

“Why I Am a Missionary”

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jan Carlsson-Bull
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What a loaded word it is if we've grown up in a faith tradition or downwind of a faith tradition with the common practice of sending forth true believers to distant lands to convert the so-called heathen, the marginalized multitudes not yet in pace with the hallowed few on a sure path to a glorious afterlife. Missionary! It's a notion compelling for some and cause for others, perhaps many of us here this morning, to positively recoil. For years and years I recoiled at the term itself. As a child I was privy and vulnerable to the missionary as proselytizer, also known as Aunt Thelma. Aunt Thelma belonged to a church whose core identity was “missionary.” When she came to visit, my Dad rolled his eyes and headed for the golf course. My Mother, her sister, was patient and kind – right out of Paul's New Testament Letter to the Corinthians that describes love as “patient and kind.” Not that Mom was on the same religious page with her sister, but she modeled loving tolerance in the face of her sister's decided intolerance. No setting, no person – especially a religiously curious child – was out of bounds for Thelma's missionary work. More than a few hours of my life were spent in therapy diffusing the threat-heavy core of her particular brand. Her message was gospel writ in granite, gospel that found voice in a passionate certainty.

How can I possibly call myself a missionary, now that I've found the “true faith” of Unitarian Universalism? Rewind that statement. One of the attractions for many of us who have chosen this faith is that it's not faith “writ in granite.” Nor do we find voice in a “passionate certainty.” It's faith in flux, uncertain, in search, personal and communal in its unfolding, a faith that reminds us again and again that we can live together in loving covenant, that together we can create lasting legacies of care and compassion, that we can meet in mindful worship and honor in our everyday lives the living tradition that is Unitarian Universalism.

A missionary is one who is sent – but for what purpose, toward what end, by what means? I believe that we are called by our own lessons of experience, by our heeding a “still small voice” nascent in each of us, and by a faith community – not just First Parish, but the larger faith community that is Unitarian Universalism – to be the most amazing creatures we can be in this interdependent web of life itself. Each of us enters the world with bud-like possibility. How we fare rests not just on our own choosing or the circumstances into which we were born, but the will, good or ill, and the spirit, cooperative or otherwise, of the rest of humankind.

Our theological tent is a large one, not erected for conversion but for transformation through which you and I and the oft-feared “other” however the “other” may be defined, discover we are family. For some members of our human family, the conviction is intense that truth is singular and with border crossings – our Aunt Thelmas.

For some, it is easier to ignore faith and religion altogether, tossing the countless varieties of faith and religion into one steaming pot, all of whose ingredients are deemed toxic. How understandable it is to respond thus to the zealotry of the religiously certain, to react to the harm done and being done in the name of religion by dismissing it altogether.

For some who come into these doors, the mere mention of “God” elicits a visceral avoidance, chafing patches of barely scabbed scar tissue of early religious experience. For some who come into these doors, if God is not cited, worship doesn't qualify as worship. Many of us arrive as ironically sure of ourselves in terms of what we don't want, yet varied, so varied, in

how we articulate what it is that gratifies our religious yearning, our yearning for something that transcends our smallness, bringing us into a larger space where we can yet be assured that our voice will be heard and taken seriously.

What is the “gospel,” the good news, of Unitarian Universalism? What is there here, in this faith, in this congregation, to get excited about? Why would I possibly imagine myself or any of you as a “missionary,” a message bearer of high enthusiasm, given the rancid residue that the very term might carry for any of us, most surely myself?

For me this faith rings true – not granite writ true, but credible, mirroring the surprises, the detours, the contours of how life unfolds. It’s a faith of heart and mind, though we often lend undue weight to mind, reasoned and erudite as we deem ourselves to be. It’s a faith whose quite recently adopted principles and purposes reflect heart and mind in flux, but ever leaning toward compassionate justice; a search for truth and meaning – with emphasis on search; acceptance and nurturance of one another; an ethic of peacemaking as an activist enterprise; governance driven by practices democratic, muddy as democracy can be; learning that never stops; teaching that embraces the questions; theology that invites a host of modifiers such as liberation, feminist, anti-racist, multicultural, theist, agnostic, each lending resonance to our tightrope walk over the daunting chasm of time and being; and the humility born of mutuality, for none of us conducts an honest search for truth and meaning in isolation.

As Unitarian Universalists and as humans, we’re all in this grand and glorious mess and miasma of Creation together. I’m ever grateful to know a faith that affirms the mess, that nurtures the questions, and that holds an ethic of compassion as we put one foot in front of the other. Am I still a Christian? I always answer: inclusively, but not exclusively. I learn and grow from many sources, though my early Protestant Christianity grounds my theology perhaps more than any other tradition. Had I been born into the practice of Roman Catholic Christianity or Judaism or Islam, my grounding would be different. I am ever grateful to be in a tent with open flaps that I recognize as the larger meeting house of this faith that we share.

For me, this faith rings credible, calling me day after day to another chance to be larger than I could otherwise be, larger of heart, broader of mind, more resilient of spirit; and because this is so, I am thrilled to speak openly about Unitarian Universalism, just in case you asked, just in case a stranger on the T leans over my shoulder to skim some faith-specific article in my lap, just in case I run into someone at Shaw’s and they happen to recognize me as the “new minister” and I once again hear: “Oh yeah, you’re the folks who don’t have to believe anything, right?” “Not quite,” and I explain in terms that are distinct for each of us here.

We are each challenged again and again to explain our faith, to articulate what it is we believe. Does it matter what we believe?

Sophia Lyon Fahs, that pioneer of liberal religious education, thinks so. In her words:

“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 divisive, separating the saved from the unsaved, friends from enemies.

Other beliefs are bonds in a world community, where sincere differences beautify the pattern.

...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.”

Fahs' contrasts emerged from her own religious journey. Born in 1876 as the daughter of Presbyterian missionaries in China, she was nurtured early in the tradition of evangelical missionary, one sent to convert unbelievers. Her arc bent slowly. As an undergraduate at the Presbyterian College of Wooster in Ohio, Sophia was intent on a career in the Student Volunteer movement, whose goal was " 'the evangelization of the world in this generation.' " She sealed her commitment in signing a pledge card: " 'It is my purpose in life, if God permit, to become a foreign missionary.' "

Two years of her life were spent visiting colleges and urging students to take the same pledge she had taken. A turning point came with study at the University of Chicago during the earliest years of the 1900s. While hoping to gain more skills that would prepare her to become the foreign missionary of her pledge, her keen intellect opened to the ideas then gaining ground there – that the Bible was a most human anthology and education could be modeled on how a child developed when her experiences were affirmed and her questions encouraged. Biblical criticism and progressive education sparked her mind and her imagination. In 1902 she married, and she and her husband headed to New York City, where he worked for the Methodist church and Sophia continued her studies at Columbia University's Teachers College and eventually at Union Theological Seminary, my own *alma mater* just across the street from Columbia

As Sophia Lyon Fahs became the mother of five, she began to publish her ideas in the form of religious education curricula for children, with a philosophy that honored children's experiences over hard-edged doctrine and application that took root at the newly founded Riverside Church, where she became Director of Religious Education. Observing her own children, she grew increasingly attentive to a child's sense of wonder and penchant for questioning, which became the building blocks of her professional work.

Sophia was her own "young sapling, ever growing with the upward thrust of life." Grow and stretch she did, with a faith that grew pliable and expansive, leading the way into "wider and deeper sympathies" that led her to go to work for the American Unitarian Association. From 1937 to 1965 she developed religious education curricula for this faith movement, newly defined in 1961 as the Unitarian Universalist Association. This woman whose ardent spirit led her in her early years toward a career as foreign missionary was ordained at the age of 82 as a Unitarian minister. She retired at the age of 91. Fear not, I won't stay that long! Her life wound down at the age of 101.

Some would say she never fulfilled her early goal of becoming a missionary. I don't think so. Fahs' mission evolved. What she discovered she lived. Her early evangelical zeal morphed into a high enthusiasm for discerning and discovering and distributing in voice and print her unfolding beliefs about religion and its meaning for growing hearts and minds.

I empathize. I empathize with her early sympathies and her will to share widely what mattered deeply. I empathize with her slowly expanding inclinations toward a religion that is free in spirit and pliable in texture, that serves the cause of the human spirit in the natural world, that tends more to the here and now than the complete unknown of the hereafter, and wherein the notion of God breathes as freely as a child's question or a child's walk in the woods or a child's need to love and trust.

Sophia Lyon Fahs is just one of the myriad reasons and exemplars I can offer for telling a complete stranger – or you, Sunday after Sunday – about Unitarian Universalism. As for my mission and yours, it is as living as our tradition, as individual and idiosyncratic as each of us, as flawed by human error and human foibles as I am, as defined by community as we are, and as expansive in spirit as is the spirit of the larger congregation of this faith that we share and love and talk about and sing about. So right now, let's sing about it as we stand and lift our voices to "We Laugh, We Cry." Amen

Sources

Sophia Lyon Fahs, "It Matters What We Believe," in *Singing the Living Tradition*, The Unitarian Universalist Association, Beacon Press, Boston, 1993, 657.

Edith Fisher Hunter, "Sophia Lyon Fahs: Liberal Religious educator, 1876-1978, Notable American Unitarians, Harvard Square Library Home, www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/unitarians/fahs.html.