

**Growing Up in UU Congregations:
Spiritual Formation Whether You Want it or Not!**

Sunday, August 20, 2023
UU Society of Sacramento

Introduction & Concluding Questions by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones with Other Voices
Hymns: #364 Come, Sing a Song with Me; #123 Spirit of Life/Fuente de Amor; #114 Forward through the Ages

Chalice Lighting Words

Ministerial Intern Rosemary Dodd explains her UU childhood experience and teaches hand gestures, leads the words. (*English, introducing hand signs*): We are Unitarian Universalists: People of open minds, warm hearts, and welcoming hands. (*Spanish*): Somos Unitarian Universalistas: Gente de mentes abiertas, corazones generosos, y manos solidarias.

Introduction by Roger Jones: The Congregation as Curriculum

A month ago, six of our worship associates gave a group service about the moment when they discovered UUism or decided that they were UUs. Today's service includes a few people who didn't *discover* UUism, they grew up in it. If you are on Zoom now and you grew up Unitarian Universalist, I invite you type your name and home church into the chat. I know that one of you is Nancy Oprsal, who started at First Unitarian of Dallas more than 80 years ago.

And raise your hand if you're in the room and you grew up in the faith. Of course, there are a bunch of people who are growing up in this UU congregation right now. Some are in the nursery. We sang to other UU children just moments ago when they left for Sunday school.

You know, it is a misconception to think that spiritual formation happens *only* in a program that a church labels "Religious Education." That's *part* of it, but not the only part. The late religious educator Maria Harris has written that the educational curriculum of a congregation is *everything* that congregation does.¹ To be sure, part of it includes instructional times, with stories, discussions, writing, or making art. But that's only one aspect. What happens in worship services also has a formative role. The structure of a service, and its rituals, music, meditation, or prayer all play a role, as well as the sermon.

Being of service as a volunteer also shapes us, such as helping out in the congregation in a variety of ways, serving together in the local community, and working for justice and fairness in society. The ways that we work out our disagreements are part of the curriculum. So are the ways the congregation learns to face a challenge together, and the ways we support its mission with our contributions.

When we gather in Soul Matters groups (or other small groups) to reflect and connect with others, we embody the curriculum of the church and are touched by it. When we have potlucks, work parties, coffee hour, and Soup Sunday—that's all part of it.

A few of our adult congregants have written to me in response to me about growing up as UUs. When Dixie was 12 in San Mateo, her parents decided that their Presbyterian church was too negative and focused on sinfulness and avoiding hell, so they looked around. The new Unitarian church was renting space at the YMCA, and the family started going. A meeting room with a stage was turned into a sanctuary. Dixie writes: "I immediately liked it, and felt the services were uplifting. I didn't go to the RE program, except for the coming-of-age

series.” One thing I remember is that the hymns were the same tunes as at the Presbyterian church, but the verses were changed. I like that the members were unafraid to speak their views. That was a good example for me. The coffee hour after the service was also a new thing. My parents made a lot of new friends and joined marches and demonstrations that were going on a lot during that time.”

Richard has told me that he has fond memories of being a child here in *this* congregation in the mid to late 1980s. He writes: “I remember group excursions to congregations of a spectrum of religions, with a Buddhist service at the temple off Broadway standing out particularly. I am constitutionally an atheist and being exposed to groups of people who had specific practices [and] yet were open to the curious and the seekers, helped me to be an atheist without the anger that seems to plague so many people of that persuasion. I have taken these ideas with me, and I try to teach my daughter to appreciate the practices, values, and wisdom of ... traditions to which we don’t belong. I am happy for those who take comfort in these things. Life is hard enough without us judging each other.”

When Meg was 5 years old, her parents founded a small Unitarian Church in South Bend, Indiana, along with a few other religious liberals in that area. She writes: “Every Sunday provided a space for kids to have opportunities for friendship, art learning and service. In the old mansion we occupied on Riverside Drive, I enjoyed helping in the massive kitchen with clean-up in the company of loving adults after coffee hour.” She drifted away from church during college and when starting her working life, which brought her to California. In 1980, however, she discovered UUSS and joined us in 1982. Meg writes that in the past 40 years, “I have continued to deepen my life through my learning and commitments here, and support from our leaders and dear friends in this congregation. Thanks, Mom and Dad!”

This morning we will hear from a few others. First you can see pictures of their church on slides. The 1st slide shows a church in Lancaster, Pennsylvania where Dan and Frances Myers took their four daughters. The 2nd shows the UU Fellowship of Sunnysvale. When they installed me as their minister 23 years ago, they made me this clerical stole with names or signatures of all the children there at the time. *Right here* is the name of Lindsey, who will speak this morning. Also, our opening hymn we sang today is her favorite from those years. The 3rd slide is a picture of the First Unitarian Church in Baltimore, where Gail grew up. Our closing hymn is one that Gail enjoyed singing with her family--to the pipe organ’s booming, majestic accompaniment.

Dan Myers: Raising Four Daughters in UU Communities

My wife Frances and I have raised four Unitarian Universalist daughters who are now adults with kids of their own.

When we started a family, I was no longer Catholic, and I resented family members who felt that they needed to share their worries that my children weren't going to go to heaven if they weren't baptized. I was also scared, not only because I had this human life suddenly to care for, but because I had grown up Catholic and I had absorbed, for 20 years, the same beliefs as my family members. Part of me worried: was I wrong? WAS I endangering their immortal souls just because I no longer believed in God? But Frances and I agreed, we weren't going to raise our children in any religion, because at that time we just couldn't see a good reason for doing so.

Well, by the time the kids were in preschool, I'd softened a little bit. My kids were coming home with Bible stories that their friends had told them. Frances had never been raised in any religion and those stories were all new to her. But I knew those stories very well and I could

help my kids process them. And while I was still bitter about Christianity in general, I did have fond memories of activities and friendships that I'd developed in my 12 years of Catholic school.

I suggested to Frances that maybe we should look for some kind of religious structure that we might find palatable. I argued that the kids were going to get exposed to religious ideas anyway, and literature is full of biblical references so it would be useful for them to learn the stories. And we didn't have family in the area and maybe we could get a few more playdates for the kids.

So we started church shopping and we found two Unitarian Universalist churches equidistant to our home, the UU churches of Lancaster and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. They were wonderful, kid-friendly places. One year the RE kids put on a Christmas pageant for the congregation, but instead of the usual nativity story, this pageant was - *The Night Before Christmas*, "when all through the house" Our daughter Maeda was the mouse. Often at Halloween services, the kids paraded through church in their costumes while the organist played spooky music. As teenagers, each of our girls went on a service trip to a different part of the country with their church classes.

Just as importantly, Frances and I met many, many like-minded people. Parents with children our ages; parents of older children who shared their wisdom; loving congregants who truly enjoyed interacting with our kids – at least on Sundays. During our children's childhoods, the central Pennsylvania UU churches were a large part of our family's experiences.

Today, none of our adult children attends a Unitarian Universalist church, and they don't raise their children in any particular religion. But that's OK. Because now I realize that the benefit of raising our kids as UUs is that it made Frances and me better parents.

When we started our family, we still had a lot of personal growing of our own to do. Unitarian Universalism helped us develop and nurture ourselves spiritually. It gave us life-long friends who were available in those inevitable times of need. Sure, those churches provided my kids with safe space in which to laugh and play and ask questions. But more importantly, they helped me become a better person, and as a result, I was a better parent -- and now grandparent. And for that I'm so grateful.

Lindsey Arasmith Wilkie: Sunnyvale in the 1990s & 2000s

I was about 7 years old when my mom asked if I would like to go to church. Up to that time, my religious experience included my baptism as an infant and a few days at a friend's summer Bible camp. When mom said, "go to church", it wasn't so much a place as an idea. My parents had grown up in Episcopal and Methodist traditions, but I was a church-novice.

So then she asked *where* I'd like to go to church, and we decided to try a few out. I think my mom was a UU long before she knew it.

I don't remember many specifics about our church dating experiment, but we settled in at the UU Fellowship of Sunnyvale – coincidentally not too long before Roger would appear there as well.

When I think back on those formative years, Sundays at church are a repeating bright spot. I was – let's say – a spirited youth, and I didn't feel the need to tamp down that spark on Sundays. From the start, the UU congregation felt like a safe place to be myself, to find out who I was.

When I was very little, I had dreams wherein God (or some form of the divine) came to me. God came to me as an alligator. I remember telling someone at a friend's Bible camp about this, and they were very put off by it. ("You must have misunderstood your dream," etc.) The dreams stuck with me though. Some years later, as a UU, I told my religious education coordinator, Marie, about the alligator-God dreams. "Here we go," I thought. "They're all going to shun me." But I was so wrong. Marie lit up. She was thrilled. She told me about how some indigenous people believe in spirit animals, and perhaps that was a spirit animal come to me. I should learn more about alligators, I should embrace the dream. She didn't shut me down, she encouraged me. She gave me a lens to see the experience, to explore and find meaning, and continue to appreciate it.

The congregation's environment was an encouraging one. Whatever your passion, it was embraced and nurtured. The good and the bad. I went through a phase where I changed my name frequently. And every time I submitted a new name badge request, a new name badge appeared. There was freedom to explore. Support in that exploration.

Sometimes to the congregation's own detriment: when we were about 12, my best friend and I wrote a rap: "The Seven Principles Rap." We performed this rap in a service. With microphones, and visual aids, and a beat from a little electronic keyboard. It was probably a horrid (or hilarious) 5 minutes for everyone watching, and I don't know how we got away with it. But let me tell you: I don't know a single other person who grew up in a church that not only allowed them to be themselves in their fullness, but also encouraged them to do it *during the service*.

But to really sum it up, growing up UU –for me – has instilled confidence in my search for truth and meaning. I have a deep appreciation and curiosity for other religions and spiritual practices, that I don't always see mirrored in my peers. And perhaps that's because my memories of Sundays at church are bright. I remember checking the order of service every week for my favorite songs. I remember learning about other religions. I remember outings to learn how we could serve our community and our planet. I remember feeling excited and honored when asked to pick the reading and light the chalice. I remember a sense of belonging and support.

And I still feel that compassionate presence, anytime I see a UU congregation.

That's what brought me here – to USS – in my college years, when I was away from home and longing for spirit and strength. For songs I knew, and sermons with questions I was asking, too.

And that's what brings me back as a mother. The hope that my 6-year-old son will also grow up with open mindedness and appreciation for the diversity in our world, a respect for the interconnectedness of us all. The lessons he learns here – in a classroom or just in his interactions – forming a loving foundation as he grows and searches for meaning of his own.

Gail Evans: 1950s & 60s in Baltimore

I grew up in the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore from the mid-1950's to 1972.

Our church was steeped in history. It's a grand building dating to 1818. A Tiffany glass mosaic of the Last Supper hangs over the altar. The ceiling is barrel-vaulted with hundreds of small lights. Magnificent music fills the church from a massive pipe organ. Our church had been a waystation during the Underground Railroad, sheltering slaves as they escaped to northern states.

Growing up in the 1960s coincided with a tumultuous time in our country, with political upheaval and protests. Yet there was also idealism about the future.

The 1960's blew through my church and my home like a strong wind. You just had to hold on. I didn't realize until later that the families of my non-UU friends watched the 60's from a more tranquil vantage point. But my UU family embraced change. We were liberal. We experimented. We were energized.

Our church had a very large, dynamic religious education program. We discussed issues which I now categorize as morality. Inquisitiveness was encouraged. I learned about Helen Keller, Darwin, Thoreau. I was inspired by the nameplates of prominent UUsers on our RE classroom doors -- like Jefferson, Dickins, Emerson, Louisa May Alcott. Our classes supported UNICEF by selling holiday cards.² Sometimes we had special guests. The Baltimore Zoo brought large reptiles to the parish hall one Sunday morning. "Kids, who wants to pet the python?" I quickly disappeared behind my tallest friends.

Sunday sermons were booming and focused on social justice. There was an emphasis on the intellectual. In 1960, a new minister was hired to reflect the changing times. We innovated. One Sunday, I was mesmerized as members of the Baltimore Ballet danced up the church aisles in flowing chiffon.

But the traditional side of church also existed a vibrant church choir, babies being dedicated, potluck dinners, and folk music sing-alongs. There was a strong sense of community. The same minister with the booming voice compassionately called my mother for months after my toddler brother died.

During church coffee hour, adults held animated discussions on the issues of the day. I remember observing quietly, learning about things like separation of church and state. These principles are a part of me to this day.

On school days I would ride my public-school bus, and my religious classmates sometimes discussed their church catechism classes. Some kids pressed their beliefs and invited me to Bible study, to no avail. Years later, as an adult, I participated in a spiritual seekers' discussion group. One week, the facilitator said she was going to read a passage from Genesis. She began, "Now, this may be hard, but I want you to close your eyes and imagine that you are hearing this for the very first time." Funny thing – I was hearing it for the very first time.

Was there an intellectual arrogance in my UU upbringing? I sensed a bias against people who weren't open minded. Later in life I decided that people could be more open-minded about folks who may not be open-minded. We all have a right to our perspectives.

One final memory – at the conclusion of our annual Christmas Eve service, the sanctuary lights would dim. We formed a large circle around the pews. We held candles and sang "Silent Night" without accompaniment. There was a hush, and a moment of awe. We extinguished our candles. And then, low and behold, the speakers opened up with the music of the rock band Three Dog Night, blaring out: "Jerimiah was a bullfrog, was a good friend of mine" and the rest of their rock hit "Joy to the World." We left with a bounce in our steps. Only in UU.

And a coda on my journey back to UU. My mother, Patricia Evans, was a Unitarian for over 60 years. After her death three years ago, I wanted to honor her and find a spiritual home here at USS – and this very welcoming congregation. I'm so glad I did.

Concluding Questions by Roger Jones: Life-long Formation

Thank you all. As long as we are alive and participating in a congregation, our spiritual formation is happening. In the stories we heard this morning, I hope you noticed the ways a community like this can play in our formation. Here, all that we do is part of our curriculum.

Formation is a life-long process. It happens to all of us! How might participation in this community be shaping *you* as a person? Think about it and let us know. Talk about it at coffee hour. Here are some examples of how I was formed in UU congregations.

As a new UU at age 24, my church helped me to overcome self-consciousness. Believe it or not, at first it was intimidating just to be asked to serve as a greeter and usher, and feel on display as I collected the offering, moving down the center aisle. The first time I read aloud a simple church announcement from the podium, I trembled. But then I got lots more experience at speaking in front of church. It turned out that learning to speak in public would be good for my future career.

As a young adult I learned how to be comfortable as an openly gay person talking to non-gay people – when I did not feel ready to be open with my family or at my workplace. I have also gained an education in music primarily in congregations—by learning the hymns, by hearing about the lives of composers whose music we heard, and by singing in choirs.

How does a UU congregation inform you and shape you?

It was in UU congregations that I began to learn the history of civil rights activism and the persistent reality of systemic racial injustice in this country. I learned to sing African Spirituals, Civil Rights anthems, and protest songs by Holly Near—in church! I learned how to take minutes at a meeting, and then how to make an agenda for a meeting. I learned about generosity. I learned how to stretch myself in giving to places and to causes that I care about.

New people enter congregations like this one at all ages and stages of life. And no matter what stage of life we are in, it makes a difference. It makes a difference to each person, and it makes a difference to the congregation.

We are your curriculum, and you are part of ours. This is a blessing. By your presence, participation, and support, *you* continue to play a role in shaping the lives of people you know, and of people you may never meet. Thank you for this. As a community, let us go forward in gratitude and hope, moving in faith toward a vision of growth, justice, joy, and love. Amen.

¹ https://www.uua.org/files/pdf/r/reader_curriculum_guide.pdf

² <https://www.unicef.org/>