

Guide for Reflection and Discussion

Judith A. Frediani
Curriculum Director, UUA

The Gift of Faith: Tending to the Spiritual Lives of Children

By Jeanne Harrison Nieuwejaar.

Boston: Skinner House Books, 2002.

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[Available from the UUA Bookstore: www.uuabookstore.org

Contact information: bookstore@uua.org or 1-800-215-9076

This gentle, profound book is too powerful to keep on our shelves. I suggest that after you read it, you consider using it as the basis for a group learning experience. Each participant will need a copy of the book, and the reflection/discussion questions that follow here can help you facilitate the group process. Discussing the many implications of *The Gift of Faith* can help a congregation articulate religious education/faith development philosophy, set goals, prepare and motivate teachers, and inspire parents to be more active and effective religious educators with their own children.

Who should read and discuss *The Gift of Faith*?

- RE/Lifespan Faith Development Committee
- RE teachers
- Clusters of religious educators (including virtual professional development groups)
- Parents of children
- Board/Parish Committee
- Congregational staff
- New members of the congregation
- New parents
- Anyone interested in the religious and spiritual development of children

Description [from the cover]:

This eloquent, inspiring book stresses the importance of family participation in religious community for the benefit of our children's spiritual growth. *The Gift of Faith* calls for parents to be intentional, strong, and clear in their choices regarding church life, particularly in an increasingly secular culture that pulls families away from church participation. By sharing her own stories and experiences, Jeanne Harrison Nieuwejaar shows that religious community can play an integral role in clarifying and deepening the faith of parents, who inevitably are children's primary religious educators. This important book is ideal for any adult of any faith who is concerned with a child's spiritual development.

About the Author

Jeanne Harrison Nieuwejaar was raised in a small Universalist church in rural New England and has remained active in the liberal religious faith throughout her life as a lay worker, religious educator, and minister. Jeanne's newest book is *Fluent in Faith: A Unitarian Universalist Embrace of Religious Language*, published in 2012 by Skinner House Books and available in the UUA Bookstore.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion with

The Gift of Faith: Tending to the Spiritual Lives of Children by Jeanne Nieuwejaar

1. Nieuwejaar describes the village community in which she grew up.
 - a. How does her experience compare with your own?
 - b. Today our congregants are unlikely to come from such a small, homogeneous town. What community(ies) does your congregation draw from? What are the implications for your faith community?
2. How do family lifestyle and composition today compare to the author's experience? What are the implications for your faith community?
3. What is your understanding of and vision for "the Sabbath"? Does it hold any meaning for you? What are your ideas for confronting "the gremlins of time management"? (page 15)¹
4. What does "Teacher, the Geranium on the Window Sill Died and You Just Kept on Talking" mean to you? (page 16)
5. On page 27, Nieuwejaar writes: "The howls of materialism, alienation, speed, and greed are deafening. We are a profoundly secular culture." Do you agree? Do you feel that going to religious services is countercultural for children and youth?
6. What obstacles do you see working against the nurture of a spiritual life and the building of religious community? What is the state of your own spiritual life? What nurtures you spiritually?
7. What do you think is the nature of the child? Were you spiritually active as a child?
8. On page 67, the author quotes a child as asking, "What do we get at church?", and suggests that this may be the wrong question. But it is the question many seekers and others ask. It comes up during every pledge drive. What *does* the religious community offer children? Youth? Adults? What *could* it offer?
9. What did you think of the parable "Of a Foolish Father"? (page 49) Are parents prepared to be the primary religious educators of their children? If not, what do they need? What is lost when parents are not effective religious educators of their children?
10. Nieuwejaar writes that children need to be companioned in their religious thinking by their parents and by a wider circle of caring others. **In** what ways have you companioned children in their spiritual or religious journey? **In** what ways does your congregation ensure that this companioning occurs? What ideas do you have to strengthen this "gift of faith"?

¹ Page numbers refer to first edition