

What Shall We Give the Children?
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It comes earlier every year. This year I found it already on my porch on the most humid of August mornings when I went to fetch the newspaper. The Sears Wish Book. “Don’t they know anything?” I muttered to myself - it’s not supposed to come for at least another month. Published for 55 years, the Wish Book is a third generation tradition in my family. Many an October night I spent as a young person – studying the catalogue once my school books were closed for the evening. Turning down the corners of pages I wanted to mark until the toy section was completely dog eared, carefully pondering the many possibilities for the present I would ask for. One year in particular, I asked for, and got, a Barbie doll. (This was before feminism enlightened us about Barbie.) It was the most modern Barbie, one with hair that could change length. That year I received something else too. Something marvellous. Something that wasn’t in the catalogue. After all of the presents had been opened my father announced that there was one more. It was too big to be wrapped and he and my mother led me to the basement where the entire workbench in my father’s shop was taken up with a Barbie doll house made with great care by my parents. My father had built the structure and made small wooden tables, chairs and beds. My mother had sewn, knitted and crocheted miniature sheets, blankets, curtains, even tiny doilies for the tables. Together they had decorated it with remnants of wallpaper and carpet from our home and fashioned little lamps out of found materials. I was simultaneously overwhelmed with the surprise of having something I hadn’t asked for, something so unique, and touched by the realization that for weeks my parents had been planning and secretly toiling over this project. It was the Christmas I remember as the best of my childhood. I think that’s because the dollhouse was more than a present. It was a *gift*. “Gifts differ from presents because no matter what form they take, they always represent something greater, something deeper, something more enduring.”ⁱ The dollhouse was an old fashioned, homemade gift of time and talent and love and imagination.

My friends and I spent hundreds of hours playing with the dollhouse. I’m not sure when or how it happened exactly, but it was retired somewhere amidst dolls giving way to record players and dances and then cars and parties until those too fell away

in favour of a house and family of my own. I raised my children in the 80's and 90's. A time of conspicuous consumption with Madonna's "Material Girl" for an anthem and stickers on truck bumpers that said "he who has the most toys in the end wins".

In the early 90's I came upon a poem that had appeared in Good Housekeeping magazine entitled "What Shall We Give the Children?" that awakened in me the enduring "heritage of mind and heart" that was the dollhouse.

What shall we give the children?
The holidays are almost here.
Toys and games and playthings,
as we do every year?

Yes, for the magic of Toyland
is part of the yuletide lore
to gladden the heart of childhood,
but I shall give something more,
a more sympathetic ear,
a little more time for laughter,
or tenderly dry a tear...

I shall take time to teach them
the joy of doing some task.
I'll try to find some time to answer
more of the questions they ask.
And take long walks in the sun.

Time for a bedtime story,
after the day is done.
I shall give these to my children,
weaving a closer tie,
knitting our lives together
with gifts that money can't buy.

This simple poem reminded me of the values demonstrated by my parents. Along with membership in my Unitarian congregation where anti-consumerist sentiment was growing, I had the much needed fortification, in a neighbourhood where

everyone seemed to be the Joneses, to buy less of the Furbies, Tamegotchies and Beanie Babies – and focus more on the *real* gifts that families give children, year round. I like to think that the benefits my children received from those gifts that money can't buy are now evident in their spirit of enquiry and appreciation for nature, their love of a good book and yes – their ability to turn household objects into treasures like their parents and grandparents before them.

My children are grown up now and have graduated from RE and Coming of Age and Youth Group. As I take up my work here serving the next generation of children, youth (as well as adults) I ask myself and you ... what shall we – the family that is First Unitarian – give the children and youth who are here with us?

In his sermon in mid September, Shawn expressed his hope that "more than our history or our theology, more even than our core principles and beliefs, [he wanted our children] to know and feel that they are cherished . . ." I agree that this is an important gift for any child. Throughout twenty years of volunteering in and offering professional leadership to UU children's programs, I have gotten to know a wide variety of our children and I continue to marvel at their curiosity, their critical thinking ability and genuinely spiritual insights. I have been deeply touched by the empathy and compassion they express as they have their own social justice awakenings and come to the realization that there is great inequity and unfairness in our world which we must try to remedy. I do believe that they deserve to be cherished, as the precious individuals that they are.

However, as DLRE, I hope that the children of this congregation can have it *all*. On talking with members who grew up here, I have come to believe that, rather than one or the other, it *is through* the very acts of transmitting our history and theology as well as our living out our core principles and beliefs that our children come to feel valued.

As I've been getting to know all of you, I was quite interested when a few individuals identified themselves as graduates of the RE program here. I asked these individuals what they remembered about growing up Unitarian Universalist. One observation that came up in every conversation was that while they attended as many as hundreds of classes, they remembered little about the specifics of the actual RE lessons. One remembered only three classes – wrapping dolls as mummies in a study of the religion of ancient Egypt, scientific explanations of the "miracles"

reported in the Bible, and a class where hot chocolate was served. Another with similarly spare recollections remarked that the fact that she could remember so few of the actual lessons to which teachers devoted so much time and energy was rather like the countless meals made for us as we grow up. They take far longer to prepare than they do to eat. And although we can't recount exactly the menu on any given day – that doesn't in any way diminish the value of what was served up at the dinner table nor in the classroom. What's important is the *feeling* created by gathering together, being nourished and cared for that remains so powerful, many years later. It's the *gifts* of time, love, affirmation and commitment that we remember in the end. In each of these conversations, the subject turned from *specifics* to *impressions*. It soon became clear that there were other gifts of their upbringing here which arose out of three interconnected characteristics of the congregation as a whole.

First, the teachers and the whole congregation were role models who lived their principles and beliefs.

This was illustrated by comments such as “they practiced what they preached” and “my RE leaders when I was in junior high were very fine people and I learned a lot from them”

Secondly, they said that the congregation created a sense of belonging

One noted that “Members made it a point to get to know each of us kids”; another said that “this was the one place where I felt like I could be my true self” and a third said “I returned to this congregation with my only child, who won't be growing up with cousins – so that she will have a place other than her family where she belongs.”

Third, the congregation transmitted their history and theology in such a way that they felt valued both as individuals and as part of the fabric of an organization they could admire and respect as authentic in its intentions and actions saying:

"They created a balanced, living faith, shaping a world view that equipped me for life." Another said:

"In my late teens as differences started to emerge among people at school – for instance someone would say “I'm gay” – that wasn't a novelty to me. It was natural for me to think these things were normal having grown up in the diversity here. I think it was possibly unique to our upbringing that we went into the world unaware of the anxiety about differences because it was normal to us”:

These comments from within our congregation are echoed across our denomination in a book entitled “Full Circle” by UU religious educator Kate Tweedie Erslev who asked those who grew up UU “Why did you stay?” The answers included these same themes:

- role models who mentored children and teens (as 22 of you will do this year for our Coming of Age Class);
- the congregation offering opportunities to live out our values;
- the sense of belonging that came from attending regularly, from singing together, from joining in the celebration of holiday events and special occasions (like last week’s Central America Sunday which the kids affectionately call piñata Sunday!);
- celebrating heritage and life-long members.

Not only in our congregation, but around the denomination it seems that it is, indeed, as religious educator, Maria Harris, in her book “Fashion Me a People” suggests: that the entire course of a congregation’s life *is* its curriculum. Not only the binder of lesson plans or the work of our 12 devoted RE teachers and 2 committed youth advisors ... but everything this congregation does or doesn’t do, everything it says or does not say teaches our children what we are about.

The religious education of our children and youth is a sacred duty to which, whether we realize it or not, each and every one of us is called. Whether you have children or grandchildren here, whether you hope to have children, whether your children are grown, whether there are no young people in your life apart from those who are here in your congregational home – it is up to all of *us* what they will learn. If the congregation is the curriculum, then we are *all*, in a way, the teachers and youth advisors. All of us.

Here we are, on our very own “acre of diamonds”. If we are looking for our chance to make a difference in the world it’s all right here at our feet. If we want to change the world, let’s start by equipping the citizens and leaders of tomorrow, the future of Unitarian Universalism that is in every corner of this building – in our nursery, our classrooms, and our youth room.

Friends ... teachers and youth advisors all – what shall we give the children? As **role models**, what will they learn of kindness and fairness and genuine

appreciation for each other by watching *us*? Will we practice what we preach? As **creators of community**, how will we contribute to their sense of belonging? Will we involve them and make a point of getting to know them? As a **people with a distinctive theological method** embedded in our history and our contemporary culture will we be willing to claim it and take responsibility for using it, along with our youth, to face a global society that is not organized to serve human wholeness, worth, freedom, and dignity”?ⁱⁱ

As **keepers of our history** as free thinkers and dissenters, as pioneers in the feminist and gay rights movements, the civil rights and social justice movements – it is not, as the meditation today affirmed, the place of someone else to hand our children and youth their heritage. It is ours. All of ours.

Since ancient times and in many cultures, this season marks the time of turning. Our Jewish friends are currently observing the high holy Days of Awe – the time of turning inward, of introspection and contemplation between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur; Samhein will soon be here for our Pagan and Wiccan friends - the night the wheel of the year turns back on itself. For our agrarian ancestors this was the time of year when they reaped what they had sown, a time for taking stock. Let us search our own hearts for those gifts that we have to give our children. The unique and enduring gifts of time, talent, love and commitment which we may have been holding back and re-commit to giving them freely. Let’s take up the work together of weaving a closer tie, knitting our lives together, with gifts that money can't buy.

ⁱ David Blanchard “The Gift” Quest Vol. LX, No. 11, December 2004

ⁱⁱ Rev. David Takahashi Morris “Three D’s and an F: Unitarian Universalist Theology” December 4, 2005 (adapted)