

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
“**How Safe is Safe?**”
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore March 22, 2009

Sermon

Growing up, I was not a safe child. Before we were in first grade, my next-door neighbor Donny and I discovered a honeybee nest in a bush between our houses. Donny didn't like bees. We poked the nest with a stick till it fell down. The bees didn't like that. They swarmed all over us, stinging us mercilessly. In second grade, my friends and I were playing king of the topsoil dirt pile near a construction site for a new house. We were throwing dirt clods at each other. I got hit with one in the head that contained a rock, partially blinding my right eye. I played near the railroad tracks. I had lots of accidents on my bicycle. It wasn't until a car hit me badly breaking my right leg, at age of 20, while riding a moped, that I finally decided I wanted to practice a safer lifestyle and live to see my 21st birthday.

All the while, from the time I could master my first tricycle and ride around the block by myself, my parents let me out of the house, unsupervised. My mother would holler out the back door and ring a bell to get me home for dinner. Otherwise, I was all over the neighborhood playing with my friends until it was time for bed.

Contrast the laissez-faire parenting I received with how many parents **today** are raising their children. Concern about potential threats has parents keeping their children inside rather than allowing them to roam free. Parents today make play dates for their children. That play is often carefully supervised while the adults converse keep a watchful eye on them.

Many parents want to be more involved in their child's safety at school than in the past. Sometimes, mothers who like to smother their child volunteer as room mothers and teacher's aides. These "Helicopter Moms" hover over their children, even into their college years, trying to protect them from real or imagined dangers.

Real or imagined, in the post-9/11, around-the-clock news, media saturated culture, potential threats bombard parents practically hourly. They hear about school shootings like the one in Germany last Wednesday that took 15 lives and wonder how safe their child's school really is. They worry about everything from mad cow disease and avian flu to kids suffocating in the trunks of cars and teens being abducted in the tropics. There is the ever-present danger of global terrorism. This affects not just parents. It should come as no surprise that the

surgeon general recently reported that 13 percent of children in this country have a diagnosable anxiety disorder--a 30 percent increase from ten years ago. (Dacey & Fiore, p. 3)

John Dacey and Lisa Fiore, authors of *The Safe Child Handbook*, add these reasons for anxious parenting today. Couples are delaying childbearing and having smaller families than in the past. Only children get far more attention than the fourth or fifth child in a larger brood. Mothers are more anxious due to role overload, trying to balance parenting with full time employment. Expectations of parenting have risen as the balance has tilted toward nurture and away from nature. Parents are admonished, nurture can optimize their chances for success whatever your child's genetic makeup.

The world parents must prepare their children to grow into has radically changed. They will not be competing with the kids across town for jobs. They'll be competing with children growing up in Paris and Peking in the new global economy. Parents are more stressed out than ever shuttling kids from sports, to music lessons, to scouts, to clubs, ending the day ready for the psych ward suffering from nervous exhaustion.

Growing cultural awareness of the potential dangers of child sexual abuse has only exacerbated parent's anxiety. Prior to the 1970's, sexual abuse remained rather secretive and socially unspeakable. In consciousness raising groups, second-wave feminists started revealing to each other the abuse they had suffered. Current studies suggest 15% to 25% of women and 5% to 15% of men were sexually abused during their childhood years. The 1980's saw laws against abuse tighten and penalties increase. Megan's Law, enacted in 1994, and amended in 1996, gave the public access to knowledge of sex offenders nationwide.

Partly spurred by the Catholic Priest sexual abuse scandals beginning in 2001, many religious organizations, including many UU congregations, started to realize they needed to develop policies to protect their children. Over 20 years ago, our congregation was already working on developing those policies as Directors of Religious Education started implementing protection measures in our classrooms.

Our latest iteration of looking at our safety policies happened after a workshop several of our members attended in Schenectady in the Spring of 2006. This workshop, led by the Rev. Debra Haffner, UU minister and Director of the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing, addressed the incidence and prevalence of child sexual abuse. She talked about the need for congregations to develop "safe congregation" policies. Her presentation spurred our Board of Trustees, in the fall of 2006, to form a task force to update and consolidate our policies. That work was finalized with the passing of our safe

congregation policy in the late spring of 2008. The title of that policy is very important: *TOWARD A SAFE CONGREGATION: Policies for Prevention of Sexual Misconduct, Physical Abuse and Harassment And Guidelines for Responding.*

Right now we are in a one-year trial period of the policy. One requirement of that trial period is for the task force to educate the congregation about the policy. If you want to learn more, stay after the service for our congregational conversation about it. You may also read it on our web site. It can be found via a web link titled "file cabinet". Leah has also developed a frequently asked questions handout that will be available after the service.

I'd like to read the carefully crafted first few lines of the policy that describe its philosophy:

Our Unitarian Universalist approach to religion puts great faith in our human potential. We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person and justice, equity and compassion in human relations. While we recognize there will be moments many of us fall short of this high aspiration, a few individuals will reject these principles for themselves and others. It is our obligation, as a congregation, to protect each other, particularly children, youth and vulnerable adults from those who would take advantage of them. Recognizing that exploitative and disrespectful relationships **can exist** in any population, we commit the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany to taking reasonable actions and precautions to prevent and stop abusive, disruptive and harassing behavior in our facilities and programming.

So what are the risks of abuse happening here? First, let me assure you, the risks are very, very low. We have had a number of preventative measures in place for many years. We have a minimum of two unrelated teachers in the classroom. Teachers sign a code of ethics. Parents are welcome to observe children's classrooms. Teachers are informed about any allergies a child may have. Youth conferences have 24 hour monitoring by teams of adults. The precautions are thorough, well considered, and rigorous.

The safety policy does have one area that has caused a significant amount of controversy: background checks. The policy requires teachers to submit to a criminal background check. Some feel this is an unneeded measure, particularly in the case of those who have taught here for many years. Some feel it is an inappropriate, fear-mongering invasion of personal privacy. Many parents feel the safety of their children and the desire for teachers to be of good moral character trump personal privacy concerns. Others feel it is an onerous responsibility to put on the DRE to determine the suitability of people for teaching without access to doing background checks.

Part of the reason for this congregational conversation after the service is to get a wider sense of the congregation's feeling about background checks. They have become the standard for schoolteachers in New York State. Most employers do them. They are now in the process of becoming the standard for voluntary organizations like the Boy Scouts. Should we resist this trend or cooperate with it?

What we do know is the threat of abuse from strangers is quite low. 90% of abuse is by someone known to the child, often a relative or friend of the family. In the rare cases when it does occur in religious organizations, the abuser is usually well known to the child, most often one who is **trusted** by the child. This is the crux of the issue. Our congregation designates teachers as worthy of a child's trust, increasing their potential vulnerability. We have a strong moral and legal responsibility to be as sure as we reasonably can that our teachers are worthy of that trust.

Another potentially controversial part of our policy describes how we may permit a sex offender to participate in our congregation. If we welcome all free seekers of truth and meaning and honor their inherent worth and dignity, one or two may be sex offenders. Is it possible for us to allow such people to have us serve their religious needs and support their recovery? The policy says yes, as long as they agree to define a limited access agreement that will protect those vulnerable to abuse in our congregation. Do you agree or disagree ... and why? And on what moral, ethical and religious grounds?

Thorough and rigorous as our safety policy now is, no policy can completely guarantee our safety. I'm mindful of the Baptist minister who was shot to death in the pulpit recently. We are not about to put metal detectors in every doorframe and search every purse for weapons each Sunday morning. I'm willing to bear the risk of being shot to death to excite your spirit and inspire its growth and development. To better protect our children, however, we need all parents to take responsibility for educating their child about how to resist abuse without making them anxious in the process. That includes keeping an eye on them here. We really don't want to discover them bungee jumping off the balcony during coffee hour.

One of the most important lessons parents need to teach, if they miss it here in our RE program, is about good touch and bad touch. There are a number of good books, media and Internet resources that help little children learn to tell them apart. The most important lesson when learning about good touch and bad touch is teaching the child about trusting her or his own feelings. Some kinds of touch don't feel right even though the abuser may be sending the opposite message. Learning to pay attention to what is happening inside us is core curriculum for our whole approach to religion and religious instruction!

The most important safeguard for parents is developing and maintaining a trusting and open relationship with their children. This will permit a child to be willing to report any suspicious or unwelcome attention they might receive from an adult or an older child.

The safety of our children here matters a great deal to all of us. Some here today have very strong feelings about this topic for very personal reasons. Some here were the victims of abuse and never want their children to go through what they went through. And some here want to teach, believe themselves to be well qualified to teach, but have strong objections to requiring background checks. This is a hard issue where people of good will can and do disagree. We need to hear all of your voices and all of your visions for how to achieve the goal we all desire, the safety of our children.

I close with the concluding paragraph of the philosophical preamble to our policy:

It is ultimately the responsibility of the entire congregation, not just those in leadership and teaching positions, to create and maintain a climate that supports the growth and welfare of children and youth. Those working with young people in the context of our Unitarian Universalist movement have a crucial and privileged role, one which carries with it a great deal of power and influence. Whether acting as a youth advisor, chaperone, childcare worker, teacher, or in any other role, the volunteer has a special opportunity to interact with our young people in ways which are affirming and inspiring to all involved. Implementation of this policy will endeavor, as much as possible, to develop methods and solutions in harmony with the mission of our congregation to “strive to excite the human spirit and inspire its growth and development; to respond to moral and ethical issues in our local, national and world communities; and to sustain a vital and nurturing congregational life.”

So be it.

Benediction

Talking about this difficult subject of child abuse can put us in a very suspicious mood about our fellow human beings and their motives. Yes, there are people out there (and possibly in here) who do very bad things from very bad motives. Even if the flame of love has gone out in that person's heart, I believe it can be re-lit. I endeavor to meet everyone in a way that honors and illicit their inherent worth and dignity.

But that doesn't mean all are
right now ready and worthy to teach our children.

In my ***adult*** priorities, safety comes first.

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