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# Spirited Homeschooling: Home-, Church-, and Community-based Learning in the Liberal Religious Family

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Spirited Homeschooling:  
Home-, Church-, and Community-based Learning  
for Liberal Religious Families

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This publication was made possible with funding from the Unitarian Sunday School Society and the Liberal Religious Educators Association 21st-Century Grant.

“Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do it, because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”

-- Howard Thurman

*Rumi said that there are a thousand ways to bend and kiss the ground. Shepherding the education of children is one of them. Thank you for the work you are doing for our collective future by engaging children’s hearts, hands, and minds in learning about and transforming themselves and our fantastic, needy, beautiful, broken world.*

*Teresa H-Y*

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# Introduction

For more than three decades now, sitting around kitchen tables, catching one another during the coffee hour on Sundays, and later, seeking one another out online, Unitarian Universalist homeschooling families together have been imagining, organizing, crafting, testing, and tweaking an educational approach that is like no other. Part homeschooling, part whole-family spiritual quest, part community immersion, their experiments were the beginning of a small, loose movement that may be one of our most successful models of homegrown faith development to date.

Among ourselves (I myself am a Unitarian Universalist homeschooling parent), there isn't a name for this home-education-as-lived-liberal-theology phenomenon, so for the sake of clarity--and a bit of description--I'm calling it Spirited Homeschooling in this book. Spirited Homeschooling is distinct from simply being simultaneously Unitarian Universalists and homeschoolers in ways that I'll discuss further in Chapter 1.

The name Spirited Homeschooling is references two main sources. One is the UU-specific, Montessori- and Godly-Play inspired religious education model created by Nita Penfold, Ralph Roberts, and Beverly Leute Bruce called "Spirit Play," which is characterized by use of story, ritual, play, creativity, wondering, structure and routine, and shared responsibility. With these elements of Spirit Play, adults and children co-create deeply spiritual educational environments, a goal and approach that resonate strongly with many UU homeschoolers. And the second inspiration is UU minister Erika Hewitt's work on what she calls "Spirited Worship," worship that is deliberately multigenerational, multi-sensory, ritualistic, engaging of the whole person, deeply connective, and flexible. More than simply lending language to my work, these UU innovators and philosophers were points of light for me in the terrain of liberal religion. For their generosity and creativity of spirit and of intellect, I am grateful.

This is a book about making the values of liberal religion a dominant feature in the education of children in families who intend to raise shining, whole, justice-seeking, open-hearted, many-gifted, loving, faithful people in an age when those qualities are daily challenged from the White House to the lunch table to the cheer squad to the Minecraft chat bar. Spirited Homeschooling is part Family Ministry and Part Religious Education, and somehow in that synthesis, a thing that is new, too. It is, unequivocally, the most soul-stirring, intense, love-filled, and challenging work I have done thus far in my life.

UU home-educating parents are outliers both within their faith and among the population of North American homeschoolers. Chapter 2 will address some of the challenges Spirited Homeschoolers face from among their own comrades. And yet, they have persisted, partly because of the intoxicating power of watching their children thrive within this model, and partly due to finding their own spiritual sustenance in the practice of educating and being educated.

In September of 2016, I conducted a survey of 442 UU families who were currently homeschooling or who had homeschooled their grown children when they were younger. I was seeking qualitative data, and asked questions that I hoped would elicit stories and examples that would help me better see and then share what homeschooling looked like in Unitarian Universalist families. I've included many of these families' own words here, edited only for length and clarity; while they're woven throughout the book, they are especially featured in Chapters 3 and 4 featuring the hows and whys of Spirited Homeschooling.



Because liberal religious homeschoolers have created their own UU-grounded, values-based educational approach since the mid-1980s, often in partnership with churches and other covenanted communities (even if those churches and communities were unaware of the central role they played in the children’s homeschooling), UU homeschoolers’ anecdotes and data have been crucial in painting a picture of what Spirit Education is and can be. They represent a movement-within-a-movement, families with a vision of a whole-life orientation toward the values of liberal religion. Their ingenuity and adventurous approach were, and continue to be, the inspiration for this book and the evolving methods I attempt to describe within it. I am particularly grateful for the words and examples of pioneering homeschoolers Kathryn Baptista and Karen Tucker, trailblazers and generous leaders in homeschooling from a UU core going back three decades now.

When we talk in terms of education rather than schooling, we’re able to open up all kinds of possibilities for infusing a life with religious principles and spiritual nurturing. Spirited Homeschooling, as it has been lived and shared with me, has been primarily a homeschooling approach. But it has wide and exciting

applications beyond the homeschool. In Chapter 5, I'll talk about possible futures where stronger church-home-neighborhood partnerships meet educational, social, and developmental needs that none could meet alone, and that would allow *Spirited Education* to flourish to its full potential in many different contexts.

As Unitarian Universalists who understand the crucial role education plays in the creating of a loving and just society, we are impelled to use the tools of our faith to create and support learning environments for the children and youth of our movement and in the communities we share. This has always been our charge, though we have taken it up with different degrees of commitment over the years. The time has never been so urgent as now, though, and so, this book is also a call to our congregations and covenanted communities for an expanded, more flexible approach to supported learning within, among, and beyond our liberal religious families. Church is changing very, very rapidly, and I'm arguing that supporting and learning from Spirited Homeschooling is the kind of adaptive change that could keep churches vital, engaged, and integral to their communities, as well as grow souls into their own shape of the divine.

Finally, I draw heavily here from our movement's more than half a century of innovative, savvy, theologically deep, multicultural, congregationally based religious education programming. Professional religious educators are some of our faith's bravest, most heartfelt, creative, humble, and knowledgeable leaders. Their work can--and will!--lead us toward culture-shifting educational encounters in the home, in our churches, and in community spaces, if we are willing and able to accept their offers of shared ministry. There are too many of these gifted, wise, gritty, clear-eyed, humble teaching elders to name, but I hold them all in my heart with gratitude both for what they do for our faith every week, and for what they've offered me, personally, in my own spiritual and professional development.

In this book, I'm addressing two audiences. One is religious education professionals and lay leaders. To them, I hope to present Spirited Homeschooling as one of our faith's most successful models of family ministry, and to offer insights that might be applied in broader contexts to the larger congregations and covenanted communities they serve. The second audience is current or would-be Unitarian Universalist home educators, especially those who

have or might build their homeschools on the foundation of their faith. This book hopes to tell a story of who we are and who we hope yet to be. And because these two audiences are interdependent, I advocate for partnerships that are mutually beneficial and enriching to the communities that hold both.

I've shared that I am presently a Spirited Homeschooler; my homeschoolers at the time of this writing are 12, 8, and 3. I'm also a credentialed religious educator who served a small congregation in the Arkansas Ozarks for 4 ½ years. I continue to serve this faith as a hospital chaplain, Our Whole Lives sexuality educator, UU summer camp coordinator, writer, and lay leader. I've taught in public schools in rural North Florida and metro Atlanta, and at a small, progressive private school in a Southern college town. I'm a straight, white, college-educated, Southern, middle-aged, cis-gender woman from a working-class, Catholic background. I bring these identities, among others, to my work here, and understand and accept them as both assets and limitations.

## Chapter 1: A Unique Definition



In her essay, “Making Sure There is a There There,” Unitarian Universalist religious education pioneer Judith Frediani describes a UU approach to the

concept of curriculum as “creating experiences that give people an opportunity to learn something worth learning.”<sup>1</sup>

What is it that is worth learning? What comprises the curriculum that will help us guide our children toward lives well lived, engaged, joyful, in service of neighbors and our shared earth, brimming with enthusiasm for what tomorrow may yet bring, and faithful to a set of values and principles that hold them in challenging times? State legislatures have ideas about this. School teachers have ideas about this. Employers, philosophers, innovators, and spiritual leaders have ideas about this.

And, no less, parents and children themselves have ideas about this, about the curriculum of childhood, the experiences and understandings at the center of one’s formative years. Many of the parents whose words appear in this book--the Spirited Homeschoolers--have described Unitarian Universalism as a core aspect of their homeschooling curriculum.

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Frediani, “Making Sure There is a There There,” in *Essex Conversations: Visions for Lifespan Religious Education*, ed. Essex Conversations Coordinating Committee (Boston: Skinner House, 2001), 61.



Frediani goes on to say that we Unitarian Universalists “can be proud of our history of eclectic, progressive approaches to education,”<sup>2</sup> a tradition that has drawn from the wisdom of educators such as Channing, Montessori, Faahs, Dewey, Holt, Knowles, Friere, hooks, Derman-Sparks, and others. The philosophies of some of these thinkers diverged from conventional, compulsory schooling into what is still the relatively unexplored terrain of home- and small-community education. This is where Spirited Homeschooling picks up.

In this introduction, I’ll focus on my working definition of Spirited Homeschooling and its two main components. I say working definition because I know that what I gathered from my survey in 2016, as well as conversations with other homeschooling UU parents over my own seven years of homeschooling, is still simply a snapshot of a dynamic and evolving educational model. Furthermore, I’m making a distinction between Spirited Homeschoolers--those for whom

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<sup>2</sup> Frediani, 61.

Unitarian Universalism is central to their family's approach to education--and UUs who also happen to homeschool.

## Definition

Spirited Homeschooling uses the tools of Unitarian Universalism to engage the whole person in learning, acting, and reflecting with the goal of helping them grow toward the Holy, however they may define it, and to joyfully join in manifesting the beloved community.

The theological underpinning of this holistic approach rests on the fact that the world needs all of our gifts, and that when we assist one another in living into our gifts--helping each other to become liberated from oppressions and to develop an ear for the small, still voice within--we are, in fact, manifesting the Spirit of Mystery and Wonder that some people call God. It is only through our collective liberation and a cooperative approach to individual spiritual growth that our lives and our planet will be saved, and Spirited Homeschooling is an experiment in--or some might say, a return to--moving toward those goals.

## The Components

There are two components that make a learning environment one where Spirited Homeschooling happens. One is the **focus on relationships**, between learner and parent, learner and co-learners, and learner and community. The second is the **abiding presence of Unitarian Universalist theology**, defined as the body of our liberal religious teachings, values, ethics, stories, songs, experiences, and rituals. These two components form the base on which all other aspects of the education are balanced.

Relationships

Positive, personal relationships in educational settings are significant factors in students' social development and academic success.<sup>3</sup> A tenet of Spirited Homeschooling is that relationship skills are the single most important skills a human can develop in order to realize their full potential and do the work that is theirs to do in the world. In relationship is where our most profound growth takes place. Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes it thusly:

You are not human on your own. You are human through relationship. You *become* human. We are made for this delicate network of interdependence...I need you in order for me to be me. I need you to be you to the fullest...Ubuntu<sup>4</sup> says not, 'You are human because you think.' 'You are human because you participate in relationship.' It says a person is a person through other persons.<sup>5</sup>

When a parent--or grandparent, or aunt, or guardian, or beloved mentor--takes on the role of Spirited Homeschooler, we are committing to doing the unceasing and difficult work of relationship building both as spiritual practice and service. We attempt to model for the children in our care what clear, compassionate, connected communication looks, sounds, and feels like, and we practice with them so that it becomes the template of their inner lives, so that it becomes the default manner in which they conduct themselves in the world.

Positive, personal relationships are also the single most influential factor determining whether or not children grow up to stay in the faith in which they were raised. Even if you're not among those who have a strong preference for the children in your care to stay in your religion, statistically speaking, if our children do not claim a religion in their youth, they'd more likely identify with no

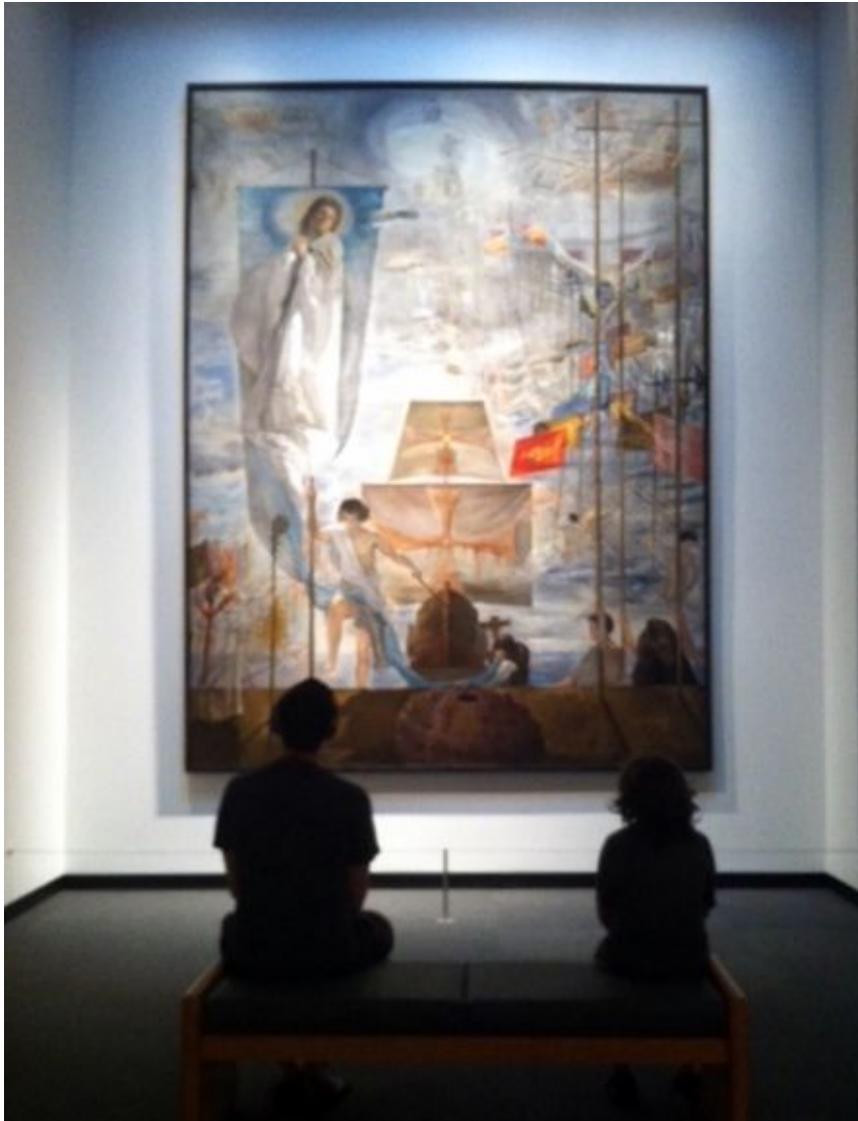
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<sup>3</sup> For a good review of literature on the importance of relationships in education, see Emily Gallagher, "The Effects of Teacher-Student Relationships: Social and Academic Outcomes of Low-Income Middle and High School Students." New York University Department of Applied Psychology OPUS (Online Publication of Undergraduate Studies), <http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/appsych/opus/issues/2013/fall/gallagher>. (last accessed Nov. 23, 2017.)

<sup>4</sup> Ubuntu is a Zulu word that translates to something like "humanity," or "our humanity toward others." Through Tutu's interpretation, it has come to signify a philosophy of interconnection among all humanity that encompasses ideas of caring, community, and hospitality.

<sup>5</sup> DesmondTutu PeaceFoundation, "We Are Human Only Through Relationship UBUNTU," [://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bx\\_rSHNEt-g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bx_rSHNEt-g) (last accessed Aug. 12, 2017)

religion at all as adults rather than find another that suits them better.<sup>6</sup> So, by the numbers, religious affiliation in childhood is less about denominational allegiance and more about a lifelong habit of religiosity that has the potential to enhance--even add to<sup>7</sup>-- the years of their lives. Cultivating positive relationships within the faith means our children will always know they have a place to return to again and again when they have deep longings or a little extra to give.



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<sup>6</sup> The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "Faith in Flux: Changes in Religious Affiliation in the U.S." April, 2009. <file:///home/chronos/u-520e38266c8f238fdd0ec503c8dff50422a9b5ff/Downloads/fullreport.pdf> (last accessed Nov. 23, 2017)

<sup>7</sup> Li Shanshan, Meir J. Stampfer, David R. Williams et al., "Association of Religious Service Attendance With Mortality Among Women," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, June, 2016.

Jean Nieuwejaar, in her book, *The Gift of Faith*, describes the significance of relationships within the church:

The important thing is that the child be companioned in his or her religious thinking and encouraged to continue in it. The bigger the circle of people with whom you child can join in this conversation and exploration, the fuller and richer his or her sense of the holy will become. Children are evolving as religious beings, whether we wish it to be so or not. We can choose to be active influences in this evolution, or we can leave the child vulnerable to random messages and meanings from wherever and whomever they may come.<sup>8</sup>

Here's another take on that sentiment, reading number 563 in the gray UU hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*. This passage is attributed there to Ralph Waldo Emerson:

A person will worship something--Have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts--but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping, we are becoming.

No matter how well we may do UU at home, we need strong congregations and covenanted communities for our children. There is simply a difference between how one experiences their faith in small family groups versus larger gatherings of one's tribe. Even as the family-church relationship dynamic is changing, there must be a faith home in some form where a parent-educator could turn in times of need, and where a child could find an abundant number of mentors, friends, and companions on the journey.

Within Unitarian Universalism--and so, within Spirited Homeschooling--relationships form the foundation of all other learning. The parent, or adult facilitator, learns with the child, models ways of being to the child,

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<sup>8</sup> Jeanne Harrison Nieuwejaar, *The Gift of Faith: Tending the Spiritual Lives of Children*, (Boston: Skinner House, 1999), 41.

and co-creates the educational environment together with the child, responding to what they are noticing about the child's needs and preferences, as well as new and interesting opportunities that come up in their shared lives. At its most quintessential, any UU could observe an interaction between a parent and child in a Spirited Homeschooling situation and recognize the relationship as being aligned with UU culture--the values being modeled, the consent being sought, the seeking of power-with rather than power-over, and so on.

### The Tools of Unitarian Universalism

So, positive, personal relationships are one of two main components of Spiritual Education through which we support the growth of the whole child. The second component is the body of values, ethics, stories, experiences, and rituals of our faith tradition--Unitarian Universalism in practice.

Children, especially those in the elementary and pre-teen years, are developmentally primed to learn and mimic the ways of their tribe. To the degree that we foster a sense of belonging, we also create a readiness to internalize and apply the lessons inherent in our traditions.



What are those lessons? What are the traditions that uphold them?

When we light the chalice, in a moment of reverence, and speak the words of togetherness, we teach that there is power in the gathered body, and there is power in language, and with this power we can create and offer sanctuary.

When we join our siblings from other faiths on the steps of our capitol buildings, holding signs that affirm love and condemn hate, raising our voices for our elected leaders to hear, we teach that there are many paths that lead toward salvation and liberation, and that we need all of them in order to reach all hearts and ears.

When we sing “Come, Come, Whoever You Are” as we load disaster-relief supplies into the back of a truck heading south, we teach that we are a people who shows up, joyfully, and ready to share what we have.

When we sit in quiet, open-hearted witness to another’s painful truth, even as that truth unsettles the assumptions that we have built our own lives upon, we teach love of self and love of another, fortitude and flexibility, and to paraphrase the words of Maya Angelou, once we know better, we do better.

A child’s life--soaked through with a sense of compassion and justice, with stories of radical hospitality and love without exception, with holding and soul-stirring rituals such as singing words of joy and grief with 100 other pilgrims or lighting a candle in somber silence in the name of those who came before--this religious life, is a rich life. That child’s life is infused with a love that will not let go, and it will reach its fullness through passions explored unselfconsciously, questions posed with driving curiosity, affirming joys indulged fully and often, hurts experienced with a resolute heart bent on compassion, and a surety that all the beauty and goodness in the world is meant for them to know, to protect, and to create for themselves, their neighbors, and for the generations that follow them. These are the fruits of our tradition, when we commit to cultivating them.

Imbedded here is the not-small assumption that the adults shepherding the child’s education are familiar with the ways of their faith, and have taken up the charge of learning more all the time, of approaching their own faith development with diligence and joy and a deep and abiding love. In her book, *Tending the Flame: The Art of Unitarian Universalist Parenting*, master-level credentialed religious educator Michelle Richards urges parents to “take some deliberate steps on the journey toward understanding your own beliefs.” This is so that children can both see this as a task that spiritual mature (and maturing) people set themselves to, and so that they can reap the benefits of their parents’ growing knowledge and wisdom.

This is crucial, and applies both to UU parenting and to Spirited Homeschooling: if our faith is at the center of our lives, our children will see and know its potential to radiate from within, illuminating every endeavor we undertake. If we neglect or

disdain our faith, cut corners with it or complain about it with cynicism and blame, our children will understandably choose something else to be at the center of their lives, and will lose access to the particular gifts our faith has to offer.

Implied here, too, is the role of the church in equipping parents for the task of being their child's primary religious educator. In fact, this call was at the center of UU regional leader Kim Sweeney's paper, "The Death of Sunday School and the Future of Faith Formation." Sweeney writes:

The purpose of faith formation programs is to bring the love and grace of Unitarian Universalism to our families' lives. A compelling and supported path to disciplined spiritual maturity is central to congregational life. While the majority of UU congregations' focus has been on providing faith formation opportunities for children and youth, most parents still expect congregational life to support them in forming their children into spiritual beings. How can this happen if the parent or caregiver is not also engaging in faith formation? Faith formation is a lifelong process. If we are to bring the love and grace of this faith to our families' lives, we must intentionally support the faith formation of both our children and our adults.<sup>9</sup>

Parents' spiritual development may look like structured adult education courses, maybe even aimed specifically at parents such as Parents as Spiritual Guides, or something that has immediate applications for a UU-based educator such as Faith Like a River. Or, parent spiritual development may look different.

Participating in covenant groups or book clubs, taking a role in or even leading worship and social justice endeavors, gaining familiarity with selected songs and stories, having opportunities to represent our faith and to witness--these are all ways parents as spiritual educators can deepen their own spirituality, more effectively educate their children, and enrich the church community at the same time. When this work is seen as a core ministry of the congregation--not just for parent-educators, but for all parents--we will be truly serving families and feeding the future of the movement.

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<sup>9</sup> Kimberly Sweeney, "The Death of Sunday School and the Future of Faith Formation," Northeast Region of the Unitarian Universalist Association: 2016. P. 17  
[https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/the\\_death\\_of\\_sunday\\_school\\_and\\_the\\_future\\_of\\_faith\\_formation\\_ksweeney\\_june2017.pdf](https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/the_death_of_sunday_school_and_the_future_of_faith_formation_ksweeney_june2017.pdf) (last accessed Nov. 23, 2017)



I want to make this call as clearly as possible to our churches and covenanted communities: you are the keepers of the flame of Unitarian Universalism. To the degree that you share that light and warmth, our faith will have powerful and positive influence on our world of deep need. And, if none bravely carry that flame--the body of theology that is Unitarian Universalism--with the intention of sharing it as far as our time, talent, treasure, and sometimes tears can bring it, then it will blink out, and what good might have been done will be lost. We cannot let this happen. We will not let this happen. If you are reading this book, then you are a flame bearer, and you have something that saves. Share it.

## Engaging the Whole Person

We often hear of holistic approaches to problem-solving, and holistic health, and here I'm referring to Spirited Homeschooling as attempting to engage the whole person. The idea of wholeness hints at a sense of balance, a recognition of interrelated systems, and of the sum being both greater than the collection of individual parts. But wholeness isn't fixed as a concept, and the word holistic--like the word natural--is often applied in ways that conjure up more feeling than substance.

So let me offer a few models of what a "whole person" education might attempt to cover, and why we'd attend to it.

The British writer Rumer Godden's autobiography, *A House With Four Rooms*, popularized the axiom to which its title refers:

There is an Indian proverb that says that everyone is a house with four rooms, a physical, a mental, an emotional, and a spiritual. Most of us tend to live in one room most of the time but unless we go into every room every day, even if only to keep it aired, we are not a complete person.

Godden's description is tidy, memorable, and brings to mind a compelling image of symmetry, agency, and discipline. But some people might find it helpful to categorize even further. The list below contains eight facets of human development and expression, and is drawn from Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences, from our own movement traditions of religious education, and the current movements to reunite children and the outdoors, among other influences:

- Intellectual
- Emotional
- Spiritual
- Physical
- Social
- Earthwisdom or Nature Knowing

- Sexual
- Making/creating

Maybe you'd have more or fewer categories, or aspects of self. The important thing, as a parent-educator, is to have a model that is inspiring and workable, not burdensome. But why would we go to the trouble? What's the point of engaging the whole person?

The first reason we'd design an education that conscientiously sought to develop, or at least touch, all the aspects of selfhood would be to encourage a child's innate wisdom and gifts to find form. The idea of children's innate wisdom and selfhood is deeply rooted in Unitarianism. The Transcendentalists, whose ideas about God and humanity were dominant shaping forces in Unitarianism of the 19th century, believed that as infants, we are all closest to God. Part of our education and maturity, then, would be to figure out how to reclaim or tune back into some of that divine understanding or innate wisdom that we are acculturated out of as we grow older. This is what Thoreau meant by, "It is only when we forget all our learning that we begin to know."<sup>10</sup> This, the Transcendentalists argued, was how we effected our full humanity, how we became the people we were meant to become, or could become, if given opportunity and nurturing.

Barbara Brown Taylor, in her book *The Preaching Life*, described children's innate theological imagination like this:

To apprentice one's self to a child is to learn that the world is full of wonders, a world in which nothing is simply what it seems because everything is packed with endless possibilities of usefulness and meaning. To enter that world, all you have to do is surrender your certainty that you already know what everything is and is for; all you have to do is start over again, assuming nothing and learning how to approach every created thing with awe.

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<sup>10</sup> *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Journal IX*, ed. Bradford Torrey, (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1906), 371.

It is a process of conversion--or reconversion--a recovery of what we once knew and forgot.<sup>11</sup>

Twentieth-century Trappist monk Thomas Merton dedicated his life to reaching the “true self,” that elusive one that, when expressed, brings us into cahoots with the cosmos. A whole-person education aims to give as many access points as possible for a child or youth to find, understand, and express the true self so that they may grow into their full personhood, whatever they may decide that to be.

Another reason for a whole-person educational paradigm is neurobiological. Studies show that when we learn and try new things, especially things we’re not naturally good at and where we can expect to make mistakes, we increase brain activity and even grow more brain. A whole-person education, by virtue of its diversity, exposes students to concepts and experiences that the student might not otherwise seek out, offering greater opportunity for cognitive growth through novelty and challenge.



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<sup>11</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor. *The Preaching Life*, (Cambridge: Cowley Press. 1993), 40.

In coming to understand their own gifts and skills, children also identify their areas of struggle and difficulty. This is a crucial experience for building empathy and appreciation of diversity, qualities they, and we all, need now and in the life still ahead of us. No one is expendable. No one's selfhood is less-than. We need our musicians. We need our machinists. We need our academics. We need our peacemakers. We need our athletes. We need our soldiers. We need our teachers. We need our body workers. We need our animal advocates, our poets, our baby whisperers, our ministers, our soil-tenders, our comedians, and so on. To quote Unitarian Universalist minister Theresa Soto, all of us need all of us to make it, and it sure helps if we recognize and appreciate each other's contribution to the struggle.<sup>12</sup>

How one goes about engaging the whole person will vary from family to family. For example, a family that organizes their homeschool by unit studies may do quite a bit of pre-planning to create a variety of fun and interesting themes each semester. An unschooling family may be more likely to go with the flow, gathering resources as their child expresses interest or as they come across new and intriguing objects and opportunities. Regardless of their degree of pre-selection and planning, most homeschooling families are accustomed to making room for unexpected, unique offerings as they arise, such as an Our Whole Lives sexuality education class beginning at the church, or a basketball league or pottery course starting at the local community center.

Whatever their level of involvement in designing their child's education, every so often, a Spirited Homeschooler will want to take stock of what has been encountered and what is yet to be experienced so that they can best help their children to develop into their own fullness. One survey respondent described the joy of watching their two children develop, through Spirited Homeschooling, into full and different people:

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<sup>12</sup> Megan Foley and Theresa Soto, "All of Us Need All of Us to Make It," Unitarian Universalist Association, <https://www.uua.org/worship/words/litany/all-us-need-all-us-make-it>. (last accessed 11/25/17).

As my children became young adults I began to witness the discussions that these teens had about God, life, politics, morality, and other hot topics. They often disagreed, but did so with open ears and hearts. Listening, and really listening, to someone else's perspective is an incredible thing. My boys are now 19 and 20. We homeschooled each child very differently, as they are very different people. My 20 year old is in his third year of college and heading to London for a study abroad political science program. My 19 year old will be taking a bartending class next week and hopes to get a job and pursue his music on the side.

It's worth noting that there is no magical age after which it's "too late" or "less than ideal" for a child to experience or learn something. Science in child development points us toward periods where children's brains and behaviors are more receptive to new material, and you'll readily encounter methods of literacy, music, athletics, maths, etc. that urge early or precisely timed exposure and regimentation. But this remains one piece of the much more global task of educating a child, and engaging in childhood skill development must be weighed along with the child's disposition, the family's circumstances and values, and the equally worthy and necessary pursuits of free play; quiet, unstructured time; and self-directed activities (even if these activities are not what we would choose were our child's life ours to live).

Aiming for a whole-child approach is not a mandate for an intense and hyper-structured existence with lessons or classes in each of the eight categories, or a suggestion that you push what your child dislike and limit what your child clearly loves and excels at in order to hit all the points on an imaginary ideal called "well-rounded." A whole-person approach is a guideline for a life of interest, fun, and challenge, As you encounter new and different idea, object, and opportunities, you share them together as a family, living in a state of openness to being fascinated and engaged.

## Learning, Acting, and Reflecting

Learning, acting, and reflecting is the process through which the learning in Spirited Homeschooling happens. Think of it as a triangle, or a circle, where each

part of the process is connected to the others. In education theory, this thinking-learning-acting is called the praxis model; the word praxis coming from the Greek word meaning “to do.” The *acting* is integral to the building of understanding.

Spirited Homeschooling is alive with meaning-making not just through reading, writing, figuring, and discussing--though these are parts of it, too--but also by acting, moving, meeting, risking, and making. If we are not inviting children into actively experiencing, participating in, and co-creating the world they live in, then we are facilitating the construction of only a shadow of the understanding and development that we might otherwise encourage.

I want to use as an example of this a segment from UU theologian and religious education philosopher Angus MacLean’s 1962 redux of his paradigm-shifting speech, “The Method is the Message.” Here, he describes the disconnect created by professing a core value of democracy in our country and in our schooling while simultaneously denying children the most basic experiences of democratic participation in their own educations:

Look at a school situation in which children are guided in the study of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the USA, and made to memorize poetry in praise of the American way of life, and at the same time, are never permitted to question a teacher's statements or offer an opinion, and are denied even the simplest elements of self-government. What happens to the effort to teach democracy? A school may succeed in getting a child to love America, be it right or wrong, but it can still fail to teach democracy, even when the books are of the finest. Without the experience of what the literature represents the teaching is fruitless.

Likely you already employ praxis in your parenting, and in the ways you learn yourself. Have you ever helped someone else learn to drive, or maybe you remember learning yourself?

You read the driving handbook, or some of it, anyway, enough that you know the basic ideas about right of way and signaling and what to do when a school bus stops in front of you. You sit behind the wheel of the car, without the engine on,

and try and figure out which pedals, buttons, switches, and handles do what. You pick up the car's manual to help you with a few of these. When you feel ready, you find an empty parking lot or a field for your first attempt. After an hour or so of coaching from a more experienced driver and creeping along, parking, backing up, and a few lurches forward, you feel a little more confident. Tomorrow, you decide, you might try a real--but quiet--street. You brush up on the driving handbook again, making sure you're clear on a few things you might encounter on the road, and before falling asleep, you mentally review what you learned today. Eventually, this process will lead you to navigate eight-lane highways, perform complicated defensive maneuvering to avoid colliding with an out-of-control vehicle, and successfully get yourself off of the road and to safety if your car malfunctions.

Maybe your own experience learning to drive was in a different context, but I bet there was still trial-and-error, reflection, hypothesizing, gathering of information, re-trying, and so on. This is praxis. There is learning, there is doing (out there in the world), there is reflecting. As there is more doing, there will be more reflecting. Reflecting leads to more learning. Learning sends us back out to do. And on and on we go until we reach our goal, or until we lose interest, or until the experience has come to a natural end.



So, of all the models of education, why praxis for Spirited Homeschooling? Education philosopher Paulo Friere, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, argues that the praxis model is actually a key piece of anti-oppressive work. Through praxis--acting and reflecting--Friere says, students and teachers together can become critically aware of their own and others' conditions so that they are then able to transform their world. Friere was not concerned with skill development devoid of the purpose of creating a more aware populace and a more effective democracy. According to Friere, we need dynamic shared experiences and real, rich dialogs of reflection afterward in order to learn together how we can best work on our social structures. We cannot arrive at this understanding alone with our books (or websites, or Facebook feeds), or in our own closed communities.

To Friere, the praxis model gives a community dynamic information so they can have real conversations about real needs, and then take effective action together. This praxis paradigm not only makes for effective learning, but also invites children into community building and activism.

Looking at your kindergartner, the idea of structuring your homeschool to prime them for anti-oppression work may seem far-fetched or intimidating. But the praxis model is the same, whether the “learning, acting, reflecting” is raising Monarch butterflies from eggs or staging an anti-wage-theft theater piece. The method is the message, and with praxis, that message is alive.

## The Holy, However They May Define It

Spirited Homeschooling is unabashedly, deliciously, unquenchably both spiritual and religious.

And that statement is where I begin to diverge from a fair number of parents who responded to my UU homeschooler survey. Forty-three percent of the people who responded did not consider their homeschooling spiritual. And yet, 88% of them felt that Unitarian Universalism influenced their homeschooling. Here’s how some of them described the separate places of religion or spirituality and education:

We are secular homeschoolers but UU does provide a basis for how we choose to lead our lives, with moral and ethical lessons.

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As UU secular humanists, we’re not so much spiritual but more purpose-driven.

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I keep [Unitarian Universalism and homeschooling] separate.

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My homeschooling isn’t spiritual, but it does allow us to live a lifestyle that is spiritually fulfilling.

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Our UU beliefs and principles are consistent with our lifestyle and homeschooling approach. We like to learn about and appreciate other cultures and belief systems. We pursue scientific knowledge and literacy.

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We welcome diversity and appreciate inclusivity. We aim to include community service projects as part of our homeschooling.

I was fascinated when I got these and similar comments back from the survey. Not being a person who has had much success compartmentalizing many aspects of my life, I appreciated hearing these homeschooling parents explain their perspectives.

In fact, hearing from homeschoolers who shared these and similar outlooks was why I chose to write about Spirited Homeschooling instead of Unitarian Universalist homeschooling. The homeschoolers above found their groovy niches in both religious (or fellowship-based) community and in education, but they didn't act in concert. The spiritual and religious and the educational were on different tracks.

When they're combined, synthesized into one piece, a unified approach to education, family life, and religious community, something entirely new and different is created. That's where Spirited Homeschooling came to be.



Spirited Homeschooling calls for a conscientious infusion of the life of the learner with a sense of the sacred, as a matter of conscience and a matter of justice. Referencing Paulo Friere's work on educating as the practice of freedom, author and social justice activist bell hooks describes the spiritual imperative of teaching and learning:

To educate as the practice of freedom is a way of teaching that anyone can learn. That learning process comes easiest to those of us who teach who also believe that there is an aspect of our vocation that is sacred; who believe that our work is not merely to share information but to share in the intellectual and spiritual growth of our students. To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin.<sup>13</sup>

## Manifesting the Beloved Community

What might the beloved community look like? I like to think of it as when all of our true selves can look open-heartedly into all the other true selves, without oppression or unchecked prejudice obscuring that glorious view, and we can share the glad work of creating a future where that is and always can be so.

The term “beloved community” was first coined by early 20th century Christian theologian Josiah Royce, who pushed back against the individualism of Emerson, Thoreau, and others. “My life means nothing,” he wrote in 1913, “either theoretically or practically, unless I am a member of a community.”<sup>14</sup> He described the beloved community as an ideal where all within it were dedicated to truth, equality, and fidelity.

Martin Luther King, Jr. expanded the concept in his lifetime, and The King Center now describes it thusly:

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<sup>13</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, (New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Royce, Josiah. *The Problem of Christianity*, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press. 2001 [1913] p. 357

The Beloved Community was for [King] a realistic, achievable goal that could be attained by a critical mass of people committed to and trained in the philosophy and methods of nonviolence.

Dr. King's Beloved Community is a global vision, in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. In the Beloved Community, international disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict.<sup>15</sup>

In this way, the beloved community is not something we are waiting for, but rather, it is something we live into being, over and over again, one policy, one interaction, one act of injustice restored at a time.

As a young person growing up, if you would have asked me what the purpose of my schooling was, I would have parroted the line, "To prepare me for the real world." Among homeschoolers, I've often heard this sentiment countered with, "We're not preparing for the real world, we're living in the real world." Spirited Homeschooling isn't practice for one day living in the beloved community; it's living as if the beloved community depends on us--all of us, children, youth, young adults, middle-aged adults, and elders--bringing it into being.

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<sup>15</sup> "The King Philosophy," The Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change. Website, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy#sub4> (last accessed Nov. 23, 2017).



“Manifesting the beloved community” means one of the end-goals of Spirited Homeschooling is to equip and inspire our children to share in the vision of a future characterized by nonviolent solutions to conflicts, to understand bigotry and discrimination and work against it in themselves and their society, to be generous with their gifts, and to be voices for decency in redistributing the world’s wealth. All work undertaken in Spirited Education keeps this before it.

The rub here is that there is no one way to do this, it looks different in different families, and even looks different with different children in the same families. The movement for a more just society needs prayers, policy drafters, poster makers, and front-line fighters. It needs artists who can help show us what the beloved community could look like, and activists who can flip scripts and spin sound bites. It needs people who will chain themselves together at the site of the protest and people to care for those people’s babies until they get bailed out of jail. Adults and children alike have different skills and personalities and sensitivities and approaches to the world. The ways we live the beloved community into reality in our homeschools will take all of this into account.

This, then, is a long description of the working definition of Spirited Homeschooling. Strong, healthy relationships. Strong, dynamic faith identity. Nurturing of the whole person. Learning-Acting-Reflecting. Engaging with the Holy. And manifesting the beloved community as a matter of joyful and conscientious living. The significance of Spirited Homeschooling lies not in its numbers (for they are very, very small--a tiny number of alternative educators in a tiny faith movement--a few thousand people at most), but rather in its power as lived theology, in its radical reimagining of faith development, and in its quiet but defiant existence in inhospitable and improbable environments.

## Chapter 2: Inspiration and Dilemma



Several years ago, when I was in the wool-gathering stages of my homeschooling, unsure if and how to proceed, wanting to know more about how other folks did it, etc., I came across the writing of Kathryn Baptista. Baptista was a Unitarian Universalist religious educator who was homeschooling in the 1990s and early aughts. She delivered a sermon at her church in Massachusetts in

2005 about learning as a spiritual practice. In that sermon, she told the story of the pivotal moment when she decided to homeschool her son, Julian:

When Julian was still in school, in the third grade, he loved reading. He was unhappy in school, though, and we were struggling about whether to begin homeschooling.

Every night Beth read to him at bedtime, and one night they finished, and she told him he could finish reading the chapter of the book he was reading then turn out the light. Two hours later, sleepy, he came out to us and said, 'I'm lonely.' We tucked him back into bed to go to sleep (he had school the next morning), and he said, 'The problem with school is there's never enough time to read.' We had our answer. And the first day he was an official homeschooler he read for eight hours straight.<sup>16</sup>

Baptista's story, and many others like it, bolstered me to go part-time at the school where I was then teaching and instead to try to put together an educational plan that would allow my son to unfold gradually into the person he was becoming.

I'd assumed my challenges would be mostly logistical--how are we going to afford this? I had a toddler as well as a preschooler as I pondered this; I wondered, will I have enough time to homeschool with a 2 year old in the house as well? Is this the right thing to do for my child, for my family? But it turns out that one of my biggest obstacles was philosophical. Popping up in my conversations with peers and among my regular readings of progressive magazines and blogs were ideas lifting up the importance of sending children to integrated, neighborhood public schools while also explicitly and implicitly reproaching those who chose to send their children to specialized or higher-performing public schools, charter schools, private schools, or to keep them home. In talking with other progressive homeschoolers, especially religious liberals, I have come to understand this conflict as a source of great tension,

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<sup>16</sup> Kathryn Baptista, "Lifelong Learning as Spiritual Practice," Sermon, April 3, 2005. Unitarian Universalist Church of Wakefield, Massachusetts. <http://sandraddodd.com/kathrynsermon> (last accessed Nov. 1, 2017).

even breakdown, among those who would otherwise be friends and helpmates in causes across the progressive spectrum.

Homeschooling has been criticized, blamed, and dismissed among progressives as a choice rooted in privilege and antithetical to the very values of justice and equality that liberals work for. Simultaneously, homeschooling is growing as an educational model among people of all races (but especially people of color), socioeconomic levels, education levels, and political and religious identities, including progressives, who may choose homeschooling for reasons rooted in justice-making, multicultural identities, environmentalism, accessibility, and other issues typically associated with progressivism.<sup>17</sup> The dual complexity and centrality of this dilemma is why I'm dedicating a whole chapter to it. "All of us need all of us to make it," so we're going to have to figure out how to work through the sticky wicket of caring for our children together.

Neighborhood public schools serve by far the greatest number of children and families in our society. Defunding and delegitimizing public schools is an act of injustice that disproportionately harms poor and working-class people, people of color, recent immigrants, and children and youth with disabilities. Even broadly decrying public schools can be an act of violence to the children who learn there, and does a great disservice to the teachers, administrators, and support staff whose strength and innovation within the system are often lifelines to children and youth whose circumstances may not have blessed them with as many helpers as they need.

The assumption underlying the progressive criticism of homeschooling is that it --along with private and charter schools--removes the most privileged families from the conditions, the community, and the conversation of and about public schools, leaving those who have the least choice in the matter to advocate for themselves with dwindling funding and support. Within that narrative is embedded the assumption that our achievement of justice and inclusivity as a

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<sup>17</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, "Table 206.10: Number and percentage of homeschooled students ages 5 through 17 with a grade equivalent of kindergarten through 12th grade, by selected child, parent, and household characteristics: 2003, 2007, and 2012," [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15\\_206.10.asp?current=yes](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15_206.10.asp?current=yes) (last accessed Nov. 23, 2017).

pluralistic society depends on educating our kids in the same places, at the same times, in the same ways (with some variation for individual needs, skills, talents, and struggles, but held securely by a state-mandated curriculum and prescribed pedagogical approach), and that without schooling our children together, we are, in fact, not equally invested in an egalitarian future together.

The dwindling funding and support of public schools is a real and pressing problem. The increased racial and socioeconomic segregation of public schools is a real and pressing problem. And the appalling lack of justice and inclusive in our already-pluralistic society is a real and pressing problem. But neither educating nor parenting our children is a zero-sum game, where in order for one person to “win,” another must “lose.” When the greatest number of children are served in the ways that meet their needs best, we all win, as a society.

Polarizing the issue of education--us versus them, public school versus the enemies of public school--serves the motives of corporate interests, nationalists, zealots, white supremacists, and others who profit from race, class, and gender segregation and inequality. When we buy into this polarization, we close opportunities for real and needed dialog about the future of education in America. As people of a progressive faith, we have in the past--and can still--stare this false construct in the face and refuse to be scared by its grotesque and distorted image of our educational challenges and their possible solutions. We can exercise our imaginations and redouble our commitments to find ways that the needs of our society and the needs of our individual children can both be met, and met well; this creative tension between the individual and society is, in fact, a defining feature of liberal religion, and was a founding principle of America itself.



One way to think of the ethics of how we educate children is to compare it to how we care for our elders. Some families choose to house their elders in nursing homes and assisted living facilities. Some families use elder care services Monday through Friday, during working hours. Some families choose to use some professional support once or twice a week, as a supplement to home care. And some families choose to care for their elders mostly at home, rarely using professional help. Few would argue that families who are caring for their elders at home are somehow abdicating their duties as citizens by doing so, or are sabotaging nursing homes with their choice. Most people can agree rather amicably that families do the best they can by their elders, using any of the arrangements above that work for them. Caring for our elders, much like caring for and educating our children, is a highly personal decision influenced by wants, needs, values, and visions. Wanting the best for our individual children and for our collective society are not mutually exclusive.

So why do progressives and religious liberals choose homeschooling? Spirited Homeschoolers may homeschool for one or more of the following reasons:

- They homeschool as an expression of their faith, and a way to live out their Unitarian Universalist principles and values.<sup>18</sup>
- They want their children to retain or regain a love of learning for its own sake, and did not want their child to associate learning with testing, or being graded, or gaining a teacher's approval.
- Their children did not thrive in school, not because of any particular problem with the school, but simply because they learned best in a different environment that could be created at home. (Think back to the story of the Baptista family and reading.)
- They want their children to learn different things than what was required to be taught through the state curriculum. (Or, relatedly, they wanted their children to learn similar material, but through a different critical lens such as a feminist or indigenous peoples.)
- Families want to focus on something other than academics, such as music, sports, the outdoors, religious exploration, or homesteading.
- Families want to spend more time together. (Parents who rather unexpectedly happened into homeschooling often say that this is how they started--they just did not want to send their 5 year old away for six hours a day, and then once they started homeschooling, they loved it and didn't want to stop.)
- Families want to live more slowly and simply, learning at a pace and with a daily schedule that is easier to manage and more developmentally sound for their children.
- One or more parent travels extensively; homeschooling allows the family to travel together so they might maintain close relationships.
- There was a unique opportunity that mandatory attendance at school would have prohibited (for example, spending a grandparent's last months together with them, or being home with a parent after the birth of a new sibling).
- School proved unhealthy--physically or psychologically--for their child, and the parents were unable to successfully advocate for change within the system.

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<sup>18</sup> See especially "[The Seven Principles](#)" section of Chapter 3 for more discussion of this reason for homeschooling, as well as Chapter 4, "[The Spirit in Spirited Homeschooling.](#)"

- Intensive medical treatment or significant medical conditions made regular school attendance too difficult.

Few families point to one, single reason why they homeschool. Most may have been initially influenced by one of the above, but their reasons for staying with it changed over time, as they and their children grow. And of course, family circumstances and dynamics are fluid, calling for different approaches at different times. Some of the families who responded to my survey dipped in and out of homeschooling, or were simultaneously, with different children, homeschooling, private schooling, and public schooling all at once, making the choice that best suited the particular child.



Spirited Homeschooling happens in working-class, middle-class, and upper-class homes. It happens in white families and families of color, in the North, South, East, and West of North America, and all over the world. It is rural, urban, suburban, small town, big town, and on the road. It takes place with parents who attended college, and parents who did not. It features in families that are

neurotypical and neurodiverse, in families where one or more people have disabilities, and where none do.

Most homeschoolers are keenly aware of the privilege they have to be able to homeschool. The privilege is most often the interrelated factors of

- socioeconomic privilege (families can afford to live on one, or one-and-a-half incomes), and
- educational privilege (one or more parents is sufficiently educated to insulate them from criticism that they are unqualified to teach their own children, or they have education enough to choose one or more jobs that make homeschooling logistically possible).

As progressives, we recognize the broader problems inherent to privilege and white supremacy, and we need to think big about what extending educational privilege to others might look like: creating policies that protect people's basic and civil rights, raising the minimum wage, increasing early literacy programs within the community, making college education free, increasing access to adult education, reinvigorating unions, closing the wage gap, and other measures that bring into being egalitarianism. Unitarian Universalists share a goal of a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all, and that takes work on many fronts, using our varied gifts and abilities.

Many UU homeschoolers have been openly criticized within their UU communities for their educational choices. One survey respondent described it:

I have seen and heard pushback from some members of our church communities, that we are somehow doing the community at large a disservice by opting our children out of the school system. I've struggled with that, how to work toward improving the system for others while educating my children differently. (Interestingly, I haven't seen the same sort of pushback directed at the many members of our congregation who send their children to private schools, so there might be something else going on there besides a belief that we owe it to the community to try to change the system from within and that homeschoolers are abdicating our responsibility.)

Within our congregations and in our society at large, parents of children and youth answer for societal educational concerns unfairly (and ultimately, the effort spent shaming them into compliance hinders future partnerships on bigger and more significant efforts at change-making). Equal access to excellent education is, of course, the responsibility of all people, whether they have school-aged children or not. Elders with grown children, adults with no children, and young adults who aren't or aren't yet considering children all benefit from a society that is built on justice, compassion, skill, and understanding--all products of loving, nurturing, rich childhood education. And we can all support and advocate for public education in myriad ways, not just or even mainly by sending our children to public schools. For example, homeschoolers and others can and do advocate at the school board and state levels, support teachers' unions, work with school librarians on read-alouds and book drives, fundraise schoolwide and with particular groups such as band or art, and host extracurricular offerings such as a social justice-themed club or school garden.

The issue of education choice divides us, bitterly at times, and in many ways brings up questions very close to religious liberals, but nonetheless uncomfortable: How do we reconcile the needs of the individual with the needs of society as a whole? (For Unitarian Universalists, this is the tension between our first and seventh principles, extolling the inherent worth and dignity of individuals as well as the interdependent web of which we are a part.) What is the role that privilege, patriarchy, class, and white supremacy play in children's education? When do we find ourselves celebrating challenges to the dominant paradigm, and when do we respond with disdain and criticism? In our discussions of contentious issues, are we aiming to create healing, learning relationships with those whom we disagree, or are we denigrating others' humanity in service of our own agenda? (And relatedly, at what point are we willing to sacrifice relationship for agenda?) Finally, and importantly, where is Spirit in this conundrum, the small, still voice within that guides our choices?

Worth noting is the fact that many people who homeschool do so temporarily, for some of the reasons above, or others. One father I spoke to--presently a school administrator--adopted his two sons after their biological parents died. He homeschooled them for two years as they processed the trauma of their loss and

got to know each other as a new family. He hadn't planned to homeschool, and didn't plan to do it for their whole school career, but he described how important that time was for them. "People forget that our education systems were built for efficiency, for processing huge numbers of kids all at once. They weren't built for the individual. Keeping my boys home with me for two years was the best thing I could do for them as individuals, and it was maybe one of the best things I did for them, period."

It is worth de-stigmatizing homeschooling if for no other reason than we never know when we, too, might need to make the choice to pull our kids from school, even for a few months; it would be a great help to know that our faith communities would support us and our children during that time. It would be even better if a religious educator could say to a family, "There's this thing in our faith, Spirited Homeschooling. You can do it, and we can help."

In his charge to the Rev. Susan Frederick Gray on the day of her installation as president of the Unitarian Universalist Association in 2017, the Rev. Bill Sinkford urged, "Invite us not to follow you, but to journey with you toward that vision of the beloved community." This is where I think we do best as a people, journeying together. This means not making sweeping, presumptive proclamations about what is best for each other's children--each other's white, brown, black, cisgender, transgender, rich, poor, typically abled, disabled, neurotypical, neuro-atypical, resilient, anxious, loved, and challenged children. Journeying together means not shaming one another into a narrowly performed progressivism. Journeying together means we acknowledge our individual and shared needs, as well as the mixed and different feelings that accompany those needs, and acknowledge all of them as we puzzle through the big problems together.

## Chapter 3: Organizing Principles



“How we spend our days is, of course, how we spend our lives. What we do with this hour, and that one, is what we are doing...There is no shortage of good days. It is good lives that are hard to come by. A life of good days lived in the senses is not enough. The life of sensation is the life of greed; it requires more and more. The life of the spirit requires less and less; time is ample and its passage sweet.”  
-- Annie Dillard, from *The Writing Life*

## Response 337

I'll begin this chapter on what Spirited Homeschooling looks like with a narrative, a composite I made using responses to short answers in the survey, as well as follow-up interviews I conducted over the phone. I changed enough details to maintain privacy. We'll call this the story of response 337:

*I'm a retired grandmother to one, a granddaughter, and am her homeschooling parent. I remember the day she asked if I'd homeschool her. She was in second grade. I didn't even know she knew about homeschooling. But there she was, her big brown eyes open to me and the request she'd just laid before my feet: Grandma, will you homeschool me next year? I remember I stopped what I was doing, looked right at her, and said, "OK. We'll have a lot of fun. And, thank you for asking me."*

*I wasn't always a Unitarian Universalist. I chose this faith later in life. And yet, UU characterizes so much of our education together. I am consistently reinforcing the seven principles, modeling them and teaching them. Everything we do, we do with an eye toward humanity and justice.*

*We pick and choose when and how and what to study. I'd describe our approach as eclectic, or relaxed homeschooling. This is perfectly legal in my state; I simply keep good records--mostly notes, pictures, and work samples--that get filed with the state to fulfill our legal requirements.*

*I don't know that I set out to make our homeschooling "spiritual," and yet, I am amazed at the spiritual nature of the connection I share with my granddaughter as I teach and learn from her.*

*Through the church, we do a lot with environmental justice, gender and sexuality justice, and racial justice. We work on community service together. We talk about right and wrong from a UU perspective. We explore different spiritual practices together; sometimes we pray, but more often we go "fox walking," walking as silently as we can through the woods so that we can listen closely and be part of the life there. We study world religions--I practice Buddhism, too--and touch on UU history in our work.*

*We attend church every Sunday, worship and religious education classes. It's very important to me that my granddaughter knows that she has a community in Unitarian Universalism, and that she makes friends. I want her to always know she has a home here, that these people will love, accept, support, and challenge her as long as she wants or needs them to.*

*I get a lot out of adult R.E., too. I don't know that I'd feel as confident going deeper into the UU content if I didn't keep learning about it myself. When I was co-leading an adult R.E. class, my granddaughter helped me do some of the prep. She loved that. On another note, the church community offers me respite and support, something I feel is important to my own health and well-being, and to my ability to do what I want and need to do in the world.*

*It's hard to be my granddaughter's one main teacher. I wish other adults would be willing to share this role somehow, maybe each of us teaching our strengths to a small group of kids. I also wish this kind of education were more accessible for others, for anyone who might want this for their child but who isn't able to make it happen, or who needs more person-to-person support in order to feel confident with it. I wonder what it would take to make that happen.*

*The part I love most is that my grandchild is able to fully explore her interests. I love that we are able to learn hands-on, by doing, and by going on field trips out into the world where interesting things are always happening. I really love how*

*my grandchild is able to follow her body's rhythms of sleeping, eating, taking breaks, etc. She had social anxiety while in public school, as a result of trying to live up to other children's norms. This way, she thrives. She's free to choose her own path. To me, it's just wonderful.*

The story above illustrates some important principles of Spirited Homeschooling. One, when an educational environment is built around UU values, that means the inherent worth and dignity of the child is assumed and acknowledged, and the child has a voice in their own education; these characteristics align with the first and fourth Principles. It is the role of the parent-facilitator to honor and uphold these principles as they pertain to the children in their care.

Second, the faith community is important not only to the child, but also to the adult, as it provides regular, meaningful, edifying, and sustaining content, relationships, and experiences for the person in the very intense role of caretaker. Also, guiding the education of a child is its own very profound and unique spiritual experience, and those lucky enough to spend a portion of their lives dedicated to the pursuit have much to share with their peers about open minds, open hearts, and helping hands.



Third, being the parent-facilitator in Spirited Homeschooling doesn't mean being the only educator. In this story, a grandparent was homeschooling her one grandchild, but she longed for a more cooperative arrangement where the task of educating was shared among several like-minded adults who together could share resources make possible what one adult alone could not, or perhaps what one adult alone would struggle mightily to do. This admission hints at the far-reaching potential of Spirited Homeschooling to adapt to a variety of needs and circumstances, working alongside or in place of conventional schooling in a family and community.

The above points center on learning in community, socially constructed meaning-making. For many homeschoolers, this happens best in a cooperative situation with other homeschoolers. Afrikan-centered homeschooling advocate Dr. Samori Kamala describes below the benefits of being part of a homeschooling co-op; the same ideas would apply for Spirited Homeschoolers broadly, too:

We know we want to inculcate our children with our African values, African traditions, and African ways of looking at the world...Not only do our children get the socialization we give them, but we also have like-minded people who are going to instill those same values, those same beliefs, those same ideas. Our children are accountable to more than one person. That's one benefit. Another benefit is our children get to be around other children who are getting a very similar education. It helps us as well, as parents, because we get to see and interact with other families who are doing a similar thing...We get encouragement because we know we're not alone...Also, maybe I teach my child very well about OurStory, but I'm not very good about teaching them scientific ideas. So there's this other sister who's a part of the crew who gets to my child a lot better than I do. So, the child has more than one teacher, and different teaching styles, the child is able to learn from different perspectives...I don't believe we need to re-create the kind of public school systems that the United States of America has put into place. I think it should be a family-based thing.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Kamali Academy, "How to Start a Homeschool Co-op for Black Homeschoolers," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwppmVOWlpl> (last accessed Nov. 23, 2017)

And finally, the story of Respondent 337 demonstrates well the notion that Spirited Homeschooling begins with the parent-educator. Children are voracious and fairly indiscriminate learners, an important feature of human beings' survival. When the adults in the family decide to bring their children's education more in line with their values, it's the adults whose job it is to make the experience deep, fun, meaningful, and nurturing to the individual children. This task involves significant and ongoing personal work on the part of the adult, work that benefits from the inspiration, encouragement, and accountability of a faith community.

## The Main Approaches

Respondent 337 described her approach as "eclectic." Eclectic homeschooling is the mix-and-match method. Families who take an eclectic approach pick and choose liberally from among many different methods, approaches, and resources, weaving together an education plan well suited to their needs, interests, and circumstances. Maybe they use a pre-packaged curriculum for math, a handful of themed science books from the library, a good a documentary series supported by individual research projects for social studies, a church-based class for sexuality education, a selection of multicultural novels for reading, weekly art lessons at the community center, etc.

In identifying as an eclectic homeschooler, Respondent 337 is representative of fully 61% of the 442 UU homeschooling families surveyed; 269 of them chose "Eclectic/Relaxed" homeschooling as one of their main approaches. (This was the largest single category, but respondents were able to identify more than one main approach.)



One pass through the readings in the back of the gray hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*, bears out this eclectic tendency in our broader faith, too, turning up works from Maya Angelou, Annie Dillard, Thich Nhat Hanh, the Talmud, Thoreau, e.e. cummings, the Christian Bible, Lao Tse, and the lore of the Ute Indian tribe. While, as a faith movement, we have ongoing work around cultural tourism, appropriation, and tokenism, our six Sources of wisdom and our value of multiculturalism bring us into contact with the beautiful diversity of the world's people and words. No wonder, then, that this method resonates so strongly with UUs.



The second largest category chosen for “main approach” was unschooling. The term unschooling was coined by mid-20th century education philosopher John Holt. In *Teach Your Own: The John Holt Book of Homeschooling*, Holt’s protege, Pat Farenga, offers the following definition of unschooling:

[Unschooling] is also known as interest driven, child-led, natural, organic, eclectic, or self-directed learning. Lately, the term "unschooling" has come to be associated with the type of homeschooling that doesn't use a fixed curriculum. When pressed, I define unschooling as allowing children as much freedom to learn in the world, as their parents can comfortably bear. The advantage of this method is that it doesn't require you, the parent, to become someone else, i.e. a professional teacher pouring knowledge into child-vessels on a planned basis. Instead you live and learn together, pursuing questions and interests as they arise and using conventional schooling on an "on demand" basis, if at all. This is the way

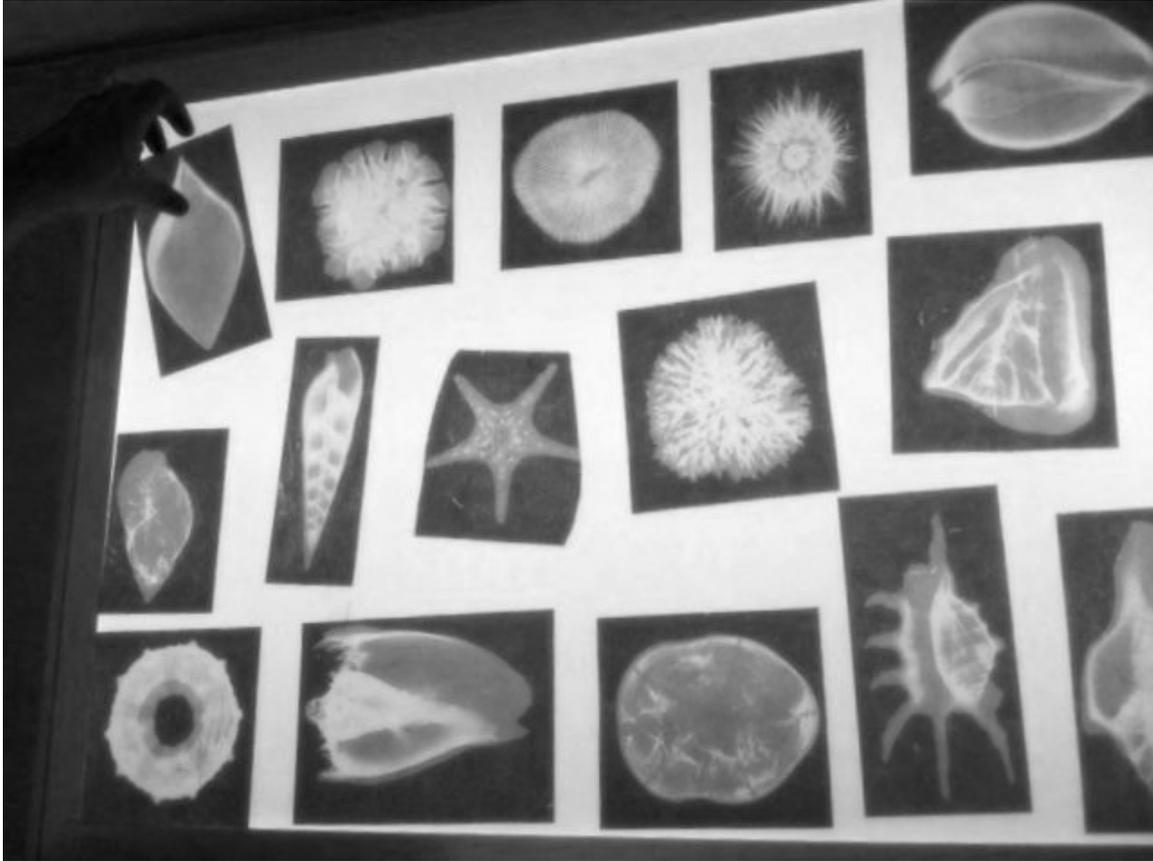
we learn before going to school and the way we learn when we leave school and enter the world of work.

Ancestor of UU religious education, Sophia Fahs, was a contemporary of raised-Unitarian John Dewey and later John Holt, among others who were experimenting with ideas of child-led and experiential learning. She certainly would not have called herself an unschooler, but she swam in the same waters that gave birth to the method in the decades that followed. In her 1959 booklet, *A New Ministry to Children*, she writes:

We are resolved to protect individual freedom of belief. This freedom must include the child as well as the parent...freedom to be honest in speech and action, freedom to respect one's own integrity of thought and feeling, freedom to question, to investigate, to try, to understand life and the universe in which life abounds, freedom to search anywhere and everywhere to find the meaning of Being, freedom to experiment with new ways of living that seem better than the old.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Sophia Fahs, *A New Ministry to Children*. Boston: Curriculum and Worship Committee, Division of Education, Council of Liberal Churches, 1959.



With the majority of UU homeschoolers self-reporting a strong preference for these two methods--eclectic homeschooling and unschooling--one can surmise that UUs tend toward educational plans that are highly adaptable to both the individual and the teachings of our faith.

Here's how some Spirited Homeschoolers described the overlap between their faith and homeschooling approach:

UU lifer here. From the beginning I assumed I would have a hyper-academic homeschool, graduating kids at 16 years old with several hours of college credit already, you know what I mean, right? Ha. Turns out being uber-educated is part of our UU elitism for which there is little theological basis. And the dyslexic introvert was having none of it anyway, so I had to figure out what 'respecting the individual' meant in this case. In order to live UUism with these particular children in my particular context, I intentionally considered our homeschooling through a UU lens. For us, that resulted in moving further towards the unschooling end of the

spectrum for a while, and now we are venturing deeper into project-based work.

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Two of our son's 'courses' were very UU influenced: Politics in Action, and Social Justice in Action. In his public speaking 'classes' he wrote and delivered speeches at local UU churches about mass incarceration, a subject he was learning about. He led his youth group at our church in a multi-year effort to raise funds for the Prison Book Project. Being UU was absolutely integrated into our approach to homeschooling!

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...we are not content to simply go along with what everyone else does, and this is reflected in many aspects of our lives. One of these is belonging to a small, not very well-known religion that allows for individuality of belief, and another is choosing an educational strategy that permits freedom to pursue truth and knowledge in ways of our own choosing.

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I want my children to be passionate in their search for their truths. I want them to be committed to the idea that they can and should make the world a better place. I want them to feel connected to their community and feel responsible for the people around them. I want them to feel grateful. I want them to be skeptical and not blindly accept the authority of others. So, these are some of the skills I teach in homeschool.

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I believe we learn to love learning through a holistic approach to education that fosters connections between points of knowledge (for example, making connections between science, visual arts, math, music, and spirituality). In our efforts to provide a curriculum based on integrity, our goals become spiritual, since spirituality is part of being a whole human being.

Despite the predominance of these two approaches--eclectic and unschooling--UU home educators reported using a wide variety of methods. Any method where the child is given voice in matters of their own education (in other

words, not a dogmatic approach, but an adaptive one); that includes or can be augmented to include anti-oppression, multicultural, and anti-racism content and approaches; and that eschews shaming, coercing, corporeal punishment, and other authoritarian means; can be and probably is used in Spirited Homeschooling.

## The Seven Principles

The seven Unitarian Universalist principles merit a special mention as we conclude talking about educational approach. Many religious professionals have mixed feelings about the prominence of the principles in the culture of UUism. The principles are not strict theology, exactly--not a belief about the divine, or afterlife, or transcendence, or the nature of humanity. They're not personal; they were written as a covenant among congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, not initially intended to apply to individuals, or even to UU communities that weren't part of the UUA. And yet, they have caught on--and deeply--among the faithful.

Among all the answers to all the questions posed to the 442 survey respondents, the seven Principles were mentioned 99 times. Spirited Homeschoolers cited the Principles as their model of how to be with their children, as the way they instructed their children to be with each other, as the lens through which they viewed history, as guides for selecting material to study, even as their inspiration for homeschooling to begin with:

I believe in living our UU principles, and many of them, such as respecting the worth and dignity of all, make more sense outside of a coercive school structure. My children (all children!) are individuals here and now, not just undeveloped people focused on becoming someone/something in the future. Also, the interconnected web of existence is much easier to grasp when existence is not arbitrarily chopped up into separate subjects, disconnected from 'real life' and pressed into contrived classroom experiences.

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I mentioned respecting the inherent worth and dignity of all people (Principle 1). For me, that means respecting children, honoring their interests, allowing them the space to explore the world at their own pace and to choose which talents to hone. In our home environment, I know that my kids experience justice, equity and compassion in human relations (Principle 2); we accept one another and encourage spiritual growth (Principle 3), we practice a free and responsible search for truth and meaning (Principle 4); my children know they have the right of conscience and that they are full partners in our democratic process (Principle 5).

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My faith made it easier to explain to my brother (and his parents, and the world) how public education isn't always the right fit at every point in time for every person, and that learning, no matter the setting, was the important thing. When we finally found a system that worked for us, it ended up including about a half hour at the start of each school morning to learning about the seven principles, and exploring aspects of the six sources. We used that as a jumping off point into literature, history and the arts, generally with some kind of UU tie-in (either a historical figure, or a theme that we might hear about at church like anti-racism work).

The prominence and popularity of the seven Principles in Spirited Homeschooling may have something to do with their elegance. In a religion that is infamously difficult to describe, the principles give Unitarian Universalists something firm to hold, to use, and to refer to. But more than that, their appeal gets back to that main component of Spirited Homeschooling, relationships. The Principles speak to us clearly about a piece of our humanity that is fraught with complexity--relating to others. We, as a faith people, are desperate for guidance in this area. Those of us who share our lives with children are equally desperate to give them more and better relationship tools that we ourselves had for understanding and acting in the big, broken world. Here is the hole in our hearts that the principles fill.

## Chapter 4: The Spirit in Spirited Homeschooling



In *Spirit Play: A Manual for Liberal Religious Education Programs*, Dr. Nita Penfold offers an evocative, modern descriptions of the importance of an education grounded in spirituality and religiosity:

*As human beings, we constantly struggle with how to make meaning of our experiences from the ordinary to the cosmic. How we answer the existential questions and make meaning of the everyday creates a*

*foundation for how we live. It is a life-long process for which we need strong but flexible tools.*

*And where do we find these tools? Some come from the model of our parents and their beliefs, some from personal experience, and some from our childhood and adult religious education and our church community. Religious education is about teaching the art of making meaning within a particular faith tradition. It is about providing us with an existential toolkit to help us in our struggle through the puzzling times, the sad times, the angry times, and even the joyful times. Giving children a container to work with this questioning is at the core of religious education.*

Unitarian Universalism, as the “container” for our children’s explorations, has educating and enrichment potential far beyond the classroom and sanctuary on Sundays. If we, as a faith movement, can envision a society shaped by liberal religious values such as compassion, justice, equity, truth-seeking, interdependence, and shared liberation, then surely we have the vision and wherewithal to take another step toward it, and use those same values to fashion educational experiences not only once a week, but every day. Spirited Homeschooling, with the tools of Unitarian Universalism, invites the mystery into every exploration so that what we learn about the world is at one with who we are in it.

Modern theological scholars work in this same vein when they discuss practical theology, sometimes called embodied theology or practical wisdom. Practical wisdom is “grounded in ordinary experiences, and learned over time in the company of others and for the sake of others.”<sup>21</sup> Also, it “is gained through forms of active and receptive participation that engage a wide range of human capacities.”<sup>22</sup> The many and varied experiences of living our lives together as Unitarian Universalists, in families and in bigger groups can, with intentionality and reflection, come to comprise a significant body of wisdom. Spirited

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<sup>21</sup> Dorothy Bass, et al. *Christian Practical Wisdom: What It Is, Why It Matters*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans. 2016).

<sup>22</sup> Ted Smith. “In Anticipation.” in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, eds. Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2008). 358.

Homeschoolers attempt to create faith-rich environments in which this practical wisdom can be gained and shared.

We feel that education is of the utmost importance for our children, but that education cannot serve them well if it is not rooted in purpose and principle for your life. The academics are not what give your life direction--it is all the other experiences and influences that do that. So we wanted to give those other experiences and influences equal weight in our family life. One of those influences is our Unitarian Universalist faith.

UU religious education pioneer Sophia Fahs said that “Instead of helping children...to think about ‘religious things,’ we need to learn how to help children think about ordinary things until insights and feelings are found which have a religious quality.”<sup>23</sup> This is practical wisdom, and valuing it and cultivating it is central to Spirited Homeschooling.



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<sup>23</sup> Sophia Fahs, *Today's Children and Yesterday's Heritage*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952).

In Chapter 1, I shared words from parent-educators who viewed their spirituality and religious practice as separate from their homeschooling. Here, I want to share words from parent-educators who see their homeschooling as rooted in their religion, and whose spirituality finds beautiful expression in their homeschooling:

The decision to allow individualized paths for my children is directly rooted in the First Principle for us. Homeschooling is a way for us to respect the inherent worth and dignity of our children. It allows them ample time to explore themselves and the world around them.

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[Homeschooling is] an opportunity to live with meaning and purpose, the ultimate 'examined life' for myself and my children.

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I take a pretty holistic approach to parenting and grandparenting. Just living is a spiritual endeavor, and so is learning. For example, teaching kids about nature--respecting nature, where food comes from, the miracle of life in all its many manifestations--this is spiritual. This is the interdependent web and learning to understand our place in it. Nurturing young minds is a spiritual endeavor. To me, it's my oath to the Goddess, or whatever you want to call that which is larger than ourselves, that I will do everything I can to help these children grow up in the way that is healthiest and happiest for them and our family. This is the very basis of spirituality.

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I consider it my spiritual duty to help introduce my children to issues of social justice and spiritual wisdom and truths, as well to grant them the freedom found in critical thinking skills and full informed consent in their chosen belief system. Attending a UU church and religious education program supports me in that endeavor.

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I absolutely consider [homeschooling] to be a spiritual endeavor. In the first years of homeschooling (during middle school), no matter what we did, almost everything came back to questions of identity (who I am),

questions of ethics (who am I in relation to others) and questions of community/worldview (where do I belong, what does the world around me look like, how do I understand that world). In 'high school', those things have been further developed and defined: finding her own voice, speaking out in social media particularly, often speaking theologically while questioning who she is in the world of faith.

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It means a lot to me to be able to convey my moral and ethical convictions to my kids, and to show them math and language and science, etc., through an anti-oppression lens, and more importantly through the lens of universal love and reverence.

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Raising my children to be open minded, moral beings that contribute positively to society is my goal which is definitely a spiritual endeavor.

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I unschooled *for* spiritual reasons. I wanted my kids to be able to have the chance to explore their personal search for truth and meaning, in freedom and unencumbered. Their understanding of their authentic selves, while trusting their innate inner wisdom/teacher, was the most important objective for us in education.

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Both spirituality and homeschooling are about finding one's own relationship to life's questions and struggles and developing an inner compass.

Within the homeschooling community, there is a divide that can be awkward for Unitarian Universalists; are they secular homeschoolers, or religious homeschoolers? More than mere semantics, this distinction informs how homeschoolers see themselves, and speaks to where they might find welcome in local and online groups. In many ways, this distinction mirrors that challenge in UUism broadly about whether we are churches or fellowships, a religion or a movement, people of faith or people of conscience. Many of us will be tempted to

reply, “both/and!” But for homeschoolers and others looking to gather in like-minded groups, this lack of distinction can be troublesome.



A UU homeschooler is in the position of being too religious for some secular homeschool groups and too broad in their beliefs for groups that adhere to a particular religious dogma (even if that particular belief is a major source for the individual Unitarian Universalist, such as Christianity). For some homeschooling families, this can pose significant challenges for peer learning and camaraderie. Even within families, the distinction between secular and religious homeschooling can become blurry. Here is how several parents described their dance around the labels of religious and secular homeschoolers:

I have always said that I homeschool for religious reasons. I was an OWL facilitator before I was a homeschooler and the values based decision making, the relationship skills, and the emphasis on conscious values discernment really informed our decision. We wanted our kids, when they made a choice to go to school to know themselves and what their values were, how to listen to others, and to stand up for themselves and others.

We wouldn't call our homeschool religious, exactly, since many would interpret that to mean 'fundamentalist Christian,' and our daughter self-identifies as atheist and secular. Even so, she is obviously animated by her UU experience and inclusive, UU principles.

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The UU principles guide our lives and our homeschooling though we haven't to date described ourselves as religious homeschoolers.

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We were part of an extended UU network in Europe (European Unitarian Universalists) and that was a huge part of my son's social and emotional network. Because it was also faith-based, it helped reinforce our family value system and his UU identity.

Some respondents answered that they were secular in their homeschooling, and that religious influences in the public schools played into their decision making about homeschooling to begin with. And yet, a few of the more secular-identifying families wondered if the mindfulness and gratitude practices that they used in the homeschool, or their inclusion of quiet time in nature, could be considered spiritual, though they themselves wouldn't use that word. For one, there was complete congruity between the family's humanism and the "mind-body-spirit connection." Another described the "joy of learning" as being its own kind of spiritual experience.

It's a delicate dance we do as Unitarian Universalists. Our pluralistic identities don't lend themselves to tidy understanding, and often we ourselves sit in the mystery until such a time that it becomes necessary to haul water and chop wood, or in this case, help mix the paper mache or fix second breakfasts.

A frequently mentioned asset to spiritual development of parents and children was time. It's not a universal--some homeschoolers are highly scheduled, have parents who work many hours, and struggle with many of the same constraints that conventionally schooled children do. But, many homeschooling families do have more available time than their schooling peers.

I didn't think of our homeschool as spiritual at first, but the time I have available definitely makes spiritual awakenings easier.

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We spent almost three hours yesterday on a hike, playing in waterfalls, and catching various pond creatures. While we could have attached plenty of formal learning to the adventure the real purpose was free play in nature, and as someone with a natural spirit bend I find that play good for the spirit.

Unitarian Universalist homeschooling, to be rooted in the history of this movement, to reap all the benefits that this community has to offer individuals and humankind, cannot be anti-religious.

Unitarian William Ellery Channing famously described this in his address to the Sunday School in 1837. "The great end in religious instruction," he asserted, "whether in the Sunday-school or the family," was "not to stamp *our* minds irresistibly on the young, but to stir up their own; not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly and steadily with their own; not to give them a definite amount of knowledge, but to inspire a fervent love of truth;...not to tell them that God is good, but to help them to see and feel his love in all that he does within and around them."<sup>24</sup>

Sophia Lyon Fahs, when she headed the faith development office of the UUA through the middle of the last century, oriented the whole of UU religious education around children's innately questioning minds, encouraging their development of a personal sense of the divine through experience and wonderment. Children's relationship with the sacred is at the core of our faith.

However, several parents described how homeschooling was or had become integral to their own faith development, too:

I definitely view homeschooling as a path and a journey that is rife with opportunities for personal growth for both me and my daughter. Along that path I have struggled, hypothesized, tested, observed, grappled with

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<sup>24</sup> *The Works of William E. Channing, Vol. 4*, (Boston: George Channing, 1894). 361.

issues greater than myself, and basked in the glory of connections and mysteries that I don't really understand.

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...helping my children reach for their best selves inspires me to do the same, and...it challenges us all to explore and be grateful for our world and family, which leads to lots of philosophical and religious questioning and refining of ideas.

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Guiding my children in their education as well as as all aspect of their growth has helped me to grow spiritually.

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Knowledge, freedom, exploration and compassion IS my spirituality and we venerated those things every day when we were homeschoolers.

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Raising my children is my spiritual vocation.

For many homeschoolers, the effort evolves as the adults and children learn and grow.

We aren't homeschooling *because* of spiritual issues, but because of the joy we have in homeschooling and the freedom we have, it has become a key part of our spiritual growth.

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Using the principal and purposes and the sources as an overt basis for our family and then being together so much due to homeschooling brought my own faith journey much more into my conscious living.

We acknowledge that contemplating, experiencing, and sometimes facilitating the wonder and mystery that exists everywhere and permeates all life and even all of the universe, is a real, powerful, and central aspect of humanity. We use different words for it--the holy, the sacred, the profound, the soulful, the transcendent, goddess, god, love, oneness--and the ways we seek and develop

our sense of it is different, but the significance of the experience of that All-that-Is is not ignored or denigrated in Spirited Homeschooling. Instead, it is approached with open heart and open mind. Its pursuit is relished, indulged, and shared by the family, to whatever degree or with whatever language suits that family best, with the parents and children each sharing and developing their own understanding along the way.



## Chapter 5: Home-Church Partnerships



“The parent is the primary religious educator” has been a mantra in Unitarian Universalist churches for generations. The church-based religious education programs--which may have been called Sunday School, or faith development, or religious exploration--purported to supplement what was happening at home: presumably, the lived love-of-neighbor; the ethics arrived at during side-by-side conversations on long car rides; the quiet, bedtime theology; the deep dive into the stories of who we were, who we are, and who we may yet be; the pervasive holiness of gladly keeping one another.

But was faith development happening at home? Did it look like religious educators and ministers imagined it looked? Did parents and religious professionals want the same thing for the children and youth of the faith?



Steadily declining attendance in religious education programs, coupled with decreased support in the form of volunteer hours and money, suggest that

parents, other adult congregants, and religious professionals have different priorities, different expectations, different approaches, different needs, maybe even different ideas about the purpose of religion in one's life.

Spirited Homeschoolers occupy an interesting niche in the ecology of religious education. On the one hand, many have dedicated a substantial portion of their lives to creating a home-based educational model that centers on UU theology. On the other hand, they don't seem to be any more likely than conventional schooling families to attend and participate in church. Why would this be? Some may not live near a church. Some may not enjoy or have a good relationship with the church that they do live near. But my sense in reading their comments was that most of them--like most of us--do a cost-benefit analysis on Sunday mornings: is the value of this for my family worth the time and energy it takes to get us all there? On average, even among committed UUs with good relationships to their local congregations, the answer was "yes" about twice per month.

Is twice a month enough? Are church leaders and families with children talking to each other about what enough means to each of them? Are they talking to each other about their hopes and dreams, for the church, for their family, for their community? Does what feels like "enough" change after actions are taken to realize those hopes and manifest those dreams?

Those questions are beyond the scope of this book. But, I can share with you some of the ways that UU homeschoolers work with UU institutions to create faith-based educations that bridge home and church in creative and mutually beneficial ways. First, let's look at the home side of that bridge.

## Faith Development in the Unitarian Universalist Homeschool

There are some features that are common to most religious education programs anywhere in North America: learning about figures in UU history, lighting a chalice to mark the beginning and end of time together, sharing teaching stories from the world religions, etc. I asked UU homeschoolers to check a box if they

frequently, occasionally, or never addressed these topics at home. The table below describes the percentage of UU homeschoolers who did so frequently or occasionally:

Wisdom tales or teaching stories from various traditions	96%
World religions	95%
Racial justice (content or action)	94%
Community service	94%
Environmental (content or action)	94%
Discussion of morals and ethics from a UU perspective	92%
LGBTQIA justice (content or action)	89%
Exploration of spiritual practices	86%
Unitarian, Universalist, or UU history	54%
Blessings or prayers	40%
Using UU Religious Education materials	37%
Family worship	36%
Lighting of a chalice	35%



What I don't have is a study comparing how Spirited Homeschooling homes compare to conventionally schooled kids' homes with the criteria above. It could be that this table describes most any UU household, or even many religious liberal households, with a few changes made to the specifically UU activities. Or, it could be unusual among UUs, with more families than average regularly engaging with their faith in these ways throughout the week.

From that list we learn that the religious education elements most frequently appearing at home are world religions and wisdom tales, coming in at 95 and 96 percent. In our current political moment, it's hard not to talk about world religions, especially Islam, Sikhism, and Judaism, so some of those responses might have been a reflection of discussions inspired by listening to the news together or trying to make sense of snippets of conversation overheard. Those statistics also might be explained by what children and youth often find the most meaningful in

shared worship spaces--the stories for all ages, which frequently come from various traditions and cultures. From a homeschooling point of view, world religions and teaching stories are wonderful leaping-off points to study other topics such as geography, art, and language; many homes, simply having a collection of picture books will expose children to wisdom tales. But ultimately, these are guesses; the predominance of these two topics surprised me, and I can't find an easy explanation for them being so popular among UU homeschooling families.

Another very high number, nine out of ten UU homeschoolers and their children have discussions, take action, or both, related to social and environmental justice. Many homeschoolers described their desire to build more justice awareness and work into their children's education as a motivation for homeschooling to begin with; clearly, this is a place parents would be keen for opportunities to go deeper and to find mentors who could reinforce the values they are modeling at home.

A whopping 92 percent of families discuss morals and ethics from a UU perspective. That, to me, suggests a pretty good grasp on one's faith, to be able to apply it to the quandaries we regularly find in history and face in life. It's also a testament to those willing to wrestle with big questions and take strong and difficult positions from the pulpit, the carpet square, and online; this modeling is clearly making it home.

I wished I had asked respondents which spiritual practices they most often engaged in; that figure--86 percent of all families using spiritual practices--is intriguing. Spiritual practices seem to have been a focus in many religious education programs over the past six or seven years, and it would be interesting to know more about their use at home with children and youth, as well as for parents themselves.

I was surprised that more than half of UU families included figures in Unitarian, Universalist, or UU history in their homeschooling. Like discussing morals and ethics from a UU perspective, this suggests far more than a passive participation

in one's faith. It may also be reflective of many homeschoolers' near constant search for ways to make academics personal and fun.

Thirty-seven percent of UU homeschooling families use religious education resources such as the UUA's Tapestry of Faith collection, the Church of the Larger Fellowship's RE Express, the Family Pages section of UU World magazine, and others. I am curious how these resources are used. I can imagine a scenario where a homeschooling family might work with a congregation's religious education program to make a series of videos or demonstrations on doing R.E. at home for fun, for enrichment, or to strengthen academic areas such as reading and critical thinking.

Finally, the rituals and acts of worship came in between 35 and 40 percent--with lighting a chalice, maybe the most iconic of our faith's actions, coming in last. This, to me, was the area most ripe for reinforcement, for modeling, sharing, and supporting. This is the somatic knowing, the embodied practice that speaks to children in ways words cannot. This is a clear call to religious leaders to help families build UU rituals into their home life.

## Faith Development within the Congregation

In "The Death of Sunday School," UU regional leader Kim Sweeney describes faith formation as "a foundational ethos of Unitarian Universalist ministries." She goes on to urge church leaders to recognize the failure to adapt that led to the current decline in energy, enthusiasm, and support for religious education programming, and asserts that "Paying attention to the shifting needs of our families and children, releasing ourselves from the rigid structures of our past, and boldly experimenting to contribute to the evolution of faith formation may just be the spiritual task of our time."

This is how UU homeschoolers described their relationships with their local congregations:

Since becoming a UU, I have considered RE, OWL, and [our regional multigenerational summer camp] to be part of our educational experience.

Bring a part of a beloved religious community provides incredible fodder for deep and meaningful conversations in our home.

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We are doing a co-op this year with several other (non-UU) families along the theme 'Be The Good.' We are renting space from our UU church and many of the subjects align quite nicely with UU principles. In addition, my personal spiritual connection with nature means we are outside more often. We also discuss many of our history, geography, world news topics within a framework that, while not specifically UU, would fit in the UU theology/social practice.

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My 10 year old wants to do a unit of study about what it means to be a good person. I plan on using UU religious education resources, as well as hopefully setting up conversations between him and our minister, religious educator, and other folks at church.

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In order to increase our interconnectedness, I manage a homeschooling umbrella through our UU church. We welcome all comers, as long as our Principles are respected. We have created a community for social gatherings and some social justice activities.

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We are deeply involved in our community. My youngest, the only one still homeschooling, is active in our youth group and finds fulfillment in giving back to the community.

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The homeschool group I helped start needed a space to meet in, and my church agreed to let us use space there for our activities as long as we took a donation. My church was the only one other members felt comfortable using because we didn't try to lure people in. Nevertheless, a significant number of families did find UUism by coming to the church for homeschool group. So, just being open to offering space to secular homeschoolers seems to me to represent our faith.

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Not only do we incorporate UU lessons into our explicit curricula, but we also incorporate our shared values around love, justice, and integrity into nearly everything they do. We rely on the church to provide a much-needed source of knowledge (as different people have different strengths and perspectives), thus we use the church community as curricula as well.

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Since we attend a larger church with a thriving RE program, we didn't 'study' UU at home.

What stood out at you in the list above? What did you find exciting? What challenged you? Religious education classes, Our Whole Lives Sexuality Education classes, summer camps, inviting the community into the church space during the week, growing and maintaining good relationships with church leaders, seeking out church leaders as mentors in matters of ethics and faith, youth fellowship, shared service--this, taken as a whole, is a mighty and dynamic love at work in a community and in the lives of the members of the congregation.

While Spirited Educators and other parents can and do engage in faith development independently, there is no substitute for a vital, connected, courageous, faith-based learning community. Parker Palmer, American education philosopher, built on Desmond Tutu's theory of Ubuntu in *A Hidden Wholeness*. He said, "A strong community helps people develop a sense of true self, for only in community can the self exercise and fulfill its nature: giving and receiving, listening and speaking, being and doing."<sup>25</sup>

## The Attendance Issue

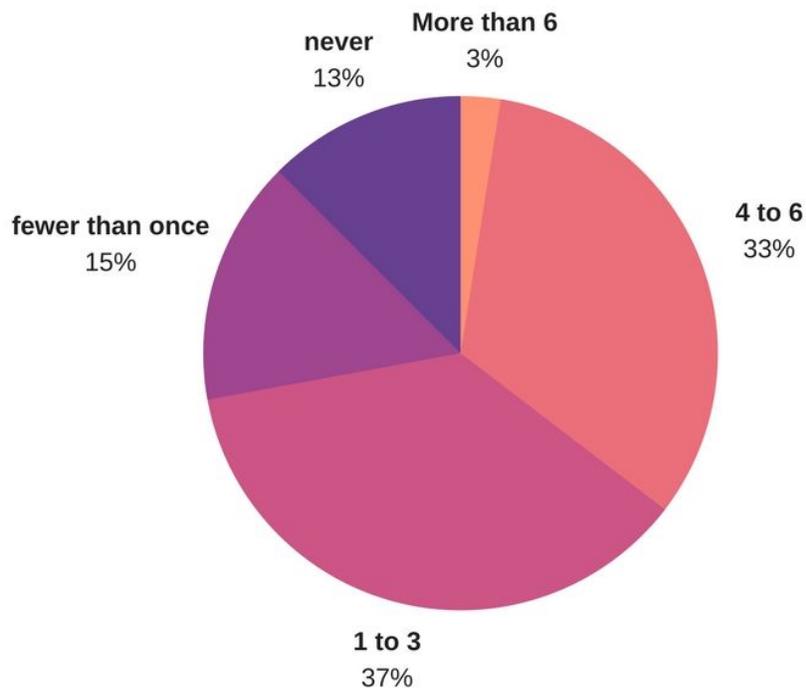
While the Unitarian Universalist Association collects data on religious education program enrollment, they do not for program attendance. However, in informal

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<sup>25</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009).

polls taken incrementally over the years among professional religious educators, I have learned that twice a month is a pretty reliable average. It seems that the graph below showing monthly religious education program attendance among homeschoolers reflects the pattern of attendance among the children and youth of a congregation as a whole:

Frequency of monthly attendance among homeschoolers in congregationally-based religious education programming:



So, about two-thirds of UU homeschooling families attend church anywhere from once a month to every week plus another couple days a month. (The extra days of the month beyond 4-5 Sundays is likely for programming such as choir or a special class such as Our Whole Lives sexuality education program, or to provide a service to the church such as cleaning or groundskeeping.) An intriguing three percent attend more than six times per month. (I suspect a greater than average number of these children may belong to families of church professionals; among the survey respondents, several identified themselves as religious educators and

ministers.) And an equally intriguing thirteen percent identify as Unitarian Universalist despite never going to church at all.



## Carrying Sunday Through the Week

At its most basic level, simply having religious education content available on Sunday mornings that is engaging and accessible to children and youth gives families—including homeschooling families—something to build on and connect to. But for a time, some religious educators were taking that a step further, creating extensions of weekly R.E. lessons to carry Sunday’s message, theme, music, etc. throughout the week. This was often part of a “Full Week Faith” initiative, and may have included a take-home sheet of paper with suggestions for activities, or a follow-up email to parents, or even cell phone texts with words of encouragement related to the message sent to families mid-week.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> For more on Karen Bellavance Grace’s Full Week Faith project, sponsored by the Fahs Collaborative, see <https://fullweekfaith.weebly.com/>.

Efforts such as these are time consuming, and fewer religious educators may do this now because it may not have proven useful for the majority of the families in a program. But homeschooling parents do indeed build on that content during the week; take-home activities, games, projects, even simply questions for discussion have great potential for families to make connections Monday through Saturday. Questions to consider might be, is the content engaging and relevant to families? Are the parents getting ideas on how to use them? Is there a meaningful follow-up, a way for families to talk about if and how the content is creating discussion, changing thoughts and behavior, acting as a catalyst for connections among family members and ideas?

Another way we're likely to inspire religious moments mid-week is by offering something really special and out-of-the-ordinary in worship, through a church alive on Sunday morning with Spirited Worship for All Ages.<sup>27</sup> Multigenerational Sunday services have long been an imperative in our movement, and many church bulletins will claim week after week that their services are multigenerational. But how many churches are regularly living up to that promise? The case for whole-church worship has been made elsewhere and well, and there are terrific workshops, videos, and books on how to do it. Suffice to say, for this book, there is an opportunity there to involve families more and better. What if families were invited to work with worship teams on regular Spirited Worship services, to make props and rehearse skits and act as song leaders? How likely would a family be to attend church--happily, excitedly--if they got to wave their own, homemade puppet from the pews? If their child had been singing the featured hymn all week in preparation? If they knew their children would be able to dance, ask questions, and do their best to participate in the moments of silence--among supportive fellow seekers, not simply grim-faced obligers?

Sunday mornings may not work for a family because of an early shift or limited transportation, or simply because of the rhythm and flow of the family on the weekends. One UU homeschooling family from a Texas bay area church

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<sup>27</sup> Rev. Erika Hewitt discusses Spirited Worship for All Ages in a recorded workshop published to YouTube by the Central East Regional Group of the UUA, and located here: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLNP4i-lirN5vWLd\\_mugQ5tebM7O\\_eNTK](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLNP4i-lirN5vWLd_mugQ5tebM7O_eNTK). There are also excellent resources on multigenerational worship available at the [InSpirit book store](#).

described how well Saturday-evening Sundown Services worked for families with children: “With young kids, we weren’t really going out much on the weekend nights anyway. These were short, maybe 30-minute, interesting services and then a potluck afterward. The kids would play on the playground while the adults cleaned up together afterward. It was exactly what we needed when our kids were little.”

Finally, are we showing families what our rituals and worship can look like at home? Do our potlucks have small, flower-pot chalices on every table, and do we invite children to light them and lead us in our chalice-lighting words before we eat? Have we ever created a mock-bed in the front of the sanctuary and presented a skit about bedtime prayers, either memorized favorites or freeform? Or put two chairs in the front of the sanctuary, pretending we’re in a car, to show what it’s like to have one of those really hard but beautiful side-by-side car-ride conversations with teenagers? Do we ever invite the whole congregation to join hands and share a moment of silence, modeling what a family might do in times when there just are no words?

## Hosting Homeschool Groups

There were several mentions in the survey of being part of a secular or interfaith homeschooling co-op that met at the Unitarian Universalist church. This, to me, is a great first step toward deeper and broader partnerships between homeschoolers and the UU community. Earlier in this book, I mentioned the difficulty that many Spirited Homeschoolers face in joining collaborative learning environments, which are often polarized into anti-religious (including UU) on one end and fundamentalist Christian on the other. Unitarian Universalist spaces are, by our principles, sources, and professed values, safe spaces for open-minded secular humanists and liberal religious folks alike, and one of our defining features is our historic and ongoing effort to promote mutual understanding and enrichment between those groups. UU congregations may be among the only places in some communities where liberal religious and secular homeschoolers feel welcome.

There are two ways that a church could host a homeschool group. One would be to simply rent their spaces to the group, the classrooms or social halls or other areas that are designed for group learning. These arrangements most often come to be when a homeschooling family is already affiliated with the church, and acts as a liaison between the group and the church administration. The church usually handles this kind of arrangement like any other rental, in a very hands-off kind of way unless conflicts arise.

A second way would be to proactively co-create a homeschool group that, if not explicitly Unitarian Universalist in tone, could nonetheless be dynamically interfaith and justice-focused in its flavor. In this scenario, professional religious educators, ministers, or lay leadership would work with leaders of the homeschool group to create learning opportunities based on our Tapestry of Faith curricula, UU day camp curricula, Spirit Play, original workshops, or other activities and events unique to the particular congregation and its collection of skills, talents, and resources.<sup>28</sup> The faith community's leadership would have a relationship with the homeschool group's leadership based on shared values and shared goals.

A sponsored homeschool group, such as the above, could be an excellent laboratory for trying out new ideas. What about a weekly meeting along a theme such as religious diversity in our country, or science and religion, or mythology? Or a freeplay group that begins and ends with a circle and a chalice lighting with UU-inspired words or a brief, quiet mindfulness practice? A project-oriented gathering, where over several sessions together, participants learn about, say, bats, and then build a bat house for the church grounds? A groups such as this could become a model for an after-school program for neighborhood youth or a caregiver's morning out once a week.

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<sup>28</sup> See Resources at the end of this book for more information on these and other UU religious education materials.

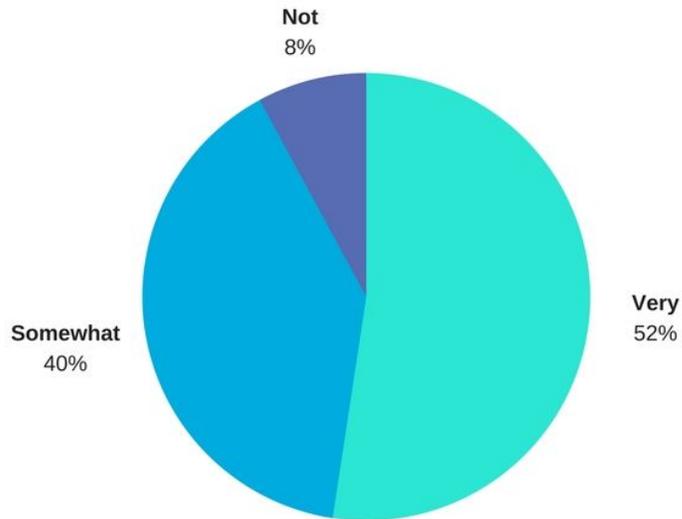


The sponsored homeschool group, of course, is not unlike some of the interesting new models that UU congregations have been trying out in their religious education programs for many years now. I would see this homeschooling-focused programming as an extension of that kind of religious education innovation, or in churches where attendance in R.E. is dwindling or too sporadic for creating and maintaining community, a way to continue offering the tools of our faith to the next generation.

## Fellowship as Faith Formation

Here is something encouraging: despite scattered monthly attendance numbers in R.E. programming, Unitarian Universalist homeschoolers indicated an overwhelming desire for their children to form relationships with other UUs:

"How important is it to you that your child form social connections with other UU children, youth, and adults?"



Fully 92% of survey respondents valued their children having positive, multigenerational relationships with other UUs. What if forming friendship wasn't just a byproduct, but the explicit and embraced core of our programs? What if religious education programs didn't focus on lessons and competencies, but rather, lived experience in being UU together? Might this be a better alignment with what our families want and need from their faith communities?

The dominance of the two styles of home education--eclectic, and unschooling--supports this compelling vision of faith development. Of all the methods of schooling, these two are among the least "schooly." For the greatest number of the children in our programs, school is the dominant force in their lives, often taking up more time than children even spend with their families. I wonder if the further we get from schoolish religious education, and the closer we get to learning-for-the-fun-of-it, healthy-happy-socializing-because-it's-wonderful,

and service-together, would we be best meeting our families where they are, and truly inviting them into a shared practice of faith?



## Day Camps and Landed Camps

The American Camp Association published a study in 2005 that showed significant gains in positive identity and social skills among children who attended landed camps (sleep-away camps) and day camps. Ninety-six percent of the campers polled, from 5,000 families and 80 different camps, said “Camp helped me make new friends.”<sup>29</sup> Thinking back to that 92% of families who value exactly

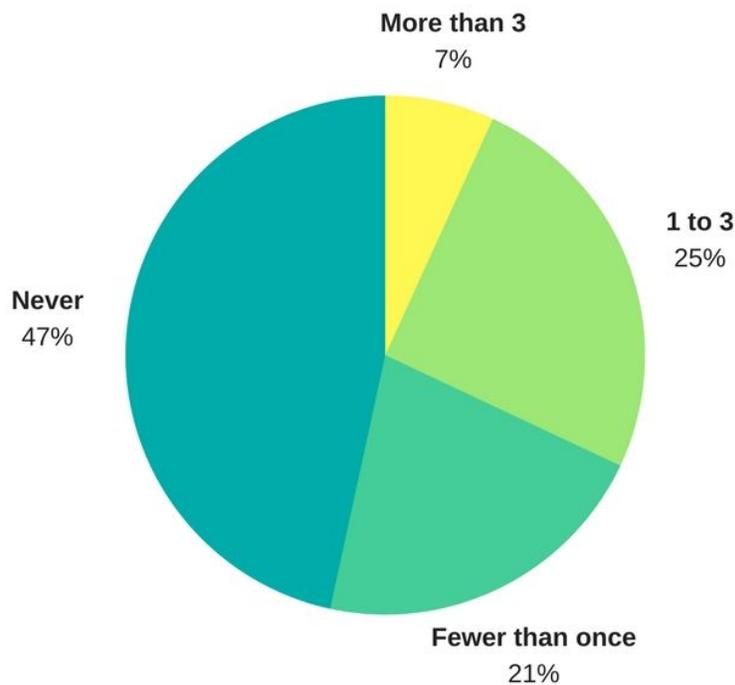
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<sup>29</sup> “Directions: Youth Development Outcomes of the Camp Experience,” Philliber Research Associates for the American Camp Association, 2005, [https://www.acacamps.org/sites/default/files/resource\\_library/report-directions-youth-development-outcomes.pdf](https://www.acacamps.org/sites/default/files/resource_library/report-directions-youth-development-outcomes.pdf) (last accessed Aug. 14, 2017)

this--friendship with other UUs--for their children, this option becomes very interesting.

Still, only about 53% of UU homeschoolers attend immersion experiences such as camps, rallies, conferences, or service trips. This number may be slightly lower than the national average for UU youth, though the data for these types of events are collected separately, so a direct comparison between homeschooled and schooled children and youth is difficult to make.

Frequency of yearly attendance in UU immersion experiences such as camps, rallies, conferences, General Assembly, or service trips



The American Camp Association statistics about the value of camps for children applied to both landed camps and day camps. In a question asking whether UU homeschoolers who lived within an hour of a congregation would participate in religious education classes, interest groups, mentorships, day camps, or other educational opportunities hosted at their church during the day, 63% said they would be very likely to. Camps and camp-type experiences at the local level

seem to be a fertile ground for meeting families' present needs. And, from a faith development perspective, there's evidence of a correlation between teen attendance at summer camps and their self-reported importance of religion to their day-to-day life, with 50% of summer camp-attending teens across faiths claiming their religion as "extremely important."<sup>30</sup>

Here's how Dan Gottfried, director of Unirondak camp in upstate New York, described the importance of the camp experience for Unitarian Universalist youth:

In my mind, there are several aspects of the experience a camper has at UU camps that are unique and essential. First, they provide young people with a daily experience of living their UU values. The acceptance they experience, the challenge to think critically that is an essential part of camp programs, the learning about how to live with differences, and the opportunities for growth and self-discovery are too numerous to list. But perhaps the most significant contribution of camps is that they provide young people with hope. At camp they learn that you can live differently, that you can satisfy those deep needs for connection in a positive way.

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<sup>30</sup> National Study of Youth and Religion, "U.S. Teenagers' Involvement in Religious Summer Camps," University of Notre Dame, 2017.  
<http://youthandreligion.nd.edu/announcements/u-s-teenagers-involvement-in-religious-summer-camps/>  
(Last accessed Aug. 14, 2017)



## Learning Centers as Places of Spiritual Development

One UU homeschooling family in the Northeast took their approach to home education and applied it to a “community education project,” a farm-based sustainability and youth-empowerment center called Wild Goose Farm, now in its third year.<sup>31</sup> “While it is not specifically UU, it is based in UU principles,” said owner Kathy Krisjanson-Gural. “Our hope is to engage young people and all ages to gather, play and work together to be a part of creating a better, more sustainable world.” Kathy’s family hosts permaculture workshops, film showings, community discussions on

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<sup>31</sup> You can learn more about the mission, organization, and programming of Wild Goose Farm at <http://www.wildgoosefarmpa.com/>.

consumerism and classism, week-long theater and nature camps, babysitter training courses, and campfire sing-alongs.

The Wild Goose Farm uses its rural setting to lend character and form to its offerings. The Center for Ethical Living and Social Justice Renewal, located on the second floor of the First Unitarian Church of New Orleans, has a kindred mission in an urban setting. CELSJR promotes justice "through activism, community engagement, and transformational learning." Their youth programming is among the most innovative and powerful work being done with adolescents in our movement today.

Justice-focused learning centers are a different way to "do" UU, and while it's not a new model, it's one that I believe may portend out future by marrying and making available the best of what our faith has to offer: deeply soulful approaches to complex and challenging justice issues that require loving, considered, brave, and creative solutions undertaken in partnership with other groups. Spirited Homeschooling families may be natural partners for initiating and growing these kinds of endeavors. They are already using praxis--learning, acting, and reflecting, and work in multi-age groups, often pursuing learning as a whole family. Almost all of them (as high as 94%) engage in justice issues as part of their homeschooling. And, many of them see learning as a spiritual practice.

## Faith Communities as Public Education Allies

In Chapter 2, I mentioned ways that all members of a community, whether they have school children or not, could support their neighborhood public schools. This is a place where good and rich work could be done as a faith community. A church--including its homeschooling members--could come together to partner with its neighborhood school (or if the church is located in an affluent and already well-supported area, then a different neighborhood school) to learn of needs and commit together to helping to meet them.

When I was serving as a religious educator in a small fellowship in a college town, a retired member of the church community, Vick, would borrow books from

the religious education program's library to read aloud to their granddaughters' 2nd grade classes at two small, rural elementary schools on the outskirts of the county. The books, by virtue of being on the church's library shelves, were preselected for depicting values that aligned with Unitarian Universalism, and Vick--while never bringing their own faith into the discussion--was able to use the books to facilitate brief, post-reading conversations about class, race, gender, ability, birth, and death through the (unstated, but present) lens of UU values of justice and inclusivity.

What might a program such as this look like, shared by all members of a church community who could spare two or three hours on a school day every month or so? Or if they could not, could they help curate a list of books to purchase for others to read? Once a critical mass of books was acquire, could the church do what one UU homeschooling family does, and provide books and volunteer hours to the local public school librarian?

My own family volunteers for a refugee resettlement service in our region, contributing maybe 10 hours a month on a team with eight other people. The director of the service recently shared that she encourages newly forming resettlement support teams to bring in stay-at-home parents and homeschoolers. "They tend to have more time during the day, and in that first month, our resettling families need to get to doctor appointments, go to the DMV, get their kids enrolled in school, stuff that needs to be done during normal business hours, but they may not know the public transit system well enough yet to get it all done." In this way, retirees, stay-at-home parents of young children, and homeschooling families together could form a stout contingent of the church for doing service work during the week.

These are just a few examples. Doubtless there are hundreds more, playing out in your own communities. I'll reiterate that much of what makes a great church-homeschool partnership also makes a great church-family partnership more broadly. The particular gifts homeschoolers may be able to offer a church community are their time during the day, their whole-life approach to learning, and their experience with dynamic and multifaceted learning environments. And, their particular needs may include opportunities for their children to gather

meaningfully with other UU children, as well as family experiences with deep and rich UU theology--the teachings, values, ethics, stories, songs, experiences, and rituals--on which to build a solid and sustaining religious identity in the homeschool.

## Conclusion



## What Spirited Homeschooling Is, and What It Isn't

So far in the book, we've defined Spirited Homeschooling: using the tools of Unitarian Universalism to engage the whole person in learning, acting, and reflecting with the goal of helping them grow toward the Holy, however they may define it, and to joyfully join in manifesting the beloved community. We've examined the two primary components of Spirited Homeschooling, relationships and the tools of Unitarian Universalism (liberal religious teachings, values, ethics, stories, songs, experiences, and rituals). We've addressed reasons why families choose homeschooling, what keeps them homeschooling once they start, and the main criticisms of homeschooling from among other progressives. We've examined the main approaches to Spirited Homeschooling--eclectic homeschooling and unschooling, as well as the role of the seven UU principles in informing homeschooling. We've looked at spirituality in Spirited Homeschooling, both the child's and parent's. And we've heard examples of and imagined possibilities for home-church partnerships that both utilized the particular assets of homeschooling and attempted to meet their needs. Let me offer Spirited Homeschooling one last one, in two lists, of what it is and what it is not:



### What Spirited Homeschooling Is

If you spent a season in a Spirited Homeschooling environment, you might make many of the following observations:

- ✓ Children are actively engaged in their own learning and meaning-making.
- ✓ You'd be able to point to ways that the whole child's development was addressed--intellect, emotions, spirituality, physicality, socialization, nature knowing, healthy sexuality, and creativity. (Or, if you prefer, heart, hands, and mind, or intellect, emotions, body, and spirit.)
- ✓ There is UU-specific content, maybe first encountered at church or maybe from another source.
- ✓ Students frequently and deeply study, perform, and reflect on the work of social and environmental justice.

- ✓ The Spirited Homeschooling environment operates with an openness to and encouragement of questioning.
- ✓ There are frequent discussions and applications of morals and ethics, including from a UU perspective.
- ✓ There may be a ritual or routine that ties the family or other group together in a time set-aside from bustle of the rest of the day.
- ✓ Unitarian Universalists other than the child's parent or parents may act as mentors and spiritual companions in the lives of the children in the homeschool.

### What Spirited Homeschooling is not

Now that we've established some criteria likely common to most Spirited Homeschooling homes, here is what you won't find featured regularly:

- You won't find shaming, coercing, shunning, manipulating, using verbal or physical aggression, or insulting a child in order to gain compliance and obedience. This behavior undermines the inherent worth and dignity of children, and is counter-indicated by the preponderance of social science on education, behavior, and child development.
- You won't find a limiting of exposure to new material in order to cultivate a single, preselected world view. In other words, Spirited Homeschoolers don't deny a child different developmentally-appropriate perspectives on matters important to them or about which they are curious; this act deprives them the opportunity to search for and discern their own truths and meanings.
- You won't encounter denigration of the humanity of another individual or group of people in word or deed. This means that Spirited Homeschoolers are doing relentless work on their own closely held attitudes, beliefs, and communications to ferret out where they might be acting on unexamined

privileges, prejudices, assumptions, and less-than-compassionate conclusions. We aspire to the universal love that our faith calls us to model, and acknowledge the ways that our white supremacist culture stymies our growth and the growth of others.

- You won't find a dogmatic adherence to a single educational method or approach if the family is suffering under its implementation or results. Spirited Homeschooling environments are flexible and adaptive, and take the children's perspective into account as a matter of morality and practicality. UU religious education forefather Angus Maclean, in a spin on the familiar adage, said, "Education is not a matter of leading a horse to water. Drinking waits upon thirst and upon the horse's judgment of the quality of the water."<sup>32</sup> Pragmatism runs deep in our faith's history, and our educational spaces reflect that.
- You won't find a lack of engagement in or care for the social, political, and environmental struggles of our time. Spirited Homeschooling spaces, like UU churches, are the dwelling and growing places of activists, advocates, and allies.
- You won't find a neglect of the spiritual life of children or adults. While UUs vary widely on what we mean by spiritual, the Spirited Homeschooling space will undoubtedly nurture the spark within each of us that connects us to that which we cannot see or understand. Spirited Homeschoolers acknowledge, seek out, and learn to facilitate for ourselves and others experiences that prompt feelings of transcendence, awe, wonder, and interconnection with the sacred and all of existence.

## A Parting Thought

My friend Chaya's 13-year-old daughter Nitza was diagnosed with a rare blood condition in 2015. Nitza spent months in the children's hospital out of state

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<sup>32</sup> Angus Maclean, *The New Era in Religious Education*, 1934, p. 4.

getting difficult treatments, with Chaya and her partner alternating staying with her. Blessedly, Nitza is recovered, and their family is reunited. Life goes on. When Chaya first told me about receiving the prognosis, she said that a thought came to her, clear and strong: “I realized I had no regrets,” she said. “What people would normally think, spending more time together, wishing they could let a kid follow their passions, really getting to see them grow up, taking it slow. We were already doing all that. Homeschooling is exactly what I would have wanted to be doing with her.”

The power of this story, for me, is that it cuts through all the politics and educational models and lesson plans and future plans and zooms in, right up close, to the parent and child in this moment, held in space by the bonds of family and community, by the Great and Wondrous Love that permeates all life. When I ask myself, in moments of doubt about my homeschooling--can we afford this? do I have time to homeschool my sons, all three of them together? is this the right thing to do for my children, for my family? and in recent years, is this the right thing for my community?--I come back to this story. I think about the work of the Rev. Howard Thurman, spiritual adviser of Martin Luther King, Jr., who believed that all social change begins with a soul change, a personal transformation of the heart, a whole-self orientation toward the Spirit of Mystery that he would call God:

...meaningful and creative shared experiences shared between people can be more compelling than all of the faiths, fears, concepts, ideologies, and prejudices that divide; and if these experiences can be multiplied and sustained over a sufficient duration of time, then any barrier that separates one person from another can be undermined and eliminated.

I believe that what Spirited Homeschoolers are doing is creating a life around these meaningful, shared experiences; to raise shining, whole, justice-seeking, open-hearted, loving, faithful people who will love learning, love their neighbors, love themselves, and love the Divine Unknown. This is one way of living optimistically, of cultivating hope for a better future for all of us.

# Appendix I -- Distribution of Educational Approaches

Eclectic/Relaxed...61.7%  
Unschooling...41%  
Project-based...15.9%  
Unit Studies...12.3%  
School-at-home...11%  
Waldorf or Waldorf-inspired...9.3%  
Classical/Socratic...9.1%  
Charlotte Mason/literature-based...8.6%  
Montessori or Montessori-inspired...8.4%  
Hybrid/public school/dual enrollment..2.4%  
Afro-Centric ..... 1.8%  
Other (including Polynesian-centered, technology-centered, tailored to disability needs)... .8%  
Social justice centered... .6%

## Appendix II -- Sample Unit Studies

Let me give you a couple of examples--sketches--that a parent-educator might make in the planning stages. Let's say the primary educational approach is thematic, sometimes called using unit studies. With unit studies, one subject is explored deeply, with the intention of experiencing many of the spheres of development. Themes or unit studies lend themselves particularly well to Spirited Homeschooling.

Let's imagine the adult facilitator noticed that the children are very interested in whales, or maybe there is a whale exhibit coming to the local aquarium that the family plans on attending. Whales might be chosen as the first theme, with the intention of running the theme over the course of three weeks or so. Imagine there is already a rhythm to the day: a circle time for singing and centering, a group mindfulness practice; read-aloud time; outdoor freeplay time; etc. The below might represent aspirations for one to two hours of each afternoon, three or four days a week.

Activity: Going Deeper with Spirited  
Homeschooling:

Invite a storyteller to share a folktale or myth about whales, or read them together and create skits from favorites	Talk about world religions as a source of Unitarian Universalism
Watch whales on OrcaLab's Whalecams	Include gratitude for the power and beauty of our fellow creatures during prayers before bed.
Learn about whale migration and geographic distribution, including how whales are threatened by	Mention our UU responsibility to seek understanding (4th Principle) and work for peace and justice (6th Principle), as

<p>certain environmental, economic, and cultural practices such as climate change, net fishing, and whale hunting:</p>	<p>well as respect and protect the interdependent web of all existence (7th Principle).</p>
<p>Look up pictures of whale totems among the Native American tribes of the Pacific Northwest; try your hand at whittling or carving soap with a butterknife</p>	<p>Talk about cultural appropriation, and the importance of honoring the sacredness of another culture’s objects and expressions of religion</p>
<p>Do a waterway trash clean-up with friends</p>	<p>Find a map that shows how your local waterways connect to the ocean, where plastics and other refuse create inhospitable environments for whales and other sea creatures.</p>
<p>Watch a documentary together on whale anatomy and social behavior, including, if possible, the birth of a whale</p>	<p>Bring up the UU Animal Ministry’s “First Principle Project,” which was an attempt to change the wording of the first principle from “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” to “the inherent worth and dignity of every being,” recognizing that all species have worth, dignity, and right to exist. Mention how not all UUs agreed this was a good idea, since not all people yet are treated with dignity and worth. Talk about the birth using anatomically correct language, and drawing out information they already know about mammals including live birth, nursing, and a longer period of staying with the mother.</p>
<p>Outdoors, play the game, “Sharks and Minnows,” but change the</p>	<p>Draw on any previous knowledge about predators, prey, and the circle of life.</p>

animals to a predatory whale and its prey that you've previously encountered in your studies (Ex., Orca and Seal, or Sperm whale and Squid.)	Invite questions about humans' place and role in that circle.
Learn Peter Mayer's beloved UU song, "Blue Boat Home"	Connect the themes here back to the interconnected waterways you discovered
Visit a nearby aquarium	Read the first paragraph of the Code of Professional Ethics of the Association of Aquariums and Zoos before you go. Discuss why such a code might be necessary.
Take part in the annual Blessing of the Animals service at the local UU church	Explain the work you've been doing to the religious educator or worship leader, and offer to read Mary Oliver's poem, "Humpbacks."

The educational sketch above

- Works explicitly with four of the seven Principles (1st, 4th, 6th, and 7th)
- Features the UU values of taking good care of the earth and all its inhabitants; learning about cultures other than white European; learning, and then being part of the solution
- Includes a service to the church community in the form of offering a worship element (the Mary Oliver poem)
- Includes a service to the wider community through the waterway clean-up
- Weaves in science (anatomy, zoology, biology), social studies (geography of whale migration, maps of local watershed), reading (whale myths, text at aquarium), technology (OrcaLab's Whalecam), public speaking and literature (poem reading), music ("Blue Boat Home"), and art (carving)
- Touches on cultural appropriation

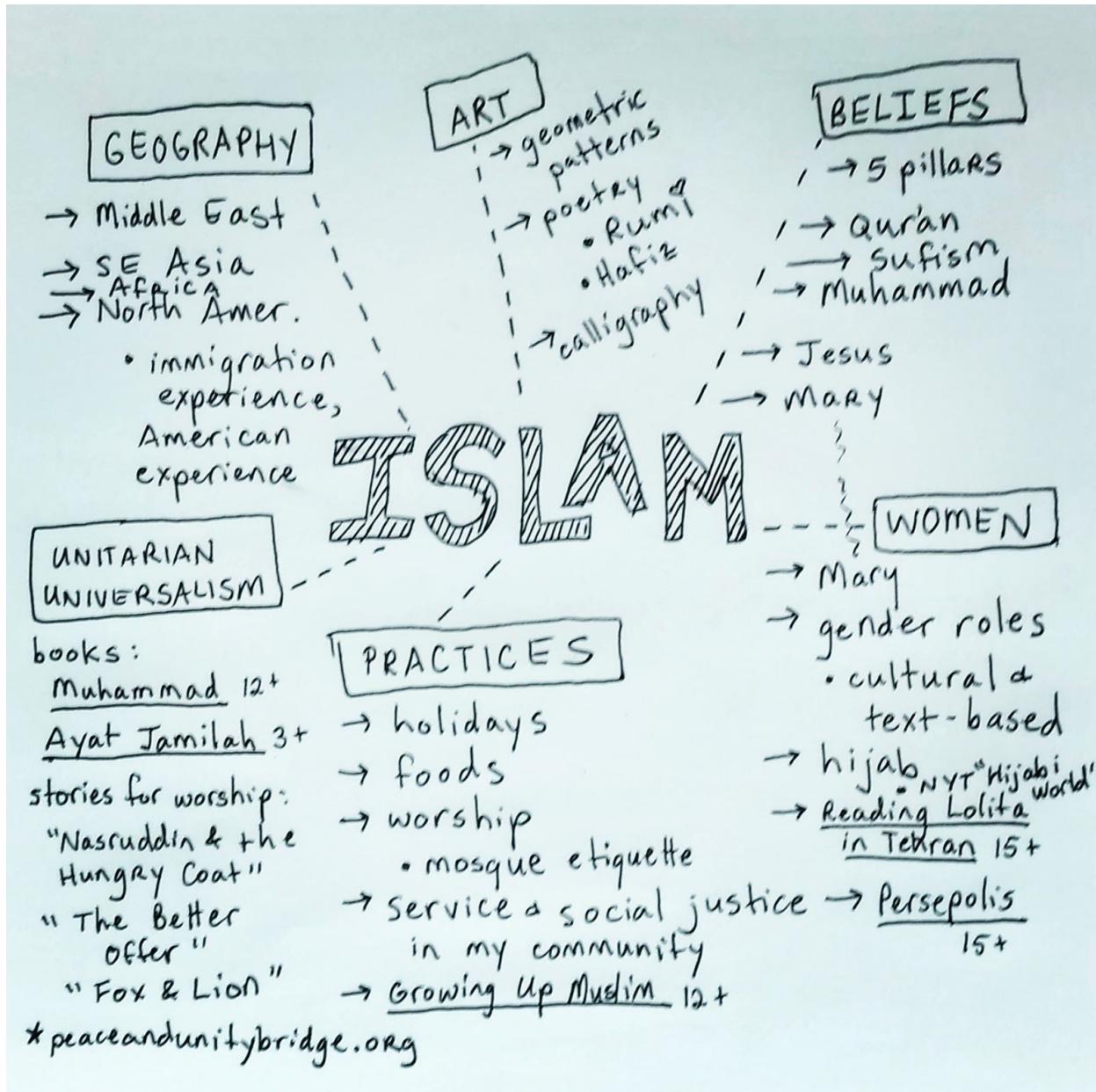
- Reaches out to the church community to reinforce connection between the intellectual, social, and spiritual lives of the participants
- Calls forth the spiritual nature of the children through experiences wonder and maybe awe, singing together as a family, and praying together before bed
- And touches on most of the spheres of development

Spirited Homeschooling through unit studies begins with curiosity on the part of the adult facilitators. Once a child makes an interest known, or a topic of study has been chosen for a group of children, the adults wonder: How can we help bring this topic to life for our students? How can we connect this to our faith? How can we bring the depth and sustenance of Unitarian Universalism to this learning experience?

The actions that follow these initial questions must be handled with delicacy and adaptability. The adults must take care not to overdo it; nothing turns children off more than adults co-opting something they're excited about. (When my oldest son was five, I nearly ruined for him the joyful and inherently interesting experience of baking cookies, since I tried too hard to work in a lesson on fractions with every added ingredient. Lesson learned--by me!) But neither is it left up to chance for the child to connect what they're learning and doing to what their religion holds up for them as good and worthy; being intentional and explicit, as well as sensitive and responsive, opens up new pathways for exploration, and deepens the way the learning becomes integrated in the child's life.

Here's another example using one of my favorite tools--a graphic organizer. My pre-teen began asking questions about Islam--just a few, here and there, and I saw an opportunity to go deeper into the topic in a way that could touch on not only world religion studies, but also gender studies, geography, art, and our UU faith, as well. I mocked up the basic structure of this graphic organizer based on our early conversations. We then filled the organizer out over several weeks, sometimes aspirationally, sometimes reflective of what we had already encountered. It was tacked to our cork board for reference during that time, and then (recopied and cleaned up a bit) added to his portfolio, which is basically a

large manilla folder with notes, work samples, or ephemera such as brochures or handouts from activities that he got a lot out of.



The Spirited Homeschooling piece, you probably noticed, is both in the subject itself--a religious study--but also in the tie-ins with Unitarian Universalism. There are three stories mentioned that, if learned well, could be offered as a worship element in a UU Sunday service. The website listed, too, has ideas for worship.

And in a more informal way, the information learned could be shared with a youth group or an article for the newsletter or website.

## Appendix III -- Resources

- The online Church of the Larger Fellowship offers the email service “RE Express” to their members, as well as the free, online [“Spiritual Exploration for Families.”](#) a curated collection of videos and readings related to the month’s theme.
- UU World magazine has an excellent, multi-faceted quarterly centerfold called [“Family Pages.”](#) Back issues to 2009 are available online for free download.
- Rev. Amy Freedman’s Facebook-based project [Alice the Chalice](#) regularly features interesting education- and family ministry-related links.
- The [Tapestry of Faith](#) curricula are available free online, and are searchable by age group, spiritual theme, Principles and Sources, etc.
- Neither the [UU Parenting](#) nor the [UU Homeschoolers](#) Facebook groups aren’t very active, but at nearly 1,000 members each, they’re worth joining for the philosophical discussions that do come up as well as the resource-sharing potential.
- The InSpirit Bookstore has an excellent collection of [books for children](#) including picture books, social justice books, books on Principles and Sources, and my favorite, collections of stories.
- Unitarian Universalist [Spirit Play](#) is a Montessori-based method of religious education with practices that could easily be adapted to home education.
- Veteran religious educator Kate Covey has a fantastic UU day-camp guide and world religions curriculum available for purchase [on her website.](#)

## Appendix IV -- A Typical Week

Sometimes it's easiest to picture what happens in an educational setting if someone can walk you through a typical week. I say week because for many homeschoolers, a significant benefit of homeschooling is the flexibility it affords a family. So, many homeschoolers have a more relaxed schedule that takes into account the needs and opportunities of days so that, over the course of a week, a month, or more, any material that they want to cover can be. I'm going to feature three models of home education here, in three family compositions, plus a fourth schedule of varied activities located at the church itself to give an idea of how a congregation can become a hub of a homeschooler's family life.

Remember that by far the most popular method employed by UU homeschoolers was an eclectic or relaxed style, which uses elements from many different styles as the circumstances necessitate, so imagine mixing and matching these sample outlines.

### **Unit Studies for the UU Homeschooler**

This example is for a first grade student, Emma, the child of Jessica and Selena. Jessica works full-time as a school guidance counselor, and Selena has her own online business helping people with genealogy research; they swap childcare with another homeschooling parent on their co-op days. (Many homeschooling families have these kind of hybrid employment and childcare arrangements.) Jessica and Selena consider their homeschool week from Tuesday to Saturday, so that they can share in role of Emma's home educators. Emma is a singleton--an "only child." Being so young, Emma's parents take a mostly play-based approach to her learning, adding in a few structured activities throughout the week.

One-week unit: Bees

## Tuesday

- Visit observation hive at children's museum
- Read *The Life and Times of the Honey Bee* from library

## Wednesday

- Homeschool co-op this week at the UU: Beekeeper Naomi presenting on Tuesday. (Emma goes to co-op with another parent and then spends the afternoon at their house while Selena works from home.)

## Thursday

- Construct mason bee house (tutorial online) to install in far corner of church memorial garden (take pictures to share in newsletter, including facts learned about friendly and pretty mason bees!)

## Friday

- Bake honey-sweetened carrot muffins to bring to fellow congregants Marty and Devon, who just welcomed their new baby
- Homeschool co-op: visit botanical garden (Bring nature observation box with magnifying glass, bug container, nature identification books. Selena takes Emma and the child of the parent she swaps childcare with.)

## Saturday

- Buy two different honeys (wildflower and tupelo) at grocery co-op, Emma helps count out the money to purchase.
- Read *Apples and Honey: a Rosh Hashanah Lift-the-Flap* (2003) and make honey-apple snack afterward.
- Make apple-print postcard to send to penpal at UU across the country (practice writing),

## **African-centered UU Homeschooler's Week**

Nicola and Elijah, 10 and 7, are the children of Abena and Justin. Justin is the children's primary homeschooling parent. The family lives out in the country,

where there is plenty of connection with nature, wildlife, and the family's large garden. Abena commutes an hour each way to her IT job in the mid-sized city. Justin supplements their income with a small cut flower business selling to local florists, which the older child, Nicola, enjoys helping with. Justin has a large whiteboard in the kitchen where he writes up the day's assignments, and the children do most of their lessons in the middle of the day, when Justin is finished with the morning's farming chores.

Their studies are based on the [Kamali Academy](#) curriculum, supplemented with Spirited Homeschooling and some subject-specific curricula such as [Beast Academy](#) math. For particulars on the Kamali Academy curriculum, please visit their website.

### Monday

Culture/OurStory: *Classical Africa* by Molefi Kete Asante

Math: Beast Academy book work, 2A for Elijah and 4A for Nicola

Reading: *Nelson Mandela's Favorite African Folktales*

Science: *The Cartoon Guide to Physics*

Religion: Family read-aloud prayer (continued for week): "History's Road," by Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley and Clyde Grubbs, from *Voices from the Margin*.

### Tuesday

Writing: Write down key phrases from read-aloud "History's Road"

Math: Beast Academy math 2A and 4A

Reading and speaking: memorize and recite poem of choice from *Honey, I Love* by

Eloise Greenfield

Language: Swahili through Mango Languages online (free through library)

Arts: Crochet practice

Religion: "History's Road," act out prayer with body

### Wednesday

Culture/OurStory: *Classical Africa* by Molefi Kete Asante

Math: Beast Academy 2A and 4A

Reading: choice from nonfiction bookshelf

Arts: Djembe drumming class at UU

Religion: "History's Road," take turns reading passages

### Thursday

Writing: Copy selected African proverbs from *Wake Up to Your True Identity* by Maurice Lindsay

Reading and Language study: *Moja Means One and Jambo Means Hello* (Swahili)

as well as Mango language program through the library

Arts: Crochet practice; African dance class

Home Economics: Vegan snack prepared together to bring to homeschool co-op

Science: homeschool co-op, physics experiments

### Friday

Culture/OurStory, *Classical Africa* by Molefi Kete Asante

Reading: choice from fiction bookshelf

Math: Beast Academy 2A and 4A

Arts: Piano lessons

Religion: illustrate something from "History's Road" as it's read this last time

## **The Unschooling UU**

This is a fictional journal entry written by Robin, single parent to teen Albert. They live with Robin's mother. Robin works full-time as nurse's assistant, and Robin's mother--Albert's grandmother--stays with him while Robin is at work. Many homeschooling parents keep journals both to satisfy some states' regulations about school records and for their own efficacy as homeschooling parents. Journals help show that learning is, in fact, happening, and helps parents keep better track of their children's questions, interests, and epiphanies so they can follow up later on.

Week of April 13

*Teen is building custom BMX bike ramp this week (woodworking, angles and other geometry, working within a budget, physics). Was kind to and inclusive of*

*pre-teens in the neighborhood who wanted to watch and help. Has been working on design to paint on the side, inspired by the street art of Alix Diaz.*

*One of the neighbor kids was doing skateboard tricks as they were hanging out. Fell and skinned her knee. Teen showed her how to use the weed plantain to heal scrapes. (Learned during last year's foray into herbalism.)*

*Nana took Teen to Coming of Age class on Wednesday evening at the UU, followed by pizza and freeplay. Youth group kids also did some planning for upcoming Black Lives Matter event, too.*

*Teen picked up Kerouac's "On the Road" to learn what the big deal was about the book. Not impressed so far. Watched "The Source"--documentary about Beat generation--together for a little context.*

*Invited Katrin over for dinner, talked a lot about her homeland of Iceland. Teen particularly interested in music scene and the persisting belief in elves/trolls. Played Thinking Sticks after dinner; Teen got "myth" and "geography" and wondered if volcanoes contributing to Iceland's stories about fire and ice.*

*Maybe inspired by that, Teen built temples to Norse gods in the public UU Minecraft server he maintains for kids all over the world: Emerson's Adventure Land. Wrote up signs explaining basics of Norse mythology.*

*Teen saw me register for Church of the Larger Fellowship's online class, "Subversive Biblical Literacy." Asked to take it with me. Yes!! Should be fun, and a good one to add to the transcript.*

## **Building on Church Activities**

A strong and well-maintained home-church partnership can enhance any learning approach. The above examples provide some examples of how home-church partnerships can feature in Spirited Homeschooling. The following weekly schedule gives more ideas about how we can make the church the center

of families' lives, by providing opportunities to gather and engage all aspects of one's personhood.

Sunday -- Spirited Worship first hour, all-ages religious education second hour.

Monday afternoon -- Community yoga class, which previously had only been attended by retirees and adults with flexible lunch hours, now has two homeschool teens, too.

Tuesday morning -- 9 to 12 a.m., parent's morning out childcare program, two homeschooled teens work alongside the two adult childcare providers.

Wednesday mid-morning -- homeschool enrichment program

Thursday -- no programming, but one of the homeschooling fathers and his child come to pick up the donated food items collected over the past week and bring them to the food pantry.

Friday -- after lunch, all-ages hike led by congregant on identifying and learning about local ecosystem

Saturday -- drop-in group project, sign-making for upcoming rally for reproductive justice (including REAL sexuality education for children and youth!)

## Appendix V --The Survey Questions

Which of the following best describes you?

- I was a Unitarian Universalist before I began homeschooling.
- I was a homeschooler before I was a Unitarian Universalist.
- I became a Unitarian Universalist and a homeschooler at about the same time.

How would you describe your main homeschooling approach? (If choosing more than one, try to focus on the main two or three approaches you use.)

- Afro-centric
- Charlotte Mason
- Classical/Socratic method
- Eclectic/Relaxed
- Montessori or Montessori-inspired
- Project-based
- School-at-home
- Unit Studies
- Unschooling
- Waldorf or Waldorf-inspired
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

Do you consider your homeschooling to be a spiritual endeavor? If so, how?

What were your reasons for choosing to homeschool?

Does your Unitarian Universalist religion inform your homeschooling? If so, please describe how.

How often does your homeschooling feature the following:

	Frequently	Sometimes	Never
Blessings or prayers			
Community service projects			
Environmental justice content or action			
Family worship (at home, or somewhere other than church)			
LGBTQ+ justice content or action			
Lighting of a chalice			
Discussion of morals or ethics from a UU perspective			
Racial justice content or action			
Exploration of spiritual practices			
Unitarian, Universalist, or UU history			
Wisdom tales or teaching stories from various traditions			
World religions			

UU religious education lessons (such as the “Family Pages” in UU World, the CLF’s “RE Express,” or lessons in the UUA’s Tapestry of Faith collection)			
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How many times per month does your child attend congregationally based religious education programming?

- More than 6 times per month
- 4-6 times per month
- 1-3 times per month
- Fewer than once per month
- Never

How important is it to you that your child form social connections with other UU children, youth, and adults?

- Very important
- Somewhat important
- Not important

How often does your child attend UU immersion experiences such as camps, rallies, conferences, General Assembly, or service trips?

- More than 3 times per year
- 1-3 times per year
- Fewer than once per year
- Never

Does your family participate in a social-educational group with other homeschoolers, such as a learning co-op or park play day?

(This question is intended for people living within one hour of Unitarian Universalist congregations or covenanted groups.) If a local UU congregation or covenanted group offered religious education classes, interest groups, mentorships, day camps, or other educational opportunities during school hours, how likely would you be to participate in them?

- Very likely
- Somewhat likely
- Not likely

(This question is intended for people who are actively homeschooling children or youth.) If a church or other UU institution offered online classes for children or youth, how likely would you be to participate in them?

- Very likely
- Somewhat likely
- Not likely

What are the main challenges you face as a homeschooling family?

What is the best thing about homeschooling for your family?

Is there anything I didn't ask about that you'd like to share regarding Unitarian Universalism and homeschooling?

## Author Biography



Teresa Honey Youngblood currently resides in the Ozarks of Arkansas, where she raises vegetables and children, writes poetry, lifts weights, and works part-time as a hospital chaplain and freelance writer.