

“Religion as Child’s Play”

I suppose that inside me, there’s a little mix of Mary Poppins and Peter Pan. I love to laugh, and sometimes I feel like I’m flying. I’m lucky that these qualities have always been a strong part of me. The culture in my family included a good dose of singing and silliness. My mother still imagines where the fairies live; *you know* – in the tiny, dew-covered tents you find in the meadow in the early morning.... And my father -- when someone cries, “Oh, God!” thinks he’s sooooo funny when he replies, “ -Yes?” Appropriately, in a community theater production of *The Wizard of Oz*, he was cast as Oz.

I’m a Religious Professional. I dig where it’s deep. But I need to mix in a good dose of lightheartedness too. Because of my penchant for play, I am inspired to fiddle with some common assumptions about education; -- about *learning*. Instead of assuming that most learning happens when we’re young, and *teaching* is done only by adults who’ve achieved some level of competence, what if we flipped this notion on its head to see what we adults might learn from children and youth? I believe that the unique wisdom they offer is of particular benefit to Unitarian Universalism right now.

Last fall, a group of UUs from this congregation responded to Gary’s invitation to read and discuss a little booklet called, “Unitarian Universalist Culture: The Present and the Promise.” The author, the Rev. Marilyn Sewell, starts by asking: “... given how fitting Unitarian Universalism seems to be for our times, why has the movement never caught on widely – and in fact has *lost* a significant number of members since 1970?” Her booklet suggests why, for many reasons, this is true. For every quality of Unitarian Universalism that we love, there is a complimentary quality, or as Sewell puts it, a “shadow side.” The shadow side is not a negative thing; *instead*, like the Yin and Yang, these two sides form a whole. But we have neglected our shadow side, and this has cost us.

One quality many people are drawn to, in UU, is the intellectual stimulation found here. The heavy emphasis on the intellect sometimes causes us to perceive its complimentary side in a negative light. Sewell describes that side as “... a distrust of and disengagement from the body, a fear that emotion will lead us astray, a suspicion of all we cannot readily understand – in short, a peculiar lack of heartfulness for a people so intellectually impassioned.”ⁱⁱ I think she makes a powerful point, and in New England, this claim feels especially true. How is it that, since the two separate denominations of Unitarianism and Universalism joined together in 1961, the one *combined* movement has become *dominated* by *Unitarian* priorities? The noble value of religious freedom, which is the core of Unitarianism, emphasizes the life of the mind, as well as the finances and class values to educate that mind. *Universalism* complements Unitarianism. With its roots in typically rural, middle- and lower-class communities, its core is *love*. Love comes from the heart, not the mind. Put Unitarianism and Universalism together in a *truly balanced way* and you get what Francis David, a Unitarian from Transylvania, proclaimed roughly half a millennium ago: “We need not think alike to love alike.”ⁱⁱⁱ

What would it mean to address our *feelings* and our *bodies* more as UUs? I think we've already begun to do this here. I believe that including the children at the beginning of all our worship services is one example of balancing the mind with the heart. The reflections for all ages I provide at our services must be accessible to those who can't yet grasp abstract concepts. That's why I almost always use some *object* to convey an idea... something we can see, touch, and even sometimes taste!

How else could we bring more feeling into our worship? What would happen if we put words aside?

In seminary, I took a class called "An Experiential Basis for Theological Thinking." It defied most standard teaching methods. One day, our professor directed us to try experiencing the world as if we were babies. The idea was to sense each other and our surroundings as immediately as we could.

I remember crawling around with my classmates, initially stifling our giggles. With time, though, we relaxed and got into it. We sniffed the floor, shoved and slapped furniture with our palms, and scratched and picked at things with our fingernails. We pressed our cheeks up to the cool of the windowpane and stared outside. We lay on our backs and rolled around for the sheer pleasure of it. We grunted and made silly mouth sounds -- again, just to explore the possibilities of our own vocalizing and the sensation of fluttering tongue and lips.

Yup, this is part of one's training for a career in religion!

But what the heck was that all about? Imagining I was a pre-verbal child -- in an intellectual world, which rewards bright minds and eloquent writers, -- taught me that I would be *utterly foolish* to overlook *pure sensation* and *emotion*. There are times when we're too overwhelmed, or confused, or awe-struck, or humbled, or enraptured... to speak, to explain, or to even understand. And yet, I think, it is often in those moments, where we may find ourselves *especially* deep in powerful, meaningful communion. We *know*. And we *are known*. As our Universalist forbears would remind us, we are all accepted, all loved, and *all* held, in our uniqueness, within the Ultimate Mystery.

Now, we don't all have to act like toddlers to grasp this. Fortunately, toddlers abound who are free to do it for us and let us come along for the ride.

The biologist, Rachel Carson, best known as the author of *Silent Spring*, brought her toddler-nephew, Roger, with her on many excursions along the Maine coast. She wrote a book about it: *The Sense of Wonder*. It is about wide eyes and open spirits. It is about children in their most fortunate, essential selves. It is about the complex and simple marvels of the world. It is about awe and wonder. The whole point is to have fun, and that's where the world pours in, full of learning.

If we *know*, deep down, as Carson does, that a sense of wonder with the world is sustaining, then it is our sacred responsibility to bring children into the world's wondrous variety of forms. Because *children*, in their *essence*, when afforded the freedom and support to BE children, are wide open to this wonder. When we share it with them, they will reflect that wonder back to us, and magnify it too.

For several years, I've been on my own delightful ride of discovery with my niece, Rachel, as she grows into her world. When she was about 2 years old, we were walking along the sidewalk, when she stopped and said, "Look, Marfa! Ants!" There were a whole bunch of them, and they were clearly busy with something, as ants tend to be. Rachel was captivated. The ants were crawling across the sidewalk and up a tree. Then I noticed all this sawdust in the grass at the base of the tree. And as I watched, I saw grain by grain, more sawdust dropping from somewhere up above. I looked up the trunk to discover the source: the ants were doing it. Each ant, one at a time, was chewing out a mouthful of wood from inside the tree, carrying it to a hole in the trunk and spitting it overboard. I'd never seen anything like that before, and would have passed it by, were it not for the 2-year-old "wonder eyes" with me that day.

"Seeing" is the title of a chapter I love in Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*. She shares that as a young girl, she used to periodically take one of her own precious pennies and hide it somewhere outside. Then, she'd use chalk to draw arrows on the sidewalk, so that, coming from any direction, someone lucky would be guided to her secret little surprise. When she got old enough to write, she would add words like "SURPRISE AHEAD" or "MONEY THIS WAY." And then she'd scoot off home, smiling to imagine the mystery-gift and its lucky recipient.

Dillard tells the story to express how much deliciousness the world offers! "There are lots of things to see," she says, "...unwrapped gifts and free surprises. The world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside from a generous hand." Have *you* stooped to pick up a lucky penny recently? I rarely pass them up, even if it's wintertime and they're stuck in the dirty ice. Somehow, they're worth more than one cent to me. Dillard suggests that, "If you cultivate a healthy poverty and simplicity, so that finding a penny will literally make your day, then, since the world is in fact planted in pennies, you *have*, - with your *poverty*, bought a *lifetime* of days. It is that simple. What you see is what you get."^{iv}

I work with kids because it's fun and full of rich surprises. There's a kid in me – that cousin of Peter Pan, that friend of Mary Poppins -- that sparks off their fresh energy. I *learn* from children and youth. And I *grow*. In their essential selves, these fledglings are teaching us all the time, if we will risk receiving their wisdom. What have they got? They remind us how to play. They help us to see more deeply. They invite us to imagine. They start the fun. They understand love.

What gifts! Each young person has them to give, if we but notice and make space for the possibilities they offer. Those possibilities from young spirits *belong* in Unitarian Universalism.

We can begin here, in this meetinghouse, in our worship together. This is something you already understand! When you responded to the music survey last spring, you pleaded for a wider variety of musical styles. We're already exploring that. We might also try using fewer words. Incorporating more silence, meditation, and even prayer. Adding more movement, so we might express our passions and commitments through our bodies.

For years, the Unitarian Universalist Association has been struggling with how to retain our youth after they leave high school. One reason many may drift away is because of the striking differences, both in style and purpose, between youth worship and adult worship. If we're going for more heart, why not take a cue from them? Most importantly, they can help us HAVE FUN!

Years ago, I was the assistant coach of a high school girls' soccer team. The head coach was a tough, older man, who the girls nicknamed, "Commander." Most afternoons, The Commander ran practice and I just helped out. We focused on skills, drills, and fitness. One Friday afternoon, he couldn't be there, so I was in charge. We were a few weeks into the season and I felt the girls had yet to really *bond* as a team. So I planned two hours of fun and games. That day, it was raining, so the field was pretty soggy. By the end of practice, I realized that I had turned that team of girls into a monster. It was the silliest, giggliest, happiest monster I'd ever met. And it took me into its many arms and lovingly tackled me to the mud.

What's the harm in silliness? As Guy Noir, of *Prairie Home Companion* fame, once concluded, "It is better to go out burnished from youth than rusty from principle."

I once received an email about *love*. In it, a bunch of children, ages 4-8 were posed the question, "What does love mean?" Children know what love is, and can articulate it in ways that sometimes unhinge us. Here's what some of them said:

"When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know that your name is safe in their mouth." – Billy, age 4.'

"Love is what makes you smile when you're tired." Terri, age 4.

"Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen." Bobby, age 7.

"Love is when Mommy sees Daddy smelly and sweaty and still says he is handsomer than Brad Pitt." Chris, age 7.

"Love is when your puppy licks your face even after you left him alone all day." Mary Ann, age 4.

"When you love somebody, your eyelashes go up and down and little stars come out of

you.” Karen, age 7.

And finally, the email concludes with this:

There was once “...a contest to find the most caring child. The winner was a four-year-old whose next door neighbor was an elderly gentleman who had recently lost his wife. Upon seeing the man cry, the little boy went into the old gentleman’s yard, climbed onto his lap, and just sat there. When his Mother asked what he had said to the neighbor, the little boy said, ‘Nothing, I just helped him cry.’”

We smile, we laugh, and we, too, may even cry to hear these children’s words. They *get* it. The world is a messy, but marvelous place. As Donna Schaper puts it, “God is spreading grace around in the world like a five-year-old spreads peanut butter; thickly, sloppily, eagerly, and if we are in the back shed trying to stay clean we won’t even get a taste.”^v

So may we all have a taste. Better yet, let’s have a feast! Forks and napkins are optional. The world is offering us life and love on a platter. Let’s dig in!

ⁱ Unitarian Universalist Culture: The Present and the Promise, by Marilyn Sewell, p 6.

ⁱⁱ Unitarian Universalist Culture: The Present and the Promise, by Marilyn Sewell, pp 13-14.

ⁱⁱⁱ Unitarian Universalist Culture: The Present and the Promise, by Marilyn Sewell, p 21

^{iv} Three By Annie Dillard: Pilgrim At Tinker Creek, An American Childhood, The Writing Life, by Annie Dillard, pp 21-22.

^v In *Stripping Down*, from 100 Ways to Keep Your Soul Alive, edited by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, p 63.