

ON THE THRESHOLD

by

Shirley Ann Ranck

I begin with this poem by the Rev. Carolyn Owen-Towle:

See a blossom in your mind's eye.
Allow it to fill the interior of your imagination.
Greater perfection of form in nature cannot be imagined.
With inward gaze absorb each wondrous fluted petal.
Slide down its humid surface
 Until you drop as the dew into its velvety core.
Immerse your senses in this safe chamber.
Such fragile beauty gives impulse to weep.
Slowly reverse the journey;
As you ascend the shaft toward
 Wider light, turn your
 Imagination around and around
 To see its many facets.
Stored within is the memory of all flowers.
Marvel that this creation, while
 Utterly fragile—yet undaunted,
 Boldly buds forth turning
 Resolutely toward the sun.
We, too, shimmer with
 Expectation, exuding our own

Illumination, color, pulse, and scent.
Vulnerable, still we venture our
 Lives courageously toward hope
 And light, at once fragile and rooted.¹

I light the chalice in honor of the divine female who dwells in all of the women we celebrate, past, present and future. Women fragile but rooted, vulnerable but undaunted. Poised here at the beginning of a new century and a new millennium let us honor them with this flame. Blessed be!

A few years ago when I was trying to retire I went to a gathering of retired UU ministers. It was held at a small but very beautiful Catholic retreat center. On the wall in my room there was a rather unusual cross. It was made to look as if it had been formed from the rushes of plants. Beneath it there was a sign saying it was St. Brigid's cross.

Shortly after that when I was with my daughter Laura she showed me a new necklace she had bought for herself. I said, "Oh it's St. Brigid's cross." She said, "How did you know that?" Then she told me how she happened to buy it.

At that time Laura lived in Sonoma, California and there's a very popular place on the plaza called Murphy's Irish Pub. On Friday nights she often took her little son Kevin down there for fish and chips and Irish music. I've been there with her. Near the pub there's an Irish shop. Laura was in the shop one day trying to decide between a Celtic cross necklace and one with St. Brigid's cross. A friend of hers came into the shop and told her the following story:

¹ Carolyn Owen-Towle, #492 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston, 1993.

St Brigid's father was a pagan chieftain of Leinster, and as he lay dying, she sat beside him in prayer. During her long vigil, she told him the story of Jesus. She took some of the rushes used to cover the floor and wove from them a cross. He became interested in his daughter's faith and died a Christian.

After hearing the story Laura chose St. Brigid's cross. Then she went home and researched St. Brigid. According to legend, St. Brigid of Ireland was born just as her mother was stepping over a threshold. The story is an apt symbol for Brigid's time in history—she was born in the year 452—and for the many qualities and activities attributed to her. The daughter of a pagan chieftain, she became an ardent Christian who established a famous monastery in which great works of art were produced. At the same time she took on the name and all the attributes of creativity, healing and smithcraft previously attributed to the ancient Celtic Goddess Brigid.

She also took on the feast day of the Goddess Brigid—February 2. It is the feast of the waxing light. What was born at the Solstice begins to manifest as the Child Sun grows strong and the days grow visibly longer. This is the time of individuation: within the measures of the spiral, we each light our own light, and become uniquely ourselves. It is the time of initiation, of beginning, when seeds that will later sprout and grow begin to stir from their dark sleep. We meet to share the light of inspiration, which will grow with the growing year.

I especially like one story illustrating St. Brigid's gift of healing. Once when she was traveling with her father, a servant was taken ill. She fetched water from a well, prayed over it, and gave it to him to drink. He said it tasted like ale and he recovered. No doubt those who go down to

Murphy's and other such establishments on Friday night after a particularly long week of work could also testify to the healing powers of ale.

Nobody is certain whether or not there was a real woman named Brigid. However, if there was such a woman, she was born and lived her life on the historic threshold between the old Celtic religion and the new Christian religion which was taking over the land. The Celtic Goddess of creativity lived on in the Christian St. Brigid who built her monastery on an ancient sacred pagan site of worship of the Goddess Brigid. It is said that a sacred fire was kept burning at this site for over a thousand years after St. Brigid's death.

Biblical scholar Savina Teubal² suggests that many centuries earlier, the matriarchs of Genesis—Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel—lived on a similar threshold as priestesses of an old Mesopotamian religion struggling to maintain customs of matrilineal descent and powerful female influence at a time and in a place where the newer patriarchal ways were taking over.

And scholar Elaine Pagels³ seems to suggest that Mary Magdalene occupied a similar threshold in the very earliest days of Christianity. She was believed by the early Gnostic Christians to be not only a full-fledged Apostle but a leader among the Apostles. We did not know about her as an apostle until recently because when the church fathers of the fourth century decided which writings to include in the official canon, they pronounced the Gnostic writings to be heresy. All the writings that mentioned Mary Magdalene unanimously pictured her as one of Jesus' most trusted disciples. All were excluded from the New Testament canon, and as Pagels points out,

² Savina Teubal, *Sarah the Priestess, The First Matriarch of Genesis*, Swallow Press, Ohio University Press, Athens, 1989.

³ Elaine Pagels, "Introduction," *Secrets of Mary Magdalene*, Dan Burstein & Arne J. de Keijzer (eds.), CDS Books, New York, 2006.

“When these texts came to be excluded...many Christians excluded as well the conviction that women could—and should—participate in leading the churches.”

Most of the Gnostic Christian writings were destroyed but someone buried a whole collection of them in a large jar in the desert in Egypt. And there they stayed until 1945 when they were accidentally unearthed and eventually studied by scholars like Elaine Pagels.

In the intervening centuries patriarchy triumphed. Another turning point for the legends of Mary Magdalene came in the year 591 when Pope Gregory combined several New Testament stories which were not really about Mary Magdalene to transform her into a repentant prostitute saved by Jesus. It wasn't until the 20th century that the Roman Church officially declared this view of Mary Magdalene to be erroneous. Indeed this false image became so ingrained in the popular imagination over the centuries that it was even perpetuated in the popular musical *Jesus Christ Superstar*. “I don't know how to love him,” says the song. But the early Gnostic Christians said she knew better than anyone how to love him. They said she was his closest companion because she understood him so well.

These ancient women lived on the threshold between an earlier social order which accorded women power and respect and a newer patriarchal social order in which women lost more and more power and respect until even the divine spirit of the universe could no longer be personified as female, but only as male.

Today we stand upon a new threshold. In her beautiful telling of the myth of the Goddess Hecate, Charlene Spretnak writes: “...they offered Her ritual suppers at lonely crossroads...When Hecate's rites were observed, the black nights passed silently one into another. But if the Goddess was defied,

She unleashed the power of Her wrath and swept over the earth, bringing storms and destruction.”⁴

Hecate. Do you know Her? She is old and wise and very powerful. Firmly She stirs the bubbling cauldron of life and death. She has been ignored and almost forgotten for many centuries. She has been ridiculed, called ugly and hideous and dangerous whenever She has appeared. She has certainly been defied. But today Her power is rising. She represents the power, the wisdom and the wrath of old women and our numbers are increasing at a phenomenal rate. Hecate is the Crone within each of us. Will we seize the opportunities before us and accept the challenge of Hecate’s crossroads?

Hecate reminds us of the sacred history that is ours as women. Let us take a few moments to review that history. It is a story grounded in the findings of 20th century archeology and anthropology. At the same time it is a story that transcends those findings as it serves a mythic function in our lives. Great myths reflect and teach us many truths about ourselves, our history and our society. Hecate reminds us that divine power, the power of life and death, was for many thousands of years thought to be female.

As a woman, my religious history is rooted in the ancient pre-patriarchal world when the divine was imaged as a Great Goddess who gave birth to all of creation. Archeologists such as Raphael Patai, Rachel Levy and Marija Gimbutas tell us that for many thousands of years human beings worshipped this divine mother. In Joseph Campbell’s opinion “there can be no doubt that in the very earliest ages of human history, the magical force and wonder of the female was no less a marvel than the universe itself and this gave to women a prodigious power.”

⁴ Charlene Spretnak, *Lost Goddesses of Early Greece*, Moon Books, Berkeley, CA, 1978, p. 73.

The male consort of the Goddess gradually became more and more important and powerful. Mythology tells us that in early historic times Goddesses and Gods reigned together with varying amounts of power. Eventually the male deities became the chief deities. In Judaism and Christianity the male God became the only deity. I was raised in a culture that assumed that this male monotheism was superior to polytheism. What a marvelous smoke screen to hide the real issue, which was the demise of female divinity!

It is difficult to describe the intense shock of recognition and anger that I felt as a woman at the moment when I realized that in contrast to Christians, who worship a divine *father* and *son*, the pilgrims who made their way to Eleusis for 2,000 or more years worshipped a divine *mother* and *daughter*. The medium is indeed the message. All the teachings of love and justice in the world could not erase or make up for the stark and overwhelming absence of the divine female in my Protestant Christian upbringing.

Another moment of shock occurred when I came upon a painting of the towering Athena as she may have looked inside the Parthenon. The Parthenon! The most famous temple of all time! Built for the Goddess! Somehow that fact had not registered with me, perhaps had never been emphasized. A tamed and patriarchal Goddess, but a Goddess nonetheless, presiding over the glory of ancient Athens.

Pagans they were called, those Greeks and Romans, Minoans and Canaanites, Egyptians and Old Europeans who worshipped Goddesses. As a woman, I need to claim that heritage. I need to know that great civilizations were created by people who worshipped the divine as female. If the myths

of a culture reflect its social arrangements, women must have had power and respect. The myths tell us that in very early times the Goddess reigned.

In later times, male deities waged battles against her, tricked her into giving up her power or, if she was very powerful, married her. If the myths of a culture reflect its social arrangements, women must have suffered an overall loss of power and respect. And yet, in the old pagan religions, even after all the battles and the exalting of the male deities to the most powerful positions, the Goddesses were still there. Zeus had to ask Themis to convene the deities. Hera married Zeus, but fought him all the way. And it was Athena who stood in the Parthenon. As a woman, I need very much to reclaim my pagan religious roots. I also believe that men as well as women need to know that for many thousands of years of our human heritage God was female.

Over the course of millennia the Great Goddess began to be worshipped in three separate aspects: as the maiden, the mother, and the crone. In Greek myth the Crone was known as Hecate. The three aspects of the Goddess were linked to the phases of the moon—the waxing moon was the maiden with all her possibilities, the full moon was the abundance of the mother, and the waning moon was the wisdom of the old woman. Women felt in their own bodies and menstrual cycles a very close connection with the phases of the moon and the cycles of birth, growth and death that they saw in the plants and animals around them.

Women were thought to be endowed with divine power because they could bleed without harm, give birth to new life and provide milk. Menstrual blood was sacred and thought to contain the divine wisdom that created new human beings. People believed that when a woman stopped bleeding she was storing and retaining that divine wisdom.

Another way of describing the triple Goddess was as Creator, Preserver and Destroyer. In this rendition the Crone takes on not only the wisdom but also the power of death. She is the one who knows when an individual life must end in order for new life to begin. She is the Goddess of that mysterious transformation that occurs as we are returned to the earth, to the ongoing cycle of life and death. In the old Goddess religions death was believed to be part of the cycle of life. When the male gods sought to control or take over the powers of the old goddesses, it was the Crone, the Destroyer they feared and hated most.

*Cakes for the Queen of Heaven*⁵ was published by the UUA in 1986, and it had an amazing impact on the women of our denomination. I think it started us on a spiritual journey. New things happened when women came together to study our own history and to share our personal experiences with each other. We were not just studying the past. We were evolving a whole new world-view and theology for the future.

One of the most important things we learned was that in ancient Turkey and in Old Europe and on the island of Crete no evidence of weapons or fortifications can be found in the very earliest civilizations. Carol Lee Flinders⁶ suggests that at the earliest stages of human civilization, survival of the group depended upon a social order of cooperation. Whether or not we agree with these findings and interpretations, they do raise a huge question for us about the future. After some 5000 years of patriarchal competition, hatred and vicious wars we have developed more and more lethal weapons which can destroy not only ourselves but the entire planet.

⁵ Shirley Ann Ranck, *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven, A Ten Session Adult Seminar in Feminist Theology*, Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston, 1986.

⁶ Carol Lee Flinders, *Rebalancing the World: Why Women Belong and Men Compete and How to Restore the Ancient Equilibrium*, Harper Collins, New York, 2002.

Not to mention the growing problems of pollution and global warming. We need to stop and to ask ourselves if we still know how to establish a social order based upon cooperation and the absence of weapons and fortifications.

Perhaps it is about time we heard from that half of the human population which has been so effectively silenced for so long. Perhaps you don't believe that women are silenced anymore in today's world. Wrong! Too often even today we are brutally silenced. Right in our own Women & Religion community we have seen a recent violent tragedy. A mother, her children and her friend killed. We have a special reason to mourn their loss because these women were leaders in their district Women & Religion organization. But these deaths are not only personal tragedies. They say to every woman and child, "You are not safe."

One of the lessons many of us learned as we began to work for the needs and the rights of women is that the personal is political. Violence against women continues around the world. As Starhawk says of a woman, a mother, killed in Padua, "If someone killed her because she was an organizer and an activist, the killing was political...And if someone killed her because she was a woman, the killing was also political...It shouldn't need to be said, in 2001, but it does need to be said, and I say it again: Her death was political."⁷

There have always been women crying out for change, for reclaiming the highest and best of our human potential. Too often they have been voices crying in the wilderness of patriarchal culture. Women like Julia Ward Howe in the 19th century who wrote: "From the bosom of the devastated earth a voice goes up with our own. It says 'Disarm, Disarm!'"

⁷ Starhawk, "A Woman is Dead in Padua," *Webs of Power: Notes from the Global Uprising*, New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, BC, 2002.

The sword of murder is not the balance of justice! Blood does not wipe out dishonor nor violence indicate possession. As men have often forsaken the plow and the anvil at the summons of war, let women now leave all that may be left of home for a great and earnest day of counsel. Let them meet first, as women, to bewail and commemorate the dead. Let them then solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means whereby the great human family can live in peace...”⁸

A hundred years or so later the women of the late 20th century began to do just that, meeting at several United Nations sponsored conferences around the world. Now in the 21st century we Unitarian Universalist women will sponsor our own international women’s conference, NEXT YEAR! Be there! Meet your sisters from many countries! And let us “solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means whereby the great human family can live in peace...”

Today I would like to tell you about a woman who I believe has pointed the way to the future for feminist theology and for Unitarian Universalist thea/ology. A woman who was far ahead of her time. A woman who stood on the threshold between the old world-view of patriarchy and violence and an emerging scientific world-view of cooperation and peace. Her name was Sophia Lyon Fahs and many of you know of her as a leading Unitarian religious educator. I would suggest to you that she was also a major theologian, perhaps not recognized as such because she was a woman and because her views were so far ahead of her time.

Well, you may ask, is it really important what theologians say? Does it really matter to us in the 21st century? I think it does. There is a theory in

⁸ Julia Ward Howe, “Mother’s Day Proclamation,” #573 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston, 1993.

the social sciences (I referred to it earlier) a theory that says that the great myths or stories the people of a culture believe in, reflect *and reinforce* the social structures of the culture. It is no accident that when ancient people believed that a great goddess gave birth to the world, women had more power and respect in society than they did in later patriarchal times. When the great over-arching myth or story of a culture, accepted uncritically by most of the people, when that story concerns a father, his son and the son's male apostles, with barely a mention of any women, that story reflects and reinforces a patriarchal social order. An order in which women are accorded little power or respect.

In his book *The Great Turning*, David Korten⁹ suggests that if we want to change the world we must change our stories. Writing in 2006, he says it matters very much what stories we believe. Those of you who know some of the writings of Sophia Fahs have probably guessed where I'm going here. Fahs wrote a beautiful poem way back in 1952 entitled *It Matters What We Believe*. She said:

“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 with fears of unknown calamities.

Other beliefs are like sunshine, blessing children with the warmth of happiness.

⁹ David Korten, *The Great Turning*, Kumerian Press Inc., Bloomfield, CT and Berrett-Koehler Publishers Inc., San Francisco, 2006.

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 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."¹⁰

As we consider who we are and what we believe as Unitarian Universalists in this new century, three major theological issues have emerged: (1) the feminist demand that the other half of the human story be told, that of women and their insights; (2) the environmental demand that we change our attitude and behavior toward the earth from conquest and dominion to respect and harmony; (3) the multicultural demand that we honor the richness of diverse traditions around the world, traditions which have often been dismissed or trivialized as less important than our own Western religions.

¹⁰ Sophia Lyon Fahs, #657 "It Matters What We Believe," in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston, 1993.

Sophia Fahs made important contributions to our awareness on each of these issues. Her work points powerfully toward feminist analyses of personal power and hierarchy, and Gaian concepts of cosmology decades before the women's movement of the 20th century or the environmental movement. Her multi-cultural perspective prepared the way for our Unitarian Universalist acceptance and celebration of diversity. Her book *Beginnings of Earth and Sky*, a collection of creation stories from around the world was published in 1938. It includes the biblical story as one among many. Her book *From Long Ago and Many Lands*, another collection of religious stories from around the world was first published in 1948.

Fahs based her theology upon her own observations of children *and* upon insights gleaned from 20th century physical and social sciences. I believe that she should be acknowledged not only as our leading religious educator, but as a major 20th century theologian. If she had been male our theological schools would be offering full semester courses on her theology. As far as I know this is not yet being done.

Sophia Lyon was born in China in 1876, the daughter of Presbyterian missionaries. She went to high school in Ohio. She was influenced by the 19th century wave of feminism and according to her biographer was very aware of being part of "this New Age of Women." She took for granted her right to higher education and a missionary career. She was not afraid to challenge practices she regarded as unfair. As valedictorian of her high school class, she insisted on speaking without a manuscript, something only boys were expected to be able to do. The principal reluctantly agreed, saying he would hold the manuscript and prompt her if necessary. In the succinct words of her biographer, "The necessity did not arise."

Sophia married Charles Harvey Fahs but continued to express strong determination to have a professional life of her own. As she raised her children she integrated her experiences as a mother into her professional work in religious education. Eventually she entered Union Theological Seminary in New York City in 1923 at the age of 47. Thirty years later she was a stunning role model for many of us young mothers as we started out in religious education.

Fahs¹¹ made her observations and understandings of children central to her theology. If the theology that surrounded her was not healthy for children, she expected theology to change. That point of view caused her to challenge the basic authoritarian and patriarchal assumptions of biblical religion.

One of the main principles that Fahs emphasized is that *how* we gain our beliefs is as profoundly important as the beliefs themselves. There are two main ways of obtaining a set of beliefs or a philosophy of life. One way is to view a philosophy of life as a set of beliefs to be handed down to an individual by some authority. That way one's religion or philosophy of life is a set of affirmations to be learned and accepted as certain truth. The other way is to view a philosophy of life as a product of maturing emotional experiences, meditation and critical thought. Religion then is regarded as the result of your own creative thought and feeling and experience as you respond to life. It was Fahs' conviction that it is healthier to develop a philosophy based upon personal experience. Notice the implication here that the personal experience of women is just as important as that of men. The

¹¹ The following discussion of Fahs' ideas is based upon her book *Today's Children and Yesterday's Heritage*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1952, especially Chapters 8, 9 and 10.

beliefs of the past and of other people can and should influence that philosophy but not completely determine it.

The importance of how we gain our beliefs lies in the kind of person produced by these different methods. Do we want to be slaves to authority or persons who enjoy the give and take of many opinions? What kind of person are you? Given your particular philosophy of life, how does that constellation of beliefs affect the way you relate to other people, to your work, to nature? *How* you got your beliefs may have more to do with your actual behavior than the beliefs themselves.

For most of us the Judaic and Christian traditions as found in the Bible have been the main religious influences in our lives. Whether we accept it, reject it, or reinterpret it, the Bible is something we have to deal with not only intellectually and emotionally, but also culturally as it still undergirds the social order in which we live.

Like other theologians and religious educators, Fahs insisted that the Bible be studied in its historical context and in relation to the insights of biblical criticism. But Fahs was one of the first to insist also that the Bible be placed alongside the myths and literatures of other ancient peoples. The Bible is thus deprived of its superior status and authority. It becomes a record of human experiences rather than *the* divine revelation of God's actions in history. Setting the Bible in historical perspective along with other ancient literature frees us to base our religious beliefs on an understanding of our own experiences, an understanding informed not only by the writings of ancient people but also by the insights of modern arts and sciences.

Such a view may not *seem* revolutionary to us today. But Fahs pointed out that the cosmology, the morality and even the concept of world

community found in the Bible still permeate our society and its assumptions and that we have scarcely even begun to reject them.

Take for example the biblical cosmology, the three-storied universe—heaven up here, hell down here, a flat earth in between, and God up there outside of it all, ruling as an Almighty King. Most religious liberals feel that they have certainly rejected this ancient pre-scientific view of the universe even if they remain committed to certain truths in the Bible. Fahs points out that we have not been aware of all the aspects of such a cosmology, and that when it is truly rejected, certain so-called truths are also called into question.

One aspect of the old world view is that creation was totally completed at some time in the past and remains fixed and unchanging. We are taught that story and we grow up expecting our world to be changeless. But we do not experience life as fixed and unchanging. Consequently we are in a constant state of future shock. Fahs suggests that if we look to our own modern science we will find evidence for a cosmology that is much more in tune with our experience. There is evidence for example that the universe is continually growing and expanding, that new matter is coming into being and that new species of animals continue to appear. There is recognition of a creative process within organisms themselves.

The old cosmology also projects a clear-cut distinction between the natural world and the spiritual world, with the natural world seen as degraded and inferior. People are seen as living in two distinct places, the temporal material world and the eternal spiritual or supernatural world. These two worlds are seen as enemies. The world and flesh are evil and in the story of the fall there is a curse upon nature. Human beings are condemned to struggle against the natural world and to conquer it. If we face squarely what is happening to our natural environment today, it is all

too clear that we are still operating on the basis of the biblical notion that nature is to be conquered and destroyed.

Fahs finds this dualism completely untenable. Once again she would have us turn to science for a more useful world-view. According to medicine and psychology body and mind are one. Physicists and biochemists are finding that the boundaries between their fields are disappearing. The dividing line between the living and the non-living is no longer clear. Matter, once thought to be something to be touched and seen is now believed to be energy at rest. Energy is found to be matter in excessive motion. Energy-matter is electrical. In every area of research we soon get to the intangible and the invisible which is nevertheless part of the material world. The universe as a whole may be alive. We can no longer set ourselves apart from the natural world because we are part of it. We live in one world—the cosmos as an interdependent unit.

Interdependent. Now where have you heard that word before? Our Unitarian Universalist principles and purposes, revised in the 1980's, now contain a 7th principle which affirms our commitment to “the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” Sophia Fahs was writing about that interdependence in 1952 in her book *Today's Children, Yesterday's Heritage*.

Perhaps the most pervasive and destructive aspect of the old cosmology, in Fahs' view, is the way in which the cosmos is seen to be controlled—by an almighty personal being who uses the forces of nature as a means of moral discipline. Even the concept of world community portrayed in the Western religious tradition, even that concept is one of conquest and dominion—the good guys will win out over and destroy the bad guys and establish a kingdom of righteousness. Most of our society has

not yet rejected the notion that life on earth is an unending battle between good and evil. We divide the world into two camps, our friends and our enemies. And as Fahs pointed out, wherever a state of war exists, mutual respect vanishes.

Once again Fahs turns to science for some insights. The scientific conception of the universe is that it is self-governed and self-regulating, interrelated and interacting to the farthest reaches of space-time. Great powers of control lie within the very nature of existence in the ability of life to be active, to create and grow and evolve. The natural order resembles a democracy more than a kingdom, a balanced interdependence better described as cooperation. Unicellular living creatures first tried to cooperate and the existence of higher living forms is the result of this cooperation and specialization.

To me these discoveries are a major source of wonder, the wonders of our own day. A new world-view has emerged, one that is very much in keeping with the insights of Sophia Fahs. A world-view that acknowledges change as a creative process. That affirms our human place as an integral part of the natural world. That points to cooperation as the norm in nature. A world-view that may heal the splits and barriers of sexism, racism and the arrogant destruction of our life support systems.

Sophia Lyon Fahs listened carefully to the questions and comments of children as they grew and developed. She absorbed the insights of the sciences. And she had the courage to trust her own experiences. She traveled a long road away from her inherited biblical religion. I believe that she created a revolutionary theology for our time.

Let us return now to the image of the threshold, the threshold we stand upon now as we look ahead into the 21st century. And let us return to the

three major theological issues that have emerged for us: (1) Who am I as a woman and what is my particular religious history? (2) What is my relationship to the earth and the natural environment that gives me life? (3) How should I relate to people raised in traditions very different from my own? I will ask you in a few moments to break into groups of four to discuss these issues and what you think is the work on each of them that lies ahead for us as women. Will we advocate for new laws that affect the lives of women? Will we write powerful stories and novels about the lives of women? Will we produce great new films? Will we write compelling poetry and songs or paint pictures that change the hearts and minds of people? Most importantly, how shall we change our stories? Please be sure each person has a chance to speak briefly on each question. And please have one person jot down any ideas you want to share when we come back together.

(Allow 15 minutes for the discussion. Call participants back together and ask for some of their responses to the questions. Allow about 10 minutes.)

In her book *Celebrating Her*, Wendy Hunter Roberts¹² remarks, “Of all the signs on the horizon, perhaps the most interesting are the countless homegrown women’s spirituality groups that have sprung up all across the nation and beyond.” This phenomenon of “homegrown women’s spirituality groups” has been especially widespread within Unitarian Universalism as women gathered to experience the *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven* and *Rise Up and Call Her Name*¹³ courses.

¹² Wendy Hunter Roberts, *Celebrating Her*, The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland, OH, 1998.

¹³ Elizabeth Fisher, *Rise Up and Call Her Name, A Woman-honoring Journey into Global Earth-based Spiritualities*, Originally published by the Unitarian Universalist Women’s Federation, Boston, 1994; republished by the author in 2007, lizfisher@RiseUpAndCallHerName.com

Let us not forget that it was the women in our congregations who stood up every time sexist language was spoken until the ministers and worship leaders changed the words. It was the women in our movement who demanded that sexist language not be part of our Principles and Purposes. It was the women who demanded a hymnal free of sexist language. It was the women who brought home from women's conferences and incorporated into Sunday worship the sharing of joys and concerns; the sharing of the waters collected on summer vacations; the arrangement of chairs in half circles rather than rigid rows; the closing words "Blessed be."

Most importantly, it was because of the women that a spirituality of personal experience and warmth of community across all theological positions gradually began to replace the cool intellectual sermon. The spontaneity of drums and chanting was heard along with the old hymns. Trees and vines and rocks and shells were added to the décor, and the elements of earth, air, fire and water were named and honored. Winter Solstice celebrations became as common as Christmas and Hanukah services. Women in "homegrown spirituality groups" made it happen. I hope we will continue to do so. In that spirit I would like to close with these words by Jane Caputi:

"Imagine the Crones standing over a raging fire in the dead of night. Hanging above that dragon fire is a giant cauldron that changes colors from purple to silver to copper to red and finally to black. The Crones are waving large, crooked sticks over its surface, stirring up trouble, brewing up brainstorm, reconstituting creation. The cauldron is the magical matrix of Chaos into which all the structures by which we have been ruled and controlled for millennia are now crackling, cracking, and dissolving. Peer with your owl eyes into the rising, infinitely turbulent steam. Actively

visualize what is now bubbling forth. Become fateful, taking responsibility for what turn our world is now taking.”¹⁴

Thank you and blessed be!

Are there any questions or comments? (Whatever time is left.)

¹⁴ Jane Caputi, *Gossips, Gorgons and Crones*, Bear & Company, Santa Fe, NM, 1993.