

“The Gift of Faith”
First Unitarian Church of Toledo
Rev. Lynn Kerr
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Reading from ~ Tess Baumberger

Wouldn't it be great if you could take a picture of your soul? Then when your mother wanted to brag about you she could show people the picture and say, that's my daughter, doesn't she have a beautiful soul, all sparkly and many-colored and flowing all around her? Wouldn't it be great if we walked around surrounded by our souls? So that they were the first things people saw instead of the last things? Then people would judge us by who we really are instead of how we look. Imagine no more racism, ageism, sexism, fatism, shortism, homophobia. Imagine falling in love with who a person is, just by looking at them. It would be a kind of cloaking device, hiding physical faults, defects, or even perfections. I'd want it to be mandatory. Then people would work at making their souls more attractive instead of their bodies and faces. Imagine people knowing by your soul that you really need a hug. Imagine people helping each other and their souls changing colors or growing. Imagine soul gyms with exercises to get your sagging soul in shape. Imagine the long lines forming for soul lifts at churches, temples, mosques, synagogues or nature's grand cathedrals.

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“Wouldn't it be great if we walked around surrounded by our souls? So that they were the first things people saw instead of the last things,” writes Tess Baumberger. **“Imagine soul gyms with exercises to get your sagging soul in shape.”**

I think of our church as a soul gym. Think about it, regardless of age, race, sexual orientation, or creed, you are welcome to join the community. Many of you come here at least once a week, but sometimes more, to try some new things because you have a little extra time. You chose the high impact stuff like being on a board or committee or you stick with less rigorous exercises that won't hurt too much because your soul needs toning slowly, so you become an usher or you help with mailings. And, unfortunately, as with our bodies at the gym, our souls are not transformed in one workout! Unitarian Universalist churches and their educational programs give us the room to spend time on every part of the person, ultimately, making the “whole” healthy and strong.

Our soul gym includes educational programs for children and adults, worship, fellowship, and social action. Each experience building on the one before. Here, I think, is a big difference between our faith and many other religions. We believe our bodies, our souls, will change. Memorization of our seven principles is not the end, only the means. The emphasis of our faith is deeds, not creeds. We are born worthy and the exploration and questioning of our beliefs only make our lives richer.

Of course, our gym really operates on the group workout concept. Sure, individual strength training is important, but I think the experiences of a group of seekers can teach us the most. Some religions see human's relationship with the sacred or holy ultimately personal. In some Christian faiths, individuals must accept Christ as their savior and consequently be born again. Their acceptance into heaven sealed. Unitarian Universalists would probably relate more to poet e.e. cummings' description of our salvation when he wrote, "we can never be born enough."

Personally, I've lost count of my experiences of being born again! Our faith is not rigid, it is pliable. It bends and sways, it changes from day to day and year to year. There is no one answer to life's questions. And that is why our faith is such a gift. Unitarian Universalism is progressive. It is rarely sudden. The emergence of our beliefs is a long search for truth and meaning. Without this journey, our souls can grow stale. UU minister, A. Powell Davies wrote: "When someone asks where now is thy God, we can answer that the sacred is where it always was: in the struggle. In the pain of our hearts, in the growing clearness of our minds, in the sharpening edge of conscience...."

I believe that our own Ralph Waldo Emerson would have liked that phrase, "growing clearness of our minds." In fact, there is a story about Emerson as an old man, serving as an Interim minister in a Massachusetts church. He re-used many of the sermons he had written as a young man in Boston. It is said that frequently, Emerson would be preaching, he would pause, look up at the congregation and with a smile say, "I no longer believe that," and then go back to the same sermon.

In speaking to one of our youth recently, we discussed Emerson's philosophy of self-reliance. This youth understood and agreed with Transcendentalism, but also felt that rather than self-reliance, a UU today favors community. I do believe that Emerson would be thrilled to hear that our faith has indeed continued to be alive and growing. Perhaps one of the most widely

recognized Unitarians in modern history, and we don't even accept *his* philosophy as the only and ultimate truth.

When we ask our Coming of Age class to write their credos, we ask them, "What do you believe right now, in this moment." The assumption is never made that we are ever "done." Whether you are 9 or 90, what you believe right now is most likely different from what you believed 5 years ago, and what you believe now will most likely change in the future.

The fact that any of us here today can say, "well, I used to believe..." is where the strength of our faith lies. Religious education, or faith development, are means to that fluid state. Although much has changed over hundreds of years as to how we "educate," I believe one thing has remained true; the sacred is always present and always available to us. This is the gift of our faith, our salvation—however and whatever that translates for each individual, is for everyone.

Our task as religious educators, professional or parental is complicated by the pure metamorphic quality of this faith. It is easy to see why we are not a mega church. This is hard work. The responsibility of the UU preacher is not to remind you of the truth. It is to stimulate your soul to search for itself. Why are Unitarian Universalists not more evangelical? Because many of us find our beliefs too difficult to articulate. Gosh, even our long name, Unitarian Universalist is difficult to articulate! But churches try to help by providing programs that guide us. Think of the church as a loom. A place where we each add to our thread at different times on our journey. The loom is infinite, the textile never finished. William Stafford puts it this way in his poem, "The Way It Is:"

*There's a thread you follow. It goes among
Things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt
Or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.*

Sometimes it is hard to “get” that children, teens and young adults all have their threads. At times, adults mistakenly believe that the process of faith development is only possible in the mature soul. I believe the loom is available at our birth. In fact, renowned Educator, Parker Palmer writes, that education is among the most important looms. As we grow, we learn and weave. Children *are* spiritual beings. As adults, we can guide and support their journey of faith. As parents, we must be especially vigilant. Children learn behaviors from us, but also faith from us. One Unitarian Universalist, Christopher Buice, says this process is akin to gem mining, using our ability “to discern what is worth keeping and what should be sifted out and discarded.” He acknowledges the difficulty for our children. There is a lot of information to sift through. He writes, “They learn values from television, popular music, the Internet, books, magazines, their friends, and many other sources. We can’t even know all the messages they are exposed to on a regular basis.”

And believe me; my son comes home with some choice phrases that he did not learn from our household! Inevitably, our children *will* fraternize with people of other faiths, hardly a surprise when there are only a quarter of a million UU’s in the United States—practically everyone they bump into will be of another religion. My son at almost 5 has been attending a Methodist preschool. He has no question in his mind that God with a capital “G” is a man in heaven who created everything. For now, this is okay with me. He will have many other experiences in his life giving him different perspectives and ideas. Of course, that doesn’t stop my husband and me to add to all of his religious observations, “well, that is what *some* people believe.” Often in our house, you don’t hear the name of Jesus without Buddha or Mohammad in a subsequent sentence. We constantly prepare our children to make decisions about their beliefs. Still, some UU parents’ will have the disappointment of an adult child coming home and announcing that they are Baptist, Mennonite, or Catholic or anything not UU! It could be you; it might even happen to me!

Seriously though, we do have the job to prepare them for the wider world and its beliefs. Buice says, “We cannot shelter your children forever. But we can teach them the process of discernment and the art of gem mining. We can help to awaken the conscience so that they will be able to make responsible choices, to separate things of value from things of no value. At some point we must open the door and lead our children into the world and speak to them that tradition says God spoke to the children of Israel: ‘I have set before you life and death, a blessing and a curse. Therefore, choose life.’ ”

I urge parents to take seriously, your own faith journey. Although structured and purposeful here in religious education classes, our children's primary religious insight will come from and through their elders, parents, mentors, ministers, teachers. And how does one prepare for those roles? You are already doing one of the most important things, what has been called, "immersion in a religious community." Once you can establish who *you* are as a spiritual being, articulate your beliefs for *yourself*, then you can help children to articulate theirs. The responsibility is not any one person's alone. We must see the entire community as religious educator of our young people, directly and indirectly.

This why I am so excited about our new RE program for children that you learned about today. People across generations will be teaching and learning. Educationalist Charles Foster describes this intergenerational education as a place where, "people from at least two and preferably three or more age groups or generations [enter]into a teaching-learning process in which all members give and receive from the experience." One psychotherapist calls it, "peoplemaking."

All of us indeed are peoplemakers. What an honor and awesome responsibility. And how do we ever know how we are doing? As you heard before, in our new Children's programming, we will evaluate the knowledge and beliefs of the children before and after our programs. But that is not the only way and perhaps not even the best way to witness the success of our peoplemaking efforts. In *this* soul gym, answering questions correctly does not mean the workout is finished. We must look at the soul, and because we don't have our souls following us on the outside as the poet Baumberger suggests, we look to more subtle clues. One of the great pleasures of ministry is when we recognize one of those clues! One of our youth recently told me that because of Unitarian Universalism, he is more accepting of his friends who are fundamentalist because he understands better how they believe in their faith as much as we believe in ours. He saw their worth and dignity as clearly as he sees his own. This is a young man who has already begun to embrace the Unitarian battle cry of faith, reason, and tolerance. We can only hope that his membership in this soul gym is long and productive and that all of us always have the energy to do our exercises.

Parker Palmer believes that a good education is always more process than product and that it should also leave the students dissatisfied at least for a while. Why on earth would we want people dissatisfied? The very nature of our faith is questioning, examining, and even challenging

what we thought or think of as the truth and meaning. Perhaps dissatisfaction will keep us coming to the gym. We are never finished. We must continuously tone our souls. We must always be willing to teach and to learn. And that is the gift of our faith.

I believe that our own Ralph Waldo Emerson would have liked that phrase, “growing clearness of our minds.” In fact, there is a story about Emerson as an old man, serving as an Interim minister in a Massachusetts church. He re-used many of the sermons he had written as a young man in Boston. It is said that frequently, Emerson would be preaching, he would pause, look up at the congregation and with a smile say, “I no longer believe that,” and then go back to the same sermon.

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