

“Blessing of Teachers and Children”

Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan

Honoring all who teach

The reading for today, Taylor Mali’s poem “What Teachers Make,” speaks to me because teachers are my people. I was a public school teacher for many years. It was my first calling in life, and so I know the truth of what is expressed in the poem: that teachers are undervalued by many people, and that teachers are underpaid. Or that teachers are underpaid *because* they are undervalued. In our society, the two tend to go hand-in-hand.

In this service of blessing for teachers and children, I want to honor all those who call themselves teachers, at any level. I know a college professor who teaches freshmen statistics, and she sees it as her mission to empower especially the young women in her classes, who have somehow internalized the false idea that girls aren’t good at math. I know a public school kindergarten teacher who saw that some of her kids didn’t have coats when they came to school, so she went to the store that day to buy them good winter coats and gave them to their mom the next day.

In this sacred space I honor all those who parent children, all the grandparents who raise grandkids, all the tutors and mentors and school bus drivers and coaches. And I include them all in this statement by William Ellery Channing, a Unitarian minister from the early 1800’s:

There is no office higher than that of a teacher of youth, for there is nothing on earth so precious as the mind, soul, and character of a child.

Adults who work with children and care for children are so important because childhood is so precious, so beautiful, so fragile, and so fleeting.

School education vs. UU religious education

Now I want to focus on the particular type of teaching and mentoring and caring for children that we do here in this UU Fellowship, and in UU congregations generally. I'm going to talk about some differences between what children get in schools and other social groups and what we try to give them here. I think what we do in UU congregations for our children and youth is **life-changing, it is child-affirming, and it is grounded in love.**

I want to share a personal story related to this, regarding my call to ministry four years ago. At that time in my life, just before I decided that I wanted to be a Unitarian Universalist minister, I was poised to embark on a different career path: being a middle school principal after having been a teacher for many years. I thought this was my way to contribute to society, to make the world a better place, because I firmly believed in the mission of public education—and I still do.

Free, quality public education for all, preparing students to be informed, productive members of society—that's the mission of public education. For all children, rich and poor. What a noble cause!

In that moment of decision four years ago, in order to follow the path of becoming a minister, I had to give up the dream of being a school principal, and what helped me to decide was when I realized that the good we do for children and youth in our UU congregations, in just a few hours on Sunday, is equal to the good that schools do with children all week.

It's different, but it's equal. Because while schools are focused on educating the mind, we are focused here on nourishing the spirit. Our mission in religious education might be phrased as: encouraging children and youth in joy and wonder; inviting them to explore spirituality; surrounding them with love and support; accepting them just as they are.

Youth cons

I want to give two examples of the magic that I've seen in religious education in Unitarian Universalism. The first is not from here, but it's from my experience in Ohio, and my experience with my own children.

My children were raised as UU's from ages 2 and 4. When they got to be teenagers, my congregation, a fellowship about the same size as this one, was lucky to have a robust youth program. A youth group of about 6-8 teenagers met with a volunteer mentor from the congregation on Sunday afternoons. And in that district in Ohio, the youth from across the state would get together 4-5 times per year for youth cons. "Con" is short for "convention" but we also just called the cons. To picture a con, you have to imagine 100 teenagers and 15-20 adult chaperones spending the weekend in a church. We would arrive Friday night and on Sunday we would get up early, clean the whole church, and be gone before worship started. During those 36 hours there were workshops, business meetings, youth-led worship, small group discussions, always a dance that lasted until 2:00, 3:00, or 4:00 in the morning, sleeping (sort of) on church floors and pews. It was great fun unless you are an introvert or unless you need to get a good night's sleep.

But the magic of the cons was in the youth community and their acceptance of one another. It was always a diverse group of youth. Some socially awkward, and may have been bullied or teased elsewhere. Some were questioning their gender or sexuality – or coming out as gay, lesbian, bisexual, as transgender or gender non-

binary. And this peer group of teenagers was uniformly accepting, loving, and welcoming. Uniformly.

I know that some of these youth were not welcomed or accepted for who they are anywhere else in their lives—not in their families, not in their schools, not anywhere else. But they were accepted and held in love by their peers in this youth community. It is no exaggeration to say that this community was life-changing and life-saving.

The religious education offered in UU settings is child-affirming, life-changing, and grounded in love.

The OWL program

My second example of this is the OWL program, and this is something that we are doing here in this Fellowship. OWL is an acronym and it stands for “Our Whole Lives.” It is a sexuality education program, and it is one of the best things we offer in the UU church. I’m guessing you didn’t come here today expecting your minister to talk about sexuality education, but that’s what I’m about to do.

The OWL curriculum was developed jointly by our denomination, the Unitarian Universalist Association, and another progressive denomination, the United Church of Christ. It’s a comprehensive, secular, values-based sexuality education program and it has many levels: there’s a curriculum for young children; for older elementary school children; the one that we teach is the big one, for youth in grades 7-10; and there are also curricula for young adults and for adults.

This year our Fellowship is offering this class not only to teenagers within our congregation, but to those in the wider community as well, so it is a gift that we give to others. Four adults have gone through an

intensive training to be the facilitators of this program. When we offer it, it will span 13 weeks.

To give you a sense of this program, let me share some of the principles that guide it:

- *to strengthen and support each child's sense of self and self-esteem*
- *to help children understand the place of sexuality in human life and loving*
- *to encourage children to appreciate their bodies as good and beautiful, private and special*
- *to provide children with accurate, developmentally appropriate information about human sexuality, reproduction, and gender identification*
- *to help children learn to make responsible decisions that show respect for themselves and others*
- *to help families communicate openly about all life questions*
- *to strengthen parents' role as their children's most important sexuality educators¹*

The last one is especially important: that parents are the primary sexuality educators for their own children. Parents also participate in an intense orientation session for the program, and that in itself is very valuable: a chance for parents of teenagers to get together and talk honestly about the challenges of sexuality education in today's world. I have been through the OWL program as a parent; I have been through the teacher training and I've taught the curriculum. I don't want to be throw anyone else under the bus, but I can say that this program is 100 times better than what most kids get in school. It's one of the best

¹ Our Whole Lives Sexuality Education for Grades 4-6, second edition, by Kirsten deFur & Amy Johnson, page x.

things we do, because these are the values we believe in. In this, and in all of our programs, we strive to provide religious education that is **life-changing, child-affirming, and grounded in love.**

Closing prayer:

May all those who teach, mentor, coach, and parent be blessed and honored for their work. Those who do it here, those who work in a school, and those who care for children at home.

May all the children and youth of this fellowship be blessed. May they experience a childhood and an adolescence that is physically and emotionally safe; may their bodies grow strong; may their minds be encouraged to think, to wonder, and to dream; may their hearts know what it is to love and to be loved; may their spirits experience deep connection with the divine spark which dwells within each of us and exists beyond all of us in mystery.

May this prayer extend not only to the children and youth of this fellowship, but to children who are lonely, children who are hungry, children who are unsafe, wherever they may be. This is our prayer for every child on earth, with no exceptions.

In the name and faith of all who are gathered here, may be it so, today and always.

Andrew Frantz

September 15, 2019