“Worshipping Together with Questioning Minds”

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It’s my pleasure to be with you this morning as we celebrate the beginning of our new year of Religious Education programming, and honor Unitarian Universalist Religious Education for children and youth, and its roots. One of my favorite television shows lately is called, “Perception.” In the show’s fictional world, the actor Eric McCormack plays a gifted and popular university professor named Daniel Pierce. Dr. Pierce teaches neuropsychiatry. As near as I can figure, neuropsychiatry is the science of how our what our brains perceive to be reality affects our behavior and our emotions. Dr. Pierce also and suffers from schizophrenia. In an episode I watched earlier this week, Dr. Pierce explained a theory to his students called, “neuroplasticity,” saying, “our brains can change; our experiences can rewire us; we can learn from mistakes we made in the past and choose not to repeat them; and we can do new things, in new ways.” I also realized as I watched that episode that what I appreciate most about this character, as played by Eric McCormack, is that he is confident, but not overly egotistical.

The woman who created and developed Unitarian Universalist Religious Education for children, Sophia Lyon Fahs, didn’t know about the theory of neuroplasticity. But she did develop her programming so that children would grow up 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. Sophia Fahs didn’t know all that we know today about how learning new things and availing ourselves of new experiences can develop our brains. But she knew that our brains are different at different ages levels and stages of our lives. And so Unitarian Universalist religious education programming is age appropriate according to the abilities and interests of children and youth. Our Religious Education programming here is off to a great start! I’m happy to say that we have more volunteer teachers than we’ve had in years. Our knowledgeable and dedicated Religious Education Director is Rachel Finley. I hope you will ask her, the teachers, and the children and youth themselves about their appealing classes and programs. Rachel has divided the church year into four sections of themes. This first one is “personal growth in our relationships with others.” In November we’ll begin “world religions, cultures of the world, and our Jewish and Christian heritage.” From January through early March the theme will be “social justice and peace-making.” And the final theme of the year will be “the interdependent web and our interconnectedness with the earth.” Our religious education classes begin at 10:00 a.m. on Sundays, before our worship services all together.

As we heard in this morning’s reading, the poet, Robert Frost, continually reflected on our interconnectedness with the earth, and human beings’ relationship to it, and human beings’ relationships to each other, to contemplate some of the biggest issues and questions that are part of being alive. Questions such as: What happens to a person’s spirit after they die? Why do some people act so mean sometimes? Why do others have it in their hearts or character to notice who needs kindness, and act in kindly ways? Why are there wars? And why are so many wars about religion? Why do people say that Jesus “walked on water”? Did he really perform miracles? What do people mean when they say the word, “God”? How do we decide what it means to each of us to “do the right thing,” or to be ethical, or moral? What sorts of people do we admire most, and want to try to follow the example of? And how, in the midst of loss or pain, can we find a sense of comfort and peace?

Throughout his whole life, from when he was a boy until he became an old man, Robert Frost kept searching for the answers to these questions-- just as he described to us all feeling compelled to gaze deep down into every well he passed, trying to see and understand a larger truth and light. That searching led him to become one of America’s most acclaimed and beloved poets. I’ve loved Robert Frost’s poems my whole life. And they have helped me figure out my own answers to the big questions and issues that arise from being alive.

That way of discerning our own answers to questions that are spiritual or religious, from early childhood to our elder years, has been part of our denomination since 1937, thanks to Sophia Lyon Fahs. Beginning back then, she
gave Unitarian Universalism a method, books and articles, curricula and real life experience with teaching and raising children, so that children could approach becoming religious with “a sense of wonder and a questioning mind.” Many of the materials she produced are still in use today. She wrote that, “each child should have his [or her] chance at an original approach to the universe.” I’ve been inspired to look at the life and work of Sophia Fahs this week. Though she died in 1978 [at 101 years old], her writing is as fresh and lively as if it were written yesterday. She 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. In her book, *Today’s Children and Yesterday’s Heritage*, she wrote:

“We have found the need to experiment with different ways of keeping alive in children some awareness of the wonder that is in what is immediately theirs to touch and see and feel. We ourselves have had to learn to be more imaginative. We have had to practice the art of being curious about common and small things. We have had to remind ourselves over and over that there is an infinitely long story in every single thing in the universe – that we can pick up anything or stop to meditate on anything, and if we are persistent enough we may touch infinity. As Blake put it, this infinity is even in a grain of sand. Sometimes children themselves are our teachers. [A girl named] Dorothy, aged eight, had been basking in the sun on a pile of sand, playing with [her dog, an] Irish setter, when she came into the house to find her mother. Carrying in her hand one single grain which she had picked up out of the big drab pile of sand, she wanted her mother to join her in wondering over its beautiful form and how it had come to be! Perhaps we need to become as children in order to recapture such a sensitive awareness of the intangible in little things.” [p. 213]

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.]

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 a UU Religious
Education 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! And this is why, today, a Coming Of Age class, trying to discern their answers to questions of good and evil, includes a trip to a Holocaust museum. The program for middle school children which is now called, “Neighboring Faiths,” was originally created by Sophia Fahs as, “The Church Across the Street.” Those children do research and write questions about religious traditions different from ours, then visit different houses of worship for one of their services and talk to their clergyperson. Then they discuss the experience afterward with their teachers and mentors. 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 is 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 [you guessed it] 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.”

“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]

In 1959, when she was eighty-two years old, Sophia Fahs was ordained as a Unitarian Universalist minister by our congregation in Bethesda, Maryland. That was an unusual and enormous honor. Sophia delivered her own
Ordination Sermon, which was also not usually done. To me, her ordination put into effect one of the great causes of her life: that ministers, and all adults, must take religious education for children most seriously. One happy result of our having done so since Sophia’s time is growth in membership in our congregations and our denomination. But the more important reason is that our children and youth need and deserve help and mentoring from adults who are educated, compassionate, and involved, if they are to grow into mature, empathetic, pluralistic, and service-oriented adults themselves. I’ll close with these words Sophia Fahs often lifted up, which are by C. Madeleine Dixon:

“Each child must plumb vastness and infinity. Let him [or her] call it what they will— fire, water, death, God, worlds, stars. And somehow, [the child] must share [their] curiosity and [their] awe before [they have] too many static answers. ... We forget that the probing of strange phenomena, creation, God, death, magic, has made our scientists, our artists, [and] our religious leaders, throughout the ages. Why should we shorten this probing or cover it up for children?”