

Boy Friendly RE



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By Neil Chethik

The 8-year-old boy was puzzled. In his first years of Sunday school at First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa, he'd surely noticed the attention paid to women's rights. But on this morning, the feminist message was especially robust. It was International Women's Day, after all, and his teachers were impassioned as they led students in naming women leaders, women heroes, and the court cases that had brought equal rights to Canadian women.

Finally, the puzzled boy spoke his mind. "This feminism stuff is interesting," he told his teachers, "but when are we going to have a class on boyism?"

Eight-year-olds are not the only UUs asking questions about gender and religious education. In a movement where just over half the clergy is female, where a greater majority of religious educators are women, and where feminism is embedded in the principles, parents and education leaders are for the first time wondering aloud if boys are getting what they need from the church schools they attend.

"It's a subtle thing, but the issue comes up all the time," says Rev. Barry Andrews, minister of religious education at the UU Congregation of Shelter Rock (N.Y.). "Teachers come to me and say: 'The boys are bored with the material. They're acting out inappropriately. They're speaking out in class. What should we do with the boys?'"

It's a good question. And a sensitive one.

Over the last several decades, the UU movement has been closely aligned with the second wave of feminism. Many UU women – and men – fought energetically to transform the cultural stereotypes of dominant male and submissive female, while at the same time working to reform laws that fed those stereotypes. UU religious education changed during this period too; increasingly, it highlighted the contributions of women while adopting a non-competitive style championed by many feminists.

While educators say the results have been mostly positive for girls, they're not so sure about the boys. The Unitarian Universalist Association, which reports that 61,436 students are currently enrolled in UU church schools, does not keep statistics on how many of those students are boys. But an informal survey by the World of a dozen UU religious educators indicates that boys tend to be less interested than girls in religious education, more likely to misbehave in class, and less inclined to stay in church school into their teenage years and beyond.

In the stark words of Michael Gurian, a member of the UU Church of Spokane (Wash.), and author of the book, *Girls and Boys Learn Differently*: "Religious education isn't set up for boys. That's the UU reality."

While not all religious educators agree, they acknowledge that UU church schools tend to be geared for what one teacher called "quiet learners." The dominant format – especially in the critical grade-school years – is "read, discuss, and do a craft." A story is read or told aloud, a conversation ensues, and then the children use paintbrushes, crayons, glue, and other materials to create artwork that relates to the story.

Unfortunately, the less-than-quiet learners are often less than captivated by this style. These students fidget or fight during the story and discussion, educators report, and sometimes use the small crafts as small arms. Most of these educators acknowledged that the restless children are usually boys. "Boys are different, in a general sense," concludes Elizabeth Benjamin, who has been minister of religious education for 15 years in Ottawa. "On the whole, they seem to have a greater need to move around. We need to give them effective ways to use their energy."

Not long ago, Benjamin found a way to do that. She stumbled upon a book called *Learning to Play, Playing to Learn*, by Charlie Steffens and Spencer Gorin, which contains a series of moving-around games designed to teach fairness, cooperation, and other qualities. "When I read that book, I just wanted to throw all the (UU) curricula out the window," Benjamin said. "These games taught many of the values we're trying to teach, but they did it in fun way."

Benjamin explained how she used one of the games in a lesson on how children can effectively deal with bullies. She and the children began the lesson by discussing various bully situations. The children agreed that rather than confronting bullies, it would be best, in most cases, to seek support from their peers.

Instead of following up the discussion with a hand-craft, Benjamin led the children in a spirited game of "Rattlesnake Tag," outlined in the Steffens and Gorin book. In the game, a blindfolded child tries to tag another child who is shaking a rattle. The pair are encircled by the rest of the children, who join hands and help the "tagger" by collectively herding her toward the rattler. Benjamin recalls: "It was lively, it was fun, and I think we got across the message that we can work together to help each other.... There are more ways to teach our principles than through stories, books, and conversation."

Frank Robertson, minister emeritus of religious education at the Unitarian Church of Evanston, spent 40 years as a UU religious educator. He agrees that boys tend to benefit when religious education takes place outside the traditional classroom setting. Robertson said he used to ferry his students to an indoor ice-skating rink, and sponsor a vigorous game of Broomball. The kids played hockey in boots, using brooms as hockey sticks and a ball as a puck. "Everyone is sliding, slipping, and having fun," Robertson says. "It's a game that almost anyone, regardless of skill, can play."

But is this really religious education? Robertson says yes – emphatically. "We have to be advocates for the total child. We have to dismantle the prejudice against children who might have needs other than a highly structured Sunday morning."

He explains further: "If you take our purposes and principles, we are trying to implement certain values. We want children to build relationships, to learn a sense of awe and wonder, to become ethical people. All of that can happen in a Broomball game. We also want children to know they are unique, and have unique gifts. If they happen to excel in Broomball – and not reading or crafts – then that's their unique gift. Not to have physicality as part of our programs is to negate their personhood."

From a style point of view, in fact, there seems to be a consensus among UU educators that incorporating more physical play, and more non-classroom activity, would help keep boys interested, and probably satisfy many girls as well. So what about the themes – the content – of UU religious education classes? Are boys getting what they need in this arena?

In a lot of cases, Robertson says, the answer is no. He points out that when it comes to male heroes, "we value men in social justice and the intellectual realm: Schweitzer, Channing, Emerson. These are great men. But many of the boys can't relate. Our blind spot is that we haven't cherished the great physical men: Michael Jordan, for example. He exemplifies the triumph of physical conditioning, of commitment, of teamwork."

Robertson also thinks competition, a traditionally male characteristic, has been devalued in the UU classroom. What's wrong with games that involve winners and losers? he asks. "Do we want to turn our boys away from UU churches because we're too cowardly to admit that competition is fundamental to our democratic society? The question is not: Should there be competition? The question is: How can we learn to be appropriately happy when we win, and to be happy for someone else who beats us in a competition?"

Gurian, the Spokane writer whose books include *The Wonder of Boys* and *The Wonder of Girls*, agrees that some UU churches "threw out the good with the bad" when they shifted the focus of education in the 1960s and 1970s.

The father of two girls, Gurian says he supports the greater focus on female heroes and accomplishments, and the teaching of feminist spirituality in church school. But he believes that in their zeal to eradicate patriarchal thinking, some UU educators lost sight of boys' need to learn what Gurian calls "heroic spirituality," which focuses on protecting others, accepting responsibility, and fighting for what's right in the larger world.

"One of the reasons churches exist is to teach males what is good and ethical," Gurian said in an interview. "Males want to be socialized. Because boys have more testosterone, because they're more impulsive than girls, they want to know: What contains me? What do I do with my power? UU religious education is very haphazard now because we're afraid to step on any toes."

As these arguments indicate, Gurian bases much of his analysis on what he sees as the differences in male and female biology. He acknowledges that biology has been misused in the past to maintain sexist cultural systems: Because women bear children, many chauvinists have argued, women should stay home with those kids.

Gurian disavows this perspective, but says it's wrong to act as if boys and girls are the same biologically. In fact, he contends, good research shows that boys and girls tend to learn at different rates, and have different educational strengths and weaknesses.

Females, for example, tend to have stronger connective pathways than males between the various lobes of their brains, which Gurian says translates into better language and fine-motor skills among girls. Meanwhile, the higher testosterone level of boys tends to make them more assertive and self-reliant. Gurian says if more UU educators accepted these tendencies, they might re-shape their classes in ways that work better for both genders.

While Gurian has no qualms about putting the conversation in gender terms, other UU educators are more circumspect. Kate Beasley, director of religious education at the Eno River UU Fellowship in Durham, N.C., says: "I prefer to stay away from generalities because it puts certain expectations on our kids. We have done this to our girls for generations. We want to pigeon-hole kids. The danger is we don't see children as individuals."

Beasley has three children of her own, including two sons. She said her sons were quite different as they grew up; one was very active while the other was more quiet and cerebral. "In teaching, it's important to teach to the *temperament* of the individual child," she said, not the *gender*. She's also not convinced that biology plays as big a role as socialization does in shaping boys and girls. "I would challenge the idea that boys are inherently more active."

If there is ongoing disagreement over the inherent differences in boys and girls, there is considerably less discord on another gender-related point: Men are needed in the leadership and teaching ranks of UU religious education programs.

Kate Erslev, religious education director at the UU Fellowship of Boulder (Colo.), said that when she started as a UU religious education director 17 years ago in nearby Fort Collins, virtually all the teaching positions were held by women. She became convinced that this under-representation of male teachers contributed to a high male dropout rate. "It's a closed system when you have all women," she said. "We needed men who could help create a masculine zone."

Erslev said she began recruiting men vigorously, and within about three years, reached her goal of equal numbers of women and men in the teaching ranks. There were snags along the way, however. She remembers receiving a call from a male corporate executive, who was having second thoughts after agreeing to teach 5-year-olds. The man told Erslev: "I can do a presentation in front of 25 executives, no problem. But I can't sleep at night at the thought of teaching seven or eight kindergartners."

Erslev said she agreed to attend the executive's kindergarten class until he got comfortable. "Within two weeks," she said, "he was down on his knees, wrestling and growling with the kids. He ended up teaching for four years."

Erslev said the value of male teachers was apparent for both boys and girls. Boys benefitted from having a same-sex adult in the class, someone who could understand

their particular interests and fears. Both genders, meanwhile, benefitted from having the diversity of style and approach that men brought to a predominantly female avocation.

The struggle to involve men in religious education extends to the top levels of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Patricia Hoertdoerfer, who directs the children, family and intergenerational programs for the UUA's department of religious education, acknowledged in an interview that most of the curricula available from her office "speak more to the strengths we tend to find in girls." Why is this the case? "A lot of our curricula are written by women," Hoertdoerfer says. "A lot of the curricula staff are women."

Hoertdoerfer said she knew of no UU curricula designed for boys or men; there are several specifically for girls and women. "I've tried to elicit or solicit (male-oriented) material," she said, "but we don't receive it."

Some churches have taken to developing such material on their own. During the 2000-2001 church year, all of the boys in the 4th/5th grade class at First UU Church in Houston, stopped coming to class, said Cynthia Mellor-Crummey, one of the teachers. At first, Mellor-Crummey said, she "took it very personally." Eventually, however, she called together the children and their parents and asked how she could serve them better.

Mellor-Crummey recalls: "The kids were very vocal about not wanting to be told what to do anymore. They wanted to write plays, and put them on for the younger kids – to do creative things, basically." The church's educators responded by creating a monthly social event that has included watching movies and going bowling. "The boys have come out of the woodwork for this," Mellor-Crummey reports. Not incidentally, girls have shown up as well.

Jaco ten Hove, minister at Paint Branch UU Church in Maryland, is president of the UU Men's Network, a continental group that works to improve programming for boys and men in UU congregations. He says UUMeN would like to work with the UUA to design more "boy-friendly" curricula, and to train UU religious educators how to meet the specific needs of boys.

He agreed that an important step in making religious education more enticing to boys is to bring more men into the teaching ranks. He added, however, that congregations also must expand their vision of religious education, moving it outside the classroom walls. Ten Hove, a UU since the age of six, said the most important religious education experiences in his childhood involved picnics, holiday parties, and rummage sales.

He recalled one incident: "When I was about 12, my father and another guy were running the tool table at the rummage sale. And at one point, they decided to put me in charge. It wasn't a big deal to them. I just had to be there to watch the table and take money. But I remember sitting up proud, just knowing that these adults would trust me to run the tool table."

This is an example of religious education at it most compelling, ten Hove says, and it offers inspiration for expanding the vision of church schools in all directions. "We're a

linguistic, mathematically oriented culture right now, and that's what gets rewarded," ten Hove said. "We have to remember that there are many different kinds of intelligences. Great athletes are geniuses, in a way – they have kinesthetic intelligence. There's also interpersonal intelligence, intrapersonal intelligence, musical intelligence. Yes, we need grounding in curriculum, but there's a lot more to religious education than what happens in a classroom."

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