

A Sense of Wonder
The Rev. Elizabeth M. Strong

"Long before we hold any belief about it, we feel the presence of something sacred and meaningful. Unable to name it, we respond with metaphor, with vision, with decision: And we live as though that were the way the world is."

That to me is why there is religious education. To touch the core of how and why we live our lives as we do. Maria Harris in her book, Teaching and Religious Imagination, writes that "Our thinking and our knowing in all human endeavor is shaped by the metaphors we employ. It matters which words we choose when we teach and when we teach others to teach."

The metaphors and the visions we choose can either connect us with the wonder of life, or constrict us from engagement in an open, free, and disciplined search for truth and meaning. It is a life-long process that begins in infancy and only ends when we cease to wonder.

In the seemingly ageless book of wisdom and wonder, Today's Children and Yesterday's Heritage, by Sophia Fahs, these words of Madeline Dixon are a good place for us to start today as I share with you my thoughts and beliefs about religious education.

"Each child must plumb vastness and infinity. Let him or her call what he or she will -- fire, water, death, God, worlds, stars. Somehow each one must share this curiosity and awe...before they have too many static answers. ... We forget that the probing of strange phenomena, creation, God, death, magic, has made our scientists, our artists, our religious leaders, throughout the ages. Why should we shorten this probing or cover it up for children?"

These words give us an idea of the importance of a sense of wonder for children, and of the need to honor and encourage that wonder. Children want to know everything. "How thick is the sky?" "Does it hurt the ground to have holes in it?" "Where does light come from?" "Why do I have two eyes when I can see with one?"

Dr. Werner Wolff, in the same book, states that. "The young child does not explore the world only in order to gain knowledge..." But that each child is on the beginning journey of the search for self..of "Who am I?" and "What am I for?"

The questions children ask seem to come in the order of where, what, why, who and how, representing a deeper and deeper plumbing to find a kind of wholeness of meaning." Dr. Arnold Gesell says "This reaching out for more and more understanding is sometimes so intense that the young child becomes a runabout question mark." An appropriate image for Unitarian Universalists don't you think?

And the adults who share with a child the quest of the question marks will have a rare experience. They will share in the sense of wonder. I have likened it to being taken on a tour with the North wind. You will go to places you did not dream possible, or if you did once, you have forgotten by growing up. But, as is detailed in the book, How Miracles Abound, a Unitarian Universalist children's curriculum from the 1940's, "There is cause for wonder on every hand." Sara Teasdale said it best in this line from a poem: "And children's faces looking up, holding wonder like a cup."

In our classrooms on Sunday morning our children are here to experience wonder, they are here to ask questions about their religion, they are here to be with friends, they are here to have fun. A comparison study was done on the reasons adults come to church and why children come to church. The conclusions are that adults come to experience worship, community, social action, fun in socializing, intellectual interchange, and personal support. Children come for fun, to see friends, to worship, for religious education, and to do social action. We all are here to make a difference in our living and to make some sense of our lives.

To name the unknown, to gain an edge on uncertainty, to have a personal response from whatever God there may be, are part of the religious quest of children, youth, and adults. Our youth are intensely involved in their search for self, and if the rest of the world does not directly relate to this search, they do not believe in it. They cannot believe in it.

This is part of the long process to religious understanding and it is crucial to understand about youth. The world that was magic has become stark and real; dragons become reptiles that have died, dreams can turn into nightmares in an instant, laughter to tears, and love can hurt.

Our youth are on their own journey through the labyrinth of life. There are so many questions, so many answers, so many maybes, not yet's, and waits. So many, so many ---too many sometimes. Even a sense of wonder becomes a frustration.

And yet as we continue to grow into adulthood we learn that we can live in frustration at the labyrinth of life, or we can live with wonder because of it. To live with these unknowns is what is asked of our youth, time and time again. As Unitarian Universalists we ask our youth, children, and adults to live within the ambiguities, and uncertainties of the religious quest. We must determine for ourselves what it is we believe. It is tough to wonder about tomorrow, or about God, or about death when the "I" that is you is changing every day. And that is a major challenge in our programs of religious education.

As Frank Herbert says in the book, Dune, "The mystery of life isn't a problem to solve, but a reality to experience."

As adults we enter into the mystery of life through our participation in our religious communities. It is here that we are challenged to connect our thinking with our senses and create meaning in our living. And a sense of wonder is at the core on many levels. To wonder about something, to stand before the wonder of something, to approach life with wonder are ways to remain open to the experience of the reality of the mysterious in life.

Colleague Bruce Southworth so eloquently wrote: "We live in mystery. We live torn apart at times -- so much glory, so much pain. We live in faith; faith in ourselves and each other and in so doing we create bonds of the spirit that proclaims; we are not alone."

I would offer to you that the process of religious education is a vital place in which to connect the generations, to live out in dynamic interchange the message that we are not alone. It is the place where our interactions as a religious community cross the generations and permit us to experience the reality of existence and the mystery of life in religious community.

Maria Harris, in her book, Teaching and Religious Imagination, offers an exciting dimension to what I value as a minister of religious education. It is the use of religious imagination as the metaphor for teaching in our congregations.

I have been a teacher in Universalist or Unitarian Universalist programs of religious education since I was a teenager. That is partly because when I was growing up there was no curriculum for senior high youth. So I began to teach. My first experience teaching was with the curriculum, Beginnings of Earth and Sky, and then Beginnings of Life and Death, both by Sophia Fahs. I taught just as my teacher had done, using arts and crafts extensively to dramatize the stories, and trying to imagine how the people lived who told the stories, and what questions they were trying to answer with the stories. And I still remember some of the children who were in my classes back then. Way back then! I taught 25 consecutive years in the Rochester Unitarian Church, and still can't keep myself out of classrooms. Now I include adult education classes in that statement.

Every now and again even teachers as wild about teaching as I need inspiration. Maria Harris has done that for me. She writes that: "Teaching is a work of art, a work of loving and being loved. Every teacher is a creator, an imaginative person who can mold and shape subject matter in ways that help students see who they are and what they might become."

If you have ever been part of a young persons learning process to the point that you can stand in awe when the blooming occurs, then you know the joy of being a teacher who made a difference. For you will know a blooming within yourself, and part of the mystery of life will have been experienced.

Maria writes, "This noble, beautiful, and graced activity, this teaching; a religious vocation, which when entered into with grace and dwelt in with fidelity, has the power to re-create the world. ... The heart of teaching is imagination, which, in Paul Ricoeur's words, 'has a prospective and explorative function in regard to the inherent possibilities of human beings. ... in imagining possibilities, human beings act as prophets of their own existence.'"

"Essential to the teaching role, then," says Maria Harris, "is the work of creating possibilities, of handing on the belief that we have within us the capacity to alter our existence. ... Teaching is the creation of a situation in which subjects, human subjects, are handed over to themselves."

I believe that this is essential to any program of Unitarian Universalist religious education, for children, youth, and adults. That it is through our capacity to alter our existence that we can change and re-create the world, that we can continue to hand down through the generations the legacy and faith that is ours to share.

For, as Thomas Alhburn in my first reading this morning states, "Not out of this world but in this world we are, in and of this world of skies and seas and fellow creatures. And we shall never know why. The creation is finally mysterious: it is a wonder."

We need to remain relevant to the world around us as well as maintaining the continuity and integrity of our Unitarian Universalist heritage. William Walsh states that "All too many of the problems of education are mysteries made shabby by the absence of reverence."

I believe that the sense of wonder is crucial to our congregational life, and that our programs of religious education offer us the places where children, youth, and adults can participate in experiencing mystery, wonder, and majesty. Places where the generations can imagine a new world, a self becoming, and the continuation of our religious heritage.

As teachers, as adults who participate in our religious education for children and youth we will have the opportunity to understand these words by Sara Teasdale.

"And I know that I
Am honored to be
Witness of so much majesty."