

Finding Our Own Path Sparrow F. Alden

Good morning, I'm Sparrow Alden, the Credentialed Religious Educator for this congregation -

(Slide - mountain path)

In the course of my duties, I share the essence of Unitarian Universalism with visiting parents and children, frequently in the time between a cracker spill and the next squished finger. So I have my "elevator speech" down pat. It has to do with diverse people climbing the same mountain on different paths, experiencing that mountain from an idiosyncratic perspective, helping one another when our paths cross with encouragement and respect for one another's inherent worth and dignity. It's all the same mountain and everyone is on it. I take my opportunity this morning to tell you what I've learned about the different ways of hiking those paths.

(Slide - height and weight)

When we take our children for a medical check-up, the nurse practitioner can check the baby, compare her measurable signs to the charts, and let us know if she's a little ahead of certain developmental milestones (which makes the overachievers cheer and the centrists worry), right in the middle of the pack (which makes the centrists cheer and the overachievers worry), or a little smaller, a little lighter, a little more relaxed in response to stimuli, which makes everyone worry.

(Slide - bear crawling)

Not just height and weight, there are sensorimotor skills that come at certain ages - head up, eyes tracking, roll, sit, crawl... They just come, skills encoded so deeply in the lizard brain that the healthy child will get there. Mother taught me that when a child of any age is completely moonstruck

and confused, such as after a temper tantrum, to get down on the floor and crawl with them. Crawl. First one hand, now the other knee, now the next hand, then the last knee. Take the most complex computer on the planet right back to its earliest learning, rhythmical motion, get back to crawling and the system will re-boot.

Some babies, like my brother Steve, never learned to crawl. Steve scooted on his bottom; a good number of babies learn to bear-crawl, hands and feet, no knees, as in this photo. Some exclusively bear-crawl. I found out recently of multiple documented cases of siblings who lived very remotely with no social pressure to walk who bear-crawled right into adulthood - it's an efficient, ground-eating way to get around if you don't have to carry anything. When a sensorimotor delay is more worrying, a physical or learning delay, that's a good thing to track, so that good professionals can coach a kid over a hurdle, recommend dietary or medicinal supplements, help strengthen a muscle or a skill.

(Slide - canoe)

I love to canoe. I've done it since I was small, and when I was twelve began taking long paddles including overnight canoe-camping trips. I learned that it's not about getting to Black Cat Island. The destination is arbitrary; actually arriving is of negligible importance. The point of this particular paddle stroke... is this particular paddle stroke. Once I figured that out, I learned to truly love the swirling water, the power in my arms and shoulders, the sound of drops running off my paddle back into the lake.

Being the last one to the campsite is not like a delay in being able to grip with baby fingers. Taking my time in a progression such as faith development is okay.

Where I am on my faith path and where my friend may be on her own path, are things which cannot be compared. The point of this step on my path is this step on my path. We are where we are. Each stage is really a

completely different way of approaching, appreciating, and hiking the mountain.

Developmental stages of higher order functions come in order, but they don't come on a time line. When we are fulfilled at a certain stage, then we are where we are, and that's the right place to be, and we can be there for the rest of our lives, appropriately and meaningfully, like the sound of the drops falling off our paddles into the water.

Slide - Babies:

The cognitive tasks of the first year of life include exploring the world by putting it in our mouths and a realization that Jean Piaget called Object Permanence - the idea that Daddy and Mommy are only temporarily out of sight.

As you can tell, this cognitive skill is the foundation for a grounding sense of trust, and Erik Erikson names what we learn Psychosocially "Trust vs Mistrust" - When we care for our babies, cuddle them, feed them, sing to them, they learn to trust the world as a place of caring and safety.

Moral - "I want it"

Slide - Fowler

These issues are at the foundation of spirituality, theology, and faith identity. Baby can have faith in "things not seen". The lessons are: you are always safe, you are always loved, Mommy and Daddy will return. And if it's a day when you are crying and kicking and hiding in the furthest corner, you are always safe, you are always loved, Mommy and Daddy will return. Just because I can't perceive it - it's still there. Soon I will learn to see that it is effecting the world even without my direct observation.

Slide - JRRRT

At this age, of course, the denotation of the words in the books does not matter. It's the sound of the words. Let's read to our babies the best

sounds of our languages, the rhythms, rhymes, word play, sound play - read Beowulf, Shakespeare, Poe, Tolkien.

Slide - I love you

It's the heart in the words. Read the words "I love you" over and over.

Slide - board books

It's the feeling of the words. They should be grippable and something you can truly dig your teeth into.

Slide - Pooh

Remember, there's reading level, and then there's content level. Winnie-the-Pooh is about seventh grade reading level:

Here is Edward Bear, coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming down stairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it. And then he feels that perhaps there isn't. Anyhow, here he is at the bottom, and ready to be introduced to you. Winnie-the-Pooh.

When I first heard his name, I said, just as you are going to say, "But I thought he was a boy?"

"So did I," said Christopher Robin.

"Then you can't call him Winnie?"

"I don't."

"But you said -"

"He's Winnie-ther-Pooh. Don't you know what 'ther' means?"

"Ah, yes, now I do," I said quickly; and I hope you do too, because it is all the explanation you are going to get.

The best-written, most accurate explanation of gender identity out there.

Slide - Preschool

Cognitively, preschoolers are ready to absorb proper syntax and grammar like sponges, and by all means feed these hungry minds all the complex, compound fifty word sentences packed with nested parenthetical asides, parataxis, rhythm, rhyme that you can find! They can imagine, they can intuit, and the Big Task is taking another point of view

Psychosocially, “me do it!”

The moral decision making skills are all about enlightened self-interest. I will make this ethical choice between two actions based on avoiding a bad consequence. But as my cognitive perspective-taking strengthens, I know that others have needs, too, and I begin to make choices based on win-win. Our time line begins to crumble, because some adults are stuck in win/lose, some situations are stuck in win/lose, and I think that all of us can agree that we'd like to keep getting better and better at finding win-win, as Beth Sawin our speaker just two weeks ago encouraged us to do.

When we need to draw a boundary around a child's behavior - or even an employee or friend - remember to let them know what the consequences of crossing that boundary will be. As UUs, we trust them to make a good choice based on all the available information.

“Faith is Caught” for preschoolers and older - Like a wildfire.

They establish habits and foundations of faith by imitating the other members of their nuclear family. Please model a healthy and observable spiritual quest. If you meditate, let your children know. And let them imitate you - first in play, later beside you on their own little mats. Let them see you prepare the table for the feast - including a chalice. Let them help choose a gift for a baby's dedication; let them attend weddings and funerals and worship with you.

If it works best for them to move on to age-appropriate learning time after a wide, warm welcome, a flickering symbol of hope, a song, a story, and a good deed... well, that matches the physical and neurological needs of these folks, and the central symbolic parts of worship have been shared. Please note that children are not the only ones who leave at that time.

Pray together. The simplest thanks over meals and prayers at bedtime can be used by even very young children. What if you're uncomfortable talking to Spirit? Model that it's OK to be uncomfortable. What if you have to grope for words? Model learning. John Buehrens made this suggestion for children and adults learning to pray: "Today I am thankful for..., Today I am sorry for..., Tomorrow I hope..."

Act for social justice together. Take the children with you when you recycle, when you serve a LISTEN dinner, when you give blood, when you vote.

Learning to shake hands and say, "Good morning," to sit still, to follow the choir, to read music, to share the cookies, to respect others, to behave kindly - these are all their religious education. We are all their role models. Our kids will treat us no more kindly than we treat them. We are all their coaches.

Margo Nutt recommends for this age *The Little Engine That Could*, by Watty Piper. Little Engine had a hard job to do, but that mantra "I *think* I can, I *think* I can," is perfect for little minds and hearts who really are ready to do things themselves.

Slide - Last Stop

I Can't help but recommend the beautiful book, the most recent Newbery Medalist, *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Peña. It's a 2016 Caldecott Honor Book, a 2016 Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor Book, a New York Times Book Review Notable Children's Book, a Wall Street Journal Best Children's Book.

Slide - inside Last Stop

Every Sunday after church, CJ and his grandma ride the bus across town. But today, CJ wonders why they don't own a car like his friend Colby. Why doesn't he have an iPod like the boys on the bus? How come they always have to get off in the dirty part of town? Each question is met with an encouraging answer from grandma, who helps him see the beauty—and fun—in their routine and the world around them.

Grandma models finding beauty in any situation, appreciation of diversity, and answering CJ in a way that affirms he is important to her.

Slide - Primary Grades

Cognitively, we begin to wrap our heads around Symbolic thinking - this means we can read. First grade teachers report that the avalanche from “Matt has a hat” to Magic Tree House chapter books happens when kids lose their baby teeth - I wish I knew more about that. We're learning conservation of matter, too, and we're ready to become scientists - not just trying things, but imagining multiple ways of addressing a question and comparing the results - it's an extension of that bartering that we began learning so recently.

Psychosocially, the question that our choices and experiences is one of Industry, now knowing that we *can* do it, shall we?

In the realm of knowing what is right, interpersonal relations matter most, what will please others - but remember, we're not on a time line. Most kids in early grades slide back and forth between bartering over what is “right” and making the choices internally that will make them “the Good, Trusted Kid.”

School exposure helps us achieve the Law & Order stage of ethical reasoning - It's right because it's the rule. Learning playground rules, classroom rules, rules that can be extrapolated from procedures is our task as we enter school.

Slide - Polly Recommends the book *People* by Peter Spier, published in 1988 and accessible to small kids and with messages at every age. The book illustrates of people of extraordinary diversity, living lives that are similar and different. Their houses, clothing, food, and families all beautifully support our first principle of affirming the inherent worth and dignity of all persons as well as encouraging our sixth principle, the goal of world community with peace and justice for all.

Folks in elementary school learn about their faith tradition through the stories our people tell. World creation stories. Stories of real life heroes. One of my favorite nonfiction books at this age was called "Women of Courage" - short biographies of five real women whom I learned to admire. Imagine the swelling of my heart when I learned that two of them - Dorothea Dix who brought compassion to the treatment of patients in psychological distress and Jane Addams, who brought compassion to the poorest neighborhood in Chicago, were a Unitarian and a Universalist.

It seems we have only a few minutes left before 11. May I just recommend *The Cat Who Went to Heaven*, by Elizabeth Coatsworth, and Nancy Drew, Tamora Pierce, Rick Riordan, Gary Paulson, Sir Terry Pratchett, Tolkien... um, my list does go on.

The harder the ethical questions we face, the more that speculative fiction can help us chew on situations that we need practice with - just in case - yet we don't want to have happen enough times to *get* the practice in real life. I suggest Tom Godwin's "The Cold Equations". And may I recommend "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" by Ursula K. LeGuin?

Works recommended in the service

Beowulf,

Guess How Much I Love You

Winnie the Pooh, by AA Milne

The Little Engine That Could, by Watty Piper

Last Stop on Market Street by Matt de la Peña

Magic Tree House Books by Mary Pope Osborne

We Are in a Book by Mo Willems

The Adventures of Captain Underpants by Dav Pilkey

Percy Jackson and the Titan's Curse by Rick Riordan

Harry Potter by JK Rowling

The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

We Laugh, We Cry, We Cook by Becky Johnson and Rachel Randolph

At Knit's End: Meditations for Women Who Knit Too Much by Stephanie Pearl-McPhee

People by Peter Spier

Women of Courage by Dorothy Nathan

The Cat Who Went to Heaven, by Elizabeth Coatsworth

Nancy Drew books by Carolyn Keene

Short story: Tom Godwin's "The Cold Equations".

Short story: "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas" by Ursula K. LeGuin

Authors recommended in the text

Shakespeare,

Poe,

Tolkien

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Sir Terry Pratchett