

Parenting As a Spiritual Practice

February 4, 2007

Rev. Martha Niebanck
First Parish in Brookline

I begin with a story: Twenty-five years ago I was advising a single mother (by choice) in an early intervention program. May, not her real name, had not spent a single minute, it seemed, away from her daughter, June, since the birth two years before. Every attempt to use a babysitter had ended in a huge crying jag that May could not weather. We consulted with a social worker who advised that May find a church to go to on Sunday morning, not to “get religion” exactly, or even to get free babysitting even, but rather—that she find a regular place where the people would be glad to see her for herself as a person in her own right, separate from her toddler.

I thought of that social worker, Nina Masters, as a wise elder and as she told us in her glorious New York accent what May really needed—adult faces smiling at her and calling her by name, I could see and hear and feel every detail of that imaginary future.

I don't know if May ever joined a church but this mother of a five-year old (me) took the advice to heart. My husband, my son, and I walked into the First Parish in Canton and just as Nina Masters had predicted there were adults reaching out to us, glad to see our faces when we showed up week after week. Each of us became know separate from each other as individuals.

My long introduction this morning is a way of speaking to those of us here who are not parents or who are not actively parenting young children. I want to say thank you for all you do to make this a sanctuary for the personhood of mothers and fathers. Thank you for all the times you smiled at an other, recognized a person with a nod and a gesture of welcome, learned a new name. Know that you are doing the good work of parenting by proxy and that we are all in this together.

Rabbi Nancy Fuchs-Kreimer, in a book entitled *Parenting as a Spiritual Journey*, makes some useful distinctions in this matter of parenting as a spiritual practice as we begin our conversation. She writes "My informants discovered, through their journey as parents, that while **theology** is what you *say*, **spirituality** is *who you are*. Children don't listen much to what you say anyway. As for who you are, children help make you that person. **Religion** is passed *down* through the generations; **spirituality** is often passed *upward*."

On some other Sunday I hope to preach a sermon on the ways to raise Unitarian Universalist children—a to-do list for families if you will—but not today. Today I am interested in raising Unitarian Universalist **adults** and the curriculum for that project is parenting. Our children are making us into the persons we are becoming. As Jim taught us last week, chaos requires us to leap into emergence. Chaos, complexity, and emergence is the curriculum of parenting.

UU minister Lisa Ward writes: “Regarding our children as our spiritual practice does not mean using them for our ends. It means embracing the role, the relationship, and the response-ability as our present lessons for life. We engage our wisdom and awareness toward what is before us and we welcome the unpredictable, ever changing context of our lives. The chaos that children bring invites us to steady our sense of self and find our footing. We are echoed, challenged, mimicked, defied, sought after and sent packing. We are put on pedestals and used as furniture, we are intensely visible and not even there. This is all the stuff we need to practice acceptance, forgiveness, gratitude, creativity and trust. This is all the stuff we need to enter life fully. That is, if we create the time.” (“Your Children Are Your Practice”)

Long before I ever thought of trying Buddhist meditation, my three year old son was my dharma teacher. Here is how many of my days were lived in his company: I remember a fall day driving from Canton to Boston. Three-year old Alex was strapped into his car seat behind me as we took a right that would turn us toward Boston. As I took that right turn, the voice behind me asked, “Why did you go that way?” “Because we are going to Boston.” “Why does this road go to Boston?” How does one answer such a question? It took me a minute to understand that Alex was really asking: “How do you know this road goes to Boston.” I remembered that “why” was his all purpose word to signal all sorts of questions.

I was happy to be able to reframe his question and ask “Do you mean ‘how do I know this road goes to Boston?’” Yes, that was what he wanted to know. I cheerfully answered, that I knew that the road went to Boston because the sign said so. He was not satisfied. He asked “Why did the sign say Boston?” By the time we were in Quincy, at least three miles of “whys” later, I understood his question to be, “how did the people who made the signs and who built the road know that this was the way to Boston?”

At long last, as we saw the tall buildings and Boston Harbor, I was able to answer him “I know that this road goes to Boston, because, every time I take it, I always arrive in Boston.” He was finally satisfied with that answer -- that experience was the final arbiter of all theories of reality. Long before we ever entered a Unitarian Universalist community, Alex was teaching me the UU practice of testing truth claims against the hard realities of experience.

Alex continued and continues to be a person who questions the authority of others against the reality of experience. This trait of questioning authority of mom’s driving, sign makers and road makers, while attractive in a child strapped into a car seat, was not always endearing. “Why?” delivered in just the right tone in the midst of too many demands can unglue even the most practiced parent.

This is where the rubber meets the road in the spiritual practice of parenting. Lots of books and experts tell us how we ought to behave but very few address the inner experience of parenting. Jon Kabat Zinn asks: “What do we do with our own mind? How do we avoid getting swallowed up and overwhelmed by our doubts, our insecurities,

by the real problems we face in our lives, by the times when we feel [in very real conflict with our children]?”

One of my favorite teachers in seminary, Bob Kegan at the Harvard Ed School, interviewed parents of ten-year olds. They generated a list of what they thought were the most important attributes of a parent: Love, Understanding, Flexibility, Openness, Warmth, Humor, Open-Mindedness, ability to listen, respect for the child’s individuality, taking an interest in what interests the child—a heart warming list.

Then he asked, “What would you do if you discovered your ten-year old stealing from the corner drug store?” He got a range of answers from this educated bunch: “Find out why.” “Love the child harder.” “Find out what the child needs emotionally and give it to her.” Finally a brave soul in the back of the room said, “I’d scream and yell at my kid so he knew I was angry.”

Kegan pushed back, “Really, you’d get angry, what about open-mindedness, understanding, and respecting the child’s individuality?” What Kegan is pressing for is a list of parental attributes that are more complex. He knows, if we are to do the work of raising the next generation, we must add the capacity to exercise power on behalf of convictions, and the ability to express moral outrage to our list of parental capacities.

As Kegan puts it: “The most intimate instruction in which the child participates is the family, and the most visceral and instructive lessons the child receives in effective self-leadership come from the ways she or he experiences being led. ...” The exercise of power as a parent is itself intrinsic to effective loving and effective leadership.

If we lived in a traditional, bounded culture in which all the generations and all the neighbors agreed on all levels about the meanings and purposes of a shared life, orthodoxy would save us in the complexity of leadership. The “ortho” in “orthodoxy” does not mean “rigid” or “dogmatic” but rather it refers to the action of correcting or straightening as in “orthodontia.” If we lived in a culture with a shared vision and an overarching ideology then young parents would be like fish swimming in the water of a body of practice passed from one generation to the next. They and we would not need to invent parenting in every generation.

Like fish out of water, today’s parents either need to find a new pool to jump into or, like our long-ago fish relatives, evolve to breath the air on land. In other words, today’s parents have a choice: find an orthodox community that will shape all the choices with a vision and ideology or find the resources to support evolving one’s parenting consciously reflecting on the values expressed in each choice we make. Neither one is better than the other, just different.

Changing the metaphor -- choosing an orthodoxy is like choosing to drive a car with an automatic transmission -- it will get you to your destination without your having to know how to shift gears. The matter and mind of shifting is built into the system. Choosing to evolve as a person in the curriculum of parenting, to develop an inner self in this

potentially relativistic, postmodern culture is to learn to drive a manual transmission. And here is the really, really hard question: “Do you really want to learn how to drive a stick shift with a car full of children?”

Long ago when I was applying to seminary I was asked, “What is the purpose of the Church?” I answered, “I cannot answer about the Church in general, but I can speak to the purpose of the church in particular. I believe that a church community gives families a chance to shape their parenting by seeing other parents and families and learning from them. In these postmodern days when grandmothers and aunts and uncles are either far away or unreliable models, mothers and fathers can build connections and learn how to parent from each other.”

In a way I think a church like this has small pools of water for those of us that are landlocked fish as yet un-evolved.

That was certainly true for me. I remember talking to another parent about how much I appreciated the loosey-goosey ways of the Unitarian Universalist church. I said something like, “Gee I am so happy that I don’t have to force my son to go to church like my parent’s forced me to go to Lutheran Sunday school.”

My new friend looked very seriously at me as she answered, “I *do* force my child to go to Sunday school. When he doesn’t want to go, I remind him of the work the teacher has done to prepare the lesson. I remind him that the class is small and that his absence will make a difference to the children who are there.” I was stopped short by that answer. She challenged my model of being an understanding parent by adding the notion of being a respectful member of community.

Perhaps if I had been a meditator at that point in my life I could have come to that more complex conclusion on my own -- but I was not. I am grateful that I was able to jump into the pool of her ways on the way to growing a more complex self.

So this is what I recommend to parents of all ages and stages.

- (1) Connect to someone or to some real community that you admire, respect, and trust. Engage with that community and allow the traditions of that community to shape and support your parenting. You and children will still get where you are going in a car with an automatic transmission.
- (2) However, if you want to add to your own complexity, in a culture in which your children will be encountering other just as compelling communities of practice, find a way to begin to practice mindfulness.

Find a way to watch your own mind at work in a way that will lead you to becoming more grounded, more serene, less needful of control for its own sake.

Find a way to watch your thoughts and know that you are not your thoughts.

I would describe this as learning to drive a stick shift in the parking lot.

Making a boundary for yourself as a learner -- whether you do it with the help of a teacher or by making a special time each day, will support your being able to bring more conscious choice to the good work of parenting.

When you are able to calm a troubled mind and evoke a relaxation response in yourself within three conscious breaths you will be on your way to driving a vehicle with a manual transmission. You will get where you are going with more awareness along the way.

Find a way to your own sovereignty, and like the emperor in our story, be a place where heaven and earth are joined -- a place where abstract values and practical realities are joined.

Thich Nhat Hanh writes: "The Buddha is sometimes called, 'One who has Sovereignty over Himself or Herself.' Events carry us away, and we lose ourselves, walking meditation helps us regain our sovereignty, your liberty as a human being. We walk with grace and dignity, like an emperor, like a lion. Each step is life." (The Long Road Turns to Joy)

I bow to that sovereignty, that emperor within you as we sing a new song together. The words are in the order of service. Let us, just for now, allow our musicians to lead us as we learn our way into the new words and melody. Someday, but not yet, it will be our turn to lead.