



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Life's Longing for Itself

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I begin today with these words from Unitarian Universalist minister Roberta Finkelstein.

Position Available: Parent. Qualifications: None. Position is open to anybody regardless of age, experience, intention, motivation, willingness, preparation or desire. The job will consist of making one or more children the center of your life for the remainder of your life. You will provide financial support, housing, clothing, sustenance, education, moral values, entertainment, limits, ideas, and boundless love.

You will encourage your children to learn to walk, so that they can walk, then run, then drive away from you. You will teach them to talk so that they can tell you "No!" in a thousand different ways. In spite of the fact that you have agreed to take them into the very core of your heart and mind, the main expectation of this position is that you let them go – sometimes gradually, sometimes abruptly.

Pay: ha, ha.

Benefits: smiles, hugs, tears, gratitude, the opportunity to know fully and unabashedly what you did to your parents, the opportunity to do things differently from your parents, the opportunity to make the same mistakes your parents made – and other, bigger and better mistakes, the profoundly moving experience of seeing your child smile, laugh, cry, fail, succeed, grow, change, surprise you, aggravate you, love you, and leave you.

Position available: parent. I've been thinking a lot about parenting these days. Most of my closest friends have had children in the past year. Despite being a difficult year for politics and celebrity deaths, 2016 was the year of the baby boom in my little universe! Maxwell, Selah, Makenna, Abe,

Ruby, Russell, Ramona, Olympia, Davis Jean and so many more. These children all came into the world through the deep effort and intention of their parents. Their arrival sparked much rejoicing from their friends and families.

When a new child is born, a new parent is born too. Navigating the unfamiliar territory of new parenting is an enormous life change. Parenting young children in these shifting political times can be especially challenging and isolating. While others attend evening meetings and protests, parenting an infant revolves around finding quiet spaces for naps and meals, being home for bath time and bedtime and struggling to pay for and find good child care.

Outshining all of the challenges these new parents face, the one thing I hear the most from these new parents is the newfound well of pure and unconditional love they have discovered in caring for these tiny new creatures. This new sense of love, and responsibility is profound and life changing. In her memoir "Operating Instructions" about her son's first year, author

Anne Lamott tries to articulate this new sense of love in this way: “There really are places in the heart you don’t even know exist until you love a child.” The South African poet Malika Ndlovu says it like this: the territory that is me has expanded- literally and spiritually- encompassing an ever-growing capacity for love.

Lisa Miller is a clinical psychologist who is the founder of the Spirituality Mind Body institute at Columbia University’s Teacher’s College. Her New York Times Bestselling book is entitled *The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and Lifelong Thriving*. She describes this love which transforms both parent and child as both scientific, and profoundly spiritual. She writes:

We can with some scientific certainty talk about mirror neurons and limbic resonance, the brains specialized capacity for processing emotional cues, and the inner states of those around us. As the infant draws us into this deep loving connection, we can, perhaps for the first time, reach beyond what we know, and reflect. This is the love that opens your heart as a parent. ...The transcendent presence through the infant awakens us to our higher self and that in other people around us: to a sense of transcendence itself.

Miller notes that parents often tell her that becoming a parent was the first time they ever felt anything spiritual. It is no wonder then that having children and becoming parents inspires a search of a religious community to share these feelings with others and seek the support and guidance of a religious tradition. My own parents have told me stories about how having children encouraged their search for a religious home. My earliest childhood years were spent in the South, attending religious preschool and kindergarten. I loved the felt-board Bible stories, the music and the brightly colored stained glass windows adorning the cool stone building. I loved the moments of connection I shared with my family in those sacred spaces, and I had so many questions about the songs and the stories I had heard, and I wanted to know more.

Who is God?

What happens when we die?

I asked my parents what it all meant, and they began their search for us to find a church.

New families often seek out our churches in this way. They are seeking a supportive community for themselves and their children, who have as many questions about religion and spirituality as they do. One couple who visited over the holiday season said their 6 year old had been asking questions about Jesus, and they wanted to know how to talk to her about their beliefs while helping her explore her own.

The first Sunday they visited happened to be the children’s Christmas pageant, which was the most highly attended Sunday service last fall. Seeing the story of Jesus, enacted by the children of the church, helped answer some of the child’s questions and it helped to see other children who, like her, were curious and passionate about religious questions.

While parents have an intuitive sense that they are children's primary religious educators, they often don't feel like they have all of the answers to children's questions or even where to find them. Children are naturally inquisitive about most things, but it's often a tragic event, like a pet or grandparent dying or an act of violence, that catapult children's religious questions.

Sophia Lyon Fahs, one of our most prominent Unitarian religious educators, began her passion for her work through her own children's questions. She noticed how many questions her children asked, not only about religion but about the world. "Where does snow come from?" and "Where are we before we are born?" As she tried to answer her children's questions, Sophia realized how much she did not know. At first, it distressed her.

In those days, most educators believed that children's minds were like empty jars to fill with learning, or banks into which knowledge was "deposited." As she parented and taught Sunday school, her perspective began to change. She came up with a different metaphor for religious learning—rather than empty jars, or banks, she began to think of children's minds more like gardens, already planted with seeds of possibility for learning and growing. From this perspective, both the parent and the teacher's job was to provide the good soil and water and sunlight a garden needed to grow.

Sophia Lyon Fahs developed her philosophy into a comprehensive religious education program for parents and children which still guides our programs today.

Rather than having all the answers, children need adults to affirm their questions about nature of the world and their place, to encourage their curiosity and to provide them with strong values to guide and support them in making their own discoveries and decisions. Not only this, but children need to feel a sense of unconditional love and positive regard from adults. No question should be off limits or inappropriate to ask. Of course, children do benefit from answers—they want to know what exactly adults believe and why, and to have their parents' beliefs and traditions clearly articulated. Our congregations are here to help parents define and share their beliefs and values, provide religious literacy and to kindle an ongoing conversation with their children to help navigate the ever changing questions facing every step of life's journey.

Here's a wonderful example from our own congregation. Last week, I enjoyed a lovely dinner with two of our members who were themselves raised in a conservative Christian church, and, through the evolution of their own beliefs and religious questions, sought and found a new religious home with the Unitarian Universalist Church. Of their four adult children, two are still connected to the conservative tradition and raising their children in it, one does not follow any religious tradition, and another daughter also found a home with the Unitarian Universalists. The member shared one of several email exchanges with her daughters about faith and belief. Her questions remained the same throughout her life: what is prayer? What is truth? What is peace? But, shifting traditions from conservative to liberal, the answers were

different. Her daughter had found solace in our hymnal, reading the text as poetry. She shared this with her mother:

“In the hymn I think I was particularly moved by the concept of silence and quietness related to peace, truth and/or spirituality. My whole life I've been taught at church that silence is God...or listening to God for what I should do. Only in the past few years have I realized that it is much more productive to seek myself in the silence.”

What is meaningful about this exchange is that mother and daughter could share openly about their evolving spirituality. It was the trusting relationship between them that allowed for the exchange to enrich and deepen their spiritual exploration, which led them both out of their traditions of origin and into a new shared faith. As their faith journeys evolved, the questions changed, but their relationship remained the loving foundation for safe exploration and new revelation.

The ongoing conversation about religious questions was a blessing for both mother and daughter—a lifelong powerful spiritual connection tethered by their shared faith tradition.

I want to close with a quote from Czech born poet Rainer Maria Rilke, from his book *Letters to a Young Poet*, inspiration for parents and children alike.

Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the answer.

May it be so, and Amen