

Always More To Learn
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When I was young, for a many summers, my family went to Ferry Beach, a Unitarian Universalist conference center in Southern Maine for a week long program. My mom was usually taking a class toward her Director of Religious Education certificate, or later, teaching classes, and my dad and I would do other programs. When I had aged out of the kids programming, as a young teen, I started taking classes with adults. One that class that really had an impact on me, was on paganism. I expected that it was going to be a theoretical class and had done a bunch of reading ahead of time to prepare because I wanted to be able to keep up with the adults, but instead it was almost all ritual and experience. The program was run by some amazing women that I still think of as role models for ways of being an adult. The people participating were very open to me being there and didn't make a big deal out of it. We did the rituals and learning together, and that acceptance and trust, I think, made a huge difference in my development as a person and my self-confidence as a young adult. It wasn't just that some adults were nice to me, or taught me something, but that we engaged in spiritual exploration together, all as seekers.

We know that having a strong Lifespan Faith Development program is vital to our community development and wholeness. It is in classes, workshops, and moments outside of worship that we have the opportunity to better learn from each other, learn about the questions we are holding, and gain concrete tools for helping deepen our spiritual and faith lives. We are committed to encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations and a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. A strong program has been a goal throughout our history as a congregation. For our adults, I think we have maintained a strong program with a lot of variety, especially for a congregation our size. For our children, in part because we have not had a professional staff person overseeing our program, our offerings have been done with all good intention, and have been stronger at some times than others, but have struggled to find the right balance of volunteers, kids, and size of program.

Once upon a time, most Unitarian Universalist congregations had separate programs for children that met during worship, but successful programs for smaller congregations that still operate in that way are the exception, not the rule. Success or lack of success is not only about staffing, or publicity, or doing a good job. Back when my husband Tadd was a Director of Religious Education in UU congregations, in one congregation in particular, his family worship service (held before the main service) was sometimes better attended than the adult service. He believed that it was because parents wanted to have a shared experience with their kids. Fundamentally, success is connected to how communities understand lifespan faith development to be a part of their community, and how they express their values through their programs. Maria Harris, a leader in 20th century religious education development spoke strongly about the importance of how what a community says it teaches (the explicit curriculum) must match the culture of the community, how things are taught and organized (the implicit curriculum) and that we must also pay attention to what we don't teach or say (the null curriculum). If these are out of sync, it can be hard for a program to flourish.

Over the last seven years that I have served as your minister, it has been our experience that while our community has an appetite for a traditionally modeled Sunday School program for children, because we want our children and families to be well-served by the community, that our program has not filled the needs of our community and has struggled. We are not a large congregation, and we are not a 1950s congregation, and so it makes sense that models designed for congregations that are either much larger, with more staff, or with an old-school expectation what church will look like, have not succeeded here. Starting next week we are embarking on a grand experiment, where we will offer an intergenerational Lifespan Faith Development class once each month, on the Second Sunday, after worship. We are calling it Second Sunday School, because I love a good play on words. We will still offer nursery care each Sunday during worship, and kids who are here but choose to not be in worship are welcome to hang out and help our volunteers watch our littlest community members, but we will not offer classes during worship. I will be working and learning myself about new ways to offer intergenerational worship, and to have the implicit curriculum of our worship welcome people of all ages. Our Coming of Age group is going to meet on Saturdays, and will attend Second Sundays when they can. As you may have read in the newsletter, the Second Sunday program will include some intergenerational time and some time broken out for kids and adults to learn and talk separately. It will explicitly ground our education program in our Purposes and Principles (the topics I chose for the first year walk through these) and it will include a variety of types of programs.

Can you think of a time that learning with someone who is a different generation than you helped to deepen your own spiritual work and experience? Can you remember a time when being with your peers helped you to open up to something that you had kept inside? We need a variety of ways to approach our spiritual and faith development. Friends, we have made bold choices and taken big steps together before. Our new Lifespan Religious Education model is a bold and important experiment for our community, and has the potential to make a big statement about how we understand faith development to work in community. We are building a model with lots of potential for lay participation, but also a way for me, as your minister, to be more involved in the education of our children, since the classes won't be happening during worship. Our Second Sunday School can be an incubator to reflect on worship and to pull out new ideas for worship. It will help us learn more about our spiritual journeys and questions. It will be an opportunity for families to learn together, and people of all ages to build new relationships and ways to talk with each other, while at the same time, allowing for parallel activity and learning in age groups.

Over a year ago, the Lifespan Faith Development Committee asked the congregation some questions in worship. They were: What are the theological and spiritual concepts that you feel are most important to you and your development? And what is the core of your spiritual life? Here are some of the answers that folks gave:

- Inclusion, listening with the heart, open to all experiences.
- facing helplessness and taking action with others to remind me of possibility
- Listening, not judging
- Justice for all people, fairness and equality, our role in taking care of the earth
- Silence – letting peace permeate my soul,... challenging fear at every opportunity!
- Gratitude for each day's gifts and opportunities
- ...observing and blessing the everyday events of life

- Faith defined when I don't necessarily have a god to believe in
- Mindfulness, paying attention,
- spirituality through music
- the power of presence
- Love and curiosity
- Inner peace, wide open heart, flexibility of spirit...
- The interconnectedness of and respect for all beings and the natural world.

These are just a small sampling of what we collected. We have an amazing opportunity to shape the theological and spiritual heart of our community. A blessing of the free church tradition is that we are self-determining, with freedom and responsibility. We won't be able to shape our programs into what we need if we don't have experiences together to reflect upon. To build a truly intergenerational community, we need to have ways to support each of us in our faith journeys, and to walk our talk. As we go forth into this experiment, we may find ways we want to change things, we may need or want more dedicated adult and kid times and spaces, and if we have the bandwidth for that, of course we can build more. For our new foundation, we are going to be in this all together. We won't know if this is going to work, unless we show up. As we heard in our reading early today, when we ask the question, "and how are the children," we are asking about the health of a whole community. Through this intergenerational experiment, we have the opportunity to learn together the answer to that question. I am very hopeful that we will all learn a lot from each other over the next year, and I hope to see you after the service, next week for our first Second Sunday School.

So may it be.