

Impressions on One Another: Community Life as Spiritual Formation

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Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Child Blessing Ritual and Community Dedication

Sermon

One Sunday this year, I was the Story Teller in Spirit Play. That's our program for kids in grade school. The story was the parable of the Good Samaritan. Somebody has asked Jesus how to live. The Jewish law says that you should love God with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself. So, the questioner wants to know: Who is my neighbor? Jesus tells a story.

One day a man was walking the long road between two cities. We use laminated characters or small props to demonstrate the stories in Spirit Play, so I held up a robed figure. Two robbers beat him and stole his money [demonstrate]. They left him on the side of the road, moaning and bleeding.

As he lay there, a religious leader, somebody like a minister, came walking down the road in his fine garments. As he neared the man by the roadside, he heard him crying. [demonstrate]. He approached and looked down at him, and then he crossed over to the other side of the road and kept on walking.

At this point, some of the kids howled: "Nooo!!!" and "You're kidding me!" It was not so much an interruption as an eruption of moral disbelief. I went on with the story: A second important person came down the road, and looked at the hurting man, and crossed on by to the other side. Only the next person, who was a Samaritan, would stop. Even though nobody thought a Samaritan would ever do anything of worth, he helped a person. He took the man into the next city, found an inn, got him a room, and tended his wounds. He left extra money with the innkeeper for the injured man's needs, and said he'd come back in a few days and pay any further expenses.

After the story, Jesus asks: Which one was being a neighbor? In Spirit Play, after we tell a story, we ask a few questions. We call it Wondering time. "I wonder...have you heard any of this before? I wonder which person did you find the most interesting? I wonder, does the story

remind you of any of our UU principles?" (We call them our UU Promises in Spirit Play.)

The big moment of the morning seemed to be the shock of discovering that a person could step around another human being who was gravely injured. The kids knew this was wrong. As author Ivy Beckwith notes, ethical and spiritual values are "more often caught than taught." These values are absorbed and embedded through our interactions in community, and through our shared reflections about life together. In a congregation, she says, "relationships need to be developed with the intention of positively forming our children."

Beckwith is a minister to families and children in a progressive Protestant church out east. I've been taking a class with her online. The title of her book is *Formational Children's Ministry*. The title of the *class* is "Let's Ditch Sunday School."

In these times, she says, the purpose of our ministry to children is no longer schooling. Instead, the purpose is to aid in the development of spiritual lives. Long gone are the days when any congregation could hope to download a lot of religious information into the minds and memories of our kids. It would be overwhelming even to try. There's too little time, for starters. And God knows we do not need more information. We need more understanding, patience, courage and hope.

Here at USSS, our Religious Education Coordinator (Miranda) and I assure our volunteers, and our potential volunteers, that you need not be an expert in teaching, in religion, or even in children. You need only be authentic, present, and thoughtful. What we have to offer in this place is relationships. Real people to real people, of any age or size.

The purpose of a children's program here is the purpose of the congregation at large. We are here to help one another to embrace life with gratitude and joy. We help one another to walk in the ways of kindness, understanding, peace and compassion.¹ We are in the spiritual formation business. This can happen not only in a Sunday school room, but at any time that two or three of us are gathered.

In this congregation we promote building relationships of joy and meaning across the

¹ [Paraphrasing Beckwith from her liberal Christian context.] Beckwith, Ivy. *Formational Children's Ministry: Shaping Children Using Story, Ritual and Relationship*. Grand Rapids, 2012: Baker Books.

generations. Last weekend more than 80 folks gathered at our all-ages camp at a recreation center an hour east of here. Single people, parents with kids, teenagers, you name it. Our age range spanned nine decades of age.

People played board games, flag football and Frisbee. We taught one another card games and weaving. A big hit of the camp was making a rocket out of construction paper and the soft cap of a water bottle. To launch the rocket you made, you would pump a bicycle pump, and then hit the ignition button. Every time, we'd look up to see how high a kid's rocket shot before dropping on the meadow. My contribution to this work was to show that it's more exciting if, before you push the button, you do a count down and then yell *blast off!*

What I'm describing could be an advertisement for next year's camp, but that's not my intention. It could be a pitch for doing weekend retreats more frequently as a congregation. That's not a bad idea. When we take some time together, to help one another or play a game or sing a song, or just introduce ourselves, we build relationships. And relationships are formational.

We shape one another by how we connect and by how experience one another. In an intentional community, we make impressions on one another, impressions on our heart and soul about living in this world.

On the second morning of camp, I said "Good morning" to a boy. "How's it going for you?"

"Good! I've met a lot of people," he beamed. It came as a surprise that he spoke so much to me, as on Sundays here I find him quiet. But we are all rushed on Sunday, aren't we? It's hard to say much, especially if you're quiet or little. Perhaps having a little more quality time is what turns merely being in the same *place* together into being in the same *community* together. That's what formational ministry is about. Helping one another, *seeing* one another, greeting one another, by name, in a safe place that we create by our intention and by our presence.

Among the parents of the children we blessed in this morning's service, one mother was herself dedicated in her grandfather's Unitarian church in New York City, in March 1979. Amanda was just a few months old. She told us this last year in a Stewardship Testimonial. Though her spiritual journey has had many resting places outside our UU

movement, it's in our congregation that she's replanted her roots in a UU community, along with Darrel and the kids.

At Amanda's blessing ceremony in 1979, the minister said: "In the church the child will be introduced to her world, there she will learn meanings people have found in the skies, the fields, the hills, the valleys, and the cities of humanity. *There* the child will be able to count the number of her days and weigh their meaning, and ... to treasure beauty, mercy and justice in the deep places of her being." [revised for gender inclusion]

Amanda said to us last year: "Children are guided not only by their parents but by the people surrounding them; their friends, their family, their neighbors, and their elders. What the Unitarian Universalists are, and are *not*, what they stand for or against, what they consider, what they notice, what they act on or not at all, is what I want my children to grow up around."

The goal of Unitarian Universalist religious education is not to manufacture millions of new UUs or to keep every last one of them that walks in our doors or gets welcomed as a child in a blessing ceremony. The goal of the spiritual formation that we practice here is not really to hang on to these kids long into the future, though it's great when it happens. The goal is *to enrich their lives right now*, in the present. Our work is to help one another to embrace life with gratitude and joy, right now. We help one another to walk in the ways of kindness, understanding, peace and compassion.

Ten years ago I flew to Chicago to attend a conference of a national interfaith economic justice organization. It's devoted to empowering low-wage workers and pursuing fair treatment for them. At one luncheon, sitting across my table was a tall young man just out of college. "Do you remember me?" he asked. After my initial surprise of seeing such a familiar face on a grown up person, I did remember his name. As a teen, he had been in the youth group of the Second Unitarian Church of Chicago, when I was a volunteer before I became a minister. One of his parents was Jewish and the other Protestant, and *he* had grown up as a UU. Once, at a service there, he had moved us by playing a classical piece on the piano. As we all sighed or applauded, another teenage boy came to the pulpit to give a short sermon. "Wow," he said grinning at his friend. "One of these days, I'm gonna say, 'I KNEW him!'"

Now as a young adult, this person told me he hadn't practiced the piano in a long time. It would not be his career, or his calling. But he'd found a job as an activist for low-wage workers, and he was fired up.

I asked him how was our church doing, my old church. "I haven't been there very much," he said. "How come?" He said that for him, the church of his childhood seemed to lack enough openness to spiritual passion and religious language. He needed a strong spiritual home to sustain him through his long days and nights of passionate social action. He wanted a connection with the divine, he said, and he didn't feel enough support for that.

I haven't seen him since then, but last week I looked him up online. On Facebook I learned that he has a new job as a community organizer in a neighborhood on another side of Chicago from where he grew up. And I learned that he's joined another church. It's not a UU congregation, but one from a moderate Protestant faith, a church in his new neighborhood. My heart sank. "We lost one!" I said to myself.

I thought about that young UU teenager I had known—the one with talent, enthusiasm and care for his world. Then I realized that I was caught in a scarcity mindset, as if his transition to another faith was the end of the world for Unitarian Universalism.

I reflected: Here is a young person who values religious community. And he has found one that suits his needs and longings. Maybe Second Unitarian Church had something to do with shaping a person who pursues his longing.

Here is a young man who feels called to the work of justice in his world. He puts his heart and soul into making a difference. Perhaps we had something to do with shaping a person who pursues his calling.

I think that growing up in our church made an impression on his heart and soul. The purpose of spiritual formation is not to increase our attendance numbers; it is to enrich our lives. The purpose is to enlarge the courage, love, generosity and joy with which we live.

Last week at camp I had an exciting conversation with one of the adult volunteers in our Junior High Youth Group. He asked: What's the purpose of religious education here? I said that the purpose of our whole community is to help one

another embrace life with gratitude and joy, and help one another to walk in the ways of kindness, understanding, peace and compassion. I said: "I consider it a success if what comes out of nine months of Religious Education is that you know all of them by name and personality, and they remember the names of the adults who spend time with them. From these relationships, I am sure that our youth will feel and know our spiritual values, even if they can't recite our list of Principles. The most important thing is that they know this congregation is their home, and know they are cherished for who they are." This, I believe, is *what we all need*

Today's message could be a pitch for you to think about volunteering in religious education for the fall. If it works that way, I'll be happy. But this message goes beyond that.

When we practice religious community as an avenue for spiritual formation, it's *never* a one-way street. It's not as if you have *only* gifts to give, or as if you have *only needs to be filled*. We give and receive gifts with one another. We shape and form one another. We all do this. *You* can do this. If the only thing you ever do is greet another person in the spirit of welcome, recognizing their humanity, you are giving this gift.

But remember, as you greet another person, the other person greets you. You have as much of a chance to receive that welcome as to give it.

Last Saturday night around the campfire, some young adults played guitar and Baby Boomers and elders sang with passion. A girl came up to me and asked if she could make me a s'more. I'd already eaten one, but how could I turn down the offer? Or the next one? "Just leave off the chocolate this time, please." I know she was not trying to curry favor with her minister, as she made the same offer to others nearby.

Our formational ministry is about sharing, noticing, treasuring, loving and growing, together. It's for all of us. It does not end when childhood ends. We make impressions on one another's heart.

Our work is to help others to embrace life with gratitude and joy. Our purpose, now, today, and always, is help one another to walk in the ways of kindness, understanding, peace and compassion.

We are so blessed to be doing this together, for one another, and for ourselves, and for this world. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

We gather now to remember to pause “for a moment on the forming edge of our lives.”² May all that is life-giving enrich our spirits.

Our thoughts are drawn to places of conflict and grief, especially this week to Iraq, now bearing renewed violence. We send prayers for healing and peace there and around the globe.

In this congregation, we give our love to those living with loss. We extend our condolences to Christopher and family, on the passing of his mother earlier this month.

At this time we may have other names on our hearts of those we have lost. Now into the space of our sanctuary, let us call out the names of those we mourn and remember. [Pause] May their memory be a blessing to us.

Today we lift up those dealing with financial troubles, a health crisis, chronic pain, or uncertainty about the road ahead. There are people on our hearts who need good wishes, prayers, or gestures of care. At this time we say the names of those we know, whether whispering to ourselves or speaking their names and needs aloud into the space of our sanctuary. [Pause] May we find the courage to reach out and the grace to give the simple gift of our presence.

With gratitude we recognize that life also has its joyful milestones. At this time, let us speak the names or events that give us good cheer. Let us speak them into the space of our sanctuary. [Pause] May another’s good news give to all of us cause for joy.

At this time of Summer Solstice, of the longest days of the year in the northern hemisphere, we say blessings on all creatures. Let us give thanks for the bounty of the earth and the power of the sun, for the flourishing fields, the fruits on the trees, and the herbs and flowers now so fragrant and full of life. May we receive the warmth and light of the sun, and share our light with others.

Spirit of Life, give us hearts full of gratitude, kindness and courage for the living of our days. In the name of all that is holy and all that is human, blessed be. Amen.

² Kathleen McTigue, at reading #435 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, the UUA hymnal, Boston, 1993.