

From The Heart
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When Preston asked me to do a From the Heart on Parenting, my reaction was to ask Dave to plan a family trip for this weekend! But after reflecting on it, I thought, of course Preston would ask the woman with the 4MKYS license plate! And, maybe, I could offer this congregation something...

As a teacher, I have always loved the honesty of children. You can always count on a child to tell you that your hair looked better the other way, and no child would ever let you walk around with chalk on your face all day! Kids' feelings are right on the surface, and if you make them mad they tell you. There are no mind games with a child. Their minds are fresh and flexible. Seeing the world through their enthusiastic eyes keeps me young.

Being a mother of four has been the most rewarding yet humbling experience of my life. Each child is unique, in how they perceive their world, their learning style, and what their strengths and weaknesses are. So, I never have had a sense of getting the mothering thing down pat. My children fascinate me, amuse me, delight me, fulfill me, and, yes, occasionally, horrify me!

I never intended to give up teaching to be a mother, but I did. I remember our first son reaching out of his basinet for me, with that smile that seemed to start in his toes and wiggle out through his outstretched fingertips. I could not believe the intensity of my own love— and unabashed pride. No one had told me that having a baby was like falling in love all over again.

Dave and I have tried to be thoughtful and deliberate about parenting. We have tried to model good behavior and when we have faltered, we have tried to be honest with our children about it.

We were conflicted about religion, so we generally avoided it. We knew we wanted our children to love life passionately, to be unafraid of asking questions, to be comfortable with their sexuality, to know the beauty and diversity of many cultures. That just didn't jibe with the dogmatism we had encountered in growing up Episcopalian.

As the kids got bigger, we visited what felt like just about every church in town. At times I felt a connectedness with the people, but never with the church itself.

I knew in my heart that if there was a God, that God loved what was good in all religions: Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and even Paganism, not just Christianity. I knew that God would be proud of Jeanine, my lesbian college roommate, who has since dedicated her life to pulling people out of burning buildings; delighted with an atheist friend who cares for handicapped elderly people... I knew that God would love love, no matter what form it took.

At the same time, the mother in me wanted someone besides Dave and I encouraging our kids to love others, to love diversity. I had trouble finding that in the churches we visited. The teen years were coming and I remembered my own rebelliousness. With no close family within 200 miles, the kids' spiritual needs weighed heavily on me.

And, then Duncan, our second son, started Catholic School. His questions rocked my being, starting with "So, what's with all of these saints?" Then, "Mom, do you believe in God?" "Do you believe in Heaven?" "What about hell?" and, eventually, "So and so says that our family is all going to hell, is that right?" His questions made me squirm with discomfort, even though I thought I was a pretty accessible mother. During a WUU orientation class, Jennifer and I laughed at what I wanted to tell Duncan, which was, "Couldn't you just ask me about an easier subject, like sex?"

It was answering Duncan's questions that renewed our search for a spiritual home, and we finally walked into this church. Dave and I would listen with amazement to the sermons and then go home and talk into the wee hours of the night. Here, we discovered a spiritual oasis, a home. We saw a church in which children and adults are encouraged to think for themselves, where love and tolerance are expected, and souls are nurtured.

We belong here. Now we have a structure for my family to explore religion. Guiding principles take the place of dogma, and a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning" takes the place of predetermination. It is a place where people talk openly and discuss issues.

So often children are told what to do, what to believe, what knowledge to acquire, what test scores to achieve, and what times they must beat in whatever race they run. Amidst this pressure to conform and cross some arbitrary finish line first, my children feel safe here at WUU. They are encouraged to come to their own opinions. Every voice is heard, and unlike their SOL tests at school, every answer is respected. They are seen, heard, and valued for who they are now, not who they might become some day. Here, with the love and warmth of this congregation, my children are developing their own sense of self.

As a family, we now discuss our own religious beliefs as freely as we have always discussed social and political issues. How funny that I have my second born son to thank for this! I don't know if we ever would have gone back to try yet another church if it wasn't for his persistent questions, his perfectly childish mind.

The bible says, "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, thought like a child, and reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up my childish ways." This quote has always saddened me. I really believe we'd all be better people if we held onto and even nourished our childish ways. As a parent, I ask of this congregation only that we see our children as unique individuals; listen to them without judgment; and love their perfectly childish ways.