environment that deals openly and honestly with human sexuality and sexual orientation.

Together we've decided that participating in *OWL* should part of our children's religious education, so we're going to make the local Unitarian Universalist congregation our primary religious home. And since Mennonites practice adult baptism, we'll let our children know that they will have an opportunity to make a commitment to that part of our family's combined religious heritage later on if they choose. The important thing is that our children understand the link between the values our family promotes, values like standing on the side of peace and love, and their parents' faith traditions.

## **What We Are**

*by Rev. Lynn Ungar*

“Mama, am I Jewish?” I knew we were going to get around to that question eventually. I just hadn’t come up with any very good answer. But here it was—they’d been talking about Chanukah in my daughter Mattéa’s first grade class. Never shy, she was quick to volunteer that we had a menorah at home, and to describe how we lit the candles and said the Hebrew blessing during the eight nights of Chanukah. Well, knowing Mattéa, I’m sure she described how *she* lit the Chanukah candles. And so, reasonably enough, her classmates wanted to know if she was Jewish.

And so, even more reasonably, Mattéa wanted to know the same thing. It’s a fair question, even an inevitable question. It’s just not that easy to answer. We are Unitarian Universalists—she knows that. But Judaism is part of my heritage, and my love for the Jewish rituals in no way conflicts with my UU identity.

How you define a Jewish identity is more complicated, though. My father is Jewish, my mother is not. Since Judaism is traditionally passed through the female line, that makes me officially not Jewish. More liberal branches of Judaism (the ones I’m most likely to be comfortable with), on the other hand, would count me as a Jew.

My daughter, however, is not biologically related to me. Although we don’t really know anything about her birthparents’ religion, it is a pretty good bet that her biological parents, both African-American, are not Jewish. And my partner, Mattéa’s other mom, comes from a strictly WASP background. How you figure matrilineal descent with two moms is anybody’s guess.

Technically speaking, I think it’s pretty clear that my daughter is not a Jew. But biology is not all that defines Judaism. There is, of course, a system of beliefs, some of which we subscribe to, and some of which we don’t. There is a rich tradition of ritual and practice, some of which we observe, and most of which we don’t. There is a wonderful body of Jewish culture, some of which she has experienced and some of which she has not. (And some of which she likes better than others. For instance, she approves highly of matzah ball soup at Passover, but has yet to develop a taste for homemade gefilte fish.)

The only answer I could think to give her, after an incomprehensible attempt at explaining the different facets of Judaism, was that she’s “part Jewish.” “Half Jewish?” she asked. She likes the idea of being half something and half something else. She has a number of friends who are half Black and half White, or half Anglo and half Latina, or any of the other permutations so common in the Bay Area of California.

“Well, no, not really. I’m half Jewish. But I’m only one of your parents.” Of course, one of how many complicates the questions. One of her two moms, or one of the foursome that constitutes her biological and adoptive parents? How do you do the math when you can’t even determine which numbers you’re using? I try again. “Let’s say you’re ‘sort of’ Jewish, OK?”

It's not that satisfactory of an answer, but it was the best I could do. She's "sort of Jewish." Raised by White parents, I suppose she's "sort of" White, which might make her, by some calculation, "sort of" Black. In reality, she describes herself as "Brown," which she sees, logically enough, as a more accurate description. A quick glance at her skin proves that she is, in fact, a lovely, medium, smack-down-the middle shade of brown. The fact of the matter is that, no matter how complicated the explanations, she knows who she is—and she knows that she can choose the words that most clearly describe her internal reality. Maybe she'll want to call herself "sort of" Jewish. Maybe she'll just want to call herself Unitarian Universalist, with all its complex possibilities and variations, and let it go at that.

## **Community Service**

*by Rev. Linda Olson Peebles*

When I was a teenager, and then a young adult, I tried very hard to be an individualist, someone who was independent and didn't go along with the crowd.

And yet, I somehow always found myself being involved with group endeavors and then eventually becoming one of the leaders! Even though I fancied myself a "rebel" who didn't trust the "establishment" I ended up involved in clubs and advisory groups and volunteer organizations, while I was a student, and after I began working. I couldn't figure out why this was happening to me, until at some point, I saw a pattern that was in my family, and had been there for generations.

My parents had jobs that involved helping people - my dad as a minister and my mom as a teacher. And they both offered volunteer leadership in their communities - scouts, sports leagues, PTAs. My grandparents' jobs didn't seem that community-minded (factory steel-worker, office-worker, homemakers), but my grandfathers were involved in working with community groups as a union organizer, a church head usher, a hospital volunteer, a Scoutmaster, and singing in choirs. And both grandmothers were leaders in their churches.

Interestingly, even though they had different political party affiliations, all my grandparents were volunteer election officers every election. Then I learned about their parents, and discovered that going back to the generation that spanned the turn of the last century, our family had included business leaders and store owners and doctors, helping shape community politics and human services. And church leadership was present in all the families.

Apparently, it's in our family nature to get involved, to care about the community, and to offer leadership to the fabric that holds us all together. So just like my parents, and grandparents, and great-grandparents, now I serve on community boards and have a career helping people in churches. And I watch my own children begin their lifetime of being involved with community!

## **My Father's Three Jobs**

*by Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley*

When I was a young child, my father had three jobs. First, by day, he worked at an iron factory. Second, his responsibilities on the church board included visiting the sick and shut-in and ministering to the needy. Third, as a trained auto mechanic and lover of cars, dad volunteered at the church-owned gas station repairing cars and church-owned vehicles (it was the old-fashioned kind of gas station). This enterprise, by the way, brought in considerable revenue for the church. As a young child, it was difficult to know just what my father's vocation was.

Frederick Buechner defined vocation as that place “where your deepest gladness meets the world's greatest need.” Of the three jobs my father held, those of us around him could tell that his work at the iron factory did not bring him the greatest gladness. We could feel the weight of hard labor when he arrived home.

By the time I was nine or ten years old, dad quit his job at the iron factory, and reinvented himself. He turned one of his jobs into something that would support the family. For nine years, he served as manager of the gas station. While I'm sure that dad was an excellent mechanic, this job wasn't so much about pumping gas or fixing cars as it was about interaction with people.

In the 1950's—some of you will remember—urban gas stations were not simultaneously the convenience stores they are today, and one didn't pump their own gas by simply inserting a plastic card in the slot. Little did we know then that gas station attendants were important avenues of communication.

I frequently stopped by the station only to find dad busy, always with a glow in his eyes. Though I suspect he didn't think of himself as a salesman, I am convinced that dad could have sold almost anyone the Brooklyn Bridge before they left. He managed to stock almost anything that might be of interest to a man (this was, of course, before women drivers were as common as men). So, in addition to vehicle fluids and tires and air fresheners, dad carried key chains, shaving cream, combs, umbrellas, caps ... you name it. He instinctively knew what men needed and he made sure that the shelves were stocked.

In the process of selling these products, his customers developed a rapport that went beyond sales and led to them opening up about whatever was going on in their lives—their spouses or children, their finances, their health, their feelings. And being the compassionate and charismatic person that he is, I watched my dad blossom as he discovered his gift for ministry at the gasoline station.

I think it was his charisma that led to him building a loyal clientele. The gas station was like the barbershop in many black communities, or the local bar in other communities—a place of relaxation and friendship, a place of confession, a place where men gathered to support each other on life's journey.

At one point, I thought that my father just had the “gift of gab,” but later I came to understand that he wasn’t ‘*just talkin.*’ He was ministering to people’s needs. Caring was my father’s calling.

Until his illness,\* dad did pastoral calling. In nearly every one of our phone conversations, he would tell me who was sick and who had recently died. It had been thirty or forty years since I had seen most of the people he mentioned; but through his passion for this ministry, I came to know them again.

When my father began to manage the gas station, I don’t think that he thought of himself as a minister. But the congregation saw his gifts and ordained him.

Ministry is what we do together—clergy and the laity. It flows from a religious conviction that invites people to become more of themselves, more whole, as we give witness to a vision of a world transformed by our care.

\* My father, Daniel L. Bowens, died in January 2005. This essay was delivered at his funeral.

## **Sibling Rivalry**

*by Cindy Spring*

I was raised with an older sister and two younger brothers, and sibling rivalry was alive and well in our household. My mother let us know early on that being angry was okay, but hurting someone else was not. When we were upset, she would have us sit down across the table from each other for five minutes. We were to look at each other, but not talk. Of course, soon we were smiling, and then laughing. I don't think I ever sat for the full five minutes. The argument was usually over in two or three minutes and we would leave happily planning our next joint activity.

When my brothers were 6 and 8 Mom bought a set of children's boxing gloves. When she heard the boys fighting, she would call them downstairs, hand them the gloves, and follow them into the living room. They would box with each other, and she would serve as referee - and again, they were soon laughing and enjoying it.

One of the great benefits is that we grew up really liking each other. We are now all in our 50s, but when we get together it is like old times.

I thought about Mom's approach to anger when I was a mother of young ones. We only had two children, and our daughter took care of herself by withdrawing into her room whenever she felt really angry. Our son was an extrovert and needed an outlet for his angry feelings. He took karate lessons in elementary school and when he started Junior High we bought him a set of drums. I can remember many days when he would come home from high school, drop his books, and head right down to the basement. He would drum for half an hour, then come back up ready to talk and be part of the family.

Helping children and youth find safe outlets for their angry feelings is so important. Of course, we were always willing to talk, too, and they knew that, but often talking isn't enough.

## **Faith**

*by Rev. Elizabeth Strong*

When my youngest daughter learned about the treatment of calves being raised for veal, she demanded that I never eat veal again. Her outrage was based on the ethical treatment of animals and I fully supported her outrage. To this day I have not eaten veal, in part because of my support and agreement with her on this issue, but also out of respect for her fervent commitment to this principle that is grounded in our seventh Principle of the Interdependent Web of Existence of which we are a part. And, I certainly would not want to incur her wrath as she is a formidable woman!!

My oldest daughter was accepted into a special program of study at the University of Virginia to earn her undergraduate degree but she declined the offer because she disagreed with many of their hiring policies and discriminatory practices. A sigh from Mom came along with the support for her decision. After several years of struggle and study she graduated this May (2005) with her Masters in Teaching degree from Mary Baldwin College in Staunton, VA.

Both of these actions were changes in behavior based on faith principles. My understanding was twofold: (1) greater insight into my children's decisions based on ethical principles that caused them to take a longer and harder journey to meet their goals, and (2) my choice to respect their decisions and align my behavior accordingly even though it meant changing my life patterns.

My youngest son is a Unitarian Universalist minister and my oldest son is an Operating Room Nurse, so they have both built on their Unitarian Universalism in the choices they have made for careers.

Someone once asked me, "When do you know if your children are Unitarian Universalist?" I answered, "When they tell you they are." I would now add, when you see that they are acting on the Principles, beliefs, and values of Unitarian Universalism in their lives and are able to articulate why they are acting as they are. Patience, humor and faith are all required of us who raise our children in this religion.

## **Moral Obedience**

*by Rev. David Pettee*

When I was twelve years old, I asked my grandfather an innocent question about our family genealogy, unaware that he been on the lookout for a family historian among his grandchildren! My question was met with great enthusiasm, and served to ignite in me an interest in family history that has become a life-long hobby. In particular, my grandfather overwhelmed me with literature about one of our forebears, Roger Williams, the seventeenth century religious heretic whose banishment from the Massachusetts Bay Colony would fuel his commitment to agitate for the separation of church and state. Three decades would pass before I would finally appreciate the difference between ancestor worship, and the responsibility borne of carrying forth a family tradition.

In 1998, I attended the ceremony of union of one of my best friends. Midway through the ceremony, the guests were reminded that this celebration of love was not legal. I remember feeling incredibly sad and bewildered why anyone would not want to bless this loving relationship. Sitting by myself, stewing over this obvious injustice, I had a sudden epiphany that as a minister, every time I signed a marriage license, I was blurring the lines that separate church from state-- forgetting that marriage was a civil, not a religious contract. I had been awakened to teachings of my grandfather, and finally understood what he had been telling me so many years ago. Every time I signed a license, serving as an agent of the state, I was colluding with the discrimination of same sex couples, denied the freedom to marry. I decided to no longer sign marriage licenses until same sex couples had the legal and civil freedom to marry.

Not long after deciding to commit moral obedience, I met with a couple and shared the reasons why I was unwilling to sign their marriage license. Not only did they respect my position, they asked me to preach a short homily about it during the marriage ceremony itself! In preparation, I realized that I could draw strength and grounding directly from my familial heritage, spurred on my ongoing genealogical research that had revealed that my connection to Roger Williams was much deeper, as a descendant through three of his six children! As an ever-present reminder of the responsibility of being a guardian of a living tradition of justice and equality, on the wall above my desk in my office at the UUA, is a century old pen and ink drawing of a statue of Roger Williams.

## **Volunteer Involvement**

*by Elizabeth M. Jones*

When asked about why I decided to become a religious educator, I often tell the story of my mother. My mother taught the four and five year old Sunday School class in the church I grew up for over 24 years. The church decided that it was about time to recognize her for her commitment to the program, and during a church service they asked all the people present who had ever been one of her students to stand. My mother said that it was a little daunting to see two generations of people stand. It wasn't long after that when my mother decided that it was time to switch to some new involvements with the church!

As I've been pondering this story, I realized that its importance is not in her teaching Sunday school, but in her commitment to active involvement. And, an involvement that gave her joy. I've looked back at all my family and realized that I come from a family that believes in actively serving the organizations they believe in. I remember many a Saturday when we sat around the dining room table making sheep out of cotton balls and cutting out bluebirds of happiness. I don't think that my mother saw that as a task that needed to be completed, but an opportunity for the family to be engaged in projects together.

It wasn't just my mother either. My dad drove the church bus for years. Most of the people he picked up were seniors who could not drive. They loved him because he wore a different hat each week, usually tied to the season. He found joy in what he was doing. Both of my parents served at one time or another as PTA presidents or advisors to many different youth groups where my sister and I belonged. I look even further back and remember all the dolls my grandmother used to sew for the children in hospitals, and the joy she received from being a volunteer in a Better Baby Clinic. So, this is truly a legacy my family has given to me.

And even today, my mother serves as an officer of her garden club, as a volunteer clerk in a thrift store that supports her community assistance program, and as a Spanish language interpreter for people applying for assistance in paying their utility bills. She doesn't do any of this out of obligation, but out of the pleasure she gets from helping others.

I recognize that the volunteer involvement where I have served, not only to assist others, but it brings me a sense of joy and pleasure. I see the same happening in my sister's life. My husband builds haunted houses for non-profit organizations not only to raise money but because he enjoys it. And I see it continuing on in my son who taught the four and five-year-old Sunday School class for six years, and who enjoys building haunted houses and theatrical sets. It's a family story of joy in service, and a legacy to be passed on.

## **Daddy**

*by Rev. Mike Morran*

I have learned a lot from my father. Most of what he has taught me has been good and useful, some of it not so good, and some of it I have hired professional therapists to help me sort out. We've come a long way in our relationship, my father and I. Yet there are still, and there will always be, places that we will never go together. There are subjects we will never talk about in a meaningful way, issues from the past that will never, and I do mean never, be resolved. This is not to reflect a sense of hopelessness, just an acknowledgment of the truth of how things are.

Like most fathers and sons, my dad and I have had our share of difficulties. My memory is that we could barely speak to each other when I was seventeen or so. Just being in the same room together created a tension neither of us understood or knew how to move beyond. There have been deep hurts and disappointments on both sides of our relationship, most of which go back to those problematic years when every fiber of our respective beings thought that the other was hopelessly out of touch.

These days, finally, my perception is that the relationship between my father and I is full of gratitude. I am grateful for all the loving support (and some other varieties as well) that he sends my way. We don't always agree and that's OK. We don't always approve of what the other does and that's OK too. We both lean liberal and we both feel strongly about the values that our U.U. churches espouse. I am grateful for the friendship and mutual respect that our values allow, even in the face of our being very different people. Robert Bly, on the archetypal psychology of men wrote; *"... as long as a man's father is still alive, there are still giants walking in the world."* I think about that a lot now when I think of my father.

There was a time in my late twenties when I spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to reconcile with my father. I read books, visited therapists, tried to reconnect with my inner-child, and all that sort of thing. I even started doing volunteer work with boys and young men through Big-Brothers Big-Sisters and through the juvenile court system, partially because it was a good cause and I could do it, but also partially in hopes that I could re-connect with the boy I had once been and couldn't seem to remember.

I learned a lot. I learned just how little I really knew about my father, or what it must have been like to be him. I realized how difficult it must have been to deal with a stubborn, occasionally mean-streaked, rebellious, and independent teenager like myself. And, these days being a father of two boys myself, I pray almost daily (though with ever-decreasing confidence) that what goes around won't necessarily have to come around.

I am not painting this relatively dark picture because of any desire to denigrate fatherhood, and certainly not to denigrate my father. This is simply the way I remember it, and in hindsight I know that much of the responsibility for the quality of our relationship was mine. Rather, I am telling this story to make a point about healing and about love, and I hope to say something about how far it is possible to come.

I also want to say something about this notion of “father,” and “fatherhood,” particularly as an archetype, or as an ideal. Consider the idea of father and fatherhood in the Judeo-Christian tradition beginning with Genesis. God, the father of everything places his children into a beautiful garden, lies to them about eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, then punishes them for calling his bluff, effectively holding his children accountable for their behavior but refusing to answer any questions himself. I don’t know about you, but I would consider that pretty poor parenting.

There are plenty of other examples we could point to, but the biblical story I want to turn to is the one that has always caused me the most distress, and probably the one I’ve understood the least.

Abraham is one hundred years old, and Sarah is ninety when God causes them to be blessed with a boy child. They name him Isaac, and when the boy is not quite an adolescent, God commands Abraham to lead him away to a mountaintop, and make of him a burnt offering. The troubling part is that Abraham, the father of all the Jews, patriarch of patriarchs, the one who had pleaded with God not to destroy the city of Sodom, simply obeys. He does not plead. He does not question. He does not wonder at the kind of God who would ask such a thing, or even check to make sure he heard it right. Imagine the scene... A child tied with ropes to the tinder he himself had carried, an old man, his father, standing over him with the knife raised, his hand stayed only at the last moment by God believing that Abraham’s faith had been successfully tested.

I’m not the only one who’s had a hard time finding the silver lining in this story. One of the traditional interpretations is that this story reminds us of how precarious is God’s favor, and how God rewards our trust in him, all of which rather smacks of authoritarianism to us moderns. Liberals generally understand that morality at the point of a knife or a gun is hardly a morality worth having.

But also consider the modern ideal of fatherhood. It is just as confused and just as confusing. We fathers are too hard-headed or too soft, too macho or too sensitive, too aggressive or too wimpy, too much the disciplinarian or too lax, too obsessed with sex or too detached to care, too rational or too clueless. I know deeply, and I bet every man and father also knows that there is no way to get it exactly right. This ideal that we hold our fathers up to is frankly impossible.

It occurs to me that much of the un-reconciled portions of the relationship I had with my father were due to exactly these kinds of discrepancies between the expectations of a father I’d been taught to have (and allowed myself to have), and the very human person who actually was my father.

In hindsight, I also see that both of us were struggling with deep issues that we had no language, no ritual, and no role models to help us understand. My father was struggling with the tension between his desire to hang on to his child and the need to let me grow up. I was struggling with a fierce desire to be independent and significant anger and

denial that I wasn't yet ready. All of this was complicated by an extended family dynamic that put enormous pressure on both of us.

Back on the mountaintop with Abraham and Isaac, in one way or another, we have all been Isaac. Scott Turow has written of this story: *"...the bible does not record Isaac's responses. We do not know if he, like Jesus, asked, "Father, why have you forsaken me?" We do not know if he begged, the way most of us would, for his life. We know only that he obeyed. That he was a child. That because he knew nothing else, he did as his father required. We know he allowed himself to be bound with rope. We know he let his father lay him on the altar of pyramided firewood which together they had raised to God. We know he watched his father on the mountaintop raise the gleaming knife above his breastbone. We know he was a child, the son of a man with a Big Idea, who in his longing and confusion, even in his final instants, could only look to his father with that eternal if foundering hope for love."*

For better or worse, there was a time when we, as children, in all our floundering pride and our desperate need for individuation were dependent on these men, whoever they were or are, with all of their floundering pride, Big Ideas, and bumbling humanity.

There came a time, back in those days of therapy and searching when I became convinced that what needed to happen with my father was one of those have-it-all-out conversations. It seemed important that I tell him all the ways he let me down, all the ways I had sabotaged our relationship, all the things I had gotten away with when he wasn't paying attention (and secretly wished he had called me to account for), all the anger I had for all the things he'd done or not done. I planned it meticulously. I knew just the kind of moment I was waiting for. I knew just how I was going to warm him up. I knew just how I was going to phrase things so I'd be most likely to get him to participate and least likely to put him on the defensive. I even practiced with my therapist. Then I tried it.

It was an absolute disaster. And it was a complete success. Beginning with the skill of a surgeon, and later with almost desperate bluntness, he deflected each and every attempt I made to talk about certain issues and events from the past. He changed the subject. He went off on tangents. He got us hopelessly bogged down in inconsequential details. He made it so much work to keep the conversation focused and moving that I just about lost my temper, which was just about the one and only thing that both of us knew would get me utterly dismissed as a lunatic. I don't know about you, but in my family, with our middle class, white collar habits and mores, no matter how disrespectful, dismissive, condescending, dysfunctional, snide, biting, or even downright mean anyone was to anyone else, what was always and invariably true and understood was that the first person to raise their voice instantly and automatically lost the argument! And so I was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Eventually it became clear that my have-it-all-out conversation would never happen. More importantly, it became clear that it didn't matter.

It is a great spiritual truth that being in relationship with someone we love is much less about getting what we want out of it than it is about simply loving them.

At the end of the movie *Smoke Signals*, as the main character is throwing the cremated remains of his father into the rushing waters of a river, the narrators' voice speaks a poem by Dick Lourie.

How do we forgive our fathers? Maybe in a dream? Do we forgive our fathers for leaving us too often or forever when we were little? Maybe for scaring us with unexpected rage or making us nervous because there never seemed to be any rage there at all. Do we forgive our fathers for marrying or not marrying our mothers? For divorcing or not divorcing our mothers? And shall we forgive them for their excesses of warmth... or coldness? Shall we forgive them for pushing or leaning? Or shutting doors? Or speaking through walls? Or never speaking? Or never being silent? Will we forgive our fathers in our age... or in theirs? Or in their death? If we forgive our fathers, what is left?

The question haunts me to this day. If we forgive our fathers, what is left? Perhaps what is left is not our fathers, but simply the wonderfully fallible men whose wandering path through life coincided with ours, and the love, whatever form it has taken, that was and is between us. Perhaps what is left is the steady call of Life, beckoning us to grow up and take ownership and responsibility for ourselves, just as we'd always hoped our fathers would. Perhaps what is left is the mystery of who we are, without blame, without baggage, without rancor, without limits.

## **My Faith Home, my personal story for all ages**

*by Rev. Hope Johnson*

Hi, my name is Hope and I'm from the island of Jamaica in the Caribbean Sea. I grew up all over the world but always went back home to my island. I was raised Anglican which folks here in the United States, call Episcopalian. My twin sister Janice and I went to Sunday School every single Sunday no matter where we found ourselves. And we would get in trouble *every single Sunday*. Our Sunday School teachers didn't like the questions we asked each week when there was one thing or another that we did not understand.

“I don't understand the Trinity. If God is God why do we need to pray to Father, Son and Holy Ghost? But you said ghosts are *not* real. But I don't believe that the Devil is real. Where's Hell? But I do love Jesus, I just don't understand it the way you do. Now about this Virgin Birth...”

Each question we asked was answered with: “You can't ask that. Just because. It's in the Bible. The Bible is the word of God. You will understand one day but for now, you just can't ask that...”

One Sunday, we had had enough...so when our Dad came to pick us up from the classroom he found us crying and saying we would never, *never ever* go back to Sunday School. I remember that we went out for ice cream and our tears dried up real fast! Our Dad was so patient—he talked to us for days and days. He didn't get us to change our minds. No more Sunday School... no more. He tried to understand why we didn't want to go back to Sunday School. He reminded us that we would miss our friends. He reminded us that we would miss the stories. He reminded us that we would miss everything. Oh well, we had had enough. No more, no more...

Finally, Dad said. OK. No more Sunday School. **NO MORE SUNDAY SCHOOL!**  
Yeah!!! No more Sunday School!

Sunday morning came by, no Sunday School. Yeah!!!

The following week rolled by—Sunday morning came by again. **NO SUNDAY SCHOOL!!! YEAH!!!**

The third week, Dad woke us up early. Time to get up. We are going to visit another house of worship!!! What? Groan! Oh no! But he said, hurry, you'll love this and we believed him. I'm glad we did because our Dad had the brilliant idea of visiting several different houses of worship so that we would still have opportunities to explore our understanding of ourselves in relation to our world. We could choose a different house of worship each week. If we found something we liked we could stay as long as we wanted. We did that for a year. Once in a while we went to a service or school on a Saturday, or a Friday, but wherever we were, we went somewhere at least once a week.

Then we went to a weekday school that had a similar program. Our whole growing-up life was spent all over the world in United Nations Schools. And we visited all kinds of cool houses of worship—synagogues, temples, churches, places of gathering ... everything.

And I realized that most of the religions, most of the houses of worship all did the same thing. They asked big questions: “Why are we born? What happens after we die? What does being a good person mean? What do good people do? How should we live? What responsibility do I have for others? And for my world? What difference should my life make?”

And I knew that I didn't really care to join an organized religion because my God was bigger than all of them even put together. So I planned to live like that all my life...

Until, I grew up and was talking to my Dad one day. And he wondered if I had ever looked at Unitarian Universalism. No, I said—what's Unitarian Universalism?

All those years of visiting different houses of worship and I had never heard of Unitarian Universalism. When I finally visited the Community Church of New York, my home church, for the first time, I walked into a sanctuary that had all kinds of religious banners all over the place. I felt comfortable, as if I had walked into my spiritual living room. I felt so “at home” that for the first time in my life I wanted to be a part of something. I became a Unitarian Universalist feeling as if I was a beautiful painting and had finally found the right frame for myself.

How could I have known that I would become an active member, a lay leader, and eventually, a Unitarian Universalist minister? If my Dad had not encouraged me to explore my world I would never have been open enough to explore all of the wonderful faith traditions. If I had not explored my world, I would never have found a faith home of my own. And my sister found her faith home here too. And so did her daughter, Lehna.

My daughter Jova is growing up in this faith community and is now a youth leader. She has, through Unitarian Universalism, explored many faith communities. The other day she said “Mom, I'm so happy to be a UU. This is the only religion I know of where I'm not only encouraged to make this world a better place... it's the one place in my life where I am *expected* to make this world a better place for all!”

My Dad shared his values with me. I shared mine with Jova. And the beat goes on as we continue to share our family values with each other...

Far Away During the Holiday Season  
by Rev. Ginger Luke

It was the first holiday season when I was separated from my daughter, Katherine. She was a sophomore in college and I was half a continent away. I called to see how she was doing and there was this sobbing voice at the other end of the phone.

“It’s almost Christmas and I’m in an apartment for the first time and I don’t have time to do anything—no cookies, no decorations, no gifts. I have papers and projects due and don’t have time for anything. It doesn’t feel like the holidays at all.”

“Didn’t Grandmother give you some ornaments and lights so you could have a Christmas tree?”

“Yes, I have a box of handmade ornaments from Grandmother, but I DON’T HAVE TIME TO GET A TREE. I don’t have a way to carry one and nothing to put it up on. I JUST DON’T HAVE TIME FOR THE HOLIDAYS AND IT IS MAKING ME SO SAD!”

“We’ll just have to start Christmas on Christmas Eve when you get here. (She was planning to fly to my home in Maryland for Christmas.) Don’t worry about presents. We’ll work that out when you get here. Try to get some sleep. Remember I love you, honey.”

“I love you, too. (sob, sob).”

After being sad for a little while and feeling so far away from my only child, thinking of her more as a little girl who I would like to just hold in my arms, I began creatively thinking. I called a nursery to see if they could deliver a tree. Not before my daughter would be flying out. I called a DRE friend in the city where my daughter lived. I asked her if she and her boys would be willing to pick up a Christmas tree and stand at a grocery store tree lot and deliver it to my daughter. She said they were on their way to the grocery store in fact and she would look in her basement because she thought they had an old Christmas tree stand.

About four hours later I got a call from my daughter. “How did you do that? How did you do that? A woman just knocked on my door and said, ‘Are you Katherine Luke?’ And when I nodded, she handed me this five foot Christmas tree in its stand and said, ‘Merry Christmas.’ And then she walked away. My friends can’t believe it. I can’t believe it. How did you do it?” (Happy sob, sob.)

“I have good UU friends. And sometimes our UU friends become part of our family. Merry Christmas, honey. See you soon.”

## **A Family Values Story**

*by James M. Coomes*

Two values important to my family are inclusiveness and lifelong learning.

I am part of a multiracial family as I was transracially adopted as an infant. My parents have always made every attempt to live in integrated communities where diversity was not only respected but also encouraged. The conversation was always present about diversity and inclusiveness as well, with my parents making sure my brother and I understood that fate was not the reason we chose to live where we did. My parents were also not afraid of taking risks as long as the safety of our family was not in question.

Towards the end of 6<sup>th</sup> grade, my father had an opportunity to do some work overseas. Some company employees chose to go alone while their family remained in the United States, others opted to move their family. The proposed move was to Saudi Arabia. The advantages of such a move were the opportunity to travel the world and learn about other cultures (not to mention an ongoing stable income for a single-income family). The disadvantages were that my parents really had no idea what to expect from the experience other than the fact that this was to clearly be a learning experience. When I was adopted, my parents wanted to provide a safe and loving home to a child that needed one, with the transracial adoption issue being secondary. They weren't entirely sure of what to expect for our family after adopting me. The move to Saudi Arabia was similar in that aspect.

As I mentioned, my parents chose to live in places that valued inclusiveness and were culturally diverse. Stepping off the plane in Saudi Arabia provided an experience like none before to my parents, my brother and me. My brother is biological to my parents who are all of European descent. I am African American. Entering the terminal, we all had the very surprising realization that, while there was diversity present, the majority of people waiting for their bags or standing at the curb searching for their loved ones in the crowd looked like me. It took some effort to locate those with fair complexions, and when they did, knowing nonverbal expressions of appreciation were exchanged. Watching my parents' faces, I became aware that the expressions they carried were similar to some of the expressions I had seen in the United States when two people of color among a sea of white faces identify with each other that they were not alone, but were few in number. My brother on the other hand was more engrossed in his toy robot than anything else.

The whole move was overwhelming, from navigating our way out of the airport, to the hotel we stayed in for a few weeks, to the home we moved into for our two-year stay in Saudi Arabia. The conversation started in the hotel of our awareness of how my parents and I had exchanged roles simply by taking an extended plane flight. I remember the conversations that we had those first two weeks acknowledging how strangely different everything was to us, the impacts of race, culture and diversity, and how we would continue to develop an understanding of inclusiveness and difference. The conversation continued, and over the next two years every continent and culture we visited became another chapter in an ongoing learning experience. The decisions my parents made

throughout this part of my life are significant to my perspective of the world around me today. Although I may not have the same travel opportunities to drive home the message, these are values that I hope to share with my own children.

## **Making Grape Jelly With My Father**

*by Rev. Barbara Fast*

Before I knew about correct and fool proof recipes for making jelly by the experts, I spent late summer weekends picking berries and grapes from the hilly underbrush up at our family cottage by a lake. I pulled on long pants and high socks, and a hat, and a bandana over a turtleneck or collar up long sleeve shirt, and took my metal buckets and my father's hand, and went into the hills behind the house to pick grapes, blackberries, and raspberries.

It was a kind of homemade hazmat outfit intended to protect my skin from poison ivy, brambles and thorns that composed the thickets where berries and grapes loved to grow. It was obvious to my child eyes that berries and brambles lived together. Picking cost me only scratches which I would survive . . . the rest was free.

I remember being in the thick of a thicket not far from the flattened land where the car was parked. One car... remember the days of one car in the family?

I leaned in to reach for some berries...and then as my eyes got better, practiced at seeing what was before me all along, I spotted clusters of big shining berries under the limb. I negotiated my way closer; the more I found, the more would be found. It was exhilarating.

Before I studied recipes, I watched my father, cursing as he thrashed his way to a bright cluster behind a thorn bush. I watched him cooking the fruit, and smelled the mysterious blue scents that filled the kitchen and floated out the windows as I lay on the hammock. I watched him measuring the sugar, cooking and then testing, testing the juice, holding the spoon on its side, to see if it the hot syrup was ready to jell. And then he got eager when he was ready to pour it into the jars.

I saw the transformation of wild clusters of globed fleshy fruits into sweet dark clear jelly, bright and pungent and wild in its smoothness.

Now eating fresh wild grapes was a pleasure all its own. Shocking and filled with delight. A sweet and sour thrill. I would pop a clear slippery celadon center of the grape out of its skin and into my mouth, locating the pits with my tongue and placing them up between my teeth and gums as I chewed and swallowed the flesh. Then I would take a breath and spit the pits out onto the lawn. How uncivilized. What fun!

Dad would press the grapes and their pits and skins through this long funnel shaped sock stained a faded indigo. He would scrape the outsides of the sock, taking off the purple ooze that was clinging there and he would boil up the blue juice with sugar with a blue stained wooden spoon. Grandma had boiled up the jars; they stood on the clean towels, steaming in the air. She had the knowledge, and the basement was testament to her work.

Jars upon jars of peaches, blueberries, summer fruits from long ago that she She had put up with her Finnish sisters, years before.

*If I envy anyone it must be my grandmother . . .  
I will always remember how she poured confusion out,  
how she cooled and labeled all the wild sauces of the brimming year .*

--Mary Oliver, *Answers from New and Selected Poems*

In the end my lived experiences had at least as much if not more power than the fear of hell fire and memorized recipes I was taught in my religious education classes. On those weekends, I learned about nature, and such non-discriminating gifts of creation as tasty grapes, thorns, and thickets.

I learned my family's values.

I learned about human nature... Dad would make a mess. He would need help. He would lose patience. He would be expectant, playful, serious, totally engaged.

I learned about family relations, my membership, my value in my family.

I learned about the transformation of feelings, from mad to glad, from careful to carefree.

I learned about my family's traditions and the importance of elders,

I learned about human creativity in the world.

We do change the world.

I can change the world.

We can choose to change it for good.

I can choose.

We can make jelly and still leave places wild.

I can make jelly with my father.

I learned about patience, making a mess, cleaning it up.

I learned about what mattered in my family:

I mattered, nature mattered, tradition mattered.

And I thought I was just learning how to make jelly!

And what else? I learned about happiness - enjoying life. It seemed to me that grown ups

I knew didn't do that much. My father did not allow himself much happiness - enjoyment. But when he made grape jelly, he enjoyed himself.

Maybe that was a message about his life and the price of living through depression and war. Maybe it was the message of his religion. How he heard it. Maybe it was his being a first generation immigrant. Poverty and war are powerful religious educators.

Oh, he had moments when the playful part came out. When he made grape jelly, Dad transformed the indigos of his worry and loss into a sweetness we could enjoy and taste.

How much happiness do you allow yourself? Is being happy OK now? I realized since September 11 that making grape jelly helps me face my fears--and enjoy life. And to think - I learned it back when I was a girl, making grape jelly with my father.

Making grape jelly is a way I have been pouring confusion out and filling some of this time with redemptive palpable healing joy. That tastes good!

## **Hope**

*by Rev. Keith Kron*

Hello. My name is Rev. Keith Kron. I am the Director of the Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Concerns for our Unitarian Universalist Association, and I am here to recruit you.

To recruit you to be alive in the world- to work to make a difference in the wider world.

I grew up a product of a mixed marriage. My father is from a blue state. My mother is from a red state. The first place I remember was Connecticut where my father lived. We went to a Congregational church where they had good doughnuts on Sunday morning and many of the kids in town went there. When I was eight we moved to Kentucky so my father could get his doctorate, and we went to Southern Baptist church, the denomination of my mother's childhood, in part because the Congregational church in Lexington was completely African-American, though I didn't know that until I was an adult. The Southern Baptist church turned conservative in the early 70's, as so many did, but my parents stayed. The church never quite made sense to me and we only ever had doughnuts once. So when I went to college at the University of Tennessee, I vowed never to step into a church again.

Therapy would change that.

As I was coming out in my first year of teaching school, I sought a therapist. His suggestion on the first day I met him was, "Well, you should go and check out the Unitarian Universalist church. They're a little different from most places here in Lexington." A month later, at a gay bar for only the third time in my life, a guy at the bar said, "You talk like a friend of mine—a little different from most folks. Let me introduce you. His name is Charlie Kast. He's the minister of the Unitarian church here in town."

Meeting Charlie was totally cool. He was having a beer and was just a regular guy talking to me about baseball, being gay, religion, life. And what made it cooler was that he was out on a Saturday night and had to preach the next morning. I was so impressed that I told him I would show up at church the next morning. He nodded, but as he told me later, he was sure I wouldn't show.

I did. The church was celebrating its 35<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Charlie talked about the history of the church, being a voice for liberal religion in Lexington, and the service ended with everyone getting up and going outside and forming a circle around the building—where, on cue, we gave the building a hug. We'd never done that in the Southern Baptist church. It was awesome. The guy who stood next to me talked to me for a bit afterwards and I vowed to come back.

The next week when I did show up the service was about abortion. A woman who had had one told her story. Charlie offered his thoughts on the subject, though he didn't have an answer. I was impressed that he didn't.

During the service in the old blue hymnal, we were asked to take a pen, if we wanted to, to make the text of the hymn we were singing gender-neutral. As a 23-year old former Southern Baptist I was smitten. Change was possible.

Two weeks later, during spring vacation, I signed the membership book and made a pledge.

Less than a year after I had joined the church, someone asked me when I was going to seminary. I had already been recruited to teach *About Your Sexuality* to the junior high, to join the worship committee and to lead a district workshop. I was 24.

We all have our hopes and dreams. And we have sources for our hopes.

Having lived in a red state I thought about the need for fundamentalism where there was a lot of it.

My mother's parents, part of that poor white contingent who knew their place, lived in the Appalachian hills of Tennessee. Their people, my people, went back several hundred years in the area. My grandfather never learned to read and could sign his name only with an X. As a child, I would ask him to read me a story and he would say he couldn't find his glasses or something like that, and then would find my grandmother who would come and read to me and my sister.

Grandma was one of those people you just love. She had the reddest hair you ever saw, a playful laugh that made you feel good, and made a beef stew I begged for every time we visited. If she was the biggest fan in my fan club, then it was only fair that I was her biggest fan.

In large part because of her, I went to school at the University of Tennessee, some 30 minutes away and would visit on weekends. She could get me to go to church—Andersonville Baptist Church, though not as often as she would like.

I still remember the Sunday when I went with her. The preacher, not yet 30, in the middle of the sermon, yelled at a couple of congregants that they were falling asleep and needed to wake up and hear the Lord's message or they would face the wrath of God. My grandmother later said over lunch that she was glad she hadn't been sleepy but that she thought the preacher had done right. I didn't think it was right at all, but I kept my mouth shut. I knew my place.

Some months later, I was visiting them and didn't go to church. My grandmother, over Sunday dinner- which in the South is lunch-told me the story of a young man who died suddenly who was a good person who hadn't been saved. The mother of this young man

asked the preacher if he could still go to heaven anyway. No, he replied, he hadn't accepted Jesus as his Savior. So he wouldn't be in heaven. My grandmother concluded diplomatically that this was what the preacher's sermon had made her think about and worry about this morning. And then she heaped on more mashed potatoes to my plate. Not in my lifetime had mashed potatoes been heaped with so much hope.

Curiously, I was more touched by this than anything else. I knew this was her way of saying she cared about me, that she loved me—or one way. She was actually very good at saying it in many ways.

But I was the 8-year-old child who one night had asked his mother, "If you had never heard of Jesus because you were born in Vietnam, then how could you go to hell?"

My mother didn't have an answer for that one, and she said, to her disappointment, perhaps the most profound theological statement that could be made. She replied, "I don't know."

So my grandmother's story from my blue state identity made no sense to me. But from my red state identity I knew what my grandmother was saying, that she wanted me to be saved now as opposed to later, that she loved me, and I showed her respect by listening and not talking back.

Every morning at breakfast, we would stop before eating and she would read a passage from the Bible, usually from the writings of Paul or one of the Gospels.

*A dream is the bearer of a new possibility, an enlarged horizon, the great hope.*

This quote is from theologian Howard Thurman. Howard Thurman was the man who met with Gandhi, learned nonviolence, and taught Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. much about ministry and social change. Thurman's grandmother was a slave in the South and she asked him to read the Bible every day—except for the passages of Paul. As a teenager, he was fascinated by this and asked her why she didn't want to hear Paul. His grandmother replied that Paul is what the plantation owner, her slave master, preached from, often citing the passage that told slaves to be obedient to their masters. She vowed if freedom ever came and if she ever learned to read, she would not read that part of the Bible.

Both she and my grandmother struggled with their place in the world. Thurman's grandmother loved the liberation stories of the Bible, but refused to listen to the oppressive parts. My grandmother loved the Bible too, and struggled with knowing her place in the world. Unlike so many women of her generation, she was a college graduate, a teacher—married to a man who hadn't made it past third grade and couldn't read. I often think one of the reasons she never learned to drive was to give my grandfather more authority—to feel more reconciled with her "appropriate place."

Linguist, author, and Cal-Berkeley professor, George Lakoff talks about the different mind sets of the folks on the right and the folks on the left. The right has this image of a Strict Father figure who is in charge of the family. The left has a Nurturing Parent model of the world. And these models seep throughout all of their political positions. The plus of the Strict Father figure is that everyone knows their place—my grandmother, at least aloud, preferred this model. The plus of the Nurturing Parent figure is that everyone, in theory, can make their own place. Howard Thurman learned this, at least indirectly, from his grandmother. But these places are sources of hope for folks on the right and left now.

Listen to the arguments of the folks on the right and you will hear the hope in the arguments about order, place, and honor. Listen to the arguments of the folks on the left and you will hear hope in the arguments for equality, justice, and compassion. We hear a lot now from the folks on the right. And I am here tonight to recruit you to have your voice be heard.

Three months ago, I returned to Statesboro, Georgia, a rural college town two hours east of Valdosta, a place where I had done my ministerial internship.

Upon arrival, I was told that a longtime member of the congregation, a wonderful woman named Happy, was in Hospice care. Members of the congregation were looking in on her and helping her, of course. Several had asked her if they could drive her to church that Sunday but she didn't feel she had the strength. But someone did ask if it was okay if I came by for a visit. She said she would be delighted.

After preaching I stopped by. We reminisced for a while and she asked about my work. She said she had read about the Georgia congregations wrapping the rainbow ribbon around their buildings. One of the other women said they had talked about doing this at the fellowship, but were afraid that taking a stand on gay marriage would be seen as too radical. Happy gathered her strength and said with conviction, "This isn't about gay marriage. This is about being the liberal voice of religion in Southern Georgia. We should have done this because we can be the religious voice. This is about providing hope for those who need it."

She reminded me of my grandmother's preacher in that moment, exhorting in her own way, for her friends, her congregation, to wake up.

She died three weeks later, and we lost a voice of the spirit.

I learned in seminary what my mother taught me many years ago: *I don't know* is an answer. I do know that what Unitarian Universalism offers is not security through hypnosis. We offer security through authenticity, ambiguity, and knowing that we are not alone, that we need each other. It is a tougher sell. And I am here to recruit you to help sell it.

Be a voice of the spirit. Be the voice of liberal religion.  
Be a source of hope

## **Your Children Are Your Practice**

*by Rev. Lisa Ward*

The other morning I watched myself help the children get ready for school. It followed the pattern of a fairly common day. Before the bus arrival, last minute needs inevitably come up and while I'm seeking that due library book or lost belt that goes with the outfit, I have another gear of thought working, vowing once again to get this routine down, get it all ready the night before, organize ways to train the kids to remember where they put things, finally create that routine that comforts rather than frazzles. At the same time I exhale slowly to bring myself back to the moment and the task at hand, forgiving the flurry and myself in the flurry, getting it done in time and without too much tension.

Deep breath to let go of expectation and another to enter in the moment. Perfection is not mine this morning. Oh well. Maybe tomorrow. Better yet, maybe never, for life gives us the gift of being more than we can control so that we can find our essential selves within the mix. Striving for perfection won't get me there, claiming wholeness in the chaos will. We must, in fact, sacrifice perfection for wholeness.

The kids....only two of them...leave the house, giving me a moment to watch them unawares as they walk down the driveway entering their new day. I marvel that any of this is happening at all. Who are these beings becoming in my presence as I in theirs? What will they encounter? How will I respond? Then back to getting ready for work, reviewing the day's schedule juggle with my partner, and for a moment or two, checking-in. A pile of dishes will have to be done later by one of us and a dream of routine will have to be assembled bit by bit in-between the immediate tasks of the day already full.

I am a working parent who wants to know moments of inner calm and come across days when I feel fully and joyfully alive. I aspire to days whose theme is not simply to get through them but to actually dwell in them, be spiritually aware. In my work as a minister and in my life as a friend to many parents, I know I am not alone in this aspiration. More often than not, parents choose to put off cultivating their depth of being by focusing solely on the needs of their children. Some of us make the false choice of postponing our own peace of mind until "life slows down." Others of us let the chaos of natural life provide an excuse away from deeper work, pointing to any of the many distractions and obstacles in our daily lives. Thus there are many parents in this culture striving to foster healthy homes while harried, undernourished, lost, confused, tired and lonely.

Add this culture's propensity to blame the parents for the ills of society and it's a wonder any of us feel worthy to get out of bed in the morning. This does not have to be. We can honor our responsibilities, nurture others and include ourselves in the midst of it. Within the extraordinary task of tending the evolution of our species as we care for the children in our lives, there is potential for our own emergence. It is possible to find wholeness in the chaos. We must become everyday mystics, because most of us cannot stop the routines of our daily lives to get on with the truth of our lives. And this work of

honoring our truth within is becoming more and more essential as we dwell in a tumultuous, anxious world losing sight of its beauty in deference to its obsession with fear and control.

"Parenting need not be a burden," writes William Martin, "one more thing you have to do and don't do well enough. Instead consider your failures, your sorrows, your illnesses, and your difficulties as your primary teaching opportunities."

The title of this sermon emerged from two different conversations I had -- a full year apart -- about the juggle of parenthood and spirituality. The first conversation was with an esoteric Buddhist. I was offering the obstacle of parenting in a discussion about deepening my spiritual practice. I spoke of how I feel a need to pay attention to worldly events in order to guide and abide with my children who were navigating the world. You know ...."The teapot is not really the teapot, or not really there but an extension of your mind" won't help when my child needs to learn that tea is hot (for example) His reply, after several weeks of meditation, was, "your children are your practice."

A year later I was discussing with a professor of religion the challenge of parenting amidst my need to deepen spiritually. He, without knowing of my previous conversation, described a Buddhist monastery that does not accept aspirants – those who want to follow a strict regimen within the monastery – who are in the midst of parenting young children. The reply to these aspirants is: "your children are your practice."

When we are devoting much of our focus and resources on nurturing our children, we are dwelling deep in interdependence. Our lives are radically relational, cause and effect is a constant consideration, influence and teaching opportunities a daily project, interpreting life in relation a primary task. Within all of this, a sense of self needs to be maintained if we are to navigate parenting while we grow in heart and mind.

There is a pressure in our culture to produce, to prove our worth by doing something noticeable, by creating a measurable effect: something that can be counted, something that can be bought, something that out does another, something that makes its mark in the world.

When parenting, and still especially for mothers, our priorities take us "out of the loop" of much of culture's preoccupation with measurable success. Meetings cannot be as easily attended and the 24-7 lifestyle that nearly mandates this kind of success cannot be maintained when the nurturing of a child is a priority. Too many times we begin to think of our children as products of our success and we focus the claiming of our lives in the living of theirs. When this happens we have lost our way. We not only disrespect our inherent worth, we entrap our children in a poor reflection of ourselves.

"Detach yourself from the seeming successes and failures of your children," writes William Martin, "By doing so you can become able to be one with them at all times. You do not live your life through your children. Therefore they are free to find their own fulfillment."

Regarding our children as our spiritual practice does not mean using them for our ends. It means embracing the role, the relationship and the response-ability as our present lessons for life. We engage our wisdom and awareness toward what is before us and we welcome the unpredictable, ever changing context of our lives. The chaos that children bring invite us to steady our sense of self and find our footing. We are echoed, challenged, mimicked, defied, sought after and sent packing. We are put on pedestals and used as furniture, we are intensely visible and not even there. This is all the stuff we need to practice acceptance, forgiveness, gratitude, creativity and trust. This is all the stuff we need to enter life fully. That is, if we create the time.

I want to lift up that all of this is easier said than done. I aspire to what I speak of and surely have not yet fully arrived. It is also important to acknowledge that difficulties and challenges vary greatly within each household and family life. One of the easiest traps we fall into is to chart our course by comparisons, feeling less worthy than another from what we observe, or envious of another's situation, or defensive about our own choices. We may feel misunderstood or under appreciated or so much more together than another. None of this is the true work that will get us to that sense of home. No comparisons will ground us in our true being. We are each unique. And so are our children. We get to live that lesson every day. For some it is a tough road, for others an easy way to joy, for all it offers a deepening of spirit if we but let it.

There are some basic aspects to all spiritual practice. The three I will touch on today are a measure of devotion or dedication, an integrity of self, and gratitude.

It begins with gratitude, the claim that life is good. This does take training: a self discipline of appreciation. It does not mean disregarding obstacles, or dysfunctions, or immaturity, or unhealthy paths. As parents, we do not have to love the splatter of thrown food on our walls or the slammed door in our face or the mistreatment of siblings. But we can be helped in our work, calmer in our fielding of events, when we have exercised our awareness of the good in life. Then no event is too large for us to monitor and no moment devoid of worth.

This doesn't mean avoiding the challenge before us by thinking of something else that is better or more appealing. It means claiming awe and wonder as a daily routine so that we begin to trust the worth of whatever comes our way. In this way we create a positive relationship to life and we begin to make choices that nurture that relationship.

The children in our lives naturally encourage wonder. They stretch our sense of being. They are in our lives for one thing, which is beyond our individual ability, and they have personalities of their own which are familiar yet different from what we've experienced before.

I remember as a teenager I was holding an infant at a friend's house. It was close to sunset, though I had not noticed, yet not until this pre-verbal being in my arms pointed to the horizon. I followed the cue and saw a glorious setting of the sun. The colors in the

sky, the warmth in the air, the sounds of the birds. All given me by a child's urging to pay attention.

Children want to wonder. Children know of awe. Children explore to see and hear and know. Moments of shared wonder with the children in our lives not only deepen our love of life, but also help in the times of shut down, when access to a child has been denied by attitude or stage of growth.

If we exercise our gratitude, our wonder, our awe, then our field of appreciation grows and we can meet each day knowing it is full of experiences worth having.

Another basic aspect of spiritual deepening is a devotional practice, something that is done regularly for consistency and grounding.

A parent's commonplace lament, and again, felt more often, still, with mothers is "my life is not my own." More often than not, dedicated time gets lost in the shuffle. Much of the time, we find ourselves navigating varied priorities to get through the day, or, even, the next hour.

"Multi-tasking" becomes an art that can turn into an obsession, where we think we can carve out more time if we do more things in less time. Suddenly, or, in fact, quite subtly, we become responders to external stimuli: answering this question, driving to that practice, signing this form, shopping for that event, volunteering for this project, fielding that infraction.

Internal stimuli may then cry out, "this life is not my own." And we would be right. But this is also true: we are not lost in the shuffle, that is, if you claim your presence in the midst of it all. That is if we claim that we are human beings and not human 'doings.'

Family life is the great challenger of carved-out time. How important is it for you to claim yourself? How important is it for you to model such claiming for your children? Society won't help you on this one. It is telling you to go out and buy something. We must carve out the time. No one else will do it for us. Spiritual deepening won't happen without it. Children take their cues of use of time from us.

When is your carved-out time? If it isn't evident, create it. Even fifteen minutes. Make it part of the family's task to honor that time. There may be resistance within you as well as within your family. Push through that resistance and claim that space. There's room for you. It awaits your witness.

Yesterday, writing this sermon shamed me into taking a walk with my kids in the woods. I left an unfinished sermon to do it. When near a stream, I suggested we sit and listen to the water. Instant agreement. We sat for a good while enjoying human being rather than human doing. I know if we do that more often it will make a difference in all our lives.

We are prompted in this culture to schedule every waking moment. We are trained by competition and economy to fill our children's lives with programs and prep courses and college track pre-K road maps. But what we need and what our children need is "down time." Time to let our minds go and our imaginations flourish. Time to be bored so that a new idea can emerge within the vacuum. Time to be restless so that we can seek what we are meant to find. Devotional practice – a prayer – an meditative exercise – writing in a journal – taking a walk – is claiming ourselves away from the tyrannies of "should be" and "must do." Find that time. Consistently. It will replenish your soul.

A third essential element of spiritual practice is integrity of self. One of the major blocks to our authentic selves is the misconception, the grandiose expectation, that there is a mold of perfect parental love that we all must fit into. Love is not interested in being cloned. Love expands possibility, it creates new beauty. It's what fuels this gloriously diverse world. It's also how it is possible for every parent to have the most beautiful children in the world at the same time.

There is no perfect parent/child love. How we touch each other's heart is unique. Controlling or judging love gets us nowhere. People are in our lives as gifts toward understanding ourselves and as opportunities to share our gifts with others.

The first and ever challenging step in this practice is to do what we say we are going to do; to mean what we say and say what we mean. This may mean that for awhile we say less and promise to do less. Doing what we say we are going to do strengthens our integrity and sense of worth rapidly. It also humbles us and helps us see ourselves more clearly. Follow-through helps us come into our own. The more we find that we can trust ourselves, the more we will be trusted. Children will constantly test our integrity. They are seeking a way to theirs and asking of its importance in their challenge of us.

The offering of ourselves is how creation exists. What world are we creating? Are we leaving it up to others? It is in our practices that our actions have their force. The sooner we contribute to the circle of life the more we will impact its outcome and co-create a future we want our children to thrive in.

With gratitude, integrity and devotional practice we can navigate our way through the challenges we face and the joy we welcome. Our children help us do this if we but let the relationship grow in honor and love.

Happy Mothers Day. Amen.

## **Family Decisions**

*by Rev. Pat Hoertdoerfer*

*Family stories tell us who we are and to whom we belong. They cement us together in remembered intimacy. Our stories also point to the values we hold in common from family generation to family generation.*

*I will never forget the day our oldest son came home from first grade with a graph assignment. The class had progressed from graphs of fruit that the children brought to school in their lunchboxes to graphs of various branches of the armed forces in which their relatives served. My husband was an immigrant and not a citizen of the United States. He had served in neither the armed forces of his native country nor in this country. My brother had served in the Marines during the Vietnam War. My father was eligible for the draft during the Second World War but was deeply convinced of the futility of armed conflict. He risked imprisonment by registering as a conscientious objector. My son's teacher had to add a column to the graph. She listed Conscientious Objector alongside Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, and National Guard.*

*The choices we have made become part of our family story. And that family story shapes each successive generation. This legacy of conscientious objection has profoundly shaped my thinking and my decisions. And our two older sons had to wrestle with their grandfather's legacy. When they became eligible for the draft they registered as conscientious objectors. Our Unitarian Universalist minister helped them with resources, discussions and the necessary paper work to complete their decision.*

*Our stories are not just individual stories. They are embedded in our family stories, in extended family stories, and in our local community stories as well as part of the stories of our congregation and our faith tradition. The living tradition of our Unitarian Universalist faith puts our little story in a universal context. We need, I believe, sustaining stories on all these levels so that we know who we are, to whom we belong, and what we stand for.*