

All About Me

Jamaica Plain, October 17, 2004, Emily Lichtenstein

Good morning. As you probably know, I am not a trained minister, so I feel a little bit like an imposter even being up here and delivering what is called in your order of service, a sermon. I prefer to think of this as a little introduction, an expression of my gratitude for being here, and for being welcomed into your community.

At the school where I used to be principal (and I will say more about that in a minute) the kindergarteners did a social studies unit called "All About Me." It was always a very successful unit, because it was everyone's favorite topic. Well, it's a pretty easy topic for me too, so that's what you're going to hear about.

My position at First Church is Director of Religious Education. There are three key words in that title - Education, Religious, and Director - and I'm going to talk about each of them in turn, in relation to my background, and my work at First Church. First, and easiest, is "Education." I consider myself to be a lifelong educator. Starting in fourth grade, when I fell in love with my teacher and decided that that teaching fourth grade was exactly what I was going to do with my life. I grew up, went to college and graduate school in education, and began teaching elementary school in New York City. There I taught fourth grade, but also first and fifth, for several years. However, I found myself becoming increasingly frustrated with what the dysfunctional NYC public school system. Fed up with a situation which I found to be increasingly untenable, and burning with youthful idealism, I decided to go to law school in order to change the system by becoming an educational policy maker. I went off to California, got my law degree, and then returned to settle in Boston. And I did try to make an impact on the world of educational policy, first by working for the Massachusetts Office for Children, and then at the US Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights. But the world of educational policy making turned out to be bigger and more intractable than I had realized from the vantage point of my classroom. As the years went on, I became dissatisfied with working

at such a remove from the front lines. So often, my efforts seemed to go nowhere, lost in the layers of bureaucracy both within the government enforcement agencies and the school districts that I dealt with. I really missed being on the front lines after all. In a school, the arena might be smaller, but the impact you can have on the lives of individual children is definitely greater. So I went back to school again (for those of you who are counting, this would be my third round of post-graduate training!), this time to get trained as a school administrator. I emerged a year later as a certified elementary school principal, and took a job at the Conservatory Lab Charter School, a small public elementary school, now located in Brighton.

My five years at CLCS were both the most challenging and rewarding of my professional life. I learned a tremendous amount - about education, about administration and management, and about politics, but also about human nature and about myself - what is hard for me, what comes more easily, what I find to be an enjoyable challenge and what is just kind of a pain in the neck.

I loved my job, but I also did not quite have the life I wanted to have. My daughters, who are now 12 and almost 10, were growing up alarmingly fast, and I felt like I was missing it. I also had very little time for the other parts of life that are important to me - my community and my church, exercise, my friends and relations outside of my immediate family. Meanwhile, two events occurred last winter which forced me to take stock of my situation. First, my husband, John, who had been running his own consulting business out of our home, decided that it was time to return to full time employment at an investment consulting firm. At almost exactly the same time, my mother suddenly became very ill. On Christmas, she was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. In early January she moved in with us, leaving her home in NYC behind. She died in mid-February. This confluence of events forced me to scale back my work life immediately, and eventually led to my resignation from the position of principal. Of course there is more to tell, but I'm going to leave that strand there for now, and turn to the word in my title - "religious" - with the hope that when I bring this story to a close the strands will all be tied together.

I was raised in a non-religious Jewish home. Some of you may be familiar with the concept. My father's father (my grandfather) was a rabbi. When he died young, his wife - my grandmother - became the leader of his congregation, in effect becoming a rabbi at a time when women could not be ordained. The story of my grandparents is very interesting, but definitely needs to be saved for another day. My parents were avowed atheists, who at the same time were also strongly committed to instilling in their children a deep sense of Jewish identity. We rarely went to services, and I was not Bat Mitzvah'ed, but they made sure I understood Jewish history, ethics and values, food and, of course, the Jewish sense of humor.

To be honest, I didn't think about religion much at all until I met my husband, John. John was raised a Catholic, but left the church as soon as had a choice in the matter. He discovered Unitarian Universalism as a young adult. When I met him, he was an active member of First Parish Cambridge. I know next to nothing about UU, but, in the spirit of furthering a new romance, I was willing to check it out. I liked what I found. I was impressed with the thoughtfulness of the people that I met. I liked the balance of intellectual rigor and spiritual fulfillment. It seemed like it might work for me. I also have to admit that at first I was put off by what seemed to me to be the trappings of a Christian church - the cross, the frequent references to Jesus, even the fact that it was called "a church." As I told John at the time, I could never call myself a Christian, and it was really hard for me to understand how you could go to a church and not be a Christian. Still, I stuck with it, and over the course of the next ten years, I thought a lot, read a lot, talked a lot, listened a lot, and met a whole lot of Unitarians Universalists in the various churches we attended in search of a spiritual home for our family.

So now I am going to condense what I learned over those ten years into a sentence or two. What I learned is that Unitarianism is a religion that respects my core values. It is a religion that embraces people from diverse backgrounds, and allows them to discover their common core of essential beliefs - a belief in the inherent worth and dignity of all people, a belief in justice and compassion, a respect for the interdependent web of life. Is this sounding familiar? I will save for another day the details of the reconciliation of my

Jewish heritage with my Unitarianism, because that might make another good sermon. For now, let me just say that when asked about my religious beliefs, I am proud to call myself a Jewish Unitarian.

Now, finally, let me close with a few thoughts on the word "director" that will hopefully, string these stories together. As the director of your religious education program, I see myself as one part administrator, one part cheerleader, and one part visionary. The administrator part is pretty straightforward; running a church school isn't so very different from running a school. I will do my best to provide you with the curriculum, materials and supplies that you need, I will try to keep the paperwork simple and organized, I will try to channel information and keep everyone in the loop. As head cheerleader, I will be encouraging you to bring your children, to get involved yourself as a teacher, RE Committee member, or simply as a person committed to having First Church's RE program thrive, and I will do the outreach necessary to grow this program into the size it ought to be. Visionary is, of course, the best challenge of all. I have lots of ideas about this program, and how I would like it to grow, but here I'm really going to need your help to shape a collective vision. For now, I'll give you some generalities and a few specifics that I've been thinking about, just to get you in the mood to think about this with me. The readings that I chose to share with you today reflect a lot about my educational philosophy. I don't have time to talk with you know about the heroes that I quoted, but perhaps another sermon! I dream of a religious education program that engages people of all ages, from infants to adults, in lifespan faith development. I see children engaged in critical thinking and creative projects, using all of their powers - intellectual, emotional, physical - to develop into caring, creative, thinking human beings. I see the adults that make up this congregation traveling that road beside them, engaged in their own spiritual journey by helping them to grow. In terms of specifics, I would like to develop a curriculum map that lays out that path, I would like to see classes that include an age span of no more than two grade levels so that the lessons remain developmentally appropriate, I would like to see a coming of age program for our 13 year olds, I would like to more integration of social justice activities into the program ... the list goes on. Isn't this fun? I hope that this is inspiring you to want to think along with me because I'm going to close

with a plug for you to get involved, by attending the teacher training workshop that is happening tonight at 5:00. I encourage you all to think about our RE program, and to consider teaching in it, whether or not you have children, and whether or not you've ever had teaching experience. Getting involved with the RE program is a great way to connect with the life force of this church, and a great way to build your own spirituality. As someone (I don't know who) said, "there is no better way to learn something than to teach it." Please join us tonight, or when you are able, and help us begin to shape the vision.