

## A Gift To This Community

A Reflection For Faith Formation Celebration Sunday

Shoreline Unitarian Universalist Society

June 9, 2024

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I have to confess, after watching the fantastic video we saw this morning, I'm a little jealous.

Actually, a lot jealous!

You see, I have exactly one truly vivid memory of faith formation from the church in which I was raised. And it's not of puppet shows or adopting a sloth. It's not about an egg hunt, halloween party, or choosing a charity to support. Nor it is a memory of serving the larger community by picking up trash or participating in the worship service.

Instead, it's a memory of getting in trouble.

Now, what could I have done to get into trouble at church?

Well, I quite literally got out of line.

The day started out well enough and it seemed like we might even have some fun. Our teacher, whose name I don't remember, instructed all of us to get up from our seats and move to the center of the room. You have remember this was back in ancient times, the 1970's, so I don't remember all the details of the story that inspired the activity. What I do recall is that it was some story about a caterpillar that involved having us line up in a row and then moving or dancing side to side as the story was narrated.

Now, one thing I've rarely possessed is great physical coordination, let alone grace. So it was all but assured that when we were supposed to move or dance one way during the story, I went the other. And sure enough that's what happened. The first time I got it wrong the teacher gave me look. The second time I moved the wrong way, the teacher pulled me out of the line and made me go sit off to the side alone. Afterwards he questioned me, asking if I thought being disruptive and not following instructions was funny. It didn't even occur to him that my missteps were not intentional.

Looking back, the intent of the activity may have been to demonstrate interdependence. If so, I'd rather it been done in the spirit of the ballon activity shared in the video this morning. An approach with the intent, "not to form an outward regularity, but to touch

inward springs.” to quote William Ellery Channing’s thoughts on “the great end in religious instruction.”

And that is what I see and heard more broadly in listening to and watching the video this morning. Each child shared a different, specific aspect or activity from Faith Formation this year. Something meaningful to them, in their own words, that touched their inward spring.

That is what’s possible and happens when we seek to stir the minds of children rather than stamp our own onto them. And it’s a reflection of this community’s commitment to the spirit of Channing’s vision of the purpose of religious instruction which we read together this morning. A vision as progressive and needed today as it was when Channing articulated it in the early 19th century.

Way back in August of last year, I received a not so subtle hint as to how this community feels about children. As I was preparing to lead my first service here at SUUS, I found on the pulpit a fragment torn from one of the pamphlets we have for visitors in the vestibule. It read, in part, “The presence of children is a gift to this community.”

How this fragment found its way onto the pulpit for that first Sunday remains a mystery. Maybe it was there long before I found it, maybe not. Still, even if you’ve never read the pamphlet from which it was torn, you’ve heard those words every Sunday I’ve been in the pulpit because after reading them I thought to myself, “Good. We agree.” and I incorporated them into my welcome each Sunday.

And I think we agree on something else here too.

When I reflect on the herculean efforts of our Faith Formation committee, teachers, and other volunteers, and of course Molly this year. And the congregation’s response to children’s increased presence in worship, I think we agree that the presence of children at SUUS is a gift not for what it represents, according to conventional wisdom: an opportunity to bind them to “our particular sect or peculiar notions.” and thus grow our numbers. No, I think we agree that the presence of children is a gift to this community because of who they are. People with big hearts and open minds with whom we gather as a multi-generational community, “to awaken the soul, to excite and cherish spiritual life” with and for another.

And so to our children and youth, and all those who give of your time, talent, and treasure to encourage, support and increase their presence...thank you!

Amen and Blessed Be