

Muddy Children

adapted from Janeen K. Grohsmeyer in *A Lamp in Every Corner: Our Unitarian Universalist Storybook*

Hosea Ballou was born just before the American Revolution on the eastern edge of the Appalachian Mountains in New Hampshire. His father, who was a Baptist minister, moved there a few years before Hosea was born. One of the first lots in the town was set aside for the first minister, which turned out to be Hosea's father. Hosea had 10 brothers and sisters, but his mother died when he was only 2.

The Ballous lived in a one-room house. Hosea and his brothers and sisters had no shoes, and like most pioneer families, they had to raise all their own food, or kill deer, turkeys, and other wild animals. Their clothes were homemade, from homemade cloth. There was no school, and even though their father was a minister, there weren't many books, just the Bible, a dictionary, and an almanac. They couldn't afford candles for light in the evenings. He studied by the light of chunks of pine wood, like Abraham Lincoln later, and wrote on birch bark with leftover bits of charcoal from the fire.

None of this was unusual. Except in the cities, like Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, and some plantations in the South, where there were brick and stone houses, roads, stores, and books, even libraries, most people lived in one room houses or log cabins, farmed for a living, and didn't have much that they or a neighbor couldn't make. Most people that lived around here then lived the same way.

But children growing up then were about the same as today in many ways.

The story is told that Hosea loved playing in the mud. He liked it when it was soft and squishy, and he liked it when it was thick and sticky. If it didn't rain quite enough, that wasn't a problem. Hosea would carry water to the dirt and create glorious mud puddles all of his own. He liked to poke sticks into puddles and see how deep the mud was. He liked to make mud pies and to build mud dams. He liked to jump in puddles hard with both feet and make the muddy water splash really high, so that the mud splattered all over his brothers' and sisters' clothes, and he loved to step in puddles v-e-r-y slowly, so that the mud oozed up just a little bit at a time between his toes.

His older sisters took care of him. His sisters, who did the laundry, didn't like having to scrub all that mud off Hosea's clothes — or off everybody else's clothes, either, after Hosea had stomped in a mud puddle extra hard.

Then Hosea's sisters went to their father and said, "Father, please tell Hosea to stop playing in the mud."

"Hosea," said his father, very sternly, "you should not play in the mud."

"Why?" asked Hosea.

"Because," said his father, "just as we try to live a good life, to be kind to other people, and to follow

God's plan, we try to stay clean."

"Yes, Father," Hosea said, and after that day, he did indeed try to stay clean.

But it wasn't easy. He stopped stomping in the mud puddles on purpose, and he stopped making mud pies, but sometimes the mud was just there. Then he had to walk through the mud to get across the yard to gather the eggs from the chickens. He had to walk in the mud to feed the pigs. And sometimes, when he was already muddy from doing his chores, he played in the mud, just a little bit, and got even muddier.

His sisters went to their father again and said, "Father, please tell Hosea to stop playing in the mud."

"Hosea," said his father even more sternly, "you must not play in the mud."

"Yes, Father," Hosea said. He was sad, because he had truly tried not to get muddy, most of the time anyway. "Are you very angry with me, Father?"

"I am disappointed in you, Hosea, and I am a little angry with you."

Hosea hung his head and kicked at the dirt with his toes, then he dared to look up, just a little, to ask, "Do you still love me?"

"Hosea," said his father, and his father didn't sound stern anymore, "I will always love you, Hosea, no matter what you do."

"Even if I get muddy again?"

"Yes."

"Even if I get really, really muddy?"

"Yes."

"Even if I get mud all the way up to my eyebrows and between my fingers and my toes and in my hair?"

"Even then," his father said with a smile. Then he added, very stern again, "But remember, Hosea. You must try to stay clean."

"I'll remember, and I'll try," Hosea promised, and he did. He stayed clean, most of the time anyway. As he grew up, he stopped liking mud quite so much, but he still liked to ask questions about what and how and why.

"Father," Hosea asked when he was a teenager, "how can it be that our church believes that God will let only one in a thousand people into heaven, even if many of the others lead good lives?" His father didn't have an answer for that question.

"Father," Hosea asked, "if I had the power to create a living creature, and if I knew that the creature would have a miserable life, would suffer and die, and then go to hell and be miserable forever, and I

went ahead and created it anyway, would that be a good thing or a bad thing? And would I be good or bad?"

His father didn't have an answer for that question, either. Hosea had to find his own answers. So he read the Bible. He went to some Universalist churches and asked more questions there. When he was nineteen, Hosea decided that he believed that God would let everyone into heaven, good and bad.

"How can you believe that?" asked his father. "How can you believe that God would let bad people into heaven?"

"Because, Father, I remember what you told me when I was small. I believe that even if God is disappointed with people, or a little angry with them, God will always love them and want them to be happy, no matter what they do, and no matter how muddy they are."