

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, November 13th, 2016
Interim Minister the Rev. Fran Dearman

Heritage Sunday: Standing within a Living Tradition. 136th Anniversary

Part One: Universalism and Unitarian Universalism at Olinda, Essex County, Ontario
(Sources: Louise Foulds, “A Search for Truth”, rev. 1999; “Universalists in Ontario”, 2005.)

Part Two: How Sophia Lyon Fahs reshaped UU Religious Education

Part Three: the Timeline Project

Part One: Universalism and Unitarian Universalism at Olinda, Essex County, Ontario

Today is Heritage Sunday, one hundred and thirty-six years since the Church of Our Saviour was founded in the First Universalist Parish of Olinda. Big Mike Fox had stumbled across a pamphlet about twenty years earlier, and spread the good word to such extent that twenty-three men and women rejected a god of hellfire. They risked the scandalized ire of their neighbours. They declared their faith in a loving creator god who would in time call all his children home—a universal salvation, a teaching of love, not fear, an affirmation of the worth and dignity of all persons. They committed to a life where ethics and action and living their faith was more important than judgment by belief.

We saw in last Tuesday’s election in the United States how powerful fear can be; let us take hope and courage from the seven abiding generations of witness to loving-kindness here in Olinda.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, the arc of the universe bends towards justice. May it be so.

Part of the history of Olinda is the old schoolhouse that used to stand across the road, where the parking lot now lies. I understand that David Suzuki, third generation Canadian, attended school there, in 1946, around age ten, after the completion of his family’s internment in British Columbia during the second world war.

I also understand that in the 1950s the Olinda church was using the Beacon curriculum, created by religious educator Sophia Lyon Fahs (1876-1978).

Let us now turn our attention to how Universalist teachings would mesh with how Sophia Lyon Fahs reshaped the way Universalists, Unitarians, and many other denominations do religious education—not just for children, but for the child in all of us. What pathways would a Universalist ethic of loving-kindness be drawn to walk along?

Part Two: How Sophia Lyon Fahs reshaped UU Religious Education

She was born when the ink was barely dry on Darwin's "Origin of Species". By the time of her death, men had walked on the moon. During the one hundred and one years of her life, she became the pre-eminent expert in the field of religious education for children, and changed forever how Universalists, Unitarians, and others, did church school. Who was she? What did she do? What did she teach?

Sophia Blanche Lyon was born into a family of American Presbyterian missionaries in China, where she spent her early childhood. As a young woman she attended Wooster College in Ohio and thought to commit her life to the mission field. She continued her education in Chicago, where she met and married Harvey Fahs, also mission bound. Their work took them not much farther than New York City. Harvey's work was with the YMCA and overseas missions. Sophia, in addition to childcare, continued to pursue further education, in teaching and in theology. In time, she became a teacher where she had been taught.

Sophia Lyon Fahs studied under progressive educator John Dewey at Columbia University. From Dewey she learned a modernist, child-centered approach to education. This she extended into her area of special interest, religious education for children.

The new child-centered approach meant observing real children, hearing their real issues, and teaching in ways that were meaningful to them. Fahs learned quickly that children were engaged by story and that the story had best have vivid, concrete detail. Children also learned from experience. Sophia observed the children and learned from them.

Sophia needed a place to do field work. And if you were a teacher on Sophia's team, no Sunday lesson was complete until you had written up a thorough report. What were the children's issues? What questions did they ask? What answers did they offer? What engaged their interest?

In 1937 the Unitarians noticed that Sophia Lyon Fahs, by then a leader in her field, had figured out how to do RE progressively. They called her to Boston to revise and grow the Beacon Curriculum. And so she did. That Beacon Curriculum would eventually be adopted at Olinda.

Please note, Sophia Lyon Fahs was not a Unitarian at that time, and would not become one until after she retired from teaching at Columbia University. The Unitarians reached outside the denomination to Fahs because she was expert in her field. In time, she saw her new materials put to use by many different denominations.

What did Fahs do?

The first learning for Fahs, of a child-centred approach to religious education, was that a bible-based curriculum was not appropriate for very young children. Fahs estimated that seventy-five

percent of the Bible was quite unsuitable for children. She held off on the Bible until children were old enough to engage scripture as a diverse and complex work.

Fahs recognized that even a new-born infant has a rich emotional life, with pressing needs and strong responses to the world around it. Religion could be seen as a response to life, death, and what happens in between. Anthropology, psychology, and biology, and so-called primitive religions might be better sources for Sunday School stories than the Bible. Fahs looked to see what was significant to very young children, and made those areas the subject matter for their Sunday School classes.

Pre-school children were concerned about nature: the weather, the sun, moon, and stars. They were concerned about animation: what is alive and what is not and what is this mystery of being alive. The children were concerned about birth and death, about pain and sickness. The children were intrigued, sometimes even frightened, by shadows; how does one understand one's shadow? They became aware of dreaming, and at that point they began to be aware of the difference between reality and fantasy. The children were sensitive to the warmth of social relatedness, and the pain of social isolation, hostility, and rejection. And from understanding both relation and rejection together, they began to learn sympathy for those who experienced social isolation.

The children learned through personal achievement, through creativity, and through overcoming difficulty. They were concerned about making choices, learning both from success and from failure. Finally, the children learned about religion through community life and through sharing in celebrations and religious ceremonial. These were the issues of pre-school children and these were the issues that Fahs' new programmes and stories spoke to. Her approach to children's religious education trusted in the child's authentic emotions.

Fahs saw children as naturally loving, trusting, and co-operative. She believed that science showed human nature to be essentially good. She sought to provoke wonder and thought and natural growth. Experience came first, then questions. The child's questions were to be received with understanding and respect. Fahs said, "Vital religion must, in large measure, be a personal creation" (Fahs 1952 p. 57). She trusted the child to grow and create a vital religion in a supportive atmosphere.

As Fahs reached deeper and deeper, she was engaging some profound theological perspectives.

In her lifetime Fahs had seen traditional religion challenged by the sciences. Astronomy re-located us in space. Evolutionary biology re-located us in the great chain of being. Microscopes shattered our sense of the fabric of the world, right down to the atomic level, and our

understanding of the very nature of matter. Scholarship had totally reframed traditional conceptions of scripture and revelation. Psychology re-framed our understanding of relationship and personality.

We could no longer sustain simplistic conceptions of the world we lived in. Nor could we sustain naive assumptions about good and evil. Fahs called us to reject the old mind set of moral dualism, of good versus evil, and God versus the devil. She called us to set aside such dualism in our understanding of our own natures, also. Instead of seeing the divine and the daemonic at war within us, Fahs urged that we try recognizing authentic feeling. She urged that we recognize the complexity of our choices, where good and evil are mixed up together. For example, in the classroom on a Sunday morning this might look like some genuine confusion and anger in a child in response to family dynamics such as divorce.

Fahs looked for spontaneity and honesty in engaging children's authentic emotions, instead of shame, silence, and repression. She urged that we recognize the conflicts within ourselves not as simply the struggle between good and evil, but as a struggle between conflicting desires wherein we might seek out a balance we could live with.

Fahs urged that we respect our own immaturity, because learning to live is an evolutionary process. Moving into self-awareness, we become capable of making intelligent, useful choices. We grow our own, authentic, inner engagement of idealism, with optimism and respect for all humanity, with no limits on subject matter for religious study.

Indeed, Fahs called us to engage nature and work out an ethical response, not just to humanity, but also to the natural world. Fahs urged us to understand Nature, to respect nature, and to be co-creators with nature, because our relationships with other people are bound up in issues of equity and justice that involve the natural world.

Essentially, we still do Religious Education much in the way Fahs taught. But our world is no longer hers. In our world, more people are “un-churched” than regularly attend any faith community. In our world biblical literacy or religious literacy cannot be taken for granted. In our world, mass media, popular culture, and consumerism daily propagandize our children. Accordingly, we are now less shy to impart and articulate our own values.

As was said by Antoine de St.-Exupéry, “Love, like a carefully loaded ship, crosses the gulf between the generations. [There is a] heritage of mind and heart [through which we] impart to our children our knowledge and ideals, [so that] they will [not] lose all of us that is wordless and full of wonder” (hymnal #649).

May you, too, keep alive within you the child's sense of wonder and awe.

Part Three: Timeline Project

Now that we've discussed religious education—there's homework!

Your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to make your own contribution to this tracking of the history of the Olinda church that has begun, here on the table at the front. Joyse Gilbert, Carol Hylton, and John Haynes have made a start at it, for which I thank them. Members of the Transition Team are at hand to hand out some sticky notes for you folks to make your contribution, if not today then another day. We'll post it, and lift it up from time to time. Today, I invite you to think about some moment when your life and the life of the church overlapped. Were you welcomed here, one day? Were you married here? Do your roots go deep here, perhaps seven generations deep? Did you go to the school across the road? Is someone you loved at rest in the Graceland Cemetery across the road?

For seven generations, folks have made this church their spiritual home. I invite you to share a little of that. And I invite you to recall ministers you have known here, perhaps two things that you remember with gladness, perhaps one thing you might have wished to be different.

This church has a long tradition here at Olinda; and that tradition is a living tradition. There is still work to be done. The world is still in need of your witness to loving-kindness. So keep your lamps trimmed and burning, and let your little light shine. And may it be so.

Universalist Notes, for the Olinda Timeline Project, November 2016:

N.B. Much of this material is found in Louise Foulds, "A Search for Truth", rev. 1999; also Louise Foulds' "Universalists in Ontario", 2005.) See also various websites for Universalism, Unitarianism, Pietism, the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, also the Canadian Unitarian Council, also the Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda.

Universalism is an abiding teaching in Christianity, labelled heretical in the seventh century CE, but revived in the times of liberal religious enlightenment, institutionally at its strongest in the Nineteenth Century North America. Universalism advocates a theology of Universal Salvation, that all souls shall be saved, emerging among Anabaptists and Pietists during the Protestant Reformation. Living is emphasized over doctrine—deeds, not words, faith in action, that how we live is more important than how we believe, that a god worthy of belief is parent to us all, that all persons have worth and dignity. Thus, inevitably, a Universalist perspective was likely to lead to an anti-slavery posture, and overall an inclusive, ethical, humanitarian emphasis. Hellfire is rejected, which tended to set Universalists at odds with their scandalized neighbours.

Dr. Georges de Benneville (1703~1793): that goodness is universal to all faiths

James Relly (c.1722~1778)

John Murray (1741~1815): meeting with Thomas Potter on the New Jersey shore; scripture based and still Trinitarian.

1779 the first Universalist church in North America, at Gloucester in New England.

1803 the Winchester profession—beginning of shift from Trinitarianism to a Unitarian outlook

Hosea Ballou (1771~1852) teaches an increasingly progressive thought, championing freedom, reason and tolerance; HB moved away from a Restorationist posture (that humans were fallen from Grace and needed to be restored to Grace—that all would, *eventually*, be re-united with the holy. HB comes to preach “death and glory”, that all would be taken home to God at the very moment of death; HB moves Universalism from Trinitarian scripture-based teaching to an essentially Unitarian outlook in his 1805 “Treatise on Atonement”, which becomes normative among Universalists. William Ellery Channing moves liberal Congregationalists to the Unitarian posture in his similar declaration, “Unitarian Christianity”, the Baltimore Sermon of 1819.

Universalism’s openness to Enlightenment values built on a Pietist faith, enabled Universalists to accept the scientific teachings of Charles Darwin, the scholarly teachings of the higher criticism (that Scripture was an aggregation of historical and literary writings that documented human search for the holy), and to recognize value in World Religions.

Mid 1800s Clara Barton, Civil War serves as nurse, goes on to found the American Red Cross

1852 Tufts University founded, the first with no creedal tests

1863 Ordination of Olympia Brown, the first woman to be ordained by a denomination.

1851 Canada census records seven thousand Universalists, and twelve hundred Unitarians

1860-1880 Michael (Big Mike) Fox (1806~1894) (SfT 75 ff) evangelizes Essex County; the name Olinda is said to be a native word meaning “land of plenty” (SfT 75)

November 10th 1880 twenty-three men and women found the First Universalist Parish of Olinda; records of 1902 refer to the church building itself as the “Church of Our Saviour”

1933 Universalist minister Clinton Lee Scott signs the Humanist Manifesto

1936 birth of scientist David Suzuki; c.1946 DS attends the old schoolhouse at Olinda

1938 the Blenheim Universalist congregation closes; Olinda alone abides in Ontario.

1949 Humanist Kenneth L. Patton leads the experimental universal church at the Charles Street Universalist Meeting House in Boston.

1950s Olinda makes use of Sophia Lyon Fahs’ Beacon Curriculum (SfT p 102)

1954 the last communion service is held at Olinda; revived once, in 1984

1959 Olinda votes eleven to two in favour of the UUA merger

1961 at time of UUA merger, and emergence of the CUC, only three Universalist congregations remain in Canada: Halifax NS, North Hatley PQ, and Olinda.

1961 Universalists and Unitarians combine to form the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations: “Sharing a common emphasis on the values of tolerance, reason and freedom of enquiry, a willingness to accept new revelations of truth, and activity in humanitarian causes and social reform, the two denominations had long been on converging paths.” (Louise Foulds, Search for Truth page 13)

1980 Foundational affirmation crafted, by which Olinda still lights its chalice;
the affirmation is written into the 1984 bylaws.

LF/fd