

“Into the Very Midst of Us”

A Reflection by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
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“Children should be seen and not heard!” I wonder how many of us grew up with this bit of non-wisdom. I wonder how many of us still cling to it even a tiny bit, perhaps around 6:00 pm if we’re young parents and perhaps around 10:40 am on Sunday mornings, when we engage our youngsters in a conversation, a story, a song, or an exercise that taps the unpredictable riches of fresh perspectives.

Most of what I know, or think I know, about children, is NOT from my seminary education, NOT from my graduate work in developmental psychology, NOT from my ongoing reading on children’s spiritual journeys, and NOT—well not completely—from being a parent. Most of what I know about children is from being a child.

How many here started out as an adult? Hmm. How many here started out as a child? Okay, that’s unanimous. Some of us had wonderful childhoods—with loving parents, caring grandparents, considerate siblings, and friends and teachers who respected us and took us seriously, even when we acted out or were over-the-top silly. Some of us had mixed bag childhoods—with parents or caregivers who did their best but frustrated us in some core way, siblings with whom we found reason not to be close to as adults, teachers who sometimes did and sometimes didn’t understand our particular brand of math or history or writing, neighbors who didn’t always appreciate us when we played in their yards as if it were our yard too, or strangers in a city park where our parents or other caregivers kept us on an invisible bungee cord. Some of us had tattered childhoods altogether and carry the scars to this day.

Some of us grew up with religion that scared the bejesus out of us. Some of us grew up with the understanding that Jesus was a really great friend and that God was love. Some of us grew up with a “*Baruch Atah Adonai*,” a “Blessed Art Thou O God,” that was a revered part of the “*Shma!*” at holidays and holy days. Some of us grew up with an understanding that Allah was inclusive, a Universalist of sorts. Some of us grew up with no religion at all or a well-cultivated scorn for religion. Some of us actually grew up lighting a chalice and discovering that our questions were sacred, even if our behavior wasn’t always so, but we were loved anyway. Traditions of faith and non-faith defer variably to the preciousness of children. Lest we think that as UUs we’re ultimately cool in how we “do religious education for children,” be assured that we do not hold a monopoly on nurturing young people in ways that promote their development into caring loving adults.

Whatever our early or later religious experience, I stand strongly by the contention of one of my prophet-heroes—that is, Sophia Lyon Fahs. We’ve heard a lot about Sophia Lyon Fahs in this congregation over the past few weeks. Just over a month ago we celebrated Sophia Lyon Fahs Sunday. And for good reason. She was a remarkable woman, mother, grandmother, pioneering religious educator, and Unitarian minister. Today what rings loudly for me is Sophia’s declaration at her ordination at the age of 82. She invited congregants and colleagues alike to “...put the children into the very midst of us, believing that as we lose our lives in theirs, we shall find our own.”

So, kiddos, here you are, in the very midst of us. And I do believe that “as we lose our lives in yours, we find our own.” What does this mean?

I think it means that we who understand ourselves as adults might loosen the reins of our assumptions regarding grown-up wisdom, grown-up feelings, and grown-up actions. I think it means that we heed the wisdom of Kahlil Gibran, wisdom I tap in dedicating a child: “Your children are not your children; they are the sons and daughters of life’s longing for itself.” This does not mean that the pendulum of accountability swings wholly toward you who are children and youth. Rather we who are adults are challenged to be fully present with you, to listen to you, to hear you, to respect you, and to guide and nurture you in “the way of loving and thoughtful living both for yourself and for humankind,” words that I also speak during a child dedication. As we thus “lose our lives in yours,” we will indeed “find our own.”

As your minister, as a Mom, and as a Grandmom, or as one of our grandkids calls me, GramJan, I try hard to keep a promise that I made to myself when I was about nine years old. “I will never forget what it feels like to be a child.” And what did it feel like? I was curious, mischievous, energetic, and so full of it altogether, that I was quite capable of exhausting my mother into a quick smack on the you-know-what, my father into a decisive, “JAN!” and my teachers into an “Okay, into the hall for a half hour!” Such were the modes of discipline then. They have not completely disappeared.

You who are children and youth are a tough act to keep up with! You’re high energy physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Sooner or later, you ask the big questions: Where did I come from? Why am I here? Why should I care? Why should I treat Jill or Jamal as I would like Jill or Jamal to treat me? Will I ever die? Then what? Why do you who are adults tell us to do such-and-such and then do the opposite? Is God real? What is the truth? How should I live?

You who are children and youth are, most wondrously, in the midst of us. We who are adults—young, middle-aged, and ripe—are still coming to grips with the child in each of us. We find our path in life through experiences we cannot predict. None of us escapes sadness and loss. None of us escapes pain. None of us escapes failure at something or other sooner or later. So too, if we celebrate the journey of childhood, if we heed the wisdom of Sophia Lyon Fahs and Khalil Gibran and the scores of prophetic women and men who have gone before us, we will ever bow to the promise and possibility of the child in each of us.

So may it be 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.

Khalil Gibran, “On Children,” in *The Prophet*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1963.