



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Growing Up Absorbed: Lifelong Religious Exploration

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This summer I had the opportunity to serve on the UUCF search committee that recommended we hire Melissa as our new Director of Religious Education—a title we often abbreviate as “DRE.” One question our committee explored during the search process was, “What qualifications would an ideal DRE candidate have?”

The DRE job description contains a long list of all that we were looking for, but I was surprised to find one particular idea freshly resonated with me. In addition to many key qualifications, I recognized that I would love for our next DRE to have, not only knowledge and appreciation for pathbreaking UU religious educators upon whose shoulders we are raised up, but also a sense of calling to the work of continuing to innovate the liberal religious education our children need today and into the future.

It’s important to remind ourselves from time to time that the living tradition of Unitarian Universalism which we all enjoy today did not make itself; it was forged collaboratively by our spiritual ancestors. Equally important today is honoring our theological forebears by doing in our own time what they did in theirs. Our challenge today is to continue to create and shape the groundbreaking UU educational history future generations will inherit.

The good news is that our new DRE, Melissa, does have a strong interest in learning about and building upon our rich Unitarian Universalist heritage. So, as we begin a new chapter in the life of our own R.E. program here at UUCF, I want to share with you the contributions of three UUs who sparked three crucially-important turning

points in the history of what has been called “the liberal religious educators movement.”

I should hasten to add that when I refer to the liberal religious educators movement, I don't mean political liberalism *per se*; I'm referring to the classical *philosophical* liberalism of the Enlightenment, a liberalism rather more inspired by John Locke, John Stuart Mill, and Immanuel Kant. Classical liberalism derives from the Latin root *liber*, meaning “free.” And a significant part of our UU heritage is about claiming our *freedom* of religion.

The contemporary UU theological shift, sometimes called the “Liberal Turn in Religion”, is a move away from hierarchical authority, tradition and the past as the primary sources of authority, and toward an emphasis upon ***reason and experience as increasingly significant sources of authority.***

If this sermon leaves you curious to learn more, one good starting point for learning about our UU history of R.E. is *Growing Up Absorbed: Religious Education Among the Unitarian Universalists*, by Richard Gilbert. If you prefer a variety of primary sources, Gilbert also edited an anthology titled *In the Middle of a Journey: Readings in Unitarian Universalist Faith Development*. Some of you may recognize Gilbert's name as the author of the popular *Building Your Own Theology* curriculum.

There is a lot to say about the history of the liberal religious educators movement, but to limit myself to three inflection points, let me start with “**arguably the most important address on Unitarian religious education in the nineteenth century.**” In 1837, The Rev. William Ellery Channing gave a memorable and influential speech to the Unitarian Sunday School Society (*Middle* 19). As you listen to this excerpt, consider how this religiously *liberal* — this religiously *free* — worldview that Channing is espousing is similar or different from what you experienced as a child.

It is certainly different from the theologically conservative — and much more restrictive — worldview that shaped my childhood as a Southern Baptist. I was encouraged to read the Bible for myself, but it was assumed that I (or any reasonable person) would reach the same theologically orthodox answers approved of by the Southern Baptist Convention. Spoiler alert: that did not turn out to be the case.

In contrast, we UUs have a big tent and presuppose that there are many different spiritual paths and truths that an individual might be drawn toward. We are *pluralists* (there is more than one legitimate path), but not relativists (we do not hold that just anything goes).

Here's how Channing put it in 1837:

The great end of religious instruction,

whether in the Sunday-school or family, is,
not to stamp *our* minds irresistibly on the young,

but to **stir up their own;**

not to make them see with *our* eyes,

but to **look inquiringly and steadily with their own;**

not to give them a definite amount of knowledge,

but to **inspire a fervent love of truth;**

not to form an outward regularity,

but to **touch inward springs;**

not to burden the memory,

but to **quicken and strengthen the power of thought;**

not to bind them by ineradicable prejudices

to our particular sect or peculiar notions,

but to **prepare them to impartial conscientious judging**

of whatever subjects may, in the course of Providence,

be offered to their decision....

Our great aim in giving them instruction must be to aid them

in the **acquisition of truth for themselves.** (51-52).

Can you feel the radical freedom and the respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person at the core of Channing's liberal religious worldview?

Toward the end of that same address, Channing also said that, "**The most gifted in our congregation cannot find a worthier field of labor than the Sunday-school**" (26). So, it's not too late to be in touch with Melissa if you'd like to volunteer to teach R.E.!

If we had more time, we could consider other distinguished nineteenth-century Unitarian educators:

- **Elizabeth Palmer Peabody** (1804-1894), “the founder of the kindergarten movement in the U.S.”
- **Horace Mann** (1796 - 1859), founder of “the first public school system in the U.S.”
- **Bronson Alcott** (1799-1888), founder of the Temple School in Boston, whose experimental pedagogy helped inspire many progressive educational innovations. (*Growing* 54).

We have previously explored the contributions of Channing, Peabody, and Alcott in greater depth in UU history sermons available in our online archive.

Last, I’d like to shift our focus to two highly influential UU religious educators in the twentieth-century: Sophia Lyon Fahs (1876 - 1978) and Angus MacLean (1892 - 1969).

If you have attended one of our Christmas Eve Candlelight Services, you may recognize Fahs’ name. Some of her writing has been adapted into the lyrics of a Christmas hymn we sing each year titled “For So the Children Come.” The chorus goes like this, **“Each night a child is born is a holy night: / A time for singing, A time for wondering, A time for worshipping, / Each night a child is born is a holy night.”**

That’s an emblematic liberal religious move, widening our circle of concern to be more inclusive. As we gather to celebrate Jesus’s birthday, remembering his singular life is of course important. But Fahs urges us not to miss the larger point: not only was Christmas Eve, two thousand years ago, a holy night, but “*Each night a child is born is a holy night.*”

Can you feel the power of that affirmation, that it’s not just about one person long ago, it’s about *all* of us? And can you sense the connection to Channing’s earlier emphasis that it’s not about forming others in our own image; it’s about nurturing the unique flourishing of each individual? “*Each night a child is born is a holy night: / A time for singing, A time for wondering, A time for worshipping, / Each night a child is born is a holy night.*”

Someday I’ll have to plan a full sermon just about Fahs, but for now, I’ll limit myself to a few highlights of her incredible life. Part of what I admire most about Fahs

is how radical she was in her time. She was born in 1876, and died in 1978 at the age of 101. She was a radical long before second-wave feminism, and began pushing the envelope of religious education during the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, which in many ways was a very conservative time in this nation's history.

I particularly identify with her motivation of not wanting the children and youth in her care to experience what I and so many others have experienced, of growing up and having the conservative religious dogma of one's childhood crash against the complex realities of life. Fahs urged us to equip children and youth to be intrepid religious explorers from the beginning (*Growing 70*).

Along these lines, one of my favorite quotes from Fahs is that, "**The Bible is not a children's book**" (*Middle 81*) She's right! There is tremendous wisdom in many parts of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, but there are also many parts that are either inappropriate for children, or that plant seeds of confusion and fear (*Growing 70*). Fahs urged a shift from a Bible-centered curriculum to a *child*-centered curriculum that focuses on the questions children naturally ask about life, the universe, and everything (71).

Interestingly, she was ordained as a Unitarian Universalist minister in 1958 at the age of 82, less than an hour's drive from here at Cedar Lane UU in Bethesda, Maryland (75). She actually preached her own ordination sermon. She was an absolute legend Here's how she summarized her approach to lifelong religious exploration in her landmark book *Today's Children and Yesterday's Heritage* that wrestled with how to authentically teach religion in light of all that we know in modern times. Notice the parallels to the spirit of Channing's quote we heard earlier from a century before:

Some beliefs are like walled gardens.

They encourage exclusiveness, and
the feeling of being especially privileged.

Other beliefs are expansive and

lead the way into wider and deeper sympathies.

Some beliefs are like shadows,

clouding children's days and fears of unknown calamities.

Other beliefs are like sunshine,

blessing children with the warmth of happiness.

Some beliefs are divisive,

separating saved from unsaved, friends from enemies.

Other beliefs are bonds in a world community,

where sincere differences beautify the pattern.

Some beliefs are like blinders,

shutting off the power to choose one's own direction.

Other beliefs are like gateways opening wide vistas for exploration.

Some beliefs weaken a person's selfhood.

They blight the growth of resourcefulness.

Other beliefs nurture self-confidence and

enrich the feeling of personal worth.

Some beliefs are rigid, like the body of death,

impotent in a changing world.

Other beliefs are pliable, like the young sapling,

ever growing with the upward thrust of life.

It is indeed important what [humankind] has believed.

It is important what we believe.

And what a child believes is also a serious matter—

not a subject for jest or sentimentality. (78)

Overall, it would be difficult to overestimate the influence Sophia Lyon Fahs had—and continues to have—on generations of UU religious educators (80).

And if Fahs represents the quintessential *Unitarian* religious educator of the twentieth century, our third turning point is Angus MacLean, who is the quintessential religious educator from the *Universalist* half of our UU heritage (92). Similar to Fahs's honest assessment that the Bible is not always appropriate for children, MacLean found it problematic that almost all religious education curricula lacked transparency about the parts of the Bible that were much more “myth and legend” than historical fact. As with Fahs, keep in mind how ahead of his time he was. MacLean was making this subversive point in the 1920s and 1930s (96).

And distinct from the longer quotes I shared with you from Channing and Fahs, the most famous quote from MacLean is uniquely a mere five words: **“The method is the message”** (99). Part of what he meant is that regardless of the content we are intended to convey, **the way we teach is highly correlated to the lesson the students will learn**. If we teach in a rigid, controlling way with predetermined outcomes, the core lesson students will take away is that being rigid, dogmatic, and controlling is important. In contrast, if we teach in an open-minded, open-hearted, exploratory way, the core lessons students will take away is that being open and curious is important.

In MacLean’s own words:

Our message is not facts, not a creed, not a particular book, not a particular Messiah. It is a way and method by which the child or adult is helped to grow in self-understanding, in the understanding of others and in a full relationship with [the] universe. **We believe that the essence of our method is the method of democracy.** It is democracy as represented by the search for meanings rather than a didactic presentation of facts which must be learned. It is democracy as represented by a working-together relationship rather than a follow-the-leader relationship. **Our teachers and pupils explore together....**
(*Middle 202*)

Exploring big questions and new possibilities without a predetermined outcome is at the heart of the liberal religious education movement.

Here’s one other famous story about MacLean: One day a colleague from a more theologically conservative religious movement approached MacLean and said the following about the liberal approach to religious education: **“You [religious liberals] don’t know where you’re going, but you’re on your way.”** On the one hand, that appraisal could be received as a backhanded compliment, implying that we UUs are really busy heading in no particular direction—or perhaps in far too many directions. On the other hand, we religious liberals might say, you’re right, we don’t know precisely where we’re going, not that there’s anything wrong with that! Or we could turn that

critique around to say that, it's arguably better to be honest that none of us is sure about the destination, than to feel falsely sure about the destination, even while actually being deluded by obsolete, anachronistic theology.

MacLean said it this way: "Our faith may not know the end-of-life, but if it has assurance of direction, it has what matters most" (xv). Remember MacLean's famous five word maxim: "The method is the message." Today we might rephrase it this way: we may not know the destination, but we are "answering the call of love." **Love is our method and our message. And the way to any destination worth getting to will be reached by love. In a complex and complicated world, UUs freely choose to side with love.**

If we had more time, I would next invite us to explore a fourth inflection point of our UU commitment, over more than five decades (since 1970), to comprehensive lifespan sexuality education as a core component of a liberal religious education. Or more recently, we could consider the ways Religious Educators led our movement in the "UU White Supremacy Teach-ins," have helped innovate Full Faith Week, and more. But that too will have to wait for another day.

For now, I'll give the final words to Gilbert about our lifelong journey of religious exploration:

Growing up is absurd and absorbing—
the almost absurd transformation
from infancy to senility
from innocence to wisdom
from birth to death
The absorbing reality of choosing a life
and a way to live it and to give it—
growing passion and compassion
as arms and legs of a soul;
Creating community—moving from "me" to "we"—
committing one's life to something
that will outlast it. (*Growing* 327)

In that spirit, may we freely choose to commit to a movement for freedom, love, and justice that is far bigger than anything we could ever accomplish alone.