Final Sermon Oct 25 2026 Church as Curriculum

Each year during the summer I am given time for vacation and study leave. Most summers like this summer I go to Ferry Beach in Saco Maine. Ferry Beach is a Universalist camp and conference center, and I attend the week that is for Religious Education. It is a time when I meet with my colleges, talk about how our years went, what worked what didn't. It gives us all a chance to reconnect and to learn from each other. Also, as a part of RE week at Ferry Beach, they offer what is called Sparks Modules. Sparks Modules are weeklong workshops that give DLRE's a chance to learn new skills or ideas to enrich the work that we do. This year the module was on curriculum, and I was excited to learn about new ideas to bring to our SEEK and adult programs. While I was excited to find out about a possible new curriculum for world religions or teaching wisdom stories with a UU lenses. I was surprised when the facilitators started by defining "the church" as the curriculum. What if everything that we do from the look of the church from outside and inside our sanctuary, the accessibility of our building and what happens at social hour not just what we do in our SEEK classrooms and adult programs is part of what we are teaching people about Unitarian Universalism and First Parish. This idea shifted the way that I look at my work and how I viewed my own lessons that I have learned from my time being a part of a church community. I went to Catholic school and church until I entered High School. The church buildings that I remember going to were what one imagines when they think of a Catholic church. Large stained-glass windows, dark wood pews with red velvety cushions that despite their look were not comfortable to sit on. The thing I remember most vividly from my very early years in church services was the "cry room". The cry room was a room at the back of the church with a window open to the sanctuary that had the service piped into it but kept the noise of crying babies or rambunctious children "acting up" out of the service. I spent a lot of time in the cry room as a kid. When I thought of that experience from my childhood in the lens of learning not just from the lessons in

classrooms or sermons from the pulpit and that everything in church is a curriculum I learned some hard lessons from that experience. I learned that church was a dark serious place where there was no room for noisy children of any age. I had learned that there were many rules to be followed and that there was no bend in those rules and that those rules did not always welcome me. There were many things that I learned from my time as part of a catholic church and not all of them were bad, but I can now see that those early experiences often colored my experience of being in that community. I wonder if after sharing with each other if your early experiences in religious community still colors your ideas about religious community in a good way, a bad way or if it doesn't affect your perspective at all.

The next leap on this line of thinking is to think of the lessons that I had learned and am learning as part of a Unitarian Universalist community outside classrooms. As I thought about that I remembered the first time Jocelyn and I went to a funeral together.

All four of my children went to preschool at the child development lab at Framingham state. The woman who ran the preschool at the time was Jean Canelli. Jean was not only wonderful teaching my preschooler's important life lessons, but she was a huge support to me as a mother. I got a phone call from a friend a few years after all my kids were in preschool that let me know that Jean Canellie had passed away. I decided that I would like to attend her memorial service and my daughter Jocelyn asked if she could come too.

The morning of the service it was raining. I don't mean a bit of rain but torrential buckets of rain. This was also pre-GPS so I had my directions printed out from map quest to find my way there. So, Jocelyn and I hopped into my minivan and headed out to the memorial service. Well between the rain and the often less than reliable MapQuest directions I got lost and we drove

around for about half an hour passed the start of the service. At that point I pulled over in a parking lot parked and burst into tears. After a few minutes of crying I took a breath and I knew where I needed to go. I put the car in gear and drove to the Sherborn UU church that my family attended at the time. We went into the dark sanctuary with the sound of the rain falling loudly on the roof and lit the chalice. Then Jocelyn and I sat in a pew and we told stories about Jean. I remembered how she always found something special and wonderful to say about each of the children and how she sent me to the college health center when I was stung by a bee. Jocelyn remembered Jean taking them to the college's cafeteria to make their own pizzas. This moment was me taking curriculum I had learned from being part of a church community. Not from a sermon that I had heard or class or program I had taken. I learned the lesson in the church kitchen preparing food for after a funeral service, passing tissues in the pews and giving hugs to someone who needed one while they grieved. I had learned that our church was a sanctuary not just on Sundays but a place you could go to reflect and hold moments that were important in life.

When I asked my family what they had learned while they were part of a UU church but not from a class or sermon my daughter Ashley said she learned acceptance when she came out as trans to the kids she had grown up with in her the classes on Sunday mornings, my husband said he learned skills he didn't know he had like teaching kids in a class and how to manage a committee, my son Jack said he learned that "if you ever need help you just have to ask and someone will be there to help"…but just so we don't completely discount the importance of the learning our children get in our RE classes Jack's first answer before I said learned outside the classroom was he learned how to put a condom on a banana….OWL class is very important in teaching life skills too.

Like any good curriculum how do we take it outside our walls to the greater world? I have seen us do that by standing on the lawn when there is a No Kings rally. While I was talking to Lynne Lipcon one day she mentioned how she had

been at a protest and met a friend while she was there. While they chatted, she was greeted by several people and her friend commented on the fact that she knew a lot of nice people and asked how she knew them. Lynne let her know that most of them were people she had known for years as part of her community at First Parish. The fact that so many of us were willing to stand outside often in the cold to work to bring justice and democracy to our country speaks volumes. The banners that we display on our front lawn inviting people in to help us build a better world also takes the ideas that we hold dear to the greater community. Opening our doors to the local girl scouts and other organizations that reflect our values tells folks that we are not only a place that supports our members but that we are here to support the community too.

Each of us learns not just from books or classrooms all the time. The world around us is always teaching us things but I think that the reason the class on curriculum as church struck me so hard was because it gave me new perspective on the work that we do in our community here at First Parish. I work each week to write lessons for the kids in our SEEK classrooms and I work on programing for our adults and across all ages. My hope when I write the lessons and do the planning for programs is that it will give people things to consider about their own beliefs and values but there are things not specifically written into those lessons or programs that I have a different perspective on. When people come to church my hope is that they find friendships while they are here with both their peers and across all age groups, I hope they know that there are people that think that they are important, I hope that they learn this is a place where they can laugh hard, cry hard and think about hard questions when they need to and there are people here that will share that with them. Living in church community isn't always easy but the lessons that it teaches us can be life changing.