

Sophia Lyon Fahs Sunday
October 16, 2016

Invitation

Molly Nolan, Director of Religious Education

I invite you to discover more about Sophia Lyon Fahs. The life and work of this most prophetic woman touches each of us...today. Sophia Lyon Fahs led a life of curious exploration. She changed the course of religious education in the then American Unitarian Association, now the Unitarian Universalist Association, and has had influence beyond our own denomination.

Fahs wrote many stories incorporating folktales from around the world, taking us out of a closed canon into exploration of the wisdom of the world's peoples. She started us on the path of experiential learning. Fahs was practicing our 4th principle even before we formalized the Seven Principles, and she thought its spirit should be the foundation of religious education for children, really for all of us—"A free and responsible search for truth and meaning" or, as the children say it, "We believe that each person must be free to search for what is true and right in life."

The blessing of Sophia Fahs lives on in The Fahs Collaborative at Meadville Lombard Theological School, an exciting laboratory that brings people together to explore and create innovative ways to deepen faith through educational encounters, the Fahs Lecture at our Unitarian Universalist Association's General Assembly, where the leading edge in faith development is explored each year and through Tapestry of Faith curricular that are built around story and experiential learning.

As we worship today and lift up the life and work of Sophia Lyon Fahs, I invite you to cherish her legacy and the living gifts she has given us.

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Introducing Us: *Sofia and Sophia*

Sophia Johnston

Did you know there are two Sofia's here this morning? We spell our names differently, and she's no longer with us, while I am. This other Sophia was one of five children, and I'm one of one. This other Sophia was born in China, though she was a US citizen. I was born in Connecticut. I am also a US citizen. This other Sophia lived to be 101. I'm just getting started, but if I live to be as old as Sophia Lyon Fahs, we'll be into the 22nd century!

What an amazing life she lived! I hope that mine blossoms into an amazing life too. In fact it's already amazing in so many ways. I have parents who love me. I'm a good student. I like to laugh. I have great friends. [and whatever else you would like to say about yourself.]

Oh yes, Sophia Lyon Fahs wasn't born into Unitarian Universalism. When she arrived, in 1876, the Unitarians and Universalists hadn't yet tied the knot that makes the name of this faith sooo long! That would take another 85 years! Sophia's life began in a family of Presbyterian missionaries on the other side of the world. It's hard to imagine what her life was like as a little girl. I understand that her family was what we call "close knit", and expectations were VERY high for academic performance and good behavior. I think I do pretty well in both areas, but Mom and Dad, please don't get any ideas about RAISING your standards!

As I learn more about Sophia Lyon Fahs, I understand why she's so important for those of us in the still unfolding history of Unitarian Universalism—especially for kids and teachers. As she grew up, she remembered what it was like to be a child, a teenager, and a young adult. A curious mind, high energy, a commitment to goals not so easy to attain, and love of family are like threads that wove through her life. Interesting that I have some of these same threads

weaving through mine, though my path is already so different from hers.

I do love stories, reading them, thinking about them, and sometimes discovering how they can shape my life, young as I am; and what a story lover Sophia Lyon Fahs was! She understood that kids connect through stories. We learn through stories. Sometimes we place ourselves inside stories that we read or hear or even write. The more Sophia did this, the more she was drawn to working with children. She went to college in Ohio. She went to graduate school at Teachers College, now part of Columbia University. And she went to seminary—New York City’s Union Theological Seminary, the same one that Rev. Jan went to, though Sophia was there MUCH earlier. Sophia was an excellent student. This served her well in the long run, but in those days when guys were thought to be more intelligent than girls, she took some flack from her fellow students AND her professors. It wasn’t easy. Some people still don’t get it—that we who are girls and women are as capable in every way as boys and men, sometimes more so, and that we deserve lots of respect and admiration for surviving all that we have survived!

It was in Sophia’s freshman year of college that she taught her first Sunday School class. We call it RE. It’s almost the same thing, but those of us who experience religious education here BENEFIT from what Sophia learned as she grew older and became even more savvy about kids AND the appeal of liberal religion. She always remained Christian, but she became Unitarian and then Unitarian Universalist as she found a need for a faith community that cherished curiosity no matter where it led.

My friend Sophia—and I’m beginning to feel that she is my friend, even though she’s not here to agree with me—married and had five children. She loved them dearly; she learned from them; and she loved her husband dearly, though she didn’t hesitate to disagree with him if his beliefs were too narrow for her adventurous mind.

Sophia eventually worked for the Unitarian Universalist Association, creating some of the most amazing and kid-friendly programs that revolutionized, yes revolutionized, what religious education is about. Sometimes we tease ourselves that a sacred symbol in Unitarian Universalism is the question mark. Didn't you ever notice how the flame of our chalice curls into that funny shape with a little dot at its base? Just kidding, but you really can imagine your way into seeing it.

My friend Sophia wrote books that set forth her ideas and how they worked for teachers and parents and youngsters like me. And work they did. Those of us who are kids develop in different ways, ways that Sophia understood. We develop in phases. You've heard adults say, "Oh, she's going through a phase!" Well, she probably is, whoever she is. Sophia understood what works in relating with us at these various phases of growing up.

Throughout her life, Sophia worked very hard and made more than one crack in what we now call "the glass ceiling." I believe we still have some cracks to make! At the age of 82, she was ordained as a Unitarian minister. That is, she became Rev. Sophia Lyon Fahs. This might seem old, but she was a vital force for another 19 years. Maybe she slowed down a bit as she approached 100, and maybe not.

As for me, I hope that every day I live I can be a vital force and change my world in ways that someday I too can look back and say, "Yes! I have grown into my name, Sofia." It's no accident that Sofia, however it's spelled, means wisdom.

“Something Here”

Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden
Meriden, CT

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*We laugh, we cry, we live, we die;
we dance, we sing our song.
We need to feel there's something here
to which we can belong.*

Belonging...how each of us longs to belong to something that reminds us of the gift we are in this life we live. How each of us longs to belong to something that calls us to unwrap that gift. How each of us longs to belong to something that taps the underground streams of our spirit—“Spirit of Life, come unto me.”

You, you, you, and you are a precious collection of stories. Here in this community of faith and doubt and wonder, you're invited to share the stories of who you are, of the path you're on, of your laughter, your tears, your joys, your sorrows, your hopes and your hurts.

Here in this sanctuary of search and reflection, song and silence, the stories that we inhabit at this particular point in our journeys converge—not just on Sunday mornings, but at those gatherings for which Unitarian Universalists are notorious—committee meetings. And yes, in conversations planned and spontaneous. It is an honor of professional ministry and of ministry that is shared to hold the trust that makes these conversations possible. As your minister, I'm called to earn that trust again and again. In shared ministry, each of us is called to earn that trust again and again.

Trust building is at the core of what we call Small Group Ministry, that intentional gathering of groups of eight to ten folks led by a trained facilitator to address matters intimate and ultimate. Each gathering begins with check-in—rather like what we do in candles of community, but often with a longer telling and in an intimate setting. Then we explore topics meaningful to us all—our names, family, hope, fear, friendship, and yes, the most popular topic, those connections with our non-human animal friends!

Trust is at the core of the work of our Board of Trustees and our Leadership Council and our stewardship leaders and our Finance Committee and the teachers of our youngest and ripest, and yes, out there on the Pumpkin Patch, where we trust that we can welcome the larger community even if our interaction is also a transaction.

Something here? How about fun? I arrived a tad late to partake of the fun work—I hope it's fair to call it that—on Friday afternoon when so many of you showed up to unload the pumpkins from the truck that arrived early. Smiles mingled with sweat as you gracefully decided, almost by instinct, who would haul the super pumpkins and who could carry the minis out into the yard that is now our pumpkin-scape! Then, that sacramental meal of such a

gathering—pizza! Then time for games—board games, card games, made-up games! I believe it was called a trifecta of work, food, and play!

Something here? One of my great joys is to hear the shouts and laughter of our kids out in back on a sunny Sunday morning. It's delicious diversion from what might be happening in the sequence of morning worship. In the words of Molly, we're raising "free-range kids." And just moments before I will have invited them to come up front and wonder out loud what is in the Wonder Box. I wonder if those of us deemed grown-ups don't join our youngsters in the curiosity that we cultivate across the spectrum of this faith—an open-eyed, open-eared, open-mouth faith that is anything but blind and compliant. If sainthood ever became a reality in Unitarian Universalism—not to worry!—the first to be canonized would surely be Curious George!

Something here? How about the many ways we can advance justice?

The racism that is the fault line of this nation is healable. How glad I am that the Common Read of works like Debby Irving's *Waking Up White* and Rev. Dr. William Barber's *The Third Reconstruction* have attracted many of you to dig deep and speak your truths in these circles of difficult conversation led by Angie Swanger. How glad I am that many of us are convening for Courageous Conversations about race and racism led by our friends Bishop John Selders and his wife Pamela Selders, whom some of us came to know through activism in Moral Monday CT/Black Lives Matter.

How grateful I am that justice for the thousands who are seeking asylum in this country and have been so badly treated by power and policy gone awry is yet another way in which we seek to advance justice, thanks to United Action CT led by Steve Volpini. It plays out in this congregation and in congregations across the state.

How we all take joy from the Spiral Garden, one of the first acts of our Green Team, led by Diane Szymaszek. "Beauty emerges, when love takes root," we recall during that rite of spring that is our Flower Communion. An edible forest on our grounds? Why not? A few saplings have already been planted, the first fruits of the vision of Cary Grey.

We know that a number of us—adults and children alike—are hurting with mental and emotional turmoil. Thank you, Rev. Rick Klimowicz, for reconvening our Mental Health Ministries Task Force, providing support and information for those of us—so many of us—who know mental anguish in ourselves and our families.

Something here is commonly about something there! Consider Haiti and our neighbors on this island that has been downwind of earth trembling, hurricanes pelting, and a cholera epidemic that has ravished hundreds. In solidarity—not charity, but solidarity with indigenous groups in Haiti and throughout the world, our Unitarian Universalist Service Committee is there. And with the leadership of Michael Milardo, we participate. Stay tuned for those little boxes that we're each invited to welcome into our homes as we observe Guest at Your Table Sunday a few weeks from now.

Something here? Consider the worship that is increasingly varied in focus and media and ever more inviting of your active participation. Thanks to our Worship Associates. Thank you to you, John, and to you Peg for coordinating this ministry in its second year.

Something here? Our children and our ripest learners grow in spirit and deed Sunday after Sunday, thanks to our teachers and facilitators and our Director of Religious Education Molly Nolan. In the background and at the roots of how we learn and grow is that prophetic person whose life and legacy we honor this morning, Sophia Lyon Fahs, introduced to us by another dear Sofia earlier this morning.

Something here? Grace and resilience, curiosity and discovery, humor and humility, fun and laughter, and “giving and receiving as love shows us how.” So many paths there are for practicing loving community, advancing justice, and nurturing spiritual growth.

How many of us have known the opportunity to respond to a quip in the workplace, the park, the supermarket, or the playground: “Oh, you’re Unitarian, what’s that other word, and you’re the folks who believe whatever you want.” Here’s your opening. What, for you, is the “something here” to which you belong? What is the “something here” that you are so eager to talk about, because you have made it possible? As for matters of belief.....

[Segue into reading with John Sepples Sophia Lyon Fahs’ “It Matters What We Believe.”]

Sources:

Spirit of Life, words and music: Carolyn McDade, in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Beacon Press, Boston, Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993, 123.

We Laugh, We Cry, words and music: Shelley Jackson Denham, in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Beacon Press, Boston, Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993, 354.