

Sermon  
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Hiking Similar Trails

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Good morning, I'm Sparrow Alden, the Director of Religious Education for this congregation. I'm delighted that Bruce Johnson asked me to speak in his absence and very pleased to be here. If I shared everything with you about James Fowler's stages of spiritual development, we'd be here until at least noon. Instead, I'll focus this morning on the spiritual development of people served by our Sunday School, and give you glimpses into our Sunday School activities. So, come walk with me and let me tell you what I've been reading and learning and, with the guidance of the Religious Education committee and the talent of our volunteer teachers, implementing for our children. This year, our theme is the interdependent world community - ideas about cooperation, covenant, and stewardship.

Unitarian Universalists have been challenged to compose an "elevator speech". In the course of my duties, I share the essence of our faith with visiting parents and children, frequently in the time between a cracker spill and the next squished finger. So I have my "elevator speech" down pat. It has to do with diverse people climbing the same mountain on different paths, experiencing that mountain from an idiosyncratic perspective, helping one another when our paths cross with encouragement and respect for one another's inherent worth and dignity. We may not encounter everyone as we walk our path, but we know they're somewhere hiking their own trail. It's all the same mountain and everyone is on it.

I love to canoe. I've done it since I was small, and when I was twelve began taking long paddles including overnight canoe-camping trips. I learned that it's not about getting to Black Cat Island. The destination is arbitrary; actually arriving is of negligible importance. The point of *this* particular paddle stroke... is *this* particular paddle stroke. Once I figured that out, I learned to truly love the swirling water, the power in my arms

and shoulders, the sound of drops running off my paddle back into the lake.

So, frankly, where I am on my faith path and where my friend may be on her own path are arbitrary. The point of *this* step on my path is *this* step on my path. Not one of us is *more* spiritual. We are where we are. Knowing this, I'll discuss Dr. Fowler's "stages" of spiritual development, knowing that each stage is really a completely different way of approaching, appreciating, and hiking the mountain.

James Fowler is a researcher and theologian who has professed at Harvard and at Boston College and at Emory University. OK, confession. When I first picked up his seminal book, I flipped to the methods and statistics appendix. You can take the Sparrow out of the lab... For a researcher studying qualitative data, Fowler does a darned good job. He and his research team interviewed hundreds of people from age three to "61 and over". He structured the interviews consistently. He spent over two hours with each interview subject; his subjects represented many different faith traditions - including atheists and agnostics - and, reflecting the US population at large, his sample has a majority who identified themselves as Christians. Each interview was rated by multiple judges on the themes expressed, the images used, the type of thinking shown by the subject.

Fowler found some very clear patterns, which have remained reliable over his follow-up research. He found that he could group people's patterns of spiritual beliefs - and the skills they could use to explore and express those beliefs - into "stages". Shakespeare claimed seven ages of man, so does Fowler. But if we all live until very old age, we will pass through all of Shakespeare's stages until "second childishness and mere oblivion." Not so for stages of spiritual development. The stages come in order, but we only reach a different one by actively transitioning to it. When we are fulfilled at a certain stage, then we are where we are, and that's the right place to be, and we can be there for the rest of our lives, appropriately and meaningfully, like the sound of the drops falling off our paddles into the water.

Dr. Fowler, of course, couldn't interview babies and toddlers, so he hypothesizes that at the very beginning of our lives, the stage he calls "Primal Faith" is closely linked to the cognitive abilities and discoveries appropriate to this age. When we care for our babies, cuddle them, feed them, sing to them, they learn to trust the world as a place of caring and safety. This grounding sense of hope encompasses the lessons of object permanence, the idea that Daddy and Mommy are only temporarily out of sight. Baby begins to have faith in "things not seen". The implications for Religious Education, of course, are very clear. The lessons are: you are always safe, you are always loved, Mommy and Daddy will return. And if it's a day when you are crying and kicking and hiding in the furthest corner from the nursery care provider, you are always safe, you are always loved, Mommy and Daddy will return.

Fowler's youngest interview subjects were three years old. People from age three to some as old as age eight clustered together in their expressions of spiritual ideas. Fowler calls it the Intuitive-Projective stage. Religious educators call it "Faith is Caught". Like a wildfire.

This preschool and primary crowd explore ideas about Spirit and God quite intuitively. They also establish habits and foundations of faith by imitating the other members of their nuclear family.

And these young people certainly imitate us! Please, Parents and all grown ups in our community, model a healthy and visible spiritual quest. If you meditate, let your children know. And let them imitate you - first in play, later beside you on their own little mats. Let them see you prepare the table for the feast - including a chalice. Let them help choose a gift for a baby's dedication; let them attend weddings and funerals and worship with you.

Pray together. The simplest thanks over meals and prayers at bedtime can be used by even very young children. What if you're uncomfortable talking to Spirit? What if you have to grope for words? Model learning. John Buehrens made this suggestion for children and adults learning to

pray: "Today I am thankful for..., Today I am sorry for..., Tomorrow I hope..."

How else can we visibly model our faith? Act for social justice together. Take the children with you when you recycle, when you serve a LISTEN dinner, when you give blood. Please, friends, take them with you to vote.

Worship together. Does this mean attending church? Does this mean singing campfire songs with close friends and family? Whatever it means, make it mean for the whole family.

It's vital to these children that there *is* a modeled faith path to imitate. I have met parents who say that they will protect their children from all forms of religion, so the child can choose in young adulthood what is right for them. When the child does not know what healthy, genuine religion looks like, they will have no way to judge the cult which approaches them. When the very human, natural need for spirituality is left void, a manipulative, showy, complicated imitation of religion - particularly one with intensive initiation rites - will fill that void.

What about our Sunday School? These young people grasp the symbols of faith like a lifeline; every class that we offer begins with a chalice lighting and candles of joys and concerns. In Carole Dempsey's preschool class, passing the unlit candle from hand to hand and speaking is a treasured ritual. It is ... complicated ...to have children join us here in the multipurpose room for the beginning of our worship service; it is... extremely complicated ... to have them share our coffee hour space. But these special times are expressions of our faith tradition. Learning to shake hands and say, "Good morning," to sit still, to follow the choir, to read music, to be quiet, to share the cookies, to respect others, to behave kindly and respectfully - these *are* their religious education. We are all their role models. We are all their coaches.

According to the latest longitudinal research on spiritual development, lifelong religious observance can be predicted quite reliably and robustly by one particular variable in the preschool years: the children's father's participation. Dad's modeling of his own spiritual quest gives his children whatever it takes to pursue their own. So thank you,

Dads, for being here with your kids, hiking your own path, but always within earshot. Lives are complicated. Under half of our registered Sunday scholars have a father who is active in our church community, so I want to say a special thank you to the gentlemen whose own children are grown, or are not yet arrived, or are not part of your path this time around who have shared your time and love to be part of our religious education program. Pass the torch.

Dr. Fowler calls the next stage of spiritual development the “Mythic-Literal” stage. Religious educators call it “Faith is Taught”. In the research samples, a few people began to walk this path when they were six years old; the majority were between the ages of seven and twelve; the oldest were in their fifties. The cognitive stage of concrete operations kicks in around seven years old: the drive and ability to experiment, form hypotheses, and discover the patterns of the natural world - and of human behavior. They learn explicit rules of behavior almost as quickly as they learn the implicit ones, and they can spot the inconsistencies. In our religious education classes, we learn about and make classroom covenants with one another. We learn how to respectfully help one another abide by the agreements of our covenants. When we perfect this, I’ll let you know how we do it, but the important thing is that we’re trying.

Seven year olds *can read!* They can take in and process stories with rich levels of meaning. Our Primary class, grades one, two, and three, is led on the three different Sundays by three different lifelong Unitarian Universalists who, between them, draw on nine generations in our faith. Their curriculum centerpiece is Kathy Christie’s captivating storytelling, using stories of community and interdependence drawn from many Native American traditions. Jodie Jones-Poljacik complements the stories with active traditional Native American games. I hope to learn more from Bruce about honoring these kids with recognition and a gift of books in an Age of Reason Ceremony. The support of the whole congregation for this group of young people can take the form of books and monetary donations to our library, bookshelves for our library, volunteer development funds for storytelling workshops - and please mark your calendars now for Sunday,

February 1, when I will share an exciting storytelling method called Spirit Play.

Speaking of books. Unitarian Universalist children love *this* book. (*hold up bible*) This book makes their parents uncomfortable. Their parents don't know this book very well. It's a hit. The children of the Elementary class are in fourth and fifth grades. They talk and learn about community and covenants; with Pam Kneisel, they use the stories of famous Unitarians and Universalists; with Dan Hinch, they use geology and ecology; with me, they use this book. Last month's lesson was about how to find a book, chapter, and verse, and we had a race to Genesis 9:13. The winner got to read aloud, "And I do set my bow in the clouds..." "It just says, 'I set.'" "Mine says, 'rainbow.'" "How can that be?" asked Sparrow. "Aren't they all the Bible?" Much rummaging and flipping of pages. "This one says 'King James.'" "This one says 'Revised Standard.'" And since I'm a little dim, they had to explain to me that different people wrote down different versions of this book. "Oh," said Sparrow. "You mean that different people studying and interpreting the Hebrew texts got different translations out of it?" Next week, I return to this class, and we'll examine Genesis 22:2 - 8. And I will allow one particularly well-behaved child to use *my* own Bible. "Agus thubhairt esan, Gabh a-nis do mhac, d'aon mhac Isaac, as ion-mhainn leat, agus rach do thir Mhoriah" If anyone else has a different-language Bible they'd be willing to loan for one hour, I would be very grateful.

Another uncomfortable topic - people of any age whose path is in this "Faith is Taught" stage develop very clear and concrete ideas about God. God looks like the guy on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. God is frequently perceived as the creator of the natural world, and always as following its laws of physics and cause-and-effect. This anthropomorphized God also follows the rules of human nature. This way of walking with the Spirit of Love and Mystery that some people call God makes many people in other stages quite uncomfortable. But this is where these kids are. Thank you for honoring their own way on their own path.

What happens when the stories begin to contradict one another? Creationism versus evolution? Adam and Eve's son finding a wife in the

next valley over? Reason and the measurable results of science versus transcending mystery and wonder? Around Junior high school, our brains develop “formal operations” - the ability to perceive and wrestle with these seeming conflicts from the outside and to search for the deeper meaning behind them.

At this age, then, young people are mentally ready to move to another way of hiking their path. It's our job to provide them with a rich variety of material and a place and the skills to conduct the inner and the interpersonal discussions to prompt this growth. A quarter of all people regardless of age walk their path in a manner that Fowler calls the “Synthetic-Conventional” stage of spiritual development. We say “Faith is Bought.” We mean that faith is about relationships - with peers, with role models, with the environment, and with God. Fowler writes “the adolescent's religious hunger is for a God who knows, accepts and confirms the self deeply, and who serves as an infinite guarantor of the self within the forming myth of personal identity and faith.” God can be more of a mirror inward, and faith a basis for identity and outlook.

The symbols and habits of our faith tradition which serve as the trees and rocks outlining the path are now assumed. Learning them new would be rather difficult. What our youth are ready for is relationships. Who else are Unitarian Universalists? And what do Unitarian Universalists do? And how do we get along? If a tradition provides an authority figure to youth, a cornerstone of their faith will be defined in terms of their relationship with that authority figure - it may be trust, admiration, rebellion, or rejection with respect to both the figure *and* the authority, but it's an essential feature of the individual's faith.

For the first time in many years, we have a large and active Junior Youth group at the UUCUV. These children are eleven, twelve, and thirteen - not necessarily hiking yet in this “Faith is Bought” way, but I know these kids and they are certainly in transition. Rob Moorhead serves as the anchor for the teaching team. He provides them with the opportunity for discussion as well as journaling time. He models for them skills necessary to the journey. I am deeply grateful for his gentle manner and acceptance of them *where they are*.

What do Unitarian Universalists do together? Well, this group goes once a month with UU grown ups to repair the homes of people in need of help, through the COVER group. They serve LISTEN dinners. They participate in and lead worship services. They play soccer, they discuss books. And anyone who doesn't see the vital core values inherent in Harry Potter hasn't read the books. They eat pizza. They chair meetings.

Remember the longitudinal study about predicting adult church participation? At this age, the most important variable is connections with peers from the wider faith community; our district provides two Junior Youth Conferences each year. Parents, I don't yet have registration forms for the con in Concord on November 7th & 8th, but if you want your young person to go, please e-mail me and I'll send that information directly to the DRE in charge.

We don't provide authority figures. We aim instead to provide role models and guides with whom these young people may make connection. We want to offer them mentors who can act as sounding boards as the kids define and articulate their own faith path. If you can accept a young person where she is, if you can listen to questions and say, "Good question," instead of offering an answer, won't you consider mentoring a young person on Second Sundays during coffee hour beginning in January as they work toward their Coming of Age? Application forms are right here.

What else do Unitarian Universalists do together? We build new paths. Paths of the Spirit, inextricable from Nature. Paths to our neighbors in other churches. Paths inward. Very frequently, we build bridges. We walk side by side when we share our Water Ceremony and Flower Ceremony in celebration of our diversity and commonality. In two weeks we will walk side by side when we honor and celebrate the passing of our loved ones who have gone where we cannot.

Well, there's the first half of James Fowler's theory. If you'd like to hear about the rest, please let the Sunday Services Committee know. For the curious, Faith is Fraught, Faith is Sought, and Faith is Universalizing.

Thank you for walking for a little while with me. Thank you for hearing about our incredible children, perhaps with a new appreciation of



their journeys, not behind us on our trails, but near us, hiking similar trails of their own making through this beautiful New England autumn.