

# **ORAL HISTORY AS AN INTERGENERATIONAL RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PROGRAM**

developed by Vicki Jenkins

**Unitarian Universalist Women's Historical Society**

## **Why Include Oral History in Religious Education?**

Unitarian Universalist religious education curricula teach students about the fundamentals of Unitarian Universalism, the history of our denomination(s), UU symbolism, an appreciation of the church, and working for peace and social justice gives a greater understanding of important historical events. We want our students to feel grounded in the community that is the church, to appreciate the holy in everything, and to feel a sense of wonder at the mysteries of life. In the process, we hope to instill a critical curiosity, and improve reading, writing, and listening skills.

Oral history is an applicable and exciting method of learning in which students become active historians. In the strictest sense, oral history is the tape recording of pre-planned interviews, given by narrators recalling first hand memories from the past. Oral history projects have the greatest potential when the details are planned by the participants. Student questions and interests become the focus of the interviews. When applied to religious education, oral history project applications are limitless. Inherent to oral history research is contact with real people from the community, generally older people with whom many youth have little contact. These first hand accounts allow youth to see history as a continuum, taking shape around them. In addition to making history come alive for the student, such projects always enrich the lives of the narrators.

## **What This Curriculum Provides**

This curriculum consists of some necessary instructive information, followed by outlines for several possible applications. Biographical interviews of several people from the congregation, exploring religious identities, local history including the history of the church, or attitudes about an historical event, or social movement all make productive oral history projects that can work in tandem with existing curricula or be used independently. Oral history projects have the greatest potential when the students take an active role in the planning of the project. As such, this is a backbone to be filled in by each group according to their interests.

This curriculum is designed to serve either as a supplement to existing curricula, or as an independent resource for smaller churches served best by curricula that can be applied to a wide variety of age groups. Its ideal usage is as a whole church intergenerational project, perhaps during a special project month. Very young children can benefit from interaction with older people, perhaps invited into the classroom to share stories. Older students can plan and implement sophisticated oral history projects on many topics. Most oral history projects take a minimum of three weeks but could easily last six weeks.

## **What Is Oral History?**

History often comes in the form of pre-written accounts of past events. The bias and perspective of the writer are written into those historical accounts. In many cases, the student takes a passive role, merely accepting the information as reliable. Oral history is an exciting complement or supplement to traditional sources of information, in that it allows students to discover their own questions, and then to ask them of someone with firsthand knowledge of an event or time. When discrepancies between background research and personal accounts, or between two tellings of the same event are discovered, critical analysis of the situation can lead students to the discovery that all accounts of history are dependent upon perspective.

For many centuries, written history consisted only of the doings of a wealthy elite with the time and resources for recording their lives. Until recently, glimpses we received about the lives of the majority were from incidental accounts within elite narratives. In a time in which the telephone has replaced the letter the life stories and insights of those who normally would not commit their stories to written form are an invaluable source of historical information and perspective. Church and local archives, as well as the UU Women's Heritage Society, would be thrilled to receive copies or oral history tapes and any final product produced by the group.

## **Goals of This Curriculum**

1. To introduce teachers and students to oral history methodology.
2. To provide students with an innovative way to appreciate the contributions of people in their midst to church and local history.
3. To celebrate Unitarian Universalism as a religious identity, along with the many contributions of UU's to social action and change.
4. To help students appreciate history as a continuing active process, defined by subjective perspective.
5. To build bridges between generations.
6. To record the stories of elderly people and empower them by recognizing their contributions.
7. To add to church or local archives the stories of people in the community.

## **What You Will Need to Begin**

Recording Equipment:

Many families will already have adequate cassette recording equipment for the project. If insufficient tape players are volunteered by the students' families, a general announcement to the rest of the congregation should yield additional equipment. Some narrators might consent to being videotaped, as well. Here are a few guidelines to keep in mind, when choosing equipment.

1. Most tape recorders have built-in condenser microphones, which are generally fine. A separate microphone produces a higher quality recording.
2. It is important that the tape player be able to record voices adequately. Some built-in microphones are fine for recording music, but they may be poor for recording voices. Test the player by recording your voice from different distances and in varying tones of voice.
3. The recorder should be able to work on both AC current and DC batteries. AC current is preferable for consistent quality and reliability.

#### Cassette Tapes:

1. When selecting cassette tapes, mid-range, low noise, name brands are preferable.
2. Sixty-minute tapes (C60's) are generally better than the longer tapes, in that the tape is thicker and more durable.
3. Be certain that the tape you choose is contained in a cassette case that can be taken apart with 5 small screws.

#### Hints for Operating Equipment:

1. Encourage all students to practice using the tape player until they are comfortable with the buttons and flipping the tape.
2. Some students set the timer on their watches for 58 minutes to remind themselves that the tape is about to end.
3. Practice speaking into the microphone to determine how close both you and the narrator need to be.
4. Make a check list for equipment needed for the interview:
  - \*Tape player, AC adapter, and extension cord
  - \*Extra batteries, if AC power is unavailable
  - \*Tapes and an extra or two
  - \*Camera to take a picture of the narrator
  - \*Notepad, pencil, and a list of questions

#### **Preparation for the Interview**

1. The first step is selecting a topic area for the project. Your class/church school may have already been working with a curriculum that could be enhanced by oral history interviews. If this is going to be a project independent of existing curricula, the following applications provide possibilities for oral history projects relevant to UU religious education. Spend some time brainstorming with the students, first about topic areas, then possible narrators and questions. Oral history interviews can be done by groups of children, as well as one-on-one.
2. Once the topic area is chosen, it is time to choose the narrators. For biographical interview, choosing the narrators could be quite simple – older

people in the community who still have clear memories of times past. If your focus is on social justice and peace issues, the narrators need not be elderly, just involved over a long period of time. Elderly people would have interesting perspectives on church history, past ministers, and changing trends in Unitarian Universalism. Use human resources in the community to help choose the narrators – the minister, DRE, or active members. If your church has a historian or archivist, she/he may be a good candidate for a narrator, as well as be able to provide some leads.

3. Once you have made initial contact with a potential narrator, either through letter (a sample letter is included in the appendices) or by phone, it is important to explain your goals for the project. Older children may initiate this step. The narrators should be aware of the general topic area, and the approximate time commitment involved. You should tell them that the tape will be heard by others and that it may be deposited in the church or local archive. After the project, offer to provide a copy of the tape for the narrator's personal use. Legal release forms are necessary, but they are quite simple. A sample form is included in the Appendix.
4. If time permits it is preferable that the students have some initial contact with the narrator before the recorded interview. It will help both parties relax. This could be a time to look at photographs, old documents, or other information that may help the student prepare for the interview. Encourage the students to write down the narrator's basic biographical information, including the proper spelling of names and places.
5. It is important to prepare students for spending time with the narrator. Teachers should attempt to ferret out assumptions and preconceptions of elderly people and discuss them with the class. If there is a person in the church community who works with elderly people, they might be interested in coming to the class and answering questions.
6. Any good historian does thorough background research. Oral history is no exception. For some projects, existing curricula may serve as background research, while in others investigation may be the first step. Be creative in recommending resources for the students. If your focus is on local history, this is a great time to lead a field trip to the local historical society, city archives, and library.
7. Preparing the questions for the interview may seem like the most daunting task facing a young historian. With each application I have listed some suggestions, however, it is useful to use group brainstorming to see what the students come up with. During the interview, the student should concentrate on listening to the narrator.
8. Before conducting the real interview, give the students an opportunity to practice on each other, their parents or grandparents, and themselves. These interviews could be taped so the student could listen to which questions provoked a response and which ones didn't work. In any oral history project application, a good first step is to do "real" interviews of the students' parents. These histories of the student's families often become the official family

history. This exercise gives students confidence and practice listening and following up on questions. It also familiarizes them with the equipment.

## **The Interview**

If the project must be limited to the church during Sunday school, the following paragraph will be mostly irrelevant. Working at the church may put students at ease and be easier to facilitate, however you may want to consider asking if an interview, perhaps a follow-up, may be done at the narrator's home. It also may be hard, especially for older students, to limit their interaction time to one hour.

The student(s) and the narrator should pick an afternoon or evening for the event. Both parties should have no plans for later, as an interview may last longer than expected. The student should be able to give full attention to the narrator without worrying about the time. The interview should occur in a place that is comfortable and familiar to the narrator.

Position the tape player between you and the narrator. At the beginning of each interview, the tape should be identified with something like the following: "Today is May 8, 2004. Pat Hoerl doerfer interviewing Lilian Reiner, MMUUS." You may want to consider having the narrators sign the release forms at the beginning of the interview, so it is not forgotten.

## **Hints for Interviewers**

1. The first thing to remember is that this should be a monologue. The interviewer should not try to carry on a conversation as such, but to listen attentively. A few minutes of chitchat at the beginning is fine to break the ice, but allow the interview to take shape quickly.
2. The questions should be clear and brief. Do not ask more than one thing at once, or the interviewer may become confused. If after the first answer a follow up seems appropriate, wait until the narrator has non-verbally signaled that s/he is finished.
3. Silent nods, gestures, and smiles are less disruptive than a steady stream of "uh-huhs" or "oh," although such responses are fine occasionally to show the narrator that you are interested and listening.
4. Ask questions that require more than a yes or no answer. For example, "Did you enjoy growing up?" will not evoke as interesting a response as "What kinds of things did you enjoy growing up?" Perhaps followed up by "What kinds of things did you least enjoy?"
5. The interviewer should not be afraid to ask for clarification if the narrator mentions an unfamiliar custom, or object. The narrator should be encouraged to provide full descriptions of such things. Along similar lines, if you would like the narrator to describe a person, ask them to begin with a physical description. Character description is a natural next step.

6. If there has been a particular event that has affected the community in the lifetime of the narrator that may be a comfortable place to begin non-biographical questions. Natural disasters, big fires, skirmishes, and the like make for interesting stories.
7. Try to establish where the narrator was or what their role was during a described event. This will help you to determine how much of the detail is from eyewitness accounts, and what is second hand.
8. If there is a silence as the narrator is thinking about an event, they should not be rushed. A memory from fifty or sixty years ago may take some time to recall. It is not necessary to fill every gap with words.
9. There is no pre-set length of time for an interview. It really depends on the participants. Watch closely to see how the narrator is doing. If they begin to look tired, a break may be suggested, or the interview could be continued another time. Some people tire after an hour, while with others it may be hard to get them to stop. At the end of the interview ask the narrator how they are doing and whether they are enjoying the process. At the end of the interview, ask to take a photograph of the narrator. Pictures provide an image for people to focus on when they listen to the tape.
10. The interviewer should have a pad of paper to jot down unfamiliar names and places, and any new questions that should arise.
11. The interviewer should not be afraid to ask daring questions. Here are a few examples:
  - What was your narrowest escape?
  - What do you consider to be your biggest mistake?
  - What scares you most in life?
  - Who was your hero/ine when you were growing up? How did they affect you?
  - What was the hardest thing you ever had to do?
  - What turning points do you see in your life?
  - What do you see as the best or happiest time of your life? What do you see as the worst?
  - Do you see any great opportunities that you missed?
  - If you had your life to live over again, what would you do differently?
  - Did your life turn out the way you thought it would?
  - How are you different from your children/parents? Do you think you had a better life than your parents? Do you think your children had a better life than you did?
  - How do you want your funeral to be?
  - What do you want in your obituary?

Questions such as these should be asked far enough into the interview that the narrator feels comfortable with the interviewer. If the narrator requests not to answer any given questions, move on. These questions add interest to biographical accounts and can fill out interviews around a specific time period or event.

## **After the Interview**

1. For the learning process to be complete, it is important that the interviewer listen to the tape and try to determine which parts of the interview went well or poorly, and why.
2. The tape should be labeled with the name(s) of the interviewer and narrator, the date, and the tape number. If you have a name for the project, include that as well. If you have collected other materials, such as a photograph or anything donated by the narrator, be sure to label it immediately.
3. Since most RE projects will not spend the time transcribing the whole tape, it is important to index each side as follows.

### Minutes:

- |    |                                     |
|----|-------------------------------------|
| 01 | Born 1914. Brothers and Sisters     |
| 05 | Family background                   |
| 08 | Description of parents' occupations |
| 10 | Education                           |

## **Different Types of Interviews**

### Biographical Interview

Rationale: Biographical interviews enable the interviewer to learn more about how the local community was affected by national events and trends. The questions can still focus on a particular period in time or activity. The following list of topics/questions is a synthesis of several projects cited in oral history books. They are only suggestions.

#### 1. Childhood

Date/place of birth – town, city, farm. If a farm, size and nature

Special characteristics of birthplace

Names of ancestors, maternal and paternal; brief description of occupations, activities; national ancestry, ethnic heritage

Number of siblings – ages, where they now live

Nature of dwelling – stone, brick, wood

Did your parents own any land? Is it still in the family? How was it divided?

What was your parents class background? Were they class conscious?

Relationship with parents – distant, intimate?

- #### 2. Education: level attained, school days, teachers, classmates, ways schools have changed, level attained by parents, siblings. Did your parents help with your schoolwork? What was the most important thing that you learned?

Did your parents grow their own food? How much? Methods used?

Discipline at home – strict, relaxed?

Responsibilities at home

### 3. Religion

Religious instruction as a youth?  
How many faith groups were there in the community?  
To which did most of the community belong?  
How have religious communities changed during your lifetime?

### 4. Social activities – community, dances, memories about what life was like?

### 5. Community

How did it get its name?  
How and why it was formed?  
How has the community changed over the years?  
Major events and activities affected the community.  
Who have been the community leaders?  
What made them the leaders?  
Are there minority groups within the community?  
Were some families significantly poorer than others?  
Did others look out for them?  
How many people lived in the community – and has its size changed since your youth?

### 6. Occupation

List all jobs you have held and when.  
How has the work that you know changed over the years?  
Professional training, trade school apprenticeship, university?  
Reasons for selecting career, method of obtaining first job?  
Age at time of first job?  
Job loss and unemployment? Promotions and demotions?  
Possible sexual, racial, or religious discrimination?  
Union activities: union leaders, opinions about unions?  
Successes and disappointments?  
Retirement: Pension, standard of living, contentment, regrets?

### 7. Relationships and Family

Circumstance of first meeting with spouse or life partner  
Spouse's or life partner's age at first meeting  
His/her family background  
Courtship, proposal, wedding arrangements, ceremony,  
honeymoon, parent's opinion of spouse or life partner  
Relationship with in-laws, interference from relatives. (If same-sex relationship, how was that dealt with?)  
Early years of married life – first home, financial situation  
Children: names, birth dates, characteristics, interests  
Division of responsibilities for child rearing  
The family unit – meaning, expectations of spouse or life partner and children, values

Special celebrations – food, traditions, vacations and holidays, religious services

House decorations, arts and crafts

Family sicknesses, cures

Language(s) spoken in the home

Marriage difficulties, breakdown, death

If single for life: What was life like for a single person? What was the role of single people in the community/church?

8. Avocations and customs

Those practiced during your youth? Still in practice now? Examples: soap making, weaving, furniture making.

9. Transportation

How did people get around?

When were the first roads built? Railroad, airport?

When did the first automobiles come in?

10. Memories from a specific period

Prohibition, the Depression, any of the wars during your lifetime

Any local hard times

11. Describe any folktales, legends or superstitions alive in the community.

12. Politics

Any memories of specific elections – local, state or federal

Any local politicians who made a particular impression on you

How did people in the community tend to vote?

13. Music

Do you play an instrument or have any favorite songs?

Would you like to play/sing something on the tape?

14. Reflections on the past

Any of the questions listed above as “daring questions”

Views on a changing society, advice to younger generations, credos for life, any other opinions you wish to share.

This type of interview is the most comprehensive. The questions can be adapted for a wide range of ages. Many of the answers will take the form of anecdotes or stories. Biographical interviews generally result in the strongest bond between interviewer and narrator.

## UU Religious Identity

Rationale: The following questions complement RE curricula that seek to help students understand Unitarian Universalism and what it means to be UU today. These questions could also be incorporated into a biographical interview. Life-long UU's provide a perspective that can make the lessons come alive.

- Were you raised Unitarian, Universalist, or as something else?
- Do you consider yourself a religious person?
- What is your understanding of the divine/holy?
- Do you consider yourself a theist? Religious humanist? Neo-pagan? Atheist?  
Other?
- What is your opinion of the Unitarian and Universalist merger?
- What was your RE experience like? To which curricula were you exposed?
- What do you think defines Unitarian Universalist ethics? Theology? Practice?
- What function do you think the congregation plays in this society?
- How does your UU identity call you to act in the world?

## Religious Community

Rationale: Oral history interviews of life-long, or long-standing members about the history and development of the congregation help students appreciate it. These questions may be answered for students from time to time, but perhaps without the anecdotal supplements an oral history interview could provide. This type of interview could be done in class, with each student asking questions in which they are particularly interested.

- When and by whom was the congregation founded?
- Was it Unitarian, Universalist, or Unitarian Universalist?
- How many people were part of the original congregation?
- For what/whom was it named?
- How many ministers have served the congregation over the years?
- What did they contribute to the community?
- What is the theological bent of the congregation? Has that changed over the  
years?
- Have there been any controversies that threatened the stability of the community?
- How has the community responded to various national or global events or trends?
- Are there any special physical characteristics of the building/grounds?

## Specific Issue or Topic

Rationale: Students interested in peace and social justice issues or various movements might be interested in interviewing a member of the community who has acted on their convictions. It is important not to forget those who may have been very active, perhaps during the civil rights or women's movements, but who may have slowed down in recent years. Older members would probably be thrilled to be asked to recount their work. As part of the interview, students could conduct a shortened version of the biographical

interview in order to give the narrator's views on a particular subject while establishing the context in which those views were formed.

### Follow-up Activities

After the interviews have taken place, there are a number of activities that can utilize the new information. The following are a few suggestions:

1. Construct a time line – for the narrator, church, family, locality, etc. Tape long strips of newsprint together. Provide pictures from magazines (Time Life books has recently published a series on The Decades, which could prove very helpful) and books, items from the church library, and anything else you can find. This is a good way to visually illustrate history as a continuum. Be sure to discuss inventions, major changes in living (such as the introduction of the automobile), changing social patterns (civil rights, women's rights, etc.).
2. Create a photo album to go along with the tapes in the library. If possible, try to take photographs of each interview. Look for old photos, newspaper or magazine articles, and other memorabilia to add to the album.
3. Develop a worship service honoring the lives of the narrators. If your interviews focus on UU identity, perhaps the words for the service could come right out of the interviews. What better way to celebrate our UU heritage than in the words of the narrators!
4. Invent a pageant, telling the story of a narrator's life, the church, town etc. (Be sure to save seats of honor for the narrators.) The pageant can take whatever form seems appropriate. The students could deliver monologues in the voice of the narrator they interviewed. If the project focused on a particular time period, stories from the interviews could be incorporated into a broader performance depicting that period.
5. Utilize any art forms available to you to allow students to reflect on their interviews. Drawings, paintings, collages, model villages, songs, skits, or plays are just a few examples of art projects that can come out of oral history.
6. Write letters to the narrators, thanking them for participating and telling them what was learned. Have the students write individual letters to the person(s) they interviewed. Younger students could send pictures they have drawn.
7. Have a party for the participants. This could be a time to view any artwork, time lines, photo albums, etc., produced by the students, or even to listen to some of the tapes. This should be a special celebration, so make it nice. Have a special recognition for the narrators and interviewers. Invite the whole church to attend.

**Sample Release Form**

I hereby grant permission to the First Church UU [or to the Unitarian Universalist Women's Heritage Society] to use the material I have given in taped interviews in any ways deemed suitable by the Coordinator and Board of the Society.

I understand that the material may be used in a variety of ways including but not limited to: an exhibit format, photography exhibit, a book, a slide-tape show, radio show, public speaking engagements, or in an archive available to the public.

I understand that this material will not be used in any way that would be slanderous or detrimental to my character.

Below are listed any conditions I wish to place on the use of this material.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name (print) \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Family member \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer \_\_\_\_\_ Date(s) \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Congregational affiliation \_\_\_\_\_

## Sample Letter to Prospective Narrator

May 8, 1992

First Church UU  
Anytown, Anywhere

Eileen Carlson  
245 E. Channing Street  
Anytown, Anywhere

Dear Ms. Carlson:

The religious education students at First Church UU are learning about the history of the church by tape recording interviews with long-standing members. As someone who has been an active member nearly all her life, you would be an excellent informant in our oral history project. Would you be willing to visit our classroom or have two students come visit you? Your observations and experience would be of tremendous value to the students. The tape would also be preserved in our church archives. You would receive a copy of the tape for your records.

Together with the students, we hope that your reply will be positive and look forward to hearing from you. I may be contacted at 357-6497. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely yours,

Vicki Jenkins