

It's a Family Affair
By Michael A. Schuler
January 10, 2010

Gleanings from Eastern and Western Wisdom
From "The Great Fool" by Larry Smith

Taigu Ryokan grew up near Mount Kugami in the late 18th century, in a community of artists and writers. At 17, he shaved his head and took his vows as a Soto Zen monk. His mentorship under an older Zen teacher lasted a decade until Ryokan received the seal of a realized Zen master. At that point he had become disillusioned with temple life and left to take up life as a solitary mountain hermit.

Ryokan had no disciples, ran no temple, and in the eyes of the world was a penniless monk who spent his life in the snow country of Mount Kugami. He repeatedly refused to be honored or confined as a "professional," either as a Buddhist priest or a poet, and he never published a collection of verse while alive.

His practice consisted of sitting in zazen meditation, walking in the woods, playing with children, making his daily begging rounds, reading and writing poetry, doing calligraphy, and, on occasion, drinking wine with friends. He later dubbed himself "Taigu" or "great fool," yet for him this title meant one who enjoys life, one who goes beyond artificial and meaningless conventions.

Ryokan's "foolishness" belongs in a Taoist-Buddhist context as an inversion of social norms. By "being foolish" monks like him discovered the Buddha Mind, unborn and marvelously illuminating. ...

To achieve this original or beginner's mind, Ryokan sought the company of children. ... Dropping whatever he was doing, he would turn to join the children's games of tag and blind man's bluff, hide-and-seek, and "grass fights." Or he would play Japanese handball. ... He relished playing dead for the children, who would bury him in leaves, and he would spend the day picking flowers with them, forgetting his begging rounds.

"How happy I am to go out into the fields," he wrote, gathering herbs and running about with the merry village children. I love their truthfulness, their lack of pretense."

Ordinary people frowned on this sort of behavior, to which he responded, "When the children surprise me, it makes them happy. When the children are happy, it makes me happy. The children

are happy and I'm happy, too. There's no truer happiness than this!"

In recording his experiences of play, begging, observing people and nature, and accepting life's bounty, Ryokan becomes the self-deprecating great fool in order to mentor us in an authentic life: one stressing simplicity, trust, humility, and finding the true way in everyday life.

From *The Mystery of the Child*
by Dennis Benson and Stan Stewart

An old man is sitting in a hospital emergency room and tears are rolling down his cheeks. His shoulders rise and fall as he sobs with his head in his hands. When his grief can bring no more sobs, he begins to moan like a foghorn wailing in the night. People begin to shift around on the hard, uncomfortable chairs. In their embarrassment over the man's suffering, people don't know what to do. The pain is too close.

Then a small child squirms loose from her mother's arms and runs around the room. The tired woman does very little to restrain her. The active child begins to play with the ashtray, the water fountain, the magazines. Ashes, water, and torn pages follow in her wake.

The twenty of so people in the room discover that it is easier to focus on this curious child than to deal with the sobbing old man. Then the little girl finally stops in front of the suffering adult. Her face becomes very serious and intent. She moves forward carefully and looks deeply as tears roll down the face of this grief-stricken person. The waiting room becomes very quiet. All eyes are on this encounter between adult and child.

What will the child do? She toddles over to his knees. Her hand reaches out to his face, and she wipes the tears from his cheeks. "All right, all right, all right," she says gently. The man opens his eyes. The shape of his mouth slowly changes. He looks at her as the littlest one in the room continues to roughly wipe his face. He gently catches her hand in his wrinkled fingers and kisses it.

Reflections

"Northern Exposure," as some of you know, is one of Trina's and my all-time favorite television shows. The quintessential "serious" comedy

series, it frequently addressed social, moral, and spiritual issues in an intelligent and entertaining fashion—which is why we have offered “Northern Exposure” as an adult education class three times here at FUS.

But much as I admired the series, one aspect of it always puzzled me. Something essential was missing—at least for the first three or four seasons that it ran. Cicely, Alaska—the show’s fictional setting—had most of the staples of a small town: general store, a bustling restaurant, a small white-frame church, a doctor’s office. What it didn’t appear to have was a school. In fact, children made only occasional cameo appearances on the program until, at long last, Holling and Shelly produced a baby. Until then it was as if the Pied Piper had visited Cicely and charmed all the children away.

From time to time scenes were set inside the small chapel, where Chris, the philosophic local disk jockey often presided. Here again, children were notable by their absence. But this didn’t strike me as *quite* so unusual because I’ve been in any number of Unitarian Universalist churches where few if any kids were present.

Many years ago I interviewed for the open pulpit in Sarasota, Florida—a congregation of several hundred adults with no children’s religious education program. The same was true of the UU Fellowship up in Door County where I spoke not long ago. About 80 adults were in attendance that morning, and the one person who showed up with two young children sat in the very back, to avoid distracting others. No age-appropriate resources or activities were provided.

A noted professor of religion once argued that truly vibrant churches share two attributes: their children are not hidden away and money issues can be discussed openly and forthrightly.

Things could hardly be more different here at the First Unitarian Society of Madison. More than 500 children are registered for our religious education programs, although only about half that number are present on any given week. The nursery is typically filled with babies and toddlers, and parents with infants rock them to sleep in our “baby haven” at the back of the auditorium. A noted professor of religion once argued that truly vibrant churches share two attributes: their children are not hidden away and money issues can be discussed openly and forthrightly.

Well, I’m not sure whether FUS meets the second criteria, but we have achieved the first. It wasn’t always this way. Twenty years ago FUS was the classic “upstairs, downstairs” church, which meant that children and adults occupied separate spheres. Except for the occasional “intergenerational” service—which most childless adults declined to attend—our kids were confined to the classroom.

Because we want to provide our young ones with experiences that match their needs and interests—that respond to the questions they are most concerned about at certain times in their growing-up—we do send them off to classes each week. But we also need for them to be present among us, both for their sake and for ours.

We say as much in our literature. The religious education brochure that families receive explicitly states that our church is a place “where *everyone* is accepted and where we learn *together*.”

“Everyone” means people of every color, class, gender, and chronological age; “learning together” implies that spiritual development is a *communal*, and not just a classroom affair. And so we have tried to create opportunities for adults and children to be in each other’s presence, to interact, and, hopefully, develop greater mutual esteem and understanding.

This is particularly important at the present moment because, as Al and Tipper Gore note, “families face so many disruptive changes and challenges in their busy lives that the connections they forge to community” are especially valuable. Mary Pipher, a well-known family therapist and author, echoes this sentiment. She remembers as a youngster walking door-to-door in her small town selling Girl Scout cookies. “Until quite recently,” she writes, “adults and children trusted each other.”

Now parents do not allow their daughters to knock on strangers’ doors. And most neighbors *are* strangers. Instead, the parents sell the cookies to their co-workers. The children miss a chance to meet adults, and adults do not know the children who live nearby. A culture in which children fear adults and adults are uneasy around children is an unhealthy and dangerous place.

I have to say that I have bought more than a few boxes of Girl Scout cookies from young solicitors here at FUS, so here we do have the opportunity to repair that bridge between the generations that the culture at large keeps knocking down.

But this isn’t always easy work. Young people spill hot chocolate, grab donut-holes by the hand-

ful, climb on the roof, trip fire alarms, drip candle-wax, and demand attention. They can be noisy, rambunctious, impulsive, and, yes, annoying. For those who come here seeking a serene experience, free from the toil and tumult of daily life, youthful energy can feel disruptive and intrusive. It creates agitation when what we came looking for is peace.

Because it *is* important for adults to have a place where, for a time, they can experience a little serenity, children need to learn how to comport themselves. Church is not an amusement park, and the same rules do not apply in the auditorium as out on the playground. Not with scowls and reprimands, but in an affirming and loving way, we must teach our kids to show respect for this place and its people.

Having made that point, I also want to say that it's equally important for the adults in our community to gain an appreciation for what children and their families give to us, and how poor our collective life would be if, as in Cicely, Alaska, they were missing.

In our child dedication ceremonies we describe them as "vital, active participants in our congregational life, *full partners* in the work and play of living..." What this means, as my colleague Gary Smith observes, is that "our children do not have to attain a certain age before they can be our ministers." Here at FUS we all minister to each other, and our children do so in ways that we sometimes fail to recognize.

Recall the story shared earlier about that precocious little girl in the hospital waiting room—how she responded caringly to the pain of an elderly man when no adult would offer so much as a word of comfort. Gary Smith offers a similar story of his own. Some years ago, an older member of his church developed a disfiguring facial cancer. The woman's anger about it made her so unpleasant that people avoided her. But one day, Gary observed as a child ran up to the woman in coffee hour and gave her a hug. "I know that this child gave that woman a ministerial presence I could never have offered," he writes. "I saw it on the woman's face."

As our friend Garrison Keillor writes: "When we are new, when we are young and fresh, our hearts are very open in a way that they may *never* be again for the rest of our lives." This is one reason why, for all their disquieting exuberance, our children need to be visible and involved.

But that very exuberance, expressed through proper channels, is also to be prized. *Seelisch* is the German word for "blessedness." Etymologically it is related to our own word "silly." It is truly a shame

when we, as adults lose completely our capacity for the open-eyed experience and child-like enjoyment of life. Children have the remarkable ability to remind us that one of our objectives in life should be, as Tom Owen-Towle writes, "to frolic early and to keep on doing so all the way to the grave."

Just as we mustn't confine our children to the classroom and keep them out of our hair, it is a serious mistake to keep our *own* "inner child" so closeted that we lose touch with it completely. As that silly Zen master Ryokan wisely put it, when I play with the children and make them happy, they make me happy, and then we are all happy together. "There's no truer happiness than this."

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We are never too old to be taught by children. The other day I spoke on "great spiritual teachers" at the Capital Lakes Retirement Community downtown. In the discussion that followed a man said that he had just returned from a visit to his young grandchild. Not having been around a toddler for quite some time, he was awed by the child's boundless curiosity and avid interest in his environment. Although in his 70s, the grandfather came away inspired and rejuvenated.

I also think that we adults can use some of our children's noisy and more boisterous behavior to our advantage. Instead of closing down in irritation, we can try to open up; be more observant to what is going on. Instead of feeling imposed upon, we can choose to see these bothersome moments as opportunities for personal growth—to build patience, practice mindfulness, find balance. In a genuinely intergenerational community the energies of young and old will sometimes work at cross-purposes. Rather than be frustrated, let's use such occasions to learn more about ourselves and each other.

In her book *Lanterns: A Memoir of Mentors* Marion Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense Fund, devotes a chapter to what *she* has learned from the young people she has worked with in the inner city. First, she says, they have taught me forgiveness. While adults are all too prone to nurse grudges, to harbor resentment, and to end relationships rather than repair them, children are more magnanimous. "I've so appreciated them telling me when I am or was wrong, but loving me

still," Edelman writes. We can learn a lot from our children's ability to get past the impatient actions, harsh words and unfair judgments of their elders and seek reconciliation.

Resiliency is another trait that has impressed Marion Wright Edelman. Kids bounce back from illness, injury, abuse, and emotional trauma and

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resume the pursuit of happiness much more readily than those who have reached maturity. Disappointments are taken in stride because children trust that there are so many more doors to be opened. They live in a world of abundance, whereas their elders tend

to think in terms of scarcity.

Finally, Edelman says, children teach us that "love matters most." As an example she describes a child born to a teenager who was unable to care for him. Her baby was placed in a foster home where he spent many hours lying in his crib with no one to talk, read, sing to him, or even to turn him over. As a result of this early neglect, he later required corrective surgery on his ear and tongue.

Silent and thought to be retarded, this child was on the verge of being placed in an institution when a caring couple took him in and *loved* him back to life. Anthony Williams eventually found his voice, gained confidence, and after some rough patches earned degrees from Yale and Harvard. Eventually he was elected and served two successful terms as mayor of the District of Columbia.

First Unitarian Society believes in its children and has demonstrated its commitment to them in many ways. Every year over a hundred adults volunteer to serve on teaching teams, and many more visit classes to share their wisdom. A council of elders works with our two Coming of Age classes, offering insights that can help these 9th graders make the transition to adulthood.

Water and flower communion, and our winter solstice service bring together hundreds of families for intergenerational worship. People of all ages

help out at the fall festival and the art fair, and they serve together at the Grace Episcopal homeless shelter. Once a month on Saturdays and at our annual Passover Seder, we break bread together. And of course, children are routinely invited to participate in the first portion of our weekly worship services.

We can always do more to make FUS a truly welcoming, child- and family-friendly community, and we *will* be doing more because we now have such spectacular space to work with. We've already noticed the tremendous difference the new Atrium Addition has made in our collective life. We have an auditorium large enough to accommodate all ages; a commons area with enough space for the generations to mix and mingle; a kitchen large enough for children and adults to cook together; a cozy library for reading and conversation; a nursery that is twice its previous size.

Ginger Luke, the Minister of Religious Education at the UU church in Bethesda, Maryland observes that the tribal councils in some Native American traditions never made a final decision until the grandparents had asked their question: "Is what is being proposed good for our children and our children's children?" That was a question we pondered repeatedly in planning for our expansion because we agreed that what was good for our children is good for us all.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the more than 600 individuals and families who contributed to the construction and restoration of our facilities—those who have done so much to make First Unitarian Society a bona fide "family affair."

In closing, let me add one more observation from Gary Smith, who speaks to the long-term benefit of creating an environment where the youngest among us feel welcomed, affirmed, supported, and useful. "When we create *this* kind of community," he writes, "it leaves an imprint for later years." After the inevitable rebellion has taken place, those who have had a positive childhood experience are far more likely to return to this or another UU community, with their own children.

And this is why we all have a stake in creating an intergenerational community that, despite its inevitable flaws, works well for everyone.