



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “It Takes a UU Village”

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A reflection delivered on December 2, 2018

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts:

*One person gives birth to a baby, but the entire community raises the child.* Yoruba Proverb

*The greatness of a community is most accurately measured  
by the compassionate actions of its members.* Coretta Scott King

*Community is first of all a quality of the heart. It grows from the spiritual knowledge  
that we are alive not for ourselves but for one another.* Henri J.M. Nouwen

*Without a sense of caring, there can be no community.* Anthony J. D’Angelo

### Reflection:

The popular expression, “It takes a village to raise a child,” originates from several proverbs, or wisdom sayings, found in many West African cultural groups, though none translate exactly to this English version. The Yoruba saying from western Nigeria that I included in the Order of Service comes closest. However you express it, the idea is clear that those who bring a child into the world are not alone in bringing that child to maturity.

A ‘village’ conveys a small group of associated houses and buildings, a community where everybody knows your name, to quote *Cheers*, the old TV show about people who created community in a Boston bar. In traditional rural villages, children often run freely about, once chores are completed. Whether in Africa or not, in a village all the adults know all the children, and all the adults assume a role in keeping the village children safe.

They also assume a role in guiding the children’s development into worthy, wholesome, productive members of the village. From their adult leadership and guidance, they expect the children to learn the traditions and cultural norms of the group, including the group’s religious ideas and ethical standards. Being small and often remote from other villages or cities, the village serves as a self-contained school, church, court, and playground all-in-one. The children of a village cannot grow up without understanding their group’s normative beliefs and behavior.

Athens is not a village. We are a small city connected to the global community. We are multi-cultural and multi-religious. Our children, therefore, are influenced by a variety of beliefs and

behaviors. And, since we who identify as Unitarian Universalists are a religious minority who receive pressure to adapt to the dominant majority religion, if we want our kids to share our values, we must give considerable attention to the teaching of those values and traditions to our youngsters, and to all who come into our faith from other traditions.

When I say we must give attention to our teaching, I do not mean we must indoctrinate those within our community. Unitarian Universalism has no doctrine to indoctrinate with. We do have principles, seven to be exact, that we hope influence members' behavior and attitudes. We want you to live out the Seven Principles as best you can.

I assume, and I hope rightly, that you believe or affirm the Seven Principles. They are printed on the back of your Order of Service, along with the Six Sources that generally inform our individual beliefs. In essence, I assume that you believe, or aspire to believe, that everyone has worth and dignity and should be treated with respect. That you believe we should be free to pursue our own religious path. That you believe people should have a voice in making decisions for their lives. That you believe what any one of us does impacts others.

These are our Principles. These we want our children, youth, and adults to value and affirm. I firmly believe that if everyone practiced these principles, if everyone lived into these values, the world would be a better, more peaceful world. If you believe this too, I hope you'll shout out an "Amen!" ...I'm glad you agree.

Within the larger whole of Athens and America, we form a UU village. Our Fellowship is a village. Though we may not know everyone's name, it's not for lack of trying. We wear nametags to promote our getting to know each other. We encourage you to participate in our activities, especially our Small Groups, so that you truly get to know others. It is through our various activities that you learn more about being a Unitarian Universalist, whatever your age. As evidenced by the number of people participating in our adult education offerings, our small groups, our committees, our choir, and our Sunday morning worship, we're doing pretty well.

Just being here, you learn from our behavior, especially what it means to follow our Fourth Principle, the free and responsible search for truth and meaning for your life. Through book discussions, conversations with others, and personal reflection, you work towards an understanding of what it means to be human and alive, knowing you'll die one day. We UUs tend to have more questions than answers, but the exploration is as important as any destination of certitude. Individual religious truth can change, and we UUs accept and embrace that.

But how are we doing with raising our children and youth? Are we acting like the village elders who all feel a responsibility to raise our younger members? Or are we paying attention to our own needs, relying on someone else to raise the children, especially if they're not the children of our own home?

I'd like to see you raise your hand if you volunteered as a teacher last year? Within the last five years? Raise your hand if you have volunteered to help with a special activity, such as the Halloween Carnival? Who has volunteered to help out with this coming Saturday's Nifty Gifty?

Now let me ask you to raise your hand if you participate in a Small Group, or have taken an adult ed class, or serve on a committee?

Clearly we're willing to participate in activities, but it seems we are neglecting our children and youth. Before this service, I spoke with Kelli McConnell, our Director of Religious Exploration (RE) for Children and Youth, about what challenges she sees for us. Not surprisingly, it was getting enough people to volunteer, not only in the classroom, but for special activities. Right now we're running a one-room schoolhouse model because too few adults volunteered to help out just two Sundays a month. All ages in one large group is not ideal. As more children participate in our programming, Kelli would like to split the kids into two developmentally appropriate groups. But that can't happen without two more volunteers.

The focus of the year in RE is building relationships between kids and engaging them more actively in fun and justice opportunities. Unlike weekday school, we're not trying to teach kids, especially elementary kids, UU history or World Religion facts. They won't take year-end tests or receive grades. Instead, we want them to develop friendships and to view this village as a safe, welcoming place to grow and explore in an ethical, values-driven manner. As they get older, we'll give them more substance, but if they don't form bonds with each other and with us as a whole, nothing will encourage them to return week to week or year to year. And it will be our loss, and the world's loss, if we fail to raise our kids to value respect, freedom of religion, and the people and beings of the interdependent world we live in.

Connie Goodbread, the current UU Acting Co-Lead of the Congregational Life Staff of the Southern Region, offers this mantra: "Faith development is all we do. Unitarian Universalism is the faith we teach. The congregation is the curriculum." Don't get stuck on the term faith development. UU minister Richard S. Gilbert, in his book *Growing Up Absorbed*, writes, "

Faith Development is that inherently subtle life-span process of growing those values, meanings and convictions—what we believe, what that belief means and to what we commit ourselves. Faith is that total expression of religion which guides our living. In simple terms, our faith is what gets us out of bed in the morning. It is not a blind belief in the unknown, but an adventure in scorn of consequences. Faith is that human construct that encompasses religion, theology and religious education. It is more verb than noun, as it captures the dynamic of what we are and do. Faith as a verb indicates far more than a set of doctrines or beliefs; it is something that is happening. It is well-nigh impossible to measure; it is also very difficult to program. (*Growing Up Absorbed: Religious Education Among Unitarian Universalists*, page 24)

The 'congregation is the curriculum' means we teach every time we gather. When we greet each other, we're teaching welcome. When we listen to each other, we're teaching compassion. When we discuss a topic with great spirit, we're teaching commitment and a willingness to learn. When we wear rainbow lanyards, we're teaching respect for all people, no matter their gender identity or whom they love. When we wash dishes after coffee hour, we teach that everyone helps out. When we talk about de-centering white culture, we're teaching equality and that complacency and comfort must be challenged. When we wear our Side with Love t-shirts, we're teaching that we take our values out into the world to promote justice. And when we *don't* volunteer to teach or help out in RE, we're teaching that our children and youth don't matter. We're teaching that the present and future of Unitarian Universalism doesn't matter.

Normally, we may not consider this Fellowship a village, but we say we're a community, a beloved community. To be that, we must commune—be with one another. We must support all ages and stages. Using the rural West African tradition as metaphor, we must sow seeds of liberal religious values, tend the seedlings, nurture their growth, and recognize their maturation. Our seeds of young life must be tended with love and care by the entire village.

May our Fellowship be such a nurturing village. May each and every adult commit to getting to know many of our children and youth by name. May our community receive the bounty of your raised hands. May it be so, now and forever.

**Questions for Reflection or Discussion:**

1. What childhood/youth experiences do you recall that you would want someone else to have?
2. In this period of waiting for Christmas or the New Year, what are you waiting or hoping for?
3. How can we best support children and youth as they grow, develop, and embark on their life journeys? What is our individual responsibility to our community (and other people's kids)?