

It Takes a UU Village to Raise a UU Child

Sermon Reprint by Rev. Dr. Tess Baumberger
Unity Church of North Easton
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Responsive Reading: It Takes a UU Village to Raise a UU Child

Leader 1: It takes a Unitarian Universalist Village
to raise a Unitarian Universalist Child.

We will read what we believe important
for our children to learn, to know, and to experience.

We invite you to respond by saying “It takes a Village to Raise a Child”

Leader 2: It is important for our children
To know that they are cared for,
To know that they are part of a larger family,
An important part of a bigger “human picture.”

Response: It takes a village to raise a child.

Leader 1: It is important for our children
To believe in themselves,
To trust in themselves,
To know that they can make a difference.

Response: It takes a village to raise a child.

Leader 2: It is important for our children
To know our Unitarian Universalist principles,
To find ways to live them in their daily lives,
And to realize that the choices they make are important.

Response: It takes a village to raise a child.

Leader 1: It is important for our children
To be able to speak about our faith,
To honor its history and its heritage,
And to appreciate its heroes and heroines.

Response: It takes a village to raise a child.

Leader 2: It is important for our children
To explore religious truth and meaning
In the Jewish, Christian, and other world religions,
and to know that ours is a religion worth having.

Response: It takes a village to raise a child.

Leader 1: It is important for our children
To experience the Spirit of Life,
To feel a sense of awe at the grandeur of the world,
And to live lives of empathy and compassion.

Response: It takes a village to raise a child.

Leader 2: It is important for our children
 To have fun together and with us,
 To have wonderful memories of this place,
 To know the value of religious community.

Response: It takes a village to raise a child.

Leader 1: It is important for our children
 To understand that life has its challenges
 As well as its rewards,
 And to have the tools to handle both.

Leader 2: It is important for our children
 To know that it's good and worthwhile
 To have your own journey,
 And to know deep in their hearts
 That wherever that journey takes them,
 They will always have a loving home here..

Response: It takes a village to raise a child.

Reading: The Great End in Religious Instruction By Rev. William Ellery Channing

The great end in religious instruction is not to stamp our minds upon the young,
 but to stir up their own.
 Not to make them see with our eyes,
 But to look inquiringly and steadily with 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;
 Not to bind them by ineradicable prejudices to our particular sect or peculiar notions,
 But to prepare them for impartial, conscientious judging of whatever subjects maybe
 offered to their decision;
 Not to burden the memory,
 But to quicken and strengthen the power of thought;
 Not to impose religion upon them in the form of arbitrary rules,
 But to awaken the conscience, the moral discernment.
 In a word, the great end is to awaken the soul,
 To excite and cherish the spiritual life.

Reading: It Matters What We Believe **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 to 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 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 are like gateways
Opening wide vistas for exploration.

Some 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.

Reading: On Children by Kahlil Gibrain

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself.

They come through you but not from you,
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.

You may give them your love but not your thoughts,
For they have their own thoughts.

You may house their bodies but not their souls,
 For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow
 Which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.

You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you
 For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

You are the bows from which your children
 As living arrows are sent forth.

The Archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,
 And bends you with might
 That the arrows may go swift and far.

Let your bending in the Archer's hand be for gladness.

Sermon: It Takes A UU Village To Raise A UU Child

In the course of this service you've heard a couple of ideas that might seem to be at odds. The first idea, from the opening words, is that it takes a village to raise a child. The second idea, from the meditation, is that our children are not our own. Those two ideas could seem contradictory.

The first suggests in some very real sense, we are each responsible for the welfare and development of the children in our midst. In this sense, these are our children to care for, to nourish, and to teach. The second notion suggests that these children do not belong to us. They are not ours.

When we look more closely at each idea, I think the contradiction between them disappears. In fact, I think the two have actually reinforced one another throughout the history of Sunday School or Religious Education in our tradition. Let me say some more about all of that.

Since it's the title of the sermon, let's look first at the notion that it takes a village to raise a child. This is an African expression popularized in this country a few years ago when a first lady (who has been in the news a great deal this year) wrote a book by that title.

The idea behind the saying is that it takes much more than just the parents and extended family to raise each child. In a traditional African village, though the children are closest to their immediate family, they also "belong" to everyone in the community.

It's as though people say, "These are our children." Whether or not adults are related to a particular child, they hold themselves responsible for that child's safety and wellbeing. Can you see how the world would be a better place if people everywhere took such responsibility for every child? Children would be safe wherever they went, and cared for by all.

Now clearly this congregation is not a village in Africa, but it is a community with kids that in a sense are “our” children and youth. Over time we watch them grow up from infants to toddlers, through preschool and elementary school, middle school, high school. We see them when they come home from college and later, if we’re lucky, we see them holding their own children in their arms when they come home for holidays. It’s hard to be a part of a religious community without taking pride in the development and flourishing of “our” children. They’re all above average, after all.

They seem like ours because we watch them grow up, but there’s also a deeper sense in which we are connected to our children. In our seventh principle we affirm and promote the interdependent web of all existence. Generally we interpret this as being about ecology, but our children are parts of that web whose strands can symbolize our connections to them.

Taking this concept of interconnection seriously, we are inter-related with each child in the world, and more closely linked to those in our families and communities. If we believe the world would be a better place if every adult took responsibility for the well being of each child, what better place could we live out that value than in this religious community?

In seminary I heard that congregational life is where the theological rubber hits the road. People like to say stuff like that in seminaries. What they mean by this is that our congregations are places where we can practice what we preach. We can practice the theology of interdependence here in many ways, including promoting the welfare of the children close to us in that web of connection and relationship. It takes a village to raise a child.

On the other hand, we heard this reading by Kahlil Gibrain who says that our children are not our own, that in some sense they belong to the wider universe. He suggests that as close as we may be to them as parents and teachers, as adults interested in their welfare, we do not own the children closest to us in that web. If anything they own us.

Gibrain writes that we are merely to act as the bow from which each child is freed into the world, into the direction his or her life will take. We are not even the archer, just the bow held in the hands of the Great Archer, whose will must surely be that each child attain his or her best and brightest potential, fly as far as we are able to send them.

We are the bow, bent by that will for bright flourishing, to send our children as living arrows into the future. In a sense, we are held in a tension between the history or experience that we embody, and the future which the children and youth of our village embody.

We were once launched as arrows by the family and teachers of our childhoods. They bent with the strength of their history and experience to send us into our lives. Those of us who grew up in faith communities may remember religious educators whose wisdom, example, or teachings brought us to this place.

In the same way, our children will become the bows of tomorrow. Remembering us and the religious education and experiences we give them here they will bend to send forth their children. And so it goes, on and on. Over the expanse of time, we can picture a cascading movement of bending, flying, bending, flying.

You can see this as a movement of shifting responsibility. The youth of the village become the parents and then the elders of the village. For me the two ideas meet

like this. In the sense of responsibility to the children in our midst, we all must be part of that bending, in order to launch them well. The more of us who join in that movement, the further the children can go.

But in the bending and the launching, it is important for us to realize that our children are not our property. They do not belong to us but to themselves and to the future they will create. Both are true – the children nearest us in the web are our responsibility but they are their own people.

This has been the basic philosophy of religious education in our tradition since its very beginnings. Those who founded Unitarianism and Universalism in our country 200 years ago believed that the religious education of our children was vitally important.

Our movement's founding parents were instrumental in promoting the Sunday School movement in our country. They advocated religious education that frees the mind, energizes the spirit, and that teaches children liberal religious values like compassion, honesty, and justice.

You can hear this philosophy in the piece Ken just read by the Reverend William Ellery Channing. Channing was one of the founders of Unitarianism in our country. He laid out the foundation of American Unitarianism in a sermon delivered in 1819.

Before this landmark sermon, the Calvinists of his day flung the word "Unitarian" as an insult at those who emphasized the oneness or "unity" of the Divine, those who denied the doctrine of the trinity. The religious conservatives of that time flung the word "Unitarian" as an insult at those who emphasized the humanity of Jesus over his divinity.

In that 1819 sermon, William Ellery Channing claimed the word "Unitarian" and used it to name a new religious movement in our country. His Unitarianism was a faith that upheld reason, saw the potential for goodness in all of humanity, and valued freedom of belief.

The sort of religious instruction Channing advocated was built on this same foundation. It encouraged awakening children's minds and spirits, helping them to form their own beliefs, to love truth, and to be conscientious choosers of their own way in life. In other words, the role of the religious educator was to bend him or herself the better to send the child forth.

Another great Unitarian religious educator carried on that tradition in the 20th century. Her name was Sophia Lyon Fahs, author of the piece I read just now. Fahs encouraged religious educators and parents to use "teachable moments" when children are experiencing awe and wonder, to help them understand those experiences in light of our religion.

Both Channing and Fahs saw expanding a child's mind and spirit as the aim of religious education, connecting them to wider truths. To them, a good religious education strengthened children's self worth, and encouraged them to explore ideas, feelings, and experiences with open minds.

In our faith's more recent history this emphasis on expansive vision has sometimes backfired. In well-meaning attempts to give children an understanding of world religions, we have sometimes neglected to give them a sense of Unitarian Universalism as a religion in its own right.

In our good-hearted attempts to teach children to honor others' religious traditions, we have sometimes neglected to teach them that our own religious tradition is worthy of honor. As a result, in recent decades, we have lost most of our children and

youth to other faiths or to no religious involvement whatsoever as they fly from the bow and enter adulthood.

This is not what William Ellery Channing or Sophia Lyon Fahs had in mind! The question is, how do we hold the tension between the strength of our tradition and the freedom of our children to fly where they will? How do we raise children who not only have Unitarian Universalist values, but who also value our Unitarian Universalist faith?

Some possible answers lie in a recent book called “Full Circle: 15 Ways to Grow Lifelong UUs.” The book is based on interviews with over 80 lifelong Unitarian Universalists, ranging in age from their mid 20s to their mid 80s. Based on these interviews, the book recommends ways to raise our children to value our religious tradition enough to choose it for themselves as adults.

From my perspective, the most important recommendation is to give children a strong sense of Unitarian Universalist religious identity. One way we can do this is by bringing forward the sometimes hidden assumptions of our faith. These include believing there is a possibility of good in each human being, that the ultimate religious act is choosing, that we make these choices based on intelligent love, and that we learn best in a community, not alone on a mountaintop.

It is important to give our children a sense of identity as Unitarian Universalists, but you cannot give what you do not have. So it is important for adults here, especially those not raised in our tradition, to develop a sense of Unitarian Universalist religious identity. You can contribute to the religious education of our children by pursuing some yourself!

The book’s other recommendations include giving children good memories of being faith community. Any of us can do that. You know that kids are like sponges, they absorb everything. Anything we say or do around kids here at Unity Church is teaching them what religious community is all about. One way you can support the Sunday School program is by living the sort of faith you want our children to catch.

Even if you don’t want to or can’t teach Sunday School, there are many ways you can support the program. You can do things like mentoring youth, fixing up the religious education classrooms, donating some new furniture (what they have is pretty ratty), and inviting youth to participate in church leadership. These are just some of the ideas in the book “Full Circle.” If you’d like to find out more of them, you can borrow it from me.

It’s clear that it takes a whole Unitarian Universalist village to raise a Unitarian Universalist child. It takes each of us, in our own ways, with our own gifts, experiences and visions, to raise the children of our congregation to value our faith enough to choose it as we have chosen it.

Our children are not our own, they are the sons and daughters of life’s longing for itself. We in the village that is this congregation are but the bow from which they are sent forth. Let us bend in the archer’s hands that the children here might fly swift and far, and may that bending be for gladness. So may it be. Blessed be, and amen.