

# Introduction To Liberal Religious Education

**Fall '06 Semester**

**SKOL 4010 / 3 units / Limit: 15**

This online seminar course provides a broad introduction to the theory and practice of liberal religious education, with an emphasis on Unitarian Universalist congregations. Topics include philosophy of Unitarian Universalist religious education, teaching and learning, developmental theories, the congregation as an educating community, social justice visions for religious education, current approaches and innovations in religious education for all ages, collegial relationships and professional standards for religious educators, and curriculum resources. The course draws from another by the same name, developed by Betty Jo Middleton, Roberta M. Nelson, Eugene B. Navias, and Judith Mannheim, with support from a St. Lawrence Foundation grant.

**Rev. Sheri Prud'homme** is a 1999 graduate of Starr King School for the Ministry. She has served interim ministries of religious education at the UU churches in Oakland and Davis, California, and also as the Pacific Central District Lifespan Religious Education Consultant. Supported by a grant from the Fund for Unitarian Universalism, she co-created Chalice Camp, a summer day camp curriculum now being used across the country to foster UU identity and understanding of UU history and theology in elementary aged children. She has also taught for four years on the associate faculty at Starr King.

## SYLLABUS

### Required Reading

Reader for Introduction to Liberal Religious Education. A Graduate Level Course for Unitarian Universalists. Online. [www.uua.org](http://www.uua.org).

Essex Conversations Coordinating Committee. *Essex Conversations*. Boston: Skinner House 2001.

Foster, Charles R. *Educating Congregations*. Nashville: Abingdon Press 1994.

Groome, Thomas H. *Christian Religious Education*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 1995,1999.

Harris, Maria. *Fashion Me a People*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press 1989.

Hurd, Tracy. *Nurturing Children and Youth: A Developmental Guidebook*. Boston: Skinner House 2006.

*Journey Toward Wholeness Sunday Handbook*. Most recent edition. Online. [www.uua.org](http://www.uua.org).

Journey Toward Wholeness Transformation Committee. *Continuing the Journey, Report and Recommendations to the 2001 General Assembly*. Online. [www.uua.org](http://www.uua.org).

### Recommended Reading

Aron, Isa. *Becoming a Congregation of Learners*. Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing 2000.

Palmer, Parker. *The Courage to Teach*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass 1997.

White, James W. *Intergenerational Religious Education*. Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press 1988.

## **Course Outline**

### **Week One: Building the Community**

All of us are teachers and learners. In his book *The Courage to Teach*, Parker Palmer writes “The courage to teach is the courage to keep one’s heart open to those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able so that teacher and learner and subject can be woven into a fabric of community that learning and teaching require.” While we are a learning community spread across the country, we will take some time this first week to introduce ourselves to one another and to begin collecting some of our experience and understanding of our subject. This is an online seminar class – engagement and participation are critical for all of us. You will be doing some of the teaching through reading, reports and small groups. Your knowledge and experience are critical to class success.

### **Week Two: Creating a Philosophy of Unitarian Universalist Religious Education—Part I**

“In a word, the great object of all [Sunday] schools is to awaken intellectual and...moral life in the child. Life is the great thing to be sought in a human being. Hitherto, most religions and governments have been very much contrivances for extinguishing life in the human soul. Thanks be to God we live to see the...dawning of a better day.” --William Ellery Channing, “The Sunday-School,” 1837. In this session we will look at three snapshots of philosophies of religious education from our history. We will consider current philosophies of Unitarian Universalist religious education and the proposals for the future by the authors of *Essex Conversations*. We will begin to articulate a philosophy of Unitarian Universalist religious education that will serve as a guide in our ministries.

### **Week Three: The Congregation as an Educating Community – Part I**

“The purpose of liberal religious education is to create a learning community committed to the discovery of useable truth.” --Richard Gilbert. This session will introduce the concept of entire congregations as educating communities and provide an opportunity for reflection on leading thinkers in this area. We will also explore ways in which religious leaders might help congregations move further in embracing and putting into place these ideas.

### **Week Four: The Congregation as an Educating Community—Part II**

“Education empowers us to move from conversation to faithful living.” --Seymour and Miller. This session continues the work of the last one, asking how our congregations prepare people for faithful living.

### **Week Five: Learning and Teaching in Liberal Religious Education—Part I**

“The method is the message” – Angus MacLean. In this session we will begin to look at how we do religious education. We will learn about shared praxis and become familiar with several Unitarian Universalist perspectives on teaching.

### **Week Six: Learning and Teaching in Liberal Religious Education—Part II**

“...a special concern of ours is the release of creativity, and the use of intuitive ideas and perceptions, in the areas of religious education. Yet so often in the liberal church we shy away

from the intuitive act of faith, the use of imaginal modalities, and the creation of symbolic equivalents for experience.”—Dorothy Tilden Spoerl in *The Creative Process and Religious Education*. Boston. Unitarian Universalist Association 1964. Multiple intelligences, creative expression in religious education, and effective teaching are the topics for this session. Teaching is both an art and a practice, and those learning to teach well engage in the practice for a lifetime. This session is merely a glimpse into these arenas.

### **Week Seven: Reports on Religious Educators**

Religious education is a rich field in large part because it requires the application of theory in practice. There is much to learn from those who have done the work or are currently doing the work. This session will allow us to collectively come to know the work of a variety of religious educators both past and present, reflecting on the theology and philosophy that guides their work and how it unfolds in practice.

### **Week Eight: Educating to Counter Oppression and Create Just Community—Visions for Religious Education**

At its best *all* Unitarian Universalist religious education educates to counter oppression and create just community. While not wanting to isolate this topic such that we might exclude it from our view while considering all the other aspects of religious education, questions of power and privilege as well institutional responses to injustice deserve our focused attention as religious educators. In this session we consider the justice visions of Starr King School, the UUA, and two congregations, reflecting on the implications for our own religious leadership.

### **Week Nine: Developmental Theories for Religious Education**

An understanding of human developmental theories is helpful in creating meaningful and engaging religious education across the lifespan. This session introduces, or perhaps reviews, some of the basics of developmental theories.

### **Week Ten: Content and Curriculum Resources**

In providing leadership for a congregation’s religious education, questions of content and curriculum are key. What do we want our children and youth to have experienced and learned by the time they graduate high school? What do we want our adults to have experienced and learned by the time they have been in the congregation 5 years, 10 years, 25 years, 50 years? This session begins to explore these questions.

### **Week Eleven: Curriculum Resources**

This session explores ideas for curriculum that are different than how curriculum is used in most UU churches. In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century to keep our religion education relevant and responsive to our cultural context, new forms and new understandings of curriculum are necessary. At this point in the semester, we will be able to bring together ideas from Foster, Harris, writers in the *Essex Conversations* and the *Reader*, developmental theory and teaching methods with our own experience and passion as UU religious educators to begin to create a refreshed vision of what is possible in religious education.

### **Week Twelve: Multigenerational Worship**

**Week Thirteen: Collegial Relationships and Professional Standards for Religious Educators**

**Week Fourteen: Creating a Philosophy of Unitarian Universalist Religious Education—  
Part II**