

"A Celebration of UU Religious Education"  
Sermon and Worship Service for  
The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship  
of Wayne County, Ohio  
September 8, 2019  
The Rev. Jennie Barrington, Interim Minister  
Worship Associate, Helen Meyers

**Opening words** (Sophia Fahs)

(Rev. Jennie)

"We are resolved to protect individual freedom of belief. This freedom must include the child as well as the parent. The freedom for which we stand is not freedom of belief as we please, ... not freedom to evade responsibility, ... but freedom to be honest in speech and action, freedom to respect one's own integrity of thought and feeling, freedom to question, to investigate, to try, to understand life and the universe in which life abounds, freedom to search anywhere and everywhere to find the meaning of Being, freedom to experiment with new ways of living that seem better than the old."

**Chalice lighting** (Christian Schmidt and Alexis Capen) (Helen Meyers)

"We light this chalice for our children and youth, and for all of us:  
Celebrating the flame of faith lit in each of us.  
Honoring the light each of us bring into the world,  
Rejoicing in the community we create together."

**Anthem** *Hidden Away*

(The Choir)

**Reading** "*For Once, Then, Something*" (Robert Frost)

(Rev. Jennie)

Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs  
always wrong to the light, so never seeing  
deeper down in the well than where the water  
gives me back in a shining surface picture  
me, myself, in the summer heaven, godlike,  
looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs.  
*Once*, when trying, with chin against a well-curb,  
I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,  
through the picture, a something white, uncertain,  
something more of the depths— and then I lost it.

Water came to rebuke the too clear water.  
One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple  
shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,  
blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?  
Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something.

**Sermon**      "A Celebration of UU R.E."      (Rev. Jennie)

When I first expressed interest in coming here to be your Interim Minister, I did not know that Sophia Lyon Fahs, the great Unitarian Universalist Religious Educator, had a connection to Wooster, Ohio! What an enjoyable opportunity this is to celebrate her, her extraordinary accomplishments, and Unitarian Universalist Religious Education for children and youth. When she turned 100 years old, our Unitarian Universalist magazine wrote a special article about her, saying, "She has a sense of the wonder of things, an appreciation of the beauties and struggles inherent in nature and science, and a religious belief that is constantly evolving." She was raised in Wooster, and graduated from the College of Wooster in 1897. When she died in 1978, at the age of 101, she was the college's oldest living alumna. Our Fellowship's meeting room and library are named in honor of her. And still today, over forty years after her death, through programming for children and teens in our congregation and other Unitarian Universalist congregations, we are changing people's lives for the better, we are teaching democracy, and we are creating world peace.

Our Unitarian Universalists Religious Education for children and youth has a unique and inspiring history we can be proud of, and it has evolved and improved over the decades since then. Unitarian Universalist Religious Education has always been designed to be appropriate and engaging for specific age groups, depending on their interests, and stage of human development. And we have also become increasingly aware that, at its best and most enjoyable, UU Religious Education happens among people of several age groups together, both in and outside of a classroom, and all week long, not only on Sunday mornings.

Beginning in the 1930s, '40s, and 50s, Unitarian Universalists created a new philosophy of liberal religious education, with new materials and methods. Two of the leaders of that movement were Sophia Lyon Fahs, and the Rev. Angus MacLean. They developed programming so that children would grow up to feel, on the one hand, confident about themselves and their abilities, with, on the other hand, a sense of awe, wonder, and reverence for this fascinating and beautiful

universe of which we are a small part. They wanted children to be able to approach becoming religious with "a sense of wonder and a questioning mind." And they wrote that, "each child should have his [or her] chance at an original approach to the universe." They believed that little children should not be told doctrine about God and the Bible, for them to memorize and recite by rote, but that we should awaken their sense of awe about all they are experiencing, and help them find answers to their questions, as appropriate for their age and stage of development, and we should share those experiences with them.

Sophia Fahs always felt that her greatest teachers were her children. She and her husband, Charles, had five children. Raising them at that time in history was hard, and sometimes heartbreaking. Their children had several serious illnesses. And two of their children died, one girl, when she was only four months old, and another daughter, Ruth, when she was only thirteen years old. Sophia felt strongly that religious education for children needed to address, in realistic and helpful ways, life issues of loss, grieving, and death. She believed we should not side-step these serious and painful situations. After her daughter Ruth died, Sophia wrote:

"One cannot live through such an experience without being profoundly different ever after. We felt shattered because Ruth's short life, so exuberant and promising, [having been] cut down. From then on, no religion could inspire that did not include sorrow and tragedy. Life had no special protective privilege to grant to anyone. Had it not been for this personal tragedy, I would never have had the courage, I believe, to think of putting the word 'death' on the title page of a children's book." [see Hunter biography]

That book she refers to is called, *Beginnings: Earth, Sky, Life, Death*, co-written with Dorothy Spoerl in 1958. It includes myths and legends from peoples all over the world about creation, birth, death, and the cosmos, as well as contemporary science. In her introduction to it she wrote:

"Perhaps as long as there have been stars in the sky and people who could look up and see them, men [and women] have been wondering. As long as there have been sunrises and sunsets, and people to watch them. As long as there have been seeds growing into flowers and trees, and people to remember their beginnings. As long as babies have been born and old people have died, and there have been people who loved them." [pp. 1,2] [Men and women have been wondering.]

In their day, Fahs and MacLean believed that the way religion is taught was more important than what was being taught. MacLean wrote an address entitled, "The Method is the Message." The foundation of Unitarian Universalist Religious Education is that it is interactive. Children are allowed, and encouraged, to ask questions and express their opinions and insights. That method is still central to how UU Religious Education is done today. Also at its core, UU Religious Education teaches understanding of, and respect for, the great religions and philosophies of the world. This is literally how we are "creating world peace" in our classrooms and sanctuary every Sunday morning, in groups of Unitarian Universalists all over the country. But over the years, we have realized that the content of what is being taught *is* of lasting importance. For many years, including while I was growing up Unitarian Universalist, we learned more about other religious and philosophical traditions than we did about our own denominational history. When I was growing up Unitarian Universalist, our seven principles and six sources for discerning religious truth and authority weren't even written down yet. They were the things that were commonly believed and practiced among us. But they weren't clarified and published until the mid-1980s. Since then, many curricula materials, including stories, poetry, and songs, have been developed based on the principles and sources. So our children, and all of us, can develop, not just a pluralistic religious identity, but a proudly Unitarian Universalist identity.

In 1959, when she was eighty-two years old, Sophia Fahs was ordained as a Unitarian Universalist minister by our congregation in Bethesda, Maryland. Following her example of professionalism, scholarship, and passion in Religious Education, Unitarian Universalist ministers are required to understand and advocate for Religious Education for all age groups, and Unitarian Universalist Religious Educators are professionals, with training in the history, method, and developments of Lifespan UU Religious Education.

One of the essential parts of Sophia Fahs' approach to religious education was that children need to be able to see and experience and ask questions about what they are trying to learn. This is why, today, I know of an R.E. class for children that, during Fire Safety Month, had a real fire truck brought in to the church parking lot. They were able to climb all over the truck, ask the fire fighters questions, and they received fire hats, toys, and fire safety information. To me, that sounds like a blast! Another method often used is for children with questions about a certain topic to write to someone famous. So I know of an entire religious education program that wrote to Pete Seeger, who was a Unitarian Universalist. [And –yes!- they received a letter back!]

Sophia Fahs describes just such an exercise in her book, *Today's Children and Yesterday's Heritage*. A sixth grade class of Unitarian Universalist boys and girls asked their teacher the question, "Do scientists pray?" The teacher helped them figure out that one way to answer that question was for them to write to several scientists. So they wrote to eight scientists, including Raymond L. Ditmars, and Albert Einstein. Mr. Ditmars wrote back:

"In my mind, prayer can be accomplished in various ways. A reverent thought in witnessing some wonder of Nature, some beautiful and natural thing, and the realization that I may enjoy it or be governed by it, seems to me a prayer of thanksgiving-- an acknowledgment to the Great Guiding Spirit of the world in which we live. I often pray thus, consciously or unconsciously. Sincerely yours, Raymond L. Ditmars."

If our religious education programming for children is supposed to awaken in them a sense of awe and amazement, then the letter the class received from Albert Einstein certainly did! Also, it was in German! So one of the children found an adult who could translate it for them. It read:

"Dear Phyllis:

I have tried to answer your question as simply as possible. Here is my answer. Scientific research work has as a basis the assumption that all events, including the activities of people, are determined by laws of nature. Therefore, a research worker would hardly be inclined to believe that events would be influenced by prayer-- that is, through an expressed wish to a supernatural being. To be sure, it must be granted that our actual understanding of these laws is very fragmentary [we only know and understand a small part of all there is to know and understand], so in the last analysis the belief in the existence of these fundamental laws rests upon a kind of faith. This faith has always been further justified through the achievements of science. On the other hand, anyone who has seriously studied science is filled with a conviction that a spirit tremendously superior to the human spirit manifests itself in the law-abidingness of the world, before whom we, with our simple powers, must humbly stand back. So, the study of science leads to religious feeling which is certainly to be distinguished from the religiousness of less-informed people. Friendly greetings to you. Yours, A. Einstein."

[The book goes on to say that:]

"Each Sunday brought at least one new letter until all the eight scientists had been heard from. All of the men were courteous and thoughtful in their replies.

Each professed a belief in a higher power. Each said that he prayed, but not in the usual ways. One said he could sometimes pray in church, but the others spoke of finding the experience of prayer most often when feeling in the presence of the mystery or wonder of the natural world." [pp. 167-171]

Volunteering to help with our religious education programs can make all the difference in the life of our children and youth. I'll close with this story from the essay by Rev. Roberta Nelson called, "The Teacher as Spiritual Guide." She writes: "A few years ago in a local church newsletter, the minister wrote about the return of a young woman in her thirties who had entered the Unitarian Universalist ministry. In her sermon, she told the congregation that they had 'saved her life.' A young man then wrote in response to the column, saying: 'Someone asked me why I remember religious education so fondly or what my favorite curriculum was. I had to reply that other than *About Your Sexuality* [which is now Unitarian Universalist OWL programming] (which was truly memorable), I didn't remember much of the curricula. I do remember being nurtured in a way that I was not nurtured elsewhere in my life. I remember it as a place that showed what school should be like. I remember the church as a safe place even when my family was not. I remember talking to the minister when things were bad. Our talks reinforced my self-esteem. I think the church saved my life, also."

Let us be silent together for a moment, in honor of the teachers and mentors who guided us through hardships and mistakes, and graced our lives with tender care and hope.

**+Hymn #1053**      *How Could Anyone Ever Tell You*

**Parting Words** (Sophia Fahs)

(Rev. Jennie)

"Life becomes religious whenever we make it so: when some new light is seen, when some deeper appreciation is felt, when some larger outlook is gained, when some nobler purpose is formed, when some task is well done."