

“Faith Formation Is For All Of Us”

Delivered to the UU Church of Roanoke on Sunday, May 3, 2026
by the Rev. Jen Raffensperger

I’m going to share a story with you this morning that I am not proud of. Not just because it doesn’t reflect well on me, but because it illustrates how we can face real challenges in the realm of religious education if we aren’t thoughtful about all the three expressions of our congregational curriculum, as described in today’s [reading](#).

As many of you know, before I was a minister I was a professional religious educator. I served as the Youth Director of my home church in Columbia, Maryland. One of my favorite parts of the job - and it was a pretty fantastic job! - but one of my very favorite parts was organizing and leading the annual pilgrimage trip to Boston. This trip was for our 9th grade students who were participating in our Coming of Age class. This class was designed to teach our youth about the history and theology of Unitarian Universalism, and also to introduce them to the idea of the responsible search for truth and meaning that is so key to the core of our faith tradition. Throughout the year the youth did fundraisers in order to pay for the trip to Boston, which happened in the spring as a kind of capstone to the year’s learning. All this was in preparation for the youth to create their own statements of personal belief, their *credo* statements, to be presented in a special worship service in May.

I had been on this pilgrimage as an adult chaperone once before, so when it was time for me as Youth Director to plan the next one,

I felt like I had a good idea of what to expect. I worked with my supervisor, our Director of Religious Education, to plan out the agenda for the trip, and secure our transportation and lodging. We took a group of around a dozen youth with myself and three other adults on an Amtrak train from Baltimore to Boston. We had a wonderful time, visiting sites of historic interest to Unitarianism and Universalism, and having conversations about what the origins of our faith can teach us today.

Along the way, however, there was some tension between two of the youths. The mother of one of the youth was serving as a chaperone on the trip. As a half-time Youth Director in charge of religious education from 7th through 12th grade, my hands were very full, but I felt like I had experienced chaperones on the trip. I noticed the tensions between these two individuals, as did the other chaperones. Overall, however, everything seemed to be okay. They got into a verbal altercation on the next to last day, but again, things *seemed* to be okay after that. I convinced myself they had let off the steam they needed to. However, when we got on the train back to Baltimore the next day - quite a long train ride that would take us most of the day - it was clear that there was still steam, there was still tension. "We're almost home," I thought. "They'll be fine," I thought. And they were, until the last 45 minutes of the trip, when there was a brief physical altercation. No one was seriously physically hurt, but the hurt and sense of betrayal among the youth was strong. And that's not just the two youth who fought, it was every single young person on that trip. The chaperones - each of whom had a deeper personal relationship with the youth in conflict than I did - took them to their corners and smoothed things as best they could. As soon as we

got all the students safely back to their parents, I called my boss and told her what had happened.

“Oh no,” she said. “We will address this together,” she said, assuring me. I knew that I had missed some vital signs, and that there were important actions I failed to take. Back at home after the trip, the DRE and I held a very difficult listening session with the parents and youth. We talked about what could be done - if anything - to repair relationships and make amends. After that meeting, my boss and I talked about how I could better manage the program the following year, ultimately realizing that with a half-time schedule, I should concentrate on high school youth only. This would give me more of a chance to build relationships of trust and accountability, with the youth themselves and with their parents.

I can't go back and repair the harms that were done at the end of that trip. But I am proud to say that when, two years later, there was another trip that showed some signs of conflict, we all addressed it, together, right away. The youth felt empowered to come to me directly with their concerns. We let the youth lead the conversation about inconsistencies they had noticed and ways they felt we, the adults, had been out of covenant. We listened, and took them seriously, and together we drew up a new covenant for that trip. The rest of that particular Boston trip was a revelation. Because we had all agreed, together, how we would behave together and what we would do if there was a problem, we had the tools to defuse conflict before it really worked up a head of steam. I think the youth on that trip learned a great deal from our **explicit** expression of our shared, lived values. I also

learned a tremendous amount, and I think the other adults on that trip did too. We learned what it can be like to truly “walk the walk” not just “talk the talk” of our values. It’s hard. It’s hard for the adult supervisors of younger people, who are actively responsible for their safety and wellbeing, to admit that they are failing at that. *I failed* at that.

But I think, so often, about the **implicit** expression of our shared values that happened on the trip with the physical altercation. And there was some **null** expression in there too - things we did not do. Those kids didn’t feel heard or seen. A few in particular were really struggling, and we - *I* - did not recognize that fully nor address it sufficiently. Yes, it was good that we did address it directly after the fact, but how much more liberating might it have felt for those youth to have had adults who were not scared to get into the messiness of conflict and hurt feelings with them? How much better would that trip have been for all of us if we’d had some hard conversations, and made some repairs, and no one had ever thrown a single punch?

Y’all. Religious education is messy. Faith development is literally for all of us, which means that we are ALL learners and ALL teachers. We’ve done this survey before, but just in case you weren’t here or don’t remember - could you please raise your hand if you were raised Unitarian Universalist or have been UU for longer than half your life? Right. And now please raise your hand if you have been UU for less than half your life.

Right. Exactly. I’ve only been UU myself for about 14 years. At the time I got hired to be a religious educator, I knew full well there

were people in that congregation who knew a lot more about Unitarian Universalism than I did. But what I didn't consider deeply at the time was, almost *every single one of those youth* that I was ostensibly serving as Youth Director for *knew more about Unitarian Universalism than I did*. At the time I was hired, in 2016, I had been UU for four years. The kids on that trip were all between 13 and 15 years old, but they'd almost all been coming to church and going to RE classes since they were little. They had a decade more knowledge and experience about UU than I did!! Of course I did have training and resources and a greater experience of the broader world, but still: within that faith context, I was much more a beginner than those children were.

In fact, Unitarian Universalism has so many people who discover it as adults, who start their faith journey within UU once they are grown, that across the board in our congregations, the children and youth are on the whole *much* more educated about Unitarian Universalism than the adults are.

We've heard today about the different ways people learn. We've heard from Ginelle about her experience being raised UU and wanting to raise her own children UU. We've heard from Connie Goodbread about the ways the congregation teaches Unitarian Universalism and our shared values - and the ways in which it does not. And I've reflected with you on ways that I needed to learn - and still need to learn - how we can do this faith development thing *together*.

We did a Children's Sunday together in March, before we had any idea that Jessie would not be with us for much longer. During that

Sunday, I let you all know that we'd toyed with the idea of "Singing the adults to class" the way we do with kids - and it's a fun idea, but it's a real reflection on the way UU churches have done religious education, and the ways it works...and doesn't.

Every Sunday, when we're all together and when we're not, we are all learning about Unitarian Universalism. We know there are a lot of different ways we learn. And we also know something else - the way families and children and people of all ages attend church has changed profoundly in the last 100 years, and will continue to do so. There's more that we know - and this is not just UUCR but in churches and communities across the country: we know that since the covid-19 pandemic, religious education programs for children and youth have changed profoundly. In some places, they're back to what they were before...but in far more places, they are not. Churches are trying new approaches, having serious but also excited and open-hearted conversations about how we can learn *together* on Sunday mornings - and all the time. Because one thing I was definitely taught when I became a religious educator was: I am not the only or the primary educator. Kids learn their faith tradition at church, in classes, and at home. They learn it from other trusted adults in their congregations, that they get to meet and learn from and teach when they gather for intergenerational learning and fellowship.

I started on a personal note and I'll end on one. I do not and will not have biological children of my own. My nephews are grown adults and even my friends' kids are mostly getting older by now. But I love and treasure children, and want the best for them. A friend of mine always says, "There is no such thing as other

people's children." This is why I don't want to send a single adult out of the room today. I want us to all stay in it, together. I found volunteering with - and then serving professionally - children and youth to be one of the single most rewarding things I have ever done with my life.

We have an amazing, beautiful opportunity here. We are at the start of something - the next bend in our journey as a congregation. Whatever our religious education program looks like in the future, we do know it will not look like what it did in the past. And that's more than okay - that's exciting. We can build a Unitarian Universalism that grows and shifts and learns from its mistakes and does better and instills within everyone, of every age, a sense of wonder and joy at the better world we dream about. There is no more important work in the world. May we give ourselves to it fully, deeply, and joyfully.

So may it be.