

A Simple Lesson

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Favreault is a 2000 graduate of Starr King School. She is serving as the interim minister for the Unitarian Universalist Church of Berkeley, Calif. Favreault delivered this sermon to her congregation in September 2004.

It was a simple lesson:

Listen.

Allow yourself to be changed.

Show appreciation.

On the journey that brings me here today, I received the most profound of religious lessons in the most unexpected of secular spaces. The Zeum Theater -- at a Teen Speaks Youth Poetry slam. As I entered the dimly lit auditorium, I didn't know what to expect and I was a bit nervous and immediately started to formulate a plan to leave before intermission. But then something caught me as I walked across the stage to my seat and the energy of excited young people of many races, many hair colors from green to brown to blonde to tiger striped danced and hugged as music plays from a turn table through speakers as large as the doorway.

I note the ratio of adults to youth is about 1 to 20. The volume of the music goes down, the spotlight comes up and the leader of the group sets forth the prearranged ground rules:

Listen.

Allow yourself to be changed.

Show appreciation.

The first two voices spoke in tandem as they crossed the stage, “There are no definites. Gender is an illusion...”

Followed by angry words about the racism of the “alleged juvenile justice system that wants my brothers kept behind bars.” Then there is singing: one voice and then many.

“This little light of mine. I’m gonna let it shine...”

The woman with the orange and black hair talks of the burning bright light of her sexuality with a frankness that leaves even an OWL (Our Whole Lives) instructor blushing.

A young guy named Eddie bounds onto the stage. He announces “From the Gospel according to Matthew:”

“Jesus left there and went along the Sea of Galilee. Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down. Great crowds came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he healed them. The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel. Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have compassion for these people; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way.” His disciples answered, “Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?”

High fives and hugs greet Eddie as he leaves the stage.

Soon thereafter the 14-year-old named Chinaka quietly shares her theology. “I sit with God and She says, ‘you are loved.’”

In accordance with the ground rules stated, I did listen, and within those first minutes coming into the space something was stirring with me that was touching and changing me. I was revitalized and hope-filled. No longer planning to sneak out between acts. I joined the others in cheering, offering a show of appreciation that felt so inadequate for the magnificent gifts that had been shared. Yet, as others bolted up again and again to offer a standing ovation. I was glued deep in my chair and my soul wept.

Listen.

Allow yourself to be changed.

Show appreciation.

Those three bits of advice echoed for me all afternoon as a concise summing up of much of what it means to me to build a religious community. Much of what countless sages implore about faith, hope and love. Much of what calls me to leadership in a liberal religious community. Bearing witness to the religious expressions and longings of young people taps deeply into my belief that there is a human form -- an incarnation of hope. Hope sounded in the words of the prophets and embodied in the young. I hear the potential of healing in community and see the abundance of possibility for transformation and grace. A vision of something more. The sharing of love among people. Creative and dynamic.

Poetry slams started about 20 years ago as “an exciting, open to anyone poetry tournament that has democratized the art form”. Young people are using this form of poetic performance in the bay area and urban centers to create social change, to lament lost loves, to meditate, to mediate.

As the afternoon continued I excitedly scribbled notes on my program, collecting the themes of the poets: sin and salvation, discipline, ancestor worship, transcendence and forgiveness... families and community. God and mind and body and soul and sex. Revenge, death crucifixion, resurrection. Justice, surrender, benediction.

RW Emerson said “great truths demand great utterance.” He said “the highest truths need the highest utterance, which means poetry.” And “the religious nature finds its full expression only in communication between people.”(Richardson, Mind on Fire) To my listening, there was great utterance that Saturday afternoon, telling the story of a generation. Rich and poor. Gay and straight. Black and brown and white. Homeless and suburban.

I wished that more adults were there to hear the words of the young people...and engage in their conversation. I linger on the quote from Angus MacLean a Universalist educator who said “religious education is for us a creative conversation between ourselves, our children and the life that surrounds us.” (Spiral Journey, UUA pamphlet). Because as delighted as I was with hearing such powerful words from the youth, my soul wept and I felt afraid. Afraid of the isolation the young people expressed - afraid of my own memories of the loneliest times.

I was afraid that most of these youth never heard of Unitarian Universalism. Might never know of our communities where their living and loving and creativity could be affirmed by an historic tradition.

Where poetic voices and prophetic wisdom and deeds of men and women are held. Where dreams are nurtured.

My soul was weeping the lament that too many Unitarian Universalists are not listening to the deep longing for religious community that is expressed in the lives of youth. I was sad about the countless times I have heard, "Oh they'll come back to church when they have kids of their own - teenagers don't need church, they'd rather sleep." I remain afraid that this movement is not equipped to engage young people longing to belong, longing for a place to worship, to learn and to share in the celebrations and sorrows of life. When I sat in the theatre - loving the company of these young people for one afternoon - I was sad that this vibrant, moving spirit of religious questioning would not be infusing my place of worship on Sunday morning. Sad that my congregation did not have a regular time or space where young people could hug and play and dance and share poetry in the company of elders.

Here in the Bay Area, with a population of more than 6.8 million people, Unitarian Universalist youth groups are few and far between. This breaks my heart. Still, I have hope. In listening to the silences in so many congregations, in hearing the struggles here to make a home for the young, I hear how deeply we need to allow ourselves to be changed.

We need to show an appreciation to people of ALL AGES if we are to confront our fears. And to show appreciation, we need time to celebrate the miracles of our living and share the struggles of our broken-ness.

We need to live in the intergenerational community with the discomfort, the noise, the awkwardness and the possibilities.

I strive to find hope. In the (1999) UUA Ware lecture, the well-known author and psychologist Mary Pipher spoke of "the wisdom that our elders have to offer our youth." She referenced a study in which adults recalled the three quality experiences of childhood: meals together, vacations together, and time outdoors together. "But these days," she said, "very few families even have a daily meal... together, we need to make time for those things that are memorable." (UUA Website)

During this year (of interim ministry) I want to hear how you see this community being a place that truly builds religious community for people of all ages... provides time together that is memorable and nourishing.

What would it take?

Pipher talked about why families want to be a part of a church community: because children can only be raised by groups. And in such groups (as a church) children are exposed to diversity in experience, orientation, backgrounds and age. "each generation has its own gifts to give," she said.

And she ended her remarks by quoting Gandhi's famous saying "We must be the change we wish to see in the world" (UUA Website).

Listen.

Allow yourself to be changed.

Show appreciation.

"Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?"

"How many loaves do you have?" Jesus asked.

"Seven," they replied, "and a few small fish."

He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, and when he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people. They all ate and were satisfied. Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. The number of those who ate was 4,000, besides women and children.

May we listen to the hunger of our young people and feed the children of our community, May we give them poetry and mentors and enough people coming forth to lead Sunday programs that we have people left over! May we share with them words and dance - and may we invite them, by name, to the welcome table, were together we can listen to one another - with one another where we can be transformed by love and where we can sing joyfully of hope and wisdom of faith and love.

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