

The Great End in Religious Instruction
Rev. Kathleen Owens
Sept. 21, 2014 HC

Sister Falls and Sister Donahue...two women in the church who were friends and thought it was important to be with and teach in my childhood Sunday School class. They were older than any other person I knew at the time...and in that class, it was the closest I had ever been to someone their age...sitting side-by-side together at the table they tenderly taught stories on the flannel board – with paper Bible figures like Moses and the Ten Commandments, Daniel and the lion's den, and Jesus surrounded by children. As a child, I was fascinated by the flannel board and how paper figures could stay up there on the board – the stories also drew me in.

Years later, Danny was our youth pastor – a tall, lanky kind of man who loved to laugh and sing and who took the youth group snow skiing in the winter months. He was the first person I think who ever believed in me as a leader – at his prompting, I preached my very first sermon in the church basement during our Sunday night youth group meeting. His faith in me, and in my ability – a youth who, at that time was shy and hesitant about speaking out, was more important than words can express. He gently encouraged me to try new things, to stretch myself.

Brother Smith, the pastor of the church of my childhood – that man could preach – he would start off at the pulpit and read his text from the Bible – and then he would begin to preach – and especially on Sunday nights, his sermons involved a lot of walking around, Bible in hand, arms waving as he emphasized a point – I sat mesmerized, not just with his movements, and the intentional use of his voice, but I was held by the intensity and urgency of his words and would listen carefully, trying to follow his points – I took notes on the sermons I heard and would try to commit to memory his text. It was an exciting time in my life and these dear people were the

ones who awakened in me a sense of the spiritual life – that there was something more in life than my own needs, wants and desires.

Today I take my text not from the Christian scriptures, though they too have influenced our thinking on this subject, but rather from another preacher who influenced a great number of Unitarians in his own time and beyond. Our own UU historians call William Ellery Channing “the single most important figure in the history of American Unitarianism.”¹ He was a preacher who served one church in his entire ministry – from 1803-42 (that’s 39 years) at Federal Street Church in Boston. Early in his ministry the liberals and the conservatives were arguing about theology – with the same passion as some argue today about the best soccer team; those theological arguments had consequences for one’s daily life. It was not unimaginable for these theological arguments to ruin friendships and create feelings of animosity among the town or city’s population. Historians say that “Channing was thrust into the public eye when he replied to the attacks on Boston liberals by Jedidiah Morse and Jeremiah Evarts in 1815. ...Channing’s 1819 sermon ‘Unitarian Christianity’ stands as the defining statement of the [our faith] and in its wake the American Unitarian Association (precursor of our own UUA today) was formed in 1825. He went on to offer important critiques of Calvinism; he developed an affirmative philosophy of human development or self-culture to profoundly influence nineteenth-century moral philosophy. He spoke out against slavery and defended human dignity and urged people...to be moral examples through daily living.”² And through all of this, children and their growth had his attention. “From his earliest days in ministry, Channing was concerned for the education and spiritual progress of children. One of the earliest innovations of his ministry was to invite the children about him after worship. This was one of a number of examples of his

¹ The Unitarians and the Universalists by David Robinson, page 229.

² Ibid.

creating small discussion groups for church members which emerged as part of the Sunday School movement. In 1813 he worked with Samuel Cooper Thacher of the New South Church to produce a catechism for the use of the children in the two churches. His first published sermon was "The Duties of Children," 1807. He worked with educational reformers such as Elizabeth Peabody, Bronson Alcott, Dorothea Dix and Horace Mann. He wrote in his "Remarks on Education," "There is no office higher than that of a teacher of youth, for there is nothing on earth so precious as the mind, soul, character of the child."³

It is then from this important minister/preacher/reformer that I take my text for this sermon: "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; ...to prepare them for impartial, conscientious judging of whatever subjects may be offered to their decisions; ...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," he writes, "the great end is to awaken the soul, to excite and cherish spiritual life."

I take this as my text this morning because our church's very existence began based on children's need for this faith. From our church's own history, so wonderfully written by Jim Boone for the 125th celebration of our church, he tells the story of how we started out in 1873 for the purpose of teaching children. The essay by Lois Wells Santalo in chapter 5 tells that story. "Most Unitarians of the late 19th and early 20th centuries opposed Sunday schools or were indifferent to them," writes Santalo, "convinced as they were that Unitarianism was too difficult

³ <http://uudb.org/articles/williamellerychanning.html>

a philosophy to be taught to children. They reasoned that children must wait until they are old enough to understand and evolve their own religious ideas. ... But San Diegans felt differently.” Our founders wanted their children to be exposed to liberal religious ideas. And after some meetings of a few adults, the Sunday “school met for the first time on June 22, 1873 with ten people present ranging in age from children to young adults.”⁴ The curriculum for the classes came from more traditional but liberal Christian churches that were adapted to meet our needs. But it wasn’t until Sophia Lyons Fahs came on the scene that Channing’s vision of the great end in religious instruction finally took hold in our faith tradition. Fahs, who studied with John Dewey at the University of Chicago and others in this field, she designed materials for graded classes (a new concept at the time in religious education) that would stir children’s curiosity and “inspire them to ask questions; so that the teacher and students might explore the wonders of the universe together.”⁵

Our church has been well served by many who have led our children’s religious education program and this morning’s service is in honor of Liz Jones, specifically, who for twenty-one years made this work of religious education a focus in her life. Throughout her time in the position of Director of Religious Education, Liz emphasized our own faith’s background in order to give to our children “a sense of identity and roots.” In fact, this whole service from the opening song to the closing one was created with honoring Liz and her work among us.

And still we have this work to do. In an age when questions are now answered by the Google search engine or Siri – or when we want to learn something we can simply watch a YouTube video - how are we awakening the souls, the hearts and minds of our children? Are we teaching them to cherish the questions, to cherish the spiritual life? I’m not casting aspirations on

⁴ Living Liberal Religion, Elbert J. Boone, page 200-204.

⁵ Ibid.

technology – I have used it often and been happy to have some help when I’m lost and needing directions or can’t remember the author of that book that I wanted. But this work of stirring one’s mind, of inspiring a love of truth, of touching inward springs – this kind of work is relational, it requires consistency, and can only develop and unfold in specific kinds of environments.

In order to appropriately and effectively stir a young mind into thinking and reasoning on their own – this work can only be done through relationship – a relationship grounded in respect, in creating an environment of trust and care. In this relationship there must be a sense of safety to explore, boundaries to protect and not over-burden a young one with too many worries of the day and a relationship that creates a sense of care that allows for a time of reflection so that all that is learned / is supported by the values and principles of our faith. Relationships take time to build and consistency on both the teacher and students’ part is essential.

In our quick-paced lives that are often overloaded with too much information, it can be challenging to be consistent with our practices, with our ways of being together. When a friend of mine was new at parenting she and her husband so wanted to be good parents. So they read all kinds of magazines, books and websites about how to raise well-balanced children and it seemed to me that with every new issue of the quarterly journal – which would emphasize a new technique or focus – they switched their methods of dealing with their young children. And it was hard on everyone. Should the child be comforted when crying or left to cry it out...should allowances be earned for house-hold chores or were those chores to be done because this is what it takes to create a home? Inconsistency can create havoc and a sense of uncertainty – something we don’t need in our homes or our religious education programs. I think one of our jobs as adults is to think carefully, remain as consistent as possible and change a routine slowly when needed or when prompted by what our children’s changing needs while we keep the larger picture in

mind. Consistency in our busy, information overloaded rushed lives can feel counter-cultural – consistency is easier to maintain in environments that are created to support this need we have for stability and growth.

One of the most influential and deepest thinkers about creating an environment for spiritual awakening and religious learning is the author and educator Parker Palmer. From his many books like The Courage to Teach – exploring the inner landscape of a teacher’s life, his book Let Your Life Speak, and my favorite A Hidden Wholeness – these books along with his others speak powerfully to the environment we must create and cultivate if we are going to live out Channing’s great end in religious instruction. Creating such environment that allows for the awakening of the conscience, of moral discernment – such an environment requires patience, and a commitment to staying with the work; intentionally creating an environment that encourages us to trust our inner knowing, of listening carefully to that small voice within that speaks our truth, the creation of such an environment means we pay attention to and take seriously the need for space, for some quiet to reflect on our own or with a few others what our longings, our souls are needing...spending time in such an environment allows us to create a way forward to meet our children’s ability to think, to be impartial, to cherish an inner life. This is the work of religious education at its deepest core. Friends, let me gently remind us, religious education happens all the time, in the classroom, on the patio, in Bard Hall and in every interaction we have with our children and youth. We are all religious educators and need to be mindful of the opportunities placed before us – to help create rich environments and relationships that will encourage the stirring of minds, and the awakening of hearts and souls.

Religious education is not for the timid – it is hard work and the rewards are great. And because of the great rewards, creating relationships with children, watching them grow and

evolve, retirement from this work is not easy – and many here I have heard have failed at being retired, some of you more than once. And even though Liz is now retired from this work, she has assured me and others that she will not permanently stay a part from this community but will, after some time, return as a member to volunteer and find ways to continue in this community. And she will continue to serve and work for Religious Education through our larger Association esp. working with the archives at Meadville Lombard in Chicago. So our gift to Liz, upon her retirement is the taking of an offering that will be divided between two organizations that Liz is passionate about and will continue to support. We will donate the offering in her honor to these organizations so that their important work and the legacy of Religious Education will continue. If you're writing a check please make it out to First UU Church, and write Liz in the memo line. Thank you. Ushers will you please come forward and receive our gift.