

## TO PUT AWAY CHILDISH THINGS?

A Sermon by Fritz Hudson  
Presented February 19, 2006

*Your children are not your children.  
They are the sons and the daughters of Life's longing for itself.*

Ysaye Barnwell, of Sweet Honey in the Rock, first learned those words while singing in the choir at All Souls Unitarian Church of Washington D.C. Taken from Kahlil Gibran's The Prophet, they appear now as reading number 715 in our Singing the Living Tradition. For generations they have been the text of our naming ceremonies, our dedication of ourselves to new-born children as they enter our world and our care. Of course, when Ysaye set the words to her music, she got to choose which ones to give her strongest emphasis, her parting push.

*You can strive to be like them but you cannot make them just like you! Strive to be like them, but you cannot make them just like you!*

Is she telling us to "strive to be like them", like our children, or is she just repeating what Gibran said, only that it's OK to strive in that direction, if we want, but not in the other?

Black Elk, the Sioux Medicine man, said "Grown men may learn from very little children, for the hearts of little children are pure, and, therefore, the Great Spirit may show to them many things which older people miss." (The Sacred Pipe. 1953)

Jesus of Nazareth, the Christians' "Son of God", said "Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 18:3)

What do we say?

As you know, for the time being, I'm wearing two hats around here – Minister yes, but also, until we fill the position, Religious Growth & Learning Director. We will interview our top 3 applicants for the position this coming week. We're hoping to present a recommended candidate for our RGL leaders' endorsement within a month – but it could still be well into this spring before our new Director is fully able to start working with us. I've spent a significant part of my last two months gathering our evaluation of our current growth & learning program, through the survey 90 of you filled out, and then focusing our needs and aspirations for our future program, through the focus groups in which 34 of you participated. In that process I've been led back to an old project, something I've been working on with RGL Directors since before I came here – for about 10 years now. It's an attempt to articulate our standards of success in our program – a usable statement of what experiences, knowledge and skills our principles call us to give to our children and ourselves as we move toward maturity in our faith. One of the strongest statements that our focus group participants made about our exploration of the world's religious heritage, for example, was that our program must keep more clearly evident why we, Unitarian Universalists, study and celebrate all these traditions. What is it about how we see the meaning of human life that drives us to plumb Judaism, and Christianity and Islam, Paganism, and Hinduism and Buddhism? Which of the many different values sometimes promoted by these traditions do we promote and affirm - liberty, justice, compassion and peace, for example. And which of the values which seemingly are promoted by at least some strains in those traditions – conformism, privilege, vengeance, and war – which of them do we question or contest? Our program must make clear both why and how our faith calls us to cull these traditions in age-appropriate, engaging, even fun, ways.

We are, our faith is, all about development. "We covenant to affirm and promote - encouragement to spiritual growth." The only reason we were not leaders in the Evolution Sunday celebration our worship committee mentioned here last Sunday is that it was motivated by religionists who wanted to proclaim, almost as a new insight, that religion and science are not incompatible. To us that's a pretty weak-kneed affirmation. We long ago realized that science is the sine qua non (the indispensable) source and screen for our religion. In this spirit, I'm planning to use my interim RGL Director months here to examine, in a periodic sermon series, how our faith is best evidenced in our various stages of physical maturation – in our childhood, our adolescence, and our early, middle and later adulthood. It could keep us going all the way until I hand this hat over to our "real" RGL Director.

So today, I want to think about the nature of our first faith, our childhood faith – and about our adult relationship to that childhood faith.

How many of you were here to hear my sermons in my first month here, in September of 1998. If you have perfect recall, you can take a minute's snooze here. I'm going to repeat myself. In 1836, our forebear, Ralph Waldo Emerson admonished the seniors at Harvard Divinity School to "Acquaint men at first-hand with deity." In his book The Tangled Wing, biological anthropologist Melvin Konner traces the root of our capacity for such a first-hand acquaintance. He describes observing a Tanzanian ape who repeatedly goes to a waterfall in the forest and stands stock-still, gazing at the falling water. "The animal seemed lost in contemplation. ... He moved closer, and began to rock, while beginning to give a characteristic round of "pant-hoot" calls. He became more excited, finally beginning to run back and forth while calling, to jump, to call louder, to drum with his fists on trees, to run back again. . . . It was something (he) had to look at, to return to, study, watch, become excited about: a thing of beauty, an object of curiosity, a fetish, an imagined creature, a challenge, a communication? We will never know. . . . But for a very similar animal, perhaps ten million years ago, in the earliest infancy of the human spirit, something in the natural world must have evoked a response like this one - in just such a response, in just such a moment, in just such an animal, we may, I think, be permitted to guess, occurred the dawn of awe, of sacred attentiveness, of wonder."

And as high school biology taught us, in each of us "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" (the development of each individual organism recapitulates the evolution of its species). Konner writes, "The human infant, for its first few months of life, is all eyes, in a way that no other animal infant quite is. It's not just that its eyes are good, that it does a lot of looking. It's that it does so little else.... The infant is not a passive figure, nor an active one either, but what might be called an actively receptive one - eagerly, hungrily receptive, famished for sights and sounds. ... The light on a leaf outside, the splash of red on a woman's dress, the shadow on the ceiling, the sound of rain - any of these may evoke a rapt attention not, perhaps, unlike that of the chimpanzee at the waterfall."

OK, veterans, naptime's over. I'm going on from this long-ago established base now

This capacity for active receptivity is to me the essence of our childhood faith. It is the core of the first source we name for our "living tradition" up here on the wall and on the back of your bulletins: "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life."

Charles Stephen, our Minister Emeritus, way back in his first years here, in September 1965, asked "What do we seek to do in our church school?" He answered, "we try to cultivate the power of seeing plain things in a kind of sunlight of surprise." He quoted Thoreau. "We need pray for no higher heaven that the pure senses can furnish. Our present senses are but rudiments of what they are destined to become." ("What Shall Our Children Believe." p.5)

The power to see plain things in the "sunlight of surprise" has a corollary. It is the power of absorption. I know all our memories are failing, but surely you remember as I do experiences like this one Earl Thompson describes for two six year olds boys, Jacky and Jerry, on a lazy Saturday afternoon:

"Look? Look, Jerry. Jacky was suddenly inspired. He put out his hand while sitting on the divan arm and stripped a string of glass beads from the fringe of a handy floor lamp. The beads hit the linoleum like small hail.

Plick-plick-plick-plick-plick - a dozen or more beads to the string. A jillion refracting surfaces spinning points of purple, rose, gold, fire colors. Water colors. All the colors of a prairie sunset. More! Each bead fell through silent space to kiss the floor with a jewel's quick kiss. Tiny cut-glass bombs falling faster than wildly beating hearts could meter the hits, they ricocheted away in all directions, the small sound like the echo of fabled thunder on storybook pages. Before the last tiny roll of a string died, Jacky started another on its way. Without a word Jerry climbed up on the divan and alternately, solemnly, happily stripped the lamp to the ultimate string. It was as if they had done nothing else all their lives. It was their work. There was not a cautioning thought in their heads, no measure of time other than that described by the flight and roll of the beads." Nevermind that these boys were ruining some skilled adult worker's painstaking handiwork and their grandmother's beautiful antique lampshade. They were absorbed - that power can be harnessed.

When my daughter Sally, now 17, was 5 and in kindergarten, I remember, I was sometimes fool enough to ask her in the morning what she was going to do that day in school today. "I don't know," she always responded, "whatever Kathy has

in mind" (Kathy was her teacher). For a kindergartner, whatever she or he is doing at the moment, whether it is drawing a picture, or tying a shoe or playing a game is often the only reality she knows.

When you come into my office (and I invite you all there, today at its 50 degrees and on warmer future days) if you look at the small round table among the chairs, you'll find a square stone marker engraved with the words "You are here." It's reminiscent of Ram Dass' well-known admonition: "Be here now." The marker was gift, maybe three years ago, from one of you. First, you told me, it was a gift to your then 16 year old daughter. But, she didn't get it – didn't understand why you'd need such a permanent reminder - so you decided to give it to me because you thought I would. Of course she didn't get it then – she could still live "being here now" every day. But as I talked with her in the coffee hour after church a month ago, when she was home from college, I suddenly realized that the marker should only be on loan to me. The time is coming, and soon, when she will "get it" and need it, as all adults do.

The capacity for wonder, the power of surprise, the passion of absorption, the presence to be present - this is what we, in this church, cherish in childhood. This is what we, as adults, strive to help our children to incorporate into their developing consciousness, so that these resources may be revived and drawn upon again throughout their lives.

And there's so much more that shoots out from this wellspring – far more I find than I can plumb today. Here's food for sermons for years ahead. Childhood, deeply considered, encompasses its own religious universe. Consider, just in tantalizing passing, just some of the things Cynthia Copeland Lewis lists among the "Really Important Stuff My Kids Have Taught Me."

She begins where we begin:

- If you want to see a shooting star, you might have to spend a lot of nights looking up; and
- Toads aren't ugly – they're just toads.

But then listen to where else she is taken:

- If the horse you are drawing looks more like a dog, make it a dog.

When Black Elk said that "the hearts of little children are pure, and, therefore, the Great Spirit may show to them many things which older people miss," he was over simplifying childhood monstrously. Purity does not explain how Lewis's kids could teach her:

- It's not really giving if you give away only the animal crackers with missing heads and feet; and
- Don't laugh if you don't get the joke;
- You can't ask to start over again just cuz you're losing the game.

There's a great deal more to childhood than purity.

When Jesus told his disciples that they had to "turn and become like children, to enter the kingdom of heaven," he was answering their question "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" The rest of his answer was "Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 18:1-4.) Humility – is that really the nature of childhood? Then how could Lewis' children, and mine for that matter, teach us:

- Just keep banging until someone opens the door; or
- If you're going to take just one step, make it a giant step.

My guess is that humility is really only an adult, or no sooner than an adolescent, virtue. I suspect I'll come back to that thought.

When young ministers enter our profession, they usually find one of its most trying challenges the leadership of memorial services for children who've died. The agony of the parents has indeed always been trying to assuage, even more so as my own children have grown and I've seen all of what their loss would deprive me. Emerson wrote well, in his own journal at his own son's death: "The sun went up the morning sky with all his light, but the landscape was dishonored by his loss. For this boy, in whose remembrance I have both slept and awakened so oft, decorated for me the morning star, the evening cloud. – Sorrow makes us all children again, -- destroys all differences of intellect. The wisest knows nothing." (Journal, January 30, 1842)

Yet over my years, by paying ever closer attention to the children with whom church life has blessed me all around of all ages, I have gained a deep sense of how rich a child's life is in its own right. It is not by any means all about

promise and development. Each day of a child's life is its own profound experience and its own momentous achievement, to be celebrated even if their accumulation does not number large. We do our children a great disservice, I believe, if we measure their value only by what they could become if they reach our age. Again one of Lewis' children's lesson: - You can try on your father's shoes, but you can't walk very well in them.

When I returned from my sabbatical leave last spring I spoke of my revived inspiration from my re-acquaintance with Europe. It was largely given form by my reading of T.R. Reid's The United States of Europe. How many of you heard Reid speak at UNL's Thompson lecture last Wednesday? I urge you to pick up the book or download the lecture from the UNL site (They're even podcast now; your teenager will explain.) I still think that Europe's humanist religious and social life could be a great inspiration to us, but there is one thing about the model they present which is very disturbing to me. They've stopped having children. In some countries, like Germany, a three-decade long rate of women averaging only 1.3 children is moving toward halving their population over 45 years. Pope John Paul II worried about this for the future of Christianity. I'm not worried about that. What I'm worried about is their links to their capacity for wonder, to the power of surprise, to the passion of absorption, to the presence to be present – and to all the other lessons childhood brings us.

"When I was a child, I spoke like a child. I thought like a child. I reasoned like a child," the first Christian preacher, Paul of Tarsus, wrote to the Corinthians. "When I became a man, I put away childish things." (I, 13:11) There are some aspects of childhood, which we believe we do well to "put away" in the sense grow beyond, extinguish, in our adolescence and adulthood. I'll talk about them in future months. But there are also some childish things which we believe we do well only to "put away" in the sense of "store for safekeeping" – to protect where they can be opened again and drawn upon as an integrated part of our entire life.

I don't believe we do well to "strive to be like them (our children)" if that's Ysaye Barnwell was suggesting in her setting of Kahlil's Gibran's words. I do believe that we should "give them love, but not our thoughts," if that means to love them rather than to strive to get them to think only our thoughts. They do have their own thoughts, equally valuable. But I also think that part of affirming and promoting the "worth and dignity of every person" and "acceptance of one another" is fully taking our children on as equal partners in our faith – expecting to exchange our gifts.

As one of my colleagues, Paul Beattie once wrote, "In some ways children experience the world more freshly and profoundly than adults, but the beauty of the world is more inexpressible because they lack the understanding born of experience and vocabulary. We have the experience and the vocabulary, but the beauty of the world and life is not as fresh for us. The child's world can be for us a touchstone calling us back to the deeper meaning of even small everyday concerns." ("The Wisdom of Winnie the Pooh." 1983)

Or as Sydney and our adult choir partnered to sing so well to begin our service:

*"I am small part of the world. I have a small dream in my eyes.*

*But if I tell you my dreams, and if you add yours to mine,*

*together we can reach up to the skies."*