

Rearing UU Kids in a Non-UU World (Gary)

Childhood ends. Babies grow up and move away. But parenting goes on and on. Once you've had kids, you never really stop being a parent. Last fall, I was visiting an older couple in our congregation whose children have long since left home and acquired little ones of their own, but on their refrigerator door there's a magnetized message. "Being a parent," the sticker says "means living with your heart outside your body for the rest of your life." Having recently launched one offspring toward college and preparing to say aloha to another next fall, I realize that the heartache and vicarious celebration that parents feel in their children's ups and downs don't suddenly stop when they graduate from high school. All that really changes is that tuition bills go up. And yet as Dori and I prepare to become empty nesters, I am aware that an important phase of my life is coming to an end.

I think that's why the two of us were invited to be part of a panel last winter organized by the Religious Education Committee in our congregation. The topic was parenting, and we were seen as the wise old birds who'd managed to hatch our brood and nudge the fledglings on their way. What lessons had we learned? What mistakes were made? And how had our Unitarian Universalist principles informed our journey as a family? In short, we were invited to explain to the younger parents whose chicks were still pipping out of the shell how we had managed to rear such splendid children and pass on our advice.

I think our children are exceptional, and I'm not ashamed to say it. Because kids need their parents to brag on them. Every child deserves at least one small cheering squad, support team, fan base, booster club, and that's what parents are for. As a mom or dad, you're supposed to believe that your child is first class, top-of-the-line, because the rest of the world is not always such a friendly or encouraging place. I remember counseling with one family recently whose daughter had gotten into trouble at school. She'd broken a classmate's crayon, and when the teacher scolded her in front of the class, the six-year-old told a friend in private that she wouldn't mind putting a poison toadstool in old Ms. Grundy's morning oatmeal. Well, the friend told a friend, who then snitched to teacher, and before you know it, the police had been called in, along with a small army of psychiatrists and social workers to evaluate the girl for aggressive sociopathic behavior and develop a treatment plan. The parents' reaction was "What's wrong with our child?" But my reaction was "What's wrong with this school?" A six-year-old breaks a crayola and says she'd like to kill her teacher and suddenly it's a federal case. So I suggested to the parents that maybe they needed to take a more active role as their daughter's advocate and defender. With the principal, the law, and the mental health system all arrayed against her, goodness knows the little tyke needed someone on her side. And that's what mama bear and papa bear are for. To believe that their little cub, who has just managed to collect all the ingredients needed to make a homemade batch of gunpowder, shows bright promise as a budding chemist; to maintain that their precious angel, whose scribbles look like the work of a crazed graffiti artist is really the next Picasso. Because inside every child there is a reservoir

of beauty and goodness and creativity, of inherent worth and dignity, that needs to be nurtured and cultivated and affirmed to come out.

But parents' job is twofold. Job number one is to love your children unconditionally and defend them against all comers. But the second job is to ever-so-gently nag them, constantly admonishing, reprimanding, preaching, sermonizing, correcting, bribing, cajoling, threatening and exhorting them to become better than they are. For children naturally represent the chaotic forces of excess and exuberance; they're wild, undomesticated, non-toilet trained. Parents, on the other hand, are the civilizing agents who make sure that vegetables get eaten and homework is completed. Mothers and fathers represent the voice of tradition, authority, grammar, punctuation and right reason. To speak theologically, one might say that a baby is God's way of saying "yes" to life, while a parent is the Almighty's way of occasionally saying "no."

I've been willing to say no on numerous occasions over the years. And I think my children would agree that I've been a fairly strict father. Ours was the family that said no to gameboys and nintendos, no to cable television, no to staying up past bedtime, no to skipping Sunday School, no to MacDonal'd's and mostly no to fast food, no to piercings and tattoos, no to unlimited internet, no to capguns and war toys, no to using vulgar language, and no to "R" rated movies. In the negative, it sounds like our kids must have suffered a terribly bleak and empty upbringing, with a killjoy paterfamilias in control. And on some days, that might be the story they'd tell you. But what I've learned from eighteen years of parenting is that you have to say no in order to say yes. No to fast food in order to say yes to home-cooked family dinners. No to unlimited television in order to say yes to occasional interludes of quiet where you might actually have a conversation with each other. No to the onslaught of advertising and branding that turns kids into precocious consumers in order for them to enjoy a few sheltered years of innocence before getting sucked into the rat race of getting and spending. What youngsters need most from their elders are not playmates, pals or buddies but adults who can set limits and help kids internalize a healthy set of routines and restraints. Saying "no" is often the greatest gift we can give our children.

That, and our time, our presence, our attention, our availability, which is what children really crave. When they're young, it's obvious. "Look at me," they holler, diving off the high board, riding with no hands. "Look, admire, adore, affirm me, acknowledge my experiences and accomplishments." But even adolescents, studies show, say they want to spend more time with their parents, not less. It's a little sad, isn't it, that there's a book out now with the title, *One Minute Bedtime Stories*, as though we're in such a rush that spending even sixty seconds with our children at the end of the day has to be carefully scheduled and managed. Quality time with your kids is important, but quantity time counts even more.

Of course, I know that Dori and I could never have done it alone. Holly and Noah are preacher's kids, and this congregation has played an especially large role in their upbringing. This community has shaped their values, just as the Unitarian church that I grew up in shaped mine. Much has been absorbed by osmosis, not just by attending

Sunday School, and then Our Whole Lives, and then Coming-of-Age and then Youth Group every week, but by getting dragged to Social Action meetings but from hearing their parents talking about gay rights and helping their Dad paint protest signs, and from serving lasagna in the basement on First Night. This has been their spiritual home away from home.

But the curious thing is that our Unitarian Universalist principles and values don't always give much acknowledgment to children or how we actually pass on our faith. For ours is a religion that proclaims the equality of all people, and yet children are not our equals but rather dependents in need of guidance and protection. Ours is a democratic religion, but our homes and schools aren't not ruled by popular vote, and shouldn't be. We promote choice and freedom of association, but no one chooses their parents or selects the personality of their particular child. Families aren't free associations; like it or not, they're what you're born into. Indeed, it's interesting (and a little sad) that our Unitarian Universalist principles make reference to individuals and congregations and to the world around us and even to the interdependent web of nature, but make no mention of families, the most basic biological and social unit of human existence, and potentially the most satisfying, but also the most problematic for many of us.

Because we know families are stretched. We realize how demanding motherhood and fatherhood can be, especially for single parents or those in non-traditional families or those without enough discretionary income to afford babysitters or adequate childcare. And even those without kids understand how scary it is to be rearing children all alone in a world filled with oxycontin and materialistic excess and reality TV where wife-swapping is presented as standard evening entertainment. When parents are faced with being the agents of civilization all by themselves, it's tempting to just surrender and let the barbarians in the gates.

And this is one of the most important roles of a faith community--to provide an extended family of support and care, to help children feel they have a wider network of fans rooting for them. Because you see, rearing UU kids in a non-UU world is not just the job of parents. It's a joint responsibility. And saying yes to teaching Sunday School or being a mentor or OWL trainer or youth advisor is also a way of saying no to the idea that young people should receive their primary moral training from MTV or Fear Factor.

Some of the people I admire most teach Sunday School--like Jimmy Carter, who knows that it's not enough to work for peace and human rights on a global scale or build habitat houses for the poor without also doing something to answer the question, "Why should we care?" and doing something to pass on his faith to the coming generation. He volunteers every week at his church in Plains. The Nobel Peace Prize winner has even written a children's book, *The Little Baby Snoogle-Flejer*, to share his dreams with the youngest among us.

Maybe Jimmy Carter inspires you, too. And I hope that many of you who haven't taught Sunday School before might consider saying yes to sharing your wisdom and experience with our congregation's children. Now it's easier than ever. With two

services starting next fall, you can teach at one session and still hear the sermon at the other. The commitment in time is relatively small. But the risk is great. You may find your spiritual journey taking you in directions you had never expected. And you may have to live for the rest of your life with your heart outside your body.