

What/Who/Where/Why
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I'm interested in children, and in their religious education, their development of religious faith. Actually, I'm interested in faith development over one's whole lifetime. That is expected of Unitarian Universalist ministers. When I began my ministerial internship, back in the fall of 2001, at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Princeton - I'm going back as their guest preacher on June 1, by the way - one of the gaps in my ministerial preparation was religious education for children. As a member, for quite a few years, of the UU Church of Arlington, I had never taught RE. Singing in the choir filled that time slot. And when Kerry and I got married, her children were already eleven and seven, so I had missed out on the early years.

But at the Princeton church, to fill that gap, I was asked to teach - with an experienced co-teacher - a class of 5th and 6th graders. We did Neighboring Faiths that year, with several weeks in the middle of the year devoted to OWL, Our Whole Lives.

Because of my interest in religious education for children and, in particular, my interest in children's RE here among the Unitarian Universalists of Gettysburg, I thought I should undertake a research project during spring break, to talk to kids, to learn about their religious lives. I'll share with you this morning several of the more interesting interviews from this project, seven of them, actually. At the beginning of each interview I would make a simple request to the young person, "please tell me about your religion."

Here are the responses of two children, Jaylin and Jessie, ages eleven and nine, growing up in a Presbyterian family. First Jaylin.

1. I like going to church. I like being in church. I'm not sure why. I like the way it feels when we're all in the sanctuary together, when I'm sitting in the pew between my parents, with Chris. I like it when the organ plays, filling the sanctuary with its big, mysterious sound, and when we all sing the hymns. It's the music, when we sing the hymns, it's the music, not really the words, that give me that funny feeling. But sometimes, when I'm not at church, the words, not just the music, will just pop into my head - "As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen, Amen." I'm not sure what that's all about, but it's part of me.

If feels like a safe place, our church. My grandparents, my mother's parents, were with us for the weekend recently. Usually they and my father have a good time together, but this time something seemed different. My grandparents seemed cool; it's not like them. My father

seemed to go out of his way not to engage with them. I don't know. Maybe that was all in my imagination. But Sunday morning it felt especially good to be in the sanctuary again, to recite together, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." It was as though all was right with the world.

We're Presbyterians. Why? I don't think anyone has ever asked me that before. We're Presbyterians. We just are. We always have been. I know that some of my friends are Methodists, some are Baptists. I don't know why. They just are. What are the differences? I have no idea. I guess I've always assumed that there weren't any differences, that they were all really all the same, underneath, just a different label.

Most of the time when we go to church, I'm in Sunday school. That's OK. Usually. But it's the time in worship in the sanctuary, looking at the stained glass windows, leaning against my mother's shoulder and falling asleep during the pastor's sermon, waking up again to the sound of the organ – that's what's special.

Next Jessie, the younger child of this Presbyterian family.

2. I've been going to church with my family every Sunday as long as I can remember. The church, well, you could say that it's at the center of our life. Recently, my father has gotten even more involved than he used to be. A lot of late night meetings. My mother has even taken to nagging him some for being out so much. And we all like the new pastor who started last fall. A woman. She's just as good.

But lately I've gotten worried. We all believe in Jesus, and that means we're saved, we'll be together again in heaven – I'm thinking of my grandparents, they're getting old, my grandfather turned 72 a few weeks ago. But what about the people that lived before Jesus was born? What about the people in China, or India, who have never heard about Jesus? Will they be saved too? God must have thought of this, and taken care of it, but I feel confused.

Over on the other side of town, there's a synagogue. I've never been in it. My mother says the people there – Jews, I think she said they're called – that they don't believe in Jesus at all. What will happen to them?

In Sunday school this year we've been reading stories from the Old Testament. We've learned about Noah, and Abraham and Sarah, and Joseph and his brothers. But I've been thinking about Moses. His people were held in slavery, and finally Pharaoh let them go, and they set out for the Promised Land, and then Pharaoh changed his mind and sent his army after them, and then they were at the Red Sea and how would they escape from Pharaoh's army?

And there are two things that bother me. First, God parted the waters of the Red Sea so they could escape. Well, Moses knew the Red Sea was there, didn't he? It must be on all the maps. Why didn't he choose a different route? But more importantly, what's with God here?

Can God just do that – part the waters? I’ve never heard of anything like that in our life time. Why hasn’t God intervened in Syria? Why didn’t God save that Korean ferry, with all the children on board? Or why didn’t God save that Malaysian plane that mysteriously disappeared?

But what happens next bothers me even more. Pharaoh’s army continued to chase after the Israelites and God released the water and they all drowned. That just doesn’t seem right. It wasn’t they’re fault. They were just obeying orders. Couldn’t God have saved the Israelites without killing all the soldiers?

I haven’t read much of the Bible myself, but how do we know it’s all true? Jesus taught his followers to “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” and that it’s “better to give than to receive.” That seems to make sense, but is that because Jesus said it, or is it something else?

Sorry, one question just seems to lead to another.

The adults in church recite the Apostles’ Creed every Sunday. I wonder if they understand it. Will I be able to understand it, when I’m an adult? “I believe in the resurrection of the body.” Do I? How should I know? What if you’ve been cremated?

Next is an interview with a child, Amari, age twelve, whose parents are, or at least were, hostile to religion.

3. I think, well, I’m quite sure, I got my ideas about religion from my parents. But now they’ve changed their minds – holy bother!

Let me explain. My father’s family was Jewish, in an ethnic, cultural sense. I doubt if dad ever set foot in a synagogue growing up. My mother’s family was AME, that’s African Methodist Episcopal, you know – AME in the sense that if someone asks you what are you and you say AME they won’t give you a hard time. Hers was the kind of family that might complain to the pastor that they sing the same hymns every time they come.

My parents taught me about religion, by their behavior, by their skeptical and disparaging remarks, and by direct instruction. Religion is a mistake; it’s misguided, a crutch, superstition. You’re better off without it. My mother is an engineer. She likes logic, mathematics, verifiable facts. She can’t get two sentences into the Bible without talking back – who says? how do you know? My father’s a nurse. He gets upset when chaplains or priests try to comfort patients or their families with assurances of God’s love, or when they offer prayers for help they know won’t be delivered.

So here’s what happened. A couple of months ago my parents attended a memorial service for a colleague of my mother’s who had died. A memorial service at a Unitarian Universalist church. They were impressed with the no-nonsense attitude towards death. They

were impressed that it was the celebration of a life and not just an opportunity to drum up business for Christ. They were moved by the hymns they sang. There was one they mentioned in particular, Spirit of Life, I think it was called. During the reception they talked to some of the members of the congregation. They were touched by their stories of how they had discovered Unitarian Universalism and what it meant to them. They talked a little with the pastor, who was very welcoming, and gave them some pamphlets.

So they've been going to that church pretty regularly, and now they want me to come with them. I should unlearn everything they've taught me? They had been telling me that it's time for me to start becoming more independent. I agree. I can decide about Sunday morning for myself. They told me about the so-called OWL curriculum. I forget what that stands for, but it's about sex. Come on! They think I don't know all that stuff already? Where do they think I've been hiding? Actually, I think I know a few Unitarian kids at school. They do chess club, poetry, tutoring, book drive. If I start hanging out with them, there goes my reputation.

The next child, Riley, age eleven, has been growing up unchurched.

4. Religion – that's unknown territory for me. It's not part of our family's life. I went to a wedding in a church once. I didn't get much out of it. Had trouble hearing what they were saying, couldn't see very well from where we were sitting, and it seemed to be over when it had just begun. Friends of my parents, I didn't know them. Apparently they're divorced now.

My parents are divorced now, too. My mom's been seeing a guy, says he's a Mormon. Should I care?

My father tells me that he was brought up Catholic, but his parents were pretty indifferent to Catholicism, just sent him to church to make *their* parents happy. He stopped going when he was a teen, and he's never gone back.

My mother was brought up Lutheran part of the time and Episcopal part of the time. It depended on where they lived, or which priest her parents liked better. But they were marginal at best, and didn't object when she dropped out, when she was a teen. She said she had a renewed interest in religion as a young adult – I think it had to do with someone she was dating – but it didn't last.

I do hear about church some from friends in school. But it doesn't make much sense to me. I'm interested in the here and now, not the pie in the sky by and by. Social injustice, income inequality, racial discrimination, global warming, mistreatment of animals, war – that's what concerns me. How does spending an hour in church each week help with all that?

The next child, Quinn, age ten, is from a “spiritual but not religious” family.

5. When kids ask me where we go to church, I don't know what to say. The simple answer would be just to say we don't. But the way they ask the question, I don't think that would satisfy them. I've asked Dad about that. He suggested, not very helpfully, if you ask me, that I should say that ours is a spiritual but not religious family. Great. I don't really know what "religious" means, and I sure as hell have not the slightest idea what "spiritual" means. Pop hasn't been much help either. He said his family used to go to church when he was young, but not very regularly. Then when he was about 11 they moved to a new town and never bothered to find a new one.

Am I missing something? We take long hikes together, Dad, Pop, Chris, and I; we go to the shore several times during the summer; they take us to concerts and museums. We talk about the future, about how we should treat other people, and animals, about what the world might be like in fifty years, about whether there's life anywhere else in the universe. I'm taking 'cello lessons. Am I missing something?

"In God we trust." I've heard that slogan. No one's ever been able to explain to me what it means. I've been told – not by Dad or Pop but by others – that I should love God. I say, OK, I'll try that, what do I need to do, exactly? How does one go about loving God? I never get a coherent answer.

And now we have something else. Pop and Dad have decided to get married. It's legal for them here now. They feel that it's a big deal, and they want to do it right. They've always understood that weddings are held in churches, or at least that the ceremony is performed by a minister, by a member of the clergy. But they're not part of a church: spiritual but not religious, remember? They've been looking around, and asking friends. They haven't made up their minds yet, but they're thinking of asking the minister at our local Unitarian Universalist church whether he'll do it. Oh, I think they referred to the minister as "she" actually.

I have no idea what Unitarian Universalism is, but maybe I'll be finding out.

And, next, we have Emerson, twelve years old, a child, finally, growing up in a Unitarian Universalist family.

6. I'm a Unitarian Universalist. Did I say that with conviction? Did I say that with pride? Actually, it's much more complicated than that. I'm not really sure what I am, and I'm quite unsure about what I'll be in five or ten years. But I hope I'll stick with it.

Here's the deal. My father was brought up UU. His father had been brought up Unitarian, his mother something else before they were married, Evangelical United Brethren, I think it was. My mother was brought up Presbyterian. She thought it was important to bring up the children to have a religious faith; he wasn't so sure. His concession was that he would agree to have a family religion, as long as it was Unitarian Universalist. As a Presbyterian he would feel like a hypocrite. My mother acquiesced, but without much enthusiasm.

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So they've brought up Chris and me as UUs, but family attendance has been irregular, and they don't volunteer any more than they can get away with.

I'm the active one in the family. I often ask myself why this is, and will I keep the faith when I'm older?

Here's my take on Unitarian Universalism, here's why I'm part of it.

- First, we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We don't give up on people. We don't believe that anyone is going to hell.
- Second, we believe in our world, this world, here and now. We need to take care of our planet and all its inhabitants. We need to be part of the struggle for justice, the struggle for peace.
- Third, we believe in the use of reason and in the empirical approach of science. I don't know about God, but I certainly cannot accept a God who occasionally intervenes and sets aside the laws of nature. What a chaotic world that would be.
- Fourth, there's more to life than math and science. There's music, art, poetry, mystery, love, and on and on.
- Fifth, there's no substitute for religious community. We need the love and support of others, and they need ours.

But what will I do if I fall in love with a Presbyterian – or with anti-religious fully secular atheist?

Here's the last one, Kamryn, age eleven, the child of a religiously mixed marriage.

7. Couldn't you ask me something easier, say, about sex or politics or money? I don't know much about religion. We don't talk about it in my family.

Here's the situation, as I understand it. My mother is Jewish, or was Jewish. My father comes from a Muslim family. They met in high school, in Detroit, Michigan. They kept up with each other off and on over the years, and when they were in their late 20's something happened between them, and they got married. I don't think either family fully approved. We see my mother's family from time to time, and we see my father's family from time to time. But we never see both of them together. I haven't dared ask about the wedding. I wasn't there. Well, actually I was, but not so one would notice.

We don't talk about religion at home, but, maybe because of that, I'm quite interested in it. I've done research on the Internet, and my friends and I at school have long, deep discussions. Being half Jewish and half Muslim and living in a Christian society, I try to find the common elements, the best features, of the three faiths. I don't know if it's possible.

The first challenge is Jesus Christ. Judaism and Islam are unequivocally monotheist. A God in three persons? A Jesus who is both man and God, human and divine? I don't think so. I can accept Jesus as a teacher, a prophet, a victim of the Roman oppressors, but that's as far as I'll go.

The second challenge is God, and the man God picked to get things going. I don't mean Adam, or Noah, but Abraham. God instructed Abraham to kill, to murder his son, Isaac, and Abraham, without hesitation, agreed and would have done it, if God had not intervened in the nick of time. Abraham didn't even consult the boy's mother, his wife, Sarah. What kind of god gives such commands? What kind of man obeys them?

Do I have to make up my own religion, or is there a faith community, a religious home that is waiting for me?