

**Homily: Mothers and Other Spiritual Guides**  
**Rev. Martha Hodges      May 10, 2009**

I received much of my religious education in our family's kitchen. Yes, I went to Sunday school – sporadically – but it was in the kitchen that my mother and I had our most intimate conversations – I perched on the kitchen stool and she peeling potatoes or standing with her hands deep in a mixing bowl. This was the time and place where she was all mine. Not that all our talk was about God, by any means. I would tell her about school, the good and the bad, and she would tell me stories from her life. All this was religious education.

If religious education is the pursuit of truths about life and all that matters most – all that gives shape and life to our souls and teaches us how to live – then almost everything we do is a kind of religious education. And, as children, we study the adults around us, looking for clues to the life that is still a great mystery to us. We have not yet narrowed our field of vision. We haven't yet decided what is relevant and what isn't; nor have we decided that we already know enough and no longer need to be paying attention. Even when we seem not to be listening, we are paying attention. And learning what it is our parents value; how are parents treat other people and what they say about them; how they manage tension and conflict; what makes them laugh; what lights up their eyes. We study our parents and other adults around us and sometimes we ask questions.

Questions about why people are so mean or act so crazy; about what we should do when we're confronted with a new problem on the playground or what to make of some new information about how other people live. We ask questions – not always in the form of questions – about our feelings of pride, fear, sadness and joy; about what is worth working for and worrying about and celebrating. These are religious questions.

Sometimes we even ask directly about God, or death, or love or suffering. If we're lucky, we get some answers that help us to think rather than shut us up. Such thoughtful answers may not satisfy us at the time. As children, we tend to demand absolute answers; we want certainty, facts, rules.

Unitarian Universalist parents often feel especially challenged when our children ask these religious questions. Questions like, “Do we believe in God?” “Do people come back to life after they die? Do they go to heaven? Why don't we pray to Jesus?” UU parents often struggle with these questions for a couple of reasons. For one thing, they don't feel confident that they know the answers, or that anyone does. For another, they may remember being taught some doctrinal answers to this kind of question when they were children, and they are determined not to saddle their own children with certain beliefs they later found to be untrue or even harmful. And of course, as UUs, we tend to prefer the questions to the answers. And as UUs, we believe in encouraging others to find their own answers, to question everything. We're afraid of imposing our beliefs on others, even, or maybe especially, our own children.

I think we make a mistake by being too cautious about sharing our beliefs with our kids. I think we owe them our best answers to these questions – hedged around with qualifications, by all means. Qualifications like, “Well, you’ll decide about that yourself, but I believe that...” or “Some people say that, but I don’t agree....” But answers... even if the answer is, “I really don’t know.”

Do you remember asking these questions? I do. I remember asking these questions in the kitchen, while my mother sliced apples and chopped onions. And, for the most part, I remember the answers. And for the most part, I still agree with those answers.

My mother told me that God was everything that was good, including what was best in people; that God was in everyone and everything. She told me that we live on after death only in the memories of those who knew us and in the differences we made in the world. That Jesus was a teacher whose good ideas are still worthwhile trying to follow. And that heaven and hell were not places, but states of mind that we create for ourselves here on earth.

I was lucky to have a Unitarian mother, who gave me answers that made me think, even if I didn’t understand them. Answers that were heart-felt and real. Answers that, in the words of Tagore that we heard Celia sing just now, allowed “faith in the marvelous to bloom anew each dawn.... My mother’s voice gave meaning to the stars.”

What an awesome and impossible responsibility this is – this parenting. No wonder no one ever gets it exactly right. Beyond feeding, clothing and comforting the physical hurts of our children, may we truly feed their spirits, clothe their minds, and comfort the hurts of their souls.

May we imbue them with a spirit open to the marvelous, clothe their minds with rich and diverse ideas and understandings that evade our own powers to fully grasp and prepare them for a future we can’t imagine. May we comfort their souls with the certainty that hope and trust and freedom are theirs for the asking, and that, most of all, no matter what they do, they are loved and worthy of being loved. As are others. This is the most important answer we can give them. When life, with its hurts and disappointments, challenges and shakes this faith, as it will, may this certainty, this spiritual conviction, stand by them.