

Unitarian Universalist Church of Wakefield
September 20, 2009
“Go Now and Learn: Our Lifespan Education”
Reverend Maddie Sifantus

READINGS William Ellery Channing

The great end in religious instruction is not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own;

Not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly and steadily with their own;

Not to give them a definite amount of knowledge, but to inspire a fervent love of truth;

Not to form an outward regularity, but to touch inward springs;

Not to bind them by ineradicable prejudices to our particular sect or peculiar notions, But to prepare them for impartial, conscientious judging of whatever subjects may be offered to their decision;

Not to burden the memory, but to quicken and strengthen the power of thought;

Not to impose religion upon them in the form of arbitrary rules, but to awaken the conscience, the moral discernment.

In a word, the great end is to awaken the soul, to excite and cherish the spiritual life.

Bill Schultz: When we Unitarian Universalists proclaimed that “revelation is not sealed,” we had it almost right, but not quite. It is not just that revelation is not sealed; revelation is not sealable. If there is one thing that follows from the New Physics, it is this: the perspective from which we observe the world changes what we see. Look at an electron in one way and it looks like a wave; look at it in another and it looks like a particle. Mystery lies curled into the very heart of being like a worm in an apple.

Aristotelian logic was wrong. We do not have to choose between A and Not-A; the same thing can be both. The first conclusion we draw from the New Physics is that even the most sophisticated instruments of observation cannot touch the ineffable. The first Unitarian Universalist affirmation which we can make is that the wonders of creation out spill every category into which we try to fit them.

SERMON HYMN #190 Light of Ages and of Nations

Our hymns before and after my words this morning were written by prolific Unitarian hymn writer, Samuel Longfellow. Even though he lived between 1819 and 1892, we still have nine hymns he wrote in our hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*. Samuel was the younger brother of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and a Unitarian minister who wrote over 90 hymns, among other things. *Light of Ages and of Nations* is one of our earliest hymns to fully recognize non-Christian religious traditions. I want to especially point out the line to you in the third verse that says: “revelation is not sealed.” Please rise as you are willing and able and sing hymn number 190.

SERMON “Go Now and Learn: Our Lifespan Education”

Many months ago when I was thinking of our church gathering together after the slower summer months, and I was planning the worship schedule for this fall, I decided, along with our former religious education director, Starbuck Hersey, and our religious education committee to have our service this morning be about religious education—what we think it is, how we do it around here, how we can revitalize the program and what our plans were for this year. Lots has changed since that decision. As I said in my *Gleam* article—our church newsletter—we have had more changes over the summer months. If you missed our ingathering Sunday last week, haven’t read *The Gleam* or are new among us this morning, both our long-time volunteer music director, Jeff Workman, and our religious education director, Starbuck Hersey, resigned over the summer. And, as I have been saying, this can be an opportunity rather than a challenge. Change *is* challenging—it shakes things up. It challenges us to think, to renew ourselves and adjust to a new reality, the new normal, if you will. This new normal has made it seem all the more important to me to talk about our religious education here at the UU Church of Wakefield this morning: a little bit about what it has been and a little bit about what it can be, if we find that vision together.

For, after all, as the words of the venerable hymn we just sang tell us, “revelation is not sealed...truth and right are still revealed”.¹ Written in each of our own deep pages are the influences of the “ancient sages, Greek, Barbarian, Roman and Jew.” Our history, our living tradition, draws from many sources, which, as you may know, are listed under our Principles and Purposes in the front of our hymnal. We affirm our religious pluralism which we believe informs our faith, enriches our lives, deepens our understanding of what it means to be a living human being and expands our vision of what it means to be alive.

“Revelation is not sealed,” it says. That means we are still learning.: learning our place on this earth and with each other in human community. Learning what it means to be moral and ethical people. Learning our place in history and in our particular history as Unitarians and Universalists, now UUs. And if we are still learning, then it follows for me that we need religious education, all of us, from the smallest to the those at the very end of life. This is what we call Lifespan Religious Education. This is what we need to be about here.

¹ SLT 190.

Lifespan Religious Education of course includes what is normally called “Sunday School.” For those of you who are new, what has happened here in recent years is that the children arrived and went downstairs to our Social Hall, the room under this one, which was transformed into religious education space. The youngest went to the nursery, where they were watched over by some of our teenagers. The school age children were met with Starbuck and adult volunteers for a program of liberal religious education.

Last year the children considered the world religions using a format called “Spirit Play” which was developed by UU educator Nita Penfold after a curriculum called “Godly Play” which is widely used in Protestant churches. This uses a Montessori approach, allowing children a lot of freedom in exploring the theme of the day. The purpose for our religious education program according to last year’s pamphlet is “to learn about our religion and others, helping the children to find their own answers to life’s big questions.” As William Ellery Channing said in our reading: “The great end in religious instruction is not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own; Not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly and steadily with their own.” Although Channing wrote those words going on two hundred years ago, they remain foundational to our philosophy of religious education for children...and I maintain that each of us, you and I, need to continue to look “inquiringly and steadily” with our own eyes, as long as we draw breath.

Our children convene using what is called the UU promises, based on our Principles and Purposes. Each promise is connected to a color of the rainbow. For instance, the color red represents “respect for all people”; and the color orange asks one to “offer fair and kind treatment for all”. By interacting with these UU promises, our children are beginning their lives learning what is important to us as a faith community. Of course, the most important place of learning for them—and for us—will continue to be in the home and family. But here we can support each other and our children in that learning.

There is a pamphlet published by the UUA named “UU Religious Education and Your Child”. This answers frequently asked questions for parents and others interested in what a UU religious education program might look like, both for their children and themselves. The author, Gaia Brown, says that children “will learn that all big questions have many answers, and that it is their duty to search responsibly for their own answers.” She says that children can expect to learn that “there are as many ideas about God as there are people; (that) we hold Jesus in the tradition

of the great prophets and teachers, and we learn from the example of his life; (and that) death is a mystery that is inseparable from life, and the only immortality we can know for sure is that which lives on in the hearts and minds of those whose lives we touch.” She goes on to say that “how we lead our lives each day is of utmost importance.”

Which brings me to the question of why Jesus—or the Good Shepherd—is in the stained glass window behind me. I know that there are many answers to that question, just as there are to all big questions. I have heard from several of you with slightly different stories—ah, the myths of the UU Church of Wakefield! The most recent story was that it came here after there was a fire in the Methodist church, and that it was given to replace a previous window, a photo of which Wendy Dennis showed me the other day from the archives. I am sure there is a much more complicated story there...but, for me, this image shows us the heritage of this historic Universalist church and also our Unitarian roots which were joined to the Universalists at the time of the merger in 1961. I believe that it is important that we—both the children and all of us—understand our Judeo-Christian roots and how they inform our faith today, how they permeate the very floor and rafters of this old building. The roof is brand new, so who knows what is going on up there!

With this understanding of our historic roots, the Judeo-Christian ones along with those of the other ancient sages, we here at UU Wakefield who plan religious education have planned to explore our Christian roots this church year, not with the intention of making Christians out of folks who don't claim that orientation, but in the service of understanding both our past and our place in the faith landscape today. In fact, Susan Kilkelly and Lucy Skeldon are downstairs this morning beginning the groundwork with exploring the history of this church. Better understanding of this part of our heritage enables us to have better interfaith dialogue with our faith neighbors, understand the theological and moral thinking still present in our culture, not to mention the stories, and to better know ourselves. We can all benefit from that, from the younger to the older.

I hope you will consider joining me this evening as we have a conversation about religious education here, what your dreams for it would be, how you can help us move it forward, how we can learn together. From the youngest to the oldest. And in the immediate, Susan Kilkelly, Lucy Skeldon, the Board of Management all need to have the congregation be part of the decision of how we move forward—do we fill Starbuck's position? Do we look for

another model? What would a multi-generational congregation look like? How can we truly welcome all those who come through our doors, from the youngest to the oldest? We'd love to have your ideas and brainstorming as we walk this path together.

I believe that religious education should permeate everything that happens in a faith community. The most obvious place it happens is in the classroom, as we strive to give our children “roots and wings”. But what about in a committee meeting or in other meetings of the church? Can we learn there how to use the democratic process named in our Principles, keeping what is sacred to us, our understanding of the holy foremost in our thoughts and actions? It seems to be the perfect place to practice the inherent worth and dignity of every person...even if you don't agree with them or don't like the paint color they might be proposing for our foyer after it gets repaired. How we walk the path of our faith with each other is part of our learning. How we move through the life of the church, if we are nourished, will keep us coming back, help keep us taking care of the place and the people who have come before us on their path of learning together and understanding faith.

Singing in the choir is another way we can learn—about new anthems and musical concepts for sure, but also about harmony, a harmony of notes on the good days, and beyond that the transcendent possibility of music to bring harmony amongst people of diverse theological beliefs or interests or the understanding of what might be called ultimacy. Music is an important part of our worship services here and the larger life of this church. And worship services are a place where religious education can take place. At their best, they bring time for “dedication, introspection, thanksgiving, and celebration.”² It is a time to encounter our theology and history through the words of our hymns and readings. I like to occasionally give the history behind some of our hymns and hymnodists, as I did with Samuel Longfellow this morning. And, in our tradition, we have what we call the Free Pulpit. What I may talk about this week may not be the same as a guest minister or a lay person does in another week. Because we walk the path of this faith “inquiringly and steadily”, revelation is indeed not sealed.

There was an article in our denominational magazine, the *UU World*, back in 1991 titled “Never a Graduation”. The article described an exploration that was ongoing at the time in UU adult religious education circles. As one participant in the discussion, Midge Skwire, said, “The

² UUA: UU Religious Education and Your Child, Gaia Brown.

church is the one institution from which you never graduate!”³ It talks about the difference between intellectual religious education—the sort of didactic, classroom kind—and the experiential sort—Spirit Play for adults, if you will. Our minister at the Follen Church in Lexington, Lucinda Duncan thinks that “adult religious education works best when it offers activities outside the classroom, where people go out and build houses or make quilts for homeless shelters or work in soup kitchens.” She describes a sort of action/reflection model which she believes “invites reflection and a more intimate understanding of another’s value system.”⁴ And Mark Morrison-Reed answers her: “Experience is fine, but experience uninformed by tradition is hollow.”

We all learn in different ways, from childhood through adulthood. Our challenge here is to provide in our worship and in our activities to offer both those intellectual activities rooted in scholarship and verbal presentation and activities that involve folks experientially. But perhaps also the challenge is in our thinking. What if in addition to providing the traditional intellectual sort of education, we also thought in a broader way about all of our activities here, making even Board of Management and committee meetings spiritual and educational activities—getting the work done but being nourished at the same time instead of drained by it all? What if we looked to each other to share our gifts and knowledge in an intentional way. After all, as Midge Skwire says later in the UU World article, “religious education is not something handed to us but something we create for ourselves.”⁵

It is each of our responsibility. It is our responsibility to figure out what it is about this faith that sustains us and propels us to live our values in our faith community and in the larger world. It is our responsibility to provide a framework, however intellectual and experiential, so that all of us, from the young ones to the old, can embody connection, compassion and creativity. It is our responsibility I look forward to our discussion after coffee hour with the Outreach Committee and our conversation this evening about how we want to be together, how we want to bring our message beyond these walls and how we will go on discovering that revelation is not sealed.

³ UU World, Nov/Dec 1991, 12.

⁴ Ibid., 12.

⁵ Ibid., 16.