

**Teach Your Children Well**  
**June 6, 2010**

I've mentioned before, probably more than once, that my *clearest* memory of church as a very young child is the taste of the back of the pew in front of me. I can see myself, sitting on my mother or father's lap, leaning forward, taking hold of the pew and, as they say in La Leche League, latching on. Wood. Varnish. Polish. That, for me, as a girl somewhere between the ages of zero and four, was the heart of Sunday mornings. Or, I should say, Sunday morning *worship*. Because, at some point in the service, at some age, I did begin to get shuffled off to Sunday School, in another building, in a brightly colored room. There, I traded the taste of wood for the feel of felt. Felt in the shape of little animals. Little felt animals that would somehow stick to a felt background. Yes. That is my memory of Sunday School. No faces of fellow four year-olds, or of teachers, though I see some bodies around me. Mostly, just brightly colored felt in a brightly colored room.

I might have had a few *more* memories of my little Unitarian Universalist church in the West hills of Portland, had I stuck around. But my parents separated when I was somewhere around four, maybe five, and

ultimately divorced, and church after that became no more. No more pews. No more little felt animals... No more dresses!

Moving into unchurched-dom, I imagine I might have missed two out of three of those things about church. Mostly, though, I probably very naturally transitioned into shapeless Sundays, in which the neighborhood and the park surrounding much of it became my come-when-you-please place of worship. Our neighborhood--and maybe it was the time, too--was an actual community of families, in which kids of all ages played kick the can at night, and croquet by day, where Franklin Court, the steepest street, was transformed into a sledding hill the minute there was snow, where neighborhood potlucks and picnics were not infrequent and, you just plain old knew people's names.

I don't know if neighborhoods are like that anymore. I don't know if neighborhoods are where people get their needs for community met. Maybe yes in some neighborhoods, not so much in others. I've heard more than one person here at Wildflower say that the primary reason they joined this church, and are thankful for it, is because of the sense of loving, caring community they find here. That tells me they might be finding here what is harder these days to find out there. There's an intentionality here that maybe is harder to find in the busy-ness of the other six days of our weekly

lives in which we do *not* gather as a congregation. I hope there is that sense of community here. I hope here is where like-minded, like-valued people can come together to share in each other's lives, where parents can find other parents who want to raise their children in a loving, soul-nurturing way, and where children feel a sense of ownership and belonging like I did for the very short stint in my early childhood church and, for a longer period of time, in my childhood neighborhood, where I lived from the ages of two to thirteen.

Speaking of ages two to thirteen, we've got a whole bunch of children here at Wildflower Church in that exact age range, and several on either side of that spectrum, too. And while I don't get to work with them in their classes on Sunday mornings, cutting out little felt animals, or reading stories, or learning about the value of sharing, I'm really lucky that for about five or ten minutes every Sunday, I get to hang out with those kids right here in the front of the sanctuary--to be in conversation with them, address them by name, learn from them, and laugh with them. And I don't think you all mind those five or ten minutes, either, because I always hear you laughing right along with us, and sometimes shouting out answers to my questions just as eagerly as the children do.

We are all blessed, I believe, to share in that time, where our children shine, where their curiosity is encouraged, and where we get to smile proudly and say to ourselves and those we sit next to, “yes, that is a Wildflower child.”

Then, when my five or ten minutes is up, the children take their cue, and we sing to them wishes of going in peace, and of the spirit of love surrounding them everywhere they may go, as they head off to class.

Now, you may not notice this, or maybe you do, but along with the children go a fair number of adults, too. True, some of them are parents just walking their kids to class, because their kids--or they--need that one more moment of connection. And you see those parents, or grandparents, returning to the sanctuary sometime during the responsive reading or the offering.

But there are other adults who, like the children, don't come back until the amen and the blessed be have been said, and the benediction has been sung. That's because, for every class--pre-kindergarten, kindergarten through one, two through four, fifth through 7th, and 8th on up--for every class, there are at least two adults, a teacher and a teacher helper, who go with the kids and stay with them, in order to teach them the Sunday school lesson of the day. And of course, there is the head honcho of the bunch,

our Director of Religious Education, Penny Burnette, who shepherds over all of the classrooms, and there are the childcare workers who watch over and play lovingly with our littlest ones, ensuring all of us back here in the sanctuary that all is well with the children of the church while we sing and listen and meditate and pray.

But wait. Why am I explaining this to you? Surely you know *first hand* what goes on in our religious education class rooms. Why would I assume, just because you're not currently, or never have been, a parent of a child aged somewhere between ages four and eighteen, that you've never stepped up to teach our Wildflower children? After all, a bunch of you will be participating in this summer's World Travelers program, telling the children about your adventures to Japan or Australia or Poland or Guatemala or other fabulous places. And *none* of this year's Coming of Age teachers--Donna Lilly, Laura Miller, Patrick Gallagher and Katie Landolt--none of them is currently the parent of an eighth grader or a high schooler; they were just committed to teaching these young teens all year long. Yes, Laura has three kids in elementary school, and Patrick has a five year-old. But Donna's children are full grown, and Katie--well, who knows what she and Kevin have planned as far as expanding their new family. But the point

is, *of course* you all know you don't have to be the parent of a Wildflower child to teach that child. Right?

I'm speaking about this from some personal experience, too, just so you know. Teaching a Coming of Age class for a year, and in that same year being hired as the high school youth group director, back at my home congregation, was a major turning point for me choosing to go into ministry. In fact, for a good long while in my discernment process, I seriously pondered studying to be, specifically, a Minister of Religious Education. But, partly because of the issue I speak of today, I chose to go this other way, this congregational way. And just what is that issue that I speak of today? Let's call it: segregation. As a minister to-be, I did not want to be perpetually segregated from the rest of congregational life. Nor did I appreciate that *that* is what so often happens to the children of our congregations.

Sure, we love them and think they're adorable when they light the chalice or brilliant when they speak up during Time for All Ages, and we *love* it when they do a reading or say a few words during an intergenerational service. But on "regular" Sundays, we're just as happy to see them go off to class, so we can have our grown up time together. And when the service is over, we might watch them running around, or express

concern that they're going to knock over one of our more delicate elders. But how many of us say to ourselves, as we vigilantly do with visitors, "I'm going to introduce myself to that child, and I'm going to ask her her name, and I'm going to ask her how she's doing"? How many of us say and do that?

If you're catching a scolding tone in my voice, that's *really* not what I'm aiming for, though I own the tone may be there. Because, in the spirit of that enigmatic originator of the phrase, I *am* here today, at least in part, to comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable. I am here to say, hey, parents who teach Sunday after Sunday, and feel like you've missed services more than you like in order for your child to get a liberal religious education, and hey, non-parents of children in our religious education program, what's up? When it comes to teaching our children well, where's the spirit of *shared* leadership? Where are the non-parental adults boldly claiming, as our mission statement does, that we "*joyfully* nurture one another in our *lifelong* spiritual journeys"? To what extent are we being deliberately inclusive, or non-inclusive, of our children when we, as our mission statement says, "commit to transforming ourselves and the world around us through acts of compassion, love, and social justice"?

For many of you, it may feel like my questions this morning are coming out from left field, that suddenly I've become horribly unsatisfied with how the larger population of our adult Wildflowers have strived to be a part of our children's lives. I'm not horribly unsatisfied. However, for some time I *have* been witness, via online communications, to how frequently Penny has had to scurry to find teachers for upcoming Sundays, and to how, at times, she's had to combine classes for lack of teachers. And I've witnessed at least one parent, having traded off Sundays with her husband, teaching and teaching, Sunday after Sunday, saying one day, as if it were a *miracle*, "My husband and I actually got to sit together through the *entire* service for the first time last Sunday." Hmmm.

I wonder, thinking about those who have not thought to volunteer to teach our children, what's the hesitation? Is it that, with your own children grown, and even some of them having children of their own, you feel you've done your duty, and now you're in child-raising retirement? Is it that, having never been a parent, you're a little terrified of these foreign beings and of what they might do to you? Is it that you feel you don't know *how* to teach? I will *not* accept as a reason you haven't taught that you don't want to miss out on a single one of my sermons, because my ego will just run way too far with that, and with all that running, my bunion will surely flare up. You

don't want to see me when my bunion's flared up. So let's just scratch that one off the list right now.

So, tracing our steps back, we've got the "I don't know how to teach" excuse. OK. Just as quickly, I say to you, "teaching is learning twice." That's the joy of it. It's not about memorizing, or acting as if your brain's packed with a vast labyrinth of impressive information. It's about the joy of discovery, right alongside, or may just one or two steps ahead of the children you're working with. It's not, as William Ellery Channing says, about stamping our minds upon the young, but about stirring up their own-- and our own as well! It's not about, as Channing says, giving the children a "definite amount of knowledge," but about inspiring "a fervent love of truth." Channing says, "In a word, the great end [of religious education] is to awaken the soul, to excite and cherish spiritual life." And I say, if I may, Mr. Channing, it's not just the children's spiritual lives we're talking about, but the teacher's lives as well. Teaching can and does excite and cherish our own spiritual lives.

Then there's the trepidation, as a non-parent--never have been, never will be--of working with children for the first time. You wonder, what language do they speak? What do they eat? What are their cultural norms? What currency do they use? Beloved non-parents, just as first-time parents

know, as well as first-time travelers to foreign countries, there is only one way to find out. Jump in and immerse yourselves. You will wonder what you've gotten yourself into. You will get homesick. You will be exhausted. But more importantly, in the end, you will have established new relationships, you will have seen souls. And they will have seen yours.

Finally, the part about "I've done my duty; my kids long ago flew the nest." To that, I respond with this. This past Thursday morning at Seton Hospital, as Maxine Barkan and I walked away from Room 458, where Mark Barkan had passed away just an hour or two before, I said to her, "As I write my sermon this weekend, Mark is going to be my muse." I said that to Maxine because there I was, brewing up some as yet unarticulated message about the imperative of teaching our children, and there was Mark, this beautiful man, who at 92, had still been traveling with his puppets to teach young children at the Jewish Community Center. There was Mark, who had been such a committed volunteer that, in 2008, Zavala Elementary School created a Mr. Barkan Day. There was Mark, who back in Houston, I discovered, had been the middle school teacher of our own Laurel Martin, now a mother of two young boys and an active teacher herself here at Wildflower Church. Mark, this gentle, beautiful, creative soul who never talked himself into believing that the work of teaching, of being

with children, of offering up his gifts to the generations following his, was over and done with. He knew he had stories to tell, insights to teach, relationships still to discover. I know that because Mark was my teacher, too.

So. Beloved Wildflowers, I think you get it now. I think you get that you have something to give, and something to receive. I think you know that, in order for us to truly “joyfully nurture one another in our lifelong spiritual journeys,” all of us--not just the parents, not just Penny, not just the few--but all of us need to teach our children well. It is a calling. It is a challenge. It is a blessing. All it takes is the power of faith, the power of hope, the power of love, and the power of joy. And one of the best ways to access that power is to sing.

So let us sing, and, in the memory of Mark Barkan, good friend, loving teacher, cherished soul, let us teach.

Amen.

#368 Now Let Us Sing