

“Exploring Together” (Martha Dallas)

Let me begin with some images:

The youthful huntress, Diana, poised to release her arrow...

Paperwhite narcissuses blooming in my house, scenting the air I breathe as I write... flopping over, instead of standing up straight like they do in the photos of my houseplant catalog...

The acorn... with its mind-blowing potential to become a massive oak tree...

These images come to mind as I listen for what I most want to share with you this morning: reflections on where we've been, where we are, and where we dream to go; who *is* the WE I'm referring to, and what matters to me about religious education, as a UU.

I grew up in Concord, Massachusetts, the town where the “shot heard round the world” was fired... where Thoreau lived an experimental lifestyle in his cabin on Walden Pond... where Bronson Alcott taught in his schoolhouse and his daughter Louisa imagined her Little Women. They were Unitarians. I, though, went to the Episcopal church in Concord, and since I threw a tantrum about Sunday school in the chapel one day when I was five, *my* religious education was received while I sat in the pew with my family. That is, until I started confirmation class in eighth grade.

Part of the confirmation program included choosing a sponsor, kind-of like a mentor. The sponsor didn't have to be Episcopalian. I chose a very dear family friend, and wouldn't you know – it dawned on me decades later -- he was a UU! My best friend in middle school also was a UU. She lived in a great old house with a widow's walk on top and we used to hang out in the kitchen by the brick fireplace and chat with her mom and sisters (when we weren't doing our own goofy adolescent stuff). She remains my oldest friend – we go back to preschool – and we still have a rich and deep connection when ever we get together.

Looking back, what was I learning about religion? About my purpose in life? And more importantly, what acorns of potential were planted by others in my fertile fields? It's clear now that I was sustained in an important way by the free-thinking UU-ness in the air I breathed during those formative years.

What did the Episcopal Church teach *me* that informs *my* teaching? What do I carry that's a touchstone for me now? Youth group stuff, for one. In my youth group, we did cool, meaningful, interesting activities and there was always a social dimension, which makes all the difference when you're a teenager. The fact that our youth leader was a really good looking young priest was a major bonus. Edward laughed easily and smoked and drank beer. He wasn't stuffy and priestly in a holier-than-thou way. He must have extended some real trust to me because I knew I could trust him to be honest and sincere. I remember one day after church doing a risky thing: I asked him if he REALLY believed everything in the Bible. Was it all true, did he think? (how could it

be?) ... and I don't even remember his exact answer. But I remember how I *felt to hear* his answer. It made sense to me and I felt relieved to know that there was an easy place in his beliefs for my doubts and questions. A few years later, when I came home on my first college break, I needed to process the fact that a friend of mine, a proud and confident born again Christian, had really rocked my foundations by challenging my – albeit, wobbly – beliefs. I needed reassurance that I was OK, and I called Edward for that support.

He is still an Episcopal priest, and he's one of the most sincere, authentic people I know. What a teacher! And he taught simply by being his true self.

So what are the children and youth in *this* UU community learning? And who's teaching it? What's in the air *they* breathe here? In their fragile, formative years, what dreams are forming in their hearts? And how aware and intentional are *we* in the seeds we sow?

I've been a member here for about 6 years. Though my professional background includes being a DRE in a midsize church in Massachusetts, and teaching Religious Studies at a college prep school, most of my involvement in this society has been with other adults. I was a mentor one year in the Coming of Age program, and I was also a substitute in the OWL Sexuality program for 7th-8th graders. Aside from those two commitments, though, I have not been involved in RE here. I did notice early on, as an adult without children of my own, that when I came to worship in our sanctuary, I rarely saw children. I could easily come, Sunday after Sunday, and worship in this sacred place, and have a cup of coffee and visit with friends and *never* see a kid of any age.

Some adults here who have children use a term: "Big Church." It refers to this sanctuary, especially when adults are worshiping here. And it's not just a term reserved for children; they use it with other adults too. It's used in contrast to "downstairs" or "RE."

There are some *dualisms* in this picture I just described. Some are obvious and some are implied. There are: Children and Adults. There is Downstairs and Upstairs. There are Basement classrooms and the Sanctuary. There is Educational Programming and Worship. There is the DRE and the Ministers. I'm sure you catch my oversimplified drift here. This duality is, I think, more about where we've *come from* than where we are right now. But the past is connected to the present. There is a truth in this duality. I've experienced it and heard it in words. And it *teaches*. So I ask: *What does it teach?*

The interim part of my work as your DRE is to help this congregation discover some answers to that question: to help guide reflection on the past in order to build context for dreaming the future of RE here. The image of the Greek God, Janus, comes to mind. He had two faces: one looked forward and the other looked back. We are at a distinct time in the story of religious education in this society. How we understand where we and the program have been, will help us to orient ourselves and clarify our dreams.

At some point, we'll put Janus aside and be ready for a different image: the image of the archer, Diana, I mentioned. She is poised on the verge of great possibilities for where her arrow will fly. She has set her sights and taken aim. She is balanced and sure and ready.

It may be that she emerges out of a vision that has a different truth at its core, one we might get to by questioning those dualisms, shuffling them around and overlapping or defining them in new ways.

So here's a question: What does Religious Education mean to you? What do *you* imagine when I say "RE"? What comes to mind? I imagine many of you think of children. Sunday School. To me, religious education, at face value, says nothing particular about who it's supposed to be *for*. Do we *not*, especially as UUs, owe all of ourselves, no matter what age, well-planned and thought-out learning opportunities about Unitarian Universalism and other topics that will open our hearts, stretch our minds, and revive our spirits? Of course we do.

There is a term, used frequently in UURE circles: *Lifespan Religious Education*. I don't know if this congregation has ever thought about the educating that it does – with *all* ages – cradle to grave, as they say – as one *whole*. If we assume we all have something to learn, *always* – that our spiritual growth is never complete whether we're a baby, a child, a teen, a young adult, a fully mature adult, or a wise elder -- then it follows that there should be a deliberate wholeness to what we are teaching and learning – a wholeness that spans one's life. I encourage this society to take a look at *Lifespan RE*, and I'm here to help that happen.

The Seven Principles that we, as a UUA member congregation covenant to affirm and promote, have rightly served as a touchstone to guide young people's learning here, for *principles* by their very definition are *where it all begins*. Our third principle reads: "acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations." My work, as a religious educator, concerns itself particularly with the phrase *encouragement to spiritual growth*. To me, this encompasses many programs and activities our society promotes and develops, including Small Groups, Adult Programs, Worship, and Religious Education.

This is a reminder of why we're a religious community. In UU, you're not on a solo spiritual journey. You're not simply free to do your own thing; you're also responsible for encouraging others on their paths.

Some of you might recall a moment for all ages I presented earlier this year: I used acorns to symbolize the power of hope. What a seed the acorn is, with the potential it has under the right conditions, to become a grand and awesome oak tree. And there's not one grand and awesome human achievement that didn't begin with hope. Here's an acorn story:

Back in the 1930's and 40's, books were being written and edited by a religious educator with some new and liberal ideas about child development. Her name was Sophia Fahs. Her books were used in both Unitarian and Universalist Sunday Schools.

As the children who heard her stories grew into youth, they discovered how many commonly held values they shared. Since their similarities outweighed their differences, they merged their continental youth organizations. Later, in 1961, it was *they* who as adults, merged their religious denominations completely, forming the Unitarian Universalist Association. Here is one woman whose vision for children and their learning became a force behind the unification of two religious denominations. Our community room is named for her. One idea she espoused was that children should have the opportunity throughout the religious education process to build their faith on their own experience. "Each child," she said, "should have his (or her) chance at an original approach to the universe."

As I preach this sermon, there are UU kids in our midst, each being offered that chance to approach the universe in his or her unique way. We can't see or hear them right now, but they are near by and they are learning.

I'm grateful that I was born in a time that UU exists and is as strong and vibrant as it is... what if we lived in a time and place where we had to be closeted about our beliefs and values? UU history's many roots are tangled in oppressive cultures and regimes, where religious freedom was at best a dream. Now imagine the possibility that UU could grow into one of the world's more influential religious movements... wouldn't that be *something*? Is this a dream you share with me? Whatever dreams or visions you have for humanity, for the planet... to build their potential, plant them in the heart of a kid. I mean it.

I have a friend who imagines extending one of her hands to the past to hold the hands and receive the stories and dreams of those who went before her. Her other hand extends to take the hands of those in the next generations. Through her, through who she is, and the example of the life she leads, the past and the future meet and connect.

It is a wild and gratifying adventure to teach UU kids. The bonus of the experience is that you're not required to have a brain full of answers. But it goes a long way if you bring a heart full of love and a passionate spirit. With the two services format, RE has recruited over 100 people to work with our kids, AND we need a bunch more. Do you see a place for yourself here? If so let me know!

What I dream for our kids is that they feel this community holding them safely and surely, while they stretch their wings and figure out how to fly.

In my last newsletter column I got playing with word origins and hit on an image that feels like a keeper. It began with my assumption that "spire"(as in, on a church) and "spirit" both derive from the same root, "spiritus," meaning "breath," or more basically "to blow." It stood to reason that this architectural reaching of a building towards the heavens is an attempt to spiritually connect people with God. But in fact, "spire" is related to "spear." People are trying to connect with divinity, but not by whispered prayer. Instead there's a thrust of heavenward energy symbolized here. Like the miracle of a spring bulb pressing its firm, young, spear-like intentions out of the still, frozen confines of earth, humans aspire to something warmer and brighter, to an existence rich with meaning and purpose.

So while my narcissuses burst forth with their heady perfume, and while they lean and flop under the wild weight of their own liveliness, I'll indulge in a little wordplay and suggest that "spearituality" – s-p-e-a-r-ituallity might be the kind of religious engagement UUs are particularly inclined towards. UUs are groundbreakers. It's a hallmark we proudly bear. I liken the relationship between UUs and Christians as to that between the early Christians and Jews. We have grown out of Christianity, and now in most UU communities I think it's fair to say we are distinctly different than Christians. We are a new religion, just like Christianity once was. I'd even go as far as saying we're redefining religion. In fact, that would be my UU bumper sticker if I had one: "Unitarian Universalism: Redefining Religion." This explains why it's so difficult for many of us to explain what UUism is. And why it's so important to keep teaching each other and our kids who we are and what we're about.

In my interview for this position, I was asked to express my understanding of Unitarian Universalism. I said that some people would say that UU is not a religion. This is because it doesn't espouse a core creed, *and* we teach so much about what *others* believe. Gary immediately asked me, "Well what do YOU think? Is it a religion, or not?" It wasn't easy to answer, but I did, and said, yes it was. It's a religion in the sense that we do promote a common sense of values, and we do this *in community*.

If UUs go to a variety of sources for inspiration, and the variety is what matters... we take seriously the balance between freedom and responsibility. We are free to believe... but not anything we want. Or more accurately, we can believe what we want, but we can't justify our actions arbitrarily. Our liberal faith is part of a living tradition that has broad and deep roots. We stand on the side of justice; compassion, and love. We follow the Golden Rule. We are guided by our hearts and our minds in upholding these values.

Our religion is nothing if it doesn't compel us to act morally, work responsibly, feel honestly, think freely, and love generously. To be reminded of this is why we gather on Sundays.

I close with a poem by Mamie Cole:

I am the child.
All the world waits for my coming.
All the world watches with interest
To see what I shall become.
Civilization hangs in the balance
For what I am
The world of tomorrow will be.

I **am** the child.
I have come into your world about
which I knew nothing.
Why I came I know not.
I am curious. I am interested.

I am the **child**.
You hold in your hand my destiny.
You determine largely whether
I shall succeed or fail.
Give me, *I pray you*, those things
That make for happiness.
Train me, *I beg you*, that I may be
A blessing to this world.

Which way will our arrows fly? It's up to us to decide. Just remember that young hearts are fertile places to plant dreams and know the inherent power in your speeeearituality!