

“Dear Sophia...”

A reflection by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT
Sophia Lyon Fahs Sunday
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Dear Sophia,

Today we honor you. You're still alive. Did you know that? Well, if you were alive in the way that we think of alive, you would be 138, so you're alive in a different way. You're alive as the teacher and guide you continue to be for our own journeys of spirit. You're alive in the many gifts you gave throughout your 101 years on this earth.

We know that you wouldn't want us just to sing your praises, though we do as we sing songs that would make you smile and nod. We do as we tell stories. We do as our children are part of this worship, not a part from it. We do as we connect with the children in each of us; for how ever old we are, the child that we were—or perhaps are right now—lives within us and through us every step of our journey.

We are in wonder that you were born in China into a Presbyterian missionary family. You knew the gifts of loving family with high expectations for your behavior and your beliefs. You accepted Presbyterian Christianity without question for many years, and you never stopped being Christian. You just stretched and squirmed into an ever-widening view of what it meant for you and all children to be children of God.

Thank you for never letting go of your fierce curiosity. Thank you for never forsaking the core love of the faith in which you grew and stretched.

Thank you for working so hard as a student, or maybe I should say, “one who paid close attention and asked questions and wrestled with the responses.” It's so tempting just to recite the steps of your remarkable life as little girl, daughter and sister, student, student and student. Yes, you graduated from Wooster College in Ohio, Teachers College of Columbia University in New York City, and then, well into your 40s, Union Theological Seminary, just across the street from Columbia. By then, you were married and the mother of five.

Thank you for walking the tightrope of being wife, mother, student, and professional, never losing sight of the wonder of the journey. Thank you for not drowning in the theory of theology or the theory of how children think and grow, but for understanding that we who are children connect with stories that we can feel, smell, hear, and touch. What a storyteller you were.

I wonder at your grace and resilience in the family you created with Charles “Harvey” Fahs. You and your husband certainly didn't see eye to eye in your beliefs, as yours stretched and his, well, his sometimes seemed to resist stretching. Perhaps you knew intuitively that “we don't need to think alike to love alike.” You were mother to five beautiful children, and you lost two to illnesses that would now be treatable. How did you bear it, Sophia? How did you bear it?

You grieved, and you honored them by continuing to love and nurture your other two daughters and son, who grew into such remarkable figures in their own right.

I wonder at the thousands of children you raised spiritually—children at the New York City’s Park Avenue Baptist Church, Riverside Church, and all the children touched by the lessons and books you wrote for the American Unitarian Association. Ah yes, the Unitarians finally figured out that we needed you. But you didn’t become Unitarian until 1945. You were almost 70 years old. Talk about waiting!

You were never ever too old to do and grow and be. How moved I am that you were ordained as a Unitarian minister in 1959 at the age of 82. In this brief letter, I can’t begin to recount your dedication, your perseverance, and the specifics of your generous life. Perhaps for now it’s enough to say a heartfelt Thank You for all you have done and all you were, for all you do across the generations and for all you continue to be.

How could we celebrate Christmas Eve, without those memorable words that emerged perhaps from your lifelong readiness to heed the wonder of every child?

“Each night a child is born is a holy night—
A time for singing.
A time for wondering.
A time for worshipping.”

Thank you, dear Sophia, thank you, thank you, thank you....

With abiding love and gratitude,
from one of your children

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, “For So the Children Come,” in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Beacon Press, Boston, The Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993, 616.