

Take Time, Take Care

Today's UU children are generally quite privileged with opportunities and enrichment; activities that stretch their minds and bodies, develop innate talents, boost academic standings, teach new technology, artistic or athletic skills. These are all good things - but maybe too many things. Our children, and we, are saturated with stimulation, and it is the loudest, most regular stimuli that claim our attention. The 'spiritual' calls to us more often in quieter tones and so may not be as easily noticed above the din, unless we take the time and care to listen.

There are very few experiences where young and old encounter and regularly "be" with one another these days. Gone for the most part are extended families many of us knew, where annual retreats and vacation connections were planned with care and happened one year to the next - and where stories rich in human understanding and life's meaning could be passed on from generation to generation. Our congregations can offer and nurture deep connections between people of all ages, to bridge the generations. Ours are communities of interesting, open minded, unique, creative and thoughtful Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists (U*Us.) Our faith community does not necessarily replace extended family but can help name and honour the lessons, values and sense of continuity that was once more a part of that extended family structure.

We all seem to live in a fast-paced time with "to-do" lists that range from mildly daunting to beyond frenetic on any given day. We live in an overloaded-technology time as well, where even the most remote place is connected via a cell phone or e-mail. Instant messaging, blogs, message boards, e-mails and lists - sometimes the time needed in front of a computer to read and respond to all those messages keeps you away from actually being with those you care about most. More information is available than is possible to absorb, but it still keeps coming from all angles - TV, computer screen, video games, newspapers. Many of us become desensitized to the overload, with too many messages and little chance to internalize them or make sense of them emotionally.

I'll keep asking this next question. Do you hope that your children, or the children of your community, will remain U*Us as time takes them into adulthood? Do you hope that your children and youth will be (and in future become adults who are) enlivened and enriched by their faith? How will you as a parent support them in that direction? Caring to take the time now to regularly (habitually) engage the children in a warm, welcoming, spirited, exciting and supportive religious education programs, including worship, will help. How about others - not parents; as a member of your faith community - how will you support the child? How will you support the parent? With care and with time?

So, now perhaps the 'trolls of time scarcity' living in our heads may be muttering in our ear, scoffing at those two or three hours each week we'd like to set aside for participating in or leading worship, spiritual nurture, or lifespan faith development in our religious community. Are the trolls saying you can't afford the time or trouble? I think we need to talk back to those trolls! Talk to them of values and priorities and then tell them that such an investment of time surely results in our children, our youth and ourselves being more peaceful, more focused,

more able to meet life's certain challenges and 'vulnerabilities' with mindfulness and centeredness, rather than withdrawal and detachment. We all want to feel like we belong, like we can share honestly in openness and safety with those holding similar values, and that we can count on sustaining relationships. Congregations that show us, through their practices and programs, that they value multigenerational community and ministry to 'families' of all kinds, I believe will thrive.

So, how might we help one another be more engaged in and claim more joyful ownership of the work of shared ministry and lifespan faith development within our congregations when we are all so busy? Robert Kegan says, "Burnout is not from doing too much, but rather from doing too long without a personal growth opportunity." Our congregations need to be intentional at all levels of congregational life about our identity, our vision, our mission, our long range hopes and dreams - as whole, lifespan communities.

Whole communities serve people of all ages and through all stages of life, appreciating and supporting each other in their free and responsible search for truth and meaning and encouragement to spiritual growth across the life span. They don't make assumptions about someone's gifts – they offer opportunities to serve together in real, valued and important ways and they support the teacher and the learner. They offer teachers a small group ministry opportunity, through retreats and shared times of leadership development and learning. They offer programs to meet both dreams and needs of parents, youth and children; RE programs, social justice programs, gatherings and meals. They offer programs during times that fit with busy schedules. They add a spiritual or learning component to every meeting so that our service to community can become a personal growth opportunity and we lessen burnout.

We are creative people! We can find ways to free ourselves from old systems of religious education that do not work as well as they once did and try something new - something engaging and exciting. The rich history of our faith tradition and threads of learning and insight we encounter through excellent curricula available are important to be sure, but it is the caring and lively embrace of community that makes it most meaningful. Small Group Ministry models for religious education? Come learn about these with Rev. Helen Zidowecki at the ACM. Spirit Play models? Come learn about this with Nita Penfold at the Spirit Play Training being held June 18 at Neighbourhood in Toronto or out west this fall (TBA). Have another model that works well? Share it!

I read recently that we live in a time when spiritual nurture or religious life too often is crowded off our calendars, and we leave 'spiritual work' to the paid professionals – our ministers and DREs - to 'do' for us and then wonder why it has so little meaning for us when we finally show up on occasion.

We need to remind one another that learning and growing as spiritual beings is a process – one that requires a dynamic, interpersonal and relational interaction. It really needs community.

Native American and First Nations people speak of the time of the "Children's Fire" – when a council of people would come together in around their flame to make a decision, they would

ask the question, "Is it good for our children and our children's children?" Many African nations listen for the wisdom of the spirit of the child. Do we?

Unitarian Fellowship of London member Kim Stark's presentation at the UFL on Sunday April 10, 2005 asked us throughout, "How are the children?" After the service I asked if she would share her sermon and she agreed. It is on the CUC Lifespan Learning web pages – take a look and be inspired!

We need to take time, take care and take leaps of faith in our creative selves and the transformative power of coming together as communities of all ages, in our congregations and at our gatherings. I think we are at a point of transformation to whole church communities. I think it takes a shift in understanding and commitment - a letting go of old ways and a welcoming of new ones. There is much to talk about. I think it'll do wonders for us.

With love for the children and encouragement for learners of all ages,

Sylvia