Response to Gould Lecture
April 23, 2010
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This Sunday, the 3 and 4 year olds at First UU in Albany are celebrating the joy that our world has sand and soil. As DRE, a big part of my job is supporting the volunteers. So before I left for my adventures this week, in their room, I laid out bins of sandbox sand and of potting soil. I put out dishpans, shovels, spoons, sieves, and pails. "Why?" you may ask. "Don't little kids go out and play in the mud anymore?" Maybe they do; maybe they don't. But the point this Sunday is for this group to do it together. It's to mix things up and to get their hands dirty and to go "oooo" and "ugg" in community.

What RE volunteers and youth and children tell me (in various ways) is that they want RE programming to be different from what they do the rest of the week. The want to be together as spiritual equals. And they want activities that are engaging and participatory. Creating those activities can be a lot of work.   And for that we can turn to technology.

One of my RE volunteers pointed out that having artwork, photographs and maps, can help make the lessons more real for children. You can get these materials from the library, but it's a lot less work to just go on line. Some of our RE volunteers would like internet access in the classrooms. They want to be able to stream broadcasts, and download You Tube videos. They want to use the internet to address the questions that come up during discussions.

This year we began to use some of the Tapestry of Faith curriculum which is on line. There are lots of activities and resources for each lesson, and the best part is that it's all there! You still have to get some materials, but the all the stories, the scripts, masks, pictures, photographs, puzzles, links to the songs and music and dances, links for background information, messages for families about the lesson with ways to "bring it home" including family ceremonies, discussion topics and suggestions for social justice projects are all there, just waiting to be downloaded.

Ok so technology is a powerful tool, but does it have power over us? I put the question to our volunteers. One responded saying, "I think there is a very fine line between using technology to stimulate ideas and conversations and depending on it for the 'lesson'. Messy inter-active projects are more work; computers are neater and easier to control. What is our priority?"

The congregants and staff in Albany can tell you that I am not afraid of a little mess!

From conversations with my fellow religious educators, I can say that our priority is to help children and youth and adults become engaged and interact with both the material and with each other. As is often said, our religion is relational. So we want to foster relationships: to help create a spark; to get things happening.

RE participants want to be together, face to face. They want a place to share, to work, to sing, and move together, to gaze upon beauty, to sit in silence. They want to breathe the same air together. They want to get their hands dirty together. Our congregations are often the one place in their lives where they have an opportunity to do that.