

Opening Words
David Shumate

Teaching a Child the Art of Confession...
It is best not to begin with Adam and Eve.
Original Sin is baffling, even for the most sophisticated minds.
Besides, children are frightened of naked people and apples.

Instead, start with the talking snake.
Children like to hear what animals have to say.
Let him hiss for a while and tell his own tale.
They'll figure him out in the end.

Describe sin simply as those acts which cause suffering and leave it at that.

Steer clear of musty confessionals.
Children associate them with outhouses.

Leave Hell out of the discussion.
They'll be able to describe it on their own soon enough.

If they feel the need to apologize for some transgression,
tell them that one of the offices of the moon is to forgive.

Sermon
Roger Peltier

Be the Message

“I command you, in the name of Jesus Christ, to turn away!”¹ Did you cringe at that? I did. And, I’m not quoting a movie like *The Exorcist*; I’m quoting — of all things! — CNN. I command you, in the name of Jesus Christ...

I cringed every time I heard that phrase come through the TV. I cringed at the very sight of the small, helpless-looking man ordering a tsunami wave to change direction. And, I cringed at the unbelievability of the Fisherman’s story:

He was in his boat, on the water, just as the first of the great waves rolled in. Acutely aware of his impending demise — and that of the small band of tourists and children in the boat with him — he turned to face the wave — and in the name of Jesus, he heroically commanded it — he didn’t plead — he commanded the wave to change its course. And, of course, magically, he noticed that his outboard motor was still in place — unusually — at the rear of the small boat. And, of course, magically, that motor — against reputation — started on the very first try. And, of course, the fisherman turned the small boat directly into the giant wave...and (if you will) surfed to survival.

I cringed at replay after replay of that story. I cringed because it was such a gratuitous oblation for individual triumph against tsunamic tragedy. I cringed because it was so certainly theologically questionable: Did Jesus elect to “save” this one fisherman over the peril of 150,000 other victims? Is it that he had just the “right words”?

Now, folks, I must confess — as riled as I can get about these things! — I cringed, most of all, at myself for cringing at that story. As a Unitarian Universalist shouldn’t I know better? Shouldn’t I be a little more well-practiced in the virtue of tolerance? a little more accepting of another’s faith statement? After all, that Fisherman was merely turning to the faith he had. He was doing what he was taught to do, saying what he was taught to say, and thinking what he was taught to think -- and knowledge has power. The fisherman did survive. Likewise, what we are taught has power. Which brings me ‘round to the point of this sermon: “What do we teach ourselves and our children to think, or say, or do?” “What, for us, is the importance of religious education?”

¹ CNN International *After the Tsunami* “Fishermen” 01/07/05 <http://edition.cnn.com/>

As we think on these questions, let's unpack the term "religious education." I rather like the Rev. Mark Gallagher's thoughts: He says,

Education: the development of a person's full capacities.

Religion: practices for bringing life into accord with The Ultimate, individually and on a communal basis.

Religious Education, then: the process of developing the full capacity of individuals and communities for living in accord with The Ultimate.²

Now, while I'm at it, let me again confess, here, to you, I'm not so sure that I'm operating at full capacity, let alone operating in accord with the ultimate of anything. I have long been one of those people for whom "religious education" is a mystery, for whom "RE" is, at best, that incidental stuff that happens across the hall or in the basement. That's why it is such a surprise, such a revelation, a way-cool discovery, for me to conclude that everything we do is religious education. That's right, everything we do — not just with sermons and prayers and candles, but on committees and at coffee-hour, and in the supermarket, and in the living room, and at work — everything you do is religious education.

Isn't that a radical thing to say!

And so it should be. Unitarian Universalists have long been on the cutting edge of defining and defending what is religious education. It was the "reluctant radical" himself, William Ellery Channing, who long ago started the discourse, putting fourth some new principles "to reach, influence, enlighten [and] elevate the youthful mind,"³ as he said in an address before the Sunday-School Society of 1837. You may be familiar with one of Channing's more famous statements from that address:

The great end in religious instruction...is not to stamp *our* minds irresistibly on 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 and outward regularity, but to touch inward springs....⁴

Such a statement was, indeed, a departure from the rote catechism of the day. But Channing believed that children, especially the young, weren't "wax to be moulded," but rather, they had in their own hearts a certain capacity for knowing and loving the good and the true.⁵ That thought, a statement about the inherent religious nature of children, floated in the cosmos for some hundred years, though, without evoking too much change. Nonetheless, Channing's thinking was foundational for another Unitarian radical, the beloved religious educator, minister, curriculum writer, and visionary, Sophia Lyons Fahs.

² Rev. Mark Gallagher *Religious Education: A New Vision*
www.uua.org/re/reach/winter02/worship/uss_sermon_award.html

³ William Ellery Channing *The Sunday School Discourse: Pronounced before the Sunday School Society*

⁴ Channing

⁵ Channing

The Fahs biographer, Edith Hunter, best captured an understanding of the “Fahs philosophy” in these questions:

What if today's children were allowed to express freely their reactions to the same primary phenomena — birth and death, sun and moon and stars, dreams and shadows, wind and rain? Should not children's inescapable confrontations with and reflections on these realities be the beginning of religious education...? ⁶

It was Fahs — with her boundless love for children and her tireless enthusiasm for teaching — influenced by the great minds of the age like John Dewey and Angus MacLean — it was Fahs that would ultimately change the course of children's religious education, moving the instruction away from the frightening and confusing Bible stories of Adam & Eve, and Original Sin, and Hell toward instruction through nature and direct experience and love for the good and the true. In short order, Fahs made one of the most notable contributions of our time, adding the word “liberal” to the words “religious educator,” forever changing the RE landscape.

Now, for those of you that may be finding this RE rant rather uninspiring, let's pick up the pace just a bit...

My Dad used to say, “Show me your friends and I'll tell you who you are.” I was thinking about that recently when I read that “we are the average of the five people with whom we spend the most time.” ⁷ So, I guess I'd be one part sweet, one part funny, a little flamboyant, mildly compulsive, and just a bit dramatic!

What I'm coming to understand is that we really are — in many ways — composites of the people, the places and the things that we hold near and dear. And each of these say something about who we are and who we are not. The very reason we're here this morning (hopefully) is to examine exactly that — we are and who we are not — and to rededicate ourselves to be that which we say we are, to be the average of these good folk gathered here today. The question is, though, from whence comes our capacity to choose our friends? or our religious affinities? or all of our other likes and dislikes?

I said earlier that everything we do is religious education. And I want us to be very clear about that. I suspect that most of you affirm the idea that from what we do we learn — and educate. And I suspect a fair number of you agree with the old New England Transcendentalists — like Emerson or Thoreau — that children possess “a kind of spiritual knowing that would become cluttered and confused and faded as [they] grew and encountered layers of conflicting ideas.” ⁸ Those children, those spiritual beings seeking human experience, once were we.

⁶ Edith Fisher Hunter *Sofia Lyon Fahs: A Biography*

⁷ Rev. Galen Guengerich “Never Alone” *All Souls [NY] Newsletter* December 2004

⁸ Jeanne Harrison Nieuwejaar *The Gift of Faith: Tending the Spiritual Lives of Children*

And I worry for those children and for us; I worry about this: Has our spirituality — that which Channing and Fahs considered inherent in our natures — our inward springs — our capacity for living in accord with The Ultimate — has this been lost to too many layers of life? Have we become, instead, human beings seeking spiritual experience? Is it that our focus as a community ought to be on our human natures?

Maybe.

I have heard that the world is awash with sentimentalism, self help, and theological junk food. I have heard the passionate call “for the reclamation of freethought...and the secular tradition [that] formed the bedrock of our freedom *of* religion and our freedom *from* religion....”⁹ And I agree that secularism was a radical thought in its time. But secularism has come to mean “no religion.” That’s a mistake.

You see, I believe that we need to slake the hunger that secularism does not feed. “One of the dominant religious phenomena of our time” according to Maria Harris, “is the rekindling of interest in spirituality,” and in spiritual community.¹⁰ In other words, there is an abundance of “Mc-Theology” precisely because there is an appetite for it. The radical act of the present day is to be spiritual! to offer spiritual nourishment, to realign the word “religious” with the word “education” in our hearts and in our communities.

As Parker Palmer put it in his book, *The Courage to Teach*, community is a key factor in religious education. Palmer tells us that “to be a religious or spiritual being means to be in relationship with others.”¹¹ For Palmer, the spiritual community, above all other communal relationships — be they therapeutic, civic, educational, or democratic — the spiritual community is the community that calls us to be who we really are, that calls us to become our best selves, that calls us to open ourselves to one another, and that calls us to deepen our relationships in love and hospitality. Indeed, “it takes courage to grow up and turn out to be who you really are!”¹² And religious education calls us to be just that courageous.

Let me tell you about Tommy, a sixteen year-old boy in a writing class that I teach. Tommy has had a hard-knock life; he’s a high school drop out and he’s working to earn a GED. He often says things like, “I’m a failure” or “I’m stupid” or “I’ll never pass the test.”

In truth, Tommy’s test scores don’t support those statements. But Tommy believes something different about himself and that belief has become a guiding principle for him; that belief led him out of high school and into the “wrong crowd,” where he quickly became the average of his five friends.

⁹ John Gibbons *A Passionate New Year’s Call...*

¹⁰ Maria Harris *Fashion Me A People*

¹¹ Parker J. Palmer *The Courage to Teach*

¹² e.e.cummings *Inspirational Quotes* www.motivateus.com

Now, my work as Tommy's teacher isn't categorized as "religious education" by any means. But I tend to see it that way and the words of Sophia Fahs are my guide:

All that quickens sympathetic imagining,
 that awakens sensitivity to other's feelings,
 All that enriches and enlarges understanding of the world;
 All that strengthens courage,
 that adds to the love of living;
 All that leads to developing skills needed for democratic participations—
 all these put together are the curriculum through which children learn..."¹³

And all that put together is the curriculum by which I teach. I tell Tommy that he is bright and talented and that he has a contribution to make. I tell him that he doesn't have to believe his own put-downs. I tell him that he can change that message, that he can turn that around, that he can be the message — of success, of triumph, of hope. And I tell him that it matters what we believe.

When I work with him next, I'm going to assign this essay topic: To be truly radical is to make hope possible rather than despair convincing.¹⁴ Then I'm going to talk about what I learned from the Fisherman's story. I'm going to say that I was impressed by his faith — and by his courage. I'll say I was impressed, most of all, because not being able to command the wave — in the name of Jesus or any other — that fisherman nonetheless changed the course of everything by changing his own direction.

As for you, my friends, I commend to you — in the name of that which your own hearts call good and true or holy or Ultimate — I commend to you your own highest ideals, your own religious education. I'll close with these words:

If prayer worked like magic, if I knew the words that would guarantee prayer's power, I know what I would pray:

That our knowledge of sorrow be tempered with joy.
 That our fear be well-balanced by courage and strength.
 That the sight of injustice spur us to just actions.
 That our failures be teachers so that our spirits may grow.
 That we be gentle and joyful and kind.
 Then our lives will be magic, and life will be good.

And that will be a truly radical thing indeed! Amen.

¹³ Sophia Lyons Fahs *A Liberal Response to the Radical Right* Liberal Religious Education 17; Fall/Winter 1996-97

¹⁴ Raymond Williams *Truly Radical*

Benediction
Steve J. Crump

That which is worthy of doing,
create with your hands.

That which is worthy of repeating,
speak with a clear voice.

That which is worthy of remembering,
hold in your hearts.

And that which is worthy of living,
... go and live it now.

Amen.