

Should My Child Go to Sunday School?

Tony Larsen

Should my child go to Sunday school? That's a good question. And it deserves a thoughtful answer. After all, one might argue that your child would be better off not being taught any religion so that he or she wouldn't be biased and could make a free choice as an adult.

Some parents do feel this way, and try to raise their child without any "sectarian" training. For these parents, I would like to recall the words of a Unitarian minister from the nineteenth century, Minot Judson Savage, who said,

Parents tell me continuously that they do not give their children any religious training, from the feeling that it is taking unfair advantage of the child. They say, "I propose to let my children grow up as far as possible unbiased." [But] if you do not bias [your children], the first one that [they] meet on the street, or in school, or among their companions, will begin the work of biasing, of the impression of education, for this is a continuous process. Whether you will it or not, it is something over which you have no choice. It is something that will be done either wisely and well-or unwisely and ill.

I believe Rev. Savage's words are as true today as they were more than 100 years ago. Religion is like sexuality. If you don't teach your children about it, they'll learn about it in the street. And what they learn there will not necessarily be healthy.

I admit to having been one of those little kids who went around the neighborhood spreading the fear of hell and the wrath of God. And boy, was I good at it. I was the kind of kid most parents would try to protect their children from. That's why I say we should teach our children about healthy religion. If you don't tell them about religion, there may be a little Tony Larsen in your neighborhood who will!

Given that your children need a religious education of some kind, the question becomes: Can you provide it on your own, or do you need help from a church like ours?

You probably could teach your children healthy religious attitudes on your own. But why not rely on the resources of a church school that can help fill in the gaps in your knowledge while affirming the values that you hold dear?

That's where we come in. In Unitarian Universalist Sunday schools children learn about the beliefs and practices of all the world's major religions. This not only encourages understanding of other cultures, and a feeling of being a world citizen, but also helps children see our Jewish and Christian cultures in perspective. When other children tell them Jesus was born of a virgin, for example, our children know that many religions say that about their founders. Buddha was said to be born of a virgin too, as was Lao-Tse, the founder of Taoism. When someone tells them that Jesus is the savior, our children know

that many faiths teach about the coming of a savior-including Jews, Shiite Muslims, and certain Buddhist sects.

Our children also learn about the Bible in Sunday school, in age-appropriate ways. We do not teach it as the literal word of God, of course, but we do think the Bible is important to know, for at least three reasons: 1) There are good lessons and inspiring words in it. 2) Ours is a predominantly Jewish and Christian culture, and anyone who doesn't know about the Bible is culturally illiterate; and 3) Knowing more about the Bible from a historical perspective enables our children to explain their own beliefs better to others who are biblically oriented.

Our Sunday schools also teach our own Unitarian Universalist heritage. Children learn about Unitarian and Universalist forebears-like John Adams, second president of the United States; Susan B. Anthony, who worked for women's rights; Alexander Graham Bell, who invented the telephone; and Clara Barton, founder of the American Red Cross.

We teach our children what Unitarian Universalism stands for today so that when people ask them about their faith, they can feel confident answering questions. We help them understand that the inspiration of the divine is to be found not in one book but in many; that we are born not in sin but with the potential for goodness; that the doctrine of hell implies a cruel god, and salvation for members of only one religion would be unjust; and that we have a duty to cherish the earth and revere life instead of sitting back and waiting for some divinely sanctioned cataclysm to come and end it all.

Finally, in our Sunday schools we teach children about ethical living. For if Unitarian Universalism has a creed, it's not so much a doctrinal one as a moral one: to love your neighbor, to work for a better world, and to search for truth with an open mind.

These, then, are four of the subject areas that UU Sunday schools focus on: 1) the religions of the world, 2) the Jewish and Christian scriptures, 3) our Unitarian Universalist heritage and principles, and 4) the goal of ethical living. But-and this is important to us-we do not impose these things as doctrines that our children must believe. We present them as a framework that they can build upon. Ultimately, we want our children to become responsible adults who make their own decisions about what to believe and how to live.

If this sounds like the kind of religious education you want for your family, we hope you'll bring your children to a Unitarian Universalist Sunday school. And we hope you'll attend a Unitarian Universalist church yourself-and participate in our programs for adults, since religious education is a lifelong process. We find that it's a lot easier when you have a little help from your friends.

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