

It has been said that it takes a village to raise a child. And there is deep truth in that. Raising a child is hard work and although parents are the primary caretakers they cannot do it alone. It is just too complicated, just too hard. More than anything else we do raising the next generation is learned by doing and from others.

I haven't had a chance to do a child dedication service in this congregation yet. But in the services I have done I like to have the congregation say these words to the parents - we promise to hold up your arms when you are too tired to hold them up yourselves. And that is part of this interdependent web that we are all apart of - holding each other up.

It is not unusual for the members and friends of this congregation to describe this church as a family. It makes sense we sometimes feel closer to someone in this society than we do in our own family of origins. There are moments when we feel like chosen family to each other. I feel that too myself but I have to admit it is a metaphor that I struggle with. After all what are the most common processes for joining a family - birth, adoption,

marriage. And how do you leave a family - death or divorce. Those are pretty high bars. I don't think I want to ask members to vow until death do us part.

Village gets closer. But I think maybe neighborhood is a better metaphor for us in this day and age. A neighborhood can be hugely eclectic and diverse. People move in and out of neighborhoods. Some stay a long time because they love the neighborhood. And for others not so much so. Each Neighborhood has its own culture. And in really great neighborhoods our neighbors become part of the fabric of our lives.

My family moved almost 5 years ago. The move was a good one and we love where we live now. But we still miss our old neighbors Kathy and Dan. They lived across the street. Their son Tim was a best friend with my stepson Isaac. When Isaac was little we would not let him eat pop-tarts so he would go over to Kathy and Dan's house after school and eat theirs. The story goes that one day he let himself into their house. Tim was not home. Kathy said, hey Isaac Tim is not here and Isaac replied

that's OK I just needed a pop-tart. And Tim would come over to our house to play the computer games he did not have at his house. Kathy and Dan became godparents to our son Jesse. And then there was our neighbor Jon who had a snow blower and would snowplow the sidewalks of our whole block because it was his way of giving back to us who had helped him through the time after his mother died.

So I like using the idea of neighborhood to describe church community. We don't ask new members to marry us, simply to contribute to the life and health of the community. We welcome all kinds of folks. We help each other when we can with casseroles, or babysitting or cups of coffee and conversation.

Our Sunday school is where our older neighbors help out the younger neighbors - where our children get to explore what it means to be a part of this amazingly eclectic neighborhood. And so it is fair to say that it takes a whole UU neighborhood to raise a UU child.

One of the ways to raise up a UU is to teach in our Sunday school or in some way to volunteer with our children and youth. There are many ways to change this world but one of the most radical ways that I know is to teach children. We UUs often think that arguing with one another is how to change each other. But the children I have taught have taught me differently.

This world can just grind the life out of you especially if you are a child. It is wonderful that we have public education but the testing can rob a child of the experience of learning as being fun and interesting. Our children grow up watching advertisements that tell them they are just not good enough and if they buy the right thing they will be better. Our children are growing up with a kind of bullying that is mind-boggling and kills the soul.

Our reading this morning was from Sophia Lyon Fahs (1876 - 1978) - a revolutionary UU religious educator. Much of what we do in RE is built on her philosophy of education and her theology; especially that last line of the

reading "The Living Universe calls us to understand, to appreciate, to cooperate—rather than to conquer"

In our Religious Education ministry we do not seek to bend or subdue or conquer our children. We ask our children to be their best selves. We teach them that we are each part of this interdependent web and as such we must always be in the process of understanding ourselves and understanding the other. We teach them that each part of this interdependent web has worth and dignity and that no one of us gets to make ourselves feel better by making someone else feel worse. Those are radical notions especially when they are lived out.

Some people might call me overly optimistic or not a realist. And I can live with those labels because I have seen what our religious education can do for our children.

Angus MacClean was a famous Religious Educator who coined the term the method is the message. Our message is in

How we welcome the child with special needs

How we resolve conflicts between children

How we nurture them in having leadership in their group

How we smile with them

The way we listen with respect to them

How we do not talk down to them

We have 30 or so teenagers from both May Memorial and First UU who make up our Teenz. 30 that is an amazing number. Because the size of our youth group is the size you would find in a very large congregation and even when you add the membership numbers of the two churches you don't get anywhere near a large congregation of adults. We are attracting and retaining a number of teens disproportional to our size. People ask me how we are doing this and I wish I had the answer because I would write a book on it and become famous in the uu world.

I have some ideas though first is we have a wonderful Director of Lifespan Faith Development Tina Lesley-Fox. She knows how to work with both adults and children; she is imaginative and creative, nimble in thought, and committed to this place. But maybe most of all she tends to light up when a child comes in the room, and you know every child needs someone who will light up when that child comes in a room.

Also we have some great volunteers. People who treat our children with love and respect. It is easy to say but more complicated to do. But they do it. If our children leave their Sunday class feeling loved and cared for that is a success. They should learn about our values and our history and they do. But first and foremost they are loved. And when they reach adolescence they know that this is a place that is safe and where they will be loved. Katrina Dean one of our youth said this "Youth group has been important to me because it is a safe space that is outside of school, since school hasn't necessarily been a safe space to me. It's a group of amazing, intuitive, people that also feel safe in the teen room."

We are really doing some phenomenal things with our children and youth. We are helping them have a safe space and that saves lives.

Recently our Teen group hosted a “con” This is a gathering of youth from the UU churches that are part of our St. Lawrence district. 4 or so times a year youth from all over our district get together for a weekend of fun, learning, support, community. These cons are district events hosted by local churches and so the local youth group is the group that plans and leads the con.

When I went to my first con I was completely blown away. What I saw was a group of youth most of whom spend all of their waking moments trying to fit in, trying to understand themselves, trying to not stick out too far so that they don't get harassed. And when they got to the con they could finally be themselves - in the language of my teen years they could let their freak flag fly. Finally they were in a place where they could be safe. There were teens in tutus, and rainbows, teens in tie-dye and teens in all black, there were straight, gay, bi, and trans kids. City kids, country kids suburban



kids. And they were there holding each other up. It was the holding each other up that made it safe. I was so proud of our youth.

We adults get nervous when teens gather together. WE worry about what will go wrong, we worry about drugs and sex and rock and roll. I think we are worried that the children we are responsible for will do the stupid things we did. And so in our anxiety we seek to control and confine because that is safe. But in our district we are finding a different way - we do not let our youth do whatever they want and we do not control to the point of killing their spirit. Instead we, meaning youth and adults have created and are creating youth programming where the youth and adults work together so that the youth create a community that is accepting, and knows how to deal with diversity, where tolerance is more than allowance, where spirits are nurtured.

I know of one youth who has been bullied a lot and so did not go to a con because she did not want to go to one more thing where she would get

bullied. But this year she went to her first and was accepted and not bullied and now she has been to her second and cannot imagine not going.

One of our graduating seniors Elena Karpoff wrote this after the con our group recently hosted:

*I was not emotionally prepared to go back and experience the "real world" today. I mean how do I even explain how I feel about cons to someone who has never been to one before? By the youth who felt they never had friends until they came into this community? By the youth who was bullied their entire life and finally felt hope after attending a con? By the youth who was brave enough to perform a beautiful song at coffeehouse at their first con ever and brought nearly the entire sanctuary to tears?*

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*If you are reading this and have never been to a con before, I hope there's some god-given place in this universe where you feel you can be your authentic self. For me, during high school, it was cons. And as I leave, I'm*

*trying so hard to become more comfortable being my authentic self outside of them.*

From the time our children are very small up through high school we nurture their curiosity, their spirit, their authentic selves. If you haven't ever considered working in our Sunday school groups you should. It's hard work. Not because you need to know the answers because you don't, but because when one of our children looks you in the eye and asks why did her beloved goldfish die you don't get to tell her there are more fish, you don't get to tell her that she should be quiet so you can get through the lesson, you get to look her in the eye and say I don't know but let me give you a hug and we can cry together OK?

I have said that we UUs save lives. Every once in awhile I think that sounds over stated. Firefighters save lives, medics and EMTs save lives. But then I run into that young person, that young adult who says something like this to me - "I thought I was bad, I thought I wasn't made right, I thought there was something wrong with me. All my life I had heard

that I was the problem and that in order to be saved I had to change. And then I walked into a UU church, or youth group, or coffee house, or demonstration, and I found a group of people who were more interested in finding out who I was than in condemning me, who asked me who I was and let me show them what made me different, a group of people who accepted me as I am and asked me to belong to them. I don't know where I would be without my UU faith."

Be an instrument for good; save lives; be a Sunday school teacher.

In a world without end may it be so.