

**Speaking of Our Children**  
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**Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Outer Banks**  
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Once upon a time, for some of us, Sunday morning was a time of certainty. Dressed our best, shoes freshly shined, we would go with our families to church and sit, quietly and without fidgeting if we knew what was good for us. If we were lucky, the service seemed beautiful and even magical; if not, we were bored, but we stayed and paid attention anyway. If there was something we didn't understand, it was a mystery. We should accept it as something we believed and hoped to understand better someday. Before or after church, we'd go to Sunday school, where we would learn a simplified version of our parents' beliefs. I don't exactly remember these first few lines of the Baltimore Catechism, which as a young Roman Catholic I learned by heart, but when I heard them again recently the rhythm, the familiar feel of it came right back:

1. Who made us? God made us.
2. Who is God? God is the Supreme Being, infinitely perfect, who made all things and keeps them in existence.
3. Why did God make us? God made us to show forth His goodness and to share with us His everlasting happiness in heaven.

Do you remember anything like that? Most Christian and Jewish traditions have something similar, and it can be very reassuring for a young person: I know who I am, I know why I exist, I know who God is and that God loves me; I know what God expects from me. I'm part of this community that is so important to my family. What a sweet assurance for a child when the world seems chaotic and throws all the usual sorts of difficulties your way. . . .

Yet there was a shadow side to all that assurance. When I began to doubt the words I'd learned by heart all those years ago, when I began to look critically at the things people had done in the name of religious beliefs I no longer shared, the people in my immediate religious community didn't have an answer for me. They didn't even understand why they should have an answer. You either believed or you didn't. And if you didn't, the church wasn't there for you anymore.

In the years I've been a minister, I've heard some variation of that story from countless people: They grew up in a religious community that felt like home, a loving and safe place, and then suddenly for some reason it wasn't. They asked too many questions. They heard people say things that felt hateful or hypocritical, or that didn't match the beliefs they learned in Sunday School. Or there was something about them—their way of dressing, their behavior, their feelings about other boys or girls, something about their own identity—that wasn't OK, and they got a clear message: You don't belong here.

Sixty years ago, the Sunday experience for Unitarian and Universalist children and youth was very similar to what I, and some of you, grew up with. Everyone would go to the whole service together, and there would be a Sunday School in which children would be taught the basics of

their faith and its history as a reform movement and a form of liberal Christianity. The content was different, of course, from those more orthodox Sunday Schools, and asking skeptical questions was more acceptable, but the form was pretty much the same.

The great religious educator Sophia Lyon Fahs changed that forever in the 1950s. Fahs was deeply immersed in the Thomas Dewey's Progressive model of education, which assumes that children are born with the capacity to educate themselves by discovering, not a set body of facts and information but skills that enable them to unlock the secrets of knowledge for themselves. As a religious educator who became the leader of the American Unitarian Association's programs for children and youth, Fahs argued that children did not need to be taught to recite and follow the religion of their parents. They needed experiences that would set them free to explore and unfold their own spiritual lives. They needed the chance to explore the religions of the world, and to develop their own religious understandings and insights. They needed gentle guidance from adults who acted as mentors and resources rather than fountains of information to be learned.

Sixty years later, Sophia Lyon Fahs' vision is still influential in our religious education programs. Nowadays, in congregations that have a Children's and Youth religious education program, things look very different from that old model that provided so much assurance and certainty about beliefs—and so much danger of exclusion if you didn't get with the program. It's better, in many ways.

Yet there's more to religious education than figuring out what you think about a lot of different religious ideas and practices. Our children and youth need more from us than a place that nurtures their purely personal spiritual growth. Let me introduce you to a few young people. . . .

*She's on the playground at school and some of the other first graders are taunting her. "You can't have two moms," they're saying derisively. "That's weird; that's wrong." Suddenly she's surrounded by three other children, who are part of her Sunday class. "No it isn't wrong," they say. "There are lots of people like her moms in our church. It's not weird. Parents are people who love you and take care of you. It doesn't matter if they're men or women. That's what we learned in church."*

*He's not easy to have in a group. He doesn't read emotional cues well, and sometimes he says hurtful things, thinking that they're funny and not understanding how they affect others. He can't always keep himself from speaking out of turn, and sometimes he talks incessantly. The new parent volunteer at the church sleepover has been worrying all day about how to manage this difficult young person. But it turns out most of the other kids have known this guy for years, and when he says something inappropriate, one of them will get close enough to catch his attention and say something like: "You're doing that thing again. Let someone else talk." "Oh, OK," he says. And he sits back and listens. They're not mocking or shaming him. With their adult teachers and advisors, they've worked out strategies to engage with him and to keep him in the group, because they care about him.*

*They're eleven and fifteen years old, and this is not the first protest their parents have brought them to. Gathering before the rally, they wander among the other marchers with their "Black*

*Lives Matter” signs. A passerby stops and asks them why they are there, and it’s clear from his voice that he doesn’t expect them to really understand. The younger child says: “We’re here because people shouldn’t have to be afraid of the police just because of the color of their skin. In our church, we believe no one should get hurt or killed just because some people think black people are more dangerous than white people.”*

*He’s new to the congregation. His father died a few weeks before—a suicide, completely unexpected and shocking. He’s been stoic and quiet about it. The family didn’t have a spiritual community; his mother came to the Unitarian Universalist minister for help with a Memorial Service because a friend suggested it. She heard about the youth group and pushed him to come; he didn’t want to, but he doesn’t want to fight with her about anything right now, so he shows up. He doesn’t expect to talk. Then there’s a check-in time, and he finds out that four of the other youth have lost a parent within the past year and a half. Within a couple of weeks they’re trading darkly funny stories about the kinds of things people say to them, and what it’s like to have something happen in your life that it seems like no one else can really understand. In a few months he’s a leader in the group, and he’s playing saxophone in the band for some of the Sunday services.*

*They’re sixteen or seventeen, and they’ve just joined the congregation recently under a new “Youth Membership” policy. At their first congregational meeting as members, there’s a discussion about hanging a large banner on the front of the church that says “This Church Supports Marriage Rights,” in response to a proposition banning same-sex marriage that’s on the ballot. There’s a lot of controversy—people are nervous about backlash in the neighborhood; not everyone is supportive, and some don’t want to offend the people who are opposed. There’s a strategic effort to table the discussion, and suddenly the young people come to the microphone together. One after another they talk about how the religion they have grown up in taught them that you have to stand up for what you believe, and about the harm the proposition does to people they know at school and at church. No one speaks after them. The motion to table fails, and the banner vote passes by a huge margin.*

These are all young people I have known. Each of them needed and received something more from their spiritual family than just an opportunity for thoughtful religious exploration and spiritual development. What they also needed and received is what we all also need: We need to know ourselves as part of a community of people of all ages who, as Natalie Briscoe says, “learn and teach together and figure out what it means to live a Unitarian Universalist life.”

Our children need to know that there are adults other than their parents who care for them and take an active interest in their lives. They need to know that their whole self, their whole identity is welcome among us, that they will never be cast out for asking the wrong questions, finding the wrong answers, or somehow being the wrong kind of person. They need to know that their religious community is committed to making the world a better place, and that they should never be afraid to speak up for that, because we will speak out with them.

Our children and youth need to know that they are fully part of their religious community, that their voice is heard and respected, and that their presence is important—here in worship, in any

classes or groups we might create for them, in our social and service events, and in the work we do in the name of love and justice.

I do think it would be good for us to develop some intentional religious education opportunities for the young people who are part of our community now, and who might come in the future. I hope that we'll be working on that this summer, to begin by the time the school year begins next fall. Yet I also think it will continue to be important that we worship together as a whole community, for part of every Sunday and for the whole service sometimes; that's religious education too. One scholar of religious education, Maria Harris, goes so far as to say that *everything we do* in a congregation is religious education. Everything we do together expresses and teaches what we really believe, and moves us either toward or away from the ideals we claim. Everything we do together can help to equip us—and our children—to lead engaged, committed, meaningful and abundant lives.

Our children need this. Truly, we all need this, for as Kahlil Gibran says, our children are the arrows that will bring the hopes and aspirations they learn and teach with us into the house of tomorrow. For the sake of our children, for the sake of the future of our faith, may our bow be guided by love, aimed toward justice, and drawn with courage and strength so that they may go swift and far.