

“Sophia Herself: Growing Up, Growing Out”

A reflection by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull and Molly Nolan
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT

Sophia Lyon Fahs Sunday
March 20, 2016

Jan:

The “words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to...” Think, imagine, question, act with compassion, and yes, “confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.” It’s one of the sources of our living tradition that in my not so humble opinion simply soars.

Molly:

I’m guessing that you have somebody in mind this morning. Might it be Sophia Lyon Fahs?

Jan:

You’ve got it, Molly. And we know our own youngsters gave voice to the gifts that this woman left us. [During early segment of service in which Molly and Jan read Sophia Lyon Fahs’ “It Matters What We Believe” narrative interspersed with personal statements of belief by three of our youngsters]

Molly:

Gifts that we keep unwrapping, even when we forget they’re gifts from Sophia. It’s cause for celebration.

Jan:

Yes, but there’s a risk here. When we hold up the life of anyone who has left gifts that we just keep opening, we’re tempted to hold them up as figures larger than life, like Jesus or Buddha or Mother Theresa.

Molly:

Or Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. or Rosa Parks.

Jan:

We forget that they were once little kids with childhoods that were more or less happy and families that were more or less loving and courses that were less than smooth across the passages that make up a lifetime.

Molly:

How to predict that little Sophia, born as the fourth of five children to dedicated Presbyterian missionaries in Hangchow, China, would become such a force of faith and doubt in this faith that we know as Unitarian Universalism?

Jan:

How did she grow up and grow out? If we're lucky, we all grow up. And if we're lucky, we all grow out—not in shape, but in how widely we embrace our world, how readily we see beyond the horizon of our beginnings.

Molly:

Sophia definitely did this. It was as if there were some seedling in her, some spiritual gene or genie, that wouldn't let go of her curious nature and her willingness to travel well beyond her comfort zone.

Jan:

Sometimes I say that I'm Christian inclusively but not exclusively. Reading some of Sophia's works on how children learn and grow and some samples of her teachings—almost all in story form—and the story of her life that I just couldn't put down, I feel a kinship with this woman. From a true believer Presbyterian to a Unitarian Universalist who never threw out the baby Jesus with the bathwater, Sophia had to scale points in her journey that simply chafed.

Molly:

Yes, moments of reflection and questions that went against the grain of what she had learned early on as gospel truth—until she began to stretch her notion of gospel, or “good news” worth sharing.

Jan:

Imagine Sophia Lyon Fahs as she approached her 102nd birthday. Just imagine what she saw as she looked back on her life of 101 years.

Molly:

We would be here into endless tomorrows if we just *began* to name the high points, but let's begin anyway.

Jan:

And then go back to those early years, to Sophia as “a young sapling.”

Molly:

Yes. Rev. Sophia Lyon Fahs was ordained as a Unitarian minister at the age of 82! It wasn't easy. She hadn't even become Unitarian until the age of 70, which was in 1946. The Unitarians and the Universalists were still in different religious camps. And in 1946, Sophia was teaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, your alma mater, Jan.

Jan:

It wasn't easy. The feminist movement of the 1970s was years away, even though she and we have benefitted from the struggles of those 19th century feminists Margaret Fuller and Olympia Brown and Susan B. Anthony, and more. At Union, Sophia was downwind of a pretty strong “good old boys” network. I wonder if her fellow faculty members—the commonly recognized Protestant theological giants of the mid-20th century like Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich—gave her the time of day.

Molly:

Thankfully Sophia was firmly grounded in her searching, her questioning, her faith. While most of her colleagues didn't take religious education for children too seriously, she knew that children asked the most important questions and deserve to be taken seriously.

Jan:

Like our own youngsters. I love the way you sometimes call them "free-range kids."

Molly:

They are. Sophia is partly responsible for creating them! Sophia Lyon Fahs changed the course of religious education for children in our own Unitarian movement. Her preparation was manifold in form—diligent study at New York City's Teachers College and Union Theological Seminary, and before then at the University of Chicago and Wooster College in Ohio, mindful observation of how children learn and grow, and her own experience of being lovingly and thoughtfully parented and becoming a loving and devoted mother of five.

Jan:

Learning and discovery came not just from the pages of books and the teachings of esteemed professors, but from the everyday lessons and challenges of family life from the time she was a young child. Her years as religious educator at New York City's Park Avenue Baptist Church and Riverside Church gave added depth to her creation of imaginative lessons and curricula for children. She understood that youngsters connect with stories that they can feel, smell, hear, and touch. Kids who sat in a circle around Sophia surely used every one of their senses as she brought to life stories from the Bible and stories from a multitude of cultures and religions.

Molly:

All the while she walked a tightrope of being wife, mother, student, and professional, without losing sight of where she was when and the wonder of the trip!

Jan:

I think of that song, "Sing out praises for the journey." Hers wasn't easy. I especially think of Sophia mothering five children, each of whom she adored. Two she lost to illnesses that today would have been readily cured. The loss of a child has to be the most painful kind of loss. Sophia knew raw grief, a grief one never gets over. She also heeded the call of ongoing commitment to her husband and her living children and her work.

Molly:

I think of Sophia's early journey. Raised in a family where belief meant certainty, it was as if Sophia kept a door ajar—just in case of whatever—whatever she might discover, think differently about, or question.

Jan:

And her questioning got her into trouble. She and her husband didn't always see eye to eye in their understanding of "the big questions." Some of her colleagues at Union Theological Seminary weren't so collegial. When Sophie challenged their ways of thinking about God and the divinity of Jesus and what is sacred, she did so with her curious mind and keen intelligence; and she bumped up against a rigidity that didn't hold much grace.

Molly:

Being a woman at that time surely brought some “Who does she think she is?” comments from the mostly male powers that were.

Jan:

And helped her in the long run. Academic research supports the tendency for women to think more contextually than “by the book”. Right and wrong, for example, depend on circumstance. If you steal a loaf of bread, is it right or wrong? If you do so to feed your children, love wins out over right and wrong. This doesn’t mean a man wouldn’t steal a loaf of bread to feed his children, but males are more likely to call it wrong.

Molly:

This helps us understand why Sophia’s work for children reached children. She connected not with where she thought they were supposed to be at whatever age they are, but where they were. She told stories that reflected the lives of real kids, not kids who are “too good to be true.”

Jan:

You know, Molly, you and I could go on and on about the accomplishments of this remarkable woman, but I’m wondering if we might share a bit about how she grew up, like the “young sapling” she referred to in her writing about beliefs. Her early years make it all the more remarkable that she bent and stretched and soared as she did in an increasingly larger view of God, of religion, of church, and of how to *nourish spiritual growth* in children of all ages.

Molly:

Our young sapling Sophia was born in 1876 into a Presbyterian missionary family in Hangchow, China. Rev. David Nelson Lyon and Mandana Doolittle Lyon were Caucasian Americans. Educated in the United States, they had gone to China in 1869 to spread the Christian gospel. They were staunch believers, but not rigid people. Both were highly intelligent, and Mandana was a natural teacher—imaginative, engaging, and resourceful. With a strong commitment to education for all, she started a day school for girls in Hangchow, while managing her own children and supporting her husband in his work.

Jan:

Little Sophie’s home life was filled with expectations to excel academically and behave morally. It was also filled with love.

Molly:

And probably lots of delicious noise, since she was the fourth of five children. Altogether there were three girls and two boys.

Jan:

When little Sophie was 3 ½, her parents decided they needed to go back to the States to get a good education for the children. This meant Wooster, Ohio, where Sophia would grow into a young woman.

Molly:

With her parents so committed to their missionary work and to each other and their children, it was a tough decision when six years later Sophie's father felt the call to return to China. His family would stay in Wooster. Sophie was just ten, when Rev. Lyon bid a tearful goodbye to his wife and children and headed back. She would be almost ready to graduate from high school when he returned.

A close family? Yes, in spirit and commitment to what David and Mandana Lyon felt was a greater good. Sophia's biographer, Edith Hunter, noted that while the natural curiosity and spiritual development of the growing Sophia "would take her far afield from the Gospel [her parents] went out to preach, she would always feel that their devotion to goals beyond their own personal fulfillment was a priceless part of her heritage." (7)

Jan:

As Sophia grew up, she didn't grow apart from the family who knew about ties that bind but don't constrict. Consider a Christmas when Rev. Lyon was halfway across the world in China, Mrs. Lyon had little money and five children. Fun and imagination reigned. "The Christmas feast" was cause for crafting "table decorations, place cards, menu cards, and one year a green salad made of green paper" (since greens in winter were unheard of). "On each separate leaf, a joke or conundrum had been written to be enjoyed during the meal." Mrs. Lyon modeled the kind of teacher that her daughter Sophia would become, with Sophia's added accomplishments in bringing together her mother's creativity, her own intellectual acumen, and her unquenchable thirst for learning and discovery.

Molly:

One more story about Sophie's temperament as a young woman. No surprise that she graduated from Wooster High School at the top of her class. However, "the principal had told the girls who were to have a part in the graduation exercises that they would read their essays, whereas the boys would give theirs as orations." This didn't sit well with young Sophia. Her memory was as good as any boy's, and she convinced the principal that she would deliver her essay as an oration. He said that he would prompt her if necessary. Sophia needed no prompting!

Jan:

All five of the Lyon children went to college. Sophia and her brothers and sisters were fortunate to go to Wooster College tuition free. [Can we only imagine what tuition at Wooster College is today?] Sophia graduated *cum laude*.

Molly:

During her freshman year of college, Sophia taught her first Sunday school class. This was just the beginning. Young Sophia would grow and stretch and study and teach and reach out and love and give birth and parent and nurture and grieve and celebrate and look back more than 80 years later on a life that brimmed.

Jan:

Sophia Lyon Fahs touches each of us as we too grow up, grow out, and move through each amazing day of all the days we are given.

Molly:

What a blessing you were; what a blessing you are, dear Sophia. And Amen.

Sources

Sophia Lyon Fahs: A Biography by Edith Hunter, Published on the Occasion of Her One Hundredth Birthday August 2, 1976, Beacon Press, Boston, 1976.

Sophia Lyon Fahs, "It Matters What We Believe," in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Beacon Press, Boston, The Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993, 657.