

The Wisdom of Robert Fulghum – August 2, 2015



by **David Green**

Presented as a "reader's theatre," with David Green, Kristy Fuller, Jason Hudson, and Ellen Robertson Green.

How many of you have a copy or have read *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*? That little book of fifty short essays, published in 1988, stayed on the *New York Times* Bestseller List for two years. The second book by the same author, another collection of essays, was called *It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It*. It was published the following year, and reached #2 on the *Times* Bestseller List at the same time *All I Need to Know* was at #1.

They were written by Robert Fulghum. He was born in Waco, Texas in 1937. He's been a painter, sculptor, and singing cowboy. He also was a salesman for IBM, a ranch hand, and played in a rock and roll band. But Robert was a Unitarian minister in Washington State when he put his essays together in that first book. And obviously, they struck a very popular chord. Those books and his subsequent works have sold 16 million copies in 27 languages.

His writing is simple, folksy, funny, and deceptively profound. And probably the vast majority of his readers have had no idea that all along the way they've been absorbing Unitarian Universalist principles about valuing human worth and dignity, embracing mystery and diversity, encouraging love and compassion, and viewing the wonder of the world through hope-filled eyes.

Today, we thought we would share some of the wit and wisdom of Robert Fulghum from a variety of his works. Some of these bits and pieces you may have heard before, and some may be new to you. They follow no particular theme, but they tell us a great deal about what it means to be human, and good.

They remind us what it means to be Unitarian Universalists: who we are, how we live together in loving community, and what we're compelled to do with our neighbors here and around the world.

READER 1

"These are the things I learned (in Kindergarten):

1. Share everything.

READER 2

2. Play fair.

READER 3

3. Don't hit people.

READER 4

4. Put things back where you found them.

READER 1

5. CLEAN UP YOUR OWN MESS.

READER 2

6. Don't take things that aren't yours.

READER 3

7. Say you're SORRY when you HURT somebody.

READER 4

8. Wash your hands before you eat.

READER 1

9. Flush.

READER 2

10. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you.

READER 3

11. Live a balanced life – learn some and drink some and draw some and paint some and sing and dance and play and work everyday some.

READER 4

12. Take a nap every afternoon.

READER 1

13. When you go out into the world, watch out for traffic, hold hands, and stick together.

READER 2

14. Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup: The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.

READER 3

15. Goldfish and hamster and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup – they all die. So do we.

READER 4

16. And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned – the biggest word of all – LOOK."

— Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

READER 1

"We're all a little weird. And life is a little weird. And when we find someone whose weirdness is compatible with ours, we join up with them and fall into mutually satisfying weirdness—and call it love—true love."

— Robert Fulghum, *True Love*

READER 2

"I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge. That myth is more potent than history. That dreams are more powerful than facts. That hope always triumphs over experience. That laughter is the only cure for grief. And I believe that love is stronger than death."

— Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

READER 3

"Without realizing it, we fill important places in each other's lives. It's that way with the guy at the corner grocery, the mechanic at the local garage, the family doctor, teachers, neighbors, coworkers. Good people who are always "there," who can be relied upon in small, important ways. People who teach us, bless us, encourage us, support us, uplift us in the dailiness of life. We never tell them. I don't know why, but we don't.

And, of course, we fill that role ourselves. There are those who depend on us, watch us, learn from us, take from us. And we never know.

You may never have proof of your importance, but you are more important than you think. There are always those who couldn't do without you. The rub is, that you don't always know who."

— Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

READER 4

"I know what I really want for Christmas. I want my childhood back.

Nobody is going to give me that. I might give at least the memory of it to myself if I try. I know it doesn't make sense, but since when is Christmas about sense, anyway? It is about a child, of long ago and far away, and it is about the child of now. In you and me. Waiting behind the door of our hearts for something wonderful to happen. A child who is impractical, unrealistic, simpleminded and terribly vulnerable to joy."

It's harder to talk about, but what I really, really, really want for Christmas is just this: I want to be 5 years old again for an hour. I want to laugh a lot and cry a lot. I want to be picked or rocked to sleep in someone's arms, and carried up to bed just one more time. I know what I really want for Christmas: I want my childhood back. People who think good thoughts give good gifts."

— Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

READER 1

"It doesn't matter what you say you believe – it only matters what you do."

— Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

READER 2

"Don't worry that children never listen to you; worry that they are always watching you."

— Robert Fulghum, *Maybe, Maybe Not*

READER 3

"The grass is not, in fact, always greener on the other side of the fence. No, not at all. Fences have nothing to do with it. The grass is greenest where it is watered. When crossing over fences, carry water with you and tend the grass wherever you may be."

— Robert Fulghum, *Uh-Oh*

READER 4

"Think what a better world it would be if we all-the whole world-had cookies and milk about three o'clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankies for a nap. Or if all governments had as a basic policy to always put things back where they found them and to clean up their own mess.

And it is still true, no matter how old you are-when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together."

— Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

READER 1

"Every person passing through this life will unknowingly leave something and take something away. Most of this "something" cannot be seen or heard or numbered or scientifically detected or counted. It's what we leave in the minds of other people and what they leave in ours. Memory. The census doesn't count it. Nothing counts without it."

— Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

READER 2

"Peace is not something you wish for, it is something you make, something you are, something you do, and something you give away. "

— Robert Fulghum, *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It*

READER 3

"One of life's best coping mechanisms is to know the difference between an inconvenience and a problem. If you break your neck, if you have nothing to eat, if your house is on fire – then you've got a problem. Everything else is an inconvenience. Life is inconvenient. Life is lumpy. A lump in the oatmeal, a lump in the throat and a lump in the breast are not the same kind of lump. One needs to learn the difference."

— Robert Fulghum, *Uh-Oh*

READER 4

"What I notice is that every adult or child I give a new set of Crayolas to goes a little funny. The kids smile, get a glazed look on their faces, pour the crayons out, and just look at them for a while....the adults always get the most wonderful kind of sheepish smile on their faces – a mixture of delight and nostalgia and silliness. And they immediately start telling you about all their experiences with Crayolas."

— Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

READER 1

"Above all, if what you've done is stupid, but it works, it ain't stupid."

— Robert Fulghum, *Maybe, Maybe Not*

READER 2

"Love is the grand prize and the garbage heap. Love is a spiritual root canal and the only thing that makes life worth living. Love is a little taste of always and a big bite of nothing. And love is everything in between these extremes."

— Robert Fulghum, *True Love*

READER 3

"If you tell people you talk to God, they'll think you're religious, but if you say God talks to you, it's ten to one they'll think you're crazy."

— Robert Fulghum, *Maybe, Maybe Not*

READER 4

"It's the spirit here that counts. The time may be long, the vehicle may be strange or unexpected. But if the dream is held close to the heart, and imagination is applied to what there is close at hand, everything is still possible."

— Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

READER 1

"If I don't have time to live my life well the first time, when am I going to find the time to go back and live it over?"

— Robert Fulghum, *Uh-Oh*

READER 2

The small creature is alive and looks for adventure. Here's the drainpipe – a long tunnel going up toward some light. The spider doesn't even think about it – just goes. Disaster befalls it – rain, flood, powerful forces. And the spider is knocked down and out beyond where it started. Does the spider say, "To hell with that"? No. Sun comes out – clears things up – dries off the spider. And the small creature goes over to the drainpipe and looks up and thinks it really wants to know what is up there."

— Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

READER 3

"Remember, most of us got something for nothing the first time just by showing up here at birth. Now we have to qualify."

— Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

READER 4

"I often say that I don't worry about the meaning of life—I can't handle that big stuff. What concerns me is the meaning in life—day by day, hour by hour, while I'm doing whatever it is that I do. What counts is not what I do, but how I think about myself while I'm doing it."

— Robert Fulghum, *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It*

READER 1

"And sure, I know if you eat this way you'll die. So? If you don't eat this way you're still going to die. Why not die happy?"

— Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

READER 2

"I do not want to know what you will hope for. I want to know what you will work for. I do not want your sympathy for the needs of humanity. I want your muscle. As the wagon driver said when they came to a long, hard hill: 'Them that's going on with us, get out and push. Them that ain't, get out of the way'. "

— Robert Fulghum, *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It*

READER 3

"I get tired of hearing it's a crummy world and that people are no damned good. What kind of talk is that? I know a place in Payette, Idaho, where a cook and a waitress and a manager put everything they've got into laying a chicken-fried steak on you."

— Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

READER 4

"Making a living and having a life are not the same thing. Making a living and making a life that's worthwhile are not the same thing. Living the good life and living a good life are not the same thing. A job title doesn't even come close to answering the question. "What do you do?"

— Robert Fulghum, *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It*

READER 1

"Never, ever regret or apologize for believing that when one man or one woman decides to risk addressing the world with truth, the world may stop what it is doing and hear. There is too much evidence to the contrary."

— Robert Fulghum, *Maybe, Maybe Not*

READER 2

"But it does no good—solves nothing—to distance myself from the front lines of human need by using the mail as a safe shelter. I believe that serving the best ends of humanity means getting out in the middle of it just as it is, not staying home writing checks and thinking hopeful thoughts. The world does not need tourists who ride by in a bus clucking their tongues. The world as it is needs those who will love it enough to change it, with what they have, where they are. And you're damned right that's idealistic. No apology. When idealism goes into the trash as junk mail, we're finished."

— Robert Fulghum, *Uh-Oh*

READER 3

"If you do not join the dancing you will feel foolish. So why not dance? And i will tell you a secret: If you do not join the dance, we will know you are a fool. But if you dance, we will think well of you for trying. if you dance badly to begin and we laugh, what is the sin in that? We will begin there."

— Robert Fulghum, *What On Earth Have I Done?: Stories, Observations, and Affirmations*

READER 4

"Liberation, I guess, is everybody getting what they think they want, without knowing the whole truth. Or in other words, liberation finally amounts to being free from things we don't like in order to be enslaved by things we approve of. Here's to the eternal tandem."

— Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

READER 1

"To ponder is not to brood or grieve or even meditate. It is to wonder at a deep level."

— Robert Fulghum, *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It*

READER 2

"I've always thought anyone can make money. Making a life worth living, that's the real test."

— Robert Fulghum, *Maybe, Maybe Not*

READER 3

"As one old gentleman put it, " Son, I don't care if you're stark nekkid and wear a bone in your nose. If you kin fiddle, you're all right with me. It's the music we make that counts."

— Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

READER 4

"Until you have experienced raccoons mating underneath your bedroom at three in the morning, you have missed one of life's sensational moments."

— Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

READER 1

"Is it always to be a winners-losers world, or can we keep everyone in the game? Do we still have what it takes to find a better way?"

— Robert Fulghum, *Maybe, Maybe Not*

READER 2

"I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have – I can reflect light into the dark places of this world – into the black places in the hearts of men – and change somethings in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life."

— Robert Fulghum, *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It*

READER 3

"I am sometimes amazed at what we did not fully grasp in kindergarten. In the years I was a parish minister I was always taken aback when someone came to me and said. 'I've just come from the doctor and he told me I have only a limited time to live'. I was always tempted to shout 'WHAT? You didn't know? You had to pay a doctor to tell you – at your age? Where were you the week in kindergarten when you got the little cup with the cotton and water and seed? Life happened – remember? A plant grew up and the roots grew down. A miracle. And then a few days later the plant was dead. DEAD. Life is short. Were you asleep that week or home sick or what?"

— Robert Fulghum, *Maybe, Maybe Not*

READER 4

"It's just this: that there are places we all come from-deep-rooty-common places- that makes us who we are. And we disdain them or treat them lightly at our peril. We turn our backs on them at the risk of self-contempt. There is a sense in which we need to go home again-and can go home again. Not to recover home, no. But to sanctify memory."

— Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

READER 1

"The Storyteller's Creed:

I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge.

That myth is more potent than history.

That dreams are more powerful than facts.

That hope always triumphs over experience.

That laughter is the only cure for grief.

And I believe that love is stronger than death."

— Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

READER 2

"1. Children are not pets.

2. The life they actually live and the life you perceive them to be living is not the same life.

3. Don't take what your children do too personally.

4. Don't keep score cards on them – a short memory is useful.

5. Dirt and mess are a breeding ground for well-being.

6. Stay out of their rooms after puberty.

7. Stay out of their friendships and love-life unless invited in.

8. Don't worry that they never listen to you; worry that they are always watching you.

9. Learn from them; they have much to teach you.

10. Love them long; let them go early.

Finally. You will never really know what kind of parent you were or if you did it right or wrong. Never. And you will worry about this and them as long as you live. But when your children have children and you watch them do what they do, you will have part of an answer."

— Robert Fulghum, *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It*

READER 3

"I have never liked the phrase that says we're just made of dust and return to dust. We are energy, which is interchangeable with light. We are fire and water and earth. We are air and atoms and quarks. Moreover, we are dreams, hopes, and fears held together by wisdom and driven apart by folly. So much more than dust. The biblical verse should say, "Miracle thou art and to Mystery returneth."

— Robert Fulghum, *From Beginning to End*

READER 4

"I and you – we are infinite, rich, large, contradictory, living, breathing miracles-free human beings, children of God and the everlasting universe. That's what we do."

— Robert Fulghum, *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It*

READER 1

“Instructions For Wayfarers:

READER 2

They will declare: Every journey has been taken.

READER 3

You shall respond: I have not been to see myself.

READER 4

They will insist: Everything has been spoken.

READER 1

You shall reply: I have not had my say.

READER 2

They will tell you: Everything has been done.

READER 3

You shall reply: My way is not complete.

READER 4

You are warned: Any way is long, any way is hard.

READER 1

Fear not. You are the gate – you, the gatekeeper.

READER 2

And you shall go through and on . . .

— Robert Fulghum, *Robert Fulghum Boxed Set*