

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
“Always a Learner, Always a Teacher”
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore June 1, 2008

Spoken Meditation

In the peaceful quiet of this magnificent place
Feeling the presence of the Spirit of Life all around us
My heart whispers quietly to me:

May the Spirit of Life be strong in me, too.

May all those who suffer, find comfort and healing.

May I remember that to which my life is committed.

And may I remember Howard Thurman’s words:

Keep fresh before me the moments of my High Resolve.

Let us take these words and our own thoughts, prayers and reflections into a time of silence.

Sermon

Leah and I have been talking up the idea of “lifespan learning” since September. Much as we like the idea of lifespan learning, we’ve also been trying to figure out how to do it and find out what other congregations are doing it well.

One way to understand lifespan learning is that education is a lifelong journey. At every age we are still learning. We don’t stop when we graduate from high school or college. At every stage of life there are new tasks and conditions to master. Formal schooling may prepare us to think and find a job but it doesn’t prepare most of us very well to be parents and have healthy relationships with our partners. Formal schooling for many of us didn’t teach us to appreciate the arts. Formal schooling generally doesn’t do a great job of teaching us how to take care of and learn from our bodies. This becomes very important as our bodies age. We must watch for early warning signs of disease or suffer the consequences. Formal schooling doesn’t teach most of us how to make the most of retirement. And formal schooling doesn’t teach most of us how to make peace with the life we’ve lived and prepare to die.

So, yes, we’re always learners throughout our lives. But just focusing on the need for learning throughout our lives didn’t feel to me like the whole story.

I attended a training in February in San Jose, California on “Leading Congregations into a Multiracial, Multicultural Future.” At the conference, I saw Mark, someone I knew from my former congregation in Oakland, California. We had a good conversation about

the challenge of intentionally moving a congregation toward being multiracial and multicultural. I commented it was like the challenge of intergenerational programming.

I don't know where the idea came from, but as we talked, I suddenly realized a new vision for lifespan and intergenerational programming that could be the paradigm for what we are trying to achieve with lifespan learning: "always a learner, always a teacher," my title this morning.

As soon as the thought appeared in my mind, my brain began lighting up with associations and connections. At every age there can be a balance of teaching and learning. Older kids can teach younger kids. Kids can teach adults as well as adults teaching kids. Our elders have much to offer the young (if they will slow down and listen). The young try to bring their elders up to date with the latest scientific discoveries, and how to use their G-D computers to communicate. And no matter how much we have mastered one area, there are dozens of others where we are ignorant till the day we die. We may decide to close our minds and stop learning. We may decide we have all the answers we need or want. But we will still have much we COULD learn (if we were open to it) from which we may derive benefit in the quality of our living and loving.

As I reflected on this insight, I realized it was deeply connected to the work of creating a multiracial and multicultural future. If we are to encounter those with different histories and cultures as equals, we must first encounter our ignorance of them. Prejudice is often cultural misunderstanding or lack of appreciation. Simple cultural differences such as how close we stand together and how often we touch each other can create negative impressions due to emotional discomfort. I remember Jose, a Portuguese fellow I worked with on an assembly line thirty years ago, who liked to stand very close to me while we talked. If he got excited about something, he'd start poking me in the shoulder and practically spitting in my face as he made his point. I had the good sense, at the time, to realize he wasn't being aggressive, this was his cultural context for communication. If you grow up in an Italian family, you're likely to get touched two or three times a minute by your parents. If you grow up like I did, you're lucky to get touched once a week by your parents. I'm not arguing one way is better than the other – they are just different.

We've made a big mistake by treating our children as dependent learners till they graduate from college. We should be encouraging them to teach practically from the time they can walk. The transmission of knowledge and culture is everyone's business. The big danger of mass media culture is narrowing the teachers and cultural leaders down to an elite who we pay to see perform. All of us can entertain each other. All of us can perform for each other (as we do at the UU Weekend talent show). And all of us can teach and learn from each other, invigorating our sense of worth and value.

So since that revelation in February, I've been thinking about how our congregation could be transformed by multigenerational teaching and learning. *Where have we missed opportunities for learning and where have we missed opportunities for teaching in our programming?* This is an open question I present to you today. I have a few ideas but I'm very interested in what you think too.

Social Justice

One of the key areas for teaching and learning in our congregation is our social responsibility work. This August we'll be starting work on building the Susan B. Anthony Habitat for Humanity House on Odell Street in the South End. People can volunteer to help build that house and experience teaching and learning at many levels. If you know how to saw boards or pound nails, you can teach those who don't. There are lots of tricks and techniques to both teach and learn in the construction business. But there can also be learning and teaching about low-income housing, problems in the South End we may witness, and about the lives people lead in this area. Those who take breaks and knock on doors to register people to vote will also learn about community concerns.

When I've lobbied for issues like women's reproductive rights and the protection of gays, lesbians, transgender and bisexual people from discrimination and abuse with Family Planning Advocates, the Empire State Pride Agenda and Interfaith Impact or for minority hiring, health care reform, youth and educational services, and better police community relations with ARISE and the West Hill Ministerial Fellowship, we usually have a educational time to both learn about the issues and share with each other what we know before we visit and advocate with our governmental representatives. After the visit we reflect on what he heard and learned and what next steps we can take to influence this person and this issue.

Children, youth and adults need to find ways to be moral witnesses in the larger world together. As a community we are stronger than we are as individuals. This coming year, the Religious Education Council and the Social Responsibilities Council are working to get out of their respective silos and see if they can collaborate. My hope is that whatever collaboration they do will incorporate education as a central component of the action followed up with communal reflection so everyone can potentially be both a learner and a teacher.

Our anti-oppression curriculum "In Our Hands" is written for and offered at four levels: Grades 1-3, grades 4-6, Jr. High and Senior High. The children and youth need the help of adults to "walk the talk." Sometimes the children and youth brainstorm ways to take action on what they learn on Sunday mornings. This year, the 5th graders supported a food pantry, and the 8th/9th graders raised funds for women in Darfur. Those ideas came directly from the children and youth and were facilitated by their teachers.

Imagine what we can do if we become more intentional about involving our children and youth in social justice.

Congregational Administration

The administration of the life of this congregation from serving coffee on Sunday morning to making decisions at the Board of Trustees contains many opportunities for both learning and teaching. I've been working at developing both my leadership and followership skills for the last thirty years. And I know I still have much to learn about increasing my ability to be an effective leader and an effective follower. A few may be naturally gifted with these abilities. The rest of us can develop them. And every time we use them, we also teach each other about what effective leadership and followership

looks like. How I deal with conflict between competing interests, how I include people by sharing the public space, making sure everyone has a chance to speak and be heard, how I put aside my opinions and genuinely listen to understand another point of view, how I share my power to empower others, how I make room for new leaders to emerge, how I work for consensus, all these actions are moments of both teaching and learning.

Teaching Religious Education

The most obvious place for both teaching and learning at all ages is our religious education program.

Being “a teacher” here is very different from the conventional classroom. As Leah puts it, “We don’t teach religion. It has to be caught.” We design our Sunday morning program for our kids to be a safe, nurturing environment. The adult teachers are encouraged to share their religious passion and enthusiasm through each lesson while listening carefully and respecting the needs of the children and youth. Each child, like each adult, has his or her unique interests and questions they bring to the classroom. What we strive for is the “ah-ha” moment when a core religious concept connects with the inner world of the student.

Since Unitarian Universalism is a non-creedal religious tradition, we are not trying to indoctrinate our children with a set of beliefs or rules. All ages study the “core curriculum” of the RE program: the sources of our liberal tradition; world religions; the stories of our UU ancestors who strove to make this a better world for all; our historical foundations; exploring ways to address one’s spiritual, ethical, and theological needs; and how to work for equality and inclusion. Our goal is to share our wisdom and the wisdom of the world’s religious traditions with them. We want them to come to their own provisional answers of the great religious questions.

The children who have been in our program are often “ahead” of those who came to us as adults when it comes to understanding Unitarian Universalism. Teaching a class next fall is one way to start catching up with them.

I have a lot of other ideas but not a lot of time left to share them. I hope I’ve stimulated your imagination that no matter what age you are, you can still be a learner and still be a teacher. *This shared educational model is a perfect complement to our vision of shared ministry.* Leah’s job and my job are to help you discover your talents for learning, teaching and ministry. We may be a little more experienced than you are. We may have a special set of skills. But there is no way either of us can do it all ourselves. We shine when you feel empowered to share what you know, to learn something, and to comfort, inspire, appreciate, and agitate each other.

When we all shine, we become the beacon of liberal religion that this room was built to represent.