

MEANINGFUL MOMENTUM

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There are formative times in our lives that create deep identity energy that can sustain us for a lifetime, and to which we return (in mind, heart and community) for inspiration and renewal.

I invite you to recognize what was undoubtedly a formative era in your own life, a time captured by the title to one of A.A. Milne's delightfully evocative little books: "When We Were Very Young" (in which an indelible character appears for the first time: Winnie-the-Pooh).

We adults continue to research and learn about the astounding importance of the early years of a growing human being's development, but this only confirms what we likely know in our hearts anyway: it greatly matters what young people experience, how they take in their expanding world and absorb what becomes for them, and I daresay for all of us, meaningful momentum.

There are certainly, throughout one's entire life, more moments that magnify our meaningful momentum and continue to forge our personal identity. But so much takes early shape in the first two decades of life to project an arc of passion and purpose that urges us forward in often unseen but oh, so influential ways.

I remember a few years back when it was my turn to portray my spiritual odyssey in a ritual sharing we enjoy each year among the UU ministers of this region. In preparation for this presentation before my UU colleagues, I thought long and hard about the life journey I'd been on and realized there was a strong motif from my childhood that had stayed with me quite vividly, even though I was only then bringing it to clarifying awareness.

In short, I had had one particular, ongoing young experience of gazing curiously from my bedroom window and front yard at an intriguing house on a hill all by itself, sticking out of woods in the far distance. This theme of being drawn toward a longer view became a unifying thread, both practical and metaphorical, that I rather compellingly wove throughout all the chapters of my odyssey, and it is still an important mode for me along my journey.

So I testify, as I expect each of you can, to the impact and resilience of the meaningful momentum that emerges for us over our first decades of life. We hold onto and return to such valuable aspects of this early development, to ground us as we follow our authentic path forward.

Amid all the external direction we get from adults during that formative era, we nonetheless can intuitively sense the directions that are right for us, which hopefully are visible also to those sensitive mentors and relatives who can help elicit our particular, unique genius.

Such a productive balance of both interior self-learning and external support has become a calling card of Unitarian Universalism for a long time. Our heritage, especially the Unitarian side, separated from more traditional approaches to education in the early 19th century, as evidenced by this quote from the Father of American Unitarianism, Boston minister William Ellery Channing, who wrote in an 1837 sermon:

The great end in religious instruction, whether in the Sunday School or family, is, not to stamp our minds irresistibly on the young, but to stir up their own; not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly and steadily with their own; ... not to impose religion upon them in the form of arbitrary rules which rest on no foundation but our own word and will, but to awaken the consciousness, the moral discernment, so that they may approve for themselves what is everlastingly right and good.

Channing, William Ellery, "The Sunday School," 1837, as quoted in: Williams, Jean Starr, "Our Ways of Education" in *The Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide*, ed. by H. B. Scholefield (Bost: Skinner House, 1981), p.56.

As reasonable as Channing might sound to us today, this angle on education was quite unusual for his day, to say the least. What education was available in the 1830s was largely sectarian Christian, and even the constitutionally ordained separation of church and state had yet to take hold fully, especially there in Massachusetts.

Channing was mutually inspired in his unusually empowering approach to "religious instruction" by other nearby and socially influential Unitarians of that era, notably Horace Mann, founder of the first American public school system (non-sectarian!), and the education radical Bronson Alcott (father of Louisa May), plus his collaborator Elizabeth Peabody, who later opened the first American kindergarten.

We today have an historically deep, if often ignored connection to this field, which may nonetheless explain some of the consistently high numbers of teachers who are drawn to our congregations. On surveys of the current careers of contemporary Unitarian Universalists, the category of "educator" at one level or another is often second only to "retired."

But even if public schools could effectively broach the teaching of, say, religious history, it would still not be a panacea. No, we should never expect even the best of schools to do for our children what is rightfully the job of a church community. Thus, I lift up for you the value of a Unitarian Universalist program for religious growth and learning, or more commonly known as RE, religious education. And it's hard enough getting you adults to grasp our twin heritages; bringing it to young people is even more challenging.

But our UU grounding goes beyond the specific history of two quirky denominations. It also includes our longstanding heretical relationship with Christianity and an understanding of world religions. Because of our principled emphasis on an inclusive global awareness, all of this can

and should be considered part of our UU heritage. In this way, children are taught *both* how to appreciate other perspectives *and* to internalize their own UU identity.

I have seen it happen well, and have tasted it here, although we still have a ways to go in building a truly strong, resilient, steady RE program and All Ages community at Cedars. We've concentrated, understandably perhaps, on the younger ones among us.

But developmentally, in the *second* decade of life, teaching methods have to shift quite a bit, as young minds and hearts accumulate greater knowledge of the world even as they might appear less teachable, more headstrong and individuated, with greater personality on display—or painfully withheld.

Adult guides have to change approaches with adolescents, to reach emerging young minds and hearts that can seem more protected or distracted. But the opportunities for meaningful momentum are also nonetheless growing, even picking up speed and power.

Take a quick moment and think back to when you were a youth—your own adolescent years. (Breathe deep, just note whatever images and feelings arise first... and try not to flinch.) ... When you look back at yourself, do you have a predominantly negative or positive image of that time in your life, usually dominated by junior and high school cultures?

You probably did have plenty of positive experiences, but don't we tend to dwell on the harsher moments, the oppressions, the failures and our particular brand of teenage dread, which somehow linger to rankle our self-image, often unduly, often for decades?

I think it's fair to say that a common adult assumption or stereotype, frequently drawn from looking back on our own youthfulness through a rather narrow lens, is that it's an era loaded with pain and anxieties of one sort or another. I don't deny that those and other negative facets can indeed create meaningful momentum of an unwelcome sort. But I am *not* convinced that they must prevail and dictate that adolescence, then, *is inevitably* a time most people later want to *or do* forget. That stereotype is too easy to adopt—and unfair, besides.

No, I know that the years of youth are inherently very worthy ones, and not just because they are a gateway to the glorious achievements of adulthood. It is a time of essential meaning-making and resource generation all its own, a time when youth have worth for just who and what they are: youth—nothing more, *but nothing less, either*.

Of course, some influences can lead youth deeper into negative or destructive aspects, while other paths can promote strong self-development and creative fulfillment. And this is where community comes in.

It matters, for instance, that UU youth programs exist and thrive to provide junior and senior

highers with settings that educate, affirm and support them, and that will stay with them. Just last weekend, for example, our director of RE, Candee Cole, and parent Brian Sorensen plus his spouse Luz Elena took a bundle of our Cedars middle school youth on an eye-opening and evidently very fun weekend tour of other religious groups around the Seattle area, as part of the venerable UU curriculum, Neighboring Faiths.

This group of Cedars explorers slept overnight at our Shoreline UU Church and visited six Neighboring Faiths: a Hindu temple, Buddhist center, Muslim mosque, Jewish synagogue, plus an Episcopal cathedral and Mt. Zion Baptist. I daresay the weekend excursion will live on in their memories for some time, giving them a broader and invaluable foundation for understanding the world's religious diversity.

These kinds of opportunities—outside of a traditional classroom setting—can help a congregation accomplish one of the more revolutionary things any of us can do, I think, which is to cultivate intergenerational friendships in a community of heritage and meaning where Consumerism is not the religion of choice. And where else in your week do you get to be around people of, as we like to say, All Ages—literally ALL ages.

Cultivating intergenerational friendships is, however, not an easy step to take, because so many forces are aligned against it, but it is possible to build and sustain a thriving children's and youth ministry, if an organization has the vision, the courage, the leadership. Happily, Cedars is definitely gaining on this. And counting those currently enrolled in our RE Program, Cedars is approximately 25% what I call 'homebred' UUs—raised UU.

It would be quite natural, when most of you adults did not grow up UU yourselves, to forget that the dozens of young people connected to our RE program will likely have *this* liberal religion as their primary, formative religious identification, as is the case for some of us adults, too. And hopefully they will feel quite positive about that, although that is certainly not a given.

I honor the few adults here who were raised UU, like me and Barbara, and I sympathize with any younger homebred UUs. There's usually not a lot outside of oneself for a UU young person to hold onto, religiously. Despite my pride and awareness now, after high school I spent my 20s very much adrift, with little or no visible UU mooring to help me.

Adults seem to understand, more or less, that Unitarian Universalism is a religion continually striving to reach mutual agreement with the gods of ambiguity. Holding ethical and spiritual principles but no dogma, we don't just *allow* free religious thought, we *require it* at a level beyond most, if not all other religions.

But this makes it hard indeed for young people to comprehend the process of spiritual maturation. Hard, but not impossible. They just need some help from caring, centered, mentoring adults.

They don't always know how to ask for such help, which is why the careful design and implementation of a congregation's youth ministry is so critical. We are very lucky to have here at Cedars one of the best directors of RE I have ever seen in Candee, whose awareness, creativity, resources and commitment are being applied toward a now-growing program that had all but evaporated before her arrival among us. And programmatic attention to older youth is still rather thin, although there are some significant activities under way.

But she needs a stronger faculty of volunteers for all levels to round out this R.E. ministry, providing all kinds of support to her part time directing. We know young people *will* respond well to authentic adults who bring good hearts, clear boundaries and a spirit of fun with them as they model how to be on the journey. And mentoring the older youth among us takes a different skill set and training than for their younger brothers and sisters, but is equally, if not more important.

What happens when all the good energy and commitment a church puts into its younger Religious Education program culminates in the youth group years? Unfortunately, too often the changing needs of older youth are not incorporated well into a church community, and they drift off, fade away from view, with little interest shown by the congregation at large.

It's not an easy ministry to sustain, partially because so few UU adults seem either eager or equipped to get involved with youth. But I am *not* convinced it has to be that way.

A liberal expert on fundamentalism, Martin Marty, has suggested that the rise in right wing religious fundamentalism is not so much because those churches have had great success converting adults from other backgrounds. What they are doing to increase their numbers, he says, is what most mainstream religions are not doing: they are retaining their young people.

I have a sense of how they do it: with passion and intention, which, in the case of fundamentalists, is grounded in dubious theology, to my mind. But the passion and intention parts can be translated into our setting and our philosophy! Successful UU youth ministry also involves passion and intention, but not just that of staff or a couple of isolated advisors.

Making a real place for our children and youth in the church community will involve the passion and intention of a good portion of the adults in our congregation and it will, in turn, benefit the whole community. It needn't take a lot of time from a lot of people, but it does require an alert awareness by most of us. And it's very rewarding.

Barbara and I have a very simply stated vision for religious education ministry: that senior high graduates of our RE program do so with the ability and inclination to call themselves active Unitarian Universalists. That's it: When seniors graduate from our RE program they will identify themselves as *active* UUs.

Sounds easy enough, but many churches fail to support their youth to this end, *and the youth themselves sometimes give up too easily*. But there's never been a better time to build a wider congregational base here for this very worthy purpose. (If you have ideas or are willing to assist, please contact me, Barbara or Candee.) At stake is the liberal religious grounding of new generations and the strengthening of this congregational community. Together, our worthy souls *of all ages* will nurture each other.

In closing, I invite you to imagine a very special and historic occasion when another kind of institutional step was taken: at a youth conference in Hanover, Indiana in 1953, Unitarian and Universalist youth leaders had just formally merged their separate organizations to create LRY: Liberal Religious Youth. This was seven years ahead of the merger of the two parent denominations, in 1961. You might say that the youth led the way.

Imagine the mood at this pivotal youth conference, 60 years ago now. Imagine that a goodly number of those young people, inspired by this meaningful momentum, went into the UU ministry (because they did). And by now, six decades later, all have retired, many died, after dedicating their life's work to the advancement of UUism, in the merged youth organization of LRY and beyond into congregational and continental UU leadership.

Barbara and I stand in direct line with these pioneers, some of whom became our own mentors, especially Leon Hopper, who was a major player before, during and after the creation of LRY. Imagine that when all those youth gathered at that formative event in 1953, they sang of accomplishment and celebration. They sang one special song, the words of which were written for the occasion by a young adult minister and leader, Sam Wright, to the popular tune Finlandia. That song, #318 in our grey hymnal, became known as the LRY Hymn: *We Would Be One*.

These very optimistic words help us feel the connection we share with those young people then, who, as they aged, passed the reins to us, just as we will do to subsequent generations—new guardians of our living tradition. Let us pay good attention to those already among us and shepherd their path forward with meaningful momentum, to show to all a new community.

WE WOULD BE ONE (#318 in *Singing the Living Tradition*)

*We would be one as now we join in singing our hymn of love, to pledge ourselves anew
to that high cause of greater understanding of who we are, and what in us is true.*

We would be one in living for each other to show to all a new community.

We would be one in building for tomorrow a nobler world than we have know today.

We would be one in searching for that meaning which binds our hearts & points us on our way.

As one, we pledge ourselves to greater service, with love and justice, strive to make us free.