

NURTURING THE NEXT GENERATION
Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper
 Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro (VA)
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My candle-lighting conversation with the children reminds me of a story told by Richard Gilbert, who served for many years as minister at the First Unitarian Church of Rochester. One Sunday morning he visited a class of three- and four-year-olds to talk about the flaming chalice as a symbol of our faith. At the end of his talk, they all sang “This Little Light of Mine” with great enthusiasm. As he recounts, “The service over (so I thought), I placed the cover on the sterno can to extinguish the flame and complete the ceremony, paused, ready to rejoin the adult congregation, when with a gigantic *pop* the can cover flew to the ceiling—to the astonishment not only of the three- and four-year-olds, but of me, one who fancies himself at times a technician of the sacred. How miracles abound if only I, if only we, can harness that latent energy.

This morning Chris Rivera and I are going to talk about how **we** as a congregation can harness and direct the energy of our children and youth. The mission of our Fellowship can be summarized in four words: **exploring, caring, nurturing, and sharing**. It even rhymes! Let’s repeat these together [pause and repeat them in unison]. Our mission statement, which appears on the front page of our newsletter every month and on the home page of our website, identifies as one of our shared commitments: “To provide a nurturing environment where children can question and grow to develop their own religious beliefs.” Are we fulfilling that commitment?

Last fall our Board of Directors created a task force chaired by Chris to take a closer look at our religious education program and offer recommendations for improving our support for it. The task force members conducted a survey of our own members **and** collected information from nine (?) other congregations similar to us. I would like to recognize and thank the folks who devoted many hours to these tasks. In addition to Chris Rivera, they are Fran Clark, Jen Liskey, Debby Austin, and _____. In a few minutes Chris will report on what they learned and, more importantly, the task force’s recommendations for ways that **all of us** can support the nurturing of the next generation of Unitarian Universalists. The future of our faith tradition will depend on how well we educate and inspire them. We all have a stake in religious education, not just as a challenge to **surviving** but to **thriving** as individuals, as families, as a congregation, and in the words of UUA president Morales, as “the faith for our times.” What can we do here in this Fellowship to fulfill the promise that our Unitarian Universalist faith holds for the future?

About ten years ago a group of religious educators and other leaders gathered in Essex, Massachusetts to exchange ideas about how our faith movement might address the emerging spiritual needs of the 21st century. Their thoughts were later published in a book titled *Essex Conversations: Visions for Lifespan Religious Education*. In reading these essays, I was struck by several recurring themes.

First, we are unique in our **inclusiveness**. We welcome and embrace individuals and families that are marginalized or rejected by other faiths: gay people, non-conformists, seekers, and other refugees from traditional religion. Here you are free to express and explore your questions and doubts without the concern that you will be offered simple answers to complicated questions. Here our children and youth are encouraged to learn about the world's great spiritual traditions, with the understanding that no one tradition has all the answers. Where else in this area could they have this experience? We offer adult classes that broaden not only our awareness of other religions, but also our appreciation of the previously unknown dimensions of the religious traditions we grew up with.

Second, we need to become more **family-centered**. Many of the people who are showing up at our doorway are parents who are looking for an alternative way to raise their children. They are looking for guidance in how to do this. Fran Clark and I meet with parents every other month, and the conversations we have during these sessions are both rewarding and challenging. We need to provide more resources to them as they wrestle with the dilemmas of raising healthy and responsible children in these troubling times. We need to help them apply our UU principles to everyday issues, and suggest ways to nurture a sense of the sacred in their children's lives.

Finally, we need to provide first-hand experiences of what it means to part of a face-to-face faith **community**. We need to bridge the physical and generational distance that separates the adults from the young people here in our Fellowship. Bridging the gap involves movement in **two** directions. We need to have our young people more present with us as we experience and express our ties to one another. And we need to encourage more of our adult members—not just those with children—to share their wisdom and their Spirit of Life with our children and youth. In other words, we need to back up our expressed support for religious education with our commitment to act. In the words of our responsive reading, “If others impart to our children our knowledge and ideals, they will lose all of **us** that is wordless and full of wonder.” Let me now invite Christina Rivera to share with us how we might achieve the goal of “nurturing the next generation.”