

Religious Exploration Ministry

Handbook for Teachers and Advisors



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The Soul Only Avails: Teaching as a Spiritual Act

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<http://www.uua.org/religiouseducation/teachers/framing/15417.shtml>

I would like to share a few thoughts with you about teaching—and I mean especially religious education—as a spiritual practice. In my twenty years as a religious educator I have recruited hundreds of church schoolteachers. I am deeply grateful to them for volunteering. The lives of our children and youth have been tremendously enriched by the contribution of these men and women. The fact is, the congregations I have served simply couldn't have had a religious education program without them. Some of those who volunteered were teachers in the public schools, but the overwhelming majority were not. I would say that about ninety percent of them had no previous experience as teachers. Most were simply well-intentioned parents who had relatively little experience working with children in groups. I don't mean for a moment to suggest that any of these people were lesser Sunday school teachers for not having a background in education. Far from it. Nor do I wish to slight professional teachers who love children and teaching so much that they are willing to give an extra day of the week to R.E.

But I do mean to say that what is important in religious education is not how much you know about children, teaching or even Unitarian Universalism, but how much you are willing to give of yourself, of your soul. Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, "In dealing with my child, my Latin and Greek, my accomplishments and my money stead me nothing; but as much soul as I have avails." I would say that this is true of religious education as well. We do try to equip Sunday school teachers with the basics with training and advice about teaching, curriculum, and the Unitarian Universalist philosophy of religious education. We try to pair new teachers with more experienced ones. We encourage teachers to attend workshops and classes. But there is only so much we can do with the time we have. The fact of the matter is that the best education our volunteers can receive about managing a classroom or what it means to be a practicing Unitarian Universalist is through the experience of teaching itself. I would be the last to suggest that knowledge doesn't count; but it is not the most important asset in religious education. The essential qualities of a good church schoolteacher are a love of children, a sense of wonder about life, empathy and the ability to listen, and a willingness more to share who you are than what you know. Above all, teachers are mentors and companions of the children as they undertake their religious journeys in life.

Compared to other churches and religious traditions, Unitarian Universalism is not strongly identified. Despite our inclusiveness and generosity of spirit, Unitarian Universalism is hardly a household word. Unitarian Universalist children and youth can feel isolated among their peers and family relatives. Our intellectual thrust is hard for young children to grasp. It can be difficult even for our youth to explain to others what a Unitarian Universalist is or believes. Our heritage is distinguished, but it is not rich with tradition the way Catholicism and Judaism are. We have only recently begun to develop distinct rituals, traditions and symbols, which are important building blocks of a child's religious identity. Without a sense of tradition, being a Unitarian Universalist can resemble being a Democrat or Republican. It may be what a child thinks or even stands for, but it is not necessarily who he or she is.

Having a Unitarian Universalist religious identity is not necessarily the same thing as knowing our history and heritage, although it includes them. Our heritage is made up of our values and ideals, our art, architecture, music and poetry, our summer camps and sacred sites, our traditions and folklore. Our history includes all the facts about us—people, places and events, not only "from long ago and many lands," but also here and now at our own churches and fellowships. Fundamentally, religious identity is a feeling that, "This is my church. People know me here. And I know them." As much as a knowledge of their history and heritage, children need experiences of common worship,

intergenerational activities, and "at-homeness" in the church, including familiar faces and spaces. This is a tall order. Helping to nurture a sense of religious identity is primarily a parental responsibility. But those of us in religious education have made a commitment to aid and abet the parents of our congregation's children in this important effort. We guarantee, as parents or teachers, that our children will remain Unitarian Universalists. We do believe, after all, that at some point our children will make their own decisions about religion, as well as other matters. But as long as they are with us we can foster their sense of identity as Unitarian Universalists, and, in this way, at least increase the odds that they will continue to find a religious home here.

I put the emphasis on religious identity because it involves more than knowing about our Unitarian Universalist history and heritage, even our principles. Religion is not, fundamentally, *about* anything. Religion is life. Or as Emerson put it, religion is neither doctrines nor rituals; "it is not something else *to be got*, to be *added*, but it is a new life of those faculties which you have." If it is *about* anything, religion is about being alive and engaged in the world. It is about enchantment and compassion. And it is about transformation and self-renewal. For William Ellery Channing, "The great end in religious instruction is to awaken the soul, to excite and cherish spiritual life." As religious educators, our task "is not to stamp our minds on the young, but to stir up their own; not to give them a definite amount of knowledge, but to inspire a fervent love of truth; . . . not to form an outward regularity, but to touch inward springs." In all the years since Channing wrote these words, no one has said anything wiser and more profound on the subject of religious education. Teaching the young, then, is not about filling their heads, but expanding their horizons; it is not about charting a course for them, but about being companions with them on their own journey in life. I am convinced that in religious education "the soul only avails," and that teaching is a spiritual practice requiring a certain discipline or adherence to fundamental principles. Perhaps you have others to add to the list, but here are the seven principles I would suggest as essential to the spiritual practice of religious education.

The first principle is *respect the children*. Our program is not centered on the curriculum, but on the child. If I may, I would like to offer yet another bit of advice from Emerson, who had this to say: "Our own experience with children instructs us that the secret of education is in respecting the children. It is not for us to choose what they shall know, what they shall do. By our tampering and thwarting and too much governing they may be hindered from their end. Respect the children. Be not too much their parent. But we hear the outcry which replies to this suggestion—Would you throw up the reins of discipline? Would you leave the young to the mad career of their own passions and whimsies and call this anarchy a respect for children's nature? We answer, Respect the children, respect them to the end, but also respect yourselves. Be the companions of their thoughts, the lovers of their virtue. Let them find us so true to our own selves, that they will be true to theirs."

My second principle, then, is *be true to yourself*. Confront the children, as Sidney Harris suggests, with your own humanhood. By being exposed to a variety of adults, children and youth learn more about the possibilities of being human. This includes sharing your own faith and religious identity. Unitarian Universalism is not a normative religion. There is no one way of being Unitarian Universalist, and children benefit from being exposed to a multiplicity of perspectives. What is important is that we embody our faith, that we are an example to children and youth of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. And when you talk with children, speak from the heart; answer for yourself as a living, breathing Unitarian Universalist, and not as a spokesperson for an official Unitarian Universalist point-of-view.

My third principle is *promote community*. One of the basic rights of children, recognized by the United Nations, is the right to a religious identity. We all experience a need to belong and to be accepted. A good community, in the words of TV's Mr. Rogers, "likes you just the way you are." A good community leaves no child behind—not the shy, the handicapped, the infrequent attendee, not even the disruptive or the hard-to-reach. It is in community, when we gather together in a special place, that our faith and values take on a visible shape, where our Unitarian Universalist principles

are promoted and reinforced. And, truth be told, in providing a place for children and youth, we are developing a valuable sense of community for ourselves, too.

My fourth principle is *make it sacred*. As a minister of religious education I am painfully aware of how difficult it is to be spiritual amidst the welter of activities in the RE wing on Sunday mornings. Nevertheless, the primary reason people come to churches and bring their children is to develop a spiritual life. Spirituality has many facets, of course, including social outreach and teaching in the church school. But whatever we do as teachers, consultants and committee members needs to be performed in light of our Unitarian Universalist principles and with the intention of touching inward springs, as Channing suggests. This is why worship is so important, not only in the Chapel and the Worship Hall, but in the classroom as well.

My fifth principle is *cultivate your soul*. As much as children and youth need a spiritual life, teachers need one, too. We all lead busy, stressful lives, juggling jobs, personal needs and family obligations. But, the fact is, we can only give out of a fullness of the soul, never out of an emptiness. To be effective teachers we need to awaken and excite our slumbering souls, to rediscover a sense of wonder. As Dag Hammarskjold once said, "We die on the day when our lives cease to be illuminated by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond reason." The good news is that the children, according to Swiss psychologist Alice Miller, are "messengers from a world we once deeply knew, but have long since forgotten." As we walk the spiritual path with them, they help us to remember.

My sixth principle is *grow in your faith*. Embrace your own spiritual identity as a Unitarian Universalist. Discover the richness of your religious history and heritage. By immersing yourself in your faith you will find that you will grow, as your children have done, by a process of enlargement, leading to new vistas of understanding and appreciation. There are many opportunities for growth as a Unitarian Universalist. There are district retreats, summer conferences, Renaissance Modules, the annual General Assembly, and workshops and classes in local congregations. And, of course, there are many books you might wish to read as well.

My seventh and last principle is *put down roots*. Thomas Jefferson once said that he was content to be a Unitarian by himself. If we all felt that way, Unitarian Universalism would be a one-generation phenomenon. If we feel grateful for the fact that this congregation was here for us when we needed it, we must take responsibility for making it a sanctuary for others. Our work as religious educators is a vital part of the life of the congregation as a whole, and what we do for children and youth cannot be done in isolation. Therefore, I would urge all of you to take an active interest in the affairs of the congregation-its meetings, committees, and fund-raising efforts. Get involved in the issues facing your congregation. Make your voice heard, and be an advocate for the needs of the children and youth.

The reason why I love my work as a religious educator is that in the course of a few short years I can see the results of my efforts coming to fruition right in front of me. I witness the wide-eyed innocence of the very young and the growing self-assurance of youth. Working with children and youth renews my sense of wonder and hope. And I am a better Unitarian Universalist for what they have taught me. It may be heresy to say so, but I could exist without the church. So could our children. But I do not come here just to exist; I come here to find out what it means to be a spiritual person. And the children have taught me as much about this as anyone.

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Parker Palmer's *The Courage to Teach*: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life

"We become teachers for reasons of the heart. But many of us lose heart as time goes by. How can we take heart, alone and together, so we can give heart to our students and our world—which is what good teachers do."
—Parker Palmer

Parker Palmer is a writer, teacher, and activist who is a senior associate of the American Association for Higher Education and senior advisor to the Fetzer Institute, for whom he designed the Teacher Formation Program for K-12 teachers. See many Parker Palmer articles in [Related Writings](#) on The Center for Teacher Formation website. His books include *The Active Life, To Know As We Are Known: Education as a Spiritual Journey*, and recently *Let Your Life Speak: Listening For the Voice of Vocation*.

Review and Reflections by Pat Hoerl

Palmer writes, "we teach who we are" and invites us into a deeper inquiry about education—teaching and learning—that is often overlooked. It is not the "what" question (what subjects shall we teach?) nor the "how" question (what methods and techniques are required?) nor the "why" question (for what purpose and to what ends do we teach?). It is the "who" question: who is the self that teaches? Parker Palmer explores the inner landscape of the teacher's life along three related pathways—intellectual, emotional, and spiritual.

At the heart of *The Courage to Teach* is Palmer's image of teaching: "To teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced." He defines "truth" as "an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline." The purpose of leadership in community is to create a teaching and learning space centered on the "great things" that evoke the virtues we cherish in education: inviting diversity, embracing ambiguity, welcoming creative conflict, practicing honesty, experiencing humility, becoming free.

These are a few key themes from each chapter:

Heart of the Teacher: Identity and Integrity in Teaching

- If we want to grow as teachers, we must learn to talk to each other about our inner lives, our own identity and integrity.
- Identity lies in the intersection of the diverse forces that make up a life, while integrity lies in relating to those forces in ways that bring us wholeness and life.
- Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique.
- The best gift we receive from great mentors is not their knowledge or their approach to teaching but the sense of self they evoke within us.

A Culture of Fear: Education and the Disconnected Life

- Fear is a powerful feature of both educational culture and our inner landscape. The sequence of fears begins in the fear of diversity, leads to the fear of conflict, then the fear of losing identity, and the final fear of the challenge to change our lives.
- Knowing is always communal. Knowing is a human way to seek relationship, to have encounters and exchanges that will alter us.

The Hidden Wholeness: Paradox in Teaching and Learning

- The nature of the human self is paradoxical: for every gift or strength we possess, there is a corresponding weakness or liability.
- We need to embrace opposites and appreciate paradoxes.
- Six paradoxes to build into the teaching and learning space
- The space should be bounded and open
- The space should be hospitable and "charged"
- The space should invite the voice of the individual and the voice of the group
- The space should honor the "little" stories of participants and the "big" stories of the disciplines and traditions
- The space should support solitude and surround it with the resources of community
- The space should welcome both silence and speech

Knowing in Community: Joined By the Grace of Great Things

- To teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced.
- Truth is the eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline.
- The community of truth includes a transcendent dimension of truth-knowing and truth-telling that takes us beyond relativism and absolutism alike.

Teaching in Community: A Subject-Centered Education

- The best classroom is neither teacher-centered nor participant-centered but subject-centered.
- To move us closer to the community of truth in the classroom, we must make ourselves as dependent on the participants as they are on us.

Learning in Community: The Conversation of Colleagues

- We need to create a collegial community of discourse that promote "good talk about good teaching."

Divided No More: Teaching from a Heart of Hope

- The decision to resist feeling divided, to teach from the heart, can result in change.
- To teach from the heart is to heed the calling of the soul, for connection and community.

Source: *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, by Parker Palmer, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1998.

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Placing Children at the Center

Teaching and Learning in Unitarian Universalist Parish Life

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Introduction

I place working with children at the heart of thinking about adult teacher development. Most people teach because they want to be with children. Children are natural spiritual guides. They are comfortable with the process of seeking. They are immediate in their response to love and injustice. They are forgiving companions for a journey of faith.

How does being with children nurture teachers?

The premise that children nurture their teachers is a radical one. It demands that we examine more deeply what touches us as adults working with children. Uncovering what is joyful, provocative and spiritual about being with children is both an individual and shared process. Creating processes that allow teachers to reflect about what they are gaining from being with children in RE is an essential step in understanding and supporting teachers. Structuring teaching so that adults can take time to enjoy and learn from children is essential.

Seeing the world through the eyes of the child is a gift. Walking slowly on the beach, with a toddler as our guide, we are overwhelmed at the intrigue and beauty that we see. Teaching and learning with children can provide alternate lenses for teachers. Children's clarity can be startling. A youth says: "people would think you were nuts if you did that Jesus turning the other cheek thing in middle school," and the lesson takes a turn from philosophy to authentic life. A five year old says, "God doesn't really make babies but he doesn't mind if we say that anyway," and the teacher doesn't need to comment. Later she asks, "Are there some things that God does mind?" and adults and children, ponder together the potentials of rights, wrongs, God and godlessness.

Children demand authenticity and force adults to declare truths, large and small. Teaching children during the period following September 11, 2001, those of us who teach were forced to reveal our sense of vulnerability to children. We also worked hard to maintain that we could indeed keep our communities safe. These conversations with children forced us to confront our concerns and claim our strength, as people of faith, anew. Many adults I worked with felt that teaching children was their most spiritually fortifying experience around September 11th .

Children also force us to explain parish life. Teaching three years olds this fall, I encountered a wonderful boy who asked me, "Can I walk in your maze [our outdoor labyrinth] sometime?" The way he worded this question made me pause: My maze? I explained (after giving him a clear yes) that the maze belongs to all of us at church. I told him that one of the things that makes church special is that we share everything and that we're all in charge of taking care of everything together. When he replied, "Oh, so this is my room too, and my maze," I knew that we had shared and learned together a truth about what it means to be a parish member that is dear to us both.

What is unique about being a part of a Unitarian Universalist lifespan faith development program with children?

Searching for truth and meaning, is one of our core Unitarian Universalist principles. All learners in UU RE programs (teachers and children) are explicitly on this journey together. Since our faith and our ways of

teaching do not follow a transmission (tell/remember) model, the process of learning becomes a process of the creation of our theology. We are a living faith.

When creating resources for lifespan faith development at the UUA, we always consider four aspects of development that occur through our religious education programs: Ethical development, Faith development, Unitarian Universalist identity development and Spiritual development. These aspects or strands reveal the complexity and strength of what we are learning in RE programs. In the process, we further define Unitarian Universalism for children and adults; we deepen our understandings of our faith. Considering these four strands, may help teachers better articulate what they are learning and how they are developing as adults of faith. The four strands may be tools for self or group reflection that support teaching as a spiritual act.

How can we further illuminate what is learned through the process of teaching in our parishes, both for children and adults?

Teaching and learning in our lifespan faith development programs is spiritual engagement. Much of what we do for children sustains our greater parish communities. Working with children, we often create routines or rituals, which help them to quickly gain a sense of belonging. Thinking deeply about what we do on behalf of children can help teachers realize how essentially spiritual their work with children is. I offer two examples: Snack and the fall water communion.

- **Snack.** I always make snack part of any religious education experience that I plan or teach. The sharing of food is a sacrament of hospitality and of coming together. To have and enjoy food together is a simple grace, a shared human experience that is both ordinary and sacred. It is through our deep enjoyment with each other, our sense of wonder and sense of gratitude that faith develops. We nourish our authentic selves and grow our souls. Snack both literally and metaphorically is central to this process with children.
- **Water communion.** Our parish community is a place where we make what is common, wondrous. We ask children to bring water from an ordinary or special summer place, to church with them in the fall. We know that our faith is one that welcomes us with our diverse experiences and paths. We come together, literally and symbolically, as a community in the fall. The water from the backyard sprinkler is offered and received from a child. The spirituality of everyday life is illuminated.

How can we support the learning communities of our classrooms and programs, with specific attention to teachers?

Supporting teachers means supporting the children who are learning with them. Our lifespan learning environments must be ones that allow children to be natural spiritual seekers. This happens when adults are able to conceptualize teaching as engaging children in pondering the spiritual, seeking justice, searching for what is true, learning about what is ethical and creating our Unitarian Universalist faith. Provisions of adequate space, curriculum, pastoral assistance and parish support, free teachers to enter fully into teaching as a spiritual act. The joys of teaching and learning with children can be realized most deeply when adults enter ready to learn and committed to creating faith together. Small group ministry with teachers, journaling exercises, spiritual companionship, and reframing religious education in the lives of congregations, may all be tools for adults in this process.

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