

## **“The Death of Sunday School...and Life After”**

Sermon delivered by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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Most Sundays we say together our mission statement as a reminder of our purpose in gathering as a congregation and undertaking our shared ministry. It is an elegant five lines and the heart of that mission statement, right in the middle, is our commitment to nurture each person's spiritual journey.

I'd like you to think for just a moment about what that might mean - what it might mean both to nurture your own spiritual journey and also to have your journey nurtured by others. And, if you can, I invite you to call to mind an example of how you have felt nurtured recently on your spiritual journey. Hold on to that example. We'll come back to it.

A colleague of mine recently shared this quote from another Unitarian Universalist, Dr. Takiyah Amin, that summarizes the intention behind our ministry of religious education. She said: “May we be the church of come as you are but not stay as you have been.”

I love this statement. For me, it states succinctly and eloquently one of our core purposes as a community. To show up as our whole selves and to know that we will change and that we can be transformed by being part of this community.

As a minister, I am in the business of being a companion and a guide to people who are on this journey and in particular to each of you. I have the privilege of witnessing and being part of many different moments and stops on the journey.

Blessing and dedicating babies and children who are new to their families or new to this community, talking with people as they discern whether to become members of this congregation, walking with people as they navigate big life transitions like the loss of a loved one or the departure of a child from home, encouraging people as they explore new spiritual practices, learning alongside folks how best to put our values into action to create the kind of world we know is possible.

Now, not all of these moments are part of what we might formally call “religious education” but they all have to do with our development as people who are both religious, in the sense of being bound together in community, and spiritual, in the sense of being connected to the mysteries and wonders of life. These things together make up what it means to be people of faith.

The Unitarian Universalist minister Richard Gilbert writes, “The Unitarian Universalist church is perhaps unique among religious faiths in depending so heavily on education for its spiritual and moral growth. In the absence of creed, dogma and ecclesiastical authority, it is the process of faith development over the life span that distinguishes the free church tradition of which Unitarian Universalism is a part.”<sup>1</sup>

This morning, what I’d like to talk about with you is that path that we are each on as human beings with needs for connection, growth, and meaning-making over the course of our entire lives - the path we are on as people on a spiritual journey and what that means for our ministry of religious education as a congregation.

I have to admit that the title for this morning’s sermon is intended to be provocative. “The death of Sunday school” may sound a bit ominous or may just be a startling statement to consider. It also comes from a paper published in June of this year by Kimberly Sweeney, a former staff member of the New England Region of the Unitarian Universalist Association and a religious educator. The full title of the paper is “The Death of Sunday School and the Future of Faith Formation.” We’ll get to the “faith formation” part a little later.

The paper has created quite a buzz of conversation particularly within UU religious educator circles. Some recognize quite clearly the trends that Kim identifies - of declining enrollment and attendance in religious education programs, aging populations in congregations, difficulties in recruiting volunteers to keep programs going, and of the desire for more time together as families and as a full multigenerational community. Others don’t quite recognize the picture Kim describes as being fully representative of their situations.

In one written response to the paper, a religious educator started off by referring to a scene from the movie Monty Python and the Holy Grail. It’s the one where the corpse collector is pushing a card of dead bodies through a village. We can infer that the

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<sup>1</sup> Richard S. Gilbert, “Afterword,” [In the Middle of a Journey, Readings in Unitarian Universalist Faith Development](#).

Plague has struck. The corpse collector calls out, "Bring out your dead." He's approached by someone carrying a body over his shoulder. "Here's one," he says. "I'm not dead," says the body. "He says he's not dead," says the corpse collector. "He will be soon. He's very ill." "I'm getting better." "No, you're not. You'll be stone dead in a moment." A comical exchange ensues with continued protestations from the body slung across the man's shoulder. To resolve the situation, the corpse collector, eager for his nine pence, strikes the protesting man on the head with a blunt object and they throw him in the cart.

Being called "dead" when you're not might feel a bit like that scene from Monty Python and the Holy Grail.

And, when I first read this paper, I had a similar reaction, "Hey, we're not dead!" I thought. "We have a lot going for us - our sanctuary feels full of children on many Sundays. It can some times take two or three rounds of "Go Now in Peace" to sing all the children out to their classes. Our RE volunteers are awesome - they dedicate an incredible amount of time to nurturing our children and youth. Our kids blow my mind with their energy and wisdom. And, we even have religious education programming for adults on a wide variety of topics. We're not dead!"

After I got over my defensiveness, I considered some of the other points Kim was making in her paper.

She pointed out that the demands on families' time have increased over the years and the Sunday morning time slot often has competing interests with many of our kids on the soccer field or at the hockey rink on Sunday mornings along with their parents instead of here at church. And, I've certainly heard from parents especially how their schedules can make it difficult to be here on a consistent basis.

She also pointed out how difficult it is to maintain the volunteer pool needed to offer age-specific classes for children, youth, and even adults. And, while we have managed with the generosity of many people in this congregation to fill the slots we need, it is never an easy task.

There are also other factors that paint a more complex picture.

Family life has changed so that some kids may not be here consistently on a Sunday morning because they spend time in different households on the weekends. Or, their

parents come from different religious backgrounds and so they are being raised in two distinctive faith communities.

This makes for a more nuanced picture of how children, youth, and parents are actually participating in our Sunday morning programming.

I have had people tell me that one of the reasons they come to this church is because of the presence of young families. It is a sign of vibrancy and health to have babies babbling away in the sanctuary and a chancel full of kids for our story for all ages. Over the last few years, registration numbers for children and youth in our RE program has ranged from 85 to 99 in a given year. We know we don't actually have that number of kids here, though, on any given Sunday. In fact, our average Sunday attendance for RE is more like 30. And, some of the factors I just mentioned may be part of the reason why.

Interestingly, a report written by the American Unitarian Association in 1936 cites the average enrollment of Sunday schools as sixty and average attendance thirty to forty. More than half the Sunday schools that responded to the survey had enrollments of less than fifty and two thirds reported an average attendance of less than fifty. The author of the report referred to these figures as "distressing." Times have certainly changed.

And, adults and our spiritual needs also come into play.

Adult newcomers to Unitarian Universalism are increasingly from "unchurched" backgrounds or come with no strong religious identity whatsoever. This growing group of people has been referred to as the "nones" (N-O-N-E-S). And, there is as much a need for learning about this faith tradition for the first time when you're 30 or 65 as there is when you're 6 or 12.

And, finally, the spiritual needs we have across the life span are quite diverse. Different stages of life - young adulthood, parenthood, retirement, becoming a grandparent, facing the end of life - all these stages are accompanied by different needs and different ultimate concerns and questions.

For all these reasons, this is an important moment for us to do some reflection as a community. To ask ourselves some vital questions, as Liza's great-aunt put it back in 1932.

This is, of course, not the first time a religious community like ours has re-examined its approach to religious education. The reality is that religious education within our tradition has had dramatic shifts many times in the past.

Last week, I talked about our history of going against orthodox or accepted beliefs and paving a new path. In many ways, the same can be said in regards to our approach to religious education. There are many who have shaped our history of religious education whose philosophies were quite bold and progressive for their time.

William Ellery Channing, who I spoke of last week, was a pioneer in this regard. He famously said in 1837, “The great end in religious instruction is not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own...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 spiritual life.”<sup>2</sup> This was a big shift from the view of the time which really saw children as empty vessels that needed to be filled with the proper beliefs.

Liza mentioned her great-aunt earlier in the service who was a Universalist minister and in her time presented “vital” questions intended to spark a change in the approach to religious education away from simply memorizing bible passages to getting in touch with their own experiences of the sacred.

Around that same time, what is referred to as a “religious education revival” within the American Unitarian Association, was led by in large part by Sophia Lyon Fahs from 1937 to 1951. Fahs edited a new child-centered curriculum based on vivid stories from around the world and connection to nature with an emphasis on discovery rather than instruction. There was a shift in focus in this time and in subsequent decades on the individual child and meeting their needs.

In recent years within mainline Christian denominations and also Unitarian Universalism, there has been a shift away from the language of “religious education” towards the term “faith formation” or “faith development.”

Part of the reason for the shift in language is that “religious education” had become so synonymous with children’s Sunday school. The term had come to imply that children needed to be off in some kind of separate program from adults on Sunday mornings because they need religious instruction of some kind. “Lifespan” was added to the term

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<sup>2</sup> William Ellery Channing, “The Sunday School Discourse.” Can be found in *Singing the Living Tradition*, No. 652.

“religious education” to assert that people of all ages, including adults, are in the process of learning and growing. But, this term also hasn’t fully captured the needs we have or the idea that those needs could be addressed by programming other than some kind of formal, structured class.

The terms “faith development” and “faith formation” are intended to acknowledge the expanded role of our religious communities in shaping who we are beyond what we might think of as “education” or “religious instruction.”

By “faith,” we don’t mean “faith” in a specific creed or “faith” in God. Using the term “faith” simply acknowledges that we all have faith in something. We put our trust and are able to face the challenges of life because of our trust in something whether its one another, the Earth, some sort of transcendent spirit, or our own capacity for growth and change.

The UU religious educator Connie Goodbread has said: “Faith development is a lifelong process. It is never ending. We cannot stay in the comfortable place that we have found —we must move on and become. We are always becoming. We are never finished. There is always more to do. There is always change and hopefully, I will be more tomorrow than I am today.”<sup>3</sup>

I want you to come back to that example of nurturing your spiritual journey that I asked you to reflect on earlier. Or, maybe if one didn’t come to mind right away then, there’s one that does now. I invite you to take a moment to share that with someone near you. What was that moment recently of feeling like your spiritual journey was nurtured? I you can’t think of one, that’s okay, too.

For how many of you did that example take place somewhere else that was not this church. How many of you had an example that was associated with this community?

One of our aspirations we named as a congregation in our 2020 Vision and Strategic Plan was that we would engage with one another in meaningful conversations about these kinds of matters. We recognize that we are all - every one of us at all ages and stages of life - we are all always becoming.

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<sup>3</sup> Connie Goodbread, “The Smarth Church: Three Facts,” in *In the Middle of a Journey, Readings in Unitarian Universalist Faith Development*, ed. Richard S. Gilbert

Ultimately, whatever decisions we make about specific programs or structures for our religious education ministry - it all comes down to recognizing that we are never finished and that our faith can be a resource to us in that lifelong process of becoming.

In our upcoming RE Envisioning Conversations which begin on Tuesday, we will engage in meaningful sharing with one another reflecting on the aspects of our current program that you find fulfilling and that bring you joy, naming the challenges that you and your family face in nurturing your spiritual journey, and envisioning how our religious education ministry can make a difference in your life in the future.

If you haven't already done so, I encourage you to sign up to participate in one of these conversations which you can do during coffee hour.

I close with these words from Unitarian Universalist minister Richard Gilbert:

We are part of the living tradition,  
Creatures of a glory not of our making,  
Recipients of a blessing not of our deserving,  
Benefactors of a mystery beyond our comprehension.

We are part of the living tradition,  
Inheritors of the work of generations gone before,  
Children of that great cloud of witnesses  
Who have blessed us by their work in days gone by,  
Students of those who taught by what they did and said  
Long before we appeared upon the earth.

We are part of the living tradition,  
Taking up our lives where they left off,  
Accepting the adversity of our time as they did in theirs,  
Celebrating the blessings in our age as they did in theirs.  
Here we gather to rededicate ourselves to the unfinished task before us.

So may it be.