

**JANUARY 24, 2010**  
**EXPLORING RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**  
**COMPILED READINGS**

Before his piece, Rick read the poem “At the Smithville Methodist Church,” in which poet Stephen Dunn speaks as the parent of a girl who attends an “Arts & Crafts” week sponsored by the church. When she comes home happily relating Biblical stories and singing of Jesus’ love, her father is initially troubled. Upon reflection he recognizes how the Christian story excites and engages the girl, though he himself has long since stopped needing Jesus as “nemesis and friend.” Yet he himself has no better story to offer, he reports, as evolution, while magical, does not fit the bill. Dunn leaves Unitarian Universalist leaders musing about what their own religion has to offer children.

**THE WISDOM OF WHY’S**  
*by Rick Kimball*

Reading or hearing “At the Smithville Methodist Church” leaves me as reflective as its author. It gives me pause. The lines amuse me, but my laughter has a nervous edge.

The Christian story is not my story, my kernel of truth. But it calls to children, and it challenges me, a Unitarian Universalist curriculum writer, to offer our children as much, to engage them as well.

What should we, what do we give to our UU kids? My answers have grown increasingly secure through my years of program development. We give them not myth but mystery. Not certainty but search. Not answer but question. Not pronouncement, but process. Not religious education but religious exploration.

I tried to capture the spirit of search in a curriculum I wrote last year for our denomination’s new Tapestry of Faith program, a collection of more than fifty new resources available on line to UU congregations everywhere. My new

program for sixth graders and older youth is called *Riddle and Mystery*, from the words of this morning's first hymn. Through sixteen sessions, *Riddle and Mystery* joins adult leaders with youth in exploration of the big questions humans have asked for millennia: Where do we come from? What is death? Why do bad things happen?

Each session of *Riddle and Mystery* includes a brief "unchallenge." One of them asks the kids to make the sound of the wha-wha" bird, "wha-wha" for what, and where, and when and why. It's just a silly moment. Or is it?

"No," I decided in November when our grandchildren visited. Let the "wha-wha" bird call on and on.

Our youngest grandchild, Serene, had just reached the age of two, the age of "why?"

Don't pull the cat's tail, Serene. *Why?*

It's time for bed, Serene. *Why?*

Look, Serene, it's snowing. *Why?*

People will attempt to knock the *why's* out of Serene as she moves through her years. Society and its schools will present science as solution, religion as relic. Serene's fascination and eager questions may be buried under textbooks.

But not if I can help it, not if we can help it.

Our job as UUs is to keep the questioning and the questing alive, to engage in unending cosmic exploration, to gaze with the child beyond the bonds of science, to take her hand, and together touch the mystery.

This morning's service explores how this congregation is doing that job, for both its kids and its adults.

Let's now join in our first hymn, number 1003 in the green book. It's a round, a wonderful round. Dale will play it through once, then we'll all sing it through together once. After that, start at any numbered point you want, and we'll keep going in parts until Dale stops us. Please rise in body or in spirit.

### SPIRIT OF RE

*by Cathy Walsh*

When I was a child my family belonged to a Congregational church in Mass. Since my parents were both from Miami, Florida we did not have any relatives even remotely close by. So the church became our extended family. I have many fond memories from the years I spent there. Unlike our church, this church had plenty of room having two buildings. One was a traditional white steepled church where adult worship was led. The other was an old Unitarian stone church up the street where the children would have RE. I loved that old stone church. It had an antique organ and stage and a huge attic filled with costumes for the Christmas Pageant among other things. We would have pancake breakfasts and the best games of hide and seek. But, I also remember the visits to our home by the youth minister who would be called by my parents to help them handle my unruly older brother.

Since I no longer live in MA I went in search of a new church community to join when my oldest daughter was 3. I had not heard of Unitarian Universalism before even though I had been so close to it in my youth. From the moment I came to Allen Avenue I knew it was the church I was looking for. What I found was a place where all people are accepted. There is no screening here. Come as your whole self no editing needed. This was revolutionary to find in a church! But there was more. The values expressed in the UU principals are actually brought into real action. This is demonstrated in the huge amount of community service work

performed every day by the members of this congregation. Yes, this was the church for me.

So where did I fit in? Originally I was interested in the Social Action Committee. What a great way to make a difference. But I ended up joining the RE Committee since they seemed to be in greater need of bodies. I had no prior experience working with children other than my own kids, and quite frankly before having my own kids I was even a little bit uncomfortable around children. They were loud and whined for candy in the grocery store and even cried.

One of the great gifts I have been given by my own children is being in the world of kids. It is a magical world full of imagination. I sometimes find myself hanging out with the kids more than the adults. Being on the RE Committee and being an RE Leader has not always been easy for me. I remember a year of leading a group of 15-20 3 and 4 year olds. Thank goodness for the wall of blocks! But now those kids are in the 3rd and 4th grade. What fun it is to see them grow and change. I learn something new from them every week.

But what is it that we give to the children of this community? What is it that parents find here that is not found out in the world of school and after school activities? I believe there are many things but I would like to mention a few. Most importantly we hope to help our children grow a deep connection to their own inner divinity and then show them how to shine this divinity out into the world.

Allen Avenue is a place that just like the adults the kids can truly be themselves. It is a safe place to ask questions and explore the mystery that is our lives. This is a place to learn about the broader community and world through the experience of many types of worship and through social action projects. This past Sunday our multi age worship was focused on Dr. MLK Jr. We learned about his dreams for humanity. Then we asked the kids about what their dreams are for our beautiful planet.

When I think back on my own childhood it is not the passages from the bible that I remember but that sense of family. I was raised by that whole congregation. Here at Allen Avenue we have a large group of dedicated adults who meet with the youth every week from the youngest up to the senior youth group and all ages in between. This is a place to build relationships.

Becoming the current chair of the RE Committee was the last thing that I thought I would be doing here at Allen Avenue. But, it has been a tangible way for me to grow and stretch into talents and gifts that I didn't even know that I had. It is a real honor to be a leader and friend to the children of this church.

### IMAGINE THAT

*by John Howard*

I am up here today speaking to you from the perspective of an RE leader. When I came to this church nine years ago I never imagined being a Sunday School teacher. I don't have and never planned to have children of my own, and the last church I belonged to had no Sunday School and few children. But right away I noticed that this church encouraged communication between the generations. At an all-birthday celebration, for example, I was paired with Sam Jagolinzer – age 9 (I think) - as my special birthday partner, with the purpose of getting to know each other better. It was around this time that I was invited to help lead RE groups, and I was flattered to be asked.

Being a volunteer in this program is an education in itself, sort of Religious Education and Adult Enrichment rolled into one. Not being a parent myself, I am very appreciative of the experience my co-leaders bring with them each Sunday. Most of them are parents, and some are professional educators. I learn from them about patience, boundaries and loving encouragement. I learn, for instance, that it's okay for a child to choose to remain outside the circle for a while. They

are still loved and supported. I wish I had been given that permission when I was their age.

I also get to know an assortment of our adult members under some pretty interesting circumstances. We collaborate on the lesson plans, which is good practice for a control freak like me. And speaking of control, there are the kids. Ah, yes, the kids. Of course it's not about control, it's about the free exploration of ideas in a safe and supportive setting, the biggest idea being "who am I?" I've mostly been with ages 7 through 11, and any thoughts I had about seriously discussing the big questions of life have mostly been put on the back burner for now. At that age we are action oriented. We want to get to know other kids by engaging in activities, not by talking about our feelings.

But then, you can't really generalize – there are always surprises. I never know what activities or topics will click with them. One week it was making pancakes – to honor Fanny Farmer, a UU. One group we had loved to play-act, taking parts in impromptu theater productions. One time we had fun constructing a Temple of Solomon out of boxes and cardboard tubes and little tiny people and a copper dish where they burnt their offerings. Another time there was a sort of boys against the girls scavenger hunt involving Biblical references. The boys were into it, racking up the points, while the girls couldn't have cared less and sort of boycotted the whole thing. This year our curriculum includes a lot of songs, and I thought I might be useful teaching songs to them at the piano. They hate the songs. It's almost unanimous. We know this because Tamiko actually did a survey, bless her heart.

So it's humbling and occasionally frustrating. But mostly it's incredibly enjoyable and an honor to be involved with our children. They are young for such a short time, and they change and evolve right before our eyes. I would hate to miss that. And it impresses the people I know outside the church when I tell them that I volunteer as a Sunday School teacher, though I know we don't call it that here.

It's something the wider culture understands and values. I just read Noah Adams' book Piano Lessons, and at one point he mentions that the author John Grisham teaches Sunday School in his home town of Oxford, Mississippi. Doesn't that make him seem like a real person? And now I have something in common with a famous author! Imagine that!

## GROWING UP UU

*Erica Bartlett*

My family came to this church when I was 9, which gave me the opportunity to go through the RE program. But I have a confession to make: I don't remember many specifics of what I learned in those classes. This isn't meant to disparage Tirrell, who was the DRE at the time, or any of the wonderful adults who taught me. It's just that most details of what I learned back then, be it at home, in school, or at church, have long since been buried under other memories.

I didn't realize how much I'd forgotten until 7 years ago when I co-led the third and fourth graders. We explored a variety of religious traditions, talking about people as diverse as St. Francis of Assisi, John Murray, and Mohammed. We also looked at a variety of holidays, from the Hindu New Year Divali to Yom Kippur to different versions of Thanksgiving. It was then that memories of my own RE days began to resurface.

One thing is a particular story. We learned a number of them, from many traditions, but the one that stuck with me was Jonah and the Whale. Having a father with a very scientific outlook on life, I had a hard time accepting this story at face value. What did he eat? How did he sleep without drowning? What about a bathroom?

I was excited to realize that it was not only okay but in fact encouraged for us to ask questions. Having attended Catholic Sunday School for a while, this came as something of a revelation, if not of Biblical proportions. I also learned that such stories might be metaphors instead of literal truth. Even if I didn't believe the events had happened as described, I could still learn something. In this case, the concept of faith, of giving yourself over to something greater.

Another memory was visiting other churches with junior youth group. Among them were a Catholic church, a Baptist church, and a Friends Meeting House. I was especially impressed with the Quaker meeting. Being asked to sit in silence for an hour, letting my mind wander whatever paths it chose, and knowing that I could share my thoughts without fear of judgment reflected the encouragement to spiritual growth taught at Allen Avenue, something I deeply appreciated.

Those visits also reminded me of one of our core truths. Even though my beliefs might differ from those of the people attending other churches, they were still people. They also had loved ones and hopes and fears and doubts and faith. As such they deserved to be treated with respect and consideration.

But some of my most treasured memories are of cons, shorthand for conferences. These are gatherings of youth from different churches, held over a weekend 2-3 times a year within each district.

All sorts of different activities took place, depending on location and time of year. Ocean walks or swimming at Ferry Beach, skiing at Sangerville, attending church in pajamas when we had our Warm and Fuzzy Cons here at Allen Avenue. But some things were constant. Eating lots of good food. Having touch groups to get to know at least a handful of the youth well. Workshops on everything from social justice issues to meditation to artistic endeavors. Silly games like Silent Football. Creating our own types of worship services. Staying up until odd hours to watch movies, have pillow fights, or engage in philosophical conversations.

All of that was lovely, but what I remember most was the sense of belonging and hope. Coming from a small town, it was vitally important to learn that even if I was different from the other kids in my school, that was okay, because in the wider world I wouldn't be alone.

While I wish I remembered more, these few things remind me of the deeper lessons we seek to instill in our children. To have a true sense of self, and to be proud to *be* that self. To question and explore. To treat everyone, including those who are different from us, with respect. To know that we are not alone. Those are the lessons I carry with me daily, reinforced by those small details over my many

years spent down the hall. I only hope that the little bit I did seven years ago may have offered the same possibility to that group of children.

### ENRICHING OUR LIVES

*by Beth Fitzgerald*

I can't ever remember not being excited about learning. Perhaps I inherited that proclivity from my Grandmother, who according to family legend managed to assemble a library of over 7,000 volumes in her lifetime. Or perhaps it came from my Great Aunt who adored nature, or my Uncle who was a mystic, poet and priest. Who knows? I do know it was fostered by my dear parents who allowed me to roam both the outer and inner worlds, and by my deeply intelligent and intuitive brother, with whom I still enjoy long stimulating phone conversations. But what excites me is that as I get older, more fascinating and intriguing ideas continue to present themselves, sometimes necessitating a complete reversal of thought, and often concerning the "big" issues ... those that one usually deals with in a religious community.

So I am pleased to find myself in a denomination which supports and encourages a life-long process of learning . That has not always been the case. The church of my childhood and early adulthood asked me to accept answers that were arrived at by others in ages past, and I inevitably questioned those answers. As you well know, ours is a totally different atmosphere.

Carl Rogers, one of the founders of the humanist approach to psychology, could have been speaking for Unitarian Universalism when he said:

"If we value independence, if we are disturbed by the growing conformity of knowledge, of values, of attitudes, which our present system induces, then we may wish to set up conditions of learning which make for uniqueness, for self-direction, and for self-initiated learning."

I am proud that our Principles state: “we, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote ... a free and responsible search for truth and meaning”.

This freedom to search out one’s own truth is probably one of the main reasons I have become part of the Adult Enrichment Committee on which I serve with Marilyn McWilliams, Carol Larson, and Minty Hyslop. This committee is designed to receive your proposals for courses, develop a workable schedule, and publicize the offerings. The committee invites you to be involved as teachers and students in programs, workshops, discussion groups or film series which will stretch the mind, feed the spirit, warm the heart, or just plain tickle the funnybone.

These are among the many ways to further our search for truth and meaning and to enrich our lives. We welcome your participation to make them a reality.