

**“Windows and Mirrors” a sermon on Religious Education
Rev. Brian J. Kiely Feb. 27, 2011 Unitarian Church of Edmonton**

It used to be a belief that in polite society one did not discuss religion or politics, and the discussion of sex was so taboo it did not even have to be added to the list. But it makes me wonder. If you can't talk sex, politics or religion, and if you don't like sports, what the heck interesting is there left to talk about? Maybe that's why we have gossip tabloids tracking the misbehaviour of celebrities...nothing else is acceptable.

I suppose the concern was that polite conversation should never be upsetting or disruptive. But that assumes that we can only talk about sensitive topics like argumentative brutes... that we always have to take and defend sides. It assumes there cannot be a civilized exchange of ideas. I don't believe that to be true.

On Thursday I volunteered at my daughters' school. During a break I stood with the other parents – all mums - chatting. One mom of a 10 year old said she had gotten “The Question” the night before. “Mom, what's sex?” She was paralyzed at the time. During our chat she allowed that she really should have been expecting it.

I guess our house is a little different, but maybe that's because Teilya is a midwife in training. Our girls have always had some understanding of the sex and birth process – age appropriate, of course. The thing is there is little we won't discuss with them.

They know when money is tight. They know about sickness and death. They know about race and about the difference between rich and poor. They know that some people hate other people for no good reason, and that some people believe different things about all that's important: about God, about Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy.

Of course their understanding of these issues is that of a six and seven year, which, while simple, have a moral clarity often lacking in adult conversation. But the point is they have heard these real life issues discussed, presented hopefully in a way that won't cause nightmares or

make them afraid of living their lives. And we encourage and seek their opinions and try our best to answer their questions respectfully.

The same principle is at work behind the Windows and Mirrors curriculum being used with our Pathfinders class (8-11 year olds). Course authors phrase it this way:

Unitarian Universalism views our members' multiple perspectives as a blessing. In spirit, we embrace the contribution of diversity to our collective ability to pursue truth, fairness, justice and love. In practice, however, we often fail to embrace all the experiences and viewpoints in our communities as respectfully or as wholly as we might. Sometimes, we fail to even see differences among us. We seem most prone to gloss over differences when to acknowledge them requires acute self-examination and may lead to pain, shame, discomfort or guilt.

Windows and Mirrors nurtures children's ability to identify their own experiences and perspectives and to seek out, care about and respect those of others. The sessions unpack topics that lend themselves to diverse experiences and perspectives—for example, faith heritage, public service, anti-racism and prayer. The program teaches that there are always multiple viewpoints and everyone's viewpoint matters.

The metaphor of windows and mirrors represents the dynamic relationship among our awareness of self, our perceptions of others, and others' perceptions of us

Windows and mirrors are not just images that are useful for teaching children either. I have occasionally mentioned that I sometimes like looking at the Letters pages of our city's newspapers. It is interesting to see what my fellow citizens think of this or that topic. Sometimes the letters are brilliant and insightful. Some of them add information not previously mentioned in the original articles. Reading these broadening perspectives is indeed like looking through a large glass window, and being given the opportunity to look deeply into the scene before me, appreciating the colours and depths in the details. The looking reveals both information and perspective I had not previously considered.

And then there are those other letters, you know the ones. They are filled with vitriol and small-minded self-centeredness. "Give me only the civic services I want and give them to me right now! Spending my money on

anything I don't personally use is a frivolous waste in service of freeloading bums!... Oh, and give me what I want without raising taxes!" I sometimes think that such people live in windowless houses where only one kind of idea is allowed. And following the metaphor I wonder about the quality of mirror in that house...if they can really see themselves in it. Sometimes the level of self-awareness –or lack thereof – in some of my fellow citizens, leaves me scratching my head.

That's the trick about mirrors. It all depends in how you use them. Snow White's queen wanted a mirror that only told her what she wanted to hear, let her see what she wanted to see. And what she wanted was an affirmation of her vanity, her rightness, her power. She did not want change. She feared what she might lose. She feared not having privilege. It's a wonder she didn't just break the darn mirror on the day it told her she was no longer fairest in the land. She should have sent a letter to the Edmonton Sun.

No when it comes to religion and morality, mirrors are tools not for self admiration, but for self perfection. We all need to 'take a hard look in the mirror' once in awhile, an uncompromising look. Indeed, perhaps the best thing would be to have a window with a mirror in it, so we could look in even as we look out. One way of looking into the mirror is to listen to the views of others on hard subjects, like sex, politics, religion and the like.

The Windows and Mirrors course, in a gentle way suited for children, encourages them to look at their lives as well as the lives of others. Our responsive reading shared the categories where the course helps this happen. Privilege and justice are two areas as are ageism and the need to hear everyone's view with respect.

The curriculum does not teach a 'right' way of seeing any of these issues. Like much in Unitarianism it offers no answers. Rather it encourages the children to share their developing views. A couple of weeks ago I had the privilege of meeting with our Pathfinders for a little while. They were discussing social class distinctions, the differences between the rich, the poor and the middle class.

Most of them thought that being middle class was the best place to be. Said one person, "Being in the middle class – you are rich and poor at the same time." Not sure I have ever heard it better described.

They went on to say that the extremes of rich and poor are not good. Being poor is full of hardship and want, of course, but also, “The rich have no idea what to do with their money.”

Someone went on to say, “The rich have an obligation to share their money. It’s not fair that one person is really rich.”

They also discussed how people became poor showing an astute awareness that sometimes poverty comes because of ill health or bad luck. They were sympathetic towards the poor, but did not let them get off without some responsibility.

“If they get a good education, then they can become middle class and they would be happy.” said one child, “But if they can’t get a good education they need help.” added another. And a third turned the discussion to what happens when they don’t like school and opened the possibility of home schooling. Nuance and perspective in children... I love it!

All in all I found their level of discussion pretty sophisticated and not just for their age range. I thought some of their arguments surpassed the quality of many letters to editor I have read.

I don’t know if these topics are ever discussed in their homes, if their parents include them in these kinds of conversations. But guess what? They are exposed to them. Maybe it’s in the schoolyard or classroom. Perhaps it’s the “news updates” that come in the commercial breaks on TV and radio. The point is, even if we wanted to retreat to a world where our children were only exposed to polite topics, we can’t. That ship sailed a very long time ago. It is increasingly difficult to shield our children from information. If that be true, then the solution is to give them the skills early to process the information they encounter, and to engage in respectful conversation with them where their views are given a good airing. It is our job as parents, educators and adults in community with children to help them set a solid moral compass of their own.

The Windows and Mirrors course – like many UU curricula, seeks to do that, not by giving answers, but by helping shape respectful discussion between peers and with their teachers. And isn’t that exactly what we do in this room each Sunday and in our adult programs? Isn’t that what our creedless church is all about?