

**For So the Children Come: The Legacy of Sophia Lyon Fahs**  
**Rev. Rod Richards**  
**Unitarian Universalist Church of Southeastern Arizona**  
**08/19/07**

**Opening Words** – (#439 – Sophia Lyon Fahs)

We gather in reverence before the wonder of life—

*The wonder of this moment*

The wonder of being together, so close yet so apart—

*Each hidden in our own secret chamber,*

Each listening, each trying to speak—

*Yet none fully understanding, none fully understood.*

We gather in reverence before all intangible things—that eyes see not, nor ears can detect—

*That hands can never touch, that space cannot hold, and time cannot measure.*

**Readings**

**1. *From Today's Children and Yesterday's Heritage: A Philosophy of Creative Religious Development* (1952) by Sophia Lyon Fahs:**

Thus we have contrasted two ways by which children may acquire their beliefs. One is the way of receiving and accepting what has been "said by them of old"; the other is the way of thinking things out for themselves. One way begins with the past and with authority; the other begins with the present and with experience. One begins with the stories of great people whose lives are to be imitated; the other begins with the children themselves and their companions who have their own conflicts to solve. One begins with the presentation of ideals and principles to be followed; the other is based on the belief that learning how to live a good life is a matter for experimentation and discovery. One encourages discipleship; the other encourages adventuring beyond the authorities of old, seeking ever richer insights.

The second of these two ways...is based on the belief that living forms cannot be passed on from generation to generation merely by attempts to preserve the fruits. Fruits, to be preserved, must be put in cold storage or dried or become fossilized. It is only when the fruits are cut open and the living seeds are freed from the old matrix and then planted in new soil that living and continuing forms are made possible.

**2. *Responsive Reading #652, "The Great End in Religious Instruction," by William Ellery Channing:***

The great end in religious instruction is not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own;

*Not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly and steadily with their own.*

Not to give them a definite amount of knowledge, but to inspire a fervent love of truth;

*Not to form an outward regularity, but to touch inward springs;*

Not to bind them by ineradicable prejudices to our particular sect or peculiar notions,

*But to prepare them for impartial, conscientious judging of whatever subjects may be offered to their decision;*

Not to burden the memory, but to quicken and strengthen the power of thought;

*Not to impose religion upon them in the form of arbitrary rules, but to awaken the conscience, the moral*

*discernment.*

In a word, the great end is to awaken the soul, to excite and cherish spiritual life.

**Sermon**

“Unitarian Universalism really isn’t for children.”

That’s what the woman said to me, and her husband nodded in agreement.

This was the first Unitarian Universalist congregation I had attended, we were in the midst of a congregational workshop, and we had just broken up into small groups representing the various programming areas of the congregation. We found our groups by counting off, not by choice...obviously, as this couple would probably not have chosen children’s religious education.

“I mean, we have no problem with the children within the congregation,” she said, maybe recognizing who she was talking to and in sudden acknowledgment of our own young son who attended on Sunday, “...but if we’re talking about where we should put resources...well, it’s really not a religion for children.”

“Why do you say that?” I asked, genuinely curious.

And the couple took turns explaining by telling something of their own journey to Unitarian Universalism and backing it up with stories of other members of the congregation with which they were familiar. To them, Unitarian Universalism was arrived at after one had experienced and rejected a number of other pathways, and after one had acquired the intellectual capabilities and courage to cast off the tempting but empty security of blind faith.

I pointed out that my wife was raised Unitarian from the time of infancy and still proudly identified as a Unitarian Universalist. They smiled and enthused over this charming oddity of a life-long Unitarian, but seemed to suggest that this was merely an exception that proved the rule, and even implied that lifelong Unitarians may not understand how really precious this tradition is because they hadn’t had to experience the others.

I asked—because, again, I was really curious—at what age they thought one could legitimately *become* Unitarian Universalist. If Unitarian Universalism wasn’t for children, would it speak to adolescents? Young adults? Middle aged folks? (Though I was about 35 at the time, I noticed that they’d been eyeing me with a certain amount of suspicion.)

Their answer was interesting, and revealing at the same time. “College-age.” Because, presumably, in college one would begin to groom the intellectual capabilities that would allow one to bravely challenge what you had been taught up to that point.

But what else did that imply? That one would simply *have* to go to college to be a Unitarian Universalist. These poor folks: we were screwing up their idea of Unitarian Universalism big-time. Not only were they talking to a family who had an 8-year old son attending the congregation, but the wife was a life-long Unitarian (yes, all the way from childhood), and the husband (me) hadn’t attended one day of school since graduating from high school. When I told them that, they said, “Oh, yes, but you’ve

obviously read a lot.” I was so glad to know that I could be granted a waiver under the Unitarian Universalist Education policy, with credit for number of books read.

I admit that I enjoyed overturning some of their assumptions, and I further admit to enjoying poking fun at their attitudes, but I must respect these folks, too, for giving voice to the too-often unspoken assumptions about who we are as Unitarian Universalists. And once we start examining these assumptions, we will see that they are connected to further assumptions about the nature of religion, the nature of childhood, and, indeed, human nature. These are not assumptions to be taken lightly, and I want to speak about these assumptions today, because the life and work of Sophia Lyon Fahs will give us a radical, and to me liberating, challenge to these assumptions.

The journey that led to her becoming a Unitarian was probably not so very different from the couple whom I’ve just described. The child of Presbyterian missionaries, she wanted to become the same upon her graduation from Wooster College. She joined the Student Volunteer Movement whose goal was the “evangelization of the world in this generation.” She took a job as a secretary at the University of Chicago and seized the opportunity to take classes there. She came under the influence of such luminaries as President of the University, William Rainey Harper, who was a champion of the Higher Criticism of the Bible, the study of which included historical context of each of the writings. This was a revolutionary and dangerously “scientific” study of the book which so many held to be sacred. Also teaching at the University was John Dewey, one of the fathers of the progressive education movement. It was influences such as these that would lead Sophia Fahs to question the theology that she had grown up with, as well as the way she thought about teaching (and teaching religion in particular).

So here we have two influences that line up perfectly with what had been told to me. Sophia Fahs had grown to a certain maturity (college-age) and under the influence of education, the seeds of curiosity outside the bounds of her childhood religion had been planted.

But as she grew older, married, started a family, she had another influence of primary importance that we heard about in the story: her children. She *listened* to her children. She joined the Methodist church so that she could be in the same church as her husband, and she took her children to Sunday School, but she listened to their questions and frustrations and wonderings outside of the classes. And while she took courses in writing, lectured at religious education conferences, taught Sunday School classes in the experimental Sunday School run by Teachers College, taught church school leaders and wrote numerous articles, she was wrestling with how her increasingly liberal theology would take shape in religious education. Rather than stuffing children’s heads full of our particular religious stories and symbols and meanings, what if we walked alongside children as they experienced the phenomena that led to the great religious questions in the first place? What if we let them come to their own answers first, so that they could put the stories that we later taught them into the context of their own experience?

She continued her exploration through many different venues and wasn’t actually approached by the President of the American Unitarian Association until 1937, when Ms. Fahs was 61. She came to the attention of the Unitarians through articles she had written, such as “How Childish Should a Child’s Religion Be?” in which she pointed out that a religious life is a personal achievement that cannot be *given* to anyone, and that the building blocks of such a religion are a sense of wonder and a questioning mind.

She later went on to develop for the Unitarians educational materials that included myths and tales from many different religions and cultures, as well as scientific discoveries about the world around us and

stories from the lives of people from all over the world. She began the “Martin and Judy” series, which took the normal experiences of children as a starting point for exploring all the great religious questions.

All of this to say that, though her life may have followed the journey to Unitarianism that the couple in my story viewed as normative (childhood commitment to childhood faith, education and age leading one to question the precepts taught in one’s childhood, thus eventually—at 61!—leading to Unitarian Universalism), she came to some very different conclusions. The one thing that you would most definitely *not* hear Sophia Fahs saying is that Unitarian Universalism is not for children. In fact, she *might* say that Unitarian Universalism is pointing us back to childhood, in a sense. It has, at its source, the questions that we ask from our own experience; the raw wonder that we feel when we stand by the ocean, or watch the lightning and feel the thunder in our chests, or follow a scampering lizard in the blazing heat of Arizona, or read a poem that makes us cry, or look into another’s eyes and see ourselves...that wonder that we sense before we name it, before we try to understand it. And the beliefs that then grow from those initial experiences, that is what makes for the diversity that we celebrate and for the opportunities to share and learn from one another. The experiences are common to us all, and the interpretations of those experiences can only be expected to reflect the unique character of each individual. Beliefs, because they shape our interaction with all of life, are far too important to be mandated by any authority outside of one’s own heart, mind, soul in communication with the world.

Recognizing that children are open and receptive to ideas, the model for religious education had been to seize that opportunity and stuff their minds full of the stories and teachings and rules and beliefs of a religion.

But that wasn’t the vision of Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing, was it? He said, “The great end in religious instruction is not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own... Not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly and steadily with their own.” And though Channing said that in 1837, Unitarian religious education pretty much puttered along in the old patterns for 100 years before Sophia Fahs came along and did her part to making Channing’s vision a reality.

The couple that I talked to was resigned, I think, to the old way of viewing religious education. They imagined people being indoctrinated at childhood and then, if they were lucky and intelligent enough, growing to a point where they questioned all of those early beliefs and rejected them, thus paving the way for the enlightened embrace of Unitarian Universalism. They couldn’t really imagine *beginning* with Unitarian Universalism because, for them, it was based on a rejection of other ways of being religious. I was sorry that I didn’t ask them, not what they rejected, but what they embraced. That, I think, may have brought them closer to the Unitarianism that Sophia Fahs taught, closer to an understanding of what Jesus may have meant when he said, “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (Mark 10:15 NRSV).

Religious historian [Martin Marty was a guest on Bill Moyers’ Journal](#) this past Friday speaking about his book, *The Mystery of the Child*. Marty said:

*A great French philosopher, Gabriel Marcel makes a difference between a problem and a mystery. "The problem," says Marcel, "Is something that I could isolate." "Problems," he says, "Have solutions or potential solutions." Mysteries don't. Mysteries have depths. Mysteries are unfathomable.*

*And I just love watching our children, watching grandchildren, watching great grandchildren, watching babies, watching just anybody the unfolding of that package, which you could explain of in scientific terms. But you never really capture-- what happens.*

**BILL MOYERS asked:** *So, do you think those of us who deal with children, grandparents, parents, caregivers would deal with them differently if we see them as a mystery instead of a problem?*

**MARTIN MARTY replied:** *Definitely. Marcel...says, "The problem stands outside me. Mystery, I'm inside it. Mystery, I can't get distance on myself, or it or that other person."*

A problem. Or a mystery. A child is not a problem to be dealt with but a mystery that will unfold throughout their lives, revealing more and more but not all. *Religion* is not a problem to be solved with the right answer but a mystery that will unfold throughout our lives, revealing more and more but not all.

Liberal religious education in general and Unitarian Universalist religious education in particular, thanks in no small part to Sophia Fahs, are based on the radical assumption that we don't have to work back toward mystery, but that we can *begin* at the beginning with our own experience and grow in our knowledge and understanding of the world and all of the various religious and philosophical and scientific viewpoints from there. We then have a context and a trust in our own experience that allows us not only to gather knowledge but to create meaning. Sophia Fahs saw that, rather than just learning the history of religion, we actually all *experience* it in our lives, but that too often is stifled in religious education, the very place where it should be held in highest esteem.

*...Living forms cannot be passed on from generation to generation merely by attempts to preserve the fruits. Fruits, to be preserved, must be put in cold storage or dried or become fossilized. It is only when the fruits are cut open and the living seeds are freed from the old matrix and then planted in new soil that living and continuing forms are made possible.*

Sophia Fahs, true to her vision, pressed for new innovations and reforms in religious education throughout her long life. When the Montgomery County Unitarian Church of Bethesda, Maryland a Unitarian church that had the largest church school in the country, offered to ordain her, she accepted but flouted tradition and gave her own ordination sermon. When asked if she didn't think it was a little unusual for a minister to preach her own ordination sermon, she said, "Yes, but isn't it also a little unusual to make a minister out of an 82 year-old woman?" She lived to be 101.

There are a few Sophia Fahs books in the church library and some from my own collection that I've put on the back table. If you borrow one, I only ask that you please remember to return it. The books are treasures...

They are dated, of course. How could they not be? Sophia Fahs would not have been surprised by that; rather she would look to the writers and the teachers and the thinkers and the scientists and the innovators or today...she would look to the congregations and the parents and the artists and the educators for new and provocative ideas for what's next...she would be looking to the Internet, I expect, for the immense treasures of stories and insights from around the world...but she would look, always and primarily, to the children.

She reminds us that, yes, Unitarian Universalism *is* for children...children of all ages.

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*A source for much of the biographical material in this sermon can be found in [the entry for Sophia Fahs](#) at the "[Notable American Unitarians](#)" section of the Harvard Square Library.*