

Parenting under Siege.

Sermon for March 19, 2006 By the Reverend Lone Jensen

Last week I asked you several questions: What kind of world are we creating? What kind of world do you want it to become? And what messages do you want our children to hear?

Think about it for a moment. Really imagine it. In my mind's eye I see a world filled with joy, a place of peace and justice where every single person is valued and respected. I rest in this world of hope, free of pollutants, particles, traffic jams and a real human friendly voice on the line every time you call customer service, Social Security or the IRS. No child goes hungry here and we have enough medical preventive care to keep most of us healthy. There are lots of books and learning and endless creative pursuits in this world of beauty where every child grows to its full potential. From cradle to grave in this imagined place we are free to walk the winding paths of our lives in beauty. Most amazingly people get along with each other even when they disagree, love is the only doctrine and radical hospitality and acceptance are living realities.

You have guessed it, I'm dreaming of a UU heaven! At least as I imagine it. Yours will be different no doubt and that is the beauty of it. Now with this in mind, this ideal of what could be, of

how it in my opinion the real world ought to be, let us turn to today's topic. We have a UU village here at Valley UU Church, we are all a very big extended family and our children's welfare, the messages and values they take in and bring to their lives, are our collective responsibility. Whether we have young children ourselves or not, whether we are families of one or of twenty, our hope for a better world and our hope for the future lies in these young lives and tiny flower faces.

Religion is at heart a counter culture activity. Our Unitarian Universalist faith is one of proud heresy, questioning the status quo and always searching to make this a better world. Parenting has become increasingly a counter culture activity as well. The definition of families for us UU's is affirming and embracing rather than excluding and narrow. I love that about us. There are many differences in how families raise their children. The reality TV show, Changing Places, where mothers exchange families for one week recently featured a UU woman and a conservative Christian woman. The show clearly showed the difference and it brought us a few new members. One of our young boys, the adopted son of a same sex couple, suggested that the show feature his family and another gay family who were Christian fundamentalists. I was touched by the fact that he believes this could really happen and that there would be a good supply of

Christian fundamentalist same sex couples to choose from. The real world as it could be. A world where we would be judged by the quality of our character, and not by race or sexual preference or any of the other so-called moral, but in fact immoral, religious right's litmus tests.

There are real differences in styles, in faith, in economic status and in the amount of privilege and education we have, that determine how we parent. Those with more education and resources tend to be, according to an article in NYT, more democratic and the children are enrolled in many out of school activities. I think that fits many parents here. It is a matter of balance though. You want to challenge your children and give them opportunities but they also need down time to take it all in. The gift of boredom is given very rarely in our society. Kellie Walker told me one day, and I am telling you this with her permission, that between her three children, all different ages, one day she counted the stops and trips she made in the car taking them places and it came to 19. Parents need downtime too.

But across the board all kinds of parenting in this country is under siege. What messages are our children really getting from the culture at large? Parenting has become a counter culture activity.

Recently *Sojourner Magazine* devoted a whole issue to Parenting. This is from an article called: *Taking back our children!*

"I never thought it would be this hard," Polly said one night, standing by the kitchen counter on the verge of tears. "I thought when I had children; I would have this great thing in common with everyone else. When my first child was born, I went out and bought a Disney video, because I thought that's what you do. Now I feel like I spend my whole life protecting my children from the culture. It shouldn't be this hard."

Probably no one in history has ever been fully prepared for how hard it is to raise children. But a consensus is growing among parents and students of family life that, in the past two decades, child rearing in the United States has become a more difficult and undervalued vocation.

"It shouldn't be this hard." That cry can be heard from parents outraged by an invasive, hyper-sexualized popular culture and from those struggling to find time for their children when both parents work full-time jobs.

In *The War against Parents*, Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornell West observe a general trend in which "non-market work" is being *marginalized by the profit-driven work of the market.*

"Parenting," they point out, "is the ultimate non-market activity."

In other words parenting has been devalued and downsized.

I believe all these voices are right, absolutely right, and my sermon is a both a call to the barricades and a call for deeper reflection for all of us. It is not just children that are being brainwashed.

So let us begin with the messages. Imagine you are seven years old and watch one hour of commercial television a day, less than many children watch in this country. In that one hour how many commercials will you see? Shows are often tied to toys, candies and breakfast cereals and cleverly designed to create needs where no need was before. I know my grand daughter would never have thought about a Bratz doll for example, a kind of ultimate mall princess with a gazillion accessories and day glow troll hair. Without this exposure she would have been happy enough with her Lego blocks and ordinary quite human looking dolls. *Several years ago, the Wall Street Journal reported that the rise of Britney Spears was fueled by adult marketers who, pretending to be 12-year old girls, would chat online about how cool Britney was. Sociologist Juliet Schor found one marketing research firm "that gets girls to organize slumber parties for research purposes. Girls may be given a new TV show to watch, or a food to try, and their responses are collected. Her studies also named children's materialism as a factor in depression, low self-esteem, and poor relationships with parents.*

I sure hope hearing of adult marketers pretending to be 12 year old girls covertly influencing and seducing real 12 year olds to love a product makes you angry. It should make all of us mad. Danny and Polly Duncan Collum (Sojourner) writes: *Unless parents find ways to get off the consumerist merry-go-round, they will never reclaim control of their family life and re-establish healthy connections with their children. To do so will require getting control of our own "needs" and limiting our children's exposure to commercial culture.*

This is not easy at all. But the life we save may well be our own and our children's. Try it if you are not already doing so. Have a media Sabbath! Turn off the tube one whole day a week and see what happens! Talk about what you believe, sing together, light a chalice together, create a ritual for your family, pause reflect, touch the holy, imagine what could be! Take a walk and read nature's handwriting. Quote Emerson as in "Beauty is God's handwriting." Be exceedingly silly together.

When I go to some of our minister's meetings I get to have a screen free retreat. No TV, no computer, no Plasma cell phone screen, for mine doesn't have coverage in that location, no radio either, nothing but the human voice and maybe the piano. Such times restore my sanity and feed my soul. The gift of time when

we do not have to process all those messages beamed at us from well everywhere.

There are spiritual choices we can make on our own. But it is harder than it needs to be. Our society gives lip service to families but in fact does less than most other wealthy nations to support them in meaningful, ways. Consider that 61 percent of the mothers of children under age 3 in the US are in the paid workforce. *In Sweden and most of Europe parents get 15 months of paid parental leave that can be shared between mothers and fathers. They also have a legal right to work six hours per day until their children are 8 years old. Meyers and Gornick (Sojourner)* report that it would cost only 1 percent of the U.S. gross domestic product to implement similar policies for American parents. The annual expense of \$115 billion would be less half of what we have spent so far on the Iraq war.

Make some time for our children to grow up well and do not spend the money on wars, well that seems so sensible to me, conservative even, in the true meaning of that word. Imagine what beneficial impact that would have.

American families cannot be economically stable either until we break the connection between employment and health-care access. Another battle cry for the barricades: Give us a chance if we get ill! Basic health care is for everyone. But here is a hard

truth. An agenda that flies in the face of both free-market economics and liberal cultural individualism has no political home in America today. No political party really speaks for the economic interests of families. One party takes on some of the economic issues and the other tries to monopolize the cultural debate. How about a children's and parents welfare party? Call it the future party!

I know it is hard. I salute the parents of today who work so many hours and still manage to give their children love and faith in life. And transmit carefully our values from one generation to the next. We need more change agents in this world. This is my call to arms. Let us counter the prevailing culture and do it with our own messages of real good news you can actually use. Take that hot button word: salvation. It is a given in our faith and that is good for you sure can't buy it on E-bay or in any mall. We must become warriors of the soul to have a chance against an overwhelming materialism and it is a good fight. But we are also deeply embedded in our culture. It is a matter of balance.

I am not suggesting you become a fanatic here. Like money is only a tool, buying is only a transaction. Shopping can be fun, enjoyable and sort of like a scavenger hunt. The problem is that we have made of this desire for things a near religion and that the promises are shiny surface deep only. Inside is only emptiness.

As in the Britney Spears story the mass culture offers us manufactured desire, an illusion of acceptance, beauty and security. True acceptance happens in our souls and with one another. True beauty is God's handwriting out there in the desert, in a face weathered by time and in the unfolding flower of a new life. No perfection is promised here. But it is real.

We are family. This is our village. These are our children but so are all children. Our blue boat home holds us all. I ask you again. What kind of world are we creating? What kind of world do you want it to become? And what messages do you want our children to hear?

