

Today we've been celebrating teachers. Specifically, our Religious Education teachers, the Lifespan Faith Development Committee and our newly hired DRE. And well we should, since they are actively involved, and committed, to helping to develop the future of Unitarian Universalism.

But they are not the only ones among us who should be honored as teachers. I believe we are all teachers, whether we are aware and intentional in our teaching or teach passively, without even knowing it. And I believe we are all learners. Whether we are labeled learners (student, intern, apprentice) or simply learn by living life, we are all learners. I believe that's the way of the world, the yin and yang of who we are.

I've long been a people watcher. When I lived in the Boston area, I'd sometimes go into Harvard Square, get a cup of coffee, sit on one of the cement walls and just watch people; students, old folks, performers, homeless people, just sit and watch. You can learn a lot about human behavior by just watching.

I've taken that same inclination into grocery stores, and often watch parents with their kids. As a result, I've come to understand that kids don't necessarily pay attention to what we say, but rather to what we do.

How many times have you seen parents tell their kids, no you can't have that, we have it at home or it costs too much. Parents have an easier time getting away with that when the kids are toddlers and are confined in the cart. But when they're out and about, often the kids pay little attention to the words and insist until the parents give in, often with a disdainful look.

Each time that scenario unfolds, both the parent and the child have learned something. They have each taught the other. The child learns how to get what they want and the adult learns how to avoid causing a scene. Which of course would be embarrassing...to the adult!

I keep fish. I'm an aquarium hobbyist. I've kept fish in one or many tanks since I was a kid. And I can assure you my fish have taught me things. Sometimes it's been fun and enlightening, other times it's been heart-wrenching and/or expensive. Right now, whenever I approach my tank, the fish come to greet me, or so it appears. They have learned that when a figure approaches, more times than not, food soon follows. So I have taught my fish to associate me with food. That's not what I set out to do, but that is what they have learned.

So we teach and we learn in many different ways. Sometimes intentionally and sometimes, just by living. Anyone who's coupled, has learned good ways and not so good ways to approach the other. We have learned and we have taught.

Those with formal training in teaching have learned that people have different learning styles. As I learned to be a trainer and facilitator, I've learned about these various styles—any number of times. But somehow, I can never keep them straight in my head. But along the way, I learned a wonderful and simple way to figure out how people—at least adult people (and those who would appear to be), (I've learned to figure out how people) learn best. Ask them.

But you can't just ask them to tell you their preferred way of learning, because they often don't know. What I do is ask them how they'd like me to go about teaching them how to drive a stike-shift car? Then give them choices.

Would you prefer that I sit in the passenger seat and explain how the brake, clutch, gear-shift and gas peddle all work together? Or would you prefer that I get behind the wheel and show you? Would you like me to explain how the gears inside the transmission work and how the clutch plate engages and disengages the gears? Or would you like me to just give you the keys?

You see, some folks just don't want to be taught, they're the ones that say just give me the keys—my best guess is they all tend to be the same gender. Or they may be the ones who would prefer that you sit in the passenger's seat and tell them how to coordinate their hands and feet. Once they get the idea of it, they can work out the details themselves.

Others are a bit more cautious and might want to learn by watching, or they may be visual learners. Still others have to have all the details of how the mechanics work. They need to know *why* things work the way they do.

We all have multiple ways of learning, it's just that some ways work better than others for us. So the best classroom teachers present material in a number of different ways.

As we are learners, so too are we teachers. We have our preferred, and sometimes only, way of teaching. We each have our own style. Just like some folks talk with their hands and use a lot of physical expression, while others have no need to move anything but their mouths.

Our culture seems to prefer to teach using the didactic approach. We seem to have a whole lot of lecturers. We can pontificate, edify, go on and on. And if you listen closely, you'll hear the underlying moral or political implications, or assumptions.

Another cultural inclination is to just provide the data, the facts, the information. It's largely a scientific approach, reflecting our belief and trust in that which we can test, that which is provable. There was a television character some time ago who used to say "just the facts ma'am". (Dragnet?)

But the best teaching, as we learned in the reading this morning, by Parker Palmer, is the teaching that's done through connection. Many cultures teach through stories. Many of the most profound stories are by or about our ancestors. Stories told about our ancestors give us a sense of connection. They connect us to a place in the universe, our place in the universe. They give us a sense of history and a sense of the arch of life. They tell important truths about living and about dying. They connect the past, the present and the future.

We also teach by encouragement. We share our faith and trust in another person by giving them faith and trust in themselves. We help others find the courage to leave their comfort zone, to take another step, to gain another skill or solidify knowledge and understanding. Our encouragement can enhance growth and self-esteem.

Encouragement can also support exploration, experimentation, and discovery. This is the stuff of science, math, and cultural advancement.

Teaching can also occur through challenge and questioning. Academics require PhD students to defend a thesis, a proposition, or theory. By challenging, by questioning, we can encourage further consideration, deeper thought. Questions can prompt better clarity, expose short-comings, holes, falsehoods, and limitations.

Socrates turned questioning into an art-form, a means by which to discover the truth. He used questions as a form or critique. Questions such as why, what are the implications/ramifications, what's in and what's out, what then? Such questions can elucidate, clarify.

Socrates, like any number of young children and employees, discovered that the process of questioning doesn't always turn out well.

But in the final analysis, it seems to me that the most effective form of teaching, the most authentic form of teaching is modeling. We teach others about who we are by our behavior. Whether we intend to or not, others know us by how we behave.

It seems to me, that we would all do well to give some thought to how we behave. Perhaps we should ask ourselves the question that Rev. Fulghum asked in our Words For All Ages story. WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LIFE? Maybe we should also ask, "What's the meaning of my life?", and "How would I like to be known?"

And perhaps, we will come to the same conclusion as Dr Papaderos...."with what I have, I can reflect light into the dark places of this world, into the dark places in the hearts of others. And perhaps others may see and do likewise."

In this faith community, perhaps we can teach each other and learn from each other and help to build a brighter world.

May it be ever so. Amen