

We Dedicate This Child

Linda Olson Peebles

We dedicate our minds and hearts to the spirit of this child.
—Shelley Jackson Denham

Unitarian Universalists believe that every child brings new life and hope into the world. We set aside a special time, called simply the Ceremony of Dedication, for the community to bless the child and celebrate the blessing of this gift of life. The ceremony does not make the life of the child sacred; we believe that life is sacred inherently. When we dedicate a child we acknowledge the truth that each child's life is sacred and hold that truth in the light of our faith.

We understand that we are all part of the interconnected web of all existence. The community is part of the fabric that holds all human life, the story of many shared lives woven into our cultures, and the saga of each individual. We are who we are, in part, because of the love and guidance and the inspiration and ideals that we receive, especially from those who parent us. And the church community has the privileged role not only of supporting the parents in the sacred task of nurturing life but also of weaving the threads of culture—history, values, arts, wisdom, visions—into a fabric that can enfold the family.

There is no “standard” UU Ceremony of Dedication, and each service may use different words and elements from family, cultural, and religious traditions. As we join together to name and dedicate the child and ourselves, the identity and values of the church community and the family give the ceremony meaning. We affirm our commitment to nurture the child and hold the child in the fabric of community. Even a Dedication done privately, not in the context of a public UU worship service, is a ceremony of blessings given and received. We are all blessed when we welcome the child into the human family and give our blessing to the child's life as he or she begins their journey. A Ceremony of Dedication is appropriate when a new baby is born, when a child is adopted, or when a family decides to join a UU community and wishes to have its children welcomed through Dedication.

The community hopes that every child receives love and affection, guidance and nurture, so that each child may grow into the fullness of the promise of life. Mindful that such love is an honor and a responsibility, in a UU ceremony of dedication,

- we give witness to our values and our commitment to be a religious community that stands on the side of love for all creation,
- we form a covenant with the family to support them and to honor and recognize the preciousness of the child as the gift of life, entrusted to the care of both family and community,

- we affirm the dignity and individuality of the child, as we proclaim the child's unique place in the community of humankind.

The UU Community welcomes the child in love into the human community, in the spirit of humanity's oneness, and into the fellowship of life! Our UU faith community seeks to create a world filled increasingly with love, freedom, and truth. The rite of Dedication includes the hope that the child's thoughts and actions in life will pass on to the future our heritage of freedom, service, and love, which the child receives from us.

Families covenant to accept the faith community's support as they nurture their children to grow as people who will be strong in spirit, secure in self, and outward in caring. The support of the entire community—parents, family, and congregation—is essential to the continuing unfolding of the child's life and blessing. We all accept responsibility for the child and promise to offer safety, affection, encouragement, challenge, and learning. We support the family's key role in guarding the child's life, freedom, and opportunities. Parents—and others they may include in the ceremony, such as godparents, grandparents, and siblings—join in the covenant of care and responsibility.

We honor the individual life of the child as we celebrate the miracle of the advent and the growth of the child. We see the wonder and mystery of life incarnate when we look on the face of the child. Just as UU Dedication Ceremonies include many different words, they also can include a variety of symbols and rituals, such as:

- water, a universal symbol of blessing and life
- the laying of a minister's hand on the child's head as a sign of blessing
- holding the child for all to see or walking the child through the aisles as a ritual of introduction and welcome
- the gift of a flower, a symbol of life's beauty and the unfolding of life. If the flower is a rose, we remove the thorns, in the hope that the child's life will be filled with as few thorns as possible and that when there are thorns the child will always be surrounded by a caring community
- the gift of a book, a sign of our commitment to lifelong learning

We also ceremonially name the child, acknowledging that the child is known by this name and his or her worth and individuality are recognized.

Every person's life is nourished in the love

and support we receive in community. The embrace of family love forms our dreams and hopes. The UU Ceremony of Dedication celebrates with gratitude the wonder of each child, claiming each life as sacred and giving thanks in response to the gift of the divine mystery, which dwells within us all and within the community of life.

Each night a child is born is a holy night—
A time for singing
A time for wondering,

A time for worshipping.
—Sophia Lyon Fahs

Linda Olson Peebles is the minister of religious education at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington, Virginia. She previously served the Mt. Vernon Unitarian Church in Alexandria, Virginia. A graduate of Meadville Lombard Theological School, she sits on the Unitarian Universalist Association Board of Trustees and loves to teach and minister at UU camps, conferences, and leadership schools. Her three children, now young adults, were dedicated as UU children and are still active in UU communities.

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