

Nourishing the Spiritual Child By James Galasinski

Today marks the first time I am preaching here as a father. However, last Sunday I was a pulpit guest at the UU church in Durango.

When I was there, I gave them a blessing of grace and peace from everyone at First Unitarian.

So, I would like to reciprocate:

grace and peace to you from the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Durango.

My wife, Ulrike, and son, Miles, we all went together and made a trip of it.

From my position during the service in the front of the church, I noticed Ulrike had to get up a few times and walk around with Miles.

After the service I asked her how he did during the service. Her response, "He was very cranky and fidgety, that is, until you started talking, then he just fell asleep."

I hope I don't have that affect on you today!
In fact, my first commandment of preaching is
"Thou shall not bore."

A ministerial mentor of mine told me his entire spiritual odyssey once.

One of the highlights of his spiritual life was the birth of his first child.

Let me tell you, I was there for Miles' birth,

I saw my wife in pain,

I saw all the rawness and the beauty.

I can't say it was not a transcendent experience like my mentor described.

But it was not the most spiritual moment of my life.

I have found the ordinary moments of Miles smiling at me or falling asleep together that have been more profound.

For so long, I thought having kids would impede my happiness, but I have realized having children *is* happiness.

Being a father, I am thinking a lot about what I want for him.

Essentially I want the same thing for him that I want for all the children and youth at this church, and all of you.

I want you to take the inner quest,

console with your higher self,

be connected to the Universe,

with something greater than yourself,

perform acts of service

develop a spiritual practice that makes your life whole,
ponder the big questions
these, I think, are the roads that lead to happiness
and to a fulfilled life.

I highly recommend a book I just recently read,
*The Spiritual Child: The New Science on Parenting for Health and
Lifelong Thriving*
by Psychologist Lisa Miller.

Her research shows the youth that developed and cultivated the
kind of spiritual life I am talking about are less likely to engage in
risky behavior like unprotected sex and reckless driving, abuse
drugs, and get depressed.

Now, I am getting dangerously close to violating my 2nd and 3rd
commandments of preaching which are closely linked to my 1st
commandment,

"Thou shall not give a book report!"

and

"Thou shall not give statistics."

But I think these are really powerful statistics and that is why I
mention them here.

I always knew there were benefits to the religious life,
I knew the spiritual life made me a better person
and made me happier
but I did not know you could quantify it.
Our spiritual lives do matter
and how we nourish the next generation will and does matter.
In some cases, it can be a matter of life and death.

So how do we nourish our children spiritually?
This question is not just for parents
but for grandparents, godparents, aunts, uncles, mentors,
teachers, ministers, and all of us here at First Unitarian who take
some responsibility of raising up our community's children and
youth.

Let's look back at our reading from the *Parent's Tao Te Ching*.
"Do not try to teach religion to your children."
This is a hard teaching in and of itself.

Aren't we supposed to be teaching religion?
Across the courtyard there, we have a whole building committed
to doing just that.

However, religion, as a set of principles or rules, is not what I want to pass onto my child.

Instead we should be nourishing a natural spirituality, a quality of experience that is native in all of us.

Not some supernatural realm outside of our ordinary lives. According Lisa Miller, starting as early as ages 4 or 5, children have these moments of transcendent experience.

I don't know how old I was, 8 years old maybe, I remember going to a Christmas Eve service at the Lutheran church I grew up in.

We sang Silent Night in the dark, the only lights being the one star high above the altar, the advent wreath candles and the light coming from organist's lamp.

A simple, beautiful, ritual that everyone looked forward to, young and old.

We sang the hymn in German, Stille Nacht .

Wow.

That experience still sticks with me, forever engrained in my memory.

I considered myself a religious naturalist.

That the earth and all the natural processes of life provide me with enough awe, reverence and sense of worship.

We evolved to be religious and spiritual experiences are real and meaningful pursuits.

Being religious and/or spiritual is a natural longing we all universally have in some shape or form.

So natural spirituality is located in the interior,
it is mysterious and transcendent

that all of us have experienced,

Psychologist, Abraham Maslow would have called it a peak experience.

Maslow concluded that the most creative people are fueled by these experiences.

Our religious community should be in the business of making the spiritual come to the forefront of our lives.

If we want to teach natural spirituality,
we need to start with experience.

If I want to teach my son about basketball,
am I going to start out telling him that a basket is 10 feet high
and a court is 94 feet by 50 feet?

No.

I am going to shoot some hoops with him.

(Pull out the basketball and take a shot.)

Maybe watch a game together.

Play one on one.

Offer him experiences.

If he likes it, I may show him some moves. (Do some dribbling.)

I can speak about the game of basketball but it is nothing without a ball.

I can speak about life but it is never life itself.

I can speak about spirituality but is never spirit.

The Tao that can be uttered and understood is not the Tao.

So in teaching natural spirituality we guide them into moments of marvel in all the different manifestations of life.

By encouraging a natural spirituality that is felt in their hearts, we are saying that revelation is continuous.

We should not make our children dependant on other's words but instead dependant on their own inner experience.

Like it or not, parents are primary models of spirituality.

According to German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, God is just a projection of our desires and wants. Psychologist Sigmund Freud added that God was a projection of our father figure. Paul Tillich, the Liberal Protestant theologian of the 20th century in response to Freud and Feuerbach took their metaphor of projection a step further and said:

"projection always is projection *on* something --a wall, a screen, another being, another realm.... The realm against which the divine images are projected is not *itself* a projection. It is the *experienced* ultimacy of being and meaning. It is the realm of ultimate concern."

Freud is right on some level, our sense of the divine is wrapped up in our parents. If you were loved unconditionally we are more likely to think of God as love, if we saw our parents as peaceful we might see the ultimate as peace. In the first decade of life, parents and main care-givers *are* the child's universe.

I used to think my dad knew everything.
How many of you can remember thinking that?
Parents and main care givers are god-like creatures to children
and *thus have the ability to set the table for a feast of spiritual experiences.*

First and foremost comes the simple act of loving the child unconditionally.
In so much of our culture, family has turned into breeding ground for skills and competition,
where parents are pushing their kids to do more and more.
Yet the Tao tells us do less and less.

Lisa Miller asks parents to instead build a "field of love", which help children bridge into the realm of ultimate of concern.
Family then becomes sacred in and of itself
In the first decade of life we are laying the groundwork for their spiritual lives by:
participating with them in spiritual practices,
bringing them to church,
going into nature and noticing beauty together,
we are normalizing the experience of being grasped by ultimate meaning.

Yet, it is loving children in a non-possessive way that turns out to be the best way to instill spirituality.

And a religious community like this one becomes part of that field of love.

We become part of the sacred family.

Fortunately, those of us who have or had parents that for whatever reason could not love them unconditionally, they we may be drawn to a loving grandparent, a youth minister, a teacher or a mentor.

While other youth, who did not experience the parental field of love might skip the projection step and directly relate to the wall or screen and be ultimately grasped by the transcendent realm directly.

Life has a way of healing itself.

Simply put, The Parent's Tao Te Ching says

If your children find in you

a sincere celebration of who you are

They will return eventually

to their own natural joy and natural spirituality

in themselves and in you

They learn the art of happiness, contentment, and peace from us.

If we want them to be spiritual then we must also be spiritual ourselves.

If we want them to be happy, we must be happy ourselves.

If we want them to be content, we must be content ourselves.

If we want them to be peaceful, we must be peaceful ourselves.

We spiritually nourish our children by keeping ourselves nourished.

It is a vicious circle.

In short, our spiritual journeys must continue.

And when appropriate we must tell personal stories

I have an Uncle Beno, not sure why he is called that, his real name is Robert.

He moved away when I was very young and became a wealthy businessman in California.

I have not seen him in decades.

But when I was sixteen he came and visited.

He pulled me aside

and told me about an ecumenical retreat he went on, a rabbi, a catholic priest, a protest minister led it.

He described it to me as something "beyond goose pimples".
He said if he could do it all over again he would have become a Catholic Priest but he did not pay enough attention to the inner life in his pursuit of wealth.

I must have been 16 years old.

Weeks later I received a book in the mail from him,
Seeds of Contemplation by the Catholic Monk, Thomas Merton.

That was an influential part of my spiritual journey.

His story and reading that book made me aware of an intentional spiritual life.

Again from the Parent's Tao Te Ching:

The things remembered,

the treasured moments

of sacred time

have occurred

in the quiet

of gentle conversation

and honest sharing.

Let your gentle presence teach all that is necessary

Love them, show interest in their spiritual development,

model for them the spiritual life.

Bless'ed be those rocks in our lives,
who led us into more meaning,
guided us into deeper realms of being,
who showed us the Tao.

Bless'ed be those cairns in our lives who show us the Way.
May we be those foundational stones to others.
May we spiritually nourish the children in our lives,
not with facts and principles
but with basketballs of experience
and with marveling at all the manifestations of life.

Not with knowing but with being.

Amen

Blessed Be