

## HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD HAVE A SPIRITUAL LIFE

Dr. Laurel Hallman ~ July 25, 1999

### OPENING WORDS

Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it.  
How awesome is this place!  
This is none other than the house of God,  
and this is the gate of heaven.

Genesis 28

### FIRST READING

It Matters What We Believe by Sophia Fahs

Some beliefs are like walled gardens. They encourage exclusiveness, and the feeling of being especially privileged.  
Other beliefs are expansive and lead the way into wider and deeper sympathies.  
Some beliefs are like shadows, clouding children's days with fears of unknown calamities.  
Other beliefs are like sunshine, blessing children with the warmth of happiness.  
Some beliefs are divisive, separating the saved from the unsaved, friends from enemies.  
Other beliefs are bonds in a world community, where sincere differences beautify the pattern.  
Some beliefs are like blinders, shutting off the power to choose one's own direction.  
Other beliefs are like gateways opening wide vistas for exploration.  
Some beliefs weaken a person's selfhood. They blight the growth of resourcefulness.  
Other beliefs nurture self-confidence and enrich the feeling of personal worth.  
Some beliefs are rigid, like the body of death, impotent in a changing world.  
Other beliefs are pliable, like the young sapling, ever growing with the upward thrust of life.

### SECOND READING

by Kahlil Gibran

Your children are not your children.  
They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself.  
They come through you but not from you,  
and though they are with you  
yet they belong not to you.  
You may give them your love but not your thoughts,  
for they have their own thoughts.  
You may house their bodies but not their souls,  
for their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,  
which you cannot visit,  
not even in your dreams.  
You may strive to be like them,  
but seek not to make them like you.  
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.  
You are the bows from which your children  
as living arrows are sent forth.  
The Archer sees the mark upon the path of the infinite,  
and bends you with might that the arrows may go swift and far.  
Let your bending in the Archer's hand be for gladness.

## Sermon: HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD HAVE A SPIRITUAL LIFE

July 25, 1999

©1999 Dr. Laurel Hallman

Last Saturday, in the religion section of the *Dallas Morning News*, a rather chilling article greeted us. It was titled, “Children of the End Times” and featured a movement within the Pentecostal Church—which if you haven’t noticed has grown exponentially in recent years—to train children as young as toddlers to be “Warriors for God.”

The article described parents who believe that by training their children in prayer and Bible study, they can armor children with the Holy Spirit. They believe that Satan is killing this generation of children, through abortion and through the general destruction of society—violence, moral failings, and anarchy in the schools. They believe that their children could be the last generation on the Earth before the return of Christ.

The article goes on to describe their presentations to children, especially at North Church in Carrollton, where the room for 100 elementary-age school-kids has a sound system, and an area for costume changes and puppet storage. In another room, the Bible Fact man, a member of the congregation painted all in green, got the pre-school children’s attention having them pretend they were growing grass. “How do you grow?” he asked them. “By reading the Bible!”

The fifth and sixth graders “High Voltage” class was learning about the end times, and

their literal belief in the rapture when Jesus will swoop down and lift them into the clouds.

“What if your mom, dad, sister, and brother were left behind?” the teacher asks.

Traditional Pentecostalism, which is a highly emotional religion, coupled with fear of the society and focused on Y2K—the threatened disintegration of the structures of our society when our computers go down as the new millenium begins—has given rise, (once again, I would add) to an intense, highly emotional, fear-based religion for children.

It has not been so long since Jonathan Edwards preached, in the mid-1700s, his famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” in which he described a man hanging over a dark abyss by a thread. It is said that one man, so overwhelmed by the sermon, left the church and committed suicide.

Now I would be among the first to say that fear has its place. It alerts us to potentially dangerous situations. It makes us alert in moments when we need to be. But fear coupled with religion, especially when it is given to children as a package, can be a powerful force. I will admit that when I read the article, I felt a chill of fear for those children. For I knew, at least in

part, what it was like to take seriously a religion over against a society which is to be feared, on behalf of a God which is fearsome as well.

While I didn’t grow up in the emotionality of Pentecostalism, I did grow up in a fundamentalist church where I determined to be good as proof of my salvation, which though promised, was never quite assured in my own mind.

I was afraid for my father’s salvation, who I was not sure was saved. I was afraid to reach out into the world as I grew because the world was a threat to be avoided. I could identify, unfortunately, with the little five-year-old praying fervently in her “Extreme for Jesus” class at The North Church in the lead photo of the article in the paper.

The article has made it difficult for me to speak on the subject I had planned today: “How to Help Your Child Have a Spiritual Life.” It has made it difficult because so much of what we do seems to be in response to this kind of fear-instilling, perfection-seeking, over-responsible doctrine preached to some of us as children, and certainly as we can see, taught in churches not far from here today.

For in reaction to emotionalism, it can be easy to make our religion bland; in reaction to literalism, it can be easy to skip

**Sermon: HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD HAVE A SPIRITUAL LIFE**  
**July 25, 1999 ~ Dr. Laurel Hallman**

over traditional religious teachings and stories; in reaction to fervent perfectionism, it can be easy to let children go their own way, not challenged or inspired by us. In reaction to religion as control, it can be easy to assume no responsibility for children's understanding of what is good and right to do in the world. In reaction to an over-zealous piety, it can be easy to pretend that our children are not religious beings, needing our guidance as they ask the large questions of meaning and purpose, who God is, and where to find solace in times of grief and suffering.

As frightening as the movement to turn toddlers into "Warriors for God" and that they are "Children of the End Times," we can be comforted by the reality that this is not the first time such movements have risen up among us in this country (if you're interested, read up on the "First Great Awakening," and then the "Second Awakening"), and that our faith had an answer then, and does today.

Quite simply, our Universalist ancestors, who flourished in response to the likes of Jonathan Edwards, said "God is love." This was no pabulum to comfort the frightened sinner, this was a deeply-held response to a theology of fear. "God is love," they simply said. It doesn't mean that everything is great. It means that God is not suspending you by a thread over a dark abyss unless you repent. It means you are sheltered in the

hands of a loving God no matter what.

It was a doctrine of liberation, of freedom, of universal redemption, it was a doctrine of love. It is not an accident that we begin our affirmation each week with the words, "Love is the doctrine of our church." It is. It is not something we conjure up. It is a gift. God loves us.

I would be so bold to say that our children should learn the lines of the song "Jesus Loves Me": "Jesus loves me, this I know for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong, they are weak but we are strong. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so."

It was Hosea Ballou's careful reading of the Bible out behind the barn and his stern father's eye that convinced him that nowhere did it say that God would send people to hell. It was his careful reading of the Bible that convinced him that God was love, and sent him abroad in the land preaching the Universalist (and I would say, for that time, radical) doctrine.

"Jesus Loves Me," to my mind, is a Universalist song that our children should learn to sing. And yet we have difficulty with the idea, many of us. For one thing, not all of us are Christians. In a pluralistic world would using the language of a traditional Christian faith limit our children's understanding? And then there is the concern

that our children would mistakenly think that we believe in the same Jesus that the North Church is teaching. Would the language blind them to the difference between a fear-based and a love-based religion? I believe it is our fears about these questions that have limited our ability to help our children have a spiritual life.

We teach Bible stories at this church. We teach stories of other religions. We teach stories of our own heritage, and stories are the way the wisdom of the fathers and mothers are passed to the next generations. But if we do not teach "Jesus loves me" or its equivalent, if we do not teach how to be in relationship with life, with God, with Jesus, with our deepest wisdom self, we have taught only the head, and not nurtured the heart of our children.

The antidote for me as a child, for a regular dose of hell-fire and brimstone preaching, was my deeply-held belief that "Jesus loved me." Little did I know that I was learning good Universalist doctrine, and that as an adult, I would speak it each Sunday as part of the affirmation of my church.

Let me suggest another Christian song. Hardy Sanders has told me this story, and I'm sure he won't mind me telling it. He says that as a little boy growing up in the Methodist Church in Crowell Texas, they sang, "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the

**Sermon: HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD HAVE A SPIRITUAL LIFE**  
**July 25, 1999 ~ Dr. Laurel Hallman**

world. Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world.” He said he guessed the problem was he believed it, and has lived it all his life in his commitment to desegregation of this city, and helping all the children as he could.

What I am saying is that to help our children have a spiritual life—and I’m speaking of the children of this church, whether they are yours individually or not—we have to get over our fear of religious language.

Remember when someone said, probably one of our parents, “If you cross your eyes, they’ll get stuck that way.” We learned that wasn’t true. Now we need to learn that if our children think there is a real Jesus, and he really loves them—a kind of invisible friend who protects them from monsters under the bed—that’s O.K. They won’t be destined to be literalists all their lives, not in this church. Not in our homes.

James Fowler, who has studied how faith is developed in children and adults, has made the liberating and helpful observation that people grow in stages quite naturally in relation to their religious surroundings. If their church, for example, is a fundamentalist, literal one, they probably will continue that belief all their lives. If they are challenged by others along the way in their faith communities, they will be more likely to change their beliefs and understandings as they

age.

This is to say that it is very important that we give our littlest children stories and songs which assure them in concrete ways that God loves them, that having trusting open hearts is good, that caring for others is important. As they grow we need to be very aware of when the concrete understandings can be opened up, when paradox will begin to be an important element of faith, and irony, and metaphor.

Little children should be taught to pray. And we need to be prepared when they pray for what they want and hope they will magically get and not worry about it. They are learning to express their yearnings. There will be plenty of time for them to broaden their understanding of what their deepest yearnings are—the ones that carry them forward in meaning and purpose.

Our children should be taught poems and scripture so that they will have wisdom words within their hearts throughout their lives. It is important that they be able to move comfortably among the world’s great religions, but it is even more important that they know themselves as religious people. As having “thou” relationships with people they know, with nature, and with the holy in life.

If we teach religion as an interesting topic for study, we will run the danger of raising skeptics, of raising the next

generation to embody our ambivalence and lack of clarity about our religious natures.

Someone said to me recently, “We keep our children hidden in the Religious Education building.” I’ve been thinking about that a lot lately. It is true that we want to find better ways for all of us to worship together, to play together, to get to know one another in our families.

But I have decided that the children are not hidden in the RE Building. It is we who are hiding. We, who are reluctant to share our lives with them. Share our faith with them. To pray with them. To speak in concrete terms about God and love and service. To help our older children build on a base of faith and face the polarities in their lives which seem always in tension, the paradoxes in life which are unresolvable, the trust in life which is the basis of healthy relationships. It is we who have been hiding., who leave it up to the parents to teach the children, the paid caregivers to take care of the babies.

Many of us have been hiding because we haven’t known what to say, coming from no church, many of us, or wanting not to do it the way we were raised, but not knowing what *to* do or say. We have been hiding not because we don’t care about our children, but because we care so much we don’t want to mess it up.

How do you help your

**Sermon: HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD HAVE A SPIRITUAL LIFE**  
**July 25, 1999 ~ Dr. Laurel Hallman**

child have a spiritual life? The first step is to acknowledge that you have one yourself. That Love is God here. Practicing expressing our love in concrete ways is a way to love God back. Gratitude is our response to the gifts we receive. Praying our thanks together is a concrete way to express our gratitude. Serving others together as a family is a way to express our care. Learning wisdom words, and talking about scripture and poems together is a way of promoting wise living in our children. As Clarke Wells, Unitarian Universalist minister, once said of the fervent fundamentalists, "Don't worry. We will build churches in their wake." Such fear does not sustain people. Such fervent emotionalism does not nourish an already overstimulated generation of children. Let us not let our fear make us be vague, reluctant, skeptical, and unhelpful. Let us not hide from our children when it comes to their spiritual lives. They need us.

**CLOSING WORDS**

These words of John Murray,  
Early Universalist  
Go out into the highways and by-  
ways,  
Give the people something of  
your new vision.  
You may possess a small light,  
but uncover it, let it shine,  
use it in order to bring more light  
and understanding  
to the hearts and minds of men  
and women  
(and, I would add, children).  
Give them not hell, but hope and  
courage;  
preach the kindness and everlast-  
ing love of God.