

MY SPIRITUAL JOURNEY TO LIFESPAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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Two boys were walking home from Sunday school after hearing a strong preaching on the devil. One said to the other, "What do you think about all this Satan stuff?" The other boy replied, "Well, you know how Santa Claus turned out. It's probably just your dad."

My Dad was not Santa Claus, but he did perform miracles. I was the fourth of six children born to Fred and Claire Wiant of Meadville, PA. My Dad was a dairy farmer. He grew the crops to feed the cows, milked the cows, and processed and bottled the milk for his customers. This endless cycle of growing, harvesting, and producing was a miracle to me as a child. Who else could start with seeds and end up with a quart of milk? I was very much in awe of my father for all the things he did on the farm.

I enjoyed spending my time outdoors as a young child, teaching my dogs to sit, stay, roll over, and come. My brother and I would go exploring sometimes at an old barn on the property, looking for arrowheads and fossils in stones.

We often had to help our Dad with chores such as milking the cows, cleaning the barns, feeding the cows, washing milk bottles, delivering milk, and making hay. Life during the summer was mostly hard work.

My Mother planted a huge vegetable garden and my sisters and I were the caretakers of the garden. We also took the vegetables to the local Farmers' Market to sell.

Our summers were so difficult that we looked forward to school starting in the fall and to winter. We loved to play outside in the snow either sled riding or making forts and having snowball fights. We would stay outside until almost dark, and then come back inside for hot chocolate and to stand on the register to warm up!

We didn't go many places because the cows had to be milked twice a day, but about every 2 or 3 months we would go to my grandparents farm in New Bethlehem to visit for the day. We would leave home after the milk had been delivered, and return home in time for the cows to be milked again. It was always fun to go there as there was lots of things to do. My grandmother made the best home made bread and applesauce, and she kept what she called farmer cookies in her freezer. They were as big as a lunch plate and they were very yummy!

One of my fondest memories of my youth was going with my Dad on the milk route to deliver milk to his customers. My two older sisters didn't like to go and my two younger sisters were too young, but I loved to go! I loved going into town and seeing stores and other houses. We would always get a Nehi orange pop at the Isaly's Dairy Store in the summer, or a hot chocolate in the winter. My Dad would do the driving and I would do most of the delivering. I would load up the milk carrier in between stops.

The challenge for me was to take the bottles to the milk box, deposit them, pick up the empty bottles, and make it back to the truck as quickly as possible. Then we would move on to the next customer. The faster we got through the milk route, the sooner we would get to Isaly's store. I also knew that if I did most of the delivering from house to house, my Dad wouldn't be as tired when we got home.

The one thing that I learned from my Dad on those milk routes was compassion. One year, a section of town was flooded, but my Dad delivered milk to his customers in spite of the high water. When some customers had financial struggles, he continued to deliver milk to them and told them to pay him when they could. He also delivered milk to all areas of town, to the rich and the poor, and to all the races represented in that town. It didn't matter to him what side of the tracks you lived on. If you had children in the house, you needed milk.

Other things that I learned on the farm from my Dad were respect for the environment and the animals. He had a love for the land and the cycles of the seasons. His livelihood depended on nature and the animals, and he was very aware of their interdependence.

The things I learned from my Dad were learned by example. I saw how he related to other people as individuals of worth and dignity, his compassion for those less fortunate, and his respect for the interdependent web of all existence. The things I learned from him are treasures that I share with everyone I know and meet, just as he shared them with me and others that he knew.

Over the years I have seen how important our example is to others, both children and adults, in forming our own ideas about faith, human relations, and democracy. And I have seen that all of us are in a learning mode all of our lives. Religious education is a lifelong process, ever changing and developing as we gain new insights and acquire new knowledge about ourselves, wisdom from the previous traditions, and the world we live in.

William Ellery Channing, a founding elder of American Unitarianism, challenged the religious leaders in 1837 against trying to stamp their minds on the young, calling instead for the stirring up of the minds of the young. "We are not to help children see with our eyes," he said, "but to look inquiringly and steadily with their own. Not to burden their memory, but to quicken and strengthen the power of their own thinking." As parents, we are tempted, at times, to stamp our minds on our children. We may even be tempted to try to stamp our minds or our religious experience on other adults!

The goal in teaching is to provide information and experiences for the students NOT in order to burden their memory but to quicken and strengthen the power of their own thinking.

As we strengthen the power of one another's thinking, we strengthen our whole UU movement. It strengthens how we understand ancient religious traditions, and it strengthens how we use wisdom literature from the past and present.

We are free to look at ancient truths in new ways, with new and open eyes. Back in the 1800's Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote:

Do not go where the path may lead; go instead where there is no path and leave a trail. UUism elevates the importance of what each one of us experiences. Each one of us is unique in how we experience something. Each one of us is unique in how we understand and are drawn to, or even repelled by, a religious truth or tradition. We freely acknowledge that we don't all experience spirituality in the same way.

The beauty and strength of Unitarian Universalism is that open diversity when undergirded by a foundation of compassion AND acceptance AND the use of a democratic process acknowledges that it is OK to see and experience religion and spirituality from many perspectives. It is always important to remember that we need to be open to learn from religious ideas different from our own.

An unknown author wrote, "I haven't a clue as to how my story will end...but that's all right. When you set out on a journey and night covers the road, you don't conclude that the road has vanished. How else could we discover the stars?" Being open to that which is unknown allows us to discover ever new truths and also to discover the stars. If we find ourselves on a path with a dead end, we can benefit from something Carlos Castaneda

wrote: "A path is only a path, and there is no affront, to oneself or to others, in dropping it if that is what your heart tells you."

Look at every path closely and deliberately. Try it as many times as you think necessary. Then ask yourself alone, one question: Does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good; if it doesn't, it is of no use."

Let me tell you a story. The version that I know best is about a man named Isaac. Isaac was much like his neighbors, not wealthy in material goods, but he had a small farm, a loving family, in general, a good life. A particular year the harvest was poor. His family was hungry. One night during this time, Isaac has a dream.

In his dream, a voice tells him to go to the capitol city and look for a treasure under the bridge by the Royal Palace. In the morning, Isaac dismisses his dream, thinking, "Well, it is, after all, only a dream." But the next night Isaac dreams the same dream. Still he pays no attention to it. When the dream of finding the buried treasure comes to him again, on the third night, he thinks, "Perhaps it is true." And so he sets out to make his journey.

Isaac walks through the forest, over the mountains, across the desert, to the city nestled against the edge of the sea. But when he finds the bridge by the Royal Palace, it is guarded day and night. He doesn't dare pull out his shovel and start digging. Still, something calls to him and every morning he goes to the bridge and stays until it is dark. One day the captain of the guards asks Isaac why he is there. Isaac tells of his dream. The captain laughs and replies, "You poor man. You have worn out your shoes for only a dream. If I believed a dream I once had, I would go to the place you have come from and I'd look for treasure under the stove in the house of a man named Isaac."

Isaac bows to the captain and starts on his long journey home. He turns his back to the sea, walks across the desert, over the mountains, through the forest, until he reaches his own home. He kisses his wife and hugs his children. They share a meager meal and go to bed. Isaac rises with the sun, digs under his stove, and there he finds the treasure.

In thanksgiving, Isaac builds a house of prayer. In one corner he inscribes this wisdom, "Sometimes one must travel far to discover the treasure that is near." Isaac sends the captain of the guards a priceless ruby. And for the rest of his life, he prays daily, and is never hungry again.

Isaac did not always know that his treasure was there, at his feet. I suspect that this is true for all of us at times. Sometimes we see the richness of our lives and sometimes we don't. Sometimes we don't take our dreams seriously and follow them to the source. Other times we don't know where to look. Sometimes the finding of treasure is remembering what we have had all along.

All of us have treasure we must seek; and each of us has what is treasure for another. All of us are standing on, carrying within, treasure for others and for the world. We find treasure by hearing the call, the hunger. We find treasure by taking the risk to make the journey. We find treasure by opening all the windows of our beings to what may be at hand. And then the treasure is ours to care for.

As a community, we are standing on treasure and this is a truly amazing community of seekers. Winter beachcombers, as Mary Oliver describes,

“The gatherers who come flying on their long wings, who comes walking, who comes muttering, thank you dainties, dark wreckage, coins of the sea in my pockets and plenty for the gulls, and the wind pounding, and the sea still streaming in like a mother wild with gifts – in this world I am as rich as I need to be.”

How can we better use all the treasures we have, all the resources we are – to create an even more profound community of all ages? How do we be more intentional as a learning community of all ages, celebrating together, and sharing our Universalist message of love and hope?

The answer is long. We have lots of great programs. We will be connecting them to one another under the umbrella of Lifespan Religious Education. Remember that old song, “the knee bone's connected to the leg bone, and the leg bone's connected to the hip bone.” In order to connect the programs of the church to each other, we have to know what we are connecting them to; we have to know what is at the center.

It's not that we want to connect things to each other in any random way like those imaginary creatures with pig's feet, a fish body, and a monkey's head. Rather, the drive to connect things is to create a deeper, clearer, and stronger ministry. By trying to connect our programs to each other we will, inevitably learn what stands at the center of our community life together.

With worship at the center, as it has been for a few hundred years, the children and youth are marginalized. I believe that we have had an institutional structure that leaves children and youth out of the center, leftover from an old set of bones.

Before the 19th century invention of Sunday School, worship was, and needed to be, at the center of church life. With the dawn of a greater understanding of child development and the beginnings of the public school movement, the church was divided into adults and children. I believe that at the time, this was a progressive, and just way to go. Now it's time again, to reexamine how the whole picture fits together.

Rev. Laurie Bushbaum says that the concept of Spiritual Formation belongs at the center. This model of church says that all of us, of all ages, are on a spiritual journey. All of us are about growing our spirits, deepening our truth. Imagine Spiritual Formation as the spinal column, to which everything else is connected: worship and the arts, social justice, pastoral care, and education. This model says that all ministries are equally related to the center, and move out from the center, return to the center and are upheld by the center.

In this model with Spiritual Formation at the center of the church, spiritual formation acts as the connector. It provides a pathway from each part of our ministry to every other part. This model says that there are different ways to grow our spirits. For some it might primarily be in the work of social justice, for others it might be primarily in worship and the arts, or pastoral care. And still for others the work of religious education holds most passion. None are at the center, yet all are pathways to the center.

If we can name what is at the center, and if we know how each part is related to the other, then we can move toward the future with all of us moving together, in a coordinated, graceful effort.

Imagine what it would look like for us to be the most amazing community of all ages, learning about, celebrating, and sending out to the world our Universalist message of love and hope. Naming spiritual formation at the center of the church is a theological position. Lifespan Religious Education is one component that helps us organize our educational ministry consistent with our desire to be a life-giving, intergenerational community.

Lifespan Religious Education means a way of religious education that clearly acknowledges that RE is not just for children and youth. LRE is a way of saying that each one of us in community is still learning and will forever be learning. It also means each and every age has something to give to the community. Lifespan RE is a way of saying we must consider each stage of life and spiritual growth as equal to every other. LRE is

a way of saying that whether we know it or not, every program of the church is connected to every other and we strengthen each and all if we intentionally plan our connections. LRE means we plan our community life carrying the consciousness of all members of the community. It means we are community, gathered here in one strong body.

LRE does not mean we suddenly change everything. It does mean that we ask deep questions about how we nurture faith and religious identity for all ages and life stages. It means we plan a core curriculum for children, youth, young adults, and adults.

It means we need strong programs for adults who have come to this faith as adults and need to claim it as their own. It means we develop a way to help parents nurture the religious education of their children at home. It means that we know justice making should be learned and practiced all through life. It means, as 19th century Transcendentalist and UU minister Theodore Parker, said, “All life is education.” LRE means we slowly build a strong bridge across the span of life.

Judith Freidiani, in her essay in *The Essex Conversations* quotes Thornton Wilder. “There is a land of the living and a land of the dead and the bridge is love.” Judith goes on to say, “We call it LRE, a term that evokes an image of a seamless continuum, of a graceful bridge spanning the river of life from shore to shore, from birth to death. And yes, we hope that bridge is love, beloved community.

I believe that Judith is right. That beloved community is what carries us from shore to shore with joy and meaning. I believe that beloved community is one of the most important treasures of contemporary life. And church is one of the last intergenerational communities in our culture. Judith concludes, “When we remember that the gifts of wisdom, love, and service are human capacities found in people of all ages, we will restructure our institutions to change the way we relate to each other religiously.” LRE is a way of restructuring our community so that we mutually nurture, serve, and celebrate.

At the back of the sanctuary is a door. Outside of that door is a new bridge. This new bridge, for me represents our bridge of love. The bridge stands between the sanctuary, which we have sometimes equated with adults – and the RE spaces which have been too limited to children and youth. Where we once had a dark, dingy, and inaccessible hallway,

there is a bridge. A bridge with light and beautiful space. A bridge through which the wind can blow.

The spirit of new life is blowing through this building, through this beloved community. I believe there is a call in our midst, which we are ready to hear. A call that says, "Rise up, old bones. You will have new life." We are moving into this building as if it is our own land. We are hearing the spirit blow through us with the deepest questions of who we are and who we might be as beloved community. We are looking with great and tender care to the hidden life just below the surface, at our feet. We are the treasure. We are full of life. As Mary Oliver says, "In this world we are as rich as we need to be."

Closing words:

The spirit blows in the wind, rises in the sea, scattering treasure about our feet and in our hands. The Spirit blows through our lives, commands attention, lures us on. We are called, dear ones, to new life.