

## An Advertisement for Heaven

By Wendy Soneson

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It's a great pleasure to be with Theta Alpha again. Teaching the Word is your mission and mine. I believe all of us are teachers, in the way we live....

Would you like a free ticket to heaven? Stay tuned.

Can you close your eyes for a moment and remember one of your first learning experiences about the Word? Do you remember a teacher or a project or a song?

I loved to go church in Detroit in the 1950s when our minister was Norman Reuter and his dynamic wife, Beth. They were affectionate and fun loving... I remember learning the Ten Commandments in the kitchen. I associated church with fun and friends: we had circuses, parties, picnics, and weddings—it was our community.

After my father became a minister when I was in my teens, we four children were recruited to help with all kinds of church projects, such as folding and stamping the newsletter, cleaning church floors, and of course teaching Sunday school—you other “PK’s” know what I mean. We had a joke in our family that we never got paid for all those lousy jobs, but one Christmas my parents wrapped up 100 silver dollars with notes, memories of various jobs, and finally paid us, if we could remember who did the task when we opened each one. Then we’d recite together, “I finally got paid for that lousy job.”

But teaching Sunday school is not a lousy job; I can tell you now. It is the most precious of jobs. When a child is born it speaks the language of God and it's up to us to keep that alive. When you see those little faces waiting for you, the awesome responsibility of conveying the important truths of life overwhelms you. For some of the students it's the only formal religious training they will get. You know you cannot do it alone.

I started out teaching at a church camp in California at age 18, a very artsy camp because the camp leader was a professional artist. We even made a Hollywood-inspired stop-motion animation movie. I got interested because of my love of art, and subsequently always linked art and teaching religion.

When I moved to Boston in the early 1970s my father was the visiting minister. But soon I had a more powerful motivation than being a preacher's kid to teach: I had a son. I was aware of the vulnerability of our child. So I began teaching. The most fun was a church camp we started—Junior Pineneedle. We were very ambitious in the early years—eight classes a day, several dramatic productions, plus all the food prep and late night duties. We wore ourselves out in the three-day extravaganza. I could

never do it like that now. I find now that it takes me longer to rest up than it did to get tired. Junior Pineneedle camp is still going on.

I've been through the *Bible Study Notes* by Anita S. Dole a dozen times and practically know them by heart. We sometimes assign teachers lessons that are NID (Not in Dole). That means you're on your own. Usually I can wing it but there was one lesson I was supposed to teach to my 7-year-olds that gave me pause. Usually I can now pull a lesson together in an hour, but this one had an asterisk noting "difficult lesson—see pastor." I was too proud to be reduced to calling my pastor for help. It was Genesis 19, in which Lot harbors a couple of angels while the men of Sodom attempt to break down the door to "know them carnally." Lot offers his two daughters instead, for the men "to do with them what they will." Later on those two daughters get their father drunk and rape him. Usually you can gloss over sordid details, but this story didn't have much left when you took those parts out. I agonized all week but was determined not to wimp out and skip the story. So I prayed for help.

In the end I told a child version of the story. We focused on the dinner party Lot had given the angels, leading to discussions about what angels ate- broccoli that tastes like ice cream, cauliflower that tastes like ice cream, green beans that taste like ice cream, etc. Then of course we ate ice cream and that was that! Using the five senses as much as possible works well: smelling incense, feeling fur, making bread.

I use lots of visuals, being a visual artist. My studio contains approximately 86 colors and sizes of glitter. (I am not popular with cleanup crews around the Boston area.) Since I'm always trying to teach art technique along with the lesson, I tend towards materials like clay. I am sure many parents have cursed me on laundry day because of it.

As my mother, a Sunday school and kindergarten teacher taught me, if you have a quantity of anything, be it film cans, computer parts, or coffee stirring devices, you have the beginning of an art project. As long as there are enough for each child. And with Sunday school, always three extra. That's for visitors, or if the other Sunday school teacher doesn't show up. The film can could be the base for an altar, coffee stirring devices can be staffs, and computer parts can become Aaron's breastplate. Kids have good imaginations.

Good teaching is one-fourth preparation, but three-fourths theater. A dramatic telling of the houses built upon sand can be told using a large dishpan and a rain shower provided by a watering can. Last year we staged a drama about the story of the swine. We used paper pigs with all our sins written on them, child sins, like "I took my brother's Gameboy." Our pigs jumped off the table into the wastebasket: the sins were gone forever in a deviled-ham pile of destruction. Don't we wish that we could get rid of our sins that easily!

As the parents picked them up that day I overheard one kid say when asked what they learned about, "Oh, it's just another advertisement for heaven!"

Gold stars are magical. Even twelve-year-olds will work hard for a gold star. In fact, I bet even you would work hard for a gold star....

The Boston Circle started out in a Masonic Temple in the 1960s. We are very ecumenical, so after that we moved on to a Convention church, then a Jewish temple, until we finally reached our present home of an old Baptist missionary training center. The Sunday school has taken place in closets, basements, unfinished attics, in rooms decorated with ancient Masonic symbols, Menorahs or crosses. Usually there are at least two kids in a class, but we have held many a lesson for a single student. That's when I most often feel the presence of the Lord—with the two or three of us gathered together.

I find the best way to prepare to teach Sunday school is to work on my own spiritual issues. Then, the meaning of the classes comes alive for me. I don't have to worry that they will ask a hard question, because it becomes a joint effort to understand the Word together. Knowing innocent little minds will be absorbing the truths you are trying to present motivates you to get it right. I became educated as I taught, learning more about the stories each time they came around. My own remains became activated as I recalled the lessons from my parents and teachers

Getting people to teach Sunday school can be a problem. In a small circle sometimes you find yourself on coffee duty, flowers and chancel, and teaching all in one Sunday. That plus getting the family in the car, and not too many evil spirits with them, in time to drive the 30 or 40 minutes to church, with enough breakfast in them to stave off whines in the car on the way home, can be exhausting. Some men and women may not enjoy art projects. If they are business managers, they can organize graphs about Joshua's battles. If they love to bake, the kids will never complain. Take a nature walk, make up a ball-tossing game. Do what you love; they will be just as happy as if you stayed up all night carving little crèche sets out of walnut shells. The point is to associate Sunday with positive happy times. Reach back into your childhood for what made you happy and build on that.

When you teach, look for God in the children. Yes, we are flawed and inadequate to the task, but still we have no choice; we must try. Most of all, love the children. The words will come if you start with love. Have utmost respect for the children and their enormous capacity to understand spiritual matters. Work to understand their worlds, so you can respond to real life situations they are in. Express your love for them in the mode you are most comfortable in. Validate their spiritual insights. Share with them the power to bring the Lord into their lives. Have high expectations, and work toward their empowerment to receive God, not their shame about their human tendencies. Make them understand they are safe in the Lord, and no matter what happens to them, there is hope.

If you do this, the little children will lead you.

Here's what happened in my first class this year, with four-year-olds. I find a tiny blonde boy, Mattie. It's his very first Sunday School class, and he's waiting with his aunt and younger brother. Mattie checks me out with solemn eyes:

Then Cally comes in with her dad. It's her first class too, but she seems to know what's ahead and is ready to go. She pulls out some markers and begins to draw.

I ask, "Children, do you ever wonder about how the Lord could make the whole world and everything in it?" Cally looks thoughtful and finally says, "Well no, not really."

"Well, the Lord made all the animals, did you know that?" "RECENTLY?" she says.

We talk about how the Lord on earth loved children the best. I draw a red heart on my hand: "This is to remind me how much the Lord loves me all the time—do you want one too?" Mattie is silent but keeps drawing, and nods yes or no to questions.

"Did you know the Lord came to this world?" I ask, and after a few questions I remember that "this world" actually doesn't have that much meaning to them. Their sense of time and space is still more like heaven's.

"Where is heaven?" They look at me blankly.

"Where the Lord is. Do you want to go there?"

"Not now," says Mattie. "Later when I'm older," says Cally.

I move on to the story, which is the man who had a hundred sheep and lost one. Mattie has recently seen a sheep. "What happened?" I asked. "Oh, he ran away before I could pet him." "Good," I say, "that's what this story is about." I sing Lori's "A man had a hundred sheep" song. They look transfixed, even Mattie's two-year-old brother Nick, who joined us along with his aunt. I repeat the song a few times with lots of enthusiasm, if not talent. Soon they sing along.

*"Will the Lord find you if you ever get lost? Oh yes, the Lord can find anyone anywhere, even if you move far away."*

So will teaching Sunday School give you a free trip to heaven? I guess I always kind of harbor a hope that if I do a good job it will get me in. I have this terrible fear that I will be in line ...trying to get into heaven and the guards say, sorry, you didn't do enough!

I asked the kids one time, what if I helped all the homeless people in the world get houses, would I go to heaven? NO, they said.

Okay, then what if I prayed every day, would I go to heaven? NO, they chorused.

OH, okay then, what if I did everything I thought the Lord asked me to do all my life, would I go to heaven then? No, they said.

Oh, why not? OH, they said, first you have to DIE.

That is what it's all about. We are all going to die.

One thing is sure, I know teaching Sunday school has brought me closer to heaven. I highly recommend it for any day of the week.