

Why Spirit Play? And Why Is It Religious Education?

By Joy Berry, Director of Lifespan Religious Education



In the words of Unitarian forefather William Ellery Channing:

"The great end in religious instruction, whether in the Sunday School or family, is not to stamp our minds irresistibly on the young, but to stir up their own..."
From *The Sunday School*, 1837.

Before I joined your program here at UUCA, there was a comprehensive discernment process that included lots of surveys and conversations about taking UUCA's RE program in a different direction, at least

in Spirit Play. There was widespread support for continuing Spirit Play for younger children but a desire to move to a more hands-on, child-led approach, away from a more didactic one, for our youngest kids. The instincts shown by the RE committee and former DRE, Benette Sherman, were in close alignment with the current pedagogical thinking by the best brains in Religious Education research. Our understanding of faith stage development tells us that until 8 or 9 years old, the best way we can spend our limited time together with children is to lay a strong foundation of sacred stories that explore and model our faith's tenets. These stories all reflect the principles and sources that are the backbone of our theological underpinnings.

The premise of Spirit Play is that we can trust children to come into a circle of shared community, light a chalice and share a song from our hymnal, then hear these sacred stories told well, wonder aloud with the storyteller about the deeper meanings and takeaways from the tale, and then to manage their own further processing of the story with "work" of their choosing in carefully curated classroom spaces (Drama, Music, and Movement; the Nature Classroom; Contemplation; and Art/Makerspace).

This approach is traditionally Montessori, informed by updated for a religious education setting by Jerome Berryman and now used by many Catholic and Christian churches. Please read about Spirit Play [here](#).

The basic idea? Spirit Play is based in a proven educational method whose values support Unitarian Universalism:

- Encourages independent thinking through wondering questions
- Gives children real choices within the structure of the morning
- Creates community of children in classroom of mixed ages
- Develops an underlying sense of the spiritual and the mystery of life
- Supports congregational polity through choice of lessons

Some parents have asked how, without didactic instruction, young children can learn the principles and sources. As a professional religious educator, I am consistently reading, attending training, and staying abreast of our faith's understanding of how children learn to be religious--and it turns out that isn't exactly the same way that they learn their ABCs or how to multiply. Faith development is a big package, with a trajectory of formation over the lifespan. At the age of 6 or 8, exposure to curated stories from our faith has been demonstrably more effective at laying a foundation for religious education than has any other classroom approach, and self-led work is key to the success of Montessori and Waldorf methods. I do not believe our children need more "sit down and listen to us talk" time in church when the bulk of most children's educational experience is just that. **Sacred stories, meaningful imaginative and creative play, and the opportunity to learn about our church's rituals and ceremonies, as well as the opportunity for contemplation, meditation, and silence, is the most religious approach I can imagine, one that respects a child's soul.**

UUCA is on the cutting edge of a new way in RE, one that most families and children find more sustaining and sustainable. Our first priority is to create a sacred space where our children feel they are welcome and where stories, song, and big questions are the norm. After all, that's a fine definition for what adults experience in UU churches. And adults choose their own work in churches--whether they feel most engaged by worship, singing in the choir, the board, or teaching in RE, we trust adults to look within and see what work their soul (and community) most needs from them at a given time. So it is in Spirit Play, where we seek to allow children to make choices in how they process and engage with the stories of our faith. **Remembering church as a place where their spirits were allowed to grow, instead of organized, taught to, and managed as if their needs were all the same, is a powerful wish I have for my own and your children.**

I am convicted and compelled, as W. B. Yeats said, that education ought not to be the "filling of a bucket, but the lighting of a fire."

We have your kids--even if you come every single Sunday--around 50 hours per year. We agree that comprehensive religious instruction and education can't happen in that space of time. I encourage you to stay informed via our weekly newsletter articles this year, letting you know about the stories your children will hear in Spirit Play, and what principles and sources you may be able to talk more about with them--after all, you have them at the dinner table, in the car, and around the campfire, times that are uniquely familial and perfect for deep conversations. **Make sure your children see that thinking and talking about faith doesn't only happen at church. Share your ideas, questions, and challenges around our principles and the work we UUs are called to do in the world on a daily basis.**

You are your children's primary religious educators, and we seek to support you in that endeavor. After all, we may light the flame of the chalice in RE on Sunday mornings, in our circle and in your child's mind, but it is up to you to keep the flame lit and help it to grow. (See the class notes above for some guidance.) Please talk to me if you want to discuss this further.

Want to read more about how Spirit Play is an approach grounded in theory and practice? Read [here](#).