

**"Like a Carefully Loaded Ship"  
What Shall We Teach Our Children?  
What Shall We Teach Each Other?**

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(Old Ship Church)  
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**Reading**

In a house which becomes a home, one hands down and another takes up the heritage of mind and heart, laughter and tears, musings and deeds. Love, like a carefully loaded ship, crosses the gulf between the generations.

Therefore we do not neglect the ceremonies of our passage: when we wed, when we die, and when we are blessed with a child; when we depart and when we return; when we plant and when we harvest. Let us bring up our children. It is not the place of some official to hand them their heritage. If others impart to our children our knowledge and ideals, they will lose all of us that is wordless and full of wonder....

We live, not by things, but by the meanings of things. It is needful to transmit the passwords from generation to generation.

--Antoine de St. Exupery

**Sermon**

The children who were here earlier will live into the end of this century, a few of them perhaps into the next, the 22<sup>nd</sup> century, if we can get our minds around that!

We will be with these children for some of their journey, but not for all of it. We wonder, then: What will their lives be like at the end of this century – what will their children's and grandchildren's be like into the next?

I dearly do not want them to be living in an impoverished, more dangerous world – a much warmer world of climate extremes and perhaps half as much species' diversity as we appreciate today, a world shadowed by more terror, more extremes of wealth and poverty, or still with the danger of nuclear war... None of us would want any of this for the next generation or the next or for any generation.

We would prefer to imagine a far better world, a kinder and safer world, a more tolerant world, a world in which our human presence is more in harmony with the whole of the natural order of which we are a part.

So... to help bring such a better world into being, and to avoid our worst fears for the world and for our children... what ought we to teach our children... and, for that matter... one another? For whatever else we do to contribute our share of goodness and creativity, peace and justice to the world, surely one of the most important things we can do is to help shape the lives of the children and young people in our midst, even as we continue also to teach and learn from one another.

A few stories evoke for me what I hope we can pass from one generation to the next:

First story:

When I was a summer camp counselor in the Adirondacks, one of my responsibilities was to take the boys – 8-10 year olds – on hikes. My official title was actually Pioneering Counselor. Well, near the end of the summer a few boys earned the right to an overnight hike. One summer we hiked about two or three miles away and camped out near the foot of a little mountainside. The next morning I heard two of the boys stirring in the next tent. The sun had just risen and was shining brightly across the valley. The birds were singing their sunrise bird symphony. One of the boys whispered to the other: “David, aren’t those beautiful sounds?!”

Wonder. That’s the first thing I would want to teach our children, and teach one another too. Wonder.

To begin with, a good in itself, one of the ingredients for a rich, awakened life.

Yet also out of wonder comes much more besides, comes love for life and love for the earth, the birds, the trees, the flowers, each particular and spectacularly unique thing.

And from this love comes the desire to sustain and care for it all – whether as scientist or poet or simply as citizen – the desire to care for the creation, to play a vibrant role of the continuing unfolding of life in the universe story of which we are a part. One of our most important tasks, now and always.

So... let us teach our children wonder. And let us remind each other of wonder.

Second story:

This may or may not be a true story. It is nevertheless a short story. You may well have heard it before. An adult is walking home, turns the corner, only to see two small boys sitting by their bikes crying. When one of the children is asked why he is crying, he says it’s because he fell off his bike. When the other little boy is asked why *he* is crying, he says it is to keep his friend company.

Compassion. We must teach our children compassion; and I suppose (as with so many things) we do it best through our own example. Easy enough... yet we must not forget.

And compassion, like wonder, is good in itself, one of the ingredients for a rich, awakened life.

Yet out of our heart’s compassion also grows a passion for justice and a fervent desire for peace. Out of compassion grows a spirit of acceptance and tolerance for others, regardless of their color, background, or religion in our rainbow tapestry of humanity.

So, let us teach our children (and one another) compassion, and by extension know that we are also teaching them acceptance, tolerance, justice, and peace.

Yes, let us teach them – and remind ourselves of – the heart’s compassion.

Third story:

In high school I had an English teacher named Mr. Hillman. He is among the first of my teachers who quite clearly expected us to think for ourselves. I remember for example that we read Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and Mr. Hillman expected us not just to spit back chapter and verse; he demanded that we have some original thoughts about the issues raised in this great piece of English literature. In particular I remember struggling for the first time with the enduring philosophical question of free will versus determinism. If God was all powerful and all knowing, then he knew ahead of time that Adam and Eve would make the mistakes that landed them in so much trouble; and yet Milton’s book said that they were free to decide for themselves whether to obey or disobey God’s will. How did all this work? And even if you believed there is no God,

doesn't the cause and effect of the *natural* world take away the freedom that we *feel* we have?

Well, that was just the beginning for me, as I was blessed with many other teachers and professors who expected their students to think for themselves; and of course by then our family had become part of a religious tradition – this one! – which expected this too.

So... I believe we must teach the value – and ourselves remember the value – of the freedom of thought and the discipline of thinking clearly and rationally.

Once again, this is good in and of itself for the living of a rich and awakened life, as we develop our personal philosophy of life. But clear thinking, unfettered by the dictates of dogma or so-called accepted wisdom, is also essential as we struggle to come to our own conclusions about shared social and political matters of great weight in a democratic society and a complex world.

We must teach the value of the freedom of thought and the discipline of clear, rational thinking.

Now, I don't have a story which has to do with the next thing I would want us to teach our children and one another. And there is more than one way to put this.

Here's a start: I would want our children to know that we are more than our desires and our immediate physical and emotional needs. To put it another way, I would want our children to know and realize and experience that they are part of a larger reality than themselves. They will as they grow and mature each have a different name for this reality, for this knowing – or at the least this suspicion – that *we* are and the *world* is in some sense more than meets the eye. Humanity itself has, after all, always had varied ways of naming what I'm talking about: God, Soul, Oversoul, Tao, Brahman, the Interdependent Web of Existence, or simply the Creation. You know what I'm talking about.

Why does this kind of knowing – or at least an openness to the possibility of such knowing – matter? I'll just speak personally. To begin with, it helps me to let go into the way things are at those times when I feel the weight of the world, feel like it is all up to me, for example, to end war and poverty and so on. And it helps me to let go of what are often relatively trivial and mundane concerns looming much too large; so it helps me to let go into more effectively working together with others to do what needs to be done here and now.

All this, too, is good in itself, for the living of a rich and more awakened life – part of something much larger than this our skin and bones.

The final thing I would want to teach our children – and remind ourselves – has to do with the phrase Joseph Campbell once coined, his invitation to young people and to all of us, as he put it, "to follow your bliss."

What did he mean? Here's his story: He would have conversations over the years with the students he advised at Sarah Lawrence College, where he taught for most of his career as a historian of mythology and religion. His students would often come and want to talk about what they should do with their lives. The conversation might go on in a desultory manner for awhile, until at some point Campbell would in one way or another get his student to talk about something she or he truly loved to do. Then her eyes would shine, her speech would take on a new animation. Then he was more alive!

Why? Campbell's students had touched their bliss, that activity or field of study or goal that had to do with *their* passion, *their* gifts, *their* life – not the life someone else thought best for them, but the life *they* could live from the center and fullness of *their* being.

It is not an easy thing to teach. But somehow – again, perhaps best by example –

we need to help our children discover their bliss, that which makes them feel truly more alive... because, yes... not only is this the route to a fuller, richer, more awakened life, but it is the way in which we can best be able to contribute to our *shared* life.

What, then, shall we teach... our children and one another?

Wonder – so that we might better care for the natural world, for the earth, might better play our part in the unfolding of the story of life.

Compassion – along with acceptance, tolerance, justice, peace – in short, so that we might better care for one another.

Freedom of thought and use of reason – so that we might arrive at a carefully considered philosophy of living and so that we might better engage in the social and political conversations of our time.

An openness to the “more than meets the eye” of life – call it what you will – so that we might be less selfish and more giving; so that we might more easily at least now and then simply let go into the creation of which we are a part.

And finally – may we teach our children to follow their bliss, whether through a career or an avocation or activism, to find ways of using and developing and growing *their* unique gifts in service of life.

Wonder, compassion, freedom of thought and the use of reason, openness to the invisible “more” of life, and the invitation to follow your bliss.

Well, you might have your own list. I would quickly note, though, before I close by pointing out that in many ways I discover that I have simply put into my own words much that is in our Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes – look for yourself and I think you’ll see what I mean: the inherent worth and dignity of every person, the interdependent web, the search for truth and meaning....

This said, teaching our children and one another the words – our UU Principles or the words of a sermon – is one thing. *Awakening* our children and one another to the meaning of the words and of our lives is quite another.

So – whether in a classroom or in worship, whether in the midst of social service or socializing, whether playing music or playing on the swings... this is our task, all that I’ve said put simply: to *awaken* our children and one another – to awaken ourselves to life and love, to the gifts of heart and mind, to the realities of life’s challenges as well as to the opportunities before us to contribute to the betterment of all, to the service of the continuing unfolding of life.

Like a carefully loaded ship, then, may we continue to pass love, and much else with our love, from generation to generation – good in itself so to do... *and*... so that the end of this century and into the next will be better, far better than our worst fears, perhaps even reaching toward our highest hopes.

So may it be.