We live today in urban villages where so much of the time the only glimpse you have of your neighbors is when you might see them struggle to get the garbage out on Friday morning before work. Many of us have a nodding relationship with our neighbors rather than really knowing them. This is unfortunate because so many people have very little opportunity to interact in any meaningful way with other people outside their nuclear family.

When I was raising my children, we were fortunate to have moved into a small suburb in Dayton, Ohio that was very much a village in the way people interacted. Having small children certainly influenced this experience, because children get you out of your house meeting the neighbors that often your children have already met. We lived in a neighborhood of families where the kids played outside all over a half block radius of houses, and adults stood outside supervising or sat on our porches talking together while we watched the kids. I remember that time in my life as a time where community was central. We took turns watching each other's kids, or running to the store for each other, and generally we become a large extended family.

Next door to us lived a family with two boys of similar ages to my daughter and son, Bethany and Doug. These four become siblings to each other and found delightful creative outlets in their imagination. Sometimes they would create a circus on the jungle gym in our backyard, or they would imagine they were going on bear hunts in the few trees that lined our yard. Often in the summer, the two families would have a spontaneous pot luck where we would each contribute a couple of dishes and share them on the picnic table.

I remember one Christmas Eve when we had gone out to a relative's for dinner. Our neighbor, Rick, the boy's Dad had come over the leave a bottle of wine for us for Christmas. We often just left our back door open so he came in to leave it and discovered a pool of water growing on our kitchen floor. After turning off our water valve, Rick went home, got his wet vac and cleaned up the water on the floor and in the bathroom above where it had been leaking. Then he looked on our calendar, figured out where we were and called us to tell us what had happened. This is the kind of neighbor that makes people feel cared for.

Many years later when my husband died of cancer, it was these friends and neighbors who took care of us lovingly, giving us the feeling that we were not alone. My children grew up with the knowledge that they always had adults they could turn to whenever they needed someone they could trust.

Unfortunately, most of our neighborhoods today are not like this. We have grown more fearful of each other. And we have good reason to be cautious about who we allow our children to interact with due to the awareness of predators of children. But the way our lives are constructed with commuting and long work days, we just don't always have the time and energy to find a community in our neighborhoods.
Marian Wright Edelman, president and founder of the Children's Defense Fund talks about the church community in which she was raised as just this kind of loving caring community. She says that her church community taught her that she was important, that she had responsibilities to others, and that her spiritual life was central to own health. They also taught her that she was not alone. That she could always find someone who would help her with a problem. She says, "It is the responsibility of every adult - especially parents, educators, and religious leaders- to make sure that children hear what we have learned from the lessons of life and to hear over and over that we love them and that they are not alone." (Edelman, The Measure of Our Success, p. 15) She emphasizes that as adults we bear the responsibility not just for our own children, but for creating communities in which the future leaders of our society are raised with care and concern.

Hilary Rodham Clinton writes in her book, It Takes a Village, that children learn how to treat each other by their experience of how we treat them. She recommends that more of our schools adopt character development education where the values of empathy and self discipline are emphasized. She says that while these education initiatives are important that nothing can take the place of the role models that children see in their own families and communities.

We are lucky that we have a village here. Sugarloaf is a village that welcomes and values children and adults. I think adults see the children in our community as precious treasures that enrich our lives. While we certainly have times when the noise and activity of our active kids can drive us a little crazy, I think we are working on how we can best integrate children into our worship life and our community life.

Unitarian Universalism as a spiritual base of values offers us as a teaching village important principles to teach and model. What are we teaching our children here?

The first principle of Unitarian Universalism teaches them that each person is inherently of value. That respect of each other's beliefs and life choices is the way to live in a loving community. Our faith does not teach them that they are inherently sinful as many faith traditions do. We teach them that they are inherently worthy and that each person they meet merits respect unless they prove otherwise. Marian Wright Edelman describes the adults in her church giving the children the understanding that "we always knew who we were and that the measure of our worth was inside our heads and hearts and not outside in our possessions or on our backs". (Edelman, p. 5)

How do children learn to feel this lesson? I think they learn it by adults in the community paying attention to children, learning their names, finding out what's important to them. They learn it when we bring them up for Words for All Ages and we focus on them because they are important to all of us. They learn it in their RE classrooms when their teachers treat them with respect and expect them to treat each other with respect.

We also teach them that they are responsible for their own search for truth and meaning in their lives. We don't tell them that we have the answers and that they must learn our answers. Certainly, we model our own spiritual beliefs when they see us pray or meditate, hear us speak about other religions with respect, and learn about many world religions in their classrooms. But we don't tell them that there is one answer that they must accept.

Now some of you have told me that you think that having no answers is too difficult a lesson for children below a certain developmental age who see the world in concrete terms. It's certainly true that we must be aware of the developmental tasks for each stage of childhood and structure our education with a knowledge of what children can understand at different ages. I think that means making our principles easy to understand at many levels and providing examples of them that are appropriate for the age.

We tell young children that grown ups don't have all the answers to life. We can say that we're still wondering and learning about life. We can also provide examples of how different people approach life differently. We can share with them how some of us pray to God and describe what that God might feel like for some people. We can share with them how some people meditate and share how that experience looks and feels. And we can share how some people believe that there are
important people who lived before us who gave us the rules for life and those people follow those sets of rules. While this is certainly more complex than telling them that there is one black and white answer, it is also preparing them for future developmental levels when they can understand more fully the complexity of differing spiritual views. We can teach them that having a spiritual life is an important part of a human being's health and happiness.

Modeling a spiritual life for children is important. Maria Poggi Johnson writes about her experience in raising her four children in a neighborhood where several Orthodox Jewish families lived clustered around a synagogue. Maria Johnson is a Christian theologian and she found a deep appreciation for the spiritual modeling that these Jewish families provided for her own children. While the rituals and rules of the families were quite different from her own Christian family, Maria's children watched and learned about why their friends ate special foods that were chosen because their families' honored God's place in their lives. Maria's little boy, Adam, became fond of wearing a yarmulke since his best friend always wore one. And his Jewish friends were fond of using the prayer beads that were scattered around Maria's Catholic house. All of the children playing together in these religious families learned that people honored their spiritual lives differently, but that religious life was central to each family.

As UU's, most of us keep our spiritual lives to ourselves, which means it's sometimes difficult for our children to see any evidence of it. It may be important to create family rituals that embrace the family's spiritual values. Rituals like lighting a candle and saying a mealtime blessing or saying, or sitting with your children at bedtime and talking over their day- the things they were grateful for and the things that were difficult. A nighttime prayer is sometimes comforting to children. If your family theology does not embrace the idea of prayer, you might consider a little song that creates a bedtime ritual. My mother would always come and sing a lullaby to my sister and I when we were little and I sang the same one to my children. It was a loving and comforting way to end the day.

I think for our children the most important lesson that they will learn while they are here at Sugarloaf is the value of community. They learn about community and how people interact with each other every day that they are with us. They watch us as role models. They see how we talk and laugh with each other on Sunday morning. When they help us set up the chairs and haul out the boxes in the Mason's Hall, they experience the way a community works together to make something of value happen. They come to our pot luck dinners and experience the give and take of people working together to create a meal. We take the children when we're cleaning up the woods at Sugarloaf House and they've been watching as the yurt has been built and the house has been taking shape. They notice when people ask them about themselves or when people remember their birthdays or ask about their pets.

Many of you have reached out to the children in this community in various ways. We have a wonderful group of people who have offered parents a day out when the kids are cared for by this group. Several families take turns caring for each others' kids or dropping by each other's houses. While the DeGenovas have been having difficulty with Lynn's illness, so many of you have brought meals and taken the children out for outings.

All of these things teach kids about community. They learn that they are not alone. That there are trusted adults that are available to reach out to them if they need it. They learn that working together can create something of value.

Of course, they also pick up on the conflict that inevitably happens in a community like this one, just like in a family. They overhear the frantic telephone calls, they may hear a raised voice. And there is nothing wrong with that. They will learn about conflict when they see how we deal with it. How we interact with one another when we disagree, is one of the important lessons they will learn from us. They will learn about whether people talk openly with others and listen to each other. Or they will see it when we try to hide it away. Kids are intuitive. They see the twisted look of anger on our faces, and hear the inflection in our voices when we're upset. And they should see this. Because this teaches them about feelings and how we deal with them.

It takes a village to raise children who grow up with a feeling of safety and trust as well as a healthy caution about the world. It takes a village who reaches out with care and concern for each
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other to teach children how people can care for one another. It takes a village with a healthy openness to dealing with conflict to teach children that it's okay to disagree. And it takes a village that values individual's spiritual journeys to teach a child that their own spiritual path belongs to them.

And most of all it takes a village to teach a child that they are not alone.

• Sermon archives

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