

75 Souls for 75 Years  
Rev. Hannah Petrie  
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RESPONSIVE CALL TO WORSHIP #439 We Gather in Reverence by Sophia Lyon Fahs

OFFERING

Today, as always, we welcome your weekly financial gifts that help sustain our ministries and operations, but there is another thing you can do too. The title of the service today refers to the 75 souls I hope we recruit this year for new volunteer roles. 75 new volunteers in honor and reverence of this congregation's humble yet triumphant beginnings, when it was our forebears themselves who created this beautiful place – not some contractor – it was each other - step by step, beam by beam, room by room, quite literally like a barn-raising in slow motion.

Currently, there are several souls who care for our buildings and grounds with such care, as if they were the ones who hammered and drilled it all into place. We are fortunate that one of those people is on our staff, Facility Manager Stan Pitluck, also a long-time member. However, we need many MORE souls to do the work of our 21<sup>st</sup> century barn-raising, for our NEXT 75 years.

We want souls who think in big-picture terms, and see the value in transmitting our UU values to our younger generations – we need Classroom Assistants for our burgeoning Religious Exploration program.

We want souls who want to welcome *new* souls to this exciting spiritual community, people who see value in our growth so that even more people can benefit from what we do here. We need a Chair for our Membership Team, and we need Mentor Volunteers who can help our newcomers integrate and experience that sense of belonging so many of us have been blessed with already.

I could go on and on about the souls we want to take on new leadership - in this - our 75th year, but I especially wish to name the souls we want - that are most akin to our forbears - who donated so much hard labor to build our buildings that have stood the test of time. These folks got their hands dirty, and we want souls willing to get their hands dirty too, only this time in our community garden, in Our Shared Earth Garden. We want the nurturing and love it deserves so that it may thrive, and yield the kind of high-quality produce that we can feel proud of donating to our hungry neighbors via the North Hollywood Interfaith Food Bank. So if you'll check out the insert in your Order of Service . . .

SERMON

So this is a project – Between now and Oct 3, 2018, I will collect testimonies of what taking on a new volunteer role has meant to you. Maybe it's volunteering on the night of our super-hero auction, or joining our care team, or becoming an usher. Luis would love more ushers.

There is no limit to the new volunteer roles you can try. So, no pressure, you have a year to complete this assignment, and of course it's only one of the ways we will be honoring our 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, with 75 new volunteer souls for 75 years . . .

So, all this volunteer work I'm peddling - it's not *just* so we can be a vibrant church, and so that as many of you as possible have ownership of our ministry. Yes, it's those things, but it's also because we are losing a very important cultural feature of the time in which this church was born and grew up. Back then, services donated to volunteer organizations, such as a congregation or a civic club, a city council commission, was a widespread way of life. We still have the die-hards who see value in the Rotary club and the like, and we see congregations such as our own, lovingly supported by loyal and steadfast individuals. But I worry about this commitment and dedication being re-generated, down the road.

In fact, believe it or not it's one of the main reasons I became a UU parish minister. It's because of the ideas I was exposed to as a sociology major when I was a young adult. There's a book called "Habits of the Heart" that was published in the 80's by a team of sociologists. I learned from this book how to put into words what I had sensed as I came of age, that the fabric of society really depends on the strength of our community engagement, and a sense that we do what we do as a volunteer because it's good for everyone - the reward is in strengthening the common good. Habits of the Heart, through research, showed how those community values were being eroded by such things as consumerism, by exclusive friendship groups and enclaves taking precedence over the religious community, or the civic clubs.

There was another book from this era of my formative years, called "Entertaining Ourselves to Death" with the same sort of message, and one getting worse all the time, right, our obsession with "television. the drug of the nation, breeding ignorance, and feeding radiation, yes television" – anyone remember that one?

**This community, where frankly, a lot of thankless volunteerism occurs because otherwise we wouldn't exist, is, in fact, the perfect anecdote for these modern declines in social cohesion.** Whether you're conscious of it or not, *the act of volunteer service always bears witness to this great truth, that there are others who benefit from your service, and therefore, others with whom you share this world.*

That may sound basic, but I'm sure I'm not the only one who worries that there are fewer and fewer people who don't only act in service of me and mine. So I would like us to honor the church in this way. Another way we are celebrating our 75<sup>th</sup> year is by improving our web site, which is almost ready to go live, and when it does, you'll easily be able to learn all the ways you can give of your time and talent.

Last week, as I was preparing for this sermon, I read all these historical documents about this congregation, and frankly, I was kind of flabbergasted. My hope is that our unique history will inspire you to be part of this living tradition, as we like to say as Unitarian Universalists – since we are creedless we never think of our faith as static, but as one that changes, that grows, and is constantly enlarged as it grows - a *living* tradition.

This history, I thought, wow, what a unique history – everything is here. You have this powerful apostle in the founding minister, Herbert Schneider, a pastor born of a pastor in her own right – Herb’s mother, Rose Schneider, was a Unity pastor in the 1940s, when there were hardly any female ministers. She went to Unity because the Lutherans would not ordain women.

This pioneering spirit is what brought the family to southern California. At our first location, on Ventura Blvd., Herb and Lois were given three months rent by their parents for the store shop space that was converted to church space. In 1943, they had to make it in three months. I can’t imagine this kind of pressure, of what kind of faith and determination would possess a person to start a congregation out of nothing.

But indeed, it is such far-fetched and audacious ideas that can change the world. I would be surprised if Herb’s mother did not agree with the famous Margaret Mead adage, that we must never doubt a small group of committed people can change the world, that indeed it’s the only thing that ever has.

So I dare say this congregation has feminist roots, in addition to pioneering roots, and a tradition of going its own way. You know, I like to quip that, like 12 steps, Unitarian Universalism is a program of attraction, rather than promotion. Our history illustrates this perfectly. Herb Schneider, like so many people out in the world, was a Unitarian and didn’t know it. It was when the Unity church started wagging their finger in the way that UUs can’t bear, telling him he must only use Unity-published books and literature, and not other sources of religious wisdom and teaching in his ministry.

Pastor Herb, was like Cole Porter and said, “don’t fence me in!” Imagine the great joy and relief he must have experienced when he realized there is a faith without borders – there is a tradition where you are encouraged to broaden your faith development, not sequester it.

You know how he found out about us? Again, this blows my mind. He found out because someone heard about a piece of Unitarian religious education literature, written by Sophia Lyon Fahs, the author of our responsive call to worship this morning, and a few other really key readings for our UU tradition. Fahs articulated our widespread view of Jesus and his birthday – every Christmas eve, I am sure to

quote her when she said, “each night a child is born is a holy night,” meaning, not only Jesus, but *all* of us are all God’s children.

The connection to religious education was like a Eureka! moment for me, because the tradition of excellence in religious education is really strong here. There have been several, long golden periods of really vibrant programming for our children and youth, and after reading our history, I see why.

Before Herbert Schneider was a pastor, he was an RE Director for his mom’s Unity church. When they put ten bucks down on the property here, the first thing they did was get a playground, so they could immediately serve the neighborhood’s children. The first room after the sanctuary was built was a children’s chapel. Even in the 1953 history it is noted that they always thought about the children.

I’m a parent, so this slays me, but I hope even if you are not a parent, that you feel the depth and beauty of this commitment. I constantly worry that my kids don’t get enough attention from their parents, because we live in a world that entertains itself to death, a world where the habits of the heart sometimes seem programmed by market forces and the pressure to go, go, go. So, to have a place where my kids can come, and have other adults help transmit those values, those *honorable* habits of the heart I want them to have – that first of all, they are valued, that it become their habit to value themselves, and in turn all living beings, that they value life itself and their ability to make a difference in our world – to have this authentic tradition stitched into the fabric, into the walls themselves of this congregation – it’s awesome.

More so, it says a lot about this community’s ability to safeguard its longevity. It can’t be more straight-forward than this – we keep this congregation alive and vibrant by producing more Unitarian Universalists into adulthood. Young UUs who may disappear during the college years, because we all do that, but who come back, especially after they have their own kids. If not come back this congregation, than another one. We pay it forward.

Herbert Schneider was a visionary, and he blessed this congregation and our legacy with the kind of vision that will get us through any challenge. Remember how he started – hardly anyone in the pews, led only by his “conviction of purpose”, as the history says, led only by his and his wife Lois’s determination to live “a worthwhile life of service.”

Pastor Herb said to the surrounding neighborhood of mid World War 2, Studio City, you may not know that you need this church yet, but you will. He built it so they would come, and they did.

I highlight this because it’s not much different than what we’ve always done here. We are constantly thinking of ways to better serve the community, and especially the young people of our community. I’m so pleased that our board member, Vice

President Brian Bielanski has a vision for new Family Nights here at the church. Wouldn't this be lovely: it's Friday night, you're exhausted, but all you have to do is head over to the church with some little potluck item, and you're greeted by others like you, others weary, but wanting connection, and time for camaraderie, and laughs. And the best part is that the children are happy to see each other too, and they have a marvelous time with whatever activity, film, and games we have planned.

But it's not just for people who have what we think of as families, Family Night is just that, it's for the whole Church family, the whole family, every generation.

Sometimes I pine for those times, when we can all let our hair down, and let the magic of poetry in motion take place, just in the spirit of our fellowship. Toward the end of such an evening, I can picture how we would all soften a bit, and maybe not only let our hair down, but our guards down too. In those quiet conversations we adults could admit to our struggles, and our fears, our difficulties. And then we don't feel so alone, because we listen, and we're listened to. Because we love, and are loved.

Someday, I'd like to see our Family Nights become 75 souls strong. Maybe there's 40 kids in the social hall and other rooms, 35 adults in here, doing their thing together, breathing together, letting that collective breath of relief out, because it's Friday night, and we are together.

I can see it happening, and I bet a lot of you could too.

I need to end this sermon, but there is of course so much more that can be mined from our history, and what this 75<sup>th</sup> year can mean for us. All through the year, as your Consulting Minister, I will help put it in context. My intent is to *create the conditions for a new golden period* – not just for religious exploration, but for our community as a whole, that we literally *grow our garden, and its yields*, because we have the volunteers to do so, the ones who get their hands dirty for a greater good.

Like California, we are young as a congregation. Like Los Angeles, we are young. Many UU churches are well over 100, 150 years old. I think of us as in the bridging time of life, when one comes of age as a young adult. It's when there's no doubt that you are official, you are, legally, an adult. But in the heart, in the head, and in the soul, there is some doubt. With the world spread out before you, you wonder, will I go for it? When the time comes to go all in, will I have the courage, will this congregation have the courage to create its own future, so that what lays before us isn't just what happens to us, it's what we make it to be - it's like that thing Herb had, when there was less than a 100 bucks in the bank, that "conviction of purpose" and that belief that we, as a congregation, are destined to live "a worthwhile life of service."

It takes love, courage, and soul – our souls. This church has always striven to care for our souls – first in a Christian context, then independently, guided by principles of the common good and freedom of thought, and then, as Unitarian Universalist. And now, I might venture to say, not only UU, but also post-Christian, drawing heavily upon the Jewish and Pagan elements unique to THIS community, our community, our particular living tradition.

For almost 74 years, we have inspired people to care lovingly for their souls, because we have been true to our own soul as a congregation – again and again, thinking hard about the best way to go - the way that not only felt right to us as individuals, but as a whole, as a community in sincere covenant with one another.

In honor of this spectacular story, this heritage we all share as members and friends of this humble congregation and community center, I call on you to think about my vision, of 75 souls for 75 years. There is no limit to the possibilities . . .