

Reading

Some Beliefs by Sophia Lyon Fahs

Some beliefs are like walled gardens.

They encourage exclusiveness, and the feeling of being especially privileged.

Other beliefs are expansive and lead the way into wider and deeper sympathies.

Some beliefs are like shadows, clouding children's days with fears of unknown calamities.

Other beliefs are like sunshine, blessing children with the warmth of happiness.

Some beliefs are divisive, separating the saved from the unsaved, friends from enemies.

Other beliefs are bonds in a world community, where sincere differences beautify the pattern.

Some beliefs are like blinders, shutting off the power to choose one's own direction.

Other beliefs weaken a person's selfhood. They blight the growth of resourcefulness.

Other beliefs nurture self-confidence and enrich the feeling of personal worth.

Some beliefs are rigid, like the body of death, impotent in a changing world.

Other beliefs are pliable, like the young sapling, ever growing with the upward thrust of life.

If God and Superman had a Fight...

I was first hired to be a religious educator in 1992. Within the first two years the minister convinced me to lead a class for parents of young children called, Parents as Resident Theologians. It was a wonderful experience of conversations with Unitarian Universalist parents who were trying to figure out what to tell their children about what we believe about prayer and death, heaven and hell.

One night one of the parents, Mary Ellen, said she needed help. She told a story of driving in the car with their son, Logan, who was four or five at that time. From the back seat Logan asked, "Mom, if God and Superman were in a fight, who would win?" Mary Ellen was taken aback and stumped and frankly, so was I.

Not long after I came to Atkinson in 2001, a parent from Canby approached me. She was very concerned. She told me her child attended school with many fundamentalist Christians. Her child had been asked by a friend during recess, "Is Jesus your personal savior?" The Unitarian Universalist child said, "I don't think so." And the Christian child said, "Then you are going to hell." The child came home very distraught and asked, "Mom, are we going to hell?" With astonishment she answered, "Of course not, why?" The parent felt unprepared for her child's question and came to me wanting to know what should she say? I know I gave some answer to the mother but I left with me a sense of dissatisfaction with what I had to offer her.

A friend and fellow religious educator, Jude Henzy, shared this experience.

One Sunday morning during children's chapel, six-year-old Julia asked, "Can UU kids pray?" Jude said Julia sounded concerned, as if some harm might come to her if she attempted this dangerous practice. Jude reassured her that she believed Unitarian Universalists can pray and Julia was ready with her next question, "*Should* they?"

In my experience, Unitarian Universalist adults love the complexity expressed and embodied in our seven principles. Love the abstractness and the broad interpretation we can each find in them and love the fourth principle- "A free and responsible search for truth and meaning." We love that we are not supposed to find final answers-we are supposed to keep an open mind. We love that we have a list of six sacred sources rather than looking to one holy book for wisdom. The seven principles and six sources serve adults well, but I don't think they serve a five year old who is wondering is god stronger, more powerful than superman. They don't serve a six year old who wants a yes or no answer about whether praying might be harmful to a Unitarian Universalist child. They

don't serve a seven year old who wants to know if we are going to hell and what DO we believe about Jesus if he's not our personal savior? The kind of answers they need do not jump out of the principles and sources.

When faced with questions from children I will admit to having said things like: "Well, god is an idea that some people use to describe the vast mystery and power of the universe and as Unitarian Universalists we can each find our own answer". And - well, prayer is a practice some people use to find their best selves, and to find the power in the universe that might help them be better people and as Unitarian Universalists we can each find our own answer. And - well, some people believe that when we die we live on in some way that might be in other people's hearts and minds and some people believe you go to heaven or hell and as Unitarian Universalists we can each find our own answer. I watched the children's eyes glaze over as I seemed to go on and on and on without answering their questions.

Now to a fifth or sixth, or seventh or eighth grader my answers might be fascinating. They might be the basis of some rich conversations. But they do not satisfy the minds of our younger children.

Ann B, an Atkinson member and senior high youth advisor tells a story of her four-year-old son, Ethan, coming home one day from his Christian Montessori Preschool and stating, "God made water." Ann responded to Ethan by describing how water is made up of three molecules- two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom. Ethan's eyes glazed over. So Ann said, "People have different ideas about where water came from, andGod is one of them." As Ann and her husband, Eric reflected on this and other conversations with their two young boys, it became clear that they could not discuss the big life questions with the boys the same way they can with each other. Ethan wanted to talk about life but in a different way - in a way that made sense to him, in a way that his concrete way of thinking could manage.

Now, we are intelligent people. We recognize the difference between children's cognitive abilities and adults. We recognize that we can't explain the multiplication tables to a child before they learn to count. We teach them to count and trust -as their brains develop and their mental capacities expand – they will learn more complex arithmetic and math.

We don't talk about time with children the way we do with adults. When Mick and I had young children who were not yet capable of understanding how to use a clock, we developed a system that was understandable to everyone. Our system was based on two television shows: Sesame Street, which was an hour long, and Mr. Rogers, which was half an hour. The kids couldn't grasp the concept of the clock as a symbolic representation of time but they did have the experience of watching those two television shows. So, if one of them asked, "When is dinner," we could answer, "Dinner will be ready in one Sesame Street" or "Dinner will be ready in half of a Mr. Rogers." It worked well and Mick and I certainly didn't worry we might be damaging our children's ability later in their lives to understand time in more complex ways.

But when it comes to discussing religious and spiritual questions with children, we Unitarian Universalists seem to forget that human beings develop abilities as their brains develop and as they experience life and make sense of it. As Ann B. realized, we can't tell our four year olds about the molecular structure of water and expect them to understand or feel satisfied by it.

One of my favorite readings in our hymnal was written by Unitarian minister, William Ellery Channing. It begins: "The great end in religious instruction is not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own." I love this reading and I think we do a great job of not 'stamping our minds on our young,' in fact I think we do too good a job of it. I think we are so afraid of stamping our minds on the young that we don't tell them what we do believe.

We need to find ways to communicate our life-affirming, freedom loving, hope-filled, inclusive religion – in simpler and more concrete ways. We need to get over our own hang-ups, get beyond the hurt that for many came with

childhood religious experiences. We need to each take time to discern what we believe and then do the work of making our faith understandable and useable to our young. We need to take what we know about human development and apply it to religious and spiritual education with our Unitarian Universalist children.

Imagine teaching your child to believe in a being who sees everything they do, judges their actions and rewards them if they behave well. Most of us already do just that when we encourage our children to believe in Santa Claus. Santa Claus – who sees everything they do, judges their actions and rewards them if they behave well. An all seeing - mysterious being who judges and rewards behavior. Somehow we know our children will outgrow a belief in Santa Claus but don't trust them to outgrow simple and concrete ideas of God and hell and prayer. We seem unable to transfer what we understand about how children learn math and time, for example– to how they learn religion and spirituality. We can enjoy a mysterious magical being dressed in red and cannot tolerate the idea of a mysterious being that loves everyone.

Our seventh and eighth graders participate in a Coming of Age program that includes a number of sessions designed to explore beliefs and then culminates in each youth writing a personal credo statement to be read before the congregation. Most years there are one or two youth who tell me they are going to include in their credo "I don't believe in God." Some seem thrilled that they will be shocking the congregation- taking a brave and unique stand. Others seem anxious- perhaps they will be tarred and feathered when they voice such heresy. Then I burst their bubble or calm their fears and tell them that actually a large number of Unitarian Universalists would also say, they don't believe in god. The young people are surprised to learn that many Unitarian Universalist adults consider themselves atheists.

How can that be? How can it be that young people who have spent years within our congregation do not know this? Aren't some of their parents atheists? We avoid 'stamping our minds on our young' so well that our seventh and eighth graders are surprised to learn that atheism is a respected option within Unitarian Universalism.

I think our young people, to a large extent, learn what 'church people' believe from their friends and from the larger culture. I think way too often our young people have heard in response to their questions, 'What do you believe?' and "We each decide for ourselves." So they are left to speak with people who will actually answer their religious questions. They learn about religion from those who will use the language of theology, of religion, of spirituality. Their primary religious educators are often children on the playground or the even the president of the united states on the news, declaring what 'good religious people' believe. If we don't tell our young what we believe in ways they can comprehend, they will get answers elsewhere.

The last couple of years I have had some of the richest religious conversations I have ever had in monthly meetings with the teachers of our children and youth.

We have shared our ideas about god, death, the creation of the universe and just last month we talked about prayer. There have been times when after the hour set aside for the meeting- the conversation was so engaging – when I tried to get teachers to leave, they refused and continued talking for another hour. They are enriched and excited by what our principles and sources mean to their lives and how we can make it more relevant to our young people.

The teachers are courageously standing in relation to our young people as religious educators; they are working to discern what Unitarian Universalism means to them; and they are trying to figure out how to translate it to the children or youth they work with.

Greg Penner has worked with the third and fourth graders for two years. Last year we had a month of lessons that explored a story of our Universalist roots. Greg remembers when he shared with the class that Universalism teaches us there is no hell. He said he felt the idea deeply resonate with the children. They were energized. They

took away something to say to their friends and were reassured that we have a view of death, not as something to be feared.

The teachers and I have been in an evolving conversation about how our faith can best serve our children and youth. Today is another step in that process.

I am going to say some things now, that I am fairly certain will make many of you uncomfortable. I believe this because I have said similar things in teacher meetings and have been met with serious discomfort. I consider it part of my job to push this conversation forward- inviting questions and deeper thinking. I would like to suggest four statements we might consider telling our Unitarian Universalist children to give them more concrete ideas they can think about and share with their peers.

First- What if we told our children **we don't believe in hell**,
 We adults would know -we are teaching our children
 to embrace the natural processes of life and not fear them.
 We would know -we are teaching our children
 to find hope even in the darkness that life sometimes brings.

Second- What if we told our children **It is good to pray**.
 We adults would know - we are teaching our children
 the importance of making time for regular silence
 within their often too busy, over-pressured lives.
 And we would know we are teaching our children
 the importance of making time each day for gratitude,
 self reflection, and for hope.

Third- What if we told our children we believe that **God is love** -
 We adults would know - we are teaching our children
 that love is more powerful than evil.
 We would know - we are teaching our children
 there is mystery that we cannot explain.

And finally- What if we told our children we believe **God loves everyone**.
 We adults would know - we are teaching our children –
 our respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all people- not just our friends, not just those we are
 comfortable with - but all people.
 And we would know we are teaching our children
 there is an undercurrent of love and respect in the world –
 for them and all of life.

We don't believe in hell.
 It is good to pray.
 God is love.
 And God loves everyone.

These are not statements all the teachers would agree with. We are in the middle of the conversation.

I believe more of us must do what the teachers are doing: We must be courageous leaders and claim our roles as religious educators to our children; We must do our own individual religious and spiritual work; and we must give our children statements of our faith that are useable and relevant to their very real lives.

We must answer their questions about: God vs Superman; whether or not we have a future in hell; and the harmfulness of prayer

I close with this prayer—

Mystery of life, filled with the magnificent power of love,

May we remember that children are pliable,

like the young sapling, growing with the upward thrust of life.

May we be responsible stewards to our children-

so they may give voice to their sense of transcendence;

to their fears and intrigue about death;

to their sense of fairness that comes from some deep, indescribable place;

and to their sense of belonging to a vast world that holds them in love.

May we value our own spiritual growth so we may serve them.

May we give them the roots they need to become strong, loving, freedom and justice seeking Unitarian Universalist adults.

Amen and may it be so.