

THE MIDDLEST GIRL

PREFACE:

I was asked to write a story on "How Our Sunday School Got Started." Being a good individualist Unitarian, it turned into "Why Our Sunday School Got Started."

When the children hear it, we hope they will want to know about how some of the problems were solved by the Unitarians (we were not yet affiliated with the Universalists).

There were five main reasons why it was impossible to even think of starting a Sunday School:

- 1) No permanent meeting place
- 2) All meetings were held on Wednesday nights
- 3) Only 25-30 members and no real treasury
- 4) Five children with ages spread 4 through 12.
- 5) No experienced teachers in the group.

But there were also five reasons why we should start a Unitarian Sunday School -- Robin, Ann, and Julie Hentz and two boys, Robbie Wickboldt and Rickie Lassner.

Robin was a real girl, her problem was a real problem -- But something we complacently thought was resolved in the '50's seems to be emerging again.

Betsy Cox

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February 1983

*To Diann
from Betsy
with love -*

THE MIDDLEST GIRL

Robin was the first to wake. She loved that quiet moment when winter dawn made the wall glow pink. Then she crept deeper into her soft downy comforter. She wished she could stay there forever...usually Robin was first-up. But this was Monday. That made all the difference.

Ann, her older sister in the other twin bed slept with arm overhead as though practicing a graceful pirouette. Ann did indeed star in ballet class while Robin turned and curtsied in the chorus. Robin was so proud of her sister's shining blond beauty. Ann dared to do anything! Everything!

In the small cot by the window, little Julie was tucked in like a favorite doll, smiling even in her dreams. It seemed to Robin that Julie was always smiling. When Mother said "Our Julie has never met a stranger" Robin thought how wonderful that must be - to feel you were loved and welcomed especially by people you didn't know! She knew she loved Julie in a very special way. ^{IP} Ann is biggest, Julie littlest and I'm the middlest thought Robin. Most times she liked the middle. Now she wished for Ann's daring and Julie's optimistic charm so she might find a way to face Monday. Daddy says Unitarians must find their own way. Follow their conscience - now Robin's very own middle felt tied in a huge knot.

Was that how conscience felt? How do you un-tie it? How do you find a middle way by yourself?

From the kitchen below came a coffee-cocoa-cinnamon- toast aroma that meant breakfast was almost ready. Robin knew it was time to get up and go to school.

But it was Monday.

She had never missed a day in Mrs. Eccles first grade class. Mother

said "Good attendance is very important." Ann, because she was two years older, helped her through that scary first time away from home feeling last fall. Robin was shy, since there was no public kindergarten all the children must learn about making new friends, being in class a whole day and A.B.C's all at once. Mother said "Remember, always mind the teacher and you'll be all right." Robin tried very hard to do that. And Mrs. Eccles was the best teacher in the whole world--except on Monday.

Julie rolled over and smiled at her. Robin's soft brown eyes filled with tears. She buried her face in the pillow. Only a mop of tousled brown hair was showing. Julie, alarmed, ran to get Mother.

Running a practiced hand over Robin's forehead, Mother asked, "What's the matter with my early-bird this morning? You don't seem to have a fever."

"My tummy hurts--maybe I shouldn't go to school" said Robin hopefully.

"Perhaps you'll feel better with some breakfast in that tummy!" Mother briskly laid out Robin's favorite school clothes. The brown plaid skirt, the crisp white blouse, red cardigan.

Robin dressed very slowly. Food was the last thing she wanted. But how could she find words to explain? Why couldn't she stay home on this Monday?

Ann danced around the room making her petticoat ruffles swirl in a most satisfactory way. Catching Robin's sad glance in the mirror, she stopped in mid-twirl.

"What is the matter Robin? You can tell me."

Silence -- Robin put on one sock.

"I think I know," said Ann. "Mrs. Eccles starts every morning with a Bible verse or a hymn and a prayer."

Robin put on the other sock.

"And on Monday she says 'Everybody who went to Sunday School yesterday,

raise your hands' and everyone does. Even the dopes you know never go."

Robin sat on the bed, sobbing. All the hurt and confusion came tumbling out.

"That's it. I always raised my hand too because everybody else did. It seemed to mean so much to Mrs. Eccles. Besides, Mama says 'Always do what the teacher asks' ...but Ann, do you remember the Unitarian Fellowship Christmas Party here?"

"Sure when they all argued about which Christmas carols to sing? But I don't see what ..."

..."Well I asked Daddy about that--why they argued about the Christmas carols and he said it was more like a discussion (adults like to use words like that) anyway a lot of them - Unitarians that is - feel that Jesus was a great and wise teacher, but maybe not God. So they don't feel comfortable calling him Emmanuel and Redeemer and, and a lot of other big words I can't remember. Anyhow Daddy said the important thing was to be honest inside yourself. Be responsible to your own conscience. Find your own way. Then he said 'I guess the idea is so simple, it's hard to explain, but there is room in our Fellowship for many truths.' So when I thought about that, being truthful and responsible, I decided I couldn't raise my hand any more when Mrs. Eccles asked about Sunday School.

"Last Monday everyone looked at me, even Beth Arnold who visits her Grandmother most Sundays and Timmy Jackson -- his Father is building a cabin in the mountains on week-ends.

"Mrs. Eccles stared a hole right through me. I said 'I can't go to Sunday School. We're Unitarians.'

"That's no excuse' she snapped. So I had to tell her we didn't have a Sunday School. She pointed her finger at me and said 'Go sit in the hall. You have raised your hand every Monday this year. Now you tell me your church

has no Sunday School. You must learn not to lie to Jesus." Robin took a deep shuddering breath and squared her shoulders, remembering, she added softly, almost to herself, "But I didn't lie to Jesus. I only did it to please Mrs. Eccles. Is Jesus a great teacher who wanted to help people or a God who watches? I know Mrs. Eccles thinks he watches because she said 'His eye was on the sparrow', does he watch Robins too?

"She sings 'Jesus Loves Me' but if he truly loved me wouldn't he understand why I did it? Would he make me sit in a dark hall just because Unitarians don't have a Sunday School? Would Jesus think I was worse than Timmy or Beth?"

Ann said, "Well, it's hard to know the answers to all those questions. Of course I've been sent to the hall heaps of times."

Robin looked surprised, "You never told me that!"

"Well, it really doesn't bother me. I didn't want to worry Mama and Daddy. Once Mrs. Eccles sent me out when I said I would read a poem but I didn't know any prayers. She thought I might learn to pray out there. But I just used the coat-rail for a ballet practice bar.

"Miss Lockwood doesn't make us pray in the 3rd grade. And she doesn't ask about Sunday School either. But once we had a discussion about it. (Wasn't that Daddy's word?) She said the Supreme Court made a rule that it was against the law or the Constitution, or something, anyway that they wouldn't allow prayers in the Public Schools. Do you suppose Mrs. Eccles hasn't heard about that?"

It was Monday morning...

Robin was indeed in the middle...

What could she do?

What could anyone do?