

# HOME GROWN RELIGION

## SOPHIA FAHS LECTURE

### UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST GENERAL ASSEMBLY

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It was 1980. I had been a Unitarian Universalist for about two years when my seven year old son Eric said to me: “Dad, what happens to us after we die? Is there a heaven?”

I responded as follows: “Well, some people believe that after we die we go to heaven where we live forever, and other people believe that when we die, our life is over and we live on through the memories of people who have known and loved us.”

Eric: “What do you believe?”

Me: “Well, some people believe that after we die we go to heaven, and other people believe....”

Eric: “But what do you believe?”

Me: “O.K. I believe that when we die we live on through other people but not in a heaven.”

Eric took this in and responded with words I will never forget, “I’ll believe what you believe for now, and when I grow up I’ll make up my own mind.”

My seven year old was teaching me something here. He was being a developmentally appropriate UU child, and I was not being a developmentally appropriate UU parent. He knew he needed answers, for now, to an important religious question, and he also knew that he could seek his own answers when he was prepared to do so. For my part, being a former Catholic still fleeing dogmatism, I was afraid of imposing my beliefs on my child. So I responded to him as if he were a 20 year old taking a course on world religions. I had a better sense of what *not* to do as a UU parent—don’t impose my beliefs—than of what to do, namely give him religious guidance.

A little later, I realized that we should offer Eric a little more religious literacy when he picked up a coin, look at it carefully, and asked, “What does this mean—In Gode We Trust?”

Just a few months ago I heard the most prominent and respected TV and radio journalist in Minneapolis and St. Paul mention on the air that he was raised in a Universalist church. I thought “how cool—maybe he will put in a plug for Unitarian Universalism.” Well, when asked by his co-host what Universalism was, he said all he could remember was visiting a lot of other churches; he didn’t recall much about Universalism itself. Ouch.

I’m not telling you anything new. We’ve been aware of this problem since at least the 1970s. We’ve been changing our Sunday School curricula to try to give our children a better grounding in Unitarian Universalism; we no longer keep our own tradition in hiding. But we need something bolder, something bigger than curriculum change.

Here’s my starting point: Religion is *caught* more than taught, and it’s caught most fully in the family. Church programming can supplement but not replace the home. Most parents and religious professionals agree would agree, but we know more about running organized programs in church buildings than we know about supporting faith formation in the home. When thinking about how to get parents more involved in the religious development of their children, our instinct is to start a new class for parents in how to talk to their children about spirituality. Nine parents will enroll, six will attend any given session because of schedule conflicts, and even though the parents involved will benefit, nothing much will change in the congregation.

My point is that traditional programs are not enough. The mother of all church programs, the Sunday School, began as a bold new movement in the United States about 200 years ago. It was an important step forward for children but it had the unintended effect of replacing the home as the locus of religious education and communicating to parents that they are not up to the task of teaching their children. By the mid-twentieth century when reverence for professional expertise reached its zenith, the message from the churches was clear: parents should leave religious education to the professionals and to volunteers trained by professionals. Nowadays every Christian, Jewish, and Unitarian Universalist leader I’ve talked to knows that there is something amiss with how we are doing religious education of children. Church schools are being asked to carry weight they were never designed for, attendance is inconsistent, and it’s increasingly hard to attract committed volunteers who will establish deep relationships with the children. Religious illiteracy grows while church school curricula multiply. But the reflexive response to this challenge is to do more of what professionals know how to do: design a new program and throw it into the breach. We need a new way of thinking and a new set of practices. For the last decade I’ve been learning a different approach to solving community problems by becoming a cultural change activist and community

**organizer. For the past several years I've been applying this way of working, a citizen engagement approach rather than a service providing or educational approach, to the Family Chalice Project in Minneapolis/St. Paul. I am here to share the first fruits of this way of working on the challenge of fostering home grown religion in our denomination.**

**I begin by offering twin goals for the religious education or faith formation of Unitarian Universalist children:**

- First, that they grow up spiritually alive, free, and engaged with the world.**
- Second, that they grow up as citizens in our living religious tradition.**

**The first goal reflects our tradition of spiritual search, personal freedom of mind and conscience, and commitment to building a just and loving world. The blend of these elements is what makes us unique as Unitarian Universalists.**

**Note that the second goal refers to citizenship, which means active involvement in building and maintaining local congregations and the Unitarian Universalist movement. It means more than membership, more than being on the rolls and showing up on Sunday. Citizens are engaged stakeholders.**

**Now there has been tension between these two goals in the history of liberal religion. One source of the tension is between the individual and the community, the "I" and the "We." Religious liberals are nervous about tradition, authority, and conformity because history has witnessed the tyranny of the community over the individual. The second source of the tension began when our 19<sup>th</sup> century forbearers acknowledged the value all the world's religions. Religious liberals grew reluctant to promote allegiance to any one religion, even our own—ironically the very religion that produced such bold insights into the universal value of faith traditions.**

**We have to get over this ambivalence, and I think we can. There is now a third way between conservative authoritarian but strong community and the liberal individualistic but weak community—it's the emerging public philosophy of communitarianism which emphasizes a balance between the "I" and the "We," and teaches that individuality only exists within a community and a tradition. Look deeply into the self and you see a web of connections to others in community. Look deeply into community and you see individual selves each with inherent worth and dignity. From a communitarian perspective, a fundamental task of a democratic community is to nurture citizens, starting in childhood, in the habits of the heart and mind that are necessary for human flourishing within a democratic community. Public education, then, is more than a place to teach knowledge and skills for personal gain; it is "people making" for a democratic world we want to build and live in together. In terms of religion, a communitarian approach says that there are**

no personal religious beliefs, practices, or experiences that are not connected in some way to a tradition of beliefs, practices, and experiences, even if the individual is rejecting that tradition. No one is a religious island, and religious history is part of us whether we like it or not.

This third way beyond authoritarianism and individualism in religious education steers away from molding a passive child into a fixed tradition on the one hand, and treating every child as the creator of his or her own religious universe, on the other hand. The first path is stifling, as we know, but the second path gives our children wings but not roots. It's a fantasy that getting out of our children's way or teaching them a little about all religious traditions will release them to find their own path. The reality is that we hand our children over to the gravitational pulls of a me-first mainstream consumer culture that does not satisfy their spiritual needs or help them flourish—and that sometimes leads them to turn to a more authoritarian religious community. (I recently learned that Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, came from a lukewarm Universalist family background. His paternal grandparents were strong Universalists, his father drifted away from the Universalist church, and Smith himself grew up as a spiritual searcher without religious moorings, until he found his own. With his religious genius, I can't help but think that Joseph Smith might have become one of our great leaders if he had been given a Universalist religious upbringing.)

My point is that because our children feel strong pulls from the culture of self-absorption and the culture of authority, our ambivalence about exerting our own gravitational pull towards Unitarian Universalism leaves them religiously abandoned. *We either raise our children ourselves or others will raise them for us.* If we want our children to grow up spiritually alive, free, and engaged with the world, we have to offer them citizenship papers in our Unitarian Universalist tradition. They will be free to decline this citizenship when they grow up, and many of them may fly on their own during college and into young adulthood, but they will feel a gravitational pull back as they mature, ask new questions about life, and have their own children.

I'd like to reflect now on how these spiritual and citizenship goals for religious education can be met simultaneously. I see two main venues:

- **First, the family:** where there is depth and continuity of relationships with the key people in children's lives, and where core values are lived, modeled, and developed. The family connects children to community and to faith traditions. However, the twentieth century history of professional educational practice, including religious education, was a failed effort to work around parents and the home. It failed. *We start with the home in faith formation or we don't start at all.* But the individual family is too small a unit. The faith formation of children is too hard for most of us as parents to do alone, even if we were born and raised in this

tradition, which is usually not the case. A larger We is necessary—families coming together in community.

- **So the second venue is community experiences that combine spiritual richness and citizenship opportunities**
  - These occur in settings where children and adults come together over time
  - Where spirituality is experienced as alive and free
  - Where people are contributors to the activities, not just consumers.

A potentially powerful venue is youth camping experiences that involve community of youth and adults, opportunity for spiritual experiences, and active participation of youth in shaping what happens. What these youth experiences generally lack is meaningful parent involvement and continuity with the home. In fact, many youth in our churches programs are located geographically as far away from parents as is possible without moving to the parking lot.

Intergenerational worship services and family camps offer other opportunities for families and communities. But they often miss a key element. Intergenerational worship tends to be a passive experience, lacking the co-creative, citizenship element. Unitarian Universalist summer camps, while strong on family, community, and participation, are often light on the Unitarian Universalist tradition; some camp leaders have told me that they don't want non- UUs to feel left out, which presumably would happen if we were bold enough to honor and celebrate our own rituals and symbols and traditions. People who go to a Buddhist meditation center are not offended to see Buddhist symbols—it's a Buddhist center, after all! How do we raise our children with the "feel" of Unitarian Universalism if we are afraid to expose them to the sights, sounds, and symbols of our tradition?

Here's my main point: *The central venue for faith development is the home linked to an intentional UU community.* The key active ingredient that makes this work is not what we spend most of our time on: Sunday school classes, worship services, and youth activities. Instead, the key active ingredient is the spiritual development of parents and other adults, and their grounding in both a local church community and the Unitarian Universalist tradition. Our children will not advance much beyond our adults; even if they do so during childhood, they will not return as adults. And if parents have allegiance only to a local congregation (and even more limiting, to a particular favored minister) but not to the larger Unitarian Universalist movement, then why would we expect their children to join another UU church after they leave home and move away from their local community?

I now want to add another layer of complexity to the challenge we face in raising our children religiously. As I noted before, gravitational forces in the larger culture threaten to swamp the efforts of parents and religious communities, and I'm

afraid we pay too little attention to these forces in our churches. My nominations for key challenges are:

First, the me-first, materialistic, consumer culture, with its genius for turning wants into needs and luxuries into necessities. Our children convert to being eager consumers as soon as they can see a TV screen and listen to a jingle. In my own community organizing efforts, I've been working with parents to blow the whistle on one prominent example of the consumer culture invading childhood: out-of-control children's birthday parties, which for the middle class have become competitive extravaganzas where even balanced parents feel pressure to go over the top every year, turning birthday parties into annual coronations and young children into entitled princes and princesses who do the party circuit year round. And it's never enough in a consumer culture that does not satisfy: One 8-year-old girl said to her mother after an at-home party that her mother had worked hard on: "It just wasn't magic enough." She probably attended Sunday School the next day and was instructed on the religious values of her faith tradition.

The second cultural challenge on my list is the frantic culture of busyness among adults and children—and let's face it, among clergy and other religious professionals. Widespread time famine, particularly in the achievement oriented middle class, is an outcome of overscheduled kids and overworked parents who don't have time for family meals let alone regular attendance at Sunday School or volunteering to staff church religious education programs. And sometimes our churches encourage an unbalanced life by running our staff and lay leaders into the ground. This is a spiritual issue, not just a logistical issue, and we've been silent on it. In the words of Thomas Merton:

"There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence, and that is activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of this innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by a multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone and everything, is to succumb to violence. The frenzy of our activism neutralizes our work for peace. It destroys our own inner capacity for peace because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful." (From: *Confessions of a Guilty Bystander*)

A third challenge is the culture of disengagement, not citizenship. Political scientist Robert Putnam has documented the decline in civic engagement in the past thirty years in the United States. We are now a nation of customers and clients, not active citizens. That's how we think of religious education: as a service we pay professionals to provide for our children to consume—soccer schedule permitting. Middle class people in particular expect high quality programming for their time and dollar in all aspects of church life. (A member of my congregation said at the coffee hour after a service: "The tenor was a little flat today and I lost the sermon in the middle. I didn't get my needs met today." It made me think that we evaluate

every program but don't ask people to evaluate what they put into it.) The result is that our religious professionals overwork and don't have time to innovate, parent volunteers give very limited time to Sunday School teaching, and even large churches have trouble recruiting leaders.

These three interrelated social pathologies of middle class life in the contemporary world—consumerism, time famine, and civic disengagement—are a real life curriculum, or an anti-life curriculum, for our children. If we don't find a way to counteract this curriculum or we will end up with “feel-good faith formation” that looks and sounds good but lacks power and depth. I am focusing my own career these days on community organizing around these themes in various settings, including health care, schools, and churches. I've got ideas for another day and another forum about how we can organize in our UU churches to name and combat these cultural problems just as we have done for sexism, racism, war and the denial of gay rights. For now, I want to stress that traditional faith formation programming gets swamped by the larger culture, and that while we have focused our social justice work on one set of serious cultural problems (and let's face it, problems we tend to think that other people have more than we liberals do), we have to start facing the toxicities of middle class life that threaten us, or children, and our communities. We are in the belly of this beast and confronting it will be uncomfortable but prophetic.

I've said so far that we need an approach to faith formation that puts family and home and intentional community at the center, that combines the I and the We, spiritual freedom and rich tradition. We will have to go beyond our traditional programming silos of worship, social justice, and separate faith formation activities for volunteers for children, youth, and adults separately. Instead we will have to bring the generations into closer involvement and create experiences of spiritual depth and participatory engagement. It will have to address powerful cultural forces that inhibit spiritual living and active citizenship. And now, briefly, a final challenge:

It's a barrier from our history that we have trouble talking about: we came out of liberal Christianity and are now post-Christian. How can we pass on the Unitarian Universalist tradition if we don't come to grips with our Christian past? In the family systems terms I use as a family therapist, it's a cut off from family of origin that keeps us from moving ahead into religious maturity. In personal terms, how am I supposed to revere forbearers who believed wholeheartedly in the religion I walked away from? The initiative that I will now describe has been crucial for me and the people I've worked with in figuring out how to deal with this central challenge of Unitarian Universalist identity.

At First Universalist Church in Minneapolis we have spent five years developing the Family Chalice Project. Here's its mission statement: Because we recognize that the religious development of our children occurs mostly in the home, the Family Chalice fosters the spiritual growth of families through home-based

religious practices and conversations tied to the church community. The Family Chalice is a democratic, family-led initiative that engages the energy, knowledge, and experience of the whole community.

About sixty parents and other adults have been involved in the development of several action projects. We use the Families and Democracy Model which I developed at the University of Minnesota; it's a community organizing approach, rather than a traditional program development approach, where groups come together for open ended periods of time to tackle a challenge, go deep into it, interview others in the community, and develop initiatives that call on the energy and knowledge of the community. In the Family Chalice, we have used this grass roots, democratic approach process to develop and field test a ritual designed to accomplish the goals of spiritual depth and connection to the UU tradition through engagement with families and the larger community. It's called the Sources Supper.

We've been studying Unitarian Universalist history with an eye to uncovering themes and stories that speak to us today. We've been developing a meal ritual for the home that might do for UUs what the Seder does for Jewish people—tell the UU story as OUR story in a way that is home based, binds us to our past, and speaks to us about our struggles today. A ritual designed to be done not once and then forgotten about, but instead celebrated year after year until its themes, figures, and stories get into the consciousness of the congregation and the hemoglobin of our members—where we know the themes, figures and stories from our past like we know about the journey of Mary and Joseph, and Moses and the parting of the Red Sea. A ritual where we gather in one another's homes and share something about our current spiritual dilemmas in light of what our forbearers faced. A ritual that our children can be part of, then rebel against when they are teens, and eventually feel drawn back to when they have their own children. A ritual that is never set in stone but keeps evolving as more congregation try it and own it. Because it focuses on the historical sources of Unitarian Universalism made alive for today, we decided to call it the Sources Supper. We've piloted the first version in our homes and are now working on the second version.

In our readings of the origins of Unitarianism and Universalism, we've been on a path of discovery as we keep asking ourselves what the stories say to us now. We've seen how our history is part of the stories of religious freedom in Europe and democracy in America. We also searched for a big narrative frame in UU history, a message and story line that cuts across the centuries and the particular ways that our ancestors wrote, spoke, and acted during their time in history. We were dissatisfied with the traditional historical themes of “freedom, reason, and tolerance” because these ideas, while true to the history, are specifically religious ideas and thus not spiritually compelling today. We searched for a frame that would have historical fit and contemporary religious meaning, and we consulted with people who know more UU history than we do. Here for now is the overarching frame that we have woven into the Sources Supper:

The universe is one, it's good, and we are its children. So we are open to all sources of revelation, and we push back with courage against the forces that block spiritual growth and human flourishing in our time.

We learned that our ancestors were rebels against the established order, and they created new ways to be religious by absorbing the special spirit and knowledge of their times—such as the spirit of individual freedom and knowledge about the bible or the science of evolution. Revelation for them was open ended and everywhere. Our ancestors were always restless; they kept resisting, getting in trouble, and then building something new. They were skeptics and idealists, critics and creators—and they took many risks along the way. To our surprise, we also found that many of our ancestors were mystics, people of the spirit who experienced the oneness and goodness of all creation. Both reverence and reason—affirmed, integrated, fought for, and sacrificed for.

(To give you an idea of the patience involved in the Family Chalice process, it took us more than two years of reading, reflecting, arguing, consulting, and distilling to come up with these last two paragraphs.)

For the first version of the Sources Suppers, we decided to concentrate on four founding stories of Unitarian Universalism, each connected with a date that that may eventually become the dates in the year when the congregation would mount Sources Suppers in our homes. You know, Unitarian Universalists don't have much of a liturgical calendar, and what we have is mostly from other religions (like Christmas) or secular holidays (such as Martin Luther King and Earth Day). Maybe some day we can have our own liturgical calendar. Here are pivotal dates and events in UU history that we celebrate and ritualize in the first version of the Sources Supper:

**October 27 (1553):** Michael Servetus, a scholar and mystic who dared to read the bible in its original languages and form his own opinions, is executed holding his beloved and heretical book in his arms. John Calvin and his fellow religious persecutors never recover from the public backlash.

**January 10 (1568):** The Edict of Torda, the declaration of religious tolerance authored by Francis David is issued by Unitarian King John Sigismund. For the first time, a king does not impose religious uniformity on a people. “For without freedom,” the Edict says, “their souls will not be satisfied.” Unitarians go on to realize that freedom is not merely necessary for the practice of religion—it is the heart of the spiritual life. For without freedom, their souls will not be satisfied.

**September 30 (1770):** John Murray lands in America, preaches in Good Luck, New Jersey, and launches Universalism in America, the most positive Christian religious movement since the first century. God's love permeates all creation and all are saved. Murray's cry: “Give them not hell but hope and courage.”

**May 5 (1819): William Ellery Channing's Baltimore Sermon, the first declaration of a new Unitarian denomination and the first fruit of the new American democracy for the world of religion. A free nation and a free religious people who must apply their minds to religion. The Baltimore Sermon becomes the most widely read and debated pamphlet in early America since Thomas Paine's "Common Sense." Channing, who embodies reason and reverence, a searching intellect and profound spirituality, becomes the most noted religious figure in early 19<sup>th</sup> century United States.**

The idea is that UU churches would encourage members to gather in one another's homes for Sources Suppers on these dates during the year: October 27, January 10, September 30, and September 30. In the next version of the Sources Supper, due out by December 2007 after we have piloted it locally, we will add two more key turning points in UU history. We may add other dates and events in future versions of the Sources Supper, for example, by showcasing the role of women such as Unitarian Margaret Fuller and Universalist Olympia Brown, and they later social justice movements in UU history. For now, we have chosen two additional dates that are clearly turning points in our history, but there are others.

**July 15 (1838) – Emerson's Harvard Divinity School Address. God moves from outside of creation to inside each of us, and Christianity begins to take its place as one important religious path among others. It takes Harvard nearly 30 years to recover from the shock of Emerson's address before he is invited back. Emerson was the first public intellectual in American history, and maybe the greatest. Like his Unitarian and Transcendentalist colleagues Theodore Parker and Margaret Fuller, he was both a mystic and a social critic.**

**May 1 (1933) – The Humanist Manifesto is published. It was both sobering—this world is all we have—and profoundly liberating: this world is our home and we have the capacity to understand it and flourish in it. We may be alone in the universe, but we are bound together in a grand quest for truth, freedom, and human dignity. Some UUs think that religious humanists have been all rationality and no spiritual intuition. We found otherwise. Here's an example from the noted religious humanist and religious educator Sophia Fahs, whose lecture I am honored to be giving today. In her 1952, book, *Today's Children and Yesterday's Heritage*, she first wrote analytically about how religious leaders and therapists can work together and learn from one another. And then she soared:**

**“In a united search we might find a unitary and rich meaning for all life within the cosmos, as well as a unitary picture of the single person. A dualistic deity—each part ruling but one half of life—no longer fits the great and expanded oneness to which in modern times we begin to feel we belong. We want a whole self, in a world that is undivided and in a cosmos that is unitary. This means enlarging our imaginative picture of the Everlasting Arms in whose embrace all may feel secure and live in wholeness” (p. 140).**

**For each date and event in the Sources Supper, we tell the story in a compelling way and pose questions that adults and children can respond to in our lives now. For example, here's the way we try to bring home the Michael Servetus story.**

**In many ways, it was a reading a book—the Bible-- that transformed Servetus. He engaged this book with his mind and heart, and his life was changed. We Unitarian Universalists are people of books, and many of us have been changed by encountering key books at important moments in our lives. Let's take a moment to reflect on a book that was a source of revelation in our personal lives. Can you think of a book that affected you deeply, that opened you to new ways of thinking and being in the world? It may have been a novel, a book of poetry, a nonfiction work, or a religious book. Or perhaps a song that has spoken to your heart and mind. It may be well known or only important to you. Take a moment of silence to identify that book and think about how it affected you. Then, we will share.**

**Through the Sources Supper and other Family Chalice initiatives in the incubator stage, we are learning to create contexts where adults, children, and youth can experience moments of transformation through spiritual and community experiences. But the process of getting to these contexts is as important as the product. The Family Chalice process involves going deep into a challenging area on behalf of the community and not surfacing until we have something that reflects the lived experience of those involved and the lived religious tradition we share. The I and the We, inseparable. Collapse to the "I" and you have a traditional class for individual consumers, something that does not transform the community. Collapse to the "We" and you have a history lesson that does not touch the spirit or connect to the pressure points in our personal lives today. We are now figuring out how to share the Family Chalice democratic process and its first fruit, the Sources Supper, with other congregations so that others can improve on and adapt what we have done to their own settings.**

**I personally have been transformed through this work. I have converted to the religion I joined in 1978. I feel connected to its past and committed to its future. I can not only articulate what I personally believe but I know how my own spiritual journey merges with and sometimes departs from the journey of Unitarian Universalism. I feel part of a larger We that goes back over four hundred years. And I believe that because of our unique religious tradition, we can create something new out of the tension between personal spiritual depth and freedom on the one hand, and deep ties to community and tradition on the other. If anyone can do it, we can, because the resources are there in our tradition if we can retrieve them. What we learn can help us contribute to a big public challenge at this moment in human history: how to be free and deeply who we are as individuals *and* richly connected to flourishing and inclusive families and communities that offer much and expect much from all of their citizens.**