

A Carefully Loaded Ship

Lynn Ungar

Antoine de St.-Exupery writes:

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...Let us bring up our children. It is not the place of some official to hand to 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. Let us build memories in our children, lest they drag out joyless lives, lest they allow treasures to be lost because they have not been given the keys. We live, not by things, but by the meanings of things. It is needful to transmit the passwords from generation to generation.

Nice words. I've used them on a variety of occasions over the years, especially since they comprise one of the very few readings on the subject of children that are to be found in our hymnbook, and since child dedications and Mother's Day and Father's Day all come around with alarming regularity. However, St.-Exupery's lovely words took on a different ring for me recently. Five months and four days ago, to be more precise. You see, on November 6th, at about 4:00 in the afternoon, I became a mom. When my partner Kelsey and I met the head of the adoption agency in the parking lot and she handed over that little bundle I not only became a parent, I became a Unitarian Universalist parent. This liberal faith, which has formed much of the center of my life at least since the time I was in high school, didn't back out of the way when little week-old Mattea wormed her way into the center as well. Well, it backed out of the way for a month of maternity leave, but then it was back with a vengeance. Now not only was I a U U, I as a U U with a heritage to impart. The arrival of my daughter assured me that I had treasures far beyond my own meager resources that I wanted to make sure she knew the password to. In plainer English, I am not someone who feels that so long as my child knows that she is free to follow her own path and to choose amongst the world's religions, or no religion at all, that I have done my job. I'm not so naive as to think that I can dictate my daughter's choice of faith any more than I will be able to dictate her choice of music or clothing, but I'm not willing to go down without a fight. I want Téa to hold on to my knowledge and ideals, the parts of my faith and my world that are wordless and full of wonder. I want her to grow up to be a Unitarian Universalist. If it's good enough for me it's good enough for her. Except that I really do want it to be good enough for her. I want a religion that is as beautiful and strong and open and inquisitive and loving and determined as my little girl. I want her to grow up U U, but only if she finds, all through her life, that our faith offers her something worth staying for.

And in my cynical moments, which I confess I've been having a lot of lately, I'm not sure that our religious movement has enough to offer to merit my utterly remarkable child. (If you think I might be prejudiced in that matter of just how uniquely marvelous my own particular baby is, feel free to seek further verification from her grandparents.) I want Mattea to grow up a U U, to stay within the fold, but not if the fold looks to me like a religion founded more in vagueness than in freedom, more in debate than either contemplation or action, more in challenging the authority of our own leadership than in challenging principalities and powers. If our U U movement is the ship that is crossing the generation between us and all of our utterly remarkable children, I want to be pretty damn careful about what the ship is loaded with.

Like most anyone who brings their child into a church, I am primarily interested in my kid getting a religious education. A religious education, however, is not something that just happens in a classroom in the basement or the RE wing while the adults are doing 'real church' Religious education is the process of educating people in what it means to be religious, and it happens in everything we do at church -- everything. Any person, whatever their age, starts receiving bits of religious education the moment they walk in our doors, and they don't stop getting it until they're somewhere down the street. How we greet people, or fail to greet them at the door, who is present or absent at our worship services, the state of building, our expectations about noise and silence, the way we use or don't use nametags, all of it teaches us, for better or for worse, about what it means to be a liberal religious community.

Our community teaches us, and we learn. For example, Mattea, in her five months of church-going, has already mastered an understanding of our first principle. Well, maybe she's a little unclear about the inherent worth and dignity of every person, but she's quite thoroughly convinced of her own worth and dignity. It's the first religious lesson she needs to learn, and she gets reminded of it any time she's held, smiled at, recognized, included in the life of the community. Luckily, she's a friendly baby, and it doesn't hurt that she's cute as a button. I just wonder whether she'll continue to be taught the lesson of her worth and welcome when she's a toddler, and careening around the room during coffee hour, or a teenager who wears her hairs in strange shapes or colors, or a young adult who questions all the accepted ways of doing things. What I know is that a Unitarian Universalism worth her staying with won't stop delighting in her for who she is when she stops being a cuddly baby. If we are the open religion we say we are, there will always be a place for her, always a welcome, always a recognition of who she is that teaches her over and over again that she is worthy and welcome.

The tricky part of that is not only that she needs to be recognized and welcomed as an individual, although that can be hard enough, depending on the individual. I suppose in an ideal world that would be enough. But this isn't an ideal world, and in the world as we know it, it matters that my daughter is an African-American

with two white moms. You can't really welcome her as an individual without dealing with her as a member of groups. If I, as a parent, am going to be able to afford to continue to have the U U church as my primary community, then it needs to be a place where the cultural world is wide enough to include all of us. I can't afford to just say that Unitarian Universalism only appeals to white Americans, or that I don't know what the church can do to combat racism. If my daughter is going to stay in this world it needs to be a place that includes her, where she can learn things that I can't teach her, like what it means to be Black in America. She needs to not be the only brown face. She needs to know, first-hand, through immediate experience, that her parents are not bizarre, that two women who love each other are a part of the regular make-up of the world. She needs to belong to a community where she knows, and everyone else knows, that she is not "them," that she is "us."

She will not stay in a church that routinely uses language that presumes that families consist of husbands and wives. She won't bother coming to a church which enters the conversation about racism assuming that we're all white, or that assumes that Black people are uneducated, or that figures that since she's African-American, she couldn't have been raised U U. If Kelsey and I do an adequate job of raising her, she probably won't even bother coming to a church, however open-minded, where nobody looks like her. Combating racism and heterosexism is not a good idea of something to do in the hopes that "they" will like us. It's something we have to do because anything less would teach us, my family, my child, that our worth and dignity are diminished. At my church we say in our greeting every Sunday "We honor the richness that diversity brings to our community, including differences of race, sexual orientation, age and theology." We are both specific and consistent about saying who we welcome not only because those who come in the door for the first time may be wondering, but also because those of us who are already there need to remember. Saying who we welcome doesn't end racism or heterosexism, but it is a small part of the religious education of our community.

Mattea needs to learn that she's loved, but she also needs to learn how to love. I devoutly hope that she will learn about loving from us, her family, but that isn't enough. She needs to learn how to love a community. She needs to know what it is to be in a group divided by differences, but held together by love. She needs to know that love means being willing to say you're sorry, and that love demands that we air our hurt and disappointments face to face, rather than through gossip or carping in the background. She needs to know that love means not walking away, not simply giving up when the going gets rough or the community fails her. She will not be religiously educated unless she has been taught, by example, that love, religious love, calls us to love those we don't even know, those we don't even like. She needs the religious education of a community that demonstrates to her what love looks like, what the world would look like if it was guided by principles of faith-filled love.

Of course, religious education also happens through the deliberate programs of the church I want my daughter to grow up with religious education classes that are engaging and meaningful and fun. I want her to learn about what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist, about our history as a religious movement, about the great religions of the world. I want her to learn about her Jewish and Christian heritage and I want her to explore her own beliefs about God and life and death and the great theological questions. I want her to be able to say what a Unitarian Universalist is. I want her to learn about being welcome in this community and this world, and I want her to learn to welcome others. I want her to learn to share, and then I want her to learn to be generous. I want her to learn to learn, to see her religious life as something that continually calls her to look more closely, ask more widely, that demands that she challenge assumptions and authorities to get at what rings true. Some of that, with luck, she can get from classes taught by eager, engaged teachers who are trained and supported and valued by the church as a whole. But I don't think that she can get a religious education that will carry her through her life by placing that whole responsibility in the hands of a couple of people who are with her for an hour or so a week.

For starters, one of the things that she will need from her church is an education in worship. (Revolutionary thought.) Whatever her age, from infancy through adulthood, I believe that her religion owes her the conviction that we encounter "transcending mystery and wonder" not just on mountain tops and under starry skies, but in church, on a Sunday morning, with our community around us. This past January, at the Starr King history colloquium, Robert Fulghum posed the question to the panelists and the assembled body, "What is worship?" There were a lot of good answers, and you probably have your own, but I came out of that conversation with what for me is a pretty simple definition. Worship is invoking the Spirit.

Now, we could argue about what that Spirit is, whether to call it ground of being or goddess or energy or love or my most recent post-modernist appellation: The Deity Formerly Known as God. There are plenty of good and interesting places to have that discussion about language and images and what do we really mean by that word anyway. But that discussion is not doing worship. Contrary to the old bumper sticker that our youth group used to sell, to question isn't really the answer. Questioning is a means, intriguing, vital, even crucial. But it isn't the end. And as with the old joke that explains that U Us sing so badly because we're always reading ahead to see if we agree with the words, sometimes we substitute questioning for the need to cry out to the greatest thing that can answer.

Worship is invoking the Spirit. Good worship is when it shows up. A religion worthy of my daughter sticking around knows how to get the Spirit to show up. That religion is one that has gone beyond the narrow literalism of the fundamentalist versions of both Christianity and Humanism, that understands that worship engages the mind, but draws it into the inexplicable realms of myth

and symbol and ritual. If we are interested in worship that makes a place for people of all ages - and I'd say at the moment that's a big "if" - but if we are interested in worship that makes a place for people of all ages, then we will have to accept the fact that children are highly unimpressed by scholarship and cleverness and erudition, which gives them nothing but the reminder that they aren't ready for an adult world. If we are interested in worship for everyone, then we will need to operate in the realm of liturgy and ritual and story, of symbols whose meanings unfold throughout our lives. We will need to set aside a little bit of our being impressive in the hopes that something larger might impress itself upon us.

Maybe it even means letting go of a little bit of our dignity in order to take our worship life more seriously. A week ago my congregation held its Passover Seder, and this year we made a commitment to being as inclusive of children as we could. You might bear in mind that, the demographics of my congregation being what they are, that meant that we invited in a bunch of three and four year olds to a service and meal that lasted about three hours. I can't claim that all of them were utterly engaged all of the time. But when it came time to tell the story of Exodus, of the plagues, and the flight from Egypt, I invited the children to join me in the center of the circle of tables, and I let go of the lovely words that tell the story in the haggadah we were using, and we acted out the story as I told it. Sad to say, none of the grown-ups would join me, and only some of the kids, but by the time we'd gotten through acting out the plagues - leaping frogs and buzzing flies, munching locusts and dying cattle and all - the Spirit was on its way into the room. And by the time that the call came to run out from Egypt and we grabbed up our unleavened bread and rushed out into the wilderness, Caroline and Isis, who are about 4 and 5, were right there, fleeing a condition they couldn't imagine in a country they'd never heard of, trudging across the wilderness to the sea. And when the waters parted, you could see it not only in the grandiose gestures by which they parted the waves, but also in their eyes. And because we could see it in their eyes, the miracle was in our eyes as well.

Worship is invoking the Spirit. Good worship is when the Spirit shows up. And the spirit shows up when we dare to touch our passion. Passion lets loose when we dare to tell the truth, when we opt for the depth of love over the little lies that seek not to rock the boat. Passion lets loose when ideas come together, when someone says something that you knew, but couldn't articulate, when the separate pieces fall into place. Passion lets loose when people are called to remember their truest selves, when we find our way toward justice, when we break out of the little boxes that define and separate us. And, of course, passion lets loose when we sing. Really sing, not reading ahead for the words sing.

Only a few months after I arrived in Chicago Ellen Ackerman died. She was a wonderful woman, a beloved member of the choir, who finally lost a struggle with cancer that had lasted over a decade. It was my honor to perform Ellen's memorial service, and I chose to open the service by singing one of her favorite

songs. "The lone wild bird, in lofty flight / is still with thee, nor leaves thy sight. / And I am thine, I rest in thee. / Great Spirit, come, and rest in me." And as I began singing, slowly, one by one, the voices joined in, recreating the harmony they had made with Ellen. "The ends of earth are in thy hand, / the sea's dark, deep and far-off land. / And I am thine, I rest in thee. / Great Spirit, come and rest in me." And in the music they held me up, they held her up. In the music we rested for a moment in one another, and in that mystery that was now holding our beloved Ellen.

These past couple of weeks have been hard ones. People had been coming to me to talk about their frustrations with the church, and some of them were threatening to leave. Church membership is down, attendance is down, and I was feeling like my beloved congregation, and probably all of Unitarian Universalism, were hopelessly mired in vagueness, more a pointless exercise in middle-class self-congratulation than a religion at all. And I decided it was finally time to say that. This past Sunday. Which was Easter. As Kelsey would be happy to tell you, I spend the week in angst-ridden anxiety. On Easter, the day of re-birth, was it fair to talk about being stuck behind the stone? What would the people who only came for Easter think? Never mind that, how would the people who were going to be back the next week feel when their gentle, 'I'm OK, You're OK,' minister started suggesting that we weren't OK? On Easter. I was, frankly, terrified, but I did it. And at the end of the service we rose, and we sang together "Love will guide us, peace had tried us. / Hope inside us will lead the way / on the road from greed to giving./ Love will guide us through the dark night." And we sang with depth and passion - and harmony - and I knew that it was going to be all right, that they still loved me, and that we all still loved this flawed, but still vital, faith.

A religion worth staying with through all of her life will give my daughter those experiences of worship, of opening to the presence of the Spirit. But it won't stop there. It will demand of her that she live in relationship with that Spirit, that she engage in the work of theology, attempting to understand what it is that has the ultimate claim on her life. Unlike most of the world's religions, it will not provide the answers for her, or deny what is true for her at any given moment. But unlike most of our U U churches, it will expect her to do that work, to take seriously the question, "To what do I owe my life?" It will offer her opportunities for study, challenging questions, chances to hear the answers of others around her and the answers of great teachers and writers. And it will keep reminding her that openness is not the same as a vacuum, and that our free faith is only saved from being vacuous by the willingness of our members to have a belief system, to offer their lives to something larger than themselves.

A faith worth having, a Unitarian Universalism worth having, will ask Mattea throughout her life what she believes in, what she belongs to, what she is called by. And then it will ask her what she is doing to live out her calling, how she is acting on behalf of that which she believes she was put on earth to serve. It will

insist that spirituality and action for justice are not contradictory religious impulses, not even two sides of the same coin, but something more like the same ocean moving in and out with the ebb and flow tide. It will give her opportunities to work as well as worship, a place of empowerment to join with others in living her faith. A liberal faith that could see my daughter through her life would understand that spirituality and justice were inseparable, but perhaps it would also see that education and justice were equally intermingled.

At the Meadville/Lombard Winter Institute this past February, Rebecca Parker spoke powerfully about William Ellery Channing and liberation theologian Paolo Freire. Doing justice to an hour and a half of Rebecca's brilliant lecturing in a few minutes is considerably beyond me, but since she's away on sabbatical, let me see if I can give you just the gist. Channing, our illustrious forebearer, the man who actually claimed for us the name Unitarian, understood the human responsibility to be that of self-culture, the development of one's understanding and capacities. Channing's view of the self is imbued with our Unitarian optimism about human nature and our capacity to grow. Unfortunately, Channing, and most of us who come along in the footsteps of his distinguished heritage, never manage to see outside the boundaries of the predominant middle-class culture. We grow our Selves, but only into more beautiful, more sophisticated versions of who we already are, people both caught within and perpetuating structures of oppression. Our religious practice as UUs, tied to this notion of Channing's, tends to offer us opportunities for self-culture - classes and book discussion groups and Sunday morning forums and, indeed, Sunday Services, which develop our understandings, offer us insights, and leave us pretty much operating within the dominant paradigm that we started with.

The Brazilian theologian and educator Paolo Freire, however, is aiming for something quite different. The aim of human development is not self-culture, but liberation. Our fulfillment lies not so much in the improvement of the individual as in the possibility of rising out of the morass of oppression and realizing our capacity as agents in the world, people who are able to confront powers and structures of evil through the power of the community. Freire's process begins with a question which comes out of the community and which the community refines until the subject to be investigated comes clear. Rebecca spoke of the church that she served in Seattle in the early 80's, which faced the second murder in their neighborhood within a brief while. Not surprisingly, people in the area were locking themselves in, tensions were rising, and an aura of fear pervaded the area. The Wallingford United Methodist Church chose to address the question "How can people in our neighborhood feel safe?" The second part of Freire's process is that of reflection. The reflection process draws upon the resources of the community to understand as deeply as possible the situation surrounding the question and what responses could be made. Rebecca spoke of drawing on a sociologist and an anthropologist and a theologian as well as the local police department. They spent a full year in study. People wrote position papers, public forums were held, insights were gleaned from across the

disciplines. And finally they moved into the next step, which is action. They learned from the local police during their time of reflection that there are two ways to increase public safety. The most common, and least effective, is to batten down the hatches - to get more sophisticated alarm systems, to stay in at night, to get stronger bolts and locks and bars. The other, more effective, option is for people to get to know one another, to watch out for one another, to move outward rather than inward and build a level of intimacy that allows people protect one another. The church chose as their action to foster this relationship of growing trust amongst the neighborhood. She said that they helped to get some simple locks for people's doors, but mostly they found ways to bring people together to look out for one another. And the crime rate dropped. Freire's process then invites the community into further reflection on what they have learned during the action phase of the process, which can again lead to a new form of action (or, if you want to sound impressive, praxis.) The process forms a circle of reflection and action, but the crucial part is that all of it is a response to the soul's call toward wholeness, the soul's need to respond to the restlessness that declares that we are born to build the new world that some have described as the reign of God.

In the church I wish for my child, education and action for justice and worship are all of a piece, all passion-filled, all filled with the brightness and boldness that I think of as the presence of Spirit. I wish I could say to you that the church that I serve was such an institution. Some days it feels like we're moving that way, and some days it feels like we're incredibly mired in ambiguity, trapped with neither common language nor common vision, but only a shared willingness to empower anyone to stop anything if it doesn't happen to suit them. I hope you don't think I was asked to speak this evening because I'm some kind of an expert. I have some ideas, but I can hardly say whether they're any good because most of the best ones haven't made it out into the congregation yet. Let me offer just one modest proposal. My current thought is that membership in our congregation should move beyond our current requirements that people have attended at least three services, attended an orientation or New U U class, and that they intend to make a financial contribution. Our intern minister and I are starting to talk about whether we could alter those requirement to separate the orientation from a four-session membership class, and whether we might expect that all new members engage in a theology class to articulate their own faith.

But my modest proposal goes one step farther. It would declare that joining the church is not a one-time event, but an ongoing commitment to religious life and faith development. In my fantasy, which may yet become real, we would require an annual statement from each person which would answer three questions: 1) "What am I put on earth to serve?" 2) "What am I doing now to serve that purpose?" and 3) "What new will I do this year to serve what I was put on earth to serve?" I'd like to require all members to meet in small groups at the beginning, middle and end of the church year, first to create those statements, then, in the

middle of the year, to fill each other in on their progress and finally, at the end of the church year, to evaluate how they've done.

Does that seem like too much to ask? I'm not sure. I certainly couldn't swear that everyone in my congregation would do it. I don't even know what exactly the process would accomplish. But I do believe that the greatest gift we can give our children is that of taking our religious life seriously. I have been given the tremendous gift of our liberal faith, and my gratitude is enormous. But what I see and what I have isn't enough to pass on to my daughter. The rest of the world she is inheriting is too precarious. She needs a faith that is broad enough to embrace all of who she is and strong enough to see her through. She needs a vessel loaded deep with a precious cargo not only of freedom but of faith, with treasure chests full of sacred song and a hold full of history, with crates full of challenge and sails filled with the wind of the Spirit. She needs a ship that is guided by a crew that loves to be out on the sea, that knows the tidal patterns and can follow the stars, that is ready for adventure and eager to be her companion on the voyage, which is truly the trip of a lifetime.

(Sung) ("Entering Rough Waters" copyright Lynn Ungar, 1999)

*Get on the boat and sail,
Though you're entering rough waters,
Get on the boat and sail,
There's another land on another shore,
And we might just find our way home.*

*Old Noah built himself an ark,
He was entering rough waters,
For the snake and the drake and the meadowlark.
He was looking for a way home.*

Chorus

*Odysseus headed home to Greece,
He was entering rough waters.
Like Jason with his golden fleece,
He was looking for a way home.*

Chorus

*Columbus sailed in '92,
He was entering rough waters.
If he'd know what it was coming to
He'd be looking for a way home.*

Chorus

*My grandpa sailed across the sea,
He was entering rough waters,
Looking for a life where he'd be free,
He was looking for a way home.*

Chorus

*The ship of souls is set to go,
Though we're entering rough waters.
If we want to help our children grow
We'll be looking for a way home*

Chorus