

“A Book for Every Child, A Gift for All Seasons”

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God comes to humanity as “The Word”, god came as ink, I read in a parable. In most faith-based religions ‘the word or the ink is limited to the chosen text’ be it the Bible, the Koran, Talmud, Veda, or Tao-te-ching. I like to believe that UU’S can find god or the divine or the source of their spiritual quest potentially in all words, potentially in any book.

“To articulate and promote liberal religion”...”to inspire”, “to affirm” “...community that nurtures minds and spirits” justice, equality, compassion, acceptance, encouragement, spiritual growth, “community with peace, liberty, justice, the interdependent web” --all words we use to profess the UU covenant and principles.

All faith based religions hope to instil action that reflects their faith. Today we celebrate the tenth year of our community outreach social action initiative “A Book for Every Child A Gift for All Seasons”, a true legacy of UU values in action. Ten years is an era, it is an achievement that required the faith, the spirit and the dedication of many individuals, some still here, some not among us any longer, some back today to remember and celebrate. It is a legacy that this UU community can sustain; it is a legacy that with care, with constant renewal and commitment, is tangible evidence of the integrity of UU principles in action.

The purpose of all organized religions is to create meaning. Most others require faith in a deity of sorts. This book campaign is riddled with signs throughout its history. We’ve called it fluke, coincidence, and a lot of seemly significant irony but whatever its name it’s been present.

The language of faith retains relevance even removed from the dogma of its source. Learning the language of faith or reclaiming it, perhaps, is a workable solution for the conflict some may feel when tormented by the significance of words that are intricately tied to belief systems that has been relinquished. To make this leap it helps to acknowledge that many of the excerpts attributed to god are merely the personal wisdom of individuals too insecure to ascribe it to themselves. Religious dogma creates human insecurity or maybe it's human insecurity that creates dogma. Regardless divine name dropping was the easy the way to publication for the authors of the ancient holy books. How much more powerful the message seems if it's god begotten. But the language belongs to all of us, it is "humanistically" inspired, and inspirational messages are a part of our just bequest.

A personal liberated quest for meaning requires tangibles for many. Who can deny the interconnectivity, the unexplainable, compelling need to seek the source for the mystical imposing sense of meaning that stalks us when we are receptive to the spirituality and reverence that occurs naturally in every day life? The simplicity can make it conceptually illusive.

It is in the history of this fellowship's "A Book for Every Child A Gift for All Seasons" social action project that the notion of faith first seemed conceivable to me as a UU tenet. It is faith that this community will continue to become unified when a concrete opportunity to live our principles is at hand.

The distinction in being a liberal religion is that the search for meaning is based on hope rather than fear. It wastes no time pining and planning for an afterlife, which remains a personal trust or hope. It is our obligation to create meaning in this life, to create a legacy, to tend to the tasks of the living and create a better place for those who journey after us. In the words of the esteemed theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children.

It's been said that god helps those who help themselves, but doesn't true humanity exist when those with the means help those who have not yet found the means? When we invest our financial resources in the assets of today, in hope for the future, in the potential of children, we truly live the intent of our principles.



Giving children provocative literature is an almost insurgent way of recruiting future free thinkers, a way to collectively market awareness, and the liberal commitment to free thought. There is a UU expectation of people to critically evaluate ideas, so the fundamentals of that mission should be naturally rooted in a commitment to equip children with true literacy, with the ability to discern truth from propaganda. Real literacy is a tool that chisels away the walls of prejudice. Hatred is bred from the vestiges of ignorance; literacy gives wings to empathy, hope, and peace - the progeny of knowledge.



On this anniversary I take this time to share the story of our history once again, many of you know it, many of you have asked for the story again as was the practice of ancestors who knew the value of passing on history as an oral tradition, the precursor to today's written stories. The value of reviewing history is to embrace it, so everyone can own it. This history is part of this congregation and the history of this ten year journey is an insightful glimpse into our social action past which may define an institutional path for the future.

Joan Creager asked me to chair the Children's task force in October 1997. Being a relatively new member, naïve and anxious to be more involved I agreed. "Never chair a committee that you haven't first served on" has been included in my collective pearls of sage wisdom file ever since.



I had just met Jen Loveland and I asked her to join the relatively small committee who in the past knit beautiful mittens for needy children and hung them around the sanctuary. The fact that Jen and I both had grandmas that failed to teach us yarn work forced us to relegate that project to those skilled at that craft. Out of a desperate late night brainstorming session of a few people who got together to fulfill the minimal obligation of a committee thrust upon them, the idea of collecting books and choosing stars to symbolize the light and infinite promise of each book donated is what eventually evolved and “A Book for Every Child A Gift for All Seasons” was born. We partnered with Toys for Tots that first year; which we soon discovered was totally orchestrated by the Marine Reserves. An alliance between the UU’s and the Marines seemed mismatched but we do so enjoy pushing the proverbial envelope of inclusiveness. Being UU’s we never thought to ask permission, we just jumped into bed with the local Marines and if they had concerns about the arranged partnership they remained silent and true to form, appeared “prepared” to accept our possible liberal books. They shuffled over and shared a corner of the quilt.

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We collected books, we counted, we cut out yellow paper stars and wrote the titles of each book collected and hung them from the rafters, to make up for the lack of mittens. We sold bagels after every service. We collected more books and mid - December we half heartedly joked about changing the name to “A Book for Every Other Child”, but instead we crossed the final frontier, went where we had never gone before, where we never imagined we’d go, and became telemarketing evangelists, targeting UU’s that we didn’t know very well for last minute cash donations! The shame, but hell no one here knew me that well back then, and no one told us that we could go in the red and pay back with more bagel sales throughout the winter. We delivered our offering of books and a little corps of our own UU volunteers to the Marine’s distribution center, where we wrapped toys, sorted our books, and took orders from Marines! Imagine the indignation when the Marines refused to share their wrapping paper! They were concerned about what those liberals might hide under the seasonal paper packaging and gay ribbons. Ironically this serendipitous decision became the distinguishing factor of the UU contribution; the

children served by all seven Centre County food banks would have a choice of a book. The second year we went solo, and with a brief peck of appreciation we ended our relationship with the Marines before they fully realized we had crashed their party. The old children's task force eventually dissipated and a new circle opened with a new purpose. Lou Anne Shortle joined Jen and I in establishing a practical mission and definitive goals. Practicality forced evolution and for years after, we hung the same beautiful blue and silver purchased stars, and left the titles in the bins. The image of my star man, Nigel, dangling from that beam while I helplessly screamed for someone to retrieve the crashing ladder because being shock stricken I was unable to unlock my stare convinced that as long as my eyes remained affixed on his arms he wouldn't let go. No one present for that acrobatic performance objected to the falling of the star tradition, although the imagery they created fondly remains with us.

The next couple of years blended together, adversity created tenacity. Independent bookstores closed, the big one wouldn't let us in no matter how hard we puffed; we felt the plight of David facing the conflict with Goliath. The schools were scared of liberals giving books, "what if then the Gideons ask to give out bibles and the Wiccans the *Book of Shadows*," asked a school administrator.

The sagacious, tenacious book committee didn't like no as an answer. "Ask and you shall receive" someone had read in a book somewhere. As a child I always bargained with god with that one, constantly offering the opportunity to prove his existence to me, but the Euro white male christian god of my childhood, repeatedly failed to come through. But adapted to an adult UU view where delayed gratification is expected, we learn to keep asking, reformulate the question, do a study, then target the audience in a more thoughtful way, for one will surely never become a recipient but for the asking. For this conviction we reaped our just reward, for after dogged appealing for free advertising from the CDT one year someone opened a window by dropping a name (probably because they were sick of all the voice mails) and the name said yes. The CDT subsidized the advertising, gave us front page coverage and became a regular sponsor since.

The front page Sunday coverage made an impact because the Big Bookstore that had repeatedly said no, to our blue and silver collection boxes approached us and offered a Barnes & Noble Fundraiser (they pretended they didn't remember saying no) and here are today - going back for the sixth year to take back a tiny little bit of that huge corporate profit!

We have established and supplemented children's libraries at the Women's Resource Center, Park Forest Day Nursery, Stormbreak Girls Shelter, Zerby Gap Boys Shelter, Stepping Stone Transitional Living and Burrows Street Youth Haven a temporary shelter for runaways. A grant from the Vicary Foundation, a private fund founded by Arthur Curtze's grandfather helps sustain these libraries. For the past few years we have had the funds to purchase at least one personally requested book, by title, for each child served by these agencies and for all the Centre County children in foster care.

We received the endorsement of the Interfaith Mission, and the State College /PTO council decided they could say yes to us and still say no to Bibles and the Book of Shadows without due recourse. All Centre County public and some private schools participated, for some of the outlying districts it was their first encounter with Unitarian Universalism and it certainly articulated and promoted liberal religion in just the way our mission is meant to. All of this occurred because of the groundwork that individual UU's vigilantly and meticulously tended with care. Throughout this journey we adapted, reevaluated, and redefined our goals. At times outreach and imagery and congregational unity were secondary priorities but since the beginning providing each child with the choice of a quality book was the ultimate goal. This year again we have chosen to adapt our approach and limit the collection bins to locations or groups who request them. It is the immediate goal for this tenth year to better manage the quality and equitability of the books we give and to make the labor required more manageable so that our ultimate priority may continue to be sustained.

Edward Hays in the afterward of “Sent George and the Dragon and the Quest for the Holy Grail” attributes the magic of books to the magic of words and effuses that the magic of any book received as a gift is “an enchanting expression of love that helps us to change our course in life, that calls us to greatness or to see light in the darkness, as a true gift from the gods”.

This project is the very embodiment of what social action and fellowship have always meant to me. Anyone who has been here on one of the crazy book sorting and packing nights near the end --- can attest to the magical, spiritual energy stream of connectivity that spirals through the room, the diverse members of this UU community working collectively and collaboratively for a common goal.

I’m a collector of friendships and a collector of books. Friendships and books, people and their words, both spoken and written, have been the most instrumental factors in my spiritual quest and personal growth. “A Book for Every Child A Gift for All Seasons” has been a journey with friends who love and value books and understand their impact on the world.

It is an open circle that is truly magical. Enter the circle and tend to it with care, be part of a new era. To another decade.