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UNEDITED

Spiritual Dimensions of Parenting

This year's autumn season moves us slowly toward winter. Trees turn gentle reds and browns in the misty milieu of warm valleys. Things are changing. Life in plants and trees diminishing – as leaves curl, falling to the ground. Creating soil for the new life we will be sure to witness in the spring.

And so we gathered this morning to welcome and bless children in our midst...the newest among us. Human beings give birth no matter what the season... a reminder of the possibilities of new life – always present. Any thing is possible as we look into the eyes of our children. And dedicating our children now at this time when the plants and trees are retreating to the dark of the earth... is a chance to remember our part in the circle of life.

A few weeks ago, Connie Barlow told us the Iroquois creation story. The Gods said to the people, you can have immortality or you can have children. But you can't have both. The Grandmothers said, "then, we shall have children." You can have immortality or you can have children. And the Grandmothers who cared for the children and were closest to death themselves chose children. We can't have new life without death.

Birth, death and rebirth invoke spiritual questioning. And then there are the questions about just how to live in between. This morning, as we pause from the stream of life that keeps us immersed in tasks to be accomplished... I would like to invite you into some reflections with me on the spiritual dimensions of parenting.

The first stain glass window installed in this church depicts Jesus telling his disciples to allow the children to come to him. And we continue to live out our forebears belief that children are holy and not just an adjunct part of congregational life. Children join with us at the beginning of each Sunday service, before they go to their circles. They share their sorrow and joys along with us. They hear the joys and sorrows of the adults in their community.

Each Christmas Eve, we share the poem by Sophia Fahs...

*Each night a child is born is a holy night,
Fathers and mothers-
Sitting beside their children's cribs
Feel glory in the sight of a new life beginning...
Each night a child is born is a holy night-
A time for singing
A time for wondering,
A time for worshipping.* [ii](#)

We hold a sense that each child contains a spark of the divine within. And the first ethical principle of our Unitarian Universalist faith is a belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

This idea that god is in each one of us... reminds me of the Eastern Orthodox tradition where Mary is called “Theotokos”, meaning “Godbearer” because she brought God into the world.^[ii] Under our Unitarian Universalist tent we have a great range of beliefs about Jesus and God, but for those of you who are inspired by this image... I invite you to see how your perspective shifts when you consider yourself a Godbearer through whom God may enter the world. As each of us act in kindness, as we listen and are fully present to each child... we nurture this divine spark. We allow God to enter the world again and again. *Each night a child is born is a holy night.* Every child is a holy child.

And of course, that means each of us... child or adult carry that light, spark of divine. We are born into a field of creativity and pure awareness. Some call this “spirit.” And it must be nourished, cultivated. And it is no surprise that what we teach our children is no different from what we must keep teaching ourselves.^[iii] In cultivating the spirit, we grapple with the questions about the meaning of life... how we can live and love well. And when we have the gift of children in our lives- in our families and in this community we are called to be intentional about how we live. Our children are guided much more by how we live and act than they are by what we tell them.

Fundamental to our own spiritual health is the paradox that we must honor our own particularity, along with recognizing how we are part of a whole that is greater than ourselves. Likewise, each child must be honored for the unique individual he or she is.

Kahlil Gibran wrote... “your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of life’s longing for itself. They come through you but not from you.... You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.”^[iv]

And Rainer Maria Rilke wrote... “Once the realization is accepted that even between the closest human beings infinite distances... continue to exist, a wonderful living side by side can grow up, if they succeed in loving the distance between them which makes it possible for each to see the other against the sky.”^[v]

Deepak Chopra in his *Seven Spiritual Laws for Parents* says that the one thing we cannot do without is innocence. He defines innocence as the openness to the unique person your child is, knowing that life is never certain and that love is deeper than surface events. Innocence is the knowledge that your child is yours and yet not yours. I would call this adopting a curious mind about the child in your care, rather than an all-knowing mind locked in preconceived notions.

David Spangler in *Parent as Mystic, Mystic as Parent* says we may know ourselves pretty well- more or less, but a child is a mystery. Their physical features and behaviors may remind us of someone, so we need to drop any assumptions that come to mind based on those characteristics. In our relationships with our children- and with everyone- really- we need to pay attention to when habit takes over- rather than being in the moment of the encounter.^[vi]

Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn’s wonderful book of meditations on the inner work of mindful parenting, begins also with this need to recognize each child’s sovereignty. Kabat-Zinn’s work at the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine at the University of Massachusetts rises

from Buddhist meditation practice. Drawing from their own experience with parenting and mindfulness practice, they invite us to see parenting as a spiritual discipline just as meditation is a spiritual practice.

Since beginning parenting over 26 years ago, I've been amazed by how much caring for children- as parent, aunt, teacher, family or community member when done intentionally can be process of self- analysis. You learn how attached you are to seeing things a certain way, being a certain way, or having things done in a certain way. Children are our live-in Zen masters.^[vii]

We can look at parenting as an extended and sometimes arduous meditation retreat- 18 years long for each child. When we go on a meditation retreat, we simplify our lives, so that we can observe our minds and start to notice its patterns. We engage in moment to moment, non-judgmental awareness. Using our facility for paying attention, mindfulness taps into the order and stillness embedded in and behind all activity- no matter how chaotic. It is not matter of switching into a special state in which everything is different or where your mind goes blank. Rather it is a sustained observing of the whole field of your experience, or some specific element of it.^[viii]

For many of us, going off someplace for an extended retreat is not possible when juggling responsibilities for parenting work and community volunteer projects. For years, I had yearned for such a retreat, but didn't go until my children were grown and I had a short sabbatical last spring. So it is useful to think about how we can use the circumstances of the world and parenting to help us cultivate mindfulness. If we do, we might learn not to get lost in the surface waves of our own minds. And when we are lost... we can stand still as in our David Wagoner poem this morning, What do I do when I am lost in Forest? "Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you are not lost...Stand still. The forest knows where you are. You must let it find you."

In preparing for today, waves of poignant memories from my own experiences with our small children came over me. My husband and I crossed a threshold at the end of August when our youngest son went off to college. I felt a yearning for our amazing babies and cutie-pie toddlers. And I also felt regret for those moments when I lost my temper and for lost opportunities. You may, too, suffer regrets about your parenting. "Grief for lost opportunities, for how we were or weren't in another time, lies deep within the human psyche." It is never too late to work toward healthy connections. We can cultivate awareness of the ways in which our assumptions and expectations might be limiting or disrespectful of our children. It helps to look at our grown children as if we are seeing them for the first time. Any moment together- even on the telephone – is a chance to be present, build trust, attune to them, to be sensitive, to honor their sovereignty. If we find ourselves falling into old negative patterns- critical, unkind, judging, demanding or whatever ways negativity may manifest itself in your relationships- take a moment to look at what happened. And apologize. Then you can begin again.^[ix]

As you are parenting your children, don't forget to parent yourself. Growing up is recognizing that we are each responsible for our own happiness. In healing from a wound from my childhood, I found it useful to think about what I would do for my daughter if she came to me having suffered the abuse that I did. And then I sought out friends and professionals – who would each play parts of the good parent I had needed at the time. In this way, you can re-birth yourself... all things seem possible in the event of a birth.

As part of this community, we do not need to do all this alone. Our Minister Emeritus, Rev. Jeanne Nieuwejaar wrote a book entitled, The Gift of Faith: Tending the Spiritual Lives

of Children. She writes that parents are key religious educators for their children and that the best way to prepare is “immersion in a religious community.” Each Sunday morning and each time we meet in smaller gatherings... we renew a “faith that is more than a system of belief or ideas about religious matters. Here we have the opportunity to develop a faith felt at the core of your being- giving meaning and direction to life- a cushion of care.” Jeanne writes, “The centering and strengthening of religious rituals, the release and commitment that come through communal prayer, the joy of shared celebration, working with others on things that matter most... serving as companion, guide and comforter to one another- all of these dimensions of our experience here in this community can deepen your faith. “... Parents who have a sense of purpose and belonging, a connection to a source of strength and meaning beyond themselves and a sense that there is something ultimate on which to rely communicate that deep, unarticulated sense of faith and trust to a child in a thousand ways. It is conveyed to their children as they face change, uncertainty, or threat, as they forgive, as they reach out (in gratitude) and accept the gifts of the universe.”^[x]

(pause)

When we grow weary and need to put our burdens down for awhile or simply need others to join us on the journey... we gather here with one another. You are not alone. Think of the wondrously mammoth Sequoias in west coast forests. They are weighted by huge branches that you would think would cause them to fall over. But those giant trees- stretching high and wide to the light... remain upright because their roots grow together in an intertwined system. The sequoias hold one another up because they are connected at the root. Despite the fact that our responsibilities forever seem to seduce us away from care of our souls, as human beings we are indeed meant to live in community-. In the community of family and in this community of spirit and learning and mindful presence.

And even though we have roots... it doesn't mean we can't dance. When we sing and move, we find our wings. And with help from God, spirit, family, friends and community... it will indeed be possible to give our children both roots and wings. Let's join in singing, Let it be a Dance.

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