

**THE KIDS ARE LISTENING--  
AND WATCHING  
August 14, 2011**

Before I started to Theological School at Meadville/ Lombard in Chicago, I visited the school for a long weekend, as they recommended. I met the staff, teachers, and students. I attended Friday evening vespers and a Saturday evening party. I ate pizza at the Medici, hangout of divinity students of all persuasions. And I audited some classes—both at Meadville and the University of Chicago Divinity School, at which I would have to take about 1/3 of my classes.

One of my hostesses walked with me to the Div School to attend a theology class taught by a University of Chicago star academic, Wendy Doniger. On the way over we chatted, and she remarked, “Well, if this class doesn’t scare you away, nothing will.” I asked, “Why?” And she replied something about needing to learn a completely new language.

And it was a bit challenging. However, Professor Doniger had a whole segment of her lecture that centered on the “hermeneutics of suspicion”, a phrase with which I was familiar from my independent reading in feminist theology.

Hermeneutics has to do with the science of interpretation, especially of the Bible. For long centuries this interpretation was in the hands of males only. With the recent growth in knowledge of the context and authorship of the books of the Bible, modern liberal theologians, especially women, raised suspicion about the accepted interpretations. Hence, the *hermeneutics of suspicion*.

She also talked about the Social Gospel, as promulgated by Walter Rauschenbush. And for some reason, that idea and name seemed familiar. However, it was not until later that I figured out why. As I have mentioned here before, my mother insisted that all five of her children attend both church and Sunday School. In my Methodist church, as was common among Protestant churches, Sunday School was held before church at 10:00 a.m, and church at 11:00. Initially, all of the family was expected to sit together in a pew for church services. However, beginning about the fifth grade, my mother allowed us to sit with our friends during church.

Thus, from about the 5<sup>th</sup> through the 8<sup>th</sup> grades, I, along with my friends, sat in the front row of the balcony through numerous church services. We giggled quietly, showed off for the boys sitting about two rows back—quietly—and donated our quarters to the offering at the appropriate time. I could not tell you the title or theme of any of the many sermons I sat through. It would be difficult to even remember the names of any of the ministers who preached them.

However, that is where I first heard, and integrated deeply into my psyche, the concept of the Social Gospel. That is, the idea that it is insufficient to seek salvation only for yourself, you must also enact the words of Jesus: care for the widows and orphans, and welcome the stranger. And—somehow--I even absorbed the the name of the author of this teaching, Walter Rauschenbush.

My mother would be so proud! Unfortunately she died before I had this flash of self-understanding. I wish this were not so, because she had to work hard to get me and my siblings present every Sunday. She had to be willing to ignore our pleas that we were tired, that we really needed to sleep, that church was booooooring, that it was stupid, etc. etc. The brother just younger than I raised the most fuss, but even he learned that just because he came in very early on Sunday morning instead of fairly late on Saturday night, he still was required to attend.

She was a responsible parent, and she knew that if her children were to become responsible citizens with a steady moral compass, making sure they received a moral education was part of her job as a parent.

None of us are Methodists now. However, four of the five belong to and attend a church, ranging from Unitarian Universalism to Mormon. And the fifth certainly has a moral compass.

The children are listening. What we say does make a difference. It makes a difference in our faith communities, and it makes a difference in our homes.

Clearly, what we teach our children and youth in formal Religious Education classes makes a difference. Someone, in addition to parents (to whom children can develop a deaf ear) must instruct our young about the ethical and moral choices they will be making. Someone must teach them about the Golden Rule, a version of which appears in all major religions. They must teach them that kindness is better than cruelty. They must teach them something about the complex religious landscape in which they are being reared. And they must teach them something about why we, who are liberal religionists, think our way of acceptance and love is better than some other choices they might make.

However, children don't turn off their hearing and critical thinking when they exit their religious education classes. When the kitchen area turns into the Fellowship Hall, they are still around and still listening. They can and do make judgments about whether what they hear in the Fellowship Hall jibes with the teaching they heard in their classes. And they can be very dismissive if it does not. Hypocrite is the word I hissed about some of the adults in my childhood church, and I'll guess that some of you did also.

They also hear us in the car on the way home as we process the morning's events. There is a famous story about William Ellery Channing, one of the major founders of American Unitarianism. He grew up in the 1700's, when the accepted style of preaching was what we now call *hell and damnation*. When he was a young boy, 9 or 10, he attended church with his father. The preacher held forth for over an hour (church was expected to be long in those days). His topic was the inevitable peopling of hell by most of those present. He was a good preacher, so his description of hell was colorful. William could almost feel the flames and see the agony on the faces of the damned. The theology of that time included the theory of predestination, that is, that only a relative few were predestined to go to heaven.

All the rest of humankind was destined for eternal torment. So William knew that most of his family, probably including him, was headed for the fiery pit.

He was terribly upset, and on the way home, very confused; for his father was whistling and cheerful as he guided the buggy home. Tremulously, he asked him what he thought of the sermon. “Good preaching,” replied his father heartily, and continued whistling. William was a bright boy, so it did not take long for him to understand that his father did not really believe in the terrible future predicted for humankind.

What William Ellery Channing learned as a child helped form the theology that challenged predestination, and liberal religion's understanding of Jesus. And it did not follow the teachings of his childhood.

When what we say outside of church does not take into account the teachings of the church, children are confused. If the faith community is teaching love and acceptance, but the family values do not reflect that, children will rebel in some fashion. If the faith community expresses gratitude for the gift of life and food and friends, but the children only hear complaints and kvetching at home, they will experience dissonance, and reflect that in some way.

What we do also makes a difference, both in our faith communities and at home. If parents and church members consistently volunteer to support the church community, children will understand that they are willing to work to enact the stated values of that community. My mother taught third grade boys religious education for years, climbing three flights of stairs to do so—even after she was diagnosed with severe heart disease. She was the one who organized church dinners, and helped with Vacation Bible School.

My father sat on the church board for many years, and led an adult Sunday School class in his retirement years.

Many of you do the same sort of thing. You are modeling what it means to be a responsible member of a faith community. The children are watching you and learning. And they are watching your engagement with the larger community. I am sure that they noticed your work with the Welcoming Congregation last year. I am sure they see the beautiful rainbow flag flying, and most of them have some idea that that symbolizes inclusive love. What you are doing is making a difference for many people who desperately need love and acceptance. And it is also modeling to this bright, talented, active group of kids, what it means to enact your faith and values.

What we do at home and in the community makes a difference also. It provides a model for our children. I like Jane Mauldin's *Gratitude Circle*. I wish I had thought of it when my children were small. I know other families who practice a version of it. And if we expand our gratitude for the rain that brings grass and trees and flowers and food from our gardens into sharing some of that bounty, it teaches our children an important lesson. If we give of our time and talent and treasure to programs and entities that help others, our children learn even more. What we do speaks even louder than what we say.

And the kids are listening and watching. They will notice if you, or the adults around you think that a goat can blow up balloons; or a corporation is the same thing as a person; or that it does not matter how we dispose of our waste; or that it is okay to talk trash about another person, because that person is *different* in some way.

Now, I want to step back and look at a larger vision. We are, whether we celebrate or deplore it, children of the Enlightenment. This great project, an outgrowth of the Renaissance, changed the face of Western Civilization. In many ways, and through many voices, the forces of literacy and learning brought humanism into the value system of most of our society. By humanism I am not naming a variety of theology, rather I am naming the increasing value of each human life, whether manifested in art, (Greek statuary) drama, (Shakespeare) or philosophy, (Galileo, Erasmus).

This was a remarkable project, and to it we owe our civil liberties as well as our freedom of religion. It took centuries to expand the definition of voting citizens from that of only white land-owning males to include people of color, and even longer to include women. Our freedoms are the envy of many in the world. And the value of every individual in this part of the world is at least legally recognized, whether it is enacted in every community.

However, we have sometimes forgotten that every individual is located within a society. Social scientists tell us that people do not become fully human unless they are in relationship to other people. To become the best person we can be, we must live within a society, we must be in relationship with other individuals. It follows, therefore, that we must strive for a healthy society, in which we and our children can live and move and have our being.

This is the reason we must enact our values. This is the reason we must rear our children and youth within an ethical and moral framework. Although each and every individual is important—of worth and dignity—lifting up this value to the exclusion of others is insufficient. All people have worth and dignity, and all must be treated fairly and all must live in this one world.

And the children are listening to our words and watching our actions, so that they will know how to enact the values they are taught. You never know when they hear us, or what lessons they will take away.

Recently, through the magic of Facebook, I reconnected with a nephew, the son of my first husband's brother. He wanted to find his cousins, so I sent him information. My daughter told me later that he told her that I was his favorite aunt. And I remembered a similar story his mother once told me.

I was amazed that he considered me his favorite aunt. My husband and his brother were great rivals, including which brother would produce the first son. Although my daughters preceded the birth of this nephew, he was a few months older than our son. And his father never let my husband forget it. It made family gatherings a tad uncomfortable. I could think of no reason nephew would remember me with fondness.

His mother wondered also, asked him about it, and he told her. "It's because," he said, "Aunt Nancy knew about the monsters under the bed." And then I remembered.

When both boys were still young enough to take naps, the adults, ready for a break from young male energy, put them to bed in separate rooms. Although my son was not crazy about the idea, he settled in okay. But not the nephew. He cried and whined, and seemed really upset. I went in to see what was disturbing him. "It's the monsters," he cried. "They are under the bed."

Now, I did not believe there were really monsters under the bed, but I also could see that he was actually scared. So, I took his hand and together we explored under the bed. I suggested we might check the closet also, just in case. We looked behind the curtains, and under the chest. Finally he agreed. The monsters were not in the room. I stayed with him a few minutes, until he dozed off.

I had no idea he remembered that incident. I had no idea it made such a difference to him. However, he's now 50ish, a lawyer living in Minneapolis, and he still remembers that warm summer day when we made sure there were no monsters to disturb his nap.

The kids are listening and watching. They learn from us whether we are aware of it or not. Let us be intentional about the lessons we teach. Let us help them become the best citizens they can be, the best humans they can be.

May it be so.

Shalom and Saalat.  
Blessed Be and Amen.