

“What Is the Name of This Child?”  
Rev. Dave Hunter  
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fayetteville  
October 5, 2008

This morning, I want to spend a few minutes with you talking about why we have child dedication ceremonies, and what they might mean to us.

Many of you were with us in June, when we dedicated quite a few infants and toddlers and young children. In fact, we dedicated so many kids that we didn't have time for a sermon.

Now we are preparing for another child dedication ceremony, two weeks from today, so I thought that this would be the right time to provide some historical and theological context for our practice.

What I want to discuss are three reasons why we Unitarian Universalists periodically have these dedication or naming rituals in our churches and fellowships. But before I get into the three reasons, let me touch on three preliminary issues.

First, I should make it clear that when I mention parents, I mean that term to be taken inclusively. However your family is configured, you are welcome here. We are enriched by diversity – single parents, step parents, foster parents, adoptive parents, families with two mommies or two daddies, grandparents with parental roles – all are welcome here.

Second, a question that may be on your mind, at least for some of you, is whether our Unitarian Universalist ceremony is equivalent to Christian baptism. Some of you may hope that it is; some of you perhaps fear that it is. Here's the short answer: The two ceremonies are not the same. Still, our Unitarian Universalist ceremony and Christian baptism do share some similar functions.

The evolution of the theory and practice of baptism in Universalism, in Unitarianism, and – since the 1961 consolidation – in Unitarian Universalism would make a fascinating book. At least, I would find it fascinating. We don't have time for that this morning. I'll come back to the question of baptism and how what we do relates to it, time permitting, before I finish.

Third, this morning we're mostly using the term “child dedication ceremony,” though I've also used the term “naming ceremony.” Let's not take the term *dedication* too literally. I am uncomfortable with the idea of our dedicating another person to something. We can dedicate *ourselves* to lives of virtue, or sacrifice, or celibacy, or what have you. We presumably dedicate *ourselves* to bringing up our children to be morally responsible citizens. But do we have the right to dedicate our children to something that they have not chosen for themselves? We can prepare our children for the future, but we can't determine how they will respond to it, when they are our age.

For more on the question of dedicating a child, see the first chapter of the First Book of Samuel, from the Hebrew Bible.

Now, on to my three reasons for our having dedication or naming ceremonies.

First, through our ceremony, we recognize the importance of the individual, through the name we give him or her, and through the care with which we give that name.

Names are powerful; we take them seriously. And so, when a new child enters our lives, we give careful thought to the name that he or she will carry the rest of their life, and it is fitting that we acknowledge that name in a public ceremony.

Names are powerful. One of the many African American leaders I had the privilege to meet during my years enforcing the Voting Rights Act in the southern states was a man, a preacher, named General Avery. His parents had named him “General” to confound the white folks, who would address black men by their first names, as a way to remind them of their second class status. Would they be willing to call a black man “General”?

The importance of names goes straight back to the Bible.

Names were important to the people whose stories are told in the Bible. We should take their experience and their wisdom seriously. Thus right at the start, as recorded in the Book of Genesis, God gives the first human, Adam, the earth creature, the responsibility for naming “every animal of the field and every bird of the air.” (Genesis 2:19)

Later in the Book of Genesis, Jacob, the son of Isaac, the grandson of Abraham – Jacob wrestles all night with a stranger. At daybreak, each asks the other his name. (Genesis 32:27, 29) And the stranger gives Jacob a new name: “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel.” The Hebrew word for God is *El*. *Israel* means one who struggles with God. (Genesis 32:28)

When Moses receives his assignment from God, his assignment to liberate his people from captivity in Egypt, Moses asks the One who has been speaking to him from the burning bush, “what is your name? Who shall I tell them has sent me?” (Exodus 3:13)

According to the Gospel of Luke, in the New Testament, the parents of the new born Jesus take him to the Temple in Jerusalem, for naming and dedication, following Jewish law and custom. (Luke 2:21-32)

Indeed, the very *name* of God, in the Bible, is itself sacred. Consider the opening verse of Psalm 8, to pick one of many examples from the Psalms: “O LORD, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”

In our own ceremony, we ask the parents what name they have chosen for their child. Then, on behalf of the congregation, we recognize the child by that name and bless the child. We present a flower to the child as a symbol of the individuality we affirm.

The importance of names is a reflection, an indicator, of the importance of every single human being. As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm the worth and dignity of every person. Our view of humanity is our bedrock, more important, I would argue, than our view of God. From our view of humanity flow powerful implications about what kind of world we want to live in, what kind of world we want for all of God's children, whether or not they are part of our congregation, whether or not they are part of our nation.

And this leads us right into my second point, the importance of community.

Which comes first, we might ask, the individual or the community? In this nation, indeed, in this denomination, the answer has often been, the individual: the individual comes first. But I think that has it backwards: the community, I would suggest, has priority over the individual. Now, let me make it quite clear, that I am *not* advocating the kind of raw utilitarianism in which individuals can be sacrificed to increase the so-called total happiness of the community. The point is simply this: we are born dependent on others. And we remain dependent on others, throughout our lives. We need thus to live in a way that reflects the importance of community in our lives.

To illustrate my point, I want to describe two individuals. I'm quoting here from Daniel Goleman's important book, *Emotional Intelligence*. First, here is Cecil (p. 120).

There was no doubt that Cecil was bright; he was a college-trained expert in foreign languages, superb at translating. But there were crucial ways in which he was completely inept. Cecil seemed to lack the simplest social skills. He would muffle a casual conversation over coffee, and fumble when having to pass the time of day; in short, he seemed incapable of the most routine social exchange. . . . His nervousness during encounters led him to snicker and laugh at the most awkward moments, even though he failed to laugh when someone said something genuinely funny.

Next is the story of an old man and an interaction on a Tokyo commuter train (pp. 124-25).

[A] huge, bellicose, and very drunk and begrimed man, a man perhaps in his 40's, . . . began terrorizing the passengers: screaming curses, he took a swing at a woman holding a baby, sending her sprawling in[to] the laps of an elderly couple. . . . But just as the drunk was on the verge of making his [next] move, someone gave an earsplitting, oddly joyous shout: "Hey!" The shout had the cheery tone of someone who has suddenly come upon a fond friend. The drunk, surprised, spun around to see a tiny Japanese man, probably in his seventies, sitting there in a kimono. The old man beamed with delight at the drunk, and beckoned him over with a light wave of his hand and a lilting "C'mere." "What'cha been drinking?" the old man asked, his eyes beaming at the drunken man. "I been drinking sake, and it's none of your business," the drunk bellowed. "Oh, that's wonderful, absolutely wonderful," the old man replied in a warm tone. "You see, I love sake, too. Every night, my wife and I . . . , we warm up a little bottle of sake and take it

out into the garden, and we sit on an old wooden bench . . .” . . . The drunk’s face began to soften as he listened to the old man.

Soon, the drunk is telling the old man about his wife’s death; he is crying, with his head in the old man’s lap.

We are nothing without community. Cecil was clueless about how to function in community. A community of Cecils would collapse. But the old man knew how to create community; he knew how to keep a community from coming unglued.

We want our children, we want all God’s children, to grow up in community. We want them all, while growing up, to learn to be empathetic, altruistic members of the community.

We all live in a variety of communities, from family to world community. This congregation is only one of the communities of which we are a part. It is only one of the communities, but it is an important, a very important community. Here we learn from each other; we support each other; we love one another; we hold each other accountable; we forgive each other. We have continuity. We are reliable. We are open to new members. And if you have to leave this area, there will be another Unitarian Universalist congregation ready to receive you in your new home.

Thus in our dedication ceremonies, mothers and fathers, and sometimes grandparents, godparents, and brothers and sisters, dedicate themselves to the welfare and upbringing of the new child. But not only the families. We, as a religious community, we dedicate ourselves to the welfare and upbringing of the new child; we dedicate ourselves to the support of the families as they raise their children to adulthood. We are there for them, in good times and bad.

Moreover, in dedicating ourselves as a community to the nurturing of the children among us, we are dedicating ourselves not only to them and to their families, but we are also dedicating ourselves to the welfare and future of this faith community.

And this leads directly into the third reason for having child dedication rituals. The children to whose welfare and nurturing we dedicate ourselves are the next generation, the future, of this congregation, of this nation, of our world. We have dedication ceremonies because we believe in the future. We believe, we trust, we have faith that humanity has a future. We are optimistic.

What I do not mean, is that the future will automatically be bright, that Some One up there will set everything straight. No, what I mean is that we have a lot of hard work to do – work that requires courage and sacrifice, work that requires both thinking outside the box and engaging in old-fashioned politics.

Our world is on the edge of environmental catastrophe. Our world continues to suffer from injustice and oppression. In our world we still resort to war as a means of resolving

conflict. Our world is one in which our recognition of who counts as “we” is still too narrow. There is much work to be done.

As a symbol of our faith in life, our faith in the future of life, and our recognition of the continuity of life, from past, to present, to future, we use water in our dedication ceremony: water, the universal symbol of life.

Earlier I began a discussion of the relationship between our Unitarian Universalist ceremony and Christian baptism. Let me make a few comments now on baptism.

First, Christian baptism requires the use of the formula set out in the New Testament, that the baptism is done in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. (Matt. 28:19) Most Unitarian Universalists would not use this trinitarian formula.

Second, there is a tension in Christianity between two functions of baptism. One function is welcoming the one who is baptized into the community. Our dedication ceremonies clearly fulfill that function. The second function is recognizing the one who is baptized as a new Christian. It makes sense to welcome someone into the community as soon as practical after their arrival, which often means shortly after they are born. But an infant cannot choose to be a Christian, and many would argue that baptism should be postponed until the person can make an informed choice, an informed decision to commit themselves to being a Christian. This is a big issue, both historically and within Christianity today, but it is not a burning issue for us.

Third, one reason that many Christians want to make sure that their children and grandchildren are baptized, and that they are baptized as soon as possible, is concern, is fear, that if through some misfortune the child were to die in an unbaptized state, the child would be barred from heaven. One reason that water is used in baptism is that baptism is a symbolic washing – washing away one’s sin, washing away the original sin that affects all, even the new born infant.

Now, as Universalists our response would be that no one is excluded, that all are ultimately reconciled to God, that God’s love extends to all. As Unitarians, moreover, we reject the doctrine of original sin. The alleged disobedience of Eve and Adam may have led to *their* punishment, but it did not determine the status of their descendants. We, as Unitarian Universalists, are not anxious about the immortal souls of our new born infants.

But as a pastoral matter, we need to recognize that not all Christians are universalists, and some are worried that the unbaptized child – indeed, the unbaptized person of any age – will be excluded from that final banquet in the sky. All I can say is that I spent six years of my life at Wesley Theological Seminary, as Christian a seminary as you could ever hope to find. The uniform teaching I received at Wesley was that entry into God’s heavenly realm is *not* dependent on baptism.

Dedication ceremonies are an example of what are called rites of passage. Other examples of rites of passage that may come to mind for you are weddings and holy union ceremonies, memorial services and funerals, and new member recognition ceremonies. For the clergy, we have ordinations and installations. Beyond these, our Unitarian Universalist practice is uneven. We sometimes mark the onset of puberty and the transition from adolescence to young adulthood. Are there other milestones in our lives that we recognize ceremonially? Or are there other milestones that we *should* recognize ceremonially?

And now, in summary, let us remember that names are important, representing as they do infants, children, youth, and adults who are all important, each and every one of them. Let us remember, secondly, that community comes first. As isolated individuals, we are lost. Our salvation is in community. Finally, let us be both optimistic and realistic about the future. Let us make this world one that we can with pride bequeath to our children, and our children's children. Amen.