

The Things We Get Right

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Whenever my kids hear that I'm going to be speaking, they get nervous, because of my tendency to illustrate my points with amusing anecdotes about them. They have asked, "Couldn't you write a sermon where you don't talk about us?" I answered, Of course. And some day I will. But this is not that sermon. What can I say? They're my best material.

At the time this story begins, my sons were five and two. They were not particularly difficult boys, in the grand scheme of things, on the spectrum of little boy behavior, they were pretty normal – normally difficult. Normally draining and exhausting and loud and messy. They took to heart Whitman's exhortation to sound their barbaric yawps across the roofs of the world. For a 2-year-old and a 5-year-old, perfectly normal.

One day, I went out to the county to visit a new acquaintance. She had four young children, and these children were, in my experience, not normal. They were peaceful and traditionally well-behaved. They did what their mom asked, the first time she asked. They were friendly and polite, even to adult strangers like me. But what really blew me away was that, in spite of all these things, they seemed really happy. They did not act like their good behavior was rooted in fear, or like their politeness was purely for public display. It's just how they were. Most mind-blowing, they genuinely liked one another

and got along really well together, the older ones keeping an eye out for the younger ones.

On my second or third visit to this acquaintance, I decided I knew her well enough to let her know how amazing her kids were. She shrugged this off, as one does. I felt emboldened to ask, in a half-joking tone, “What’s your secret?” To which she replied, “Jesus helps me.”

I managed to restrain myself from replying, What’s his hourly rate, and does he work weekends? But to tell the truth, I found her answer deeply disappointing. I don’t know what I was hoping for, maybe a recommendation for a particular parenting book, or a certain brand of vitamins. I don’t know. But Jesus? I mean, I’ve certainly called on Jesus a number of times in my parenting life, but mostly in the blasphemous sense. I don't have anything against Jesus, in fact I like him just fine, but I don't have the kind of relationship with him where I feel I can ask him for parenting advice any old time. I just had a hunch that whatever it was that he did for this mom, probably would not work for me.

What was I supposed to do, convert? I mean, I considered it, obviously. Any parents of 2-year-olds will understand that level of desperation. People have definitely accepted baptism for worse reasons, of that I’m sure. But on reflection, I decided that I was not ready to go that far.

I told this story to a friend of mine who is a secular Jew, but has family who are ultra-orthodox. She said that she has noticed the same phenomenon with these relatives.

When she goes to visit, she's blown away by how polite and responsible their kids are, how well they get along, and how helpful they are to their parents. She told me that on Fridays, as each kid comes home from school, they immediately set to work getting ready for Shabbat. Each has their own set of chores that they're responsible for, and they do them without reminders. And my friend had to admit that, although they were living a lifestyle that she personally found restrictive and even repressive, these kids did not act repressed. They truly seemed happy.

Now this I found encouraging, because, although I am also unlikely to convert to ultra-orthodox Judaism, it shows that Jesus is not the only way to happy, well-adjusted kids. All I had to do is figure out what those families had in common, and see if it was something that I, a Unitarian Universalist, could harness in my own parenting life.

Here's what I came up with. First of all, both sets of kids were growing up rooted in strong beliefs, but also rooted in communities with a strong sense of identity. Their days and weeks were filled with rituals and other constant reminders of who they were and what their family believed.

Secondly, both families were very clear about what was most important in life, namely being in right relationship with their conception of God.

And thirdly, both families encouraged and expected their kids to be helpful from very young ages, and to take pride in their responsibilities. Service within the family, to their community, and to the world in general was a fundamental aspect of their family lives.

Why should these three factors result in happy, well-adjusted kids?

One day, as I was still puzzling over this mystery, I heard an interview on NPR with a psychologist who had focused her research on what makes people happy. She had written a book on how different generations in the 20th century raised their children. She pointed out that earlier generations raised their children primarily to be useful, to contribute to the family's economic well-being. But starting around the 1960s or so, a shift took place. Inspired perhaps by Dr. Spock and Kahlil Gibran poems, parents began to reject the notion of children as economic assets, and instead to view them as beings made of star stuff, as "living arrows sent forth upon the path of the infinite, whose souls dwell in the house of tomorrow." They did not necessarily want their kids to be useful around the farm, they wanted their kids to be free to be you and me, they wanted their kids to be happy. And so, for possibly the first time in human history, the happiness of one's children became the goal of parenting.

Now this is of course a broad generalization, but I think that you could ask just about any parent you met nowadays and we would all agree that what we want most of all for our children is for them to be happy. We want our kids to "find their bliss." But what this writer who was interviewed on NPR – whose name I failed to write down, and have been kicking myself ever since as a result – what she noticed when she really studied happiness outcomes in different generations, is that this parenting philosophy does not necessarily lead to happy adults.

The problem, she argues, is that humans are strangely bad at figuring out what is going to make them happy. It sounds good to tell our kids to “find your bliss”, but the fact is, if bliss were easy to find, we’d all be zen masters. So often we humans confuse happiness with gratification. We tend to think that being happy means getting what we want. And as a result, many parents think that their job is to help their kids get what they want. But this psychologist and happiness expert found that there is really no correlation between getting what you want and being happy,

Even achieving the things we want may not necessarily make us happy. And thinking that it will can lead us into a cycle of pursuing new things, achieving them, feeling gratified, and then feeling disappointed when it does not lead to lasting happiness. We might spend our whole lives thinking, I would be happy, if only I had what I wanted.

Now I’m not saying that pursuing our interests is a bad thing. But this happiness expert found, through her research, that the number one factor in whether people were happy or not, was not whether or not they achieved their dream job, but whether or not they felt themselves to be useful.

It turns out that what makes humans happy, in a general, long-term sense, as opposed to feeling gratified in the moment, is being useful to others. Service makes us happy. Giving of ourselves to others, whatever it is that we have to give, makes us happy. It turns out that the old adage “It’s better to give than to receive” is scientifically true. Giving to others is more likely to make us happy than getting what we want.

Hearing this interview was an aha moment for me, as a piece of the puzzle clicked into place. If being of service makes people happy, it stands to reason that kids raised in that ethos are likely to be happy – and helpful.

I'm not saying to pull the kids out of soccer and send them to work in the salt mines. I want my kids to figure out and pursue their interests, to go to college if they're so inclined, to study what they're passionate about and ideally get a job in that field. I want those things for them, but they are not my top priority as a parent.

My oldest son is seventeen, and brilliant, if I say so myself, and yet I have to confess that only in the last couple years have we managed to start saving for his college fund. For all his life, however, we have pledged to BUF. It's possible that I might occasionally lie awake at 3 am, calculating how much we would have saved by now if we'd put that money in a college fund. But it would have been hypocrisy, for us. Education is a high priority for our family, but it isn't our top priority. What I would most like my kids to learn is this: To know who they are. To live in community with others. To be useful. To have something greater than themselves that they care about more than they care about their own wants and desires.

When my Christian friend said that Jesus helped her raise her children, I think what she meant is that her faith was a lodestar, a fixed point of reference, that helped her to set priorities and maintain perspective. At the same time, her faith was also a source of strength and comfort for her, the one thing she could always count on to dip her bucket into when her well began to run dry.

Whatever our religion or non-religion, we could all use a lodestar. We all need to be clear on what our priorities are. Both these families I've been talking about were very clear that what was most important for them was being in right relationship with what they would presumably call God. And with some tweaking of the language, my guess is that we're all more or less on the same page. What is more important to us, as human beings of conscience, than being in right relationship with our families, our friends, our communities, our planet, whatever universal mystery we may or may not believe in, and above all, with our own souls? If we don't know who we are and what we most care about, if we don't know how to get along in community with others, if we're too busy pursuing our own wants to make time to be useful to others, we will be left with a hole in our hearts that no amount of college degrees will fill.

So I don't have a parenting hotline straight to Jesus, but here's what I do have. I have you. I am part of a community that values being in right relation with all those things, and works towards it constantly in ways both big and small. Whether it's in Sunday services, or RE classes, or a retreat workshop, or the Coming of Age program that our young teens go through, we are always asking ourselves and one another, what is truly most important? What do we stand for? What is our lodestar? We may not always answer those questions, because after all, as has been said before, Unitarian Universalism is where you go to have your answers questioned, not your questions answered. But that's okay. The point is, we hold space for those questions. And here in

late-stage capitalism, in the constant pressure to work and to consume, that space is not so easy to find.

Unitarian Universalism may not be the oldest religion in the book, but we have history, traditions, and rituals that we can be proud of. We have our chalice that we light, our hymns, ancient and contemporary. We have our seven principles. Which I will not quiz you on just now, but should you need your memory jogged on what they are, I bet the kids in RE can help you. Here at BUF we have our special traditions: our covenant that we recite when lighting the chalice, our water communion in the fall and flower communion in the spring, our child dedication ceremony for welcoming children and babies into the congregation, and our bridging ceremony, for saying goodbye to our youth who are graduating and moving on in life. Some of these traditions we look forward to eagerly, such as the spread of Christmas baking during coffee hour on the last Sunday before Christmas. Others, such as the inevitable embarrassing ice-breaker games to which we are subjected every year on night one of the women's retreat, we, by which I mean I, await with dread. But all of these, even the less enjoyable ones, by their very ritualistic nature, are comforting and valuable, because they serve as daily, weekly, and yearly reminders of who we are and what we stand for.

Some of us might wonder why this is important. Some of us may even be wary of rituals that remind us of faith traditions we intentionally left, or even wary of the idea of religious identity, because we see so many examples in the world of how it can be used

to divide, isolate, and harm. But let me tell you a story about my younger son. (It's important to embarrass your kids equally.)

Several years ago, when he was nine, I was tucking him into bed one night when he asked me, "Mom, are we descended from George Washington?" I had to break it to him that, no, we are not. He frowned anxiously and asked, "Are people who are descended from George Washington better than people who aren't?" It turned out that someone at his school was descended from George Washington and was pretty pleased about that fact.

I took a deep breath and thought hard. In a moment of desperation, my eye fell on the 7 Principles of Unitarian Universalism pamphlet, brought home years ago from RE class, now taped up on the wall behind his bed. I pointed to the first principle. "Look," I said, "our principle clearly states that *Each person is important*, not *Each person descended from George Washington is important*." He perked up a little, still doubtful. "You, my friend," I explained, "belong to a religion that believes that everyone is important, *whether or not* they are descended from George Washington!" He thought about this, and his frown cleared completely. He said, "Okay," and lay back on his pillow with a self-satisfied smile.

This incident reminded me how important it is to know who we are, to take pride in our traditions and our shared beliefs. If I had simply told him that he had the same inherent worth and dignity as anyone descended from George Washington, it might have just rolled off his back, because what do parents know. But because I could point

(literally) to this principle, because I could remind him that he was part of a community of shared belief, that collectively upheld his inherent worth and dignity, it left him feeling both reassured, and proud to be a part of that community.

We at BUF also have an ethic of service. In fact, it's right there in our covenant: Love is the spirit of this fellowship, and *service* gives it life. Not only do we espouse service as a principle, we provide many opportunities to serve. So many opportunities to increase our happiness! We can serve within the congregation in an almost infinite amount of ways, from raking leaves, to drafting budgets. We also provide many opportunities to serve the greater community, through the Social and Environmental Justice Committee, Humanitas, and Family Promise, just to name a few examples. Ours is not an armchair religion. Ours is a religion that calls us to be useful in the world, in ways both large and small.

And it's important, for our own happiness, that we answer that call. Let's be wary of nurturing a religion that, like an overly indulgent parent, gives us only what we want. Even if those things are good. Coffee, cookies, entertainment, camaraderie, music, thought-provoking discussions, like-minded people, a full calendar, moments of awe. These are not bad things, they're all good things. But at the end of the day, a religion that only gives us what we want is not going to give us what we need. A religion that asks something of us, that challenges us to serve and be useful, that challenges us to bring our best selves and our highest priorities into focus, that is the religion we need.

I feel so fortunate to be a part of this community, and to have been able to raise my kids in this fellowship. You give us everything we truly need to be happy. And you ask all the right things of us. You ask us to be useful, to serve, and to be served, also an important skill. You ask us to clarify our beliefs and our priorities. You ask us to contribute money every year to our shared fiscal responsibilities, and we do. We do, because to discern what's important to us as a family, and then put our money into other things, that would be hypocrisy. And although it would be nice to have a fat college savings account, if our kids are motivated, they will surely find a way to get the education they want. We, you and I, this fellowship, we are giving them what they need.

The theme for our spring canvass this year, and maybe all years, is "Together we Transform Lives." And we do. Over the next days and weeks, we encourage you to think about how being part of BUF has transformed your life. In the meantime, let's be proud of who we are, and what we stand for, and what we are actively doing in the world. Be proud. Let your metaphorical chalice-shaped beacon shine out. And then do the things that your religion asks of you. Some Christians have a motto, "Don't go to church, be the church." We Unitarian Universalists are the embodiment of our liberal religious principles. Let's be aware every day of how we embody our principles in the world.

One last note. I mentioned at the beginning that my Christian friend's kids were extremely well-behaved. In case you were hoping that this sermon would include foolproof tips on how to achieve such perfect behavior in our own kids...give it up. It's not going to happen. It's not going to happen, because face it, we Uus embrace chaos.

Do we want our kids regimented and quiet? No! I mean, now and then. But no! We want them to sound their barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world. Maybe metaphorically. That's what we want. We want to tell them, in the words of Walt Whitman,

“This is what you shall do; Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to every one that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labor to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem and have the richest fluency not only in its words but in the silent lines of its lips and face and between the lashes of your eyes and in every motion and joint of your body.”

And so I wish for all of you. Amen.

Please join me in embodying our principle of generosity as we receive the morning offering.