Volume I

GLORIOUS WOMEN

Award-Winning Sermons about Women

Dorothy May Emerson, Editor
GLORIOUS WOMEN
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This book is dedicated to the founders of MSUU (Ministerial Sisterhood Unitarian Universalist). As MSUU President Audrey Vincent put it:

We thank you for making ministry a calling for women....You put women ministers as active agents into the center of ministry, so that the work of ministry and its historical record will reflect the dual nature of humankind—its male and female aspects....You have made the road easier for those...who have come after.
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Glorious Women has been a collaborative effort, and there are many people to thank. First and foremost is MSUU itself, members and leadership, for creating the award in the first place and for supporting the idea of publishing this book. Second are all of the authors of the sermons, for composing them in the first place, for agreeing to have them published, and for their wonderful reflections on the process. Third are those who provided funding: the Fund for Unitarian Universalism, the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, and all the people who had enough faith in this project to make donations and purchase copies before the book was published.

Then there are the many people who worked on the book itself. Gail Sceavy and Rosa Palomino compiled the list of authors, contacted them for their materials, and later they helped promote pre-publication sales of the book. Barbara Coeyman and Colleen McDonald read and edited everything in the book multiple times, making numerous suggestions that have made this book readable. Elinor Artman, Marni Harmony, and Deborah Pope-Lance contributed their knowledge of MSUU history to the writing of the introduction. The staff at Andover-Harvard Library, Harvard Divinity School, assisted with research. Ruth Roper converted the hymns into wonderfully readable music we hope you will use. Bonnie Smith, from HurdSmith Communications in Salem, Massachusetts, prepared the text for publication. Rifka Keilson, from iUniverse, answered my many questions about on-demand publishing and helped me through the publication process. My company, Rainbow Solutions, in Medford, Massachusetts, provided office support and managed pre-publications sales. And last but certainly not least, my spouse, Donna Clifford, supported me throughout the entire process of birthing this book.

Thank you to all of you. Together we have created a remarkable book.

Rev. Dr. Dorothy May Emerson, editor
Medford, Massachusetts
September 2004
TEXT CREDITS


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Glorious Women brings together a unique group of sermons about women and the experience of being a woman, created over two decades, from 1984 through 2004. Each of these sermons was a winner in the annual MSUU Sermon Award Contest. MSUU (Ministerial Sisterhood Unitarian Universalist) created the award to promote preaching about women.

Those entering the contest were requested to submit multiple copies of the sermons, without identification except on a single title page, so that the judges could read the sermons without knowing who wrote them. During the first two decades of this award, the recipients have included sixteen different authors, thirteen women and three men. Two authors won twice, and in two different years no award was given.

When the decision was made to publish the sermons, the authors were invited to submit their reflections on the relationship of their sermons to their lives. These reflections demonstrate the significance these sermons had when they were written and attest to their on-going significance, both in the lives of the authors and for the people who have had the opportunity to share these insightful pieces.

Sermons are, of course, composed to be spoken aloud, not to be read. Certain editorial changes have been made (and approved by the authors) to make these sermons easier to read. Those of us who have created this book hope readers will have their own experiences of insight and revelation as they enjoy these printed versions.

To set the sermons in context, the introduction chronicles the changes that occurred as these sermons were being created. The sermons in this anthology span two decades of phenomenal cultural change in gender relations. During this time the number of women in Unitarian Universalist ministry grew from a small minority to over half of the active clergy. A significant factor in this amazing change is the work of the organization whose annual award was given to these sermons: MSUU, Ministerial Sisterhood Unitarian Universalist.
A NOTE TO READERS

The context for this book and for these sermons is the Unitarian Universalist movement. Even those within this movement are sometimes confused by the many different Unitarian Universalist organizations within our association. Here are a few basic guidelines to help you understand the context and the many organizational names mentioned.

The Unitarian Universalist Association is the over-arching organization of over one thousand Unitarian Universalist member congregations. The headquarters, in Boston, Massachusetts, provides programs and services for the congregations and for the many associate and affiliate organizations that make up the larger Unitarian Universalist movement.

The Unitarian Universalist Association was created in 1961 by the consolidation of the Universalist Church in America and the American Unitarian Association. For more information about these two historically distinct, but related, religious movements, see The Historical Dictionary of Unitarian Universalism, by Mark W. Harris (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2004) and Unitarian Universalism: A Narrative History, by David E. Bumbaugh (Chicago: Meadville Lombard Press, 2000). These two books also contain additional information about the other organizations included in this Note to Readers.

General Assembly is the annual meeting of the Unitarian Universalist Association, held each year in June in a different location in the United States or Canada. In addition to business meetings, there are a multitude of workshops, worship services, major speeches, exhibits, and opportunities for networking and socializing.

Unitarian Universalist is often abbreviated “UU.”

The Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association is the organization that provides education, advocacy, and fellowship for ordained UU ministers and candidates for ministry.

The Liberal Religious Educators’ Association is the professional and support organization for ministers of religious education and lay directors of religious education.
MSUU (Ministerial Sisterhood Unitarian Universalist) is an organization of women ministers and students preparing for ministry. You will read more about this organization in the Introduction.

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee organizes and supports community development and empowerment programs in the United States and around the world.

The Unitarian Universalist Women’s Federation is an organization that works to advance justice for women through education and advocacy.

The Women and Religion Resolution is one of the most significant resolutions ever passed by the UU General Assembly. Approved in 1977, the Resolution called upon UU congregations and organizations to examine and eliminate sexism in language and beliefs. The Resolution was implemented through an office and staff person at UU headquarters and through the Women and Religion Committee, which in turn led to district committees, conferences, and programs. The Resolution led to revision of the Unitarian Universalist Principles and to the publication of a new hymnbook.

For further information about Unitarian Universalism and about UU congregations and organizations, visit www.uua.org, or call the Unitarian Universalist Association at 617-742-2100.

INTRODUCTION:
WOMEN IN MINISTRY AND HOW WE GREW

In 1974, when MSUU (Ministerial Sisterhood Unitarian Universalist) was founded, women made up less than five percent of ordained Unitarian Universalist ministers. In 1999, when MSUU held its twenty-fifth anniversary celebration, over half of UU ministers were women.

At the anniversary celebration, President-Elect Audrey Vincent told the following story, based on her interviews with founding members:

It was a momentous General Assembly in New York City, 1974. Gloria Steinem was there stirring everyone up. Mary Daly was there creating an uproar...in question time she would not allow men to speak, giving them the experience of silence.

Given the circumstances and the ferment of the times, should we be surprised that three intrepid women, Marni Harmony, Diane Miller, and Denise Tracy, would seize the moment and send a call out to gather women ministers and students hoping to enter the ministry?

Fifteen women responded to the call and gathered in the Unitarian Universalist Women’s Federation suite in the American Hotel. Holly Bell, one of the founding members, reported that they didn’t know what they were going to do, but they were clear about wanting to do something new and different. For the first time, many felt a new sense of power from being with colleagues who knew what it meant to be a woman and a minister.

They decided to form an organization that would meet at the annual Unitarian Universalist General Assemblies. Sandra Szalag came up with the name MSUU. Marjorie Leaming agreed to edit a newsletter and serve as coordinator and treasurer. Twelve women paid dues of $2.00 each to become Charter Members: Holly Bell, Jane Boyajan, Polly L. Guild, Marni Harmony, Marjorie Leaming, Gertrude Lindener-Stawski, Diane Miller, Roberta Mitchell, Mary Moore, Margaret Odell, Sandra Szalag, and Denise Tracy.
To appreciate the significance of the formation of MSUU in 1974, it is important to understand some history. There had been women ministers in earlier eras in both the Universalist and Unitarian movements, prior to the consolidation of the two groups in 1961. The Universalists became the first denomination to accept women as fully ordained when they ordained Lydia Jenkins in 1860 and Olympia Brown in 1863. The Unitarians followed suit by ordaining Celia Burleigh and Mary Graves in 1871. In 1893, the Unitarians listed nineteen women ministers in their yearbook, and the Universalists had ordained twenty-seven women and licensed an additional nine as preachers. In 1914, of the 640 Universalist ministers listed in their yearbook, seventy-five were women. That’s over eight percent of all ministers! By 1920, when the United States ratified the suffrage amendment affirming women’s right to vote, the Universalists had ordained a total of eighty-eight women and the Unitarians had ordained forty-two.²

However, it wasn’t easy for these nineteenth- and early twentieth-century women ministers. They were generally called to the less prestigious pastorates, or had to start their own congregations or revive dying ones. Although some women participated actively in Midwest and western denominational organizations and conferences, on the east coast (where both groups had their headquarters) women were not generally accepted into leadership positions. Women were often discouraged from ordination. Samuel Eliot, who served as president of the American Unitarian Association from 1901 to 1916, refused to find positions for women ministers.⁵

The biggest gap in women’s ordination, however, came during the Depression. Universalist General Superintendent Roger Erz wrote in 1935 that there was “tremendous prejudice against women” and that it was “practically impossible” to find them jobs.⁴ In the three decades of the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, only one Unitarian woman was ordained, and only nine Universalists.

Consciousness-raising and demands for liberation characterized the 1960s. This era also represented a turning of the tide for women in ministry. In 1961, the Universalists and Unitarians joined to create the Unitarian Universalist Association. Three years later, at its annual gathering in 1964, the General Assembly passed a resolution calling on congregations to recruit and call candidates of both sexes to the ministry and requesting that scholarship aid be available to both women and men. But ten years later, in 1974 when MSUU was founded, there were only twenty-five active, ordained women ministers. Of these, only four served as full-time parish ministers, while others served part-time, worked in religious education or community ministries, or were searching for positions.⁵

The initial purpose of MSUU was “encouragement, care, and help to each other.” Those who joined the group were inspired simply by being together, by realizing they shared similar joys and frustrations as women and as ministers. Those who had been ordained for some years shared their wisdom and experience with students and those who were recently ordained. Together, they shared laughter and tears and the awareness that they were not alone. In addition to annual gatherings at General Assemblies, members communicated with each other and shared resources during the year through a newsletter, later called Gleaning. But meeting once a year wasn’t enough.

In 1978, with funding from the Unitarian Universalist Association, Marni Harmony and Denise Tracy organized the first conference of Unitarian Universalist women clergy, in Graftville, Ohio. Twenty-nine women participated. Carolyn Owen-Towle remembers:

Until then there had not been a critical mass of us to call a conference. . . . We were like starving people desperate for water. Hungry for word from one another, we formed circle after circle where we questioned and shared the nuts and bolts as well as the theology of our work. . . . In our churches, we were regarded as anything from aberrations to apparitions; from mothers to sex objects. We knew we had a long way to go, and we sorely needed the support of each other to get there.⁶

Also during the 1970s, there was a growing awareness in the culture at large and within the Unitarian Universalist movement of the negative effects of sexism and the importance of affirmative action. A watershed event occurred in 1977 when the General Assembly passed the Women and Religion Resolution, calling for the elimination of sexism in language, religious beliefs, and organizational structures and operations. In 1978, the UUA established the Affirmative Action Program Advisory Committee for Women in Ministry, and appointed several MSUU members and others to study the status of women in ministry. The following year, the committee reported: “women are attaining positions of seniority in name only. There seems to be a limited possibility for advancement by women clergy to serving larger churches.” Clearly there was much work to do to achieve equity.

In the meantime, women found creative ways to recognize each other for what was being accomplished. Carolyn Owen-Towle, President of MSUU, initiated the Tablecloth Project in 1980. Inspired by Judy Chicago’s “Dinner Party” art installation, she invited ordained women to sign their names on a tablecloth she had brought to General Assembly. A group of parishioners in the San Diego con-
regation then embroidered the signatures. Each year more women signed. Eventually the faithful embroiderers added their names along the border. In 2000, the tablecloth, with some 300 signatures, was displayed at the Unitarian Universalist headquarters in Boston. Reflecting on the tablecloth process, Carolyn wrote: "A woman’s art, as ancient as time, has been employed to create a supple monument. A traditional time-consuming way of creating has boldly entered the arena of our ever more hectic, sophisticated lives. Its vivid, motley hues remind us that we not be pretentious, that we are precious in our most homespun ways."

In the 1980s, women ministers made great progress. The establishment of the Ministry of Religious Education in 1979 meant that increased numbers of women were eligible for ordination. In 1981, Judith Walker-Riggs became the first woman minister to serve on the Unitarian Universalist Association Board of Trustees. In 1983, Carolyn Owen-Towle became the first woman president of the UU Service Committee and in 1989 the first to serve as president of the UU Ministers Association.

By 1984, the “tipping point” of fifteen percent had been reached. According to sociologist Rosabeth Moss Kanter, when a minority group reaches fifteen percent, changes begin to occur in the organization. Substantive movement toward equality begins to be possible, but resistance to change is also likely to occur.

Ministry itself began to change. There was greater emphasis on personal relationships and families. New models of shared leadership and authority evolved, including more cooperative relationships with staff. Worship became more experiential, with an increased focus on the arts and greater involvement of children. Many ministers—both women and men—began wearing colorful robes, rather than the traditional black. A new ritual element was introduced: the lighting of a chalice to signal the beginning of worship. The chalice began to appear everywhere as the symbol of Unitarian Universalism, and many varieties of actual chalices were made or found for use in worship.

The majority of male ministers welcomed the increased number of women in the ministry as something that was long overdue, and they appreciated the contributions women made. Some, however, were less than enthusiastic. Ministers’ meetings became more supportive and less competitive; there was far less drinking and carousing, which made some men long for the good old days. Others complained about a loss of camaraderie and authority, or blamed lower compensation on the entrance of women into ministry.

Conferences continued to provide opportunities for women clergy to gather for an extended time together. MSUU held periodic conferences for women clergy and participated as a sponsoring organization in larger conferences with lay women. In 1983, MSUU even co-sponsored a conference for women and men with the theme “Dreams, Illusions, Realities.”

It was in 1984, at the Albuquerque Women’s Convocation, which was co-sponsored by the UU Women’s Federation, Women and Religion, LREDA (Liberal Religious Educators Association), and MSUU, where "it was suggested that MSUU sponsor an award for the Best Sermon on Women’s Issues." Rather than focusing on women’s issues, the decision was made to issue a call for sermons "on the subject of a Unitarian Universalist Woman or Women.” Eleven women and one man submitted sermons, and the winner, Cheryl Klein, was invited to present her sermon at an awards dinner. In 1991, the topic for the sermon contest was expanded to include “Furthering the Vision of Women within the UU Movement,” and in 1990 the venue for presentation of the sermon changed from a dinner to a full worship service.

The first few winners received ministerial stoles, created by Sarah Barber-Braun and embroidered with names of women who had been important in the UU movement. One winner received a gift certificate to the hotel gift shop. Eventually funds were raised for an honorarium, originally $250, and later raised to $500. (The increased honorarium was initially supported by a grant from the Ted and Natalie Jones Preaching Fund.)

One of the important concerns of women in the 1980s was domestic violence. MSUU participated along with other Unitarian Universalist organizations in forming UUs Acting to Stop Violence against Women. The MSUU representative reported on progress each year at the MSUU annual meeting.

At the annual meetings, women shared stories of their ministries. Although there were a growing number of women serving in the 1980s as parish ministers, it seemed that women were primarily called to smaller congregations, often with lower compensation than male colleagues with similar education and experience. Apparently women’s names were not being submitted to the larger, more prestigious congregations. So in 1986, a group of three “Sensible Sisters” was appointed to go to the Department of Ministry to talk about settlement issues. In response to the growing role of MSUU as an advocate for women in ministry, the stated purpose of MSUU was expanded in 1991 to include the “raising of consciousness about issues important to women in ministry.”

Over the years MSUU sponsored many workshops at General Assemblies and at the ministers’ Professional Days on issues of women’s marginalization and the challenges women were facing in ministry and in the world. MSUU also continued to sponsor conferences for women clergy and to co-sponsor conferences with other UU women’s organizations. One such was “Womanquest,” held in 1990 in
Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. At this conference, MSUU held an emergency meeting to confront an important equity issue. The UU Ministers Association was proposing a slate of officers for the coming year, and not one single woman was included. After much discussion, another group of three "Sensible Sisters" was chosen to find two candidates to be nominated from the floor at the annual meeting. Both candidates were elected, and MSUU advocated for the UU Ministers Association to adopt an affirmative action policy.

The Unitarian Universalist movement was joined in 1990 by the first public recognition of clergy sexual abuse within its churches. A prominent man minister was removed from his position and from Unitarian Universalist fellowship. This was nearly a decade before such scandals rocked the Catholic Church. Response among Unitarian Universalists was mixed, including some who resented the fact that the situation had been made public. Through the leadership of Deborah Pope-Lance, MSUU issued a call for members to sign a Declaration on Sexual Ethic and Professional Practice, supporting the actions of UU leaders and encouraging them to continue to remove ministers from fellowship "where there is proof of a minister's sexual misconduct." Eventually more than 100 members signed the MSUU Declaration, which was delivered to the president of the Unitarian Universalist Association at General Assembly in 1991. At that General Assembly, MSUU joined a Call to Action, sponsored by the UU Women's Federation and Women and Religion, to create a Task Force on Clergy Sexual Misconduct, later called Unitarian Universalists for Right Relations.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s the number of women in ministry was growing. By 1992, the Department of Ministry reported that thirty-five percent of 756 active ministers were women and that the number of women training for ministry was steadily increasing. On April 25, 1999, a front-page article in the New York Times announced that the Unitarian Universalist Association had reached a historic milestone: fifty-one percent of active ordained ministers were women!

Through all these changes, MSUU provided a place for women to come together to share their experiences in ministry and find support, advice, and resources. Gathering for support led to action, and the actions taken by MSUU made a difference in the lives and careers of women in ministry.

Having come far from a small beginning in 1974, MSUU was able in 2002 to respond to a request for financial and emotional support from women ministers in Transylvania. Although in a much different context, these sister Unitarians face many of the same problems our women in ministry faced in the 1970s, 80s and 90s. It is gratifying to know that what we have learned and achieved can now benefit them. Our support and communication with these sisters is an ongoing part of our ministry as an organization today.

Reflecting on the changes, Elinor Artman writes:

Who can say what we owe to women, what we owe to men, what we owe to the times...Both men and women...have said the change has been dramatic—but whether women caused it, facilitated it, or times just change, all these were hard to pin down.

Still I know we have moved light years (and mountains). 13

Having moved light years and mountains, MSUU continues its role as a support system for women in ministry. Advocacy is an ongoing responsibility to ensure that the gains will not be lost and that the Unitarian Universalist movement continues to move toward justice for all people.

Rev. Dr. Dorothy May Emerson, editor
Born: November 20, 1945
Ordained: September 25, 1988, First Universalist Society,
Wakefield, Massachusetts

Presidents of MSUU
Marjorie Newlin Leaming, 1974-78
Gertrude Lindener-Stawski, 1978-80
Carolyn Owen-Towle, 1980-82
Elinor Berke, 1982-84
Joan Kahn-Schneider, 1984-85
Martha Munson, 1985-88, Bets Wienecke, 1988-90
Jane Mauldin, 1990-91
Gretchen Woods, 1991-94
Laurel Sheridan, 1994-96
Elizabeth McMaster, 1996-98
Susan Manker-Seale, 1998-2000
Audrey Vincent, 2000-02
Betty Stapleford, 2002-04
Tracy Sprowls, 2004-


5. These are approximate numbers, based on the Directory of the Unitarian Universalist Association, September 1973. The *MSUU Newsletter*, 8/17/1974, lists 44 ordained women, a number of whom were retired or not active in 1974. The 2/17/1977 newsletter points out that 7 of 44 were not in fellowship.

6. Report from Marni Harmony’s files. The only known picture of participants shows twenty-seven attendees.


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**LITTLE WOMEN, LARGE LEGACY**

Rev. Cheryl Klein

*Sermon Award for 1985*

It is no secret that Unitarian Universalists do not have patron saints. There are several reasons for this: we do not hold any particular respect for what the miracles inherent in sainthood are usually meant to signify, and we do not feel that our foreparents, however revered their lives may have been, are watching down and protecting us from their final resting places “above.” We look for a way to honor the past and our ancestors in a manner more truly representative of the shape of our faith. Sometimes, we participate in “salvation through biography,” hoping to make meaning for our own lives by studying the lives of those who came before us. This hour presents us with such an occasion.

My own interest in this day’s hero began when I was about eleven years old. It was nearly the same time that I felt myself becoming a Unitarian Universalist. I had been asking my mother questions about good and bad, right and wrong. One of them went this way:

“Why must we wear new clothes to go to temple for the High Holidays?”

She responded: “Because you are in God’s house and you want to be dressed nicely. Besides, this is the time of the year in the Jewish calendar that God decides whether or not to write your name down in the Book of Life. There are listed the names of those who are to live another year.”

I had, quite clearly, missed the theological point of her explanation, for my next question was: “What about people who have no money for new clothes? Will God decide they don’t deserve another year? And what about old people and sick people who can’t get to temple? Will they die, too?”

My mother responded that such questions were “silly” and that ended our conversation. It was not more than a few months later that I picked up, for the first time, Louisa May Alcott’s book, *Little Women*. To this day I can remember sitting under a large shady tree in our backyard that summer, with a pitcher of
iced tea, totally involved in the story of four young women trying, as I was, to negotiate the twisted and turning path of adolescence.

Since that time, Louisa May Alcott has come and gone in my life. I did not read her other writings, but she was mentioned in other things I read, first, in studies of women’s history, and later, in my studies of the origin of Unitarian Universalism. In a world that is uncertain, at a time in history when our future is shaky, heroes from the past—their trials, their tribulations, their survival in spite of the odds—can give us an extra boost of inspiration. Louisa May Alcott’s story can mean much for us as men and women, and as Unitarian Universalists.

The publication of Little Women came in 1868, when Louisa May Alcott was about thirty-five years old. Somehow, during my adolescence, I thought that she had written about her own children, and that she portrayed herself through the characterization of the mother. In researching the subject, I learned that it was actually the story of her own life and growing-up years, and one of the girls in the story was closest to her own character. In real life, Louisa May Alcott never married or had children of her own, but she had vivid, though pain-filled, memories of her own adolescence that provided the substance out of which Little Women was born.

But let us not get ahead of ourselves. In order to understand a person of the past, it is most important to look at the context—political, social, and religious—in which he or she lived. Louisa was born on the same day as her father, some thirty-three years later, November 29, 1832. The period of 1790 to 1860 was filled with change, the American Revolution being followed by industrialization and an effort to provide education for all people, not just the “class” mentality. It was an era that provided a new way of life, and new options for women, however limited they might seem by today’s standards.

It was the era when Catherine Littlefield Green Miller helped Eli Whitney invent the cotton gin by suggesting that metal combs be used, instead of wooden ones. With the invention of the cotton gin, and the raw materials of cotton and leather, textile factories sprang up as the beginning of industry. By 1850, twenty-four percent of the labor force in this country was women, working in textile, shoe and other factories. In fact, the new fields of working in factories, teaching and clerical endeavors, opened up new opportunities for women, whose only employment opportunities up to this era had been as seamstresses and governesses. Louisa May Alcott, attempting to support her perpetually poor family, tried all of these and more, feeling profoundly the burden of a father who would not work, and a mother who had her hands full raising children.

The Alcotts were New Englanders, spending most of their lives moving back and forth between Boston and Concord, wherever friends were able and willing to loan or give them food, shelter, and the wherewithal to survive. Bronson Alcott, having failed at a number of endeavors, refused work altogether quite early in his marriage to Abba May, sister of Unitarian minister Samuel May. Louisa’s father became more than caught up in the intellectual questioning of the times; it became his full-time occupation. Louisa’s mother—feeding her husband to be a genius, a great thinker, and a great moral exemplar—begged money from friends and family, so that he could continue his conversations with Emerson, Thoreau and others. It was, in fact, this group of men who, after spending time with the Reverend William Ellery Channing, champion of Unitarianism in America, formed the Hedge Club, the early name for the Transcendentalists. Our institutional history reveals that these were Unitarians who felt it was not enough simply to look outside oneself for “reason,” but that it was also essential to look within oneself for “inspiration.”

Thus, Louisa grew up in a home where the parental roles were reversed. Her father was gentle, quiet and withdrawn, while her mother was aggressive, assertive, and outgoing, although burdened. Although Abba revered her husband for his philosophical and moral guidance, she suffered deep disappointment in his coldness and insensitivity. Biographer Martha Saxton, writing of Louisa’s relationship with her parents, tells frequently how Louisa’s mother clung to her daughter, confiding in her the disappointment and hurt she felt, but impressing on young Louisa her own feelings of fear and distrust of men. It was an impression that would last a lifetime. Although Louisa chose to destroy many of her journal entries, when she perceived her death to be near, from those still extant comes a portrait of the father-daughter relationship that is filled with feelings of inadequacy. Her father never accepted her or found good in her for the person that she was, not only because of her looks—she was dark, while he was fair—but also because of her individuality, her refusal to fit into stereotypes. (It is interesting to note that in so being, she was simply reproducing his individual way of being in the world.) Much of her father’s attitude came to the fore in his requirement that his four daughters become “little women.” For him, women were to be feminine, and to remain “small.”

It is little wonder that Louisa May Alcott had difficulty fulfilling her father’s, or even society’s, view of what women should be and become. Times were changing. Despite the industrial revolution, the label “Cult of Domesticity and True Womanhood” best defined women’s place. The prevailing notion of the era was that there were four virtues a woman should have: piety, purity, submissiveness
and domesticity. Woman's place was in the home, where she could best serve society, community and her own best interests. Women were seen as delicate and needing to be protected from public life.

What was this concept of piety and purity about? It focused on the notion that white middle-class women were keepers of the moral flame and were by nature pure and pious, naturally religious. Women participated in what has been viewed by historians as the Mary tradition: women seen as redeemers, purer than men and therefore more pious. Their education emphasized virtue and piety, rather than intellect. Marriage for these women was to be simply for procreation, but women of this era did enjoy sexual relationships, and there was much interest in the new literary genre, called sentimental novels. Moreover, the "pure woman" of this era dressed appropriately, wearing more than fifteen pounds of stays in their corsets, refusing as a substitute the "outlandish" proposal of Amelia Bloomer that for comfort, women wear trousers, called bloomers, under a tunic.

And what of submissiveness and domesticity, the other "essential" virtues? It was seen as being fixed by God that the character of woman in the divine order was to be passive and submissive. This is the character portrayed in the sentimental novels. In accepting this role, women were encouraged to see how uplifting this all was, but it was not men who perpetuated this image so much as women's books and periodicals.

Louisa was caught between the two worlds, the "cult of domesticity and true womanhood" on the one hand, and the industrialization options on the other hand, and she fit neatly into neither of them. Biographer Alma Payne characterizes Alcott as "a true daughter of Concord, dutiful child of the high priest of Transcendentalism, a young companion of Thoreau, the devoted disciple of Emerson." But there is still more:

With the raising of feminine consciousness, Alcott is increasingly seen, not as occupying the pedestal bestowed by the Cult of True Womanhood but as a professional woman, serving as an important role model for young women...joining actively in the advocacy of abolition, women's suffrage, educational, labor, and prison reform.

From our vantage point here, we might wish to conclude that she was motivated to make something of her life due to a burning desire to see women as equals; that perhaps she was a radical, an early feminist, a woman who intentionally went against the grain of society. This would not, however, be an accurate picture of her life or motivations. Her family was poor, and she despised poverty. Her father did not work, and she observed painfully the anguish of her mother, trying to provide for them. She took on the burden of providing for her whole family, and, writing became a way to pay off her family's obligations as well as provide a decent standard of living for them.

Louisa May Alcott's first book was *Flower Fables*, published in 1855 and dedicated to Ellen Emerson, daughter of Ralph Waldo. In this type of writing, fantasy and fable, Louisa found her enjoyment. Later, she developed her own style for "sentimental novels," in many ways the forerunners of today's gothic romances. It is ironic to note, however, that the women in these romantic works were powerful, seeking retribution for love denied and other such themes, women who used men to satisfy material, but never sexual, needs.

After *Flower Fables* and before *Little Women*, Alcott became an army nurse under the supervision of Dorothea Dix, another Unitarian hero who later worked in various reform movements. However, Biographer Saxton tells us, that: "at the hospital, her duties collided with her fear of men. She had to repress her fears and be physically intimate with many men" in her work. This experience resulted not only in her becoming ill after just three weeks—dizzy, nauseated, and weak—but also served as a basis for another publication, *Hospital Sketches*, detailing her nursing experience, published in 1863. Luckily, upon her return to Boston after this illness, she became an admirer of Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister and, like her father, a transcendentalist. On at least one occasion, Louisa apparently noted in her diary how Parker's sermon on working women gave her a lift.

It was upon the encouragement of her father and her publisher that she agreed to write the book we now know as *Little Women*. Clearly, it was not a labor of love. Her love of writing lay in fantasy and fable, not in reliving her painful childhood. In agreeing that the character Jo, the rough-and-tumble girl of the four sisters, represents Louisa's own adolescent struggle, critics of her work expound on her inability to come to terms with her sexuality. Biographer Martha Saxton comments upon this:

Work was an acceptable passion, a receptacle for her fantasies and desires.....*Little Women* outlines the adolescence of American morality, an ethical structure with no gray areas, no grown-up dilemmas, no confusions, no sensuality—paralleling Charles Dickens' universe, in which each person is a caricature of some virtue or vice. It is also said that in this book, Alcott endeavors to sanctify her parents, letting them off the hook gracefully for everything she suffered.
However painful it may have been for Louisa to write the book, the success of *Little Women* was instant, and she who hated being in the public eye suddenly became famous. Within two years, she published the second volume, finally titled *Good Wives*, and her reputation as an author grew by leaps and bounds. She wrote and published as was needed, finally earning the money she needed to care for her father, her mother, her sisters, and their children, as well as those indigent who came to her. However, the publisher demanded that she stop writing sentimental novels, saying that they were beneath an author of her stature, and that very important outlet for her fantasies, her escape from the reality of her family life, was taken from her.

As she grew older and weaker, Louisa continued to strive for her father’s love and acceptance, but even at the end she had never become the “little woman,” symbol of femininity and submissiveness, he had wished. It comes as no surprise that two days after her father’s funeral in 1888, Louisa died.

The story of Louisa May Alcott’s life can mean much for us today. First, in viewing history, we can remember always to be critical, to look beyond what is given, to examine the facts for ourselves. Many folks remarked to me that, having read *Little Women*, they assumed Louisa May Alcott was an upper-class woman, prim and proper, who wrote for “fun.” The deeper meaning of a book, we sometimes learn, lies in its revelation of the life of the author.

Second, Louisa’s life tells us much about the issue of sex roles and sex-role stereotyping. Some of us have the notion that feminism, and women doing traditionally male jobs, is a relatively new phenomenon. Even before Louisa’s time, the movement of women toward new ways of fulfilling their lives had begun. Today, we might conclude, is another phase in that movement, neither less nor more important than the era in which the Alcotts lived.

Finally, the painfulness of Louisa May Alcott’s individuality can help us reflect upon our own alienation as men, as women, and as Unitarian Universalists. In all ages, and in all places, those who have dared to be different, those who have dared to go against the tide and expectations of society, have felt alone; and yet, these are most often the people who have moved society forward. In our day-to-day struggles, it may seem that we are very alone, but in fact we form the next link of history. What we say and do, how we act and behave, is felt by those around us, and even by those we cannot name. In being proud of our heritage as Unitarian Universalists, we perpetuate the validity of our faith. In recalling our ancestors, we are affirmed and strengthened.

It has been said that inside of each of us there is a book waiting to be written. Some may be exciting, some may be dull, some may be written, and some may remain locked up. Let us always remember that what matters most is not whether we set our lives down on paper, but that we set them out proudly, living and celebrating our uniqueness and individual differences, affirming ourselves and inspiring our neighbors.

**REFLECTIONS, 2004**

**Rev. Cheryl Klein**

**Born: November 28, 1945**

**Ordained: June 10, 1984**

I was a graduating senior at Harvard Divinity School when I wrote this sermon, a single parent, surviving financially through loans, grants and public assistance, in order to support my two young children. In short, I understood Louisa May Alcott's struggle with poverty first-hand.

What inspired me to write this sermon was the wonder-filled feminist environment, pregnant with possibilities, in the mid-1980s. As many of us became "enlightened" about our potential, we sought and celebrated the lives of women, hitherto unknown, who had come before us. As an aspiring Unitarian Universalist minister, I felt one way to help people live out the faith they claim to live by would be to understand the shape of the faith of others, heroes and heroines.

I can't say for certain that I remember where this sermon was first preached. I believe it was the First Unitarian Church of Concord, New Hampshire. What I do remember was the particular response of women, who seemed nearly as excited and impressed as I had been to hear about Alcott's life.

I think I may also have presented this sermon for the United Universalist churches in Norway and South Paris, Maine. Women in that congregation seemed to find Alcott's poverty and aspirations both inspiring and amazing. This sermon was published in the Church of the Larger Fellowship bulletin, October 1985.

I applied for the MSUU sermon award the first year it was offered. I was a graduating senior, about to be ordained, filled with hope and possibility for the future, and I wanted to share that feeling and hope! I remember the response being supportive and appreciative when I delivered the sermon at General Assembly.

Winning this sermon award meant receiving a wonderful stole that I have worn often through my career in ministry, never failing, as I placed it atop my robe, to read again the names of the women written on it... and continuing to inspire me.
Today, as a mother and grandmother, I am living a wonder-filled existence in Cape Elizabeth, Maine, a grateful two-time survivor of breast cancer. Since 1994, I have been one of a dozen individuals who are insurance-reimbursable Licensed Pastoral Counselors in the state of Maine, and I have a busy practice, working with issues of healing and empowerment for a multicultural, trans-faith clientele of children, teens and adults. I have just added an online dimension to my practice, as well. In addition, I teach graduate level courses in Pastoral Counseling, Ministry and Spirituality at Saint Joseph's College, and undergraduate courses in Ethics and Sociology at York County Community College.

Biographical information:

Director of Pastoral Services, New England Rehabilitation Hospital, Portland, Maine
Coordinator, Literacy Volunteers of America, Portland, Maine chapter
Client Services Coordinator, Rape Crisis Services, Portland, Maine
Crisis/Suicide Hotline Supervisor, Ingraham, Portland, Maine
Publisher, Flying Solo Newsletter (national empowerment newsletter for singles)
Flying Solo Counseling Services, private practice (www.WeFlySolo.com)

1. The decision to publish this sermon came nearly 20 years after it was written, making exact references impossible to reconstruct. The majority of the biographical information came from two books: Martha Saxon, Louisa May: A Modern Biography of Louisa May Alcott (Houghton Mifflin, 1977) and Alma J. Payne, Louisa May Alcott: A Reference Guide (GK Hall and Co., 1980).

2. The first sermon award winners received hand-made ministerial stoles, created by Sarah Barber-Braun.

At the 1985 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, I attended two sessions concerning women that deeply moved me. One session, "The Women in the Pews," focused on those generally unsung heroines to whom we owe more than we know. The other session was a workshop called "The Past Is Before Me and the Women Are There."

After attending these sessions, I realized how little we knew about the women of our own church—those shadowy figures who were wives, mothers, sisters, ministers’ wives—prime movers and free spirits. I realized how much is lost when we lose their names, and their voices, which indeed are so important in the history of any church! As a result of these two General Assembly experiences, I resolved to make an attempt to celebrate our own church’s women in the pews, to record in some measure their voices. It seemed particularly important to do so as a part of this church’s 150-year celebration.

First, then, as a part of our sesquicentennial celebration, we organized a “nostalgia exhibit,” and in the catalogue we listed as many names of women as we could: those who had contributed fancy work, samplers, quilts, pictures, programs, and other items from the past that had some reference to our church and our community. Many pictures were brought to the exhibit, and thus we were able to learn names as well as see some of the women’s faces. The exhibit included three costumes, displayed on dress dummies that had been given names from our church records: Sophronia, Mehitable, and Garaphelia. These names bad been picked because we liked the sound of them. One of the people who visited the exhibit read the catalogue and announced to us, to our surprise, that “Garaphelia” was his grandmother! He left the exhibit, and returned with a picture of
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VOICES: THE STORY OF THE LADIES LIBERAL SEWING SOCIETY

Dr. Joella Vreeland
Sermon Award for 1986

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Garaphelia Goldsmith Bowman, sitting in her rocker, wearing a white apron, just as our exhibit Garaphelia wore hers. We learned that “Garrie,” as she was known, had been the oldest member of the church in 1935, when the church celebrated its 100th birthday. Garaphelia’s picture and her story have been added to the church’s history archives!

The second project involved the recording of the voices of the women of this church in a spiral-bound book called The Southold Sisterhood: Sociables and Serious Business, the Story of the Ladies Liberal Sewing Society of the First Universalist Church of Southold. Based on their actual minutes books, it is an interpretive chronicle of the first 100 years of the Ladies Liberal Sewing Society. It is a journal filled with the wit and whimsy and wisdom of the women that we believe reflects the kinds of experiences of women in most early Unitarian and Universalist churches.

The earliest records of our church are written by men, about men. The first pew rental chart of 1837 tells us the names of the men who rented them. The record of the earliest organizational meetings and another that records the important events of the first fifty years of this church list only the names of men. Yet we know that from the beginning women were active and made their voices heard, for this was a church that celebrated men and women working together. Unlike some of the other churches in the village that separated men from women in the pews, the Universalists sat together as families.

In the tenth year after the first organizational meeting 150 years ago, the Ladies Liberal Sewing Society was formed in this church and held its first meeting in 1845. The first elected secretary began volume one of twenty-two volumes. The minutes of their meetings give us a fascinating chronology of their lives, as well as of the events of the church. It has been said that the men ran the church, but it was the ladies who kept it running! Reading through those many hand-written, fading volumes, we know that was true, for while the society provided a social structure for the women that was not its primary function. Its primary function from the beginnings was fund-raising and attending to the general welfare of the church. If the Trustees needed money (and they always did), a formal request was sent to the Ladies Sewing Society for help. In 1851, deciding that they were not making enough money from their sewing projects, they held their first public “Fair,” the first of many. In those busy 1850s, the women met, had good times, and indulged in whatever activities might be of benefit to the Universalist church.

But the Southold church went through a very difficult period at the time of the Civil War, and sadly closed its doors in 1864. It hired no minister, held no services, and there ceased to be any official meetings of the Ladies Society. The survival rate for early Universalist churches in the New York Greater Metropolitan area was not spectacular. Of seven in Brooklyn and New York City, only Brooklyn and the Fourth Universalist Society in New York City survive today. On Long Island there were three Universalist societies in Babylon, Huntington, and Southold. Only Southold survived.

The Southold church’s revival—our re-birth, the re-opening of the church for services after a long sleep of thirteen years—was due largely to the efforts of the Ladies Society. A group of strong, determined, pushy Universalist women pushed husbands, brothers, and other women to re-organize the church. They recruited a young ministerial student who promised to assume the pulpit when he graduated from his theological studies.

In 1877 the Ladies Liberal Sewing Society put ads in the local papers and made their voices heard:

- All persons (ladies and gentlemen) interested in the welfare of the Universalist church, and in securing a pastor, are requested to meet...the church desires a large attendance.

- There will be a meeting of ladies at the Universalist Church on March 23 at 2 p.m. If stormy, on March 25. All of the members of the Sewing Society, together with those who are interested in the re-organization of the church and society, are cordially invited to attend.

The ladies did meet, and the pace of their activities increased. The local paper noted that the Ladies of the Universalist Church had ordered carpets and were about to complete the furnishings of the church. The Ladies Society minutes record a meeting of fourteen ladies and five men: “The latter made themselves useful as well as ornamental.” The message of the women was clear: Come, help, clean, work, sew, raise money, renovate, dedicating a church!

The church was re-dedicated in July 1878. The Ladies Liberal Sewing Society called a regular meeting (its first official one in thirteen years) and the minutes of that meeting years ago were read and approved. Mrs. Rebecca Goldsmith, who had been president in 1864, was re-elected. The Society and the church were back in business.

In this special service today there are eighteen candles around the chalice. They represent those women who, with the flames of their enthusiasm, rekindled the flame that represents this church. You are asked to say their names as I light a candle for each:
It seems most fitting to end the church's sesquicentennial year with this tribute to these women, for we must seriously ponder whether we would be sitting here today in these pews were it not for this hardy band of women who were largely responsible for the church's re-birth.

When this church was originally organized in 1835, there were no specific membership requirements and no membership book (only lists of men's names as pew renters in the treasurer's books). Now, after the re-opening of the church, the church's first membership book was begun. The first person to sign the membership book, thus officially listed as number one, was a woman: Nancy Peck.

After its re-opening the church entered its renaissance years: busy, exciting, productive times! The Ladies' minutes give us clear accounts of the year-by-year activities and growth of the church. There are graphic details of their work: the old pew cushion covers were ripped up and sold to the man for forty cents. The new cushions required one pound of thread, 67 yards of material, 84 dozen buttons, 160 pounds of curled horsehair, 300 pounds of excelsior, and 127 yards of ticking. We are inundated with the details of the food that they prepared, including a recipe for ice cream: 100 eggs, 22 quarts of milk and cream, and 12 pounds of sugar.

Our memories are jogged (if we are old enough) by names of materials long gone from the shelves of the stores today: gingham and calico, linen, cretonne, pongee, cambric, and nanook. We note the variety of things they made to sell, including aprons, dust caps, dresses, fancy work, and quilts. We particularly honor the women in the pews because they seem to have spent so much time over the years working on those pews. We read from their minutes that on one occasion the varnish had not dried properly, so the ladies covered all the pews with brown material. Fourteen women, armed with shears and tack hammers, worked with might and main until the light faded and they could work no more.

That is the story of the Ladies Society. They found a problem and forthwith set out to solve it. Some of the problems were more serious than sticky pews. In reading through the records of the church, it seemed that most of the time the church's existence, financially, was hanging by a thread. The ladies were very proficient with threads, both real and symbolic, and time and again it was their efforts that paid for the wood and coal, and the labor to split the wood, fix the leaking roof, strengthen the supports of the steeple, help pay the sexton, help pay the minister's salary, and perhaps have enough money left over to buy a new feather duster to keep the church clean.

We read of one of the entertainments that the receipts were good, the entertainment fine, the food fabulous, and the ladies were as tired as usual. But the next month they were busy planning another affair. They held a dinner that was a great success, with over two hundred people served at two seatings. But the work committee said, "Never again! Two seatings is one seating too many!" But it was not long before they had another.

They had resolved that their primary objective was to help with the finances of the church, and second, to serve the social needs of its members, and third, to do such other charitable work as they could. There was a general spirit of generosity that comes through in their minutes. For example, one of the members spoke of a lady whose children belong to our Sunday school, who is trying to support them by dressmaking. She is in great need of a sewing machine, as hers is old and worn out, and she is hiring one for $1.50 a week, which is a heavy expense to her." A motion was made and passed for the Society to buy a sewing machine for her.

Their meetings were conducted in orderly fashion, for they took their business seriously. There is a note of the president rapping her gavel for attention on occasion. The church still has the gavel, which must have had hard use, because its handle is broken and mended with a silver band. It is kept in the glass case that houses the church's treasures. It remains as a symbol that the ladies not only sponsored socials but also were out to conduct the serious business that kept the church running smoothly.

The Ladies Society cared deeply for its individual members, and sometimes leaned over backwards to be democratic. In 1901 there is this interesting notation in their minutes:

Some time ago the Society passed a motion never to give thanks to its members. Mrs. Louise Overton wished to discuss this motion, and spoke thusly: "Mrs. President and sisters, I believe this motion was a mistake, although at the time we all acknowledged the force of the argument, in its favor, which were first, that we all work for the interests of this Society, as we can, according to our time, strength, and talents, as, indeed, there is great diversity; and all cannot do the same things, and it is making a distinction between members to thank any as individuals. Second, the Society would have to spend a great deal of time at its meetings, simply thanking various members...[she then goes on to ask for a reconsideration.] This Society is like a family, and those graces that belong to family life and make it gracious and pleasant seem to me just as properly in place here. We are all liable to make mistakes, and I believe, now, this motion is a mistake." A motion was made to rescind the motion.
never to thank members, and then an immediate motion was made to unanimously give thanks to Mrs. Carrie Lowerre for her faithful, disinterested, and efficient services.

At one point in our church life we cleaned out the basement where we found a collection of old Universalist pamphlets, books, and some Bibles. It is interesting what one finds tucked inside Bibles: locks of baby hair, pressed flowers, bookmarks, and a considerable number of newspaper clippings. One of these, dated 1905, was most interesting. The headline is "Cleveland on Women's Clubs," with a sub-heading: "Seems to doubt if woman suffragettes will ever reform," and then finally: "As to less virulent Club movements, he considers even they may be dangerous to the home—which is woman's best club."

Grover Cleveland, then president of the United States, had written an article for the Ladies Home Journal. In the article he attributed women's restlessness and discontent to the suffrage movement "with its dangerous and undermining effect on the characters of wives and mothers." He says it is "a thousand pities that they cannot see the fitness of the homely definition of a good wife as 'a woman who loves her husband and her country, with no desire to run either.'"

He then gets down to the real point of his article to speak of those clubs, less virulent than the suffrage organizations but in his mind equally dangerous. He speaks of those whose professed purposes are in many instances the intellectual improvement or entertainment of women composing their membership. "Doubtless," he says, "the objects of these clubs and organizations are shown in such a light and are made to appear so good, or at least so harmless, that a conscientious woman, unless she makes a strong fight against self-delusion, may quite easily persuade herself that affiliation with them would be certainly innocent and perhaps even within the dictates of duty. The danger of self-delusion lies in her supposition that she is consulting the need of relaxation or the duty of increased opportunity for intellectual improvement, when, in point of fact...she is taking counsel of her discontent with...her home life." He claims that clubs menace the integrity of the home—wifehood, motherhood are a waste of time, perversion of effort—and "form the club habit." The article ends with a repeat of the heading: "The best and safest club for a woman to patronize is her home."

It is fascinating that this article was found in a Bible in our church. I wonder about the person who put it there: man or woman? Did they agree, or disagree? Why was there so much concern about women's organizations and clubs? Grover Cleveland was surely not alone in expressing these opinions. The real perceived danger, I believe, was in the organizing of women into a working body. I ponder Cleveland's words as I re-read the preamble of the Southold Ladies Society:

Regarding social intercourse as closely connected with enjoyment, and anxious to aid charitable and liberal objects; willing to devote a portion of our time to such purposes; and aware of the importance of Union in our enterprise..."

The word "Union" is capitalized. And it was a union, which leads to power, and organized power was something for some to be concerned about. Organization makes women uppy.

In our own church we see an opening wedge in an instance, oft repeated, in which the Trustees asked the ladies for funds to help with the running of the church. Ordinarily they sent a carefully worded explanatory message. But this time they simply asked for a sum of money for church expenses. And the uppity ladies replied, in so many words: "Tell us what you want the money for, and then we shall consider your request."

The building of the church's social hall in 1910 was the culmination of at least five preceding years of planning and discussion and money-raising. The money-raising was spearheaded by the ladies, and with that power of money and energy expended, the ladies exerted a strong voice. Their voice was not always heeded, but at least they had made themselves heard. When the hall was built, a panel was set up, and the ladies had representation on that panel to make decisions concerning the initial uses of the hall.

Time passed and there was an instance in which the following communication was sent, not only to the Board of Trustees, but to be read to the entire congregation:

We, the members of the Ladies Society, beg to present the following suggestion—that a Board of Directors be appointed to have charge of the Parish House and that the Ladies be allowed to appoint one member, and the Sunday School one, and the Men's Club one. That this Board have power to budget the expense, and raise money to maintain the Parish House. At present there is a lack of cooperation. Privileges and responsibilities are not balanced. To eliminate this representation is necessary.

The petition ended with these words: "Taxation without representation is tyranny." The petition got results. At some further point, we are told, the Ladies decided that even this kind of secondary representation was not enough. They wanted to see a woman elected to the church's highest administrative body, the
Board of Trustees. And a woman was. The next step was to have a woman serve as president of the Board of Trustees. And women did. The church by-laws were actually amended to read that there must be, at all times, one woman on the Board. That seemed rather a self-fulfilling decision, for the next few years saw just that—one woman on the Board. This by-laws section was eliminated, and it now reads: "Membership [on the Board] shall be open to both sexes." And it is.

As I read through the twenty-two volumes of the minutes books of the Southold Ladies Society, day by day, putting them down, picking up the record where I left off, finding certain names repeated, getting a sense of the personalities of the ladies, getting to know them, I became particularly fond of some of them. Carrie Lowerre was a favorite, perhaps partly because her name reminded me of a grandmother I never knew with a very similar name, but mostly because she was a dynamic person who was extremely active in the Society, holding various offices for many years. I read in one of the volumes that she had retired after fifteen years of service. Then in a 1926 entry I read of her death. It was a shock. I had indeed forgotten that as I was turning pages I was also traveling through the years. I found myself filled with such a sense of gratitude that so many women had left so many records, allowing their voices to be heard.

I think of the great women of our Unitarian Universalist Association, which is notable for the number of such great women. But I had a great need to celebrate our women in the pews—those liberal sewing society women, those quiet, fun-loving, determined, serious women who sat in these Southold church pews (but first made the cushions for these pews, and before that raised the money for the materials to make the cushions for the pews)—those women who cared so deeply and worked so hard for this church, this community, and this denomination.

REFLECTIONS, 2004
Dr. Joella Vreeland
Born: January 5, 1924, Colorado Springs, Colorado

As a member of the First Universalist Church of Southold's Anniversary Committee, I was deeply involved with a planned 150-year birthday celebration. I had begun searching, compiling, and organizing all the bits and pieces of the church's historical materials, with the goal of writing the church history.

The best-kept records were the minutes books of the Ladies Liberal Sewing Society. I told the Anniversary Committee that I needed to put aside the task of writing the church history, because the voices of the women were calling to me to write first about them. So, my first book was The Southold Sisterhood: Sociables and Serious Business. To celebrate the publication of the book, we organized a nostalgia exhibit, complete with all sorts of donated items mentioned by the ladies, including some lace-trimmed unmentionables, donated by one who asked not to be mentioned by name.

Finally, I gave a sermon called "Voices." It was well-received, and I was encouraged to submit it to a sermon contest sponsored by the MSUU. I did.

The phone rang. It was someone representing the MSUU, telling me that MY Sermon, "Voices," had WON! Remembering that day, I am re-living the excitement, filled with gratitude to those women of long ago, who made it possible for me to give the sermon about them at the General Assembly in Rochester, New York, gratitude to those who made it possible to use my own voice, to make their voices heard.

Just before I began to talk, a very special stole was presented to me by the Rev. Sarah Barber-Braun, bearing the embroidered names of women who have been important to our denomination. The stole is one of my prized possessions.

As a Lay Speaker, I began presenting sermons in the 1970s, and I am still doing that, currently as a founding member of the North Fork Universalist Society of Northville, New York. The sermon that I have repeated most often, as a guest speaker, is "Voices." It has been given to congregations all over Long Island, in New York City, in Kingston, New York, and in Naples, Florida. It was also presented as a special program, for our local chapter of the American Association of University Women.

It was last presented at my own Fellowship in 1999. I am currently working on a collection of services that I have given at the Fellowship over the last seven years, which will include "Voices."

I have dug out my "Voices" folder that holds notes and comments about the presentations. What really pleased me was how this sermon encouraged other Universalist Universalist Societies to look back into their histories, to hear their own women's voices. In these services we have lit candles: in one church, "A Circle of Light", in other churches celebrating women past, present, future. We have sung hymns: "Forward Through The Ages," "Faith of the Free," AND "Awake My Soul, Stretch Every Nerve" (my favorite). One church included a special meditation, for "those whose lives have touched our own."

Recently, I have been invited by the First Universalist Church of Southold to be a guest speaker some time in the next few months. And what sermon am I thinking of giving? It occurs to me that it may be time, once again, to present "Voices" in the church where it all began.
1. Although copies of The Southold Sisterhood are no longer available, there is a chapter on the Ladies Society in Joella Vreeland, This Is the Church, available from The First Universalist Church, P.O. Box 221 Southold, NY 11971-0221.

2. Ledger 1, Ladies Society Minutes, May 8, 1845. This ledger book, along with other resources used in this sermon, are located in the archives of the First Universalist Church, Southold, NY.

MAY SARTON:
"THAT APPALLING COMPLEX OF PEOPLE"

Rev. Rebecca Edmiston-Lange
Sermon Award for 1987

I first flirted with the poetry of May Sarton on a visit home to my mother’s house several years ago. My mother had just returned from an Elderhostel in Maine where she had taken a class on May Sarton’s poetry. She had bought Selected Poems of May Sarton and suggested to me that it might make interesting bedtime reading. This is a ritual in my mother’s house: comparing notes of what we are reading and sampling from one another. Each time I visit my mother, I take her a stack of books, and each time when I leave I take with me a different stack.

So one night during that visit I flipped through the book of poems. My attention alighted on two poems in particular: “The Action of Therapy” and “Of Grief.” I was attracted to these two poems no doubt because I was in therapy and for the first time dealing with my grief over my own father’s death. My father had died several years before, but at the time of his death, the only emotion I had felt was relief. You see, my father was an untreated manic-depressive and in the last years of his life, his delusional periods had increased to the point that he was making life hell for our family. My mother was afraid that my father was going to lose everything we owned. It was only years later that I could stand to face, with the help of a therapist, the depth of my grief—grief about his death, but also grief about the love I had never received from him.

May Sarton’s words about grief struck home:

You thought it heartless
When my father fell down
Dead in his splendid prime,
Strong as a green oak thrown.  
That all I did was praise  
Death for this kindness.  

It is the incomplete,  
the unfulfilled, the torn  
that haunts our nights and days  
and keeps us hunger born.  

There are some griefs so loud  
They could bring down the sky,  
And there are some griefs so still  
No one knows how deep they lie.  

And her description of the blessings of therapy rang true:

I watched the psychic surgeon,  
stern, skilled, adroit,  
Cut deep into the heart and yet not hurt.  
I watched it happen—  
Old failures, old obsessions  
Cut away  
So blood could flow  
A clean course through  
Choked arteries again…

With you all green things flourish,  
All flowers may be freely given,  
All fears can be expressed  
No childish need is sneered at,  
No adult gift unrecognized.  

May Sarton was writing about my needs and my hopes, I felt; yet somehow the book did not make it back home with me, perhaps because it touched too close to home.

I next heard of May Sarton in June 1982, after she spoke at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in Bowdoin, Maine. I wasn’t at the General Assembly that year, but I heard stories of how moving her poetry reading had been and of how she identified herself as a Unitarian, and I remembered those poems I had read at my mother’s house. I thought to myself, “I really want to get to know this woman’s work.” But somehow other books, other projects were more insistently pressing, and I never got around to reading May Sarton as I wished.

But, as will often happen, life presented me with a golden opportunity to get to know May Sarton’s work. Every summer, my friend and colleague, the Rev. Sydney Wilde Nugent, organizes the “Theology Through Biography” series at The Mountain, a Unitarian Universalist Camp and Conference Center. In March she called to tell me that one of her presenters had cancelled and asked if I would like to spend a week at The Mountain, free of charge. All I had to do was present a paper on May Sarton’s life and theology. Quite a bargain, it seemed!

The program had already been advertised, so there was no choice about my topic. After only a moment’s hesitation, I said yes. After all, hadn’t I been interested in May Sarton? What a wonderful opportunity! So I began reading May Sarton, her poetry, her novels, her autobiographical journals. Seventeen volumes later, many of which I had to special order, one might have wondered who got the bargain.

Bargain or no, May Sarton’s writing began to weave itself into my psyche, ineluctably affecting my dreams and my waking thoughts. She touched responsive chords. She gave voice to many of my inner yearnings. She clarified issues and dynamics of my personality. Not all of her writing is of the same caliber. With such a prolific writer one would hardly expect it to be so. (At last count May Sarton had written seven journals, seventeen novels, and fourteen volumes of poetry.) But I did feel as if I had been given a gift with this opportunity to study her work so intensely. I had been given a gift because May Sarton’s writing taught me about myself, about my gifts. I think May Sarton can teach us all about our lives and what we have to offer each other.

May Sarton says that she believes “if you go deep enough into the personal, you hit the universal.” It is the universal in her writings that speaks to me and that I hope will speak to you.

In her novel, Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing, the protagonist, Hilary, reflects on what she calls “that appalling complex of people who had entered deeply into her life, who had influenced, and changed, and enriched her.” This novel was published in 1964, fourteen years after the death of May Sarton’s mother and eight years after her father’s death. May Sarton writes that it was only after both of her parents died that she felt free to be wholly herself. The character Hilary also is a poet. She is May Sarton reworked into art. In the novel, Hilary has to come to terms with what she has become and her relationship with her parents.
The examination of the influences on her life is a continuing theme in May Sarton’s writings. She says, “So you put everything together finally into something which is yourself, which you’ve made out of the other people who have affected you.” Other peoples’ lives get built into our lives and finally the transference is complete.”

What more lasting influence is there on any of us than that of our parents? Indeed, May Sarton says of her parents “we become what we have loved.” I would like to tell you about May Sarton and her parents because I believe that when she struggles with how they have influenced her life, both positively and negatively, she reflects a struggle that we all must confront. She is telling us about ourselves.

May Sarton’s mother, Mabel Elwas, was born in 1885 near London, of an old Suffolk family. Her father, May’s grandfather, was a civil engineer who spent years away in India, Canada, and Spain building bridges. His wife always accompanied him on these trips. Mabel and her brother were farmed out to various relatives, and Mabel consequently developed a solitary personality and a love of natural beauty, qualities that May was to inherit. Mabel’s father died when she was nineteen, leaving the family penniless. Mabel was just able to manage for herself by designing furniture in Ghent, where she had gone to school and befriended a family who owned a design firm.

May describes her mother as “first of all and always an artist.” In addition to designing furniture professionally, she earned money throughout her life by designing textiles and embroidered dresses and by teaching applied design and painting miniatures. May says of her mother: “She might have been successful had she not married and become responsible for someone else’s creation.”

The man she married was George Sarton and the “creation” she became responsible for was George’s unprecedented work in the history of science. George Sarton came from a conventional Flemish family. He was an only child, and he was alternately pampered and neglected by the maids who essentially raised him. His father was a high civil servant, often distant or absent. May Sarton describes her father as “emotionally immature, [one] who suffered all his life from the lack of a mother’s care when he was an infant.” By the age of twenty, he had developed a reputation as an eccentric: he was a vegetarian and a socialist. And he wrote poetry under a pseudonym.

George Sarton and Mabel Elwas met through mutual friends. Their courtship was stormy, lasting four years, and might not have led to marriage had Mabel not finally asked George to marry her. True love was there on both sides, however. Mabel would not listen when a friend tried to dissuade her from the marriage by outlining what being married to George Sarton would be like, how little understanding George had of human relations, how immature he was.

Mabel and George married in 1910. May was born a year and a half later. They moved to “Wondelgem,” a house in the country. Wondelgem was part of that faraway paradise that existed in Europe before the First World War. Its very name evokes the image of a house and garden filled with light and love and the beautiful intricate furniture designed by Mabel. In that house, George dedicated himself to his life project—the writing of a monumental history of science. After four years, paradise was ruptured by the ensuing war and the Sartons were, as May puts it, “forced into exile.” They moved to America, a move that proved propitious for George Sarton because very soon he received an appointment at Harvard and a grant from the Carnegie Institute to pursue his life’s project. But for Mabel, it was a major disruption that ended her career in furniture design. Never again would her life be focused with such clarity and intensity.

The move to America affected May deeply as well. Although she was educated in America, first at the progressive Shady Hill School in Cambridge and later at the Cambridge High and Latin, May would spend two influential years in London in her twenties and would develop friendships there with such literary lights as James Stephens, Virginia and Leonard Wolff, and Elizabeth Bowen. May writes that she felt for the first time that she was a “half breed, an exile, both at home and a stranger in Europe.” Until recently, May Sarton made frequent and extended visits to Europe, cultivating not only her own friendships, but extending relationships with people her parents had known there. One gets the feeling that by becoming intimate with her parents’ friends, May was searching for her roots and for a way of knowing her parents that was not possible as their child.

What was her parents’ relationship like? In many ways, May Sarton’s mother subsumed her life to her husband’s. Mabel was George’s mother as well as his wife. Except in her final illness, George was never very attentive to Mabel or to her health, although she suffered from migraines and depression throughout their life together. George was always resistant to anything that distracted him from his work, often working eight-hour days. He was naive when it came to money and was never aware of all the ways in which Mabel worked to make ends meet. May writes that her mother buried her anger at George because she felt he had to be protected for the sake of his work. Were her mother’s illnesses the cost of such protection?

Perhaps George Sarton’s inattentiveness is best illustrated by his behavior when Mabel gave birth at the age of forty-two to a son, who died five days later. May writes of this experience:
When my mother was over forty she became pregnant. The Limbochés (family friends) never forgave my father for allowing this to happen, since he had been warned that the birth would be a risky business for his wife. Nevertheless, when the time came for her to go to the hospital, he contrived to be in New York. I find this almost unbelievable, but his letters from a New York club welcoming little Alfred into the world proved it to be true...My mother did not come home for a month. She went to stay with friends. It is clear to me now that she was fighting serious depression. It was no doubt a time of agonizing reappraisal for her—of her marriage, of her life itself.14

But, despite experiences such as this, May Sarton believes that her parents shared a true companionship about all the things that mattered most to them: art, music, literature, gardening, and May herself. “My happiest vision of these parents of mine,” she writes, “is of my mother lying in the garden at teatime on a chaise lounge, a white shawl flung rather elegantly round her shoulders, a hat on her lap, looking at her husband with a slightly quizzical tender expression, and of my father, a battered straw hat tilted down over his eyes, smoking a cigar and enjoying her creation, the garden: I sometimes think this hour was the only relaxed one of his day. [His] journal notes more than once, ‘A blessed day—thanks as always to Mabel.’”15

How did May make sense of all this? How do any of us make sense of the competing images and conflicting experiences we have of our parents, of all their “rich living and dying in a hundred ways”?16 Do we ever really know our parents as they really were and are?

In May Sarton’s case, her parents are a puzzle, a puzzle to which she returns again and again, for the puzzle is really herself, herself as her parents internalized. Much of May Sarton’s poetry and many of her novels are ways of expressing and discovering her parents’ influence.

During the first years of her life, May was snatched away from her mother for weeks at a time because of her mother’s illnesses. May learned to put out roots very quickly to survive, yet she too suffers from depressions as an adult, periods when she descends to “a raging infant,” as she describes it.17 She also has nostalgia for families rooted in one place. One of her earliest novels, The Bridge of Years, is about a Belgian family that not only survives the First World War, but also faces the second intact and determined not to be moved. The mother in this fictional family runs a furniture design firm, and the father is absorbed in a great work of philosophy—May Sarton’s own parents thinly disguised.

May Sarton writes of her father that he was not a father in the usual sense. He was absorbed totally in his work. For her birthday, he usually gave her a book she wanted. For example, when she was eleven, he gave her a two-volume French-English/English-French dictionary that quickly disappeared into his own library. From her father, May learned that work justifies inhuman behavior. “It was his example as a scholar, not as a human being, that molded me,”18 she says. May identified with her mother and only came to love her father after her mother’s death.

May thought of her mother as her dearest friend, an equal, “the person with whom I could discuss anything and everything.”19 Yet, Mabel Sarton also was May’s best critic, carefully challenging the budding poet in her daughter.

From her father, May learned that “talent is something given, that it opens like a flower, but without energy, discipline, and persistence it will not bear fruit.”20 It is her father in her that drives May to a perfection of form, revising a poem sometimes as many as sixty times before it is complete. From her mother, May learned the realm of feeling, an awareness of all forms of beauty and sensitivity to human beings and relationships. It is her mother in her that gives May Sarton the ability to describe the poignancy of a Japanese landscape: “We regretted the rain, until we saw the mist, floating the mountains on their dragon tails.”21

May Sarton writes that, very early on, she began to experience the conflict implied in an effort to be as human as her mother and as dedicated as her father. She describes it as “a lifelong struggle between life and art.”22

Both of May Sarton’s parents died before May was forty-five, her mother of cancer in 1950, and her father of a heart attack in 1956. When her mother died, May felt that the worst thing that could happen had happened. This is the hard death of the poem, “A Hard Death”:

We have seen how dignity can be torn
From the naked dying or the newly born
By a loud voice or an ungently presence,
Hardness of haste or lack of reverence;
How the hospital nurse may casually unbind
The suffering body from the lucid mind.
The spirit enclosed in that fragile shell
Cannot defend itself, must endure all.
And not only the dying, helpless in a bed,
Ask for a little pillow for the head,
A sip of water, a cool hand to bless:
The living have their lonely agonies.
“Is there compassion?” a friend asked me.
“Does it exist in another country?”....
I saw my mother die and now I know.
The spirit cannot be defended. It must go
Naked even of love at the very end.
"Take the flowers away" (Oh, she had been their friend!),
And we who ache could do nothing more—
She was detached and distant as a star.

Let us be gentle to each other this brief time
For we shall die in exile far from home,
Where even the flowers can no longer save.
Only the living can be healed by love. 23

When her father died, May felt relief at no longer having to be a child, finally free to be wholly herself. The poem, “My Father’s Death,” describes the release:

After the laboring birth, the clean stripped hull
Glides down the ways and is gently set free,
The landlocked, launched; the cramped made bountiful
Oh, grave great moment when ships take the sea
Alone now in my life, no longer child,
This hour and its flood of mystery,
Where death and love are wholly reconciled,
Launches the ship of all my history.
Accomplished now is the last struggling birth,
I have slipped out from the embracing shore
Nor look for comfort to maternal earth.
I shall not be a daughter any more,
But through this final parting, all stripped down,
Launched on the tide of love, go out full-grown. 24

I am fascinated by May Sarton’s portrayal of her parents, perhaps because I, too, feel that I internalized a conflict of two different personalities. In me, the war between my parents goes on—the war between a father who dreamed impossible dreams, who often lived in a fantasy world of what might be accomplished if only he had the resources, a fantasy world of success and love and fame; and a mother who also dreamed dreams, but of a more sober sort, of educating herself and her children, a mother who, often quite pessimistically, was steeped in the brutal realities of how hard life can be, who with ingenuity and determination kept my father from wrecking the family, either emotionally or financially, a mother who was often given to spells of depression and a sense of futility. I, too,

feel as May Sarton does, that it is only through a process of self-analysis that a reconciliation of the conflict in me has occurred, so that, hopefully, now I dream dreams of a realistic sort, yet avoid the shoals of depression. I took a measure of creativity and imagination from my father, a measure of persistence and discipline from my mother.

I, too, feel as if my father was often distant, never really able to see me as myself, but only as a reflection of his own fantasies. I also feel as if my mother was and is my best friend and confidante, even if she is my most severe critic, whose standards of intelligence and learnedness I might never attain.

So it makes sense that I should be fascinated with May Sarton’s portrayal of her parents. But I think, and hope, that if we go deep enough into the personal, we hit the universal. Don’t we all inherit the best and worst of our parents? Isn’t there some sense in which we all become what we have loved and hated in our parents, a mirror of their conflict of personalities?

What May Sarton teaches us is the incredible debt that we owe to those we have loved and who have influenced us. Not only debts of love and nurture, and of time and money, but debts of personality, debts that go deep down into the fiber of our being. We are what we are because of the people we have known, and primarily because of our parents. May Sarton teaches us that every nuance, both positive and negative, of our relationship with our parents is essential for becoming the persons we are. May Sarton allows us to appreciate what originally gave us pain and to experience anew the gratitude for what we remember lovingly.

May Sarton’s appreciation of the influences on her life does not rest only with her parents, of course. Her books are filled with loving portraits of people whose lives have been plaited into her own— from poets such as Elizabeth Bowen, to teachers such as Agnes Hocking, to neighbors such as Perly Cole— “that appalling complex of people” who had entered deeply into her life. Part of May Sarton’s gift is her openness to others, to the possibility of being changed by relationships. She knows that she is who she is because of whom she has known, and she calls us to acknowledge the same in our own lives. Describing years of solitude in Maine, when writing some of her best poetry, May Sarton recognizes that her days were still peopled:

I did not come here for society
In these years
When every meeting is a collision,
The impact huge....
Yet what I have done here I have not done alone....
I am always a lover here
Seized and shaken by love....
I meet no one here who does not change me.²⁵

May Sarton teaches us that relationships may be deep collisions, that indeed they must be so if soul really touches soul, that to open oneself to another is to open ourselves to relationship and to acknowledge the gifts of people we know and have known, who have influenced our lives and entered into the fiber of our being.

I would like to conclude by reading one of May Sarton’s poems, “All Souls.” It sounds, at first, as the title would suggest, that it is mournful, that it is only about those who have died. But, upon reflection, I believe the poem is also about those alive in the present, whose voices speak through us and whose influence we cherish.

Did someone say that there would be an end,
An end, Oh, an end, to love and mourning?
Such voices speak when sleep and waking blend,
The cold bleak voices of the early morning
When all the birds are dumb in dark November—
Remember and forget, forget, remember.

After the false night, warm true voices, wake!
Voice of the dead that touches the cold living,
Through the pale sunlight once more gravely speak.
Tell me again, while the last leaves are falling:
“Dear child, what has been once so interwoven
Cannot be raveled, nor the gift ungiven.”

Now the dead move through all of us still glowing,
Mother and child, lover and lover mated,
Are wound and bound together and enfolding.
What has been plaited cannot be unplaited—
Only the strands grow richer with each loss
And memory makes kings and queens of us.

Dark into light, light into darkness, spin.
When all the birds have flown to some real haven,
We who find shelter in the warmth within,
Listen, and feel new-cherished, new-forgiven,
As the lost human voices speak through us and blend
Our complex love, our mourning without end.²⁶

As May Sarton says, “So you put everything together finally into something which is yourself.”²⁷ Who are the souls who inhabit your soul, whose lives are plaited into your own, without whose influence you would not be who you are? Who are those you have loved in the past and love in the present whom you would become?

REFLECTIONS, 2004
Rev. Dr. Rebecca Edmiston-Lange
Born: January 30, 1953
Ordained: November 1986

It is very gratifying to have two entries in this volume of award winning sermons. Though in different ways, both of my sermons are about women important to my own spiritual development; and, as the logic of the heart would have it, there are emotional links between the two.

The first, “May Sarton: ‘That Appalling Complex of People’” was written in my second year of ministry, one of two sermons about May Sarton. I had been asked by my colleague, Sydney Wilde, the previous summer to participate with her and two other colleagues in the “Theology through Biography” week at the Unitarian Universalist Camp and Conference Center, The Mountain. I had been assigned May Sarton for my presentation. She was a relatively new author for me, but I soon immersed myself in her writing, reading just about everything she had written up to that date. It was not just obsessive-compulsiveness that drove this project, although I will confess to a certain degree of perfectionism. Rather I discovered early on in my reading that May Sarton was both a kindred spirit and a spiritual muse. As my sermon indicates, I found that even though her life was radically different from mine there were nonetheless certain emotional parallels.

This first immersion into the writing of May Sarton came at a time when I was consolidating my own personal and spiritual identity, reconciling parental introjects into a integrated whole and searching for my own authentic religious voice. Sarton’s revelations about her own parents and other significant persons in her life underscored the need for a conscious process of reflection upon and appropriation of the many and varied internalized objects of one’s psyche—a sifting through and a digesting—affirming some, mourning others. Her unashamed championing of the therapeutic process, her understanding of how healing proceeds, her belief that everything that happens to one becomes part of one’s identity—these spoke to me. Moreover, her aesthetic sensibility, her appreciation for the “sacramentality of the everyday,” and her precision of form spoke to me as
well. Some of Sarton's words are indelibly etched upon my psyche. Her poetry continues to be a source of inspiration and solace, courage and resolve.

I said at the outset that May Sarton was a relatively new writer for me and indeed she was. But I had first learned of her through my mother, borrowing a copy of Selected Poems of May Sarton one visit home. My mother was an avid reader and we often exchanged books back and forth, sharing our reactions and observations in long conversations. My mother and I were always very close, though our relationship was not without its struggles. "In My Mother's Garden" is a tribute of love and admiration for my mother, written when my mother was in her eighties and I was truly beginning to understand that she would not always be with us. I counted my mother as a spiritual muse, for it was often in conversation with her that inspiration would strike or clarity that had eluded me previously would be gained. She was a free-thinker, a spiritual seeker until the day she died. Self educated, she nonetheless knew, and knew well, about an amazing number of topics.

My mother was also eternally and vitally interested in all that I read and thought. And so, characteristically, once she knew I would be presenting a paper on May Sarton at The Mountain that one particular summer, my mother also began to read more of Sarton. And, in fact, my mother and my older sister, Margaret, both attended that week at The Mountain.

My mother died in 1999 of congestive heart failure. I will probably never stop missing her, but I am convinced of her abiding presence, for she is internalized as part of me. At her memorial service we used one of May Sarton poems in her eulogy. Since my mother's death I have lost both of my sisters as well: Jean, in 2001, to a sudden pulmonary embolism; Margaret, in 2003, to ovarian cancer. Lines from another May Sarton poem, "All Souls," often come unbidden into my thoughts these days. They ring ever true: "What has once been so interwoven cannot be unraveled, nor the gift ungiven. Now the dead move through all of us still glowing...only the strands grow richer with each loss and memory makes kings and queens of us."

Biographical information:

Co-Minister with my spouse, Mark Edmiston-Lange, Emerson Unitarian Church, Houston, Texas, since 1999
Served the Acostick Unitarian Universalist Church in Burke, Virginia, 1986-1999
Master of Divinity 1978, Union Theological Seminary, New York City
PhD in Counseling Psychology 1990, Catholic University, Washington, DC

3. May Sarton died on July 16, 1995. At her death she had published over fifty volumes, including 17 volumes of poetry, 19 novels and 11 journals.
9. Sarton, A World of Light, 52.
10. Sarton, A World of Light, 52.
11. Sarton, A World of Light, 58.
15. Sarton, A World of Light, 33.
16. Sarton, A World of Light, 63.
Last summer (1988) I walked into a pizza parlor looking for my husband. My two children, Benjamin at two years and Katie at seven months, were tired and hungry. I needed to ask Curtiss something, but now I have forgotten what it was. It was important enough, though, to track him down where he was having lunch next door to the Walgreen Drug store he manages. It was important enough that I didn’t care about the fact that I was dressed in old shorts and a T-shirt, rather than the decent clothes I usually wear when I look him up at work. His employees had told me where I could find him, but I don’t remember their telling me he was having a meeting with someone.

I walked up to the table, feeling somewhat embarrassed. Curtiss and the other man assured me I wasn’t interrupting anything. I was introduced: “This is my wife, Susan, and these are my kids, Benjamin and Katie.” By this time, Benjamin was running madly around the restaurant, looking at and touching everything and totally ignoring my appeals that he stay close to me. Katie, meanwhile, was whimpering with hunger and trying to get out of my arms, throwing her little body towards the floor so that I had to grab her with both hands to keep her from falling. I felt this chaos of motherhood and children hit me full swing. The man laughed slightly in dismissal of it as he stood up, in his establishment suit, to shake my hand. He looked at me, and it was then that I saw myself reflected in His eyes, in the eyes of our patriarchal society. Suddenly I realized that, to him
(and to me at that moment), I was the image of the mother in our culture: the mother in the commercials (sans make-up); the mother in the comedies of Hollywood. I felt invisible. I felt voiceless. I felt valueless. It was a terrible feeling.

Visibility, voice and value: that is what Susan Griffin is talking about in her poems, like the one about the woman at home with children:

You will never see her at night.
Stare at an empty space and imagine her there,
the woman with children
because she cannot be here to speak
for herself,
and listen
to what you think
she might say.¹

The poet also writes about the woman striving to write, the woman examining herself, the woman writing poems about other women who cannot be with us to hear or to speak. These are women trying to reclaim their voices, to become visible again, not only to others, but also to themselves. Susan Griffin shares with us some of the obstacles women have to overcome in that struggle for voice and visibility, a struggle, which is essential for the survival of our self-determination. And only through increasing our visibility, and using the voice that has been stifled, will women's value in society be realized and recognized, and eventually lifted out of the quagmire of that trilogy of ignorance, sex, and household dust.

In our Judeo-Christian heritage, we women have relied on men to give us a voice in the world. They failed us overwhelmingly, but it was not just their fault; it was women's as well to allow it. Thank goodness for those few women and men who were strong enough to trust each other and to help us to break out of the pattern of silence and degradation. Thank goodness for you who are sitting here today, for we Unitarian Universalists are on the cutting edge of progress in affirming the worth and dignity of every human being.

Are we becoming complacent, though, in our advances thus far? I have heard some of the older women in our movement remark with perplexity and worry about the apparent naiveté of the younger women. Are we really "backsliding," as Marjorie Lear, minister emerita in Santa Paula, California, has written in the newsletter of the Ministerial Sisterhood of Unitarian Universalists?² "But maybe I don't understand," she says. "Since it really is a different world twenty-five years later, I may be behind the times." She is referring to when she read Betty Friedan's Feminine Mystique, a book that I must admit I have never read, although I have her other book, passed on to me by my mother, entitled It Changed My Life, which I also have never read. Well, I am of another generation, or is it that I am complacent, since I have read the Bible, and that book is a lot older than twenty-five years.

It is a different world, and yet the changes that are taking place in our community are so new (ten or twenty years) that they have no strong foundation in tradition, are flimsy and can easily collapse, depending on the winds of the times. The Rev. Lear, in her provocative discussion, "Who is a good girl nowadays? Certainly the definition is changing since I was trying to be a good girl in my youth without much success. The music is so much more complicated to play now since there aren't any rules." We don't have any rules, and that leaves us open to backsliding just as much as encouraging progress.

Which brings us to this "wonderful" ad in Good Housekeeping magazine. Here is an absolutely gorgeous woman, with two just-as-beautiful children hanging on to her skirts, standing in a very nice house (you can tell by the shape of the window) with a large yard in the back, so large it looks like they might be out in the countryside. She is the "new traditionalist" and she has "started a revolution," says the ad, "with some not-so-revolutionary ideals. She's the contemporary woman who has made a new commitment to the traditional values that some people thought were 'old-fashioned.' She wasn't following a trend. She made her own choices. But when she looked over the fence she found that she wasn't alone."

No she isn't alone. I decided to stay home with my two little ones after a year of working part-time with my firstborn in tow. I am committed to home and family and I think it is time for our society to respect that; to respect it in a supportive and participatory way. When I was at the Ministers and Partners Conference at Palm Springs last winter, I heard one of our retired ministers tell his "Odyssey," or life experience in the ministry. The one thing, he said, that he would change would be to spend more time with his wife and children. He confessed that he let his work consume almost all of his time and energy.

This is a common attitude of our Protestant work ethic, and the stresses are now bearing on the working mother as well. Rosabeth Kanter writes about the advances women have made in the corporate world in our UU World magazine. But, she says, "ironically, the very spread of participative and entrepreneurial management practices that open more opportunity and power to some people create new problems for women's advancement. These new practices take more time and energy.... Unless there is more social support for working parents and
more equal division of labor at home, women may be left out of the new opportunities."

The vast majority of mothers can’t afford to stay home now, whether it is because they have been abandoned by their partners and must work to support their children, or because they and their husbands have set financial goals that preclude them both staying home with the children. So to whom is this ad addressed? I think it is aimed at societal attitudes in general.

"She [meaning the "new traditionalist"] was searching for something to believe in," begins the ad, "and look what she found. Her husband, her children, her home, herself." "Something to believe in." It is such an old cliché! Who has ever heard someone say that a husband should believe in his wife? The ad is saying that women should give up their visibility in society and cloister themselves in the confines of house and grocery store. It is saying that a woman should give over her voice in society to her husband and devote herself only to home and family. That has been our history, and it has gotten us nowhere. We have to speak for ourselves and stop blaming men for all the problems in the world. We mothers have a lot of work to do in this world and it is not the dishes.

Good Housekeeping claims, "Market researchers are calling it the biggest social movement since the sixties. "I hope this is an out-and-out lie, because if it is true, we have backslid to ground zero. Perhaps there is complacency among us coming out of a sense of trust in our society that is being too easily and falsely given. We younger women didn’t experience the struggles of our mothers, and yet we are aware of the progress of the past decades. We think that the changes that have been made cannot be undone. And now we have Good Housekeeping magazine coming out of the closet of patriarchy to persuade us to go back to our place in the home, to give up the voice and visibility we have worked so hard to achieve."

In the eyes of our working, moving, creating society, motherhood as a profession rates near zero on the spectrum of visibility (meaning "capable of being seen"), voice (meaning "the opportunity to express a choice or opinion"), and value (meaning "worth in usefulness or importance, merit"). My experience in the pizza parlor was especially devastating for me because I was a minister first, a profession that rates almost opposite to motherhood on the above spectrum. Ministry is a very visible profession in society, its voice is frequent and much respected, and ministry is highly valued in our culture.

Naturally, my ego is well developed. So to feel suddenly that ego being totally deflated was frightening and very disconcerting. Now that I have chosen to be a full-time mother I find it essential for my sense of self-value to write and to preach. I need to be out in the world, participating and creating, keeping my voice alive, keeping my body visible in this respected role of minister. This is important for any person—woman or man—to feel heard and seen and valued, whatever the profession. This is perhaps an understanding which motherhood can bring to the ministry.

Ministry itself comes out of a tradition that is in many ways antithetical to motherhood. The Judeo-Christian heritage, out of which our particular religious stems, has a long history of devaluation of women and motherhood, and ministers have necessarily been the carriers and teachers of that particular view. We think we have turned the tables, but we haven’t yet, not completely. I have overheard a few male Unitarian Universalist ministers make derogatory remarks about women in general, but I still think we’re making great progress, until I see ads like this.

Motherhood is going to change the ministry. It’s already happening. Now that we have reclaimed our voices we have an incredible amount of teaching to do. The entire world seems to be structured in an anti-mother way: We rape the "Mother Earth" with our bull-dozers and power saws; we posture toward others with little or no compassion, threatening to blow up some other mother’s son or daughter; the physical world is devalued next to the "spiritual" world, which has become the domain of patriarchy and masculinity.

The learning of the mother is possibly what may turn out to be the salvation of the earth, if we can hold on to the voice and visibility and value we are gaining. We may not all be mothers, but we all had mothers. If we can see beyond the prejudices society instilled in us toward our mothers, maybe we can hear and appreciate some wisdom they might have given us through their own struggles to be mothers and to be themselves.

Let me share with you some of my own learnings in motherhood:

In pregnancy I learned what it feels like to be more than just myself, to be me and another interwoven in one body, and to be completely responsible for that other, an other for which I could feel love only in an abstract way. Is not the earth interwoven in such a way, a way that demands our love, though we do not know much of it in an intimately concrete way? Are we not now completely responsible for each other and for the earth?

In childbirth I learned what it feels like to be tortured, to be in such terrible pain that the only escape is to pass out for a short two minutes of eternity. How could anyone who has experienced that condone torture of another being?

In motherhood I learned what it means to subdue my needs for that of another, to compromise and to deprive myself for another’s good. This teaching comes from getting out of bed at one, two, three, and four in the morning to
pour my exhausted and barely healed body's nourishment into another. Might not that kind of giving be what it takes to bring about the betterment of all the world's societies? Might not that be the kind of deprivation and compromise needed to bring about the healing of our earth—to teach ourselves laboriously to separate our garbage into one, two, and three bags for recycling; to not buy too much meat, etc.?

In motherhood I learned that my values are harder to live than I ever thought possible that children step beyond the bounds of our ordered lives to challenge us to see reality and fantasy, and how closely the two are interconnected. How can I judge another's beliefs, or demand that they see the world only as I see it? How can I not listen to another's vision of the world, and find the reality that may be there for me?

I have learned an intensely deep feeling for the sanctity of life. I have learned that the parts of our bodies and our secretions are not filthy, that their names are not dirty, and do not have to be embarrassing, but that they are as important to a young child as my writing is to me. I have also learned from Benjamin that making analogies is one of the first things we do as children, and, as I have just shown, is an essential process in the understanding of our world.

Women have to keep their voices alive and their bodies visible, and that will entail that we continue to strive for excellent and available child care; that we dispel the myths that only the mother, at home, is best for the child. My son adores his nursery school and they provide him with playmates, with socialization, and with experiences that I could never offer, considering my interests. Children are flexible and know when they are loved. I think the best parents are those who are truly being the persons they want to be, doing what they want to do within the confines of family responsibility.

Mother ministers are going to be speaking to these issues as they struggle with them in their own lives. Mother ministers, women ministers and liberated men ministers are going to be speaking about the silenced issues, those of child sexual abuse in our families, those of women's rights, those of making time for family and of sharing responsibilities in the home, those of the degradations of our history of patriarchal religion.

We may very well turn Christianity on its head and reclaim the beauty and goodness and divinity of women. One of these days we won't need a Women's History Month, or a Women and Religion Sunday or an International Women's Day to remind us to speak to women's issues once a year. For they will no longer be "just" women's issues; they will be human issues. We will speak to them every day until they are no longer issues, and motherhood will be praised and respected in the eyes of the world. That is the hope in my heart.

REFLECTIONS, 2004
Rev. Susan Manker-Seale
Born: June 21, 1956
Ordained: November 1986

In April 1988, my husband, Curtiss, and I were able to move back to Phoenix to be near our extended family. Our children, Ben and Katie, were 21 months and 1 month, respectively. After graduating from Starr King School for the Ministry the month that Ben was born, I had been working as the Religious Education Director of the Marin Fellowship of Unitarians in San Rafael, California, and I didn't see myself continuing with two little ones to care for. Besides, every time my parents or mother-in-law came to visit, they would solve some problem I had with Ben or the baby as if it were the simplest thing. I wanted that wisdom right next door.

Within several months or so of being a stay-at-home mom, I had the experience in the pizza parlor, referred to in the sermon. I realized I wasn't altogether happy with my new role, after being a minister. I mentioned this to Bets Wenecke, then President of MSUU, and she encouraged me to write a sermon about these feelings of being a mother and minister. I pondered it for a while, gathered some resources, and finally wrote something. The next March, I preached it at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Phoenix, the church in which I grew up. That is the only time I have ever received applause after a sermon. After that, I took it to Valley UU in Chandler, and to West Valley UU in Glendale, which would become my part-time ministry the following year, but I didn't know it then. And in June 1989, I preached it at the Northwest Tucson UU Congregation, which I would begin to serve in 1996.

On the urging of Bets, I also submitted it to the 1989 MSUU Sermon Award. There was no monetary honorarium in those days, just the privilege of preaching before the sisters in ministry at General Assembly. I was astounded that I won, mostly because I was so new in the ministry and didn't yet realize the power of personal reflection and story in sermons. I was a little frightened about preaching before my colleagues, who all had more experience than I, but I gave it my best, and I think I did my best. After I finished, Bets and the women present surprised me by giving me $250 to help with my expenses of attending General Assembly, and I was very grateful. That was the beginning of the honorarium for the Sermon Award. It felt so wonderful to have the support of those women in my strug-
gles to be both mother and minister. From those connections, I have involved myself and tried to give back to the women in ministry through the work and support of MSUU.

In November 1989, the sermon was sent out to the MSUU membership along with the membership letter. I still have that letter in which Bets wrote that "Now that one-quarter of UU ministers are women, as are two-thirds of the students preparing for the ministry, it seems more important than ever to let you know about the Ministerial Sisterhood." Our MSUU membership stood at 160 that year. It was only six years or so later, if I remember correctly, that Diane Miller announced we had reached 50% of the ministry!

The sermon has been published twice, once in a Fall 1989 loose-leaf publication by the UU Women's Federation called Reaching Sideways: An Exchange of Ideas and Views of the UU Women and Men of this Continent, edited by Sara Best. The sermon was also printed in Denise Tracy's book, Sources in Unitarian Universalist Feminism, published in 1992 by Delphi Resources.

All this interest in my sermon shored up my ministry a great deal, not just in lending balance to the self-image of struggling mother and struggling minister, but also in terms of realizing I did have important things to say and could say them in ways that inspired others.

Another surprising thing happened from that sermon. A young gay couple came to my installation at West Valley the next year, and told me that they had heard my sermon at the Phoenix church and been very moved. One of the men was a weaver, and I had used the imagery of weaving in my benediction based on Carolyn McDade's "Song of Community": "...turn towards the warp of your feminine and turn towards the weft of your masculine, and weave! Weave them into a love, a love that heals and a love that yields..." They then presented me with a beautiful wool shawl that the man had woven for me. It is purple with long fringe and still hangs over the back of my rocking chair.

Today, I am minister of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Northwest Tucson, in my eighth year with them, after serving six years with West Valley UU in Glendale part-time and an interim year teaching High School English to Special Education Juniors and Seniors. I measure my years in the ministry by how old Ben is: eighteen! My daughter Kat is sixteen and now driving. I have survived being both a mother and a minister, and I wouldn't have given either of them up. It has been hard, but also a spiritual practice to balance the demands of home and congregation, and to keep boundaries strong that protect the needs of both. Curtiss still works for Walgreens, the job he got right out of college when we moved to Berkeley so I could go to Starr King. We never anticipated that he would stay with that company, but retail was in his blood, and nothing beats good health insurance.

We love living in the desert, with a mountain to look at every day (Mt. Lemmon). We measure our years by the summer monsoons with their incredible lightning and thunder, and we measure them by the annual Unitarian Universalist gatherings at the beach in Rocky Point, Mexico, in the fall, our District meetings, and the General Assembly. It really is true, the old cliché, that I don't know where the years went! People warned me that my kids would be grown before I knew it, but motherhood was also long and tedious, just as it has been too short and wondrous. And it certainly will never end, until I die. I wish you the best in your ministries, how ever they are or turn out to be.


This morning I would like to tell you about the life of an unusual woman, the Reverend Antoinette Brown Blackwell. Not only was she the first woman to be ordained by a congregation as minister of an established church, but also she played a major role in the unfolding drama of the early women's rights movement, and she was the first feminist theologian. Her life was a response to her continuing quest to find a life of her own that was true to her nature, her profound sense of vocation, her intellectual integrity, and the deep love she had for her family. This sermon is written almost totally in Nettie's words. It is composed of excerpts from her memoirs, letters, and books. Let us hear her voice.

Antoinette Brown Blackwell speaks:

"From earliest childhood I intended and expected to have a definite life work." That's the sentence with which I opened most of the autobiographical pieces one has to write over the course of a lifetime. I lived to be ninety-six, and people were kind enough on occasion to ask me, or my publishers, about my life. It's true I always intended to have a definite work. What was not always so clear was the shape of my life work.

I was born in 1825. "In the very early days, I intended to continue somewhat along the lines of the accepted Woman's Sphere." As a child I was much in the room with my grandmother, who was elderly and a great reader. Her favorite books were the Bible and Pilgrim's Progress...after her death...they were given to me."

"I started early to school, going along with my brothers and sisters. One of the dreams of my childhood was to start a seminary for young women; another was to become an author.... At the age of nine, I joined the orthodox Congregational Church and I think I was as deeply and truly religious at that time as I have ever been at any age."

"Women of that day had no vote nor any public voice...." It was widely debated whether women were capable of abstract thought or could even benefit from higher education. However, my father agreed that I should attend Oberlin College.

"In 1845 when I was just 20 years old, I started for Oberlin and my college life...On the journey by coach...a Rochester lawyer and an old family friend and one of the trustees of Oberlin joined us. On hearing that I was to enter the junior class, he warned me of a young woman named Lucy Stone who would be my classmate. He said that she was a very bright girl. She was conspicuously radical and he strongly advised me to have very little to do with her. Naturally my first question at the long college table with the young women on one side and the young men on the other was 'which one is Lucy Stone?' She was seated beside me separated only by an aisle...." Thus Lucy and I met—we who were to be deepest friends, soul mates, and sisters all of our lives.

We young women had such high hopes of Oberlin. As Lucy said, "In our despair [at home in the East], Oberlin, away in the West, became our star, our Mecca." But once we arrived it became clear that our hopes and expectations were not to be realized. It was the men who were to be trained to speak in public. Women were expected to obey the injunction of Paul: "Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness."

We refused to accept the ban and reactivated an organization called Young Ladies Association of Oberlin Collegiate Institute for the Promotion of Literature and Religion. And we spoke! We met in a grove of trees to practice. We finally persuaded one professor to allow us to stage a debate in his class just as the men did.

In 1847, Lucy left Oberlin to begin her career as a public speaker and lecturer on abolition and women's rights. I stayed on at Oberlin in order to begin my study of theology. "When my friends understood that I really intended to become a minister every one of them realized the insuperable difficulties I should have to meet. My mother finding how determined I was begged me at least to carry on my work in some foreign mission. My father gave me to understand that his assistance would cease with my college education....Even Lucy...was opposed. How well I remember walking with her at sunset and hearing her say, 'You never can do it.' My answer was, 'I am going to do it.'"

I'd like to read from a couple of our many letters to show you how our controversy proceeded:
Oberlin, December 1848

Dear Lucy,

Helen called last evening and left the little note you sent in her letter. Do not fear my getting married. I have neither opportunity nor inclination at present to take such an irremediable step & have so little confidence in such a plan for either of us that I am glad to respond most heartily to your emphatic don't DON'T & send it back like an echo to your self....

How glad I am that you are going to lecture for The Woman's Rights Convention. I am so happy to think that you will...labor for the elevation of women but do be careful....

I feel as though I had never improved as much in a whole year as during the last three months (studying theology)....Such grand thoughts....I am in ecstasy half of the time, but after all this is a world of trials and I have plenty of them.

Write very soon won't you.10

Dearest Nettie

I wonder if you have any idea how dreadfully I feel about your studying that old musty theology, which already has its grave clothes on and is about to be buried, in so deep a grave that no resurrection trumpet can call it into being....The centuries...stand waiting to bury it in the deep darkness from which it came, while all the voices of the ages that are beyond us, are saying, "Give up. Give up." The Great Soul of the Present, hungering and thirsting for the bread and water of Life, falters by the wayside, finding no...living fountains that are not all polluted with the horrid stench which goes up from the decaying corpse of such a theology, with which Humanity and God himself are weary. Yet my own dear Nettie is spending three precious years of her life's young prime wading through that deep slough....0 Nettie it is intolerable....

Now, Nettie dear, do you think I am a monster? Wait forty years and see....Take care of your back and do not think a great while at a time...."11

When I finished my studies at Oberlin in 1850, the school would not grant me a degree. That waited till 1908. After leaving school, I traveled the country lecturing on weekdays and preaching on Sundays.

"In one place they invited me to speak in the church but said that no woman should stand in the pulpit but I was to stand on the floor just in front of the pulpit. One woman said it was not Biblical....She took her stand just outside the door of the church and addressed me from the doorsill upholding the position that it was unlawful for a woman to speak in the church."12

"Our lecturing in New York State brought us to South Butler where we held a meeting. The people of the Congregational Church, thinking that a young woman preacher might help build up the fortunes of their church, called me to become their minister....My friend, Samuel J. May was settled in nearby Syracuse. William Henry Channing was in Rochester nearby, and though the salary was small....I could have some time to continue my lecturing. So I decided to accept the call. I was ordained in my own church [on September 15, 1853]."13

Just a few days later, I went to New York City to attend the World Temperance Convention. Horace Greeley wrote a series of articles for the New York Tribune, describing the events. Women had been thrown out of a planning session, ensuring that the World Convention would be, in his words, an "Orthodox, White, Male, Adult, Saints' Convention." On the first day, determined to speak, I sought and gained recognition from the presider and began. The esteemed clergymen shouted insults, stamped their feet, and pounded their canes on the floor! Finally, we had to leave the hall, to the cheers of the delegates. The following night, when I was addressing the Women's Rights Convention, hecklers interrupted my speech again and again. Mind you, these hecklers were some of the most distinguished clergymen in the country. Mr. Greeley's editorials and cartoons shamed them and called the nation to open its platforms to women.14 Historians generally agree that after these events, women were never again barred from speaking in a public meeting simply because they were women. New excuses had to be found.15

I went home to my church. That first year of parish ministry was very difficult. "Before I had been many months at South Butler I began to be assailed by theological doubts. Undoubtedly I had a strong bent toward speculative topics. This increased with my habit of reading metaphysics. When traveling with Miss [Susan] Anthony that year, I generally carried a heavy volume...."16

"During this time, Darwin and Spencer were beginning their publications....This wide variety of opinion began seething in my mind and to no one was I willing to say anything of the difficulties which began to arise in my earnest endeavor to find my way into real and solid truth....In my mind the question of eternal punishment had long seemed...at least questionable."17
"This unsettled state of mind continued until some time in the spring of 1854. Then, suddenly I found that the whole groundwork of my faith had dropped away from me. I found myself absolutely believing nothing, not even in my own continuous personal existence. Was I the same entity now as in my childhood? Was I the same even as six months earlier? Was there any God? To me it was the complete downfall of confidence in anything possible to know or rely upon..."  

"On the basis of belief in the law of love it was possible to go on preaching and lecturing. But difficulties began to arise. A young man of the congregation became mortally ill. His mother, an earnest Christian woman, probably the most conservative member of the little congregation, an intelligent woman, who had done her best (I suspect against her wishes) to accept and befriend the woman minister, begged me to come and labor earnestly with her son. She indicated in no uncertain terms that I was to hold him as suspended over the brink of eternal suffering and in this way to impel him to a conversion that should bear him on the direction of eternal happiness...It seemed a cruel situation which it was impossible to meet in accordance with the mother's wishes..."  

"Another time the child of an unmarried mother died suddenly with croup. I was present to see that last hard suffering of the poor little thing, and was forced to preach the funeral sermon as the custom then was, with some references to the mother and the painful conditions surrounding her, while an unusual attendance of curious-minded persons were watching to see in what way I should discharge the painful task."  

"The one person to whom I began to state my difficulties was the Rev. William Henry Channing....He did all he could to cheer and encourage me, but told me frankly that no other soul could be a real helper in this personal emergency. Each one must walk over 'the burning plough shares' for oneself."  

"The strain of all this was so severe that my health was seriously suffering. There seemed no alternative but to resign. This I accordingly did.  

"I returned to my father's home; but there was no rest...I soon thought it best to accept Horace Greeley's suggestion that I come to New York."  

I worked with the poor in the slums of the city and wrote articles. "The work among those poor and degraded was so pitiful that it was almost too much for my heartfelt sympathies...and coming not long after the serious religious over-turning of my mind in South Butler...it made the whole world seem a place of shadows and sorrows."  

One of the friends I met at this time was Mr. Samuel Blackwell. My dearest Lucy had begun to spend much time with, and talk of marriage to his brother, Henry. "As Doctor Elizabeth Blackwell [Mr. Blackwell's sister] had become a physician a little earlier...we were naturally sympathetic, and my acquaintance with the entire Blackwell family progressed naturally until I knew most of them. In the midst of the blackness of darkness which was around me more or less that year, Mr. Samuel Blackwell's optimism enabled him to become to me a present help in time of trouble."  

I offer you this exchange of letters to show how our relationship developed:

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Dear Mr. Blackwell,

It is very pleasant to receive letters full of kindly sympathies and it is delightful to write whatever one thinks and feel an appreciative reader. Every line from you is welcome, dropping like a gleam of sunshine upon the heavy heart of monotony of toilsome days. But I may not be selfish enough to receive friendship under false pretenses...  

And all this, my brother, is preliminary to saying that our relations, though they might deepen and strengthen by association, could not, I am convinced, ever so far change as to realize a hope, which you have sometimes expressed. I could never be more to you than a friend—a sister...Nothing but an unsought all absorbing affection can make it feel right to waver in my plan for an untiring life work of isolation.

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Dear Sister Nettie,

Do not talk of an "untiring life work of isolation." Indeed I can't stand that, if you are my sister I shan't let you be isolated. I shall claim to go shares in all troubles and perplexities and shall absolutely demand that you come and tell your brother all about it...

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Dear Sam.

I love you Sam, but sometimes I do shrink from that new relation with many mingled feelings...  

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In January of 1856 we were married quietly.
In my quest to make a life of my own, to determine what it is that God wanted of me, I had come a long way. Most history books make no mention of my activities past this date. I tend to be known (to the extent I am known at all) as the first woman minister, who, by insisting on her right to speak at the World Temperance Convention, saw to it that nineteenth century women could speak in public. Occasionally, my friendship with Lucy Stone is mentioned and that's about it. The accounts say things, such as "she married and retired from public life." However, my determination to make a life of my own, consistent with my ideals and my sense of what God asked of me did not abate.

I dropped all affiliation with the Congregationalists, and both Sam and I became Unitarians. I was accepted somewhat lukewarmly into fellowship in 1878.

Sam and I had strong opinions about what a true marriage between equals should and could be like. At first, I maintained the schedule of public speaking to which I was accustomed. Sam stayed home and helped to oversee things there, in between his trips to the office and his own writing. Even after the birth of our first child, I was on the road for months at a stretch.

What became increasingly clear was that I delighted in the strictures imposed by the difficulties of leaving five babies and a busy household. I seemed to always be able to find the time and the energy for what became the life work to which I dedicated myself: metaphysical theology. I spent at least three hours a day at "my habitual brain work, not including daily prayers and miscellaneous light reading." One of my daughters said once that she could not remember a time when her mother was not writing a book. The only competition to my writing was my garden.

The Blackwells, men and women alike, worked avidly for the rights of women and for abolition. We all had summer homes on Martha's Vineyard, and the children flowed from one house to another. Thus Lucy and Henry felt free to campaign in Kansas, since their daughter was living with her Aunt Elizabeth that year. They would undoubtedly have understood me more had I continued to live a more public life, campaigning and speaking for the causes we all believed in and worked for so passionately. As I told my niece, Alice, one day, "I think Aunt Elizabeth thought I was a failure, and in her book she never mentioned me, though she spoke so kindly and so often of Lucy."  

I wrote six books of philosophical theology exploring the implications of the new evolutionary theories on religion and feminism. The books that precipitated my faith crisis, the works of Darwin and Spencer, became the grist for my mill.

My interpretation of evolutionary theory does not see the competitive struggle of the survival of the fittest as cruel and harsh. I see a complex interweaving of life forms each dependent on the other for survival. Each organism is related to every other organism in a relationship based on breathing the same air, drinking the same water, and the cycle of life forms eating one another. "The struggle for existence, then, regarded in its whole scope, is but a perfected system of cooperations in which all sentient and unsentient forces mutually co-work in securing the highest ultimate good." 20 "To be thus socially related, through our bodies as well as our minds, is but another evidence of the unity of the whole rational plan of creation." 21

My conclusions are considerably at variance with those of Mr. Spencer, who once argued that the survival of the fittest was an argument that could be used to justify allowing the unemployed, or those deemed unfit by the labor market, to starve. 22

I maintain that Darwin's and Spencer's male perspective prevented them from accurately perceiving woman's place in nature....[I challenge] the accepted theory that the male is the representative type of the species and the female a modification preordained in the interest of reproduction. 23

Years passed, as they must; our children grew and left home. Sam and I had more time to pursue our work, to write, and to travel. Every summer we saw us back at Chilmark on Martha's Vineyard. My niece Alice wrote to her cousin Kitty Barry one day after watching Sam and me walking the beach, "Such a pair of lovers I never saw." 24 We were lovers too, right up to the very end.

"After Sam's death in 1890, I sometimes went to Elizabeth, New Jersey, to conduct the Sunday services in a little Unitarian society there. It was decided to erect a small church building on the land I presented to them....As a most unexpected surprise, I was asked...to accept the position of Minister Emeritus, preaching once a month, which I was happy to accept." 25

One of the great joys of my life was living long enough to vote in a national election, in 1920, after the Suffrage amendment was finally passed. I died the following year, and my ashes were scattered on my beloved Vineyard home.

Minister's postscript:

In conclusion, I propose that we ask of ourselves the same questions which the Reverend Antoinette Brown Blackwell posed of herself: How can our lives be true to our own nature, to our sense of vocation, to our intellectual integrity, as well as to the love we have for our families and those dear to us? What is it that God is asking of us? Amen.
REFLECTIONS, 2004
Rev. Arline Conan Sutherland
Born: November 1, 1943
Ordained: October 22, 1989

Like many twentieth century women who have researched the lives of our nineteenth century sisters, I have found myself startled by the congruities of our lives. I felt a deeper spiritual and emotional kinship for Antoinette Brown Blackwell than I did with my mother. Nettie asked the same questions of life that I did and her values were amazingly similar to my own.

I first encountered Nettie while taking a seminar on the lives of Nineteenth Century Women in my last year at Harvard Divinity School. I was then forty-five years old and deeply in love with my husband of twenty-five years. We had two grown sons and a grandson who were and still are a central part of my life. I was seeking ways of being true to my own nature, to my sense of vocation, to finding a way of reconciling my ministry and my family life.

In 1990, when I preached this sermon, I was concluding my first year of ministry as the Associate Minister in Winchester, Massachusetts. By then, I was disillusioned by the realities of my position and by the nagging feeling that I was not doing what God wanted of me. Bringing the story of Blackwell’s ministry forward was a way for me to reconnect with her and with the questions that were keeping me awake at night.

The congregation was warmly responsive. I wondered if they understood how ambivalent I was about my ministry with them. I preached the sermon several other times. The occasion I remember most vividly was at a meeting of the Mass Bay District Chapter of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. My colleagues understood me very clearly. They sympathized with the trials of my first year of ministry when it’s all new and everything is a first: the first memorial service for a young man who committed suicide, the first confrontation with a member of the congregation, the first sense of fulfillment at preaching a sermon that wasn’t too bad. They urged me to keep asking the questions.

That sense of kinship and understanding by my colleagues was the motivation for submitting the sermon. Receiving the award was the first affirmation by people I respected that maybe I could be a preacher.

After three years of serving as the Associate, The Winchester Unitarian Society called me as its Senior Minister. I found that role more congenial. It felt truer to my nature and deeply fulfilling. But you know, ten years later, I was asking those pesky questions again. I applied for and received a grant from the Lilly Endowment so that I could ask what the next decade of ministry might hold.

Perhaps this time the congregation sensed my ambivalence. Ultimately I decided to leave Winchester and resigned in 2002. The last two years have been a period of discovery about myself and the vocation I hold dear. Jeff and I are still happily married. Our two sons are both married, and there is a new grandson to whom to tell stories. I know that there are multiple aspects to my life that must be integrated: the need to be emotionally and spiritually available for my family; the desire to create space for the spiritual lives of children; the chance to preach, which is a key part of my spiritual practice; and to work respectfully and meaningfully with a colleague.

Most unexpectedly I was asked last fall to go to the Unitarian Society of Hartford, Connecticut, to work with my friend and colleague, the Rev. Dr. Terasa Cooley, as the Assistant Minister. As such, I am in charge of the Faith Development programs for the young, the old, and those in between. I preach regularly enough to keep me happy, and since all kinds of things are not my problem, I could take a four-year-old hiking in the woods for the first time this summer and host a neighborhood potluck.

I suspect that those nagging questions will return. I am learning that, for me at least, there is no one answer to what God is asking of me and how I can be true to who I am and those I hold dear.

The Rev. Arline Conan Sutherland currently serves the Unitarian Society of Hartford, Connecticut, as Assistant Minister. She and her husband of forty years, Jeff (who works for a company that designs software for the healthcare industry), live in Davis Square, in Somerville, Massachusetts. They have two adult married sons and two grandchildren. She served the Winchester Unitarian Society for three years as the Associate Minister in Charge of Religious Education and ten years as the Senior Minister. Recipient of a Lilly Endowment Foundation Grant for Clergy Renewal in 2001, she traveled extensively in India and Bhutan, researching the spiritual lives of women in those cultures. Raised largely in the Middle East, she returned to the New York area with her family to attend high school and college. After attending Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart in Purchase, New York, for three years, she received her undergraduate degree from Arizona State University. She and her family have lived in many sections of the United States, spending many years in the Rocky Mountain region before they came back east so she could attend Harvard Divinity School, graduating in 1989.
1. Antoinette Brown Blackwell, Lifework, ms. n.d., Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, A-145, Folder 1, 1. Materials from this collection are used by permission from the Schlesinger Library.

2. Lifework, 1.


4. Gilson ms., 70.

5. Lifework, 1.


8. 1 Timothy 2:11, RSV.


11. Friends and Sisters, 55.

12. Lifework, 11.


18. Gilson ms., 170.


22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.


28. Agnes Blackwell Jones, Postscript to Gilson ms, Folder 11.

29. Quoted in Cazden, 135.


31. Ibid., 240.


34. Quoted in Cazden, 237.

35. Gilson ms., 220.
SINGING THE WOMEN’S LIVING TRADITION

Rev. David A. Johnson
Sermon Award for 1991

Note: Rather than a sermon, this is an entire worship service, complete with hymns interspersed with text. The hymns follow the text and are formatted so that readers may use them in their own settings. They have been edited to remove archaisms of language and sexism, and in some cases to make them more singable.

“Music is the prophecy of what life is to be; the rainbow of promise translated out of seeing into hearing.”—Lydia Maria Child

“I know that as long as I live, I’ve got to sing….The word can be sung, or it can be said, or the word can be in a gesture, or in a touch….I’m going to sing the word. [It is] part of what has made us a good and viable people. The tradition that’s been carried on, the meaning that’s been carried on in songs…”—Malvina Reynolds

INVOCATION

Blessed be the Heart of Creation who sings the world into being. Our religious life has but one aim, to receive, to hold, to cherish this creation, this earth and life. The world, even life itself, could not be truly felt or lived until it was sung. Only life sung is real, touchable, knowable. The songs of those who have preceded us have renewed and recreated the world in every generation. Lines of songs stretch out from this place in all directions connecting us to peoples of all times and places.

HYMN #1

“Still, Still With Thee,”1 by Harriet Beecher Stowe, poet, novelist.

CHALICE LIGHTING

The chalice and flame are a tree of life embraced by the radiant light and energy of the heavens. Peace be with us and with all under the sun. Let all hearts rejoice and fill the earth with praise.

HYMN of AFFIRMATION #2

“All Beautiful the March of Days,”2 by Frances Whitmarsh Wile, Unitarian poet, hymnodist and co-worker with William Channing Gannett on new hymnody.

HYMN of PRAYER #3

“God Hear the Prayer we Offer,”3 by Love Maria Whitcomb Willis, Unitarian hymnodist.

HYMN #4

“Cast Thy Bread Upon the Waters,”4 by Phebe A. Hanaford, Universalist minister, historian, poet, activist, and one of the editors of The Women’s Bible.

THE EARLY WOMEN’S STRUGGLE

It is often presumed that women’s hymns are overly sentimental, romantic—meaning, one assumes, that they are artificial, ethereal, and inauthentic to real life and emotions. Perhaps this is an image left over from some popular poetry of the last century. Perhaps it is a judgment attached to certain prominent, memorable hymns. Of course it may be simply sexism. Whatever it is, it is not accurate. Perhaps we should glance for a moment at the opening hymn written by Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Harriet Beecher Stowe had borne seven children. One, a favorite in whom large hopes had rested, had just died in a cholera epidemic. Harriet Beecher Stowe had endured wearing years of problematic, recurring illness, and at last decided to plumb the possibilities of her writing talents. Uncle Tom’s Cabin, her watershed novel that brought the slavery struggle to sharp public consciousness, was the result. Slavery was a subject traditionally forbidden to women by popular convention, and Stowe was both praised and savagely condemned, not only in the South. Thirty novels blasting her pro-abolitionist sympathies were published almost overnight. She was stung and wrote a bristling, angry response, filled with evidence, detail, and argumentation. The attack continued. She felt it very personally, considering it a kind of “crucifixion.” It was then that she wrote, “Still,
still with Thee." It is a hymn of courage, affirmation, calm and hope in the face of life's furies.

The next hymn is another that might be seen as sentimental. Written by Phoebe Ann Coffin Hanford, a young woman, newly married. She was later to become a Universalist minister. She would also become friend and co-worker with Mary Livermore in the Western Sanitary Commission work and the physical and medical care of the troops along the Mississippi in the Civil War. Phoebe Hanford had experienced the excitement of living in Boston in the heady years of theological, abolitionist and feminist controversy at the beginning of the 1850s. Then she and her husband moved to the tiny town of Siasconset—her place of birth—on Nantucket Island. There, with two young children, she found herself far from the crises and bustle of the mainland. She struggled with her first novel, an anti-slavery treatise, and a collection of poems. There, on the lonely shores of the sea she wrote, "Cast thy bread upon the waters."

NO MAN EVER DID MORE

Julia Ward Howe is always remembered for her "Battle Hymn of the Republic." It rather surprised, overwhelmed and pleased her that everywhere she went it went before her. At her every lecture, it seemed, it had to be sung. But it is strange that this battle hymn has become her memorial. It was Julia Ward Howe who proposed Mother's Day as a day for women to speak for peace, who organized a Woman's Peace Congress in London, who was director and vice president of the American Peace Society. In working on these hymns, and dozens more we could not sing this morning, certain common themes and characteristics emerged from liberal religious women's hymnody. A common theme is an intense concern for peace and peaceable resolution of conflict. A common characteristic is that many of these hymns have a powerful, personal, emotional resonance most men's hymns don't. In the years that followed the Civil War, Julia Ward Howe put her formidable poetic powers into hymns for peace. This one is, perhaps, the best.

HYMN #5

"Bid the Din of Battle Cease," by Julia Ward Howe, activist, poet, founder of the Women's Ministerial Conference, author of the "Battle Hymn of the Republic."

OUR DAY HAS COME

Charlotte Perkins Gilman is perhaps best known for her feminist novels and her satire, less for her magnificent body of poetry or her economic and social protest. A niece of Harriet Beecher Stowe, she had the same vigorous, unconventional intellect and powers. Through life experience and study she became painfully aware of the desperate, life denying limitations suffered by women—especially those on the ragged margins of society. She became a passionate writer, researcher, and speaker on issues of women, labor and social organization. Her magnum opus was Women and Economics. She also wrote forceful songs and hymns—some sweet and gentle, some tributes to the beauty of the earth (especially her beloved golden hills of California), some full of deep, personal faith. Many were suffrage songs, widely sung at women's rallies. Her best was doubtless this one.

HYMN #6


ALL PROGRESS IS ONE

The next hymn has always been a Universalist Universalist favorite, but who ever notices that it was written by a woman? In her time, the late years of the nineteenth century, Julia Caroline Ripley Dorr was a popular, widely published author and poet. She, too, fought passionately for women's rights. How different this hymn sounds when one realizes it was written by a young woman, affirming that the whole, grand, hopeful human heritage of thought, of knowledge, of wisdom, service, arts, belongs to women as well as men!

HYMN #7

"Heir of All the Ages," by Julia Caroline Ripley Dorr, Unitarian poet, hymnologist.

ALL SORROW IS ONE

The late years of the nineteenth century saw bitter theological battles in most faiths, including ours, as America was becoming urbanized and the plight of the cities, visible. Education was increasingly available to all, communication began to break some of the old regional barriers, and racial discrimination crept into
public awareness again. Robert Ingersoll and Dwight L. Moody—and opposite ends of the spectrum—fought for the soul of America. Every denomination was torn, bruised on the jagged rocks of tough religious questions. Few captured the spiritual hunger, doubt and struggle for faith that swept our movement as well as the Reverend Mrs. Celia Parker Woolley. In the late 1870s, she had become immersed in the life of one of America’s greatest, fastest growing cities, Chicago, where Ingersoll and Moody squared off.

Robert Ingersoll was known as the great unbeliever, heretic, an immensely persuasive and popular public speaker in the Midwest. He loved to take on biblical literalists and take apart their biblical knowledge and scholarship. Dwight L. Moody preceded Billy Graham and Billy Sunday as a popular evangelist. He was the great revivalist, biblical literalist, who condemned theatre, alcohol, gambling, and amusements open on Sunday. When he invited Rev. William Henry Ryder, from St. Paul’s Universalist Church of Chicago, to a revival, Ryder asked, “Can my people join me?” Moody said, “No.” Ryder’s immortal reply was, “I cannot go where my people are not welcome!” and refused the invitation.

HYMN #8

“Refractions of Light,” by Celia Parker Woolley, Unitarian Minister, social worker, peace advocate.

ALL HOPE IS ONE

Surely close to half of the hymnodist authors whose hymns we sing this morning have some connection with one of American Unitarianism’s greatest hymnodists, William Channing Gannett, who encouraged women writers, worked with some, recognized their gifts, published their hymns. One of his co-workers who never gets any credit was his second cousin, Abbie Gannett, of the St. Louis Gannetts. The only one of her hymns found in any of our hymnals is this one set to a turn of the century revival tune.

HYMN #9

“The Hope of the World is Loving,” by Abbie Gannett, second cousin to William C. Gannett.

ALL FREEDOM IS ONE

The Pilgrims’ first landfall on Cape Cod has been the subject of countless hymns. For some reason, this one, celebrating the larger meanings of the Pilgrims’ jour-
resulted in this service. When I first composed this service, I was minister in Tucson, Arizona, and the response to the women's service was quite enthusiastic. I printed it and made hymn texts, music and script available to my not very large following denominationally. I did give it in several places, and very soon Gene Navias and I weaseled our way into doing the two "Singing, Shouting, and Celebrating Universalism" programs at General Assemblies in Charlotte and Calgary, which led us both further into UU women's hymnody.

Somewhere along the way came the MSUU award, and that changed everything. Laypeople, ministers, scholars all over the country began to ask me about hymns, and asked whether a particular woman had written any hymns, whether there were women's hymns associated with particular congregations, etc. I found myself having to research UU women's hymnody seriously, to analyse our hymns and hymnbooks, resulting soon in a Bibliography of UU Women's Hymnody which has gone through three self printed editions. One of the most helpful effects of the MSUU Award was that people began sending hymns and hymn references to me (which is why the book went through three editions and needs a fourth). I also began work—overlapping of course—on Unitarian and Universalist hymnody itself, a book slowly making its way towards printing. In 1998 Gene Navias and I were part of a team, with Dorothy Emerson and Ruth Roper, that created the "Singing, Shouting, Celebrating UU Women" program for the Rochester General Assembly.

When we did the MSUU Award "sermon" at the General Assembly, there was a lot of standing, clapping and cheering, but I was much happier that it empowered women and some men to look for women's hymns and so often send them to me. I am now laboring on the larger history, which will include biographical sketches of UU women hymn writers (and men) since so few are known even by ministers. It is a gargantuan task, but as the son of a fierce and ardent feminist who told me that I'd better learn to iron, mend clothing, darn socks, etc. because the new women would be too busy remaking the world to continue to serve lazy men as they had in the past, it seems a wonderfully fitting one to undertake.

David A. Johnson served churches in Bloomington, Indiana; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; Tucson, Arizona; and Brookline, Massachusetts, before entering the Interim Ministry. He is also an adjunct faculty member at Andover Newton Theological School, where he taught Unitarian Universalist church history for a decade and advised the UU community, and now teaches UU Hymnody. He received his BA from Antioch College in Sociology, his MA in Philosophy from the University of Illinois, and his ministerial degree from Meadville/Lombard Theological School at the University of Chicago. He has written several books of Universalist history, the latest being Chicago Universalism, and several other historical books: a history of religion in Tucson, a history of First Parish in Brookline, a biography of Dr. John Pierce, and Bibliography of Unitarian Universalist Women's Hymnody. He has also written three chalice lighting books, including The Invisible Light, published in 2003. He was a founding member of the Liberal Religious Scholars Collegium of which he is now the History Chair and for which he has written several papers mostly on church history. He is a member of the Colonial Society, the Anthaneum, the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Unitarian Universalist Women's Heritage Society, the Brookline Historical Society (the last three of which he has been an officer). Dave Johnson was married 22 years ago to his second wife, Julie Coulter. They live in North Providence, Rhode Island and have six children, and seven grandchildren, whom they visit as often as the kids will let them.
1. Still, Still With Thee

Harriet Beecher Stowe, 1855
Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

1. Still, still with thee, when purple morning breaketh,
2. Alone with thee, amid the mystic shadows,
3. Still, still with thee; as to each new-born morning

When the bird waketh and the shadows flee,
The solemn hush of nature newly born;
A fresh and solemn splendor still is given.

Fairer than morning, lovelier than the daylight,
 Alone with thee in breathless adoration,
So doth this blessed consciousness, a waking.

Dawns the sweet consciousness, I am with thee,
In the calm dew and freshness of the morn.
Breathe, each day, nearness unto thee and heaven.

2. All Beautiful the March of Days

Frances Whitmarsh Wise, 1907
"Kingsfield" arr. R. Vaughan-Williams, 1909

1. All beautiful the march of days, as seasons come and go,
2. O'er white expanse sparkling pure the radiant morns unfold,
3. Thou from whose unfathomed law the year in beauty flows,

The hand that shaped the rose hath wrought the crystal of the snow;
The solemn splendor of the night burn brighter than the cold;
Thyself the vision passing by in crystal and in rose.

Hath sent the hoary frost of Heavn, the flowing waters sealed,
Life mounts in every throb-ting vein, love day unto day doth utter speech, And night to night proclaims,
And laid a silent love-li-ness on hill and wood and field,
And clearer sounds the angel hymn, "Good will to men on earth."
In ever chang-ing words of light, The won-der of thy name.
3. O God, Hear the Prayer We Offer

Love Maris Wilcomb Willis, 1859
Christian Friedrich Wit, ca. 1715, adapted

1. O God, hear the prayer we offer: Not for ease that prayer shall be;
   2. Not for e- ver in green pastures Do we ask our way to be;
   3. Be our strength in hours of weak- ness; In our wan- d’rings, be our guide;

But for strength, that we may e- ver Live our lives con- ra- geous- ly.
But the steep and rug- ged path- way, May we tread re- joic- ing- ly.
Through en- deav- or, fail- ure, dan- ger, Be thou e- ver at our side!

4. Cast Thy Bread Upon the Waters

Phoebe A. Hanford, 1852
Thomas Whittemore, 1841

1. Cast thy bread up- on the wa- ters, Think- ing not tis thrown a- way,
   2. As the seed on deep sides car- ried To some dis- tant shore a- lone,
   3. Cast thy bread up- on the wa- ters, Why wilt thou still doubt- ing stand?

God has said that thou shalt gath- er It a- gain some fu- ture day.
So to hu- man souls in need What thou send- est may be borne.
Bount- eous shall God send the har- vest, If thou sowest with lib- eral hand.
5. Bid the Din of Battle Cease

Julia Ward Howe (1819-1910)

Louis M. Gottschalk (1829-1896)

1. Bid the din of battle cease!
2. Let war's furious be subdued,
3. Generous, radiant are the gifts we saw
4. For the glory that we saw

Folded be the wings of fire!
All discern their common birth,
Heaven has showered everywhere;
In the battle flag unfurled,

Let your courage conquer peace,
God hath made of kinred blood,
Hope that quickens, prayer that lifts,
Let us heed God's law,

Every green heart's desire,
All the people of the earth,
Beauty's grace and love's care,
Fellowship for all the world.

6. Song for Equal Suffrage

Charlotte Perkins Gilman, ca. 1911

William Steffe, ca. 1850

1. Day of hope and day of glory! After slavery and woe,
2. Not for self, but larger service, has our cry for freedom grown;
3. We will help to make a pruning hook of every outgrown sword,
4. Comes the dawn of woman's freedom, and the light shall grow and grow

There is crime, disease and warfare in a world of men alone.
We will help to knit the nations in continued accord.

Until every man and woman equal liberty shall know.
In the name of love we're rising now to serve and save our own.
As in humanity made perfect is the glory of the Lord.
As freedom marches on! Glory, glory hallelujah, glory, glory, hallelujah!

Peace comes marching on! Glory, glory hallelujah, glory, glory, hallelujah.
Love comes marching on! Glory, glory hallelujah, glory, glory, hallelujah.
7. Heir of All the Ages

Julia Caroline Ripley Dorr, 1879 or earlier
Johann Rudolph Ahle, 1684, adapted

1. Heir of all the ages, I—Heir of all that they have wrought,
   Strive still, advance high, All their wealth of precious thought!
2. Every golden deed of theirs Sheds its lustre on my way,
   All their labors, all their prayers Sanctify this present day.
3. Heir of all that they have earned By their passion and their tears;
   Heir of all the ages, I—Mine a heritage so rare.
4. Aspirations pure and high, Strength to do and to endure;
   Not light of star, not truth of God Through Thee, Some knowledge of a better way, And

1. On bent, mis-shap-en lines of faith We back-ward try to trace The love and glory that we never Could look on face to face. But none are there so poor and blind But catch some glimpse of
2. Each falls through dim and wan-d’ring sight, The vision whole to

earth-born clouds of doubt, Can straight-way pierce the hearts of all and drive the darkness out. A prophecy and sign.

8. Refracted Lights

Celia Parker Woolsey, 1848-1918
Arr. from Ludwig Spohr (1784-1859)
9. The Hope of the World is Loving

Abbie Gurnett

1. How tattered our world, how saddened with sin;
2. And all the sad faces of earth shall be glad—The
3. Oh, joy then to live for the spirit's release—

But never too dark for the hope of the world is loving; The
deserts shall bloom, and with And see even here the fair
dawn begin—laugh—ter be clad—The hope of the world is loving!

City of Peace

Four-tailed Love, Our Source is in thee; Do-ing thy will, the spirit is free.

Beautiful day, when all of us see, The hope of the world is loving!

10. As Pilgrims Sailing

Florence Harsin, 1907, adapted

1. As pilgrims sailing through the night,
2. The living seed they planted here
3. O Thou, who led the founders on

In search of shores more wide and free,
His shown the season's rich reward,
In paths untrod and troubled fraught,

A dauntless few they went apart
With such a crowd of wisdom,
Help us with fervor to go large

To gain a grander liberty,
Should not their hope with us burn?
The larger liberty they sought.
11. Deep the Love that Calls Us On

Deep the river and deep the sea
Deep the wanderings of my mind
Deep the wounds between you and me
Deep the love that calls us on
Deep the roots connecting you and me
Deep the human need to rise and be free
Deep the memory reminding us of peace
Deep the love that calls us on

5. *Songs of Loyalty and Fraternity*, undated booklet.
10. Adapted from Hymn #361, *Hymns of the Spirit*.
GLORIOUS WOMAN

Rev. Dorothy Wilson Kimble
Sermon Award for 1992

"Wither thou goest, I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge, your people shall be your people and your God, my God..." (Ruth 1: 16)  

It is women's history month. It is both a time of sadness and celebration. Sadness that there has to be a women's history month. Celebration that we be. 

From primal existence, from formless, moving mass emerges male and female. Myths abound. Adam of dust. Eve his rib. First one and then the other. The serpent was crafty. Eve was tricked. Adam was confused. Both fell from grace. (Gen. 3: 1-19) 

The child hears the story at the elder's knee. Eve is bad. The little girl identifies. She, too, has stolen fruit. Questions abound and power struggles abound over who was created to dominate whom. 

"Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called woman, for out of man this one was taken.'" (Gen. 2: 23) 

We are raised with this story. Those who walked before us, male and female, believed this and taught the little children—both male and female, Jew and Gentile. The seeds were sown in the child's head. 

One might say that you can't talk about woman without talking about man. A Taoist view: yin and yang, darkness and light. 

The division is made real. "I will put enmity between you and the woman," (Gen. 3: 15) saith the lord. Original sin. Dust to dust, ashes to ashes. 

Over time, we forget that we are made of divine brilliance, radiant light, remarkable energy, oneness, composed by the Immortal Self. 

We have grown up with little affirmation along these lines—female and male alike. Our lights are not illuminating the world, but hidden under baskets of fear. Shamed. No longer able to accurately reply when asked: "Who art thou?" 

"I am a season connected with the seasons produced from the womb of space...as the brilliance of the year, as the soul of every being." When did you last think of yourself as the "season...the brilliance of the year...the soul of every being?"

Original sin. The fall. Enmity between the sexes. What a way to start. My sympathy lies with all of us. "All around us one vast hubbub, candles blazing, torches hurled; for tonight the world's in travail bringing forth the Eternal world."

I was raised by women to trust men. I was raised by both men and women to fear men. I was raised to believe that women had no power, no needs, no self. And the people around me affirmed that daily, and the Sunday school I attended told me so. The church put its final stamp upon my bowed child's head. 

Saint Paul said women must be silent. And women have historically been punished for talking too much or saying it the wrong way. Some have grown up invisible. I truly believe that no white male sitting here this morning could possibly understand what that has done to his sister. Some sisters sitting here this morning haven't even started to explore the possibilities themselves. And that is not an indictment of who we are. That is simply a fact. 

How do you know what you don't know when you don't even know that you don't know it? But we are coming to awareness, female and male, and for that, we celebrate. But it is admittedly a painful, confusing process for all. 

There is heat and anger and rage in women—and despair, anguish, and sorrow in their stories. As I thought about women's lives in writing this sermon, I could tolerate the feelings that arose in me. What I couldn't tolerate was the truth. The truth of womanhood can sometimes be unbearable. We are told that men do not understand women and women do not understand men, and at times, it is true. But I am not convinced that women understand women any better—or that men understand men, for that matter...But God knows, in our humanness, we try. We need to understand one another, for we need one another. I need my sisters. I need my brothers. 

I know what it is to be a woman. To be silenced, to be invisible, to be threatened, to be labeled. I have most recently ironically been labeled a "women's liber._er." (I hadn't heard that expression in years!) I have been accused as a "feminist," more often by women than men. These are labels I prefer not to give myself. I don't like labels. 

I find people are offended at times by my strength and interestingly sometimes fear my gentleness. People want me neither strong nor vulnerable. But I am woman, and I am both strong and gentle. 

This sermon is not about myth or fairy tale, not about crones or goddesses. It is simply about being a woman. Woman with strengths and limitations, with
needs and wants, with intelligence and feelings. Deep, intense feelings. Feelings may be shut off at an early age, but still there somewhere deep inside.

We are asked: "What do you women want?"

I don’t always know what I want. There are times I barely know what I need. As women, we are raised to give; to think of others first; to set aside whatever it is we thought we wanted or needed. In so doing, we have perhaps sold our souls. It is not healthy to be so self-effacing. Over time, we look too often outward for answers and affirmation. We do not trust ourselves, our own visions and voices, our ideas and feelings. We minimize our being. After a time, no one else has to do it for us; it is we who stamp the seal “second class” on our own foreheads. At least some of us. Perhaps many of us.

And so we come to this holy temple today in need. In need of affirmation. In need of validation. In need of recognition. In need of acceptance, of both strength and vulnerabilities, both merits and failings. We are first class citizens wrapped in second hand clothes, perhaps of our own making, if we are not careful.

We come in need of love. We come bearing gifts of love and baring our souls. We come enraged at life, at others and at ourselves. We come wanting to be dipped in the warmth of milk and honey. We are collectively “a quivering mass of sensitivity.”

And we come today to this holy temple to affirm that we are what we are. And we come to acknowledge that we are the holy temple, in sacred relationship with our God, Self of our Self, with each other in the holy bond of sisterhood; with the men here and elsewhere. We are in sacred union. We are sacred vessels. Sacred because we are. We exist. We are of that Holy Mysterious Other.

Stripped of our medals, our awards, our incomes, our status symbols, our glamour, our make-up, stripped of our stripes, we are even more beautiful, for the pretense is gone and we are simply we, in all our glory. No labels. Vice president of nothing. No titles. No roles. Identified only and exquisitely by our Self. Not the doctor or the doctor’s wife, not mother of the lawyer. Not anybody’s baby. Not angel. Not doll. Not minister. Not devil. Self. Beautiful self. Living and learning and growing in this world.

Part of the way we get into trouble is to be too self-conscious (lower-case “s”), caught in the illusion, forgetting that we are part and parcel of that higher Self (capital “S”). That little self forgets to laugh. The anxiety rides high. Am I good enough? So vulnerable. Often victimized, and not always by others. It is we who bow down to the myths of the moment and become the self-fulfilling prophecy of second-class manship. Unholy in our own sight. So much of who we are is determined by the choices we shape. We reach crucial forks in the road. The journey confronts us with dangers and obstacles that go far afield of the immediate. It is not always what we are faced with that endangers us, it is what we do with what faces us that can be deadly. Do we abdicate? Back down? Run away? Do we believe the other who wishes us to think poorly of ourselves or highly of them? Do we give ourselves away? It is true that society does not help us to overcome. Society at large is not affirming of women. Quite the contrary. So we are called to do it for ourselves, and for each other.

We have in this church the ladies’ alliance, a bonded group of women who meet for fellowship and enlightenment. We have the needle crafters, who glean far more than sewing tips from one another, and now we have the women’s spirituality group. The women involved in these groups are so different from one another, of all ages, different backgrounds and experiences, some outspoken, some quite timid. I attended last month’s spirituality meeting and loved being there. I loved listening to the women and watching them and being with them. I loved just being a part of that little group. I often cast about trying to find my niche. Here, I found real sharing, a safe place where talking is encouraged and silence is respected, where hesitation is not trampled, but instead, surrounded by nurturance. Ministers as a whole are not well nourished. We rarely get to the well. Sometimes we don’t even know where the well is. The women in that group nourished me. They not only invited me down from the pedestal, they assisted me down and divested me of my robes and trappings. And I am one with them. Just me. Just woman.

What do women want? The question gets hurled at us.

We want equality. We want understanding. We want recognition. We want acceptance. We want to be good enough—just the way we are—in the eyes of others. And that does not mean we want to ignore our growing edge or deny our need to change and learn. But most of all, I think we want to be good enough in our own sight. We are raised to think that we are not good enough. The sinfulness lies only in our believing it.

It is our duty, our responsibility, to overcome our own amnesia. To do this, we must listen carefully to the still, small voice within. We must draw deep from the center of our own being. Our goodness, our Godliness. We must undo the knots, the ties that bind us to poor self-esteem. We must weave stronger cords between you and me. Your strengthened strand steadying my frayed one, my thread of hope wound gently against yours of faith, and hers of trust and compassion, and his of love. Sacred unions. Sisters and sisters and brothers. One.
Celebrating the joys and sorrows, the silliness and wonder, the majesty and magnitude, the breadth and depth of womanhood.

Not denial. Not amnesia. Reality. Harsh, soft, thunderous subtle reality. Faced and explored. Until the rhythm of humanity in its fullness and harmony pulsates, radiates, through us every day of our lives and we—male and female—are afraid no more. For the truth is that we often walk in fear.

It is Mary Daly who speaks of answering the call of the wild. She writes:

Emspiritng is hearing and following the call of the wild, which is in the Self. The call to wild-ize our Selves, to free and unfreeze our Selves is a wild and fantastic calling to transfer our energy to our Selves and to Sister Selves...Wild means “living in a state of nature: inhabiting natural haunts: not tamed or domesticated.” It means “growing...not cultivated...not subjected to restraint or regulation...exceeding conventional bounds...deviating from the expected course...great in intensity.”

Intensity, I bow down before the word “intense.” I have been brought to my knees in the past by the accusation that I am intense. How could I deny it? But now I am learning to love and respect my own intensity, to nurture it and protect it from those who wish to diminish it. I am coming to see it as a sign of great care and one of being fully alive instead of a curse which plagues me.

Mary Daly calls us to move from the state of tameness. We who have been spooked and possessed in the state of feminitude...cultivated until we are mild and insipid...deprived of spirit and courage.

Oh, it is so easy today in America for a woman to be deprived of spirit and courage. We are seduced into disloyalty to our self, fragmented. Persuaded of our own inadequacies and deprived of our own idiosyncrasies. God, I love our idiosyncrasies! I do not want us to be homogenized!!

Daly goes on to say that we are impregnated with the holy spirit of alienation, the dis-couraging, dis-spiritualizing process that expels self. "Such perpetual vacation, such self-laboromization, which of course requires expenditure of energy, is the essential vocation of vacuous femininity."

"In the beginning is the awakening awareness, which is spindled, spent, mutilated by false words. Our call of the wild is a call to dispossess our Selves of the shrouds, the winding sheers of words...to dispossess our Selves of pseudo-bonding (false bonding where women hide from themselves the courage to stand, to move alone, to heal)." Ironically, we ultimately imprison ourselves.

Could it be that we have it in us to recognize the spark of divinity in womanhood? And if we recognize it, can we accept it? Can we accept our own beauty and light? And with it, are we willing to spark “the fires of female friendship?”

Provocative questions. We need to spin threads of connectedness. We need each in her own way—each other. For it is true, “we know no rule of procedure, we are voyagers, discoverers of the not-known, the unrecorded; we have no map; possibly we will reach haven, heaven.”

Every woman is different. Every woman is the same. No two are alike. Let us celebrate glorious woman.

Let us pray:

Giver of life, we stumble along the path unable to see our way clearly. We grab and grasp at false gods because we have forgotten who we are.

May we return to life by more fully recalling the divinity within, remembering our holy selves, and by reaching out from that holiness to one another.

And if at first we do not understand, as it seems we do not, may we at least move forth in our bewilderment with compassion, trusting that such knowledge will come if we but choose first to walk in faith and love.

May our lives—be we woman or man—reflect the celebration and glory of all life.

Light of life, be with us as we move from ignorance, as we seek wholeness. Amen

REFLECTIONS, 2004
Rev. Dorothy Wilson Kimble
Born: May 27, 1942
Ordained: May 3, 1981

What led to my writing this sermon? To try and put it into context, I have to briefly tell you what it was like to be a woman in the 1960s and 1970s. This was a time when most married women were expected to keep the home fires burning even when the kids were at school, the husband at work—and she bore it tears. I had become a registered nurse prior to marriage, and completed my college degree by attending evening classes one course a semester for seven years. My children were in school and money was tight. In 1976, I accepted a full time position as District Nurse for the town of Northborough, Massachusetts, and in doing so was known around the neighborhood as Helen Reddy of “I Am Woman” fame. On one hand, I took it as a compliment, on the other, I wore the name as a badge of courage, knowing some said it disparagingly.

It was also the time of the ERA’s (Equal Rights Amendment) largest march on Washington DC. The women who came to march stood together in their all-white clothing. I just happened to be there, standing on the steps of the capitol in my pink and white striped blouse and white skirt, a daughter on each hand,
watching these women with amazement, and not just a little concern. I was glad they were there, but didn’t agree with all that they professed. I recall thinking, “Isn’t this just who I am? Wanting so much for women, yet not wanting to throw away everything traditional.” The official marchers were the “women’s libbers” and I loved them for their willingness to forge on, even as I waged along their vibrant edges. I was not in the least militant, but desperately wanted change.

Those years were very confusing ones for me and for our nation, as the role of woman was being redefined. But, I was clear on one point. I knew for sure that what I wanted most for every woman was choice. Choice in all quarters of her life. That meant equality and freedom.

In the fall of 1978, I entered Andover Newton Theological School. It was a time when the percentage of women on campus was quite low, but growing. I felt welcomed and fairly comfortable there among my peers. I do recall, though, arriving on the very first night, and having a professor warmly welcome my husband to “the hill” only to be told that I was the incoming student. His response was a rather flattened, “Oh.” I think I just rolled my eyes.

I completed seminary, received the call to my first church, and was ordained all in May of 1981. My family was still quite intact, but I was so exhausted, I literally slept for a week after all the celebration. As it turned out, I was the first woman to be ordained at First Parish in Northborough. Some people referred to me as the ministerette. That wasn’t nearly as painful, though, as having a brother UU minister constantly refer to me in public as “Little Bo Peep.” Then there was the Greek Orthodox priest who told reporters that he would never sit on a dais with me. I admit I didn’t take kindly to any of this.

While I was delighted at my call to the Unitarian Church of Marlboro and Hudson, I was also aware that the congregation had had to take a straw vote to determine whether or not they would even consider calling a woman. I went there being told that some were strongly opposed. It didn’t show up in the ultimate vote, though, so off I went. Interestingly, it was not the men who voiced the greatest concern. Some women expressed their displeasure to my face; one or two others did quite a bit of damage behind my back. It was a happy day when one of the matriarchs came to me saying, “I was one of the people who did not want a woman minister, but now, I’m so glad that you are here.” So was I. We remained good friends until her death.

The ensuing years were not easy, though. The challenges were many. All around me, both men and women were confused over the changing landscape as women in far greater numbers moved out of constricted traditional roles into the profession.

I gave my first sermon on women at Gardiner, Massachusetts, in 1980. I was a student there. The topic by now for me was second nature. As far as I was concerned it was simply time for women to be wherever she wanted to be. I presented this with no harm, no malice, no heat intended. It was just sort of a reinforcement of what I assumed was a growing movement. I don’t recall any of the particulars, but I do remember that one of my greatest supporters tried to calm his wife by saying, “Even a rose has thorns.” Looking back, I still wonder what in the world I said that struck such a nerve. What I was increasingly aware of, though, was the fact that women did not seem to be hearing women very well.

In 1985, I left Hudson for the Winthrop Street Church in Augusta, Maine. Before I even got there, I was told by a UU man minister that I was to be the first full-time permanently settled UU woman minister in the state of Maine. I was delighted and surprised, but should have taken more careful note. He was far too aware of it, and what I took as a simple welcoming statement held a certain warning. The full significance of his comments did not hit home until I attended my first ministers’ retreat there. I found the men wanting and needing to talk about the increasing arrival of female colleagues. I will not share the details of that meeting other than to say that anxiety on their part was running very high.

In the church, life was also difficult at times. A marriage broke up. The woman had returned to college, and the man blamed me for setting a poor example. I’m not sure whether this occurred before or after I gave my sermon entitled “The Silent Woman,” my second one on the topic. I had visited a restaurant in Waterville by that name. There was a huge sign outside depicting a headless woman, and when you walked in, statues of women—all beheaded—confronted you. Ever looking for fodder, I lifted the restaurant name and wrote what was probably the precursor to “Glorious Woman.” I don’t recall how it was received, but I do know that the thought of how women are often silenced in America rode with me day in and day out.

At some stage, I was asked to speak on women in ministry at a colleague’s installation in Caribou, Maine. The timing seemed a little odd, but I welcomed the opportunity. The women of Caribou cheered, and the men, while puzzled, were gracious. Well, at least, the men of Caribou. One man visiting “from away” referred to me, in a not too kindly tone, as “a self-appointed feminist.” I laughed. Nothing had changed much from my Helen Reddy days. The truth was, I was still very much a homebody with family at the center of my ministry, just a woman happy to share her thoughts on life as I saw it, while trying to improve the general lot.
It would hardly make sense to say that what prompted my writing this sermon was the fact that it was Women's History Month, but it was that fact that pulled it squarely around again. The designated month was the timely reminder, but the underlying impetus was the never-ending struggle. Personally, the constant desire to keep things balanced between home and work, trying to ward off the need to be super everything, and the ever-present desire to continue to work for change and choice for every woman was at the crux of it.

I was living in Groton, Massachusetts, at the time I wrote “Glorious Woman.” While I was not the first woman to be in their pulpit, I was the first permanently settled one at First Parish Church. In preparation for this sermon, I read Witches, by Erica Jong. I pulled out that old standby Gym/Ecology, by Mary Daly. I skimmed through books by Gloria Steinem and Marilyn French’s The Women’s Room. The first time I read that was in the 1970s. I wept so much I’d have to stop and go for a walk. I had no idea why. I pulled readings from Eve and After by Carlisle and Alice Walker’s The Color Purple. When first introduced to the Walker book, I fled from it in pain and revulsion. Horrified. Terrified. And I did not know why. It was only a story.

At the time I wrote the sermon, I had no intention of entering any contest. I simply threw my hat in the ring, when a reminder crossed my desk, saying, “Don’t forget the deadline for entries.” I had just delivered this sermon and said, “What the heck.” I was totally bowled over when I received word from MSUU that I had won.

That June, my husband Stan and I set out for General Assembly in Calgary, Alberta, Canada. We had a wonderful train trip across the bottom of Canada from Montreal to Edmonton and then drove by car to Calgary. The trip was primarily funded by Elsa Hayes, a parishioner who so generously paid for my ticket. She was a grand woman and great supporter. All these years later, Stan and I still talk about the wonder of that trip. Tearing along through the days and nights lugging my robe, assorted things I wanted at the MSUU service, and squashing a perfectly good pewter chalice somewhere along the way. I was happy, excited, deeply honored—and terrified. To tell you it was one of the highlights of my entire life is no exaggeration. But let me tell you, the day of the presentation, I had butterflies the size of New England. To be so honored, to have the great honor of delivering my sermon at General Assembly, to be speaking on behalf of women, to be so affirmed by my colleagues was an enormously grand and humbling experience.

People were extremely kind to me that day, and I will never forget it. The words of one woman echoed in my head for a long time. She said, “I think my great, great grandmother would be very proud of you.” Her beloved relative was Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

It was women who got me there. It was women who surrounded, supported and encouraged me there—and in many instances along the way. But, it was also a very special man who had walked with me every step of the way, catching me when I would fall, putting up with me when I was obnoxious and confused, loving me always.

I delivered the sermon a few times after that day, usually in response to something that made me realize full well that the struggle was still on. This went on into the twenty-first century. I specifically recall giving it in a church where I was serving as interim minister when it was brought to my attention that although all the interim ministers were women, the congregation only permanently settled men. All you had to do was look around. It was only masculine names that appeared on the hallowed walls, the women so soon forgotten.

Today I live in West Hartford, Connecticut, with my husband of forty years, surrounded by our children and grandchildren. I am employed part time in the library at the Hartford Seminary. I have recently completed interim ministries in Massachusetts, but now devote most of my time to family needs, as together we raise two youngsters struggling with neurological disabilities. In my spare time, I enjoy writing poetry and will have my first poem published this year.

Reading through this sermon after twelve years, the message still seems painfully pertinent. While choices for women have increased, there is still much room for improvement. So, here’s to glorious women everywhere. May we continue to work together for choice, equality and freedom in our nation and around the world.

1. The Biblical readings found throughout the sermon are taken primarily from The New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha (1989).
3. Zechner, 190.
5. Ibid. 345.
6. Ibid. 345.
I had my fortieth birthday last Sunday. If any of you have had that experience (and I suspect that some of you have), you may remember that even though you know it’s just another day on the calendar and all that sort of thing, it still leads to some taking stock, some self-reflection.

I didn’t have the traumatic experience with my fortieth birthday that many of my friends seem to have had. I’ve just graduated from seminary and achieved professional status in the ministry I’ve wanted to be part of for ten years, so this time in my life is one of feelings of achievement and accomplishment, and excitement about what’s going to happen next, as I search for right employment in my chosen field.

I’m also in a temporary state of grace—the six-month grace period before I have to start paying back my student loan.

But nonetheless, this has been a time of looking back and taking stock, of looking for patterns of meaning in my life.

One of the things I’ve been doing is watching my family’s old home movies, which my brother transferred to videotape last year. The scenes of my mother and me fascinated me. There is scene after scene of little seven- or eight- or nine-year-old me and my mum, who is a very hearty Englishwoman, plunging together into huge crashing waves at the New Jersey shore, or wading through huge snowdrifts in our Connecticut winters, or diving off the raft at our local pond.

Our common mission in life, if these films are to be believed, seemed to be to find some piece of landscape, the more forbidding the better, and fling ourselves fearlessly into it. It was sort of a game. At the beach, the really, really great part of the game was if the weather was so bad that there was no one else in the water. When the sky was gray and the waves towering and choppy, and everyone else
had gone home or were huddling under blankets, that was the really great time to go swimming, especially if Daddy could capture our raw courage on film.

The other important part of the game was then to emerge back onto the beach with a self-conscious little grin on our faces for the sake of Daddy, who held the camera. I can remember in my body the feeling of emerging from those swims, wave-tossed and exhausted, onto the beach, finding our family's blanket and wrapping up in a warm towel and getting a delicious tomato sandwich or one of my mother's shortbread cookies out of the picnic basket, feeling loved and brave and exhilarated and safe.

I found that I had to keep fighting back tears as I watched these films. Not because my parents are gone. They still live in Connecticut and are hale and hearty. And not just because my brother and sister and I were all so incredibly cute when we were little and have grown up to be, well, grownups. The tears were for the poignancy of seeing that loving, adventurous relationship between my mother and me, and feeling that it is forever gone, because an icy wall slammed down between us when I was twenty-two. That was when she found out that I was a lesbian. She was terribly upset and angry and did not communicate with me for several months. Gradually, over time, some of that ice melted, and we have learned to live with the wall that is between us, though we still can't talk about it. But I grieve for the warm, supportive relationship that we once had, and wish with all my heart that we could revive it.

But that was a long time ago. After all these years since I came out, my gayness has changed from being a strange unwanted part of myself to just who I am, something I don't consciously think about in the usual course of things, any more than any one of us might consciously think about the fact that we are right- or left-handed. It's just not much of an issue for me. But it is, of course, a social issue, and sometimes that intrudes very forcibly on my privacy and reminds me that there are people who are not so comfortable with who I am.

I've never done this before: delivered a sermon explicitly talking about the fact that I'm a lesbian. It is scary and uncomfortable for me. I have fears that I will be rejected or disliked, and I'm uncomfortable about telling some very personal and emotion-laden stories.

If I had my druthers about what to talk to you about this morning, it would probably be about my hero, Joseph Priestley, or some of my other passions: process theology, or science and religion. But something has really chipped me over the head recently, something that I can't ignore, something that has turned me into an activist: the targeting of gay people by the religious right. The urgency of this issue is what leads me to break through my customary privacy and take the risk of sharing some of these personal stories with you.

We liberals make a big mistake when we underestimate the religious right. We tend to think of the religious right as stupid. They are not stupid. Or we think of them as inhuman. They are not. Or we laugh at them. Well, I don't think they're funny. They are human beings with human fears and human hopes. They have chosen a different path from ours, one that emphasizes fears over hopes, but I believe that by and large they are totally sincere in their efforts to achieve human fulfillment.

In his book *The Glory and the Power: The Fundamentalist Challenge to the Modern World*, theologian Martin Marty of the University of Chicago writes:

> Fundamentalists seek power...because they sincerely believe that society would be better off were it run, or at least heavily influenced, by people of explicit religious convictions who are willing to act morally and politically on those convictions. Freedom should not mean license to do anything one chooses in the name of self-fulfillment, fundamentalists argue...Authentic self-fulfillment, as fundamentalists define it, depends upon the existence of conditions in society by which it is possible to pursue the divine will...Only in obeying God's commandments is one truly free to find happiness.

But this particular path tends, as we know, to scapegoat people who seem to challenge the rigid authoritarianism of the fundamentalists' world-view, and to prey on people's insecurities and fears. And one result that we can observe happening right under our noses is the right's declared war against gay people. Here is a brief description of this effort, from an article in *The Progressive*, called "Cruel Crusade: The Holy War Against Lesbians and Gays."

> While accusing lesbians and gays of dismantling the foundations of western civilization, the religious Right itself has quietly and strategically mounted an all-out attack of hatred and bigotry against lesbians and gays. The religious Right has made opposition to homosexuality the centerpiece of its national agenda, and it is taking its crusade to states and communities around the country.

> The passage of Colorado's Amendment 2, the country's first statewide ban on gay-rights laws, marked the culmination of a calculated campaign of defamation. But Colorado may be just the beginning.

> The religious Right scored many significant political gains last year. Their successful referenda have given fundamentalist leaders encouragement to draft further anti-gay initiatives and branch out into other fertile territory.
The Far Right is sponsoring anti-gay legislation in at least twelve other states—California, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Ohio, and Washington are currently targets—and its leaders plan to move the effort into thirty-five states over the course of the next two years.

Gay bashing has increased 300 percent in Oregon since the anti-gay measure was proposed there, including a firebombing and two deaths. In Colorado, the weeks after the election saw an 800 percent rise in hate crimes over the previous November. Activists charge that the explosive surge in anti-gay bias incidents is directly attributable to the religious Right’s hate propaganda.  

I am enough of a student of history to hear distinct echoes of the Third Reich in all this. I feel very afraid and very angry. I had a transformational experience at our church in Akron a few weeks ago, attending Meg Riley’s workshop about the religious Right. I was transformed into an activist. We cannot let what happened in Colorado, and almost happened in Oregon, happen here or anywhere else.

I have been wondering what shape my activism will take: what can I do? One thing I can do is to help encourage Unitarian Universalist churches to continue to become safer and more welcoming places for gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. We all, gay and straight, and especially those of us who are involved in actively confronting the Right, need supportive, spiritual homes—safe beaches—where we can rest and heal before we venture out into the storm again.

I’d like to tell you what the Unitarian Universalist church has meant to me in my coming-out process.

My coming-out process, my process of becoming who I truly am, has had three main phases. The first was in college when I became aware of the feelings that I had for women, and first—terribly painfully—came to accept myself as a lesbian.

The second phase was when I was thirty-one. I came out as a spiritual person, joined the Unity church, and came to accept my religious self. This also was a painful process for me. I had been the radical lesbian in my twenties who marched in the Gay Pride March in New York every summer and demonstrated in front of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, chanting “2-4-6-8! Separate church and state!” Now I was going to an actual church every Sunday, my God, wearing dresses even, singing hymns. It was pretty weird. But the spirituality of that church was feeding a part of myself that was starved for meaning, peace, and a deep feeling of connection with the universe.

A lot of my lesbian friends thought I was nuts, especially when I said I wanted to go into the ministry. There were a lot of gay people in Unity, but no one ever talked about homosexuality or homophobia. No one ever named it, any more than anyone ever named any other social issues, such as racism. I didn’t even think at the time about how fragmented I felt. I had my religious life where I was loved and accepted as long as I didn’t talk about my lesbian identity. And I had my life in the women’s community, where no one wanted to hear about my religious life. That was the second phase of my coming out.

The third phase was when at thirty-five. I discovered Unitarian Universalism and came out as a spiritual person who was also a lesbian. Finally, all the pieces of myself fit together. I had come at last to a safe beach, where I could relax and be myself totally.

The reason that this happened, the missing ingredient that I found at last in Unitarian Universalism, was the fact that here I could name myself: I am a lesbian; I am a minister; my partner’s name is Mary. The power of that is incalculable. I was so starved for that naming, but it was so subtle. So subtle that I didn’t even realize it was missing, like a vitamin C deficiency that you’re not aware of until you see some fresh oranges and find yourself ravenously devouring three in a row.

We have been hurt so many times by anti-gay attitudes that we have learned silence. Silence is gay people’s “default setting.” Silence means safety. So if a church is not pro-active about naming its welcoming of gay people and its recognition of homophobia as a destructive, dehumanizing force, gays are left out of the theological life of the church.

So when people in our churches say, “It’s fine for gay people to be here, but why do they have to talk about it all the time?” it is because we cannot talk about this aspect of ourselves almost anywhere else. In the gay ghettos, at clubs or friends’ homes, we can hold hands with our partner, dance together, be recognized as a couple. But a steady diet of being only with gay people starves us. We need spiritual life, and we need a community that has a variety of people: gay, straight, white, black, young, old, atheist and theist.

A Unitarian Universalist activist from North Carolina, Bonnie Crouse, conducted a survey of dozens of gay and lesbian Unitarian Universalists to find out what they need and want from UU congregations. Listen to their answers: community, spiritual growth, acceptance, challenge, opportunity to serve, sermons, intellectual stimulus, pot lucks, coffee, singing in the choir, hearing the choir, ritual, services of union, a minister, and an opportunity to learn. I think you will agree that this list corresponds pretty closely to what many non-gay people want from their UU churches.
There is only one weapon that we can use in response to the religious right and remain true to our Principles and Purposes as Unitarian Universalists. Any other weapon will mean that we will become like them. The only weapon we can permit ourselves is love.

By this I mean only partly the "love your enemies" message of Jesus. I mainly mean that we must turn to one another within our congregations and love each other. Now we have been doing this for years, very nicely. We have been great exemplars of liberal love. By liberal love I mean the idea that all people are basically the same underneath the superficial trappings of race, sex, affectional preference, religious belief, etc.

But liberal love is not enough. Something more is necessary to help gay and straight people learn to trust each other, as it is with our efforts to become more inclusive of other races and cultures. What is required is radical love.

Radical love accepts and acknowledges and celebrates the differences between people. Radical love even accepts and acknowledges the discomfort that comes from learning how to relate to people who are different. Radical love hangs in there through the tough times, the awkward times. Radical love is committed to the other person's innate worth and dignity.

Let me illustrate the difference as far as it might impact a gay person who is checking out a Unitarian Universalist church to see if it is a welcoming place.

In a liberal love-based paradigm, the church believes that they are welcoming to everyone and so they don't need to single out any particular group. Gay visitors may come to the church and like it, but because they never hear or see the word "gay" anywhere, they assume that they must keep their identity secret if they are to belong to the church. A more likely scenario is that they will be on the margin for a while and then drop away.

In a church where radical love is the paradigm, gay visitors will feel explicitly welcomed by seeing pamphlets, bulletin boards, and the like that welcome gay people. Chances are, they will hear this stated by the minister and also by members of the congregation and in the newsletter. It is much more likely that they will feel comfortable, welcomed, and interested in returning and becoming part of the community.

Gay and lesbian people are not the easiest people to be welcoming to. We are, for one thing, very wary because we have been hurt by homophobia. I already told you about the rift between my mother and me. I also lost a job, when I lived in Virginia, because the management found out I was a lesbian. I had no legal recourse, because there were no laws protecting gay people in that state. I had friends on Long Island who were literally run out of their neighborhood, forced to sell their house and move, because of harassment by neighbors. I know two women, in two separate cases, who lost their children in custody battles because their ex-husbands were able to use the women's lesbianism in court to deprive them of their parental rights. I am afraid to even hug my partner in our living room unless our blinds are tightly closed, because we are afraid of harassment. Even when we are in a gay-positive environment such as San Francisco, we hesitate to hold hands in public because we have heard of too many gay bashing, not to mention the programming that is always in the back of our minds, telling us to hide, hide, hide.

So most gay people are very, very wary, even in the most liberal environments. I have a friend, Liz, who belongs to a large Unitarian Universalist church. Liz is a pediatrician who works for a children's clinic. She and her partner go to many church activities together, but they always take care to not be identified as a couple. The reason is that Liz is terribly afraid that if she is out at church, some well-meaning straight church member may make a casual comment to someone who knows Liz's employer, and she will lose her job. So she cannot be herself even around these well-meaning, good liberal people who love her but don't truly know her. Liz's great fear is that one of these good liberal people will think that her being a lesbian makes no difference, saying "I don't care who you sleep with; we're all the same underneath." That very person might be the one who with a slip of the tongue might cause her to lose her livelihood, because the fact that Liz is a lesbian does make a difference. It makes her extra vulnerable. It puts a huge weight on every risk that she takes.

Radical love means that we educate ourselves about people who are different from us, so we can assure them that we will keep their secret if that is what they need, or encourage them to come out in a supportive and realistic way. Radical love means defending someone's rights even if you don't particularly like them. Radical love means making a decision to be in solidarity with someone who is oppressed, because that is the way to wholeness for both of you.

The good news is, we do not all have to think alike, or be totally embracing of every aspect of one another, to love each other radically. In fact, this is what Unitarian Universalism is all about, as far as I am concerned. And we Unitarian Universalists have a very special, unique teaching role to play for our whole culture. Through all our years of grappling with our theological differences, we have learned that we do not all need to have the same model of the holy in order to come together in communities of faith. We have learned how to live with, even rejoice in, uncertainty and ambiguity in our theologies.
The time has come for us to translate our tolerance into a commitment to bring about change: to embrace a variety and diversity of cultures, including gay and lesbian and bisexual cultures.

The benefits of such cultural diversity, such radical love, come not just to gay people, but also to their heterosexual allies. Here are some beautiful words from an essay, “True to Our Tradition,” by Gary Doupe, a heterosexual Methodist minister.

I had always thought of myself as open and accepting of others, no matter what their race, religion, or sexual orientation. But sensitivity and genuine acceptance, I have learned, require more. They mean listening more deeply and patiently than I have often been willing to listen. They mean going beyond the assumptions of a “liberal attitude,” to hear the reality of another’s experience, whether that be merely a “different reality” than our own or some private pain we had never before realized.

Rare and wonderful individuals have come into my life, to penetrate my shallow liberalism with their trust and honesty. By the quality of their lives, their patience and integrity, they have invited me to be a better person. Some of these wonderful people have been gay, lesbian, and bisexual.

I did my intern ministry at a large midwestern church. I was the first openly gay intern they had had. I helped to start a chapter of Unitarian Universalists for Lesbian and Gay Concerns, now called Interweave. I remember vividly a young woman who had been on the fringes of the church, who got involved in the Interweave group. She was an adult Religious Education class I was teaching. We moved into small groups to talk about our spiritual journeys, and much to her embarrassment she broke down in tears, saying, “I never dreamed that I could be part of a church community. I thought that was absolutely impossible. I’m so grateful for this church.”

That kind of gratitude, that kind of healing, can only happen in our churches if we are determined to continue to be explicitly welcoming to gay and lesbian people.

We Unitarian Universalists have so much to be proud of! We have come so far in affirming gay and lesbian people! Let us not stop reaching out, especially now, when the times are so threatening, when there is so much healing work to be done, and so many storm-tossed people who need a safe beach to land on.

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REFLECTIONS, 2004
Amanda L. Aikman
Born: February 14, 1953
Ordained: January, 1995, Marysville, Washington

I was a very new minister in 1993, fresh out of Starr King, unemployed, and living in Cleveland, Ohio. My colleague, Julie-Ann Silberman, invited me to preach at her church in Kent.

“What shall I preach about?” I asked.

“The congregation is wrestling with becoming a Welcoming Congregation,” said Julie-Ann. “You might preach about that.”

I wrote “Liberal Love, Radical Love” in the midst of a virulently homophobic atmosphere: the religious right was trying to pass one of their anti-gay initiatives that year, as I recall, and all my gay friends were paranoid and on edge.

I was really and truly terrified of preaching this coming-out sermon, afraid that people would shun me or act weird. It was a huge step for me. I remember quivering all over as I gave the sermon, and then waiting, jaws clenched, for the awkward or hostile response.

Instead, the congregation was wonderful. They received the sermon, and me, warmly. Several people told me about their gay kids or relatives or selves, and there was a general, celebratory atmosphere of coming out. What a relief!

When I saw the notice for the MSUU sermon contest, it seemed they were asking for sermons about the theologies of Unitarian Universalist women. I figured they were looking for sermons about historical figures. But my then-partner, Mary Grigolia, encouraged me to enter my sermon. “You’re a Unitarian Universalist woman,” she said. “Send it in.”

So I did, and what a thrill it was to win! A real shot in the arm for a brand-new minister. I’m afraid I don’t remember what it was like to deliver the sermon at General Assembly. It was the same year I won the Paul Beattie memorial sermon contest, sponsored by Unitarian Universalists for Freedom of Conscience—strange bedfellows!—and I still do feel like pretty hot stuff, but the particulars elude me now.

Recently, I revived the sermon, updated it, and delivered it as a Pride Day sermon to my congregation in Port Angeles, Washington. To my surprise and discomfiture, I found myself getting choked up in a few places, still, after all these years.
It is very heartening to see how far the world has come in the past decade. There are still struggles ahead, but I encounter very little homophobia in the UU congregations I have visited and served in recent years.

It was thrilling to receive the prize a second time for "Resolve." This is how that sermon came about: my parishioner Linda Wheeler and I were brainstorming sermon titles in the summer of 2003. We decided to try some strong, one-word titles. She came up with "resolve." I thought it was an evocative title, and when the time came around to write a sermon, I thought of Dorothea Dix, who exemplified that quality for me.

Today I live in Everett, Washington. I am Creative Director of BLUUBIRD Theater Company, a Unitarian Universalist drama ministry. I write short comedies, with no redeeming social value, that are produced in a variety of venues; and I serve two churches part-time.

Biographical information:

Master of Divinity, Starr King School for the Ministry, 1993

Interim Associate Minister, First Unitarian Church, Cleveland, Ohio, 1994-95

Minister, Evergreen Unitarian Universalist Church, Marysville, Washington, 1995-2000

Consulting Minister, Olympic Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, Port Angeles, Washington, 2001-Present, and Northlake Unitarian Universalist Church, Kirkland, Washington, 2003-Present

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IN OUR MOTHERS' GARDENS

Rev. Dr. Rebecca Edmiston-Lange
Sermon Award for 1994

I begin with a poem by Bonaro Overstreet, entitled "For This World's Loving..."

For this world's loving, take calendulas
Blooming at noontime under a high sun
Where delicate flowers would fall.

Or take the woman
Who made a place for them beside the door,
Setting her will and hoe against an earth
That had been hardpan—and would be again
If any less its match than she should come
To bid it make concession to her hunger
For something that could bear the name of garden.

The water that she brings is second-hand:
The dishes had it first, or vegetables
Scrubbed for the pot.

But it is what she has,
And all she has; and there is no affront
In offering such a hand-me-down to flowers;
For her own apron is a hand-me-down
Made from a worn-out shirt, and simply tells
That she has learned to cherish what life gives:
To cherish, and make do—and to make up
For what she does not have with what she has:
A power of tenderness...
Such tender caring
You half expect that when she turns away,
The flowers will leave their place to follow her
The way the kittens follow from the barn
When she comes up from milking the lone cow.

There may be other languages of love
More subtle than the stubborn, shining words
Of these calendulas that will not die.
In spite of heat and hardpan or the silence
Of her who will not let them die if care
Can keep them blooming to the summer’s end.

There may be delicate different ways of saying
That life is good to live. But this will do. 2

Yes, “there may be other languages of love more subtle,” “there may be delicate different ways of saying that life is good to live,” but “calendulas blooming at noontime under a high sun” will do.

To plant gardens where nothing bloomed before, to yield to that secret yearning of the soul, “the hunger for something that could bear the name of garden.” It is an act of love, an act of faith, even. And the lesson is so simple really: “to cherish what life gives” and “to make up for what she does not have with what she has: a power of tenderness... (of) caring.” Simple, and yet so difficult, difficult enough for a lifetime’s learning.

My mother’s passion is gardening. Her special love is daylilies. But she also has daffodils by the hundreds, azaleas, begonias, hostas, astilbes, dahlias, asters, hycinth, flowering almond and quince, camellias and tulips and on and on. Every year my mother claims more territory from an overgrown pasture at the back of the house, a pasture that long ago went to seed and pine trees and wild blackberry bushes. And as her yard advances on that sunny western flank, each year, too, on the south side of the house, her woodland garden grows more impressive.

But her special love is, as I said, daylilies. She already has hundreds of varieties.

And each year she orders and sets out more in addition to dividing her mature plants. It’s almost gotten to be a joke among us, her children. “What’s she planting now?” we ask. “Daylilies. What else?” we reply. My mother will complain about being so tired she can hardly move, and then the next thing I hear she is setting out another bed of daylilies. A couple of years back when a shipment of daylilies arrived from a mail order house while the ground was still too soggy to dig, you could only take a sponge bath at my mother’s house for several weeks. Daylilies occupied both bath tubs. That has become a joke, too.

But if we children joke among ourselves about my mother’s obsession, it is with delight. You see, during the winter months when my mother is closeted alone inside her house, she struggles against depression and chronic fatigue. But when the days lengthen and the air grows warmer, the ground calls to her. And just as the sap rises in the trees, my mother’s spirits seem to rise as well. My siblings and I reassure ourselves during the cold seasons that once she can get outside and start working in her garden again, she will feel much better. And so she does. Every year.

Every year except this one. This year the fatigue did not lift. And finally my mother had to pay attention. She had to have surgery for colon cancer. And even though the surgery was successful, her recovery will be long. She is eighty-two and was already depleted before the surgery. Her gardening will have to wait this year.

The week before her surgery I went down to spend a day with her. We spent several hours just sitting on the wooden bench by the spreading hemlock tree, sitting and talking some. It was one of those magnificent spring days, when all the world seems new and brightly painted with bloom, the sun warm enough to tempt you to remove your shoes and feel the tickle of emerald green grass on your feet. We sat and we drank it in. My mother, of course, saw all that needed to be done that would not get done this year. I saw beauty at every turn.

On that day we weren’t so sure of her prognosis and so perhaps it was natural that her mortality was on our minds. At one point she said, “I’ve been lucky really, I’ve had a good life.”

A good life? That assessment might seem strange if you knew some of the facts of my mother’s history. A sharecropper’s daughter, poverty and ill health were her childhood realities. By the age of ten she’d had typhoid fever, rheumatic fever and whooping cough. She survived the influenza epidemic of 1917, but her closest sibling died. She was forced to quit school in the eighth grade to help support the family, she for whom education seemed salvific. As an adult she watched her younger sister, who was also her best friend, die of cancer at the age of forty. She was unhappily married for thirty odd years to a man who was mentally ill and who, in the last years of his life, squandered much of their hard earned savings on manic schemes. She, herself, suffered with long bouts of depression, in the days before we knew as much about that disease. And her children and grandchildren have brought her more than her measure of grief and concern.

A good life? Perhaps not to anyone “less its match than she.” But through it all she has “bid it make concession to her hunger for something that could bear the name of garden.”
And not just gardens that catch the sun and rain, but gardens on the landscape of the soul. She couldn’t go to school, but she could read. And she read and read, indiscriminately, anything she could get her hands on at first. And then more systematically. She taught herself, so that her breadth of knowledge and the range of her interest continue to amaze and challenge.

And though she was always burdened with too much work and too little money stretched too far, she found ways to bring herself and us, her children, music and art and poetry. She might have worried about where the money would come from for new and necessary glasses for herself, but still she managed to scrimp together the cost of piano lessons for me, for example, and installment payments for The World Book Encyclopedia, and classical recordings, and so much else. My mother has been clearing ground, making room for gardens of the soul as long as I have known her. She made a space, a bed, where the seeds of the spirit could be sown. And she nurtured the fragile shoots until the roots ran deep. Whatever flowers bloom in my soul had their beginnings at my mother’s hand.

Not such a fanciful comparison this. For when my mother is at work in her real life garden, there is something more going on than meets the eye. I decided long ago that gardening was my mother’s way of praying. And that is not just because kneeling in the soil resembles an act of supplication. I imagine that gardening is when my mother unravels her private thoughts, forgets her "self" for awhile and comes closest to communion with what she might call God. I think gardening is when and how my mother finds peace, peace gained through weighing and assessing what has been; letting go of what cannot be; and turning the will toward what yet might be. There is a kind of fierce gentleness in my mother’s gardening—a power, a power of tenderness, of caring. And it is with such fierce gentleness that the things of the spirit are nurtured.

My mother might protest to hear herself described as a religious person. But faith she has. Faith born of that simple lesson, learned through a lifetime of living: “to cherish what life gives” and “to make up for what she does not have with what she has: a power of tenderness.”

This faith of hers is no flaccid, overly rosy sentiment. For she has seen enough of life to know that it can defeat those who have not will enough, just as the sun can scorch and shrivel a too delicate flower.

On a visit last fall, my mother and I sat on that same bench near the hemlock tree. Again it was a magnificent day. The sky blue, the sun still warm, but the vibrant autumn foliage and the hint of coolness in the soft breeze augured the winter to come. I remember feeling almost intoxicated by the beauty of the earth.

Life felt so precious, precious and yet poignant. I wanted to hug the moment, that jewel of a day, close.

Our conversation, again, took a contemplative turn. We talked about life and growing old. My mother said that she had decided that life was basically tragic. "Life never turns out the way you’d planned or hoped. And the people you love die. If not before you, then after. And you can’t protect your children from the slings and arrows of fate. And it’s all so transient really. And yet nothing much changes. There will always be wars and suffering and people starving somewhere. Yes, I think life is tragic, really."

I wanted to protest. "But don’t you feel that life is also a precious gift, Mama? Isn’t it wonderful and joyous sometimes, too? What about this day, this glorious day?" I exclaimed, spreading my arms in exultation.

And she frowned a little and said, "Yes, it’s true. Life is a wonderful, marvelous gift. This glorious world didn’t have to be. We didn’t have to be."

"So, how can you say life is tragic?" I persisted. "What about love and work? And don’t some things make a difference, however small?"

And she smiled, "Oh yes, I think so. We do keep hoping and we keep loving, don’t we? I guess life is both, both tragic and wonderful. One doesn’t negate the other."

It is in that "and" that my mother’s faith resides, I think. Life may be tragic, and it is still good to live.

If ever I should doubt that my mother feels life is good to live, I only have to remember her face in isolated moments. To remember, for example, how radiant her face can look when, in an early morning in late June, she walks among her daylilies, pinching off the withered blooms, bending to cup her hands and look deep into the bowl of the new blossoms, as if drinking in their essence. Or the look of concentrated attention that comes over her face when she is at work in her garden, absorbed in work her soul must have. Or how, after an extended dry spell, when the rains finally come, my mother will go out on her porch to greet them, hail their advance across the fields with an expression of rapturous joy and a shout of "Glory, hallelujah!"

My mother’s is an angel who could have been hardpan for any less its match than she. And she has made gardens bloom—in the field and woods outside her house and in the landscape of her soul.

The lesson is so simple really: to cherish what life gives and to make up for what we do not have with what we have, a power of tenderness, of caring, and a will to bid life make concession to our hunger for something that could bear the name of garden. Acts of love. Acts of faith.
There may be delicate different ways of saying that life is good to live," but that is the lesson I take from my mother's garden, the lesson I would pass on to you.

Note: This is the second award-winning sermon by this author. See her Reflections following her first sermon in this collection.


December 6 is the anniversary of what is known in Canada as "the Montreal massacre," the day when a lone gunman murdered fourteen women engineering students who were attending class at the Montreal Ecole Polytechnic. That day has become a rallying point in Canada in the struggle to end abuse against women. The Canadian Unitarian Counsel requested ministers to dedicate a service to that sad piece of Canadian history. This sermon is a response to that request. It is tragically apt in 1994, a year in which we have seen the murder of Nicole Brown Simpson and many others whose names we never knew and will not remember.

The problems of violence clearly extend to men as well as women, to children as well as adults. Men, women and children all commit violence; all are its victims. But today we focus exclusively on the specific issues relating to violence against women. We cannot yet say: "Never again." We know more names will be added. But we can add our hands and our voices to those saying: "Stop." We can honor the dead with our memories. We can honor the dead with our tears.

Genevieve Bergeron
Helene Colgan
Nathalie Croteau
Barbara Daigneault
Anne-Marie Edward
Maud Havriernick
Barbara Maria Kluenick
Maryse Laganiere
Maryse Leclaire
Anne-Marie Lemay
Sonia Pelletier
Michele Richard
anger felt by women at his actions obviously do. Men who thought that great strides had been made in equal rights must look at this fear and anger and wonder where these powerful emotions come from.1

The answer is that no great strides have been taken—just the first few steps. We still have a long way to go.

The press reported that Marc Lepine’s father was vicious: “A close friend of his father’s recalled, ‘he that the poor boy would hug his father’s leg while he was being beaten. He was being hit so hard that he would bleed from the nose and even the ears.’” Lepine’s mother described her husband as a brutal man with no control of his emotions. He believed that women should be men’s servants.

His son learned well. In a letter found on his body, Lepine described his unhappy life, blamed it on feminists, and told of being rejected by the Canadian Forces for being anti-social. He had had the classic childhood of someone we would predict might turn to violence as an adult. Of course, even from such troubled backgrounds, few people become mass murderers. Whether because of mental illness or evil design, Lepine himself is the one responsible for the Montreal massacre.

So what does the act of a disturbed man have to do with us? What do the deaths of fourteen women have to do with us? What do these violent acts have to do with society’s attitudes and treatment of women?

One answer is: “Nothing.” People have gone over the line before—killing employers, colleagues, social workers, strangers. It is tragic, but without better diagnosis, medications, or advanced genetic engineering, people will do so again. Men murder more men than they do women. One could easily say that this crime was not about women but about madness or evil. It was about fear and rage and finding a target.

There is truth in that response. There is much truth in that response. Still, I think it is not the whole truth.

What does the act of a disturbed man have to do with us? What do the deaths of fourteen women have to do with us? What do these violent acts have to do with society’s attitudes and treatment of women?

A few years ago, a friend of mine called me, in shock. (I have changed a few details of the story to prevent identification.) Her husband had unexpectedly asked her for a divorce. Then he had beaten her. They were both good friends of mine—well-educated Unitarian Universalists.

I agreed to come visit. While I was there I spent time with their children, whom I regarded as nieces and nephews. I didn’t raise the subject; the thirteen-year-old did. She told me her own story of abuse. Then I did raise the subject...
with her sisters. I didn’t want to hear awful things about my friends, but I felt I had no choice. The twenty-three-year-old told me of the time her father had beaten her with his belt. She had had bruises over two-thirds of her body.

By the time I heard this story, my friend and her husband had made up. When I asked her about her oldest daughter’s story she admitted it. But she justified it because her husband had come home early one day and caught their daughter in their bed making love to a neighbor’s husband. My friend thought her husband’s reaction was understandable. So did the social worker who answered my call to the abuse hotline.

I didn’t. If I had been the parent who had walked in, I might have been angry and ordered the man out, but more likely I would have been worried about what this behavior said about my daughter’s emotional state. My attitude is what we more commonly teach women: be compassionate, be understanding, don’t get angry. Though, as we have seen in the last few weeks, there are gross exceptions, fewer women than men would actually beat their daughter. Many of us who are women wouldn’t think of hitting someone else even to protect ourselves, let alone out of rage. “Women don’t do that.” It’s not an option.

In contrast, our culture teaches many of us that it is normal for men to fly into uncontrollable rages, when provoked. Witness Judge Cahill’s remarks several months ago: Real men fight to defend their rights and their property...and it was not all that long that religion and society considered women property. The vestiges of those attitudes remain.

We teach men to fight. We teach women to be understanding and forgiving. The apple does not fall far from the tree. If men and women were not taught to distrust each other, if men were raised to believe it is never acceptable to use their greater strength for personal ends, if men and women were used to being treated as equals, Marc Lepine’s madness might well have been prevented—he might have had a softer, gender childhood. Even if his “madness” was genetic, it almost certainly would have expressed itself in different ways.

An anonymous woman wrote of her own personal experience in a letter to Peter Gzowski:

I grew up in an extended family of loving men—father, uncles, grandfathers. I grew up believing that men were witty, supportive, patient and loving. That they would teach a little girl how to shingle a roof as cheerfully as they would teach a boy...That hugging was good, spanking was out and yelling only happened if the barn was on fire.

At university...I was angry at the women’s group on campus (strident lesbian man-haters) spreading their anger and peddling their lies about men. They just didn’t know how to love.

My first real inkling that all was not well between men and women came when I worked in a factory with immigrant women. They told stories of their husbands’ infidelities, abuse, abandonment and oppression...That year, I was raped by a man I was dating. He said I wasn’t loving enough so he had to take some action.

Since then, in a job where I work with people, I have heard with alarming regularity stories of violent physical and sexual abuse of women who are allowed no choice in the direction of their lives and women who are one husband away from poverty. We work together to speak the anger, to find the strength to heal and to shape a new destiny.3

What do date rape and battered wives have to do with the Montreal massacre? Why was this woman’s letter written in response to the discussions of what happened in Montreal? Marc Lepine was crazy. These men are just....

Just what? What do we call the men who have physically or sexually assaulted approximately half of Canada’s women over the age of sixteen? Assaults deemed serious enough to have been acted upon by the police if they had been reported. What, I must add, do we call the men who murder 1500 women each year in the United States, the men who are responsible for the rape of approximately one in three women some time during the course of their lifetimes? Is their behavior normal, rational?

When I was in graduate school, a friend called me one day. Two men had broken into her apartment and raped her at knifepoint.

I used to belong to a singing group. A friend in that group told me that she had been accosted in the doorway to her apartment building and raped.

Another long-time friend was gang raped by a group of boys, one of whom she had been dating. I don’t bring up violence against women often, but whenever I do, I hear another story.

I have heard people say that while they know the statistics, they can’t quite believe them. They don’t personally know anyone who has suffered. Well, many of us don’t talk about it much. I don’t.

But yes, I have my own story. I was raped by the neighbor of a friend, when I was thirteen. I had never met him before that day. He tricked me into his apartment, and then he raped me. I never told my parents. I never called the police. I was going into high school in the fall. I didn’t want everyone to know. I did tell my thirteen-year-old friend who lived downstairs from this man. "Oh yes," she said. "He tried something on me, but I threatened to tell his wife and he..."
How many others had he raped who didn’t know he had a wife, who hadn’t sensed that he would stop if they stood up to them? Was his behavior so totally different from Marc Lepine’s? Is it really so irrational to see a connection between the two?

Frankly, when I moved to Canada, I thought maybe it would be different there. Less violence. Safer. Well, fewer people are murdered there, but just as many women are abused.

Isn’t there something wrong when we try to say that Marc Lepine is an isolated madman and that all these other men who are guilty of lesser assaults are more or less normal? Isn’t there something wrong when we can keep reading the news stories and the statistics and hearing about our friends and still think that women shouldn’t be angry, that women shouldn’t say that something is dreadfully wrong? Is it really so bizarre for us to say that Marc Lepine is only a more public and extreme example of the rage and violence we see every day in our lives? Is it so hard to understand that we are angry?

Deidre Kessler wrote this letter to Peter Gzowski, recalling her own experience:

[After hearing about the massacre], I recalled something I’d long buried.
In a fit of anger during an argument, my father grabbed my mother. He wasn’t listening to the pleas of his children to stop, so I ran out, ran across the street and knocked on a door. “My father’s beating up my mother. Please help.”

It was a woman who answered the door. She had an apron. She looked over her shoulder at her husband, who stood there a few feet behind her. Something got communicated between the two and the door was closed in my face.

I was scared to knock at another door—all the houses in that neighborhood looked alike and perhaps in my seven-year-old mind I thought I would receive the same treatment at them all. Anyway...[I returned home again and] found my mother with the “career woman” who lived in the apartment next door. My mother was holding her arm in a funny way. It was broken....

My parents got divorced, went through years of struggle, but, now, living separate lives in separate cities with all their marital strife long past, they are best friends....

[My father] is not an evil man. But he is, or was, one of those who didn’t know the stopping point between anger and violence. His education and his society taught him nothing about the difference between anger and violence that arises as an action out of anger. And his enculturation included the conviction that women were not equal to men....

How do we raise our sons?*

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How do we find meaning in the murders of fourteen women we never met?
How do we find a fitting memorial for those young women? This time I have some answers. We break the silence. We open the door wide when a seven-year-old knocks. We call the police when we see our friend’s child hugging his father’s leg while his father is beating him so badly he bleeds. We listen to children who confide that our dearest friends have done evil things.

The hardest thing I ever did in my life was to confront the parents of my friends’ children. I still loved them, though I was now convinced that the younger children were in danger. I wanted more than anything else in the world to forget what I had heard. I knew I would end by losing our friendship. They no longer speak to me. But I believe their children are fairly safe.

How do we remember those who did not survive? By standing up for those who did. By opening the door. By breaking the silence. By getting involved.

Last year, I wrote this poem about survivors of abuse:

They should not be alive today.
Their wounds are on the inside,
bullet holes in the heart.

They are trees on a cliff face,
clinging stubbornly to life,

snatching nourishment from the dust in the wind,
stretching out their leaves to capture the light.

They should not be alive today,

but there they stand.

They should not be alive today.
But they are, by God, they are.

Not everyone survives. The fourteen women who died in Montreal were ripped from the cliff face and dashed against the ground. Their legacy is their memory. Je me souviens. Let us all remember. That others may survive.

REFLECTIONS, 2004
Rev. Phyllis Hubbell
Born: February 18, 1944
Ordained: April 1992, Unitarian Fellowship of London, Ontario

I was born in 1944 in Chicago. Ministry and church were central parts of my family’s life. In addition to my father, my mother’s and father’s sides of the family included a total of at least three ministers between them. All were men, but
the women often taught Sunday school, both for children and for adults. Nevertheless, I never even thought of going into ministry until I was forty.

As I was finishing at the Starr King School for the Ministry, my partner, John Manwell, took a church in Mississauga, Ontario. I spent several years in Canada so I could be with him, working first as a Director of Religious Education at the Unitarian Fellowship of London, Ontario, and later as an interim minister at the Unitarian Fellowship of Northwest Toronto. In April 1992, the fellowship in London ordained me.

In 1994, when this sermon was written, I was working at Northwest Toronto. At the invitation of a local therapist I knew and respected, I was also co-leading a group for victims of satanic abuse. To this day, I do not know whether to believe all of the stories the group members told us. But whatever the details of their abuse, I grew to care very much for these women. They had clearly been through gruesome ordeals and were now trying to learn to trust again, to hold down jobs, to laugh and to find love.

The 1989 massacre of fourteen women, referred to in my sermon, was a major event in Canada. Five years afterwards, it was still publicly commemorated each year on December 6. The massacre had caused many to re-evaluate the relationship between the genders and the degree of support the government was giving to protect women from violence. The Canadian Unitarian Council sent out a request on the fifth anniversary of the massacre for sermons on that subject, and I responded.

I loved this sermon. It came out of my own life and out of the lives of so many women I have known. It spoke powerfully to both men and women. Many people came to me after I had presented it at Northwest and elsewhere to tell me their own stories of abuse. I hope it made a difference to someone, made them feel they were not alone, and gave them hope or strength. I was shocked though, when the sermon won both the MSUU award and the Skinner Sermon award in 1994.

I moved back to the United States soon after writing this sermon to become co-minister of the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore with my husband, John. I preached the sermon again at our church in our first year. I haven’t preached on this subject again, though I’ve been involved in other issues of violence and injustice. Yet over the years, I have heard several stories of women in my congregation who are still being abused today. The problems remain. Perhaps it is time for another sermon.
MOTHERING: LOVE AND LOSS

Rev. Gail S. Seavey
Sermon Award for 1997

Mother’s Day was started by Unitarian Julia Ward Howe, as part of an international peace movement after the United States Civil War. Of course, this was long before Hallmark Cards got hold of the holiday. Howe believed that mothers understood the real losses of war, the brutal and needless deaths of their children, and that their understanding and passion for life could unite mothers across nationalistic lines to put an end to needless suffering.

Today, many of us here—women and men, mothers or not—are moved by our care for others to work for peace and justice in the world. But there are limits to our ability to relieve human suffering. Even if we were able to end every war, each crime, all unkind words, we would have to face suffering and death. And there is no worse suffering, it is said, than that which a mother feels upon the death of her child.

Mothering requires that we face both life and death daily, in matters great and small. Those of us who nurture others, whether we are called mother or not, give birth to life from symbiosis, from connection. We preserve life by making sandwiches, giving lots of hugs, teaching toddlers not to run in the street, teaching school children to work as a team or organizing communities to maintain civil order.

But birth and life are profoundly bound up with death and destruction. Mothering requires that we set limits, let go, accept our losses and grieve many deaths. Each birth is completed by the cutting of the umbilical cord. For every sandwich made, a plot of wheat has been chopped down and ground. For every hug, there is a release and a backing away. For every moment of shared intimacy, there is a private daydream that is impossible to share. For every community success in protecting our children from harm, there is a community struggling to grieve its losses. For each life ends in death.

One does not have to be a mother, nor a woman to understand the profound connection between life and death, love and loss. But, risking the wrath of those who would call me a biological determinist, I think women have one common experience that reminds us of this connection periodically for much of our lives.

When we start to menstruate, we think of ourselves as women for the first time. Our bodies prepare monthly for the creation of new life, and most months new life does not begin—blood flows from our bodies and preparation for a new life begins again.

We participate, month after month, in the potential for holding on and letting go of life. Some call this cycle the curse. At times women have cried bitterly when the blood started to flow, in disappointment that new life had not begun. But just as often, women are relieved when the monthly flow begins. Our responses may have changed from month to month, but we’ve each had to accept our participation with life and death. This poem, “Country Woman Elegy,” by Margaret Gibson, expresses this point dramatically.

With a hush in their voices
country people ‘round here tell of the woman who walked
bared-headed in winter, keening aloud,
three days wandering with her seven-month child
dead inside her. She wouldn’t be comforted.
She held her loss.

Telling this
the old men shake fear from their eyes as they might
shake rain from a hat or coat. Her madness they blame
on winter, the cold and closed-in weather.
I love that woman’s fearless
mourning. The child dead, no help for that,
she had to wait until her wanting to love the child
died out in echo and outcry against bare stone.
She had to walk, nevermind the cold,
until she learned what she needed
to learn, letting go.

And I love those reticent men.
They know how most of us strain to ignore our dead,
the woman less fortunate to feel the weight of hers.
Who wants to admit death’s there inside, more privy
to our secrets than any lover, and love
a kind of grief?
Therefore we dream.
Last night a wild, purple bougainvillea bloomed in sleep.
I thought to gather a handful, but the stalks broke
like straws, and the wind
took them.

And drove them past that woman
barrenheaded on the winter road, that woman whose cries
unwound and wouldn’t be comforted by love or a lover’s body,
by childhood or any piety.

Who wants to admit “death’s there inside, more privy to our secrets than any
lover, and love a kind of grief?”

We have all seen each other shake fear from our eyes, straining to ignore our
death by glorifying life. Some try to control women in an attempt to control
death. It can be done with the best of intentions.

My grandmother gave birth to her first child after World War I. He was born
severely brain damaged, and for four years she tenderly cared for a child who did
not grow or develop. For four years she changed diapers and boiled bottles with-
out the excitement of a first smile, a first step, a first word. Nine months after this
child died, my father was born.

My grandmother never said a word to this second son about the suffering of
those first four years of motherhood, or the fear during her second pregnancy that
she could be carrying death as easily as life. My grandmother wondered as she
aged why her second son was the way he was, for he was obsessed with saving
babies from death. He observed that he became a pediatrician to save mothers
from the suffering and grief of a lost child. He was a fine pediatrician indeed. But,
as he turned away from his mother as she lay dying fifty years after his birth,
“straining to ignore his dead,” Grandma wondered why he could not look her in
the eye. She, as a mother, had had no choice many years ago, but to “walk until
she learned what she needed to learn, letting go.”

Most of us “strain to ignore our dead,” the mother “less fortunate to feel the
weight of hers.” We women have felt the weight of death irrationally, when a
period started that we hoped wouldn’t, and we have rationally felt the weight of
death, when we made the choice to have an abortion. Some of us have walked
with the weight of a miscarried pregnancy or a stillborn baby. Others of us have

watched healthy children become deathly ill, active children struck down by
senseless accidents, children in pain killing themselves, loving children killed by
hateful violence. All the love, intelligent care and desire for life those mothers felt
could not stop those deaths. We have cried and have not been “comforted by love
or a lover’s body, by childhood or any piety.”

Two years ago this fall, I sat with my sister dying of cancer. She was my baby
sister, whom I cared for daily after school so many years ago. As big sister, I was
expected to be assistant mother in ways I am just beginning to understand. But
now she was fatally ill, drifting in and out of various states of consciousness, and I
was surprised by my profound sense of failure. I was a bust at assistant mother-
hood. I was not able to protect her from harm, teach her to care for herself, keep
her within the sacred realm of life and growth and family. “Who wants to admit
death’s there inside, more privy to our secrets than any lover, and love a kind of
grief?”

“Therefore we dream.” My sister dreamed of elephants walking by the hospital
window five stories above the earth. I dreamed of Kali, the Indian goddess of all
nature, much like Asherah in the Hebrew Bible and Eostre in the Saxon north. I
dreamed of Kali creating life as a girl, preserving life as a mature woman, and
destroying life as an old woman. Reaping life so that new life could be sown.
When I suffered as a child, I used to dream that Kali held me in her arms. From
her flowed the power of life, empowering me with the energy to live. But now I
dreamed that I must hold the suffering child in my arms, empowering her to die.
I could not face the terror of my sister’s death. I could not find the courage to
hold her. Those who worship Kali are taught that they must face the curse of
existence, the terror of death, as willingly as we accept its blessings, its beautiful,
nurturing maternal aspect. No coin has one side; life cannot exist without death.
But how do we find the courage to hold our children in death?

As a child, I was not taught to hold nature up as that which is of highest
worth. I was not taught to worship Kali. My ancestors tried to cut the coin into
two separate sides. They tried to cut nature into two, calling all death evil and all
life good. They tried to cut Kali into two, calling one side a demon and the other
Mother of God. How did they find the courage to hold their children in death?

Some mothers did find comfort in the one side of the coin, called Mary, who
was shown holding her son courageously in death as well as in life. Some, like my
grandmother, learned to let go through experience and to accept death against all
teachings. Others, like my father, placed their trust in science and technology,
which was great when it worked.
But not all my ancestors found the courage to hold their dying children in the stories of the split coin. Some mothers faced death by becoming as hard as steel, untouchable, preparing their children to battle life with the weapons of their bodies. Others searched their souls for what evil they had done that caused them to be punished by death. Many gave their souls away, having given up as failures.

With this dubious inheritance, I have learned the limits of nurturing only in terms of life and health and growth. I have needed to invite stories into my dreams to transport me past the boundaries of life and into the fearful territory of death. Here is one such story from the land of Kali.

A father went out to hunt for a deer, ordering his son to stay behind with his mother, within the safe walls of home. But the son wanted to be a part of the hunt. He sneaked out from his mother’s house and followed his father into the forest, hiding from him who would send him home. The father saw a rustle in the trees and shot his arrow straight and true. As he came close to the deer he had pierced through the heart, he stopped in terror as if it was he himself who had been pierced. For there on the forest floor was his own son, shot dead by his own arrow. As he tenderly wrapped his son in his cloak preparing to take him home, he was pierced by a second arrow of anguish. How could he tell his wife, the boy’s mother, of the boy’s death?

When he entered the house, the mother cried in frustration, “Our son is lost. I cannot find him anywhere. I fear some harm has come to him.” The father replied, “Search for him amongst our neighbors, and invite those from each home that has lost a child to come to our house for a feast tonight—for I have shot a deer that we will all share, and by then, I trust, you will have found out son.”

The hours passed and the mother walked from house to house in her village. In each house the answer to her questions were the same. “Have you seen my son?” “No, he is not here.” “Have you ever lost a child?” “Oh yes, I have lost a child.” And so she asked each and every one of her neighbors to come share the deer.

As the evening fell, the mother returned home followed by all her neighbors. As she entered the house, she asked her husband, “Is our son home? You said he would be found by now but no one here has seen him.” The father unwrapped the cloak and there lay their son. “He has been found. Now we must share him with everyone.”

The mother wailed in grief and her neighbors wailed with her. They shared with the grieving parents the coin of Kali. One side is “Shakti,” the energy of life that she has given with the birth of her son. But the other side is called “Karuna,” the Treasure House of Compassion.

The dreams of Kali are painful dreams, but they are dreams that offer courage. Sitting with my mother and father, with my brother-in-law, his family and son, with my other brothers and sisters and childhood friends, sitting together in the “treasure house of compassion,” I found the courage to hold my sister in death, as I held her in life. To do so I had to let go of my dreams for her to continue to live empowered by all that was creative and new and growing. Sitting in the “treasure house of compassion,” I found the courage to “learn what I needed to learn, to let go.”

I care for my sister, but I am not my sister’s keeper. She is kept in the arms of endless, ageless experience.

I am mother of two children and it is my call to care for them, but they are not my children. They belong to nature, who created them, preserves them and will destroy them. I am minister to a community that calls itself White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church. It is my call to care for them, even as it is their call to care for one another. But they are not my congregation, and I am not their minister. We each belong alike to the sacred powers of life, of compassion, and of death.

I am a mother, but mothers are not kept by life alone. Like each and every person who has cared for another, whether they are called mother or no, I have “had to walk nevermind the cold, until I learned what I needed to learn, letting go.” I have had “to admit death’s there inside, more privy to our secrets than any lover, and love a kind of grief.”

Mothers belong to Kali. I do not face the terror of death as willingly as I accept life’s blessings of creativity, nurturing and growth. Yet Kali teaches us that we live in the realm of the sacred when we face both life and death with compassion.

I pray with all mothers, to the Great Mother for the courage to face both life and death again and again.

Blessed Be & Amen.
REFLECTIONS, 2004
Rev. Gail S. Seavey
Born: December 3, 1949
Ordained: June, 1990, First Universalist Society of Rockport, Massachusetts

I was the minister at the White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church in Mah- tombedi, Minnesota, when my youngest sister, Beth, called with the news that her brain cancer, in remission for a few years, had returned. For the next year, her failing health and then impending death were first and foremost on my mind. I worried that I wasn’t at my “best” as a minister, but members of the church reassured me that my work was always “good enough.” When Beth’s death was imminent, a member gave me frequent flyer miles to go visit her. I was numb with grief for the year following her death, and found it difficult to talk about, and impossible to write a sermon on the topic.

The following year, however, a congregant came to talk to me about her grief after a miscarriage. She wondered if I knew of any resources such as prayers, stories or poetry that could help her and others at her hospital support group. I spent some time thumbing through my favorite books of poetry when I came upon “Country Woman Elegy” by Margaret Gibson. It deeply touched the place in my heart that was still aching with grief. I had felt that the congregation, so supportive during my sister’s illness and death, deserved some reflections about the experience, in response. The poem, and the pastoral concerns of congregants, gave me a way to talk about it.

That congregation was always very responsive to my sermons. Not everyone has been. I shared this sermon with my own mother, with some trepidation. She responded with anxious questions about Kali, for She was unknown to her. I had become familiar with Hindu mythology, including stories about Kali, when I was an artist and made sculptures of very scary looking women. Viewers’ anxious questions (so like my mother’s) about the influences on the imagery led me to study many of the world’s Goddesses. But the imagery came directly from my own dreams and visions, which started in my childhood. Brought up a good Protestant, I never thought to relate anything visual to religion at all. So this sermon, in some way, is part of my life long spiritual journey, integrating images that have touched my soul over a lifetime.

I submitted the sermon for the MSUU Sermon Award, because it was the kind of sermon I liked hearing at the worship service that MSUU offered at General Assembly every year. Some of the previous winners’ pastoral reflections about contemporary women’s issues had touched me very deeply. The best part of winning the award was the meaningful experience of working with other MSUU members to lead our worship service at the General Assembly in Phoenix, Arizona.

The year after winning the sermon award I accepted a call to serve the First Universalist Church of Salem, Massachusetts, where I am now. My sister, Beth Sherwood Rodgers, died ten years ago, this coming All Saints Day. I miss her still but celebrate her memory with gratitude. I left White Bear six years ago. I miss the profound dialogue we had with one another. I dedicate this sermon to my sister Beth and to my religious brothers and sisters at White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church.

The Rev. Gail S. Seavey has been married to James F. Seavey for 35 years. James is a silversmith who currently works as a boat builder. They have two grown sons, Caleb and Ben. For fifteen years, she was an artist and teacher with a BFA from the Rhode Island School of Design. She then attended Harvard Divinity School, graduating in 1990.

FAILURE IS IMPOSSIBLE
BUT SUCCESS MAY TAKE A
LONG, LONG TIME

Rev. Margo J. Ewers
Sermon Award for 1998

This sermon is delivered in the voice of Susan B. Anthony, with the speaker dressed in
costume reminiscent of the late 19th century and a gray wig. The speaker moves
between three settings:

- The Pulpit
- A chair for the interview segments
- A small writing desk (or table) and chair, with inkwell and pen, stationary,
and an old journal.

For the interview segments, another person (preferably male) needs to ask the questions.
He should sit in the front row and ask his questions from there.

FROM THE PULPIT

Good morning. I was invited to be here today to share my vision: the vision that
led me to fight for a societal change that affects each person sitting in this town.
People call what I did remarkable. I call it striving for liberty and a democratic
way of life, participation in the noble tradition of our country. You see, I am con-
vinced that the principle of equal rights for all, as stated in the Declaration of
Independence, must be represented in the laws of a true republic. Therefore I
devoted my life to the establishment of this ideal.¹

I recognized that the legal bondage of women contributed to flagrant viola-
tions of the principle of freedom. I couldn't help doing what I could on behalf of
civil and political rights for women, so I became an active crusader and speaker. I

saw women's struggle for freedom from legal restriction as an important phase in
the development of American democracy.

To me this struggle was never a battle of the sexes. Rather it was a battle simi-
lar to that for any freedom, a battle that a loving people would wage for all civil
and political rights.

A contemporary of mine, with whom I heartily disagree, Catharine Beecher,
wrote eloquently of something called a "women's sphere." Ms. Beecher said,
"Because Holy Scripture teaches a separate, and for us a higher, sphere apart from
public life, the cause of women can be advanced within that sphere. We need not
take part in the public activities reserved for men." This term, "women's sphere,"
sent me to my pen and to the speaking platform.

I have a clear idea of a sphere either man or woman could participate in: the
field in which they were most talented. Yet rejection of the proper sphere for my
sex meant that I often encountered ridicule.

My 54-year-long effort on behalf of obtaining the vote for women is well
known. On the other hand, my work is not purely political, as people think of
political, with a clear separation between politics and religion. My fight is tied
closely to the religious atmosphere of nineteenth-century America. This morning
I will concentrate on how religion has affected my work.

I was raised in the tradition of the Quakers. When I was a young school-
teacher I attended the meetings of the Society of Friends, in Rochester, New
York. I asked the Meeting for support for the anti-slavery movement. They
would have nothing to do with the issue. Imagine!

I was appalled to learn this early lesson about apathy and opposition to a clear
social justice issue. Well, /my father and several other liberal Quakers left the
Friends Meeting and joined the Unitarian Church.² Yet, I never forget my
Quaker upbringing, and I still think of it as a positive influence on my life and
thought. It has given me a strong sense of personal duty and high ethical stan-
dards. The Unitarians added to that a larger concept of human freedom and a
deeper understanding of religious toleration.³

I left a clear and extensive record of my work and of my thinking. I am told
that this record of my work in the cause of a better world is stored at the Hun-
tington Library in Pasadena, California. Today I will repeat my words from three
types of communication: responses to journalist's questions, letters and diary
entries, and of course, my speeches.

FROM THE INTERVIEW CHAIR

I'm ready. You may begin.
You are aware of Bible teachings. How can you call yourself a Christian and propose the vote for women?

I was born and reared a Quaker. Also, I was trained by my father, a cotton manufacturer, in the Henry Clay School of protection for American products. But today I believe that all sectarian creeds and all political parties are insignificant compared with the essence of all religions, and the fundamental principles of politics, which is equal rights for all. Wherever justice for women is preached and practiced religiously, socially, educationally and politically, I find a bond of sympathy. When it is not, I find no sympathy.

Why are you so persistent in a cause that keeps you so much in the negative with men?

The Apostle Paul said, "Let your women keep silence in the churches." That is the text that is always hurled at me. Before giving a lecture I have known every minister in the town to denounce me from the pulpit beforehand. They say my speaking in public is in direct opposition to St. Paul's teaching. As a rule, on the night of the lecture, the ministers arrange a prayer meeting at the same hour as my talk. Then they make women understand that their soul's salvation depends upon attending their meeting. But all this is preliminary to what I want to say. The object of our movement is not a reversal of the relations existing between the sexes. It is only a radical revision of them.

Will it aid the cause of women if they are alienated from men?

Under the present conditions, women marry for a livelihood. But liberate woman, give her the same opportunity as man to have her opinion counted, and see how quick the law of natural selection will assert itself.

FROM THE DESK, READING A LETTER

Dear Brother Daniel,

This morning I read that Andrew Davis said women's inherent nature is Love and man's is Wisdom and the two make a beautiful blending of the principles. In other words, woman starts with the love principle predominate and grows up into wisdom, and man starts with wisdom and grows up into love.

I say if you accept this theory, you may give up change for woman. She is now where God and nature intended she should be. Therefore woman must look to man for wisdom, must ever feel it impossible for her to attain wisdom equal to him.

This I cannot accept. One group cannot justly hold all the power. It was not because the three-penny tax on tea was exorbitant that our Revolutionary fathers fought and died, but to establish the principle that such taxation was unjust. It is the same with the women's revolution. Though every law was as just to women as to men, the principle that one class may usurp the power to legislate for another is unjust. All governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed.

FROM THE PULPIT, A SPEECH AT A MEETING OF POLITICAL LEADERS

Which brings us to the vote. No other right is more central. Disenfranchisement means inability to make, shape or control one's own circumstances. Some say the ballot will degrade woman. Gentlemen don't believe it. Good, pure and noble women meet men every day. They hold the most intimate family relations with them, being their wives, sisters and daughters. Will woman's meeting vile men in the place of powers to control circumstances make them more a victim of their lusts and tyrannies than now? Woman would be as refined and pure with power as without it. The ballot will not degrade women; it will elevate them morally, intellectually and therefore socially.

Governments never do any great good things from mere principle, from mere love of justice. You expect too much of human nature when you expect that.

FROM THE INTERVIEW CHAIR

Where do you find the strongest antipathy to women suffrage?

In the fears of various parties that the institution might be disastrous to their interests. The Protestants fear the disfranchisement of women lest it result in an increase of power for the Catholic church. The freethinkers are afraid that, as the majority of church members are women, they would put God into the Constitution. The free-whiskey man is opposed to it because he knows woman would vote down his interests. Thus, you see, we cannot appeal to the self-interests of any party, and this is a great source of weakness.
FROM THE PULPIT, AT A WOMEN'S CONFERENCE

Friends and fellow citizens, I stand before you tonight under indictment for the alleged crime of having voted, illegally, in the last presidential election. I shall endeavor to show that in voting I not only committed no crime, I exercised my "citizen's right" guaranteed to me and to all United States citizens. The Constitution says: We the people, not we the white male citizens, nor even we the male citizens, who formed the union. And we formed it to give the blessings of liberty not to half of ourselves but to the whole people.\(^{13}\)

There is no she or her or hers in the tax laws. The same is true of the criminal laws. They apply equally to both sexes. The only question left is: Are women persons in the section of the Constitution that speaks of voting? I hardly believe any of our opponents will have the hardihood to say they are not. Being persons then, women are citizens! And no state has a right to abridge the privileges or immunities.\(^{14}\)

At my trial I said: "May it please your honor: I did vote. It is my constitutional right. Regarding the fine you have imposed upon me, I shall work with a might and main to pay every dollar of an honest debt, but not a penny shall go to this unjust claim. And I shall earnestly and persistently continue to urge all women to recognize the old revolutionary maxim—that resistance to tyranny is obedience to God."\(^{15}\)

FROM THE DESK, READING FROM HER JOURNAL

I have been on tours for four months in the cause of my life's work, sometimes without the luxury of a cup of coffee in a private home. Once I was traveling for six months without a home cooked meal. One gets very tired of mediocre hotels and stage depot dining rooms.\(^{16}\) My trip to Yosemite was the highlight of my free time on this trip. Sunday morning's devotion was led by my host, Minister MacLean. This man led us on a two and a half mile ride to Mirror Lake, and there we waited and watched the coming of the sun rising over the rocky spires, reflected in the placid water. Such a glory mortals never beheld elsewhere.\(^{17}\)

Yet I have traveled with a purpose, that of seeking and finding support for the women's right to vote. Even the English have asked me to travel to their country in support of their efforts toward the same end. On that trip as I stood in the home of Charlotte and Emily Bronte I could not help but think of those delicate women sitting in that fireless, moldy church, listening to their old father's dry, hard theology, with their feet on the cold, carpet-less stones which covered the graves of their dead. It was horrible.\(^{18}\)

Now that I am home, I went to Central Church this evening. It was the same old story. Sermons where man makes and breaks laws, and women by love and persuasion soften their hearts to abandon their wickedness. Nor a hint that women should assume power and make and execute laws.\(^{19}\) It is plain to me that it is not preaching that I dislike, but the fact that most of it is so anti-woman that my soul cannot respond to it.\(^{20}\)

FROM THE INTERVIEW CHAIR

Are you afraid of death?

I don't know anything about Heaven and Hell or whether I will ever meet my friends again or not. But, as no particle of matter is ever lost, I have a feeling that no particle of mind is ever lost either. The thought of death doesn't bother me. I feel that since nothing is lost, the hereafter will be managed as this life is managed now.\(^{21}\)

What is your religion?

My religion? I don't know what religion is. I am proud of my Quaker background and always identify myself as a Friend, even though my family and I early switched to the Unitarian Church. I do know what work is, and that is all I can speak of on this side of the Jordan. In many ways work is my religion. My life is informed by various aspects of religion. Many of my friends and colleagues are ministers, but I find room for everyone in the suffrage tent. Christians, Mormons, Jews and non-believers are staunch supporters of the vote for women.\(^{22}\)

Do you attend church?

I rarely miss services at the Unitarian Church when I am home in Rochester. I think of them as "Sunday up-lifts" where my spirit is born anew. \(^{23}\) But finally I peg away in accordance with my own sense of wisdom rather than Solomon's. All these old fellows were very good for their time, but their wisdom needs to be newly interpreted in order to apply to people of today.

FROM THE PULPIT, AT A MEETING OF JOURNALISTS

I am asked to speak upon "The Moral Leadership of the Religious Press." I am glad to stand here today as an object lesson of the survival of the fittest, a survivor of ridicule and contempt. My grandfather and grandmother and my father, all
Quakers, took the radical side, the Unitarian. They have been denounced as infidels. The liberals as well as the orthodox come down on my head for speaking in public. All quote the Apostle Paul: “Let your women keep silence in the churches.” The religious press, instead of being a leader in the great moral reforms of anti-slavery and women’s rights, is usually a little behind.24

As to which religious groups may speak, the women’s suffrage platform must be kept free from all theological bias. Unbelievers as well as evangelical Christians can stand upon it. If it is necessary, I will make our platform free for a Christian to stand upon whether she be Catholic, and counts her beads, or the straightest orthodox sect, just as I have fought for the rights of the “infidels” over the last forty years. I maintain that our platform must be kept as broad as the universe. Upon it may stand the representatives of all creeds and of no creeds, Jews, and Christians, Protestants and Catholics, Gentiles and Mormons, Believers and Atheists.25

What you should say in your papers is that a Christian has neither more nor less rights in our association than an atheist. When our platform becomes too narrow for people of all creeds and of no creeds, I myself cannot stand upon it. I distrust those people who know so well what God wants them to do. I notice it always coincides with their own desires.26

Every new generation of converts thrashes over the same straw. Who then, is to draw the line? Who can tell now whether your commentaries may not prove a great help to women’s emancipation from old superstitions? If we do not inspire in women a broad and catholic spirit, they will fail. When enfranchised they will fail to constitute that power for better government which we have always claimed for them.27

FROM THE DESK, READING A LETTER

My dear Mrs. Stanton, My dear Friend,

You say women must be emancipated from their superstitions before enfranchisement will be of any effect, and I say just the reverse. Women must be enfranchised before they can be emancipated from their superstitions. Women here, as everywhere, must be able to live honestly and honorably without men and before it can be possible to save the masses of them from entering into polygamy and prostitution—legal and illegal.28

FROM THE PULPIT, SPEECH TO A WOMEN’S CONVENTION

Upon my retirement this day, I am now going to let go of the machinery of this movement, but not of the spiritual part.29 We should all try to live so as to make people feel that there is a vacancy when we go, but dear friends, do not let there be a vacancy long. Our battle has just reached the place where it can win.30

Remember, the strong point in favor of the ballot for women is this: It will compel both parties to nominate candidates of the highest character. A woman would no more vote for a low-down man than a good man would vote for a degraded woman. To some extent, women voters will be influenced by the church. But admitting this, is it not a better influence than the saloon, which controls the votes of so many men?31

FROM THE INTERVIEW CHAIR

Now that you are retired, tell us of your conclusions. Are women better than men?

I do not assume that woman is better than man. I do assume that she has a different way of looking at things. She is often called more angelic etc., but I do not know that woman would be if both had the same code of morals.32

Your defeats must have discouraged you.

Defeats! There have been none in my life or my work. All defeats have been glorious victories. The cause of women has never been presented to the voters of the country without winning many of them to our cause. We never lose. We are always progressing.33

FROM THE DESK, READING FROM HER JOURNAL

The doctor said I had a stroke. I don’t know. Went to church, had a sleepy time, seems as if something was the matter with my tongue, had a feeling of strangeness, could not think of what I wanted to say, a queer sensation, all the afternoon.34

IN FRONT OF THE PULPIT

Susan B. Anthony died a few days after this entry into her journal, fourteen years before the passage of the nineteenth amendment when her fifty some years of work came to fruition. Her example was strong enough to pass the work onto
younger workers. Failure was impossible but success did take a long, long
time—seventy-five years. But women finally did go to legally to the ballot box.

While her goals for women were only partially realized in her lifetime, she pre-
pared the soil for acceptance not only of her long-hoped-for women's suffrage 
amendment, but also for a worldwide recognition of human rights. Human 
rights, as Susan saw them, are now expressed in the United Nations Charter and 
in the Declaration of Human Rights. She looked forward to the time when there 
would be no discrimination because of race, color, religion or gender. May it 
soon be so!

Again in words she spoke so long ago: "What does our pride of identity avail 
us, if the extent of our own moral exercise is limited to the clucking of our 
tongues, throwing up of our hands, or issuing an occasional snub and ineffectual 
manifesto. We must learn to ride or climb off our moral horse." 55

REFLECTIONS, 2004
Rev. Margo J. Ewers
Born: March 8, 1938
Ordained: April 1996

The first version of this sermon was written while I was an Intern Minister at Studio 
City, California, and had been invited to be a guest speaker at Laguna Beach. 
Very near the 75th anniversary of women's right to vote, August 1995, I revised 
the sermon, when I was Extension Minister at Palm Springs, and later gave it at 
Franklin, New Hampshire. Response was good each time.

I decided to apply for the sermon award, because this sermon seemed perfect 
for the theme of the Rochester General Assembly in 1998, the 150th anniversary 
of the first women's rights convention held in nearby Seneca Falls, New York. I 
looked forward to giving the sermon but was a bit surprised to find that the 
rather complicated stage setup it calls for hadn't been arranged, after assurances 
that it would be. I kicked myself for not checking the room before I got into my 
costume. Nevertheless, the presentation received many nice comments and questions 
from the audience. Winning the sermon award provided a quiet kind of 
happiness that my friends and colleagues like it.

I'm now enjoying retirement...most of the time. I still miss preparing for Sunday 
morning worship. My husband, however, is happy that we can have week-
ends and holidays together. We travel, I garden in the summer and quilt in the 
winter. Life is good.
LABOR AND LAPPALA

Randall D. B. Tigue
Sermon Award for 1999

Hyvaa huomentaja onnellista työaempaivaa. For those of you who do not speak Finnish, good morning and Happy Labor Day.

I would like to begin with a true story, written by Ethel Erkkila Tigue, my mother, who died in 1986 at the age of seventy. She wrote this story two years before her death, or sixty years after the fact. Here is her story.

When I was about eight years of age (in the late 1920s) my much-loved brother died. The disturbing events that followed his death left two indelible imprints on my youthful mind: the image of the personal power of two remarkable women...and my first acquaintance with Unitarianism.

My brother had left one deathbed order: he was not to be buried by the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church, a strict fundamentalist type church of the Missouri Synod and the only one in that completely Finnish rural community in northern Minnesota's multi-racial, iron range "melting pot." And he absolutely refused to have his minister pronounce "damnation and hellfire over my dead body." If anyone was to speak, he had said, it would have to be the Reverend Milma Lappala from Virginia, Minnesota, at a simple grave side service.

Father said, quietly, "They won't like it." Mother did not reply, but one look at her drawn, determined face told me that my brother's wishes would be honored, no matter what "they" thought. Suddenly, I was very much afraid.

Once I had heard some neighbors talk of that "shocking Unitarian preacher, a woman yet!" A sinful pagan, they had called her, who "should be run out of town." The Finnish words had an ominous sound that made this terrible woman into some monstrous gorgon.

The day of the funeral in that rocky graveyard was both dreadful and beautiful. The grave was open—that was the dreadful part—the yawning, dark cold grave in all that warm spring sunshine, with the plain brown wooden coffin beside it, next to a large pile of stony soil.

Reverend Lappala (who, to my great relief, was not a monster after all) stood at the head of the coffin, calm, sedate in a dark blue dress and hat, almost prim for a "heathen." Beside her, one hand resting gently on the cas-
This incident obviously continued to inspire my mother sixty years later. Its story has inspired me since childhood, and it has inspired three generations of Unitarian Universalists in my family. As a result, when asked me to give the message here on Labor Day, I felt compelled to go back to my roots and examine the ministries of Risto and Milma Lappala, since their ministries and efforts were inexorably tied to the labor movement among Finnish immigrants on Minnesota's Iron Range.

Professor Martti Kaups of the University of Minnesota in Duluth writes that by 1905, Finnish immigrants composed the largest foreign-born population on Minnesota's Iron Range, 39.8 percent of the total foreign-born population of 14,923. Of the Finnish male labor force, 90.6 percent were employed as day laborers or miners, in the mining industry or in related industries.2

The popular song "Sixteen Tons"3 very accurately described the conditions under which they worked. For example, in 1904 the Stratton Mining Company, in a cost-cutting measure, reduced wages for mine workers from $1.75 a day to $1.60 a day. This move prompted the Eveleth Mining News to note: "How can they expect to live on $1.60 a day when they have to pay $20-$24 a month board, buy rubber clothing for work in the mines and work only twenty days a month?"4

If you ever go to the Iron World Exhibit in Chisholm, a museum dedicated to the iron mining industry in Minnesota, one of the exhibits you will see is a miner's monthly paycheck in the amount of two cents. That was how much the miner worked left after the deductions for board and other expenses. Indeed, those miners who came out two cents ahead at the end of the month were the lucky ones. Most "owed their souls to the company store."5

However, it was not only the slave wages that were the problem. The conditions in which the miners worked were horrendous. Professor Kaups writes the following description of conditions in the copper mines in Michigan. The iron mines in Minnesota were not much different:

Besides a physically taxing 10-hour day, six days a week spent in the shaft mines, some of which reached to depths of more than 2,000 feet below ground level, the miners and laborers were exposed to hazards associated with mining. Particularly the use of explosives, falling rock and cave-ins of the hanging walls and roofs supported by timber, resulted in injuries and death, and men leaving some of the more dangerous mines for work elsewhere. Nor was the climate in the mines healthy. There was evidence that the mines were poorly ventilated, and that sanitary standards were left to the discretion of rodents. A report describing a mine accident in one of the Keweenaw copper
mines in which seven men were killed as a result of a cave-in, notes that: “Before their bodies could be recovered from the ruins, they were so badly eaten by rats as to be almost unrecognizable. Rats infest the copper mines, and they are of great value, acting as scavengers—removing all the refuse and filth which otherwise accumulating would be unendurable.”

Finnish-Americans had essentially two responses to the enslaving and dehumanizing conditions of mine labor. The first was the response of the Finnish Evangelical Lutheran Church, who advised workers to tolerate the misery and injustice, because their rewards would come in the next life. The second response was that of the Finnish Socialists, who actively organized to combat the oppressive conditions in the mines.

The responses were roughly equally divided. Professor Douglas Ollila of Augsburg College writes that the Suomalainen Soisialistimaristo, or the Finnish Socialist Federation, could claim as members roughly twenty to twenty-five percent of the Finnish population. The Finnish Evangelical Church, the fundamentalist church about which my mother wrote, could claim a membership of an additional 25% of the Finnish population.

In the early 1900s the Socialist Federation was taken over by the IWW, International Workers of the World, a radical labor union, whose objective was to organize all industrial workers in all industries. In 1907 the IWW organized an industry-wide strike of the iron mines, closing the mines in an effort to improve the wages and working conditions for the miners. The result was an unmitigated disaster for Finnish immigrants on the Iron Range. Professor Ollila writes:

As a result of the strike, the Finnish community faced disaster. Those Finns who had been active organizers and members of the union were blacklisted and many were forced to flee into the surrounding countryside to try their hands at farming. Some Finns who had no part in the strike at all were victims of discriminatory striking practices since it was often assumed that all Finns were Socialists or at least undesirable.

To this day, descendants of Finnish immigrants continue to attempt to eke out a living farming the rocky ground of Minnesota’s Iron Range. These farms, by and large, relate directly back to the fact that, as a result of union activities, Finnish Americans were systematically blacklisted from the mining companies and from the economic opportunity that went with the mining industry. As a result, the Finnish community was irrevocably divided between the religious, so-called “temperance” Finns, on the one hand, and socialists, on the other.

An Iron Range town would have a church and temperance hall, where one group of Finns would gather, and a Socialist guild or Socialist opera house, in which the Socialist Finns would gather, and ne’er the twain did meet. I attended a conference on Finnish immigration in the early 1970s. That conference literally marked the first time in fifty years that descendants of temperance Finns and descendants of socialist Finns had met under a single roof and spoken to each other.

It was into this climate of economic exploitation and injustice, labor unrest, and bitter hatred and division among Finnish immigrants, that Risto and Milma Lappala began their Unitarian ministries in Virginia, Minnesota, in 1911. They met at the Lay College for the Ministry in Revere, Massachusetts, where Milma was a student and Risto, a Congregational minister, was a teacher. The more he studied theology and philosophy, the more disenchanted he became with traditional Christian doctrine, and the disenchantment showed in his teaching and ministry. As a result, in 1910, Risto and Milma Lappala received an ultimatum from the Finnish Congregational Church in Fitchburg, Massachusetts. Clara Stocker, Milma Lappala’s biographer, described the ultimatum as follows: “Accused of holding unbiblical and false conceptions of such articles of faith as the Holy Trinity, the authority of the Bible, miracles, redemption, and the saving efficacy of the blood of Christ, they were ordered to preach the Gospel or to leave the fold.”

They left the fold. In 1911, both Risto and Milma Lappala joined the Unitarian ministry. That year, Risto’s father took ill in Finland and died. His father’s death required Risto to go back to Finland, leaving Milma alone in the United States. All alone, she got her first glimpse of the type of abuse she would receive in her later ministry. Clara Stocker writes of Milma:

She began to receive newspapers printed in the Finnish language with long, abusive articles directed at herself and her husband for their heresy. The tone of these articles was so virulent that she dreaded the sight of a newspaper in the mail. She and Risto represented the anti-Christ. People were warned to have nothing to do with the Lappalas and one article went so far as to say these people would see the errors of their ways when they found their daily bread denied them.

Upon Risto’s return from Finland, he and Milma left Massachusetts in 1911, intending to travel to Seattle. They got as far as Utah, where they received a telegram from a group of Finnish immigrants in Virginia, Minnesota. Risto had worked for a brief time as a columnist for a Duluth immigrant newspaper and
became acquainted with things on the Iron Range. The telegram urged them to come to the Iron Range, set up a church and preach to the unchurched. They responded to the telegram, established their church in 1911, and attained their own building in 1912. Risto’s salary was paid by the American Unitarian Association; the congregation consisted almost entirely of impoverished mine workers, laborers, and farmers, so they got precious little support from their congregation. As a result, Risto and Milma Lappala lived most of their ministry in nearly abject poverty. However, this did not mean they were not effective. Clara Stocker wrote of Risto:

His sermons were brilliant and profound. If at times, some of his auditors were not able to follow him, they were impressed and awed by the wealth of his knowledge and his facility of expression. His sermons abounded in quotations from great thinkers and those interested to learn the source were astonished to learn that he could name, not only the volume, but the exact page on which the quotation could be found.

Within the divided Finnish community, Risto Lappala sought to forge a middle ground. He saw liberal religion as a distinct alternative to the fundamentalism of the Suomi Synod Lutheran churches, on the one hand, and radical IWW socialism, on the other. He wrote in the American Unitarian Association newspaper (the equivalent of today’s UU World):

Two years ago the name “Unitarian” or “Unitarianism” was, generally speaking, entirely unknown to the Finnish people. Only one interpretation of religion was prevalent, that was the traditional one. That doesn’t then mean that it was generally accepted, far from it. There was, and there, are two mutually exclusive, active parties among us,—the materialists and the orthodox, the former being Socialists and the latter Lutherans, both of which are living at the cost of the other extreme. All those who were reluctant to stay with the orthodox wing or unwilling to ally themselves with the arrogant (Socialist) materialists had no other alternative to choose. So they kept themselves alone, and there are very many of them.

As a result, Risto Lappala provoked hostility from both camps. The Lutheran church continued to consider him a pagan and anti-Christ. Moreover, the Socialists saw his alternative as a threat to their movement. Professor Ollila notes that in 1915, a Finnish Socialist newspaper published a scandalous attack on Reverend Lappala, accusing him of all kinds of terrible things. The paper had to close down after only a few issues, as a result of a $15,000 defamation suit filed against it by Reverend Lappala. However, notwithstanding the hostility, there were converts. Risto’s persuasive message provided a clear alternative to the fundamentalist orthodox church, and many Lutherans came over. Moreover, the Socialists, while publicly denouncing Lappala, quietly sent their children in large numbers to Unitarian Sunday school, since it continued to provide training in Finnish language and culture, in a manner that was a clear alternative to the training they would get in the Lutheran church. As a result, generations of young Socialists were educated in the ways of Unitarianism.

In 1923, Risto Lappala left Minnesota for Red Lodge, Montana, where he had, for several years, assisted in creating a Unitarian congregation among Finnish miners in Montana. This area was also the scene of a great deal of IWW activity. After his return from Montana, Risto Lappala died at the age of 39. For years, I have been raised with the story that while in Montana, he was tarred and feathered by the Suomi Synod Lutherans, as a result of his being the anti-Christ and his sympathy for the mineworkers in their struggle against the company. Carol Hepokoski, the most recent minister of the Virginia Minnesota Unitarian Church and the source of much of my material on Risto and Milma Lappala, tells me that another rumor floating among those congregants was that he was tarred and feathered by IWW, as a result of such things as the libel suit against the Socialist newspaper. However, she suggests that the tarring and feathering story is largely apocryphal, and the incident may not have occurred at all. She tells me that the medical report makes no mention of injuries from the tarring and feathering.

In any event, in 1923, when Risto Lappala died, his life insurance had elapsed, leaving Milma alone with their children, the responsibilities of the ministry, no money, and creditors hounding them. Nonetheless, Milma was determined to carry on, and carry on she did. For the next twenty-seven years, until her death in 1950, Milma Lappala was a solitary voice on Minnesota’s Iron Range, carrying the message of immigrants’ rights, women’s rights, social justice, reason, and peace. She came from the theist, as opposed to the humanist, wing of Unitarianism, but her theism was definitely Unitarian in its character. On the subject of God she wrote:

I do not think my children would call me a loving mother if I let them suffer when I might relieve them, if I punished them when someone else was naughty and then, if they did not call me by the right name condemned them to eternal hell. That’s the way God has been presented to us. What I am contending for is that we will never find the God above us until we have found a God within us.
In a radio address on the role of the family, Milma stated: "[The family's] business is not to get children ready for Heaven, but to train them to make all life heavenly and build the Kingdom of God on Earth, which it rules with the message: Peace on Earth and good will toward men."

As was the case with Risto before her, Milma appealed to both extremes of the divided Finnish community, provoking again both hostility and success. As was the case with our family, Milma appeared to be at her persuasive best at funerals. Carol Stocker writes: "Thus it happened that a Lutheran family who greatly admired the Reverend Milma Lappala asked her to say a few words at the interment of a young daughter. The funeral sermon had been delivered in the church by the pastor. The family had not thought to consult him before asking this friendly service of Mrs. Lappala."

The event created a scandal among Lutherans, and a ruling was established that, henceforth, none but a Lutheran minister might speak at the cemetery. Soon after this ruling, a great admirer of the Lappalas, though not a member of the church, bought a lot in this cemetery in order to bury his wife. To his grief, he found that he could not engage the Reverend Milma. At his death, it was discovered that the man had bought two lots in another cemetery, stating in his will that his wife was to be removed and buried there by his side and that the Reverend Milma should speak at their graves.

Milma would also speak at funerals of Socialists. Now, the level of hostility that the Socialists, by and large, had for Christian churches cannot be overemphasized. This hostility was perhaps best expressed in a song by Joe Hill, the IWW poet laureate. Entitled "Pie in the Sky When You Die," it was sung to the tune of the traditional Christian hymn "In the Sweet Bye and Bye." The chorus goes as follows:

You will eat bye and bye,
In that glorious land above the sky.
Work and play, live on hay,
You'll get pie in the sky when you die.

Despite that general hostility to religion, any number of Socialists would request Milma's services at their funerals, often for one of two reasons. First of all, there remained among Finnish immigrants a substantial amount of superstition, even among the most ardent atheists. Finnish culture is steeped in folklore, mythology, and superstition, as evidenced by the great Finnish epic poem, the Kalevala, a rich repository of magic, folklore, and superstition. Oftentimes, even the most atheist of Socialist Finns tried to hedge their bets. Secondly, many cemeteries would not permit internment in the absence of a clergy person presiding over funeral services. In either event, Milma Lappala was preferable to the hellfire and damnation of the Lutheran church.

Describing these occasions, Clara Stocker writes that many Socialists came to funeral services with the intention of heckling, harassing, or ridiculing Milma Lappala. However, while they came fully expecting to hear "Pie in the Sky," what they heard instead was the compassionate and compelling message of liberal religion. Socialists who had come to heckle or harass instead lined up to shake her hand after the service and to ask her incredulously, "Can this be religion?"

Apart from the story about my own family, my favorite story about Milma Lappala is the invitation she received to speak at the Finnish Socialists Guild. The invitation came not from the Socialist leaders themselves, but from a group of women, many of them wives of the Socialist leaders. When Milma spoke to them, she spoke of the new freedom for women brought about by industrial development, which gave them time to think, time to study and work for political advancement and spiritual development. After she spoke, the women invited Milma to become a member of their group. Upon receiving the invitation, Milma noted that a number of the women's husbands had come to the back of the room, some of whom were her more persistent hecklers. She responded to the invitation, saying: "I see that you have a number of the home guard here. Perhaps they may have some objection."

A man spoke up, "Yes, I think it would be dangerous to welcome a Reverend among us. Very likely she would want to lead you women."

Milma responded, "But if I happen to have something to offer the women that they really want, something of value to them in their daily life, should I not be allowed to give it and they not to take it?"

"Yes, but a minister is always trying to get something for his church."

"Not in our church; we are free in mind, and we are of the seeking kind. We are only looking for the truth."

Another man spoke. "How can the Reverend Lappala, with her lined purse, be one of us?"

"The difference in our purses is so small," replied the minister, "that if all of us put together what is in our purses, the whole amount would be so small that there is certainly nothing for us to quarrel about. Could a difference of two dollars or five dollars come between us?" She was voted into the group. Once again, Milma Lappala had reduced a giant beetle of prejudice into insignificance.

From 1974 to 1976, I served as Legal Counsel for the Minnesota Civil Liberties Union. During that period of time, one of projects was the formation of "area
committees" in outstate Minnesota. These area committees would organize civil libertarians and bring civil liberties issues in outstate Minnesota to the attention of the state office. One of our most active area committees was the Iron Range Area Committee. While serving as legal counsel, I attended one of the first organizational meetings of the Iron Range Area Committee. And where should it be held but at the Unitarian Church of Virginia, Minnesota. I remember that the first thing that I did when I set foot in that church was run over to the chairperson of the area committee and ask her, "Was this Milma Lappala's church?" If it is possible for a Unitarian Universalist to believe that he is treading on sacred and hallowed ground, believe me I had that feeling, when I was told that, yes, indeed, this was Milma Lappala's church.

So on this Labor Day, I would ask that all of us remember the efforts of the courageous Finnish Socialists and the IWW, who would not be content with "Pie in the Sky When You Die" and risked everything they had to fight for social and economic justice on Minnesota's Iron Range. And, I would ask that we remember, as well, the pioneering ministries of Risto and Milma Lappala, who, in a climate of bitter division, could look to their left, look to their right, face hostility from both directions, preach the truth of liberal religion, and reduce giant beetles of prejudice to insignificance.

Randall D.B. Tigue is an attorney in Minneapolis, Minnesota, specializing in cases involving the First Amendment.

1. Ethel Erkkila Tigue, manuscript in family collection, 1984.
2. The author no longer has access to this and several other sources quoted in this sermon.
5. Lyrics from "Sixteen Tons."
7. Conversation with Carol Hepokoski, professor at Meadville-Lombard Theological School, Chicago, IL.
8. Milma Lappala, collection of sermons, Iron Range Research Center, Chisholm, MN.
10. Ibid.
Transcendentalist, proto-feminist and radical, Margaret Fuller met the American mind head on in the early part of the nineteenth century. As editor of the Transcendentalist magazine, The Dial, she brought the Transcendentalist movement to the American public. As an early feminist who sought to develop the minds and lives of young women through her conversations, she awakened a new generation of women’s thinking. And, as radical, she came into her own.

Margaret Fuller is a remarkable person who is a credit to our heritage. But that information alone does not necessarily justify a sermon. I began this sermon with biography. How is biography sermon?

The question lying behind this question is a deeper one: Why is it that we Unitarian Universalists make such a fuss over our forebears? Case in point: If it were any larger, the portrait of Susan B. Anthony at the First Unitarian Church in Rochester, New York, would be a mural not a picture. That congregation, rightfully, take great pride in suffragist Susan B. Anthony’s membership in the congregation.

There are frequent discussions of forebears among Unitarian Universalist minister. We have T-shirts that list as many Unitarians and Universalists as you can get on a T-shirt without the need of a magnifying glass for reading the list. We teach our children about them in our religious education classes. But, before I talk about Margaret Fuller, I would like to clarify why am I doing it on Sunday morning in a sermon.

The late Frank Gentile, long-time minister of Northwest Church in Southfield, Michigan, once commented that we Unitarian Universalists make a big deal about our historical people because we don’t have a central figure like Jesus or the Buddha. That makes sense to me. My childhood Lutheran church focused on the Bible and on Jesus. I didn’t learn much about Martin Luther and didn’t know of the existence of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran theologian and martyr, until I wasn’t a Lutheran anymore. But we Unitarian Universalists focus on people in our history.

We honor Origen, Francis David, Faustus Socinus, Michael Servetus, King John Sigismund and his mom, Queen Isabella, of Transylvania, and then that great cloud of witnesses from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is a source of pride that people like Clara Barton, Susan B. Anthony, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emily Stowe, the great painter Arthur Lister, Robert Munsch, Gene Roddenberry (originator of Star Trek), Pete Seeger and many others were, and are, part of our heritage. All these people are sources of pride, but how to talk about them in sermon?

I have some concern that we exercise a kind of hero/shero worship that has as much power to move us out of the spiritual and justice work of the here and now as the power to move us into such work. Hero/shero worship makes what was done before us more significant than what is possible among us now. They were so big, so remarkable, so... perfect. But none of these people was perfect. Every last one of them had broken parts in their lives, troubles and sorrows they couldn’t fix, like every one of us. But we tend to treat them as if they were perfect. So how does biography become sermon?

These people who came before us, whom we honor so much, were people like us. Nobody is perfect; all of our lives have difficult moments, years, and decades! Knowing whole stories, including the broken parts, of the most famous and courageous among us is a healthy tonic to thinking that we can’t do what people like Susan B. Anthony or Margaret Fuller did a hundred years ago and more. Superman, Spiderman, Wonder Woman, the one-dimensional heroes I grew up with, ended up making me feel less able, not more able. I don’t want to have one-dimensional Unitarian Universalist heroes and heroines that make me, or make any of us, feel less able. Our tradition is dedicated to empowering our lives.

Talking about our forebears in a whole manner, as well as speaking of our institutional history in this way, is helpful to us. There used to be an adult education curriculum called “The Disagreements Which Unite Us.” It looked at issues that have caused Unitarians and Universalists consternation over the last two centuries. It explored how we have come to be the religious people we are, through our fights and our problems, through the people who wrestled through them. The curriculum helped students see that people are forever wrestling through
hard issues, institutionally and personally—people in our tradition, people like us, like Margaret Fuller.

Margaret Fuller was not one-dimensional! She struggled and wrestled, met the issues of the day head on and made mistakes, alienated people close to her, alienated the nation for awhile, left the country to escape the mess. She wasn’t an easy woman. But she wouldn’t have been Margaret Fuller if she had been a simple person. She wouldn’t be a model if she had been simply a woman of her time. And thus I offer this sermon on a complex woman, a person like you and me, never simple.

As fifteen-year-old Margaret Fuller made clear in a letter to a younger girl about her studies:

"I rise a little before five, walk an hour, and then practice on the piano, till seven, when we breakfast. Next I read French—Sismondi’s Literature of the South of Europe." She ends the letter with this statement: "I feel the power of industry growing every day, and, besides the all-powerful motive of ambition, and a new stimulus...I have learned to believe that nothing...is unattainable."²

Margaret would learn of things unattainable. But, at the time she wrote this letter, she was fifteen! She led a remarkably intellectual life, more academic than most Americans then or now, far more academic than any other girl of her time. Her father’s challenge was the force behind the education she received. He wrote from his Senate office in Washington: "Tell Margaret I love her if she learns to read." She did—at age three.

Her father challenged her and taught her but he couldn’t teach her what to do with her genius or her education. Margaret didn’t know what to do with it either. One biographer said of Fuller that she was “living a problem the more oppressive and insidious because she couldn’t name it.”³ It was a suffering that contributed to intense and pervasive migraine headaches as well as to chronic insomnia throughout her life. Margaret Fuller was not perfect but she kept on. She suffered but didn’t surrender. Her prayer was this: "Give me truth, cheat me not by illusion."⁴

Perhaps it was because of this prayer that she gathered young women for "Conversations." For five winters Margaret and twenty to twenty-five young women met over tea in the parlor of a friend to discuss important philosophical questions of the day. She used her intellect and education; she handed on its importance to other young women, so that they would gain access to a life of the intellect, so that they would not be cheated by illusion. Perhaps she hoped to find in that group of women someone she could genuinely talk to. In her journal she wrote: "I must take my own path, and learn...without being paralyzed for today. We need great energy, and self-reliance to endure."⁵

Margaret Fuller was not a perfect woman; she made mistakes. There were rules for the Conversations: certain topics were forbidden. There was to be no discussion of abolition. She struggled (like us!) and wrote in a letter:

For all the tides of life that flow within me, I am dumb and ineffectual...I love best to be a woman; but womanhood is at present too straight-bound to give me scope. At hours, I live truly as a woman; at others, I should stifle...

With the intellect I always have, always shall, overcome; but that is not the half of the work. The life, the life! O, my God! Shall the life never be sweet?⁶

Our Unitarian and Universalist forebears were difficult people, like we all are and they got on with it—mostly!

Margaret Fuller’s biographer Belle Chevigny says something else that fits for me about the importance of learning about who this woman was:

"I found in Fuller much more than I had bargained for—a woman who can speak to us still on the problems of reconciling productive independence with emotional needs, desire for singular achievement with sisterhood, feminism with other social issues, the strain of struggle with the desire for peace and acceptance, and intellectual idealism with an imperative need to act on material reality."⁷

Fuller was a woman very much alone. Edgar Allan Poe, for example, described three classes of humans: men, women, and Margaret Fuller.⁸ Aphasia, courtesy of Pericles in Greek mythology, was the only model she could find for herself, except for women in Europe, like George Sand, whom Fuller met near the end of her life—complex, difficult, struggling, human.

When Margaret Fuller was twenty-six years old she met Ralph Waldo Emerson, then thirty-four. He introduced her to Transcendentalism, for her a religious affirmation of the life of the mind. For several years Fuller was editor and literary critic for the Transcendentalist magazine, The Dial. She absorbed Transcendentalism—and grew beyond it. Now, she wouldn’t have been able to imagine not including discussion on abolition and other justice issues of her day, and weighing in on them. Transcendentalism, with its too often emphasis on the life of the mind, was not enough for her.
She traveled one summer to what was then the United States frontier, on boats and canoes along the Great Lakes, outside the confines of Boston life, a trip that also moved her outside the confines of the interior life, farther into public life and public concerns.

She entered the fullness of her public life in America when she wrote Woman in the Nineteenth Century, the first American exploration of women’s lives. In the same year Horace Greeley hired her as the editor of the New York Tribune as the first woman to write for a major newspaper. She visited the famous prison at Sing Sing and the Bloomingdale Asylum for the Insane, and wrote about the terrible conditions and what work other women were doing to make life better for the imprisoned and the mentally ill. But her book, Woman in the Nineteenth Century, was reviled, creating more controversy than she could tolerate, so she finally escaped to Europe.

In Milan, Margaret met radicals during a time of growing ferment in Italy that would turn that country into revolution at the end of the 1840s. And she met nobleman Giovanni Angelo Ossoli. Somewhere along the way they married. Somewhere during that time they had a baby together. Through that time they lived in the revolution. Ossoli fought as a soldier, and Margaret became hospital director on a small island in the Tiber River. Their baby nearly starved—left with so-called friends—separated from both of them.

Her friend, William Henry Channing, wrote letters praising her courage. She wrote back, disagreeing:

You say you are glad I have had this great opportunity for carrying out my principles... I rejoiced that it lay not with me to cut down the trees, to destroy the Elysian gardens for the defense of Rome; I do not know that I could have done it. And the sight of these fair nobler growths, the beautiful young men, mown down in their stately prime, becomes too much for me. I forget the great ideas, to sympathize with the poor mothers, who had nerved their precious forms.... You say, I sustained them; often have they sustained my courage; one, kissing the pieces of bone that were so painfully extracted from his arm.... One fair young man, who is made a cripple for his life, clasped my hand as he saw me crying... and faintly cried, "Viva L'Italia."

"God is good; God knows," they often said to me, when I had not a word to cheer them?

It strikes me, even now, that this letter includes no mention of her separation from her infant son.

After the war, Margaret, her husband and their son embarked for the United States. Within yards of the Jersey shore a storm tore at their ship, and Margaret, Ossoli and their son all died.10

She had much yet to live for. She had much yet to bring to public conversation. A book manuscript drowned with her. But in a December 1849 letter, in the midst of revolution, she wrote her friend, Ellen Channing, what could be called her epitaph: "I neither rejoice nor grieve, for bad or good, I acted out my character."11 Her last letter to Quaker friends, written June 3, 1850, ended: "with most affectionate wishes that joy and peace may continue to dwell in your house, adieu and love as you can."12

We all struggle with our own issues, wrestle with God and demons, meet the day head on and make mistakes. We alienate people close to us and run away from some of the roughest, hardest tangents that come our way. We aren’t easy people. We aren’t simple, acting out our characters, trying to live the life that is most possible for us. We wouldn’t be heroes and heroines, models in our own ways, for the lives of the next generation, if we were simple. We are called to join together in courage and wisdom, in truth and trust, to affirm and live by what we know and what we learn. We are called to affirm and engage in the disagreements that do not destroy us, and—in our ongoing commitment and love of life and one another—make us who we are.

Like Margaret Fuller, let us say: "Adieu, and love as you can."

REFLECTIONS, 2004
Rev. Christine Hillman
Born: September 29, 1949
Ordained: June 2001

The particularity of women’s lives, in history—my own, my daughters’ and granddaughters’—grew in meaning throughout the 1980s for me, especially in the context of a poetry and reading group at my home church, Birmingham Unitarian Church in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. In the womb of that group, I first encountered such writers as Adrienne Rich and Doris Lessing. My feminist heart grew and blossomed in further opportunities to participate in the weekend workshops sponsored by the then flourishing Michigan District’s Chapin-Crane Women and Religion Team and attending the first continental gathering of Unitarian Universalist women in Lansing, Michigan in the autumn of 1980.

Learning of the life and too early loss of promise that was Margaret Fuller prompted the writing of this sermon during my ministerial internship with the Revs. Dr. Richard S. Gilbert and Helena Palmer Chapin at the First Unitarian...
Church of Rochester, New York. Most of the people who heard the sermon there, and every time I've preached it since, have responded with amazement that such a woman as Margaret Fuller is part of our Unitarian heritage and that they had never heard of her before. Her "Conversations" with women at the home of Elizabeth Peabody intrigue many who hear the sermon. The sermon and such response have been heard from New York to Michigan to Ohio and in southwest Ontario now. There remains much work to be done to understand the women who came before us, who paved the path to whatever accomplishments we make today and into the future.

What a gift it was to be encouraged by friends to apply for the MSUU sermon award and then to win it! Sharing Fuller's life and the fullness of the sermon at General Assembly became one of the opportunities of a lifetime and I am grateful. Winning this award encouraged and stretched my love of and ability to write and to preach sermons; a stretching of my love for ministry and Unitarian Universalism.

Baby boomer and Hoosier, Christine Hillman lives by Lake Erie in beautiful southwest Ontario, Canada. She is married with three adult children and two grandchildren. A 2000 graduate of Meadville Lombard School of Theology, she currently serves as the parish minister of the historic Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda, an historic Universalist congregation. She has been a Unitarian Universalist since the mid 1970s, when she and ten others started the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Kokomo, Indiana.

1. Susan B. Anthony regularly attended the First Unitarian Church in Rochester, NY, beginning in the 1850s, but did not officially sign the membership book until 1893.
3. Ibid., 6.
4. Ibid., 3.
5. Ibid., 108.
6. Ibid., 56.
7. Ibid., 12.
8. Ibid., 19.
9. Ibid., 354.
10. Margaret Fuller and her family died in the shipwreck, July 19, 1850.
12. Ibid., 497.
I was pleased when the Imam of a tiny, nearby Muslim Center approached our congregation to host an interfaith panel. When I asked him the topic, he said, "Women and Religion." He told me it was in response to the Southern Baptist Conference's ruling that the Bible prohibited women from being pastors of churches. I said, "Mr. Rahim, you are a brave man."

And the night of the conference I wondered if he realized just how brave he was! I fretted as the list of panelists grew to ten—a stretch for any panel—but when I looked across the row at the unlikely assortment of human beings to assemble in our painfully segregated community, I felt blessed. We told stories about women. A nun from Baltimore spoke of the hard, unglamorous and, yes, exciting world of her order and the woman who founded it. A student rabbi spoke of a woman who paved the way for women in the rabbinate. One of the first female Episcopal priests to be ordained and then ordered to leave when she came out as a lesbian spoke with joy about Buffalo Calf Woman. A Quaker elder spoke of Lucretia Mott. (Of course!). A soft-spoken AME (American Methodist Episcopal) laywoman spoke movingly of her mother. An elegant professional woman in a headscarf spoke of Muslim law and being black, American and professional. The question we had asked the panelists was: Who is your religious heroine?

I chose as my heroine Lydia Maria Child, an abolitionist, who was born in 1802 and died in 1880. Today she is remembered for this hit single: "Over the river and through the woods to grandfather's house we go." But in the mid-1800s her name was a household word. When she was very young, it became obvious that she was brilliant, but when she begged to be educated, she found no college open to her. She summed up Boston culture in these words: "The world seems to me one great 'Circumlocution Office,' conventionally arranged to prevent people from doing anything real, or feeling anything real." This was the struggle of women of her class and race: to be and not merely to appear. Like many girls of her era, Maria (as she was generally called) received her education from her brother, Convers, who would go on to become a Unitarian minister. She was lucky in one respect: Convers was a gifted and inspiring teacher and did not hesitate to introduce her to all the intellectuals and reformers in his circle.

At age 26, Lydia Maria Francis married young, a lawyer named David Lee Child, who has been described as "improvident." He was often in poor health and had several unsuccessful business ventures. This couldn't have been a popular or much admired marriage arrangement for that time, but some historians consider it a blessing for Maria, as she became the family breadwinner. To earn money she turned to writing. Much of her bread and butter came from writing advice books for housewives—titles like The Frugal Housewife and Good Wives. She must have been a good writer, since she liked housework about as much as say, me.

Lydia Maria Child also wrote about social reform. Her major achievement is considered to be a book called An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans. It is considered one of the earliest and most influential abolitionist books and gave an unspiring description of slavery and the slave trade. She took apart all the pro-slavery arguments point by point, and argued for slavery to end immediately, completely, with no exceptions—an extreme position at the time.

First, it was incredible that she published anything at all. Women writers of her day were called "unsexed." Taking up this particular cause finished her off in the eyes of many, many people. Most white northerners, if they didn't profit from slave labor, pretended that slavery either didn't exist, or that it couldn't be all that bad. White women were especially sheltered from it. Child described clearly, though in mild and indirect language by today's standards, the particular horrors of black women's lives. And if all that weren't scandalous enough, she didn't stop at condemning Southern bigotry. White northerners were also guilty of treating blacks with indifference or contempt made all the harsher without any contact or possibility of affection between them.

Sales of all her other works plummeted with the publication of this book. Publishers wouldn't consider anything new she wrote, and she lost her editorship of a children's magazine. The Childs went into debt and lived in extreme poverty. But Maria saw how her book could change people. It is remarkable to me, in this century, to read about people being converted to abolitionism—that you would actually need to make an argument for it. Her book influenced many prominent Unitarians, including William Ellery Channing; he favored a gradual end to slavery, including a plan for colonization to Liberia. The two of them argued several
times about this, and eventually Channing began to preach abolition more and more directly. And he suffered for this—people in his own congregation would cut him off in the street when they saw him.

In the beginning of An Appeal, Child writes: “I am fully aware of the unpopularity of the task I have undertaken; but though I expect ridicule and censure, it is not in my nature to fear them.” Writing the book and staying part of the resistance taught her something very important about her own struggle for independence. On a more basic level, she understood deeply something I am still trying to understand myself: “In toiling for the freedom of others, we shall find our own.”

Maria Child is also my heroine because she stayed this course so long. She worked for anti-slavery, and she supported black regiments during the Civil War and the emancipation of blacks—that is to say, she stayed with this cause for more than forty years. That’s a long time to fight for anything—to keep your passion alive. When she wasn’t writing or lecturing, she organized bazaars to raise funds for antislavery work. People scoffed at these fairs in the beginning but stopped when they were found to raise surprising amounts of money. During the war, she sent packages to freed families, which included clothing, sewing supplies, and stories about black heroes, like Frederick Douglass and Toussaint L’Ouverture. She was motivated by great compassion and love.

And she was interested in justice, which is the main reason she’s my heroine. She worked for justice and not charity. Charity work, doing good deeds for those less fortunate than yourself—raising money, giving food baskets etc., has long been socially acceptable work for women. Much less acceptable is to talk about justice, about rights, about trying to change a whole system in which your audience benefits in one way or another.

This is as true today as it was in her time. David Hilfiker, a current-day physician, makes the contrast clear:

“Justice has to do with fairness, with what people deserve. It results from social structures that guarantee moral rights. Charity has to do with benevolence or generosity. It results from people’s good will and can be withdrawn whenever they choose... Charity does little to change the wider social and political systems that sustain injustice... People who have done well in a system are usually not interested in changing it drastically—in fact, they may be diametrically opposed. Charity offends almost no one; at one point or another, justice offends practically everybody.”

Working for justice means that you are willing to look at and be so angry about the unfairness of something that you are willing to say or do something you know will offend some people. An activist friend of mine cheerfully describes herself as a “professional irritant.” Forty-plus years is a long time to offend people. We need heroines to help us stay the course.

We need heroines now more than ever before. I am hearing more and more reports from the front lines that students in middle schools and younger are under siege by drugs and alcohol, by expectations for sexuality at alarmingly younger and younger ages. Girls especially. Girls are sexualized at earlier and earlier ages, physically and verbally harassed in hallways and open areas of schools in record numbers. This situation alarmed Unitarian Universalist psychologist and professor Mary Pipher. She wrote Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls, she said, because she is seeing record numbers of girls with severe traumas in adolescence—eating disorders, drug abuse, sexually transmitted diseases. She compares these girls to saplings in a hurricane—tender plants that are unprotected in a whirlwind of social and physical pressures. As preadolescents, such girls once showed interest in lots of activities; they showed leadership, empathy and compassion, and were determined to save the world. In adolescence, these same girls become consumed with the world of physical appearances, the pressures to fit in, to have expensive things, and to abide by the ancient watchword for women: to be pleasing to the opposite sex. Their lives cease to be about BEING—that is, being the central actor of their own lives—and become more about SEEMING. I am reminded of the world Lydia Maria Child wrote about, one that was “arranged to prevent people from doing anything real, or feeling anything real.”

We still need heroines. We need to see how women can be different from what society expects from us, or dictates to us. I remember, as a young girl, devouring the biographies of courageous women who were like Lydia Maria Child. It was thrilling to imagine Annie Sullivan with Helen Keller, pumping water into one of her hands and spelling the word into the other... and breaking open the world for her. My heroines, Prudence Crandall and Mary McLeod Bethune, helped break open the world for me. People around me may have made fun of “women’s libbers,” but I knew what they were and that I was one of them. I knew by these stories. They made the world “real” for me.

Today, more than ever, we need stories about women that lift our imaginations and stir our hearts to become brave. The heroines’ tales we shared around the table at my church—Catholic, Baptist, Jewish, Native American, Muslim, Unitarian Universalist—were a taste, enough of a taste, to make me want more.
We need to be there for our girls. We need to tell them the stories about the boundaries that were set for us, and the women who broke through them. Let us tell them, again and again. Amen.

REFLECTIONS, 2004
Rev. Barbara Hoag Gadon
Born: April 12, 1961
Ordained: June 1, 1997, Ludington, Michigan

I wrote this sermon for an interfaith panel presentation, when I was serving my first parish in Easton, Maryland. The presentation was initiated by a tiny African American Muslim community, and in our tiny, rural town, this was a rare opportunity to cross faith and color lines. I'd participated in years past, speaking to a handful of folks in a hidden-away community center. I encouraged Mr. Rahim, the imam, to ask each panelist to invite guests from their faith communities. That year, he had suggested "Women in Religion" as the theme. I narrowed it to a question: "Who is your spiritual heroine?"

We held the panel discussion in our church that year, and I set up three long tables, gently bowed toward the audience. All panelists were women. We looked glorious up there, I'll tell you. I began my welcoming remarks with, "Mr. Rahim, you are a brave man."

The evening held its excitement and frustrations. Some of the panelists didn't quite understand the question, and spoke out of confusion. Men in the audience gave sugary tributes to their mothers. But there were moments of connection and power within the audience. I was pleased to have guests of many religions ask our members present to describe our faith. I felt a bond among all the women in the room, as I described how Child did not shrink from reporting the horrors of slavery, especially those visited on the slave women.

Winning the MSUU award was, well, fun! Speaking at General Assembly was very exciting, and I couldn't resist saying, "It's a good thing I talked with Julie Denny-Hughes, your contest coordinator, before I came over. She informed me that MSUU was not really a pageant, per se. So I left my swimsuit and high heels in my room."

I moved on in my ministry a few years later; at this writing, I serve as the Associate Minister at First Unitarian Church in Wilmington, Delaware.

1. Lydia Maria Child, 1857
3. Lydia Maria Child, An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans (1833), in Standing Before Us, 287.
I need my sheroes, women that hold up half the sky. Women who are not afraid to claim their place in the world, who speak out and fight against injustice because it is the right thing to do. Sheroes like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, born in 1825; involved in not one but five movements: abolition, suffrage, temperance, the children's movement and the literary movement. She was a member of First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia. Harper was one of the first paid lecturers hired by abolitionist associations to lecture and represent anti-slavery organizations around the country. I need me some sheroes.

Harper spent two weeks with the wife of John Brown to provide emotional support to Mrs. Brown during her husband's trial. Harper was a strong figure in the suffragette movement and formed alliances with persons such as Susan B. Anthony. She was one of the first African American women known to publish a short story, in 1859, and the second to publish a novel, in 1892. She did not live to see the fruits of her suffrage efforts; she died nine years before women received the vote in 1920.


I need my sheroes like Unitarian Fannie Barrier Williams, a free African American living with her two siblings and parents in Brockport, New York, in the 1800s. They were the only African American family in that town for years. When Fannie moved south to take a teaching position, she was shocked at the awful conditions and mistreatment she experienced merely because she was African American. Fannie eventually joined All Souls Unitarian Church in Chicago and met Celia Parker Woolley, another Unitarian woman who would later become a famous minister. The two women's friendship lasted forty years. Fannie helped found two interracial benevolent institutions, in addition to founding the Provident Hospital and Training School for Nurses in 1891. In 1905 she and the Rev. Celia Parker Woolley founded the Frederick Douglass Center. Fannie died March 4, 1944, in Brockport at eighty-nine years young.

Yes, I confess, I needs my sheroes like Marcella Walker McGee, an African American Unitarian. As a baby, Marcella was christened at the Congregational Church and attended Sunday school at the Ethical Culture Society, where her parents were members. In 1945 Marcella married Lewis Allen McGee, an African Methodist Episcopal minister. Lewis, long drawn to Unitarianism, entered Meadville Theological School, but when he completed his studies he was told he would have to form his own church, since at that time no white Unitarian church would call an African American minister. So Lewis, Marcella and a friend formed an interracial group in South Chicago, and they named it the Free Religious Fellowship. Within the year the congregation had grown, and they received the full support and funding of the American Unitarian Association and the Unitarians in Chicago.

Much of the Fellowship’s success was due to Marcella. She created numerous groups and activities, including a choir, study groups and a women's group. In 1960 Marcella was elected to the continental board of the joint Alliance of Unitarian Women and the Association of Universalist Women. She was instrumental in bringing the two women’s groups together in 1961-62, when they merged and became the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation. Marcella later received the Clara Barton Award from the UU Women's Federation, an award that recognizes women over eighty years of age who have made outstanding contributions to Unitarian Universalism. Marcella McGee was lauded for her devotion to issues of racial justice, social equality and the upliftment of women. She remained strong until her death at ninety-two, on May 28, 1997.

Now you know the drill: "I needs my sheroes." Sheroes like Annie Bissell Jordan Willis, an African American Universalist. Her father, the Rev. Joseph F. Jordan, was one of the first African American Universalist ministers. The entire family devoted themselves to the little school and church established in 1894 by Universalists for African Americans, in Suffolk, Virginia. In 1929 at the age of
thirty-six, Annie became the principal upon her father’s death. The school now became known as Jordan’s School or simply “Miss Annie’s.” Without her father to preach, the church closed, but the school lived on through Annie’s devotion, until her retirement in 1974. Even then, she continued to be involved as a volunteer. Always thinking about her children, the day before she died she spoke these words to the new director of the school, “Watch out for my children.”

Another shero was Edna Griffin, civil rights pioneer and, in the early 1970s, the first African American woman on the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Board. Griffin was best known for leading sit-ins and demonstrations in the late 1940s that forced the integration of lunch counters across Iowa. Three days before her death on February 8, 2000, in Des Moines, Iowa, Edna was inducted into the Iowa African American Hall of Fame.

A final shero, Florida Yates Ruffin Ridley, was born and educated in Boston, Massachusetts. Florida was destined to do great things because she was born into a family whose accomplishments and activism distinguished them. Her mother, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, was an abolitionist, an anti-lynching crusader, club leader, editor, orator, and suffragist. Her father, George Ruffin, was the first African American to graduate from Harvard Law School, in 1869, and he later became one of the first African American judges. Florida was the second African American teacher in the Boston Public Schools. She went on to serve as the editor of *The Women’s Era*, the first newspaper in the country that was owned, managed and published by African American women. It was the official journal of the Colored Women’s League, later known as the National Association of Colored Women. In 1920 Florida and her mother helped found the League of Women for Community Service. They also raised funds and purchased a Mansion that provided housing for women workers from the South and college students. In addition, Florida and her mother were very involved in the Negro Women’s Club Movement, a highly visible movement dedicated to the betterment of the race. Florida Ridley was also a published author of fiction and nonfiction stories and articles.

Unitarian Universalist women have made many strides and accomplishments. More contemporary projects that have been accomplished through women’s leadership include: the crafting of a new set of principles and purposes that feature non-sexist language, feminist religious education curricula, and a new hymnal. There is increasingly more evidence of feminist theology and scholarship in Unitarian Universalist circles. More and more women are moving into positions of decision-making in the Unitarian Universalist Association, on the district level and in congregations. And, women now represent 51% of active Unitarian Universalist ministers!

There are several Unitarian Universalist organizations that serve women in our movement and denomination. For example, the Unitarian Universalist Women’s Federation (UUWF), a continental body of UU women, has long attempted to lift up the diverse voices of women in our denomination. In 1976 they presented the Resolution on Religion and Human Dignity, and in 1977 the Women and Religion Resolution was passed at General Assembly. The UUWF supported the development of curricula such as *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven*, by Shirley Ranck, and *Rise Up and Call Her Name*, by Elizabeth Fisher. Their Feminist Theology Award has provided support for feminist and womanist authors over the years.

Another women-focused organization is the Ministerial Sisterhood Unitarian Universalist (MSUU) formed in 1974 for the support, concern and encouragement of women in the ministry. Among their accomplishments, they have addressed gender-based discrepancies in the ministerial settlement process and in compensation, and they have upheld and defended standards of professional ethics and practice. In 1979, they challenged the limited possibility of advancement for women ministers and asked the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) for women consultants on affirmative action for search committees. In 1990, the UU Ministers Association’s Nominating Committee submitted an all-male slate of officers for the Executive Committee. This was not acceptable to The Sisterhood. They challenged it with write-in candidates who were subsequently elected.

Lastly, the Unitarian Universalist Women’s Heritage Society, devoted to women’s history, has tenaciously worked to fulfill its mission to “reclaim, communicate, and celebrate the lives and accomplishments of Universalist and Unitarian women and to engage local congregations in the recovery of their women’s history so that our foremothers may take their rightful place in the ongoing story of Unitarian Universalism.”

Women have pushed forward the hard questions and the silent issues such as clergy misconduct, and advocated for more monitoring and victim support. Women have also challenged and innovated new models of leadership, shared ministry and alternatives to hierarchy in organizational structures.

While we have come a long way, we still have a long way to go. One of the major unexplored frontiers is the election of a woman president of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Along with that, we still have much work to do on institutional power-sharing in our movement. And while women in the ministry have
steadily increased in numbers, women of color are still a very small minority in our pews and pulpits.

There is work to be done in our seminaries. Some of them are not very welcoming to students of color, and they are not prepared to teach critical consciousness and social transformation.

Critical coalition building with women activists around social change needs to assume a more visible priority in our movement. Unitarian Universalist women must be connected to issues that promote justice and social change such as quality education and healthcare, prevention of violence, prison reform and economic justice. We must take our place on the front lines and promote interfaith solidarity in the States and around the globe on issues such as peace and social and economic justice and development.

What will be your contribution to Unitarian Universalism? The future is bright and bold. Tell me your dreams for Unitarian Universalist women—I am listening!

Blessed be! Ashe, Shalom, Amen and So it is!

Handout to Accompany “In My Sister’s Gardens”

Suggestions for things you can do to celebrate March as Women’s History Month:

- Join the UU Women’s Federation (www.uua.org/UUWF, uuwf@uua.org) and the UU Women’s Heritage Society (www.uuwhs.org, info@uwwhs.org) to support UU women.
- Visit the National Women’s History Project website (www.nwhp.org) for additional information about women’s contributions to our cultural heritage.
- Research and prepare a sermon and talk that highlights the accomplishments of UU women.
- Plan intergenerational events, such as discussions and forums about women’s contributions and related issues, or invite a local performer to enact the life of a UU woman.
- Throw a party celebrating the contributions of women and invite other community groups. Take the opportunity to build relationships with your local battered women’s shelter, women’s center, women scholars, activists, clergy and social justice groups that are focused on women’s issues.
- Start a women’s group if your congregation does not already have one.
- Purchase books from the UU Women’s Heritage Society and the UUA Bookstore about UU women and place them in your congregational library, or start a library if your congregation does not have one.
- Review your church archives to see what women have been important in the life of your congregation. Then conduct oral histories among your charter and senior members about these and other women that have contributed to the well being and life of your congregation over the years, looking for additional stories about their lives. Write up the information as part of your congregational history and timeline and present it at appropriate occasion.
- Begin to prepare for next year’s Women’s History Month using all the above suggestions to have a really outstanding tribute to UU women and all the women that have helped to inspire us and make our lives possible!
REFLECTIONS, 2004
Qiyanah A. Rahman
Born: October 17, 1948

I had wanted to become more familiar with those African American Unitarian and Universalist women that could serve as role models and a source of inspiration to me. Seeing the announcement for the MSUU sermon award convinced me that it was time to do just that and get paid for it. Once I compiled that information I wanted others to know about these women like I did.

The summer of 1998 I first gave a homily at Leadership School at The Mountain, a Unitarian Universalist retreat center in North Carolina. The homily featured Frances Ellen Watkins Harper. I researched an extensive paper on Harper as a way to learn more about her. But the first time I actually gave the sermon that includes the various women was at Northwest UU Congregation located right outside Atlanta, Georgia. It was well received. I actually wrote a children's story for each personality featured. I have given the sermon several times since then. The most recent was in a class at Meadville Lombard when I had a different reader deliver the story of each woman featured.

It was an honor to deliver the sermon at General Assembly in Quebec City. It was a small audience, but the fact that I had been selected for the sermon award almost made the delivery anticlimactic.

Winning this sermon award increased my confidence in my sermon writing and preaching. This will be the first publication of this sermon.

I currently serve as the District Executive for the Thomas Jefferson District of Unitarian Universalist Congregations and am a member of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Charlotte. I am also in the Modified Residency Program at Meadville Lombard Theological School, preparing for Unitarian Universalist ministry. As a Community Minister in formation, my interests are safe congregations, conflict management, ending violence against women and children and pastoral counseling.

I am the mother of three adult children and grandmother to Brandon. We all reside in Charlotte, North Carolina.

1. I am thankful to the UU Women’s Heritage Society and their annual calendar for the biographies on the following: Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Fannie Barrier Williams, Florida Ruffin Ridley, Marcella McGee, and Annie Bissell Jordan Willis.

A CONVERSATION WITH
JANE ADDAMS

Rev. Dr. Lee Barker
Sermon Award for 2003

Note: This sermon was written for two characters: the minister and the character of Jane Addams, who appears dressed in period costume. The two are seated in comfortable chairs, facing one another and the congregation.

Minister:

There is a sign outside her home town of Cedarville, Illinois, that says: "Cedarville, birthplace of Jane Addams, 1860-1935; Humanitarian; Feminist; Social Worker; Reformer; Educator; Author; Publicist; Founder of Hull House, Pioneer Settlement Center, Chicago 1889; President, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom; Nobel Peace Prize, 1931." In just a bit, I will more formally welcome our special guest, Jane Addams, but first I invite her to offer a reading, one of her favorites, Mathew Arnold's "Rugby Chapel," written in 1857.

Jane Addams:

Fifteen years have gone round
Since thou arosest to tread,
In the summer morning, the road
Of death, at a call unforeseen,
Sudden. For fifteen years,
We who till then in thy shade
Rested as under the boughs
Of a mighty oak, have endured
Sunshine and rain as we might,
Bare, unshaded, alone,
Lacking the shelter of thee.

O strong soul, by what shore
Tarriest thou now? For that force,
Surely, has not been left vain!
Somewhere, surely, afar
In the sounding labour-house vast
Of being, is practiced that strength,
Zealous, beneficent, firm!

Then, in such hour of need
Of your fainting, dispirited race,
Ye, like angels, appear
Radiant with ardour divine.
Beacons of hope, ye appear!
Langur is not in your heart,
Weakness is not in your word,
Weariness not on your brow.
Ye alight in our van; at your voice,
Panic, despair, flee away.
Ye move through the ranks, recall
The stragglers, refresh the outworn,
Praise, re-inspire the brave.
Order, courage, return.
Eyes rekindling, and prayers,
Follow your steps as ye go.
Ye fill up the gaps in our files,
Strengthen the wavering line,
Stablish, continue our march,
On, to the bound of the waste,
On, to the City of God.

Minister (to the congregation):

After reading a new book by Jean Bethke Elshtain, called Jane Addams and the Dream of American Democracy, I decided I wanted to hold up for you the life of Miss Addams. What better way than to invite Miss Addams to join us, and have a conversation with her here in our church? She is no stranger to Unitarianism. In 1931, she delivered the American Unitarian Association's prestigious Ware Lecture. And, although she never joined, for years she attended All Souls Unitarian Church in Chicago whose minister, Jenkin
Lloyd Jones, was her trusted colleague in many justice-making projects in the city of Chicago.²

And so Miss Addams, welcome to our church. We are so pleased that you are able to be with us today.

Jane:

Thank you so much. I’m pleased to be here.

Minister:

There is so much about your life that is of interest, and that is inspirational, that I barely know where to begin. I mentioned to the congregation that as a social reformer you are primarily known for your work in the settlement movement, and for your peace work. With all due respect, I think that you are not so well known now as you were eighty or ninety years ago. It is best probably to start at the beginning. You were born in northern Illinois...

Jane:

Yes, in 1860, in Cedarville. It was a small town, but my father saw to it that we led a very cosmopolitan life.

Minister:

In what way was it “cosmopolitan?”

Jane:

He was a close friend of the sixteenth president of the United States, Mr. Abraham Lincoln. Although we took delight in it, that particular relationship did not affect us children very directly. However, it did represent a way in which my father looked at the world. He saw himself as one who was deeply involved in the affairs of men...and women. Although he built and owned a mill, he also served sixteen years in the state legislature, and directed a bank and a railroad. So you see he infused himself into large affairs. I suppose I saw myself to be like him in that way.

Minister:

More like your father than like your mother?

Jane:

My mother died when I was not quite three years old. From that time on, I was raised by one of my sisters. There were eight children in all.

Minister:

One of your biographers says that Cedarville gave you the small town advantage of growing up in a mostly rural and classless society, that you interacted with people of a wide range of economic and cultural advantages, and that you came into contact with people from many countries of origin.

Jane:

Yes, that’s true. There was much that was gained by my childhood in Cedarville. One thing I gained was that even though our family was well off, relatively speaking, I still had the opportunity to meet, interact and—dare I say—gain the friendship of people of all backgrounds and sensibilities. I took much of that with me to the many places I traveled.

Minister:

You were not content to stay in Cedarville?

Jane:

No, I was not. Even at an early age, I wanted to head back east to attend the prestigious Smith College. It was an early disappointment that my father insisted I attend Rockford Seminary, where my older sisters had matriculated and where he had a position on the Board of Trustees. I would have rather attended Smith College. I had been accepted there, but it was not to be.

Minister:

It is understandable that your father wanted you to be close to him. Your family life had changed with the death of your mother.

Jane:

It continued to change, rapidly, I might say. When I was 21 years old, my father died. It was a devastating loss to me. It affected my physical health. It was soon thereafter that I took my first trip to Europe.
Minister:
Did you go to London?

Jane:
Yes, I also went to London. How may I describe for you the London that I saw? Let me see if I can set the scene. It was November 1883. It was midnight. We were taken to the East End section of the city by a missionary, so that we might witness the Saturday night sale of decaying vegetables and fruit. The Sunday laws in London forbade such commerce on the Sabbath. The produce could not be sold until Monday, and, as it was beyond safekeeping, it was disposed of at auction as late as possible on Saturday night. We saw two huge masses of ill-clad people clamoring around two huckster's carts. They were bidding for vegetables that were scornfully flung to the successful bidder. In the momentary pause, only one man detached himself from the group. He had bid on a cabbage, and when it struck his hand, he instantly sat down on the curb, tore it with his teeth, and hastily devoured it, unwashed and uncooked as it was. He was one of what was called 'the submerged tenth.' These were the poorest of the poor. I was on tour for two years, and it took me some time to marshal my thinking about this. I think it was really that experience, and seeing those pale hands at midnight, that caused me to want to take my role in lifting up those poor souls who were hungry and derided. Those pale hands placed me under an obligation.

Minister:
You say you needed to marshal your thinking.

Jane:
Yes, it was a progression of thought. The experience caused me first to think about my personal life and then about religion.

Minister:
It caused you to think about your personal life?

Jane:
Sir, have you not noticed? I am a woman. In my day a woman could not have both a career and marriage. Mine was the first generation of women to be college educated. We quickly learned that men did not want to marry women of the career type, and women could not fulfill the two functions of profession and home making until modern inventions made a new type of housekeeping practicable. Perhaps, I should add, until public opinion tolerated the double role.

Minister:
So you chose profession over marriage.

Jane:
Eventually I did. My progression of thinking still had to take into account my religious leanings.

Minister:
You were raised in a Protestant home. Your father took you to church. What more was there to it?

Jane:
We were Protestant, but the church never seemed very important to me. In fact, it left me wanting. I was more interested in the life of Jesus and his social gospel than I was in preaching.

Minister:
For the time, Social Gospel was a new and different kind of theological expression, wasn't it?

Jane:
The social gospel movement preached that we needed to retool our Christianity, so that it would do practical work. My friend, Leo Tolstoy, called it the "sermon of the deed," meaning, for instance, that the Sermon on the Mount was only as good as the action it inspired. The Christ spirit could only be actualized through the use of the hands. Jesus was a forerunner of the founding fathers. He was the ultimate preacher of democracy, instructing us that all people are equal in God's eyes—all people—no matter their station in life.

Minister:
You didn't belong to a church?
Jane:

No, I did not, until 1885. I was home from my first tour of Europe, and I realized that I shouldn’t remain aloof from Cedarville’s modest institutional statement of Jesus’ teachings, so I joined our local Presbyterian church. It humbled me to do so. It was not to anyone’s benefit that I stood apart from it, waiting for the perfect embodiment of an ethic of universal fellowship. I still think that my later innovations came closer to embodying that ethic better than any church ever did. Take no offense, please.

Minister:

None is taken. You’ll have to tell us all about those later experiments.

Jane:

Please, not “experiments,” but “innovations.” “Experiments” leaves the impression that we were using people to conduct our own laboratory tests. That was not the case, not at all.

Minister:

I stand corrected. Those innovations were widely successful. We’d like to know why and how. Tell us a little bit about Hull House.

Jane:

Ahh, Hull House. It took a while to establish Hull House. It became apparent that the time and the place were just exactly right for it. Vast sections of Chicago, at the end of the nineteenth century, weren’t so very different from the East End section of London I described for you previously. On my second trip to Europe, I returned to London, and became acquainted with that amazing institution, Toynbee Hall. Instead of offering old-fashioned relief to the poor, it provided mutual engagement across class lines, with university graduates and the privileged living and working among the poor. Toynbee Hall gave working men and women an education that had not before been available to them. It gave them culture and art and books. It was a settlement house, a social settlement. That is when I became resolute. My friends and I needed to find a big house in a congested quarter of Chicago, and make our own attempt at a settlement.

Minister:

What was Chicago like in those days? You made some mention that it was much like London.

Jane:

I’ll tell you about the neighborhood and the house. Although it developed into a major facility with a gymnasium and a large library and the like, we began with a house. The house was an ample residence, well built in 1856, and somewhat ornately decorated. It once stood in the suburbs, but the city grew up around it. Within a few blocks, there were ten thousand Italians, and many Germans. The side streets were almost totally Polish and Russian Jews. To the northwest were many French-Canadian people, to the north, Irish and first generation Americans. The streets were inexpressibly dirty, the number of schools inadequate, factory legislation unenforced, the street lighting bad, the streets themselves unpaved, and the stables defied all laws of sanitation. Hundreds of houses were left unconnected to the sewers.

Minister:

That is the neighborhood where Hull House did so much good?

Jane:

Yes, if numbers are any indication. More than two thousand people a day used the facility in one manner or another. We needed to do something not just for the people, but with the people. We established a house where they could live and learn. We provided day care and arts and theater and discussion groups. We offered lessons on how to read and helped people to...oh, there was a myriad of activities that we provided over the years. I can remember our charter by heart. It was our intention “to provide a center for a higher civic and social life; to institute and maintain educational enterprises and to investigate and improve the conditions of the industrial districts of Chicago.”

Minister:

“Improve the conditions?”
Jane:
It wasn't enough to make Hull House an oasis. We wanted to improve the city structures that contributed to the problems.

Minister:
So you became garbage inspector, factory inspector, labor organizer, school board member...

Jane:
Anything I could, really, to get the city moving in a direction that added to our great American democracy.

Minister:
Didn't your political involvements also signal the beginning of the end to your mass popularity?

Jane:
People didn't like their ways challenged. Politicians often did not see that it was in their own best political interests to lend a hand to the immigrants of our neighborhoods. It is also true that other politicians embraced me like no other. Are you aware that I seconded Teddy Roosevelt's nomination when he ran for president on the Progressive ticket in 1912? Truthfully, my popularity began to wane with the onset of the Great War in 1914.

Minister:
Tell us about it.

Jane:
The same impulses that drove me to establish Hull House also guided me to a strict pacifist stance. I was very concerned about children. In the cities they were being prized more for their labor power than for their innocence or their tender beauty; their ephemeral gaiety. In war, they were prized for their ability to kill on behalf of old men. That is what war is. It is the pitting of young men against young men in the struggle of life and death.

Minister:
You had long been a pacifist. It is not like you were saying anything new when you went down that track.

Jane:
People are not as resentful of pacifists in times of peace as they are in times of war. I made some unfortunate mistakes in explicating my position.

Minister:
What kind of mistakes?

Jane:
I refer to what became known as the "Bayonet Speech." I delivered it in 1915 in Carnegie Hall in New York City. The Great War had already begun in Europe. There was a great debate being conducted in our own nation as to the efficacy of joining in the conflict. My position and my notoriety pushed me into the forefront of that debate, and you know what position I took. In one speech, I noted that I had been told on my most recent peace mission to Europe that young men were being drugged on both sides so that they would be able to stomach killing one another with the thrust of the bayonet. My remarks were taken as a repudiation of the young men. As if I was calling them cowards.

Minister:
That created quite a public stir.

Jane:
People were outraged. I will confess that the mass psychology of the situation interested me even then. I was able to catch a glimpse into the future. My suffering was minimal compared to the harm done to others. By the time America entered the war in 1917, it had become permissible to tread on the rights of those immigrants who were foreign born, or those citizens who carried the sir names from nations engaged in the war. Vigilantism against Germans was routine. Deportations were many. Racism was as pronounced as it had been during Reconstruction. The wartime mind set was destroying the people I had pledged to help. It seemed to me to be un-American.
Minister:

That is why you continued to lend your voice to the public debate?

Jane:

I felt I had no choice. It was a very hurtful time. I recall one occasion when I was lecturing at the First Congregational Church in Evanston, Illinois. My topic was "Patriotism and Pacifism in War Time." My good friend, Judge Carter, was in the audience. As soon as I was finished, he approached the lectern, and said to the audience, very politely I might add, that he must break with me, his good friend Miss Addams. His argument was the standard one: no one should dare cast doubt on the justice of our cause while we were at war. I believe that if pacifism must stand down while war is going on, then pacifism is gutted. Yes, it hurt, and I felt a certain amount of self-revulsion going through it all, but as I said, I felt I had no choice.

Minister:

You felt self-revulsion?

Jane:

I found it quite impossible not to internalize the constant round of criticism. It placed a burden on every dimension of my being. Even my physical health went into a three-year decline.

Minister:

How do you look back on it now?

Jane:

I continued to work for peace, even after the war. I will tell you why. In the spring of 1919, after the hostilities had ceased, but before the terms of peace had been negotiated, I went to Europe to see the destruction for myself. Day after day, as rain, snow and sleet fell steadily from a leaden sky, we drove through lands laid waste. The ground was furrowed in all directions by trenches and shell holes. Everywhere we saw starving, tubercular children. They stood at station platforms without any of the bustle and chatter usually associated with large numbers of children. We saw their winged shoulder blades standing out though their meager clothing, the little thin legs, which scarcely supported their emaciated bodies. These are the most innocent vic-
tims of war. When Jesus of Nazareth said, "Suffer the little children to come unto me," he meant permit them to enter into a way of life based on a notion of love and understanding. War is the ultimate denial of that little piece of scripture.

Minister:

You remained true to that belief. In your final years, you took your commitment to Internationalism and Peace to the whole world.

Jane:

My father taught me to think large, to be of great consequence. Since I had the platform, and the goal was to create peace between nations, then to other nations I needed to go.

Minister:

Is this why you created the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom? My mother was quite active in a chapter in the 1960s and 70s.

Jane:

How is the League doing these days?

Minister:

It is still a force to be reckoned with in the various justice and peace movements. For the time being at least...well, like you said, wartime is not time for pacifism. The league suffers. But, it remains true to your spirit. In another time, it will be of greater consequence again, I believe.

Jane:

How about Hull House? How has it fared in this day and age?

Minister:

The neighborhood changed again. The University of Illinois grew to the point where the house became enfolded by the campus. The organization has evolved into Hull House Association. All throughout Chicago there are community centers in low-income neighborhoods that serve under the Hull House banner. They try to keep true to your original mission, but they became decentralized. It is the same all over the country. The settlement
house movement that you popularized evolved into a system of community centers.

Jane:
So the need for such facilities has not been eliminated?

Minister:
I’m afraid not.

Jane:
Things haven’t gotten better for immigrants?

Minister:
I wouldn’t say that. I wouldn’t say that you and others have not had a positive effect on the world. We have some way to go.

Jane:
Is that why you invited me here?

Minister:
Actually, all the issues that you were engaged in are alive for us today. Poverty and waves of new immigrants, yes. It is also wartime, and there are profound fears that our civil rights are being destroyed, and it is still highly unpopular to lift up alternatives to war while we are engaged in war.

Jane:
How may I be of help? This is your time. These are your struggles. My day has passed.

Minister:
You give us hope, just by your example. You give us hope. I’m struck by how courageous you were on behalf of the disenfranchised, and I’d love for some of that courage to rub off on me.

Jane:
I am not certain of that “courageous” observation, however much I appreciate it. What I accomplished can be stated very simply and succinctly. The whole list fit right on my headstone in Cedarville, Illinois.

Minister:
The headstone simply says: “Jane Addams of Hull House and The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom.” It doesn’t mention your Nobel Peace Prize. For that matter, it doesn’t even suggest that you were the founder and leader of those organizations.

Jane:
That is because those causes belong to everyone.

Minister:
We’ll take that to heart. At least we will try. We will try to have your hope in our hearts and issue it to the world.

Jane:
Remember, “Sermon of the deed!”

Minister:
“Sermon of the deed,” indeed. “On to the city of God,” as you read to us today. We thank very much.

REFLECTIONS, 2004
Rev. Dr. Lee Barker
Born: August 26, 1952
Ordained: May 21, 1978, First Universalist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota

This sermon was originally delivered on June 9, 2002, at Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church in Pasadena, California, where I had served as senior minister since 1994. There were many circumstances that contributed to my desire to write and deliver “A Conversation with Jane Addams.” Jane Addams first caught my notice when I attended seminary in Chicago in the middle 1970s. While a student, I learned about her work with Chicago’s immigrant population
and the nation's peace movement. When the new biography by Jean Bethke Elsh慎重 arrived in bookstores, my interest in her was sparked anew.

The sermon was conceived in the months between the United States' war with Afghanistan and the White House's promotion of a new war with Iraq. Following the terrorist attacks on 9-11, it was a time when there was a widely held perception that Arab Americans had been targeted for unfair treatment by government policies. Our church in California was a leader in an interfaith effort to stem the procession toward war and to reverse the harsh treatment that that had been visited upon Muslims. I wanted to convey to the membership that their anti-war activities and their compassion toward immigrants were not without historical or religious precedent. The story of Jane Addams had relevance for the times that spoke for itself.

I chose the format of a dialogue between Jane Addams and myself because I have always had a difficult time making history interesting through straight narrative. Whenever I try, I begin to sound like the history professor whose lectures are skipped by his or her every student. The technique of bringing Jane Addams into the sanctuary was one I used in order to keep the attention of the congregation. It worked. That Sunday, stage and screen actress, Kim Gillingham, played Jane Addams. She had procured a period costume from a local movie studio and she was riveting. She gave the congregation a Jane Addams whose humanity was obvious and accessible.

I did not tell the story of Jane Addams because she was a woman. I told the story of Jane Addams because she stood for values I have long embraced. So, when a friend proposed that I apply for the MSUU sermon award, I was taken aback. Thinking about it, I could see why the suggestion was offered, but I was dubious. "Surely, I couldn't win," I responded. "After all, I am a man." "That's exactly why you should enter," came the response.

I'm still not sure what was meant by that last comment, but enter I did. And I was quite stunned and thrilled when it was announced I had received the award. For me, the award became one more celebration of the truth that no matter how different from one another we human beings may be, there is always more that connects us than separates us.

Ironically, I have moved back to Chicago in the last year. Every once in a while the city serves up a reminder of its citizen, Jane Addams: a drive by Hull House, a walk through a park named in her memory, a reference by a local historian. Such reminders call up not only her glorious mark on humanity, but also this great religious movement that affirms all people and through which, even a man can win a sermon award presented by a ministerial sisterhood. I am proud, indeed.

Lee Barker was raised in a Universalist home in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and graduated in 1974 from the University of Minnesota. He received a Master of Arts degree from the University of Chicago in 1976, a Doctor of Ministry from Meadville Lombard Theological School in 1978, and a Doctor of Divinity from the school in 2001. Lee served as senior minister of Neighborhood Unitarian Universalist Church in Pasadena, California, (1994-2003). He has also held pulpits in Montclair, New Jersey (1983-94) and Harrisburg, Pennsylvania (1978-83). Lee moved to Chicago, Illinois, in 2003 with his wife, Kristina, and daughter, Ava, to serve as President of Meadville Lombard Theological School.


RESOLVE

Rev. Amanda L. Aikman
Sermon Award for 2004

What follows is a cautionary tale about where volunteering to teach Sunday school can land you.

Our story starts with James Nichols, who was a student at Harvard Divinity School in the early 1840s, preparing for the Unitarian ministry.

Then as now, seminarians were required to do field work in the community or local churches, as part of their education. Young Nichols was assigned a project that proved to be too much for him: to teach Sunday school to twenty unruly women prisoners in the East Cambridge House of Corrections. One session with this motley group was enough to convince him that he was out of his depth. He approached Dorothea Dix, a friend of his family’s who was then in her late thirties, and begged her for advice.

Nichols was astonished when, on the spur of the moment, Dorothea, an experienced schoolteacher, proposed to take over the class herself. Her own delicate health notwithstanding, she appeared at the jail on the frigid morning of March 28, 1841, and taught the class without incident—the prisoners, no doubt, being cowed by her rigid and firm approach to discipline and order.

Just as she was about to leave the jail, Dorothea noticed that several cells holding insane prisoners had no heat. Indignant demanding an explanation, she was told by jail officials that having hearth fires in the cells would be an unnecessary hazard, because lunatics could not tell the difference between hot and cold. Dorothea knew better, but she was unable to convince the jail officials to change their policy. So she prepared a petition to the East Middlesex court. It was granted at once. "Thus," wrote Nichols many years later, "was her great work commenced."

When I was a teenager, I used to watch the young athletes at the Olympics, particularly the figure skaters, with awe and envy. What did it take to be great? Besides talent, it took unceasing self-discipline; it took a willingness to be single-minded and to pass up most of the fun of being a teenager—all for the possibly elusive moment of glory, the chance of greatness and immortality. The thought of such a sacrifice fascinated me. Would I ever be willing to pursue something with such resolve, such determination and firmness of purpose? The answer, most likely, was no. Even if I'd had a talent to do some such thing, I was too lazy and too much of a dilettante, too fond of watching TV, reading books, walking in the woods, giggling with my friends.

In my own late thirties, the same age that Dorothea Dix was when "her great work commenced," I entered seminary and learned about the great Unitarians of the early nineteenth century—the ministers and reformers who drove themselves to the point of nervous collapse, requiring restorative trips to Europe—and wondered what made them tick, and whether it was worth it. I wondered if I would be willing to sacrifice my own chance at a rounded and balanced life for the chance to be great.

We have heroes; we admire people who accomplish great things, who have steely resolve that carries them through obstacles; we are interested in their lives because we want to find out what makes them forge onward. We wonder whether the same things can help us get past our own obstacles and blocks. Often, we believe that getting past our obstacles and blocks would result in our happiness. Or perhaps getting past our blocks and obstacles would make us good; perhaps, given the right motivation and the right resolve, we would accomplish great things and make the world a better place.

Dorothea Dix was a New England-bred reformer who accomplished amazing things, significant achievements that clearly made the world a better place. From that pivotal moment in the jail, her life was changed forever, as she embarked on an extraordinary journey of reform and social betterment that would make her mark on the world. Yet personal happiness and contentment were always to elude her.

Her experience in the East Cambridge jail made Dix wonder about conditions in jails and almshouses in less populated areas of Massachusetts. She was particularly distressed to learn that the mentally ill were commonly housed with felons. She prepared herself to embark upon a mission of reform, to call for decent accommodations for those suffering from mental and emotional disease. She read all the available literature on mental illness and treatment facilities. She interviewed physicians about the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness. Her knowledge of mental disorders soon compared favorably with that of leading hospital superintendents of her day.

As her knowledge expanded, Dix developed a bold and remarkable plan to provide further intellectual foundation for her reforms. To investigate accommodations for the mentally ill, she would personally visit many jails and almshouses.
She would do this at a time when women seldom traveled alone or attempted to influence legislation, funding, or the regulation of public institutions.

Dix was soon visiting jails and almshouses all over Massachusetts to conduct one of the earliest social research projects in the United States. She collected data on the number of occupants in overcrowded facilities and kept careful notes on conditions, which were far worse than she had anticipated. She found the mentally ill chained in cellars, living in accumulations of their own excrement and often suffering from the cold. Most jails and almshouses were poorly ventilated. They seldom provided proper nutrition or exercise. She was often so nauseated by the smells that she had to go outside for a bit to recover her composure.

Though jailers and proprietors of almshouses often tried to prevent Dix from seeing their worst cases, she demanded and usually got full access. "I cannot adopt description of the condition of the insane secondarily; what I assert for fact, I must see for myself." 

Based on her observations, she crafted a powerful "memorial" or document for the legislature. Unable to present it herself, since women were not allowed to do so, Dix asked an ally to present it on her behalf. In 1843 it was presented to the Massachusetts legislature by Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, Director of the Perkins School for the Blind, and himself a strong advocate for the mentally ill. The memorial first met with criticism and denial, but independent observations soon supported the truth of her claims. The legislature allocated funds for a large expansion of the State Mental Hospital at Worcester. A major victory for Dix and for the insane poor of Massachusetts, the act was also a stimulus for wider efforts.

Even before completion of her work in Massachusetts, Dix had begun investigating conditions in the jails and almshouses of other states. In 1844 she presented a memorial to the New York State legislature, and in 1845 two more, to New Jersey and Pennsylvania lawmakers. Her pattern in each state was the same. She traveled extensively to collect data, and then prepared a memorial bearing her carefully documented findings, to be delivered by a friendly and well-known political figure, pleading for funding for better accommodations for the mentally ill. For over a decade, her memorials were presented in state after state, often with gratifying results. Hospital after hospital was erected, and additions and improvements were made to existing facilities.

Dorothea became very well known, as a result of her reforms, and found that wherever she traveled, people knew who she was. And she traveled a lot. Here is a partial description of trips she made in 1846, when she was 44. She traveled primarily in creaky coaches and occasionally on horseback, for this was before trains were commonly used for passenger travel:

In September she covered prisons on Long Island and in New York City, New Jersey, and eastern Pennsylvania. After two weeks in and out of Harrisburg, preparing to lobby the Pennsylvania legislature for a state asylum, she left for Baltimore and then Pittsburgh. By the end of October in addition to touring Maryland and Virginia, she had traversed most of Pennsylvania and into Ohio. November found her in Kentucky, and then she went to Tennessee.

Although her health was very poor, she managed to cover every state on the east side of the Mississippi River. In all she played a major role in founding thirty-two mental hospitals, fifteen schools for the "feeble minded," a school for the blind, and numerous training facilities for nurses. Her efforts were an indirect inspiration for the building of many additional institutions for the mentally ill. She was also instrumental in establishing libraries in prisons, mental hospitals and other institutions.

For six years, Dorothea lobbied Congress to get the federal government to support her great dream—to ensure long-term help for the insane poor by giving a land grant of twelve million acres to be set aside as an endowment, the income to be spent for the benefit of the blind, deaf, mute and insane. President Millard Fillmore supported the plan, but by the time it passed through Congress, he was no longer in office, and his successor, President Franklin Pierce, vetoed it.

Dorothea was, to put it mildly, a little upset and deeply disappointed. She wrote to a friend, "The poor weak President has by an unprecedented extremity of folly lacerated my life." Dorothea foresaw for the first time, the eventual demise of her political career and, with it, her dream of a more virtuous society. She recuperated from the loss of her dream by traveling to Europe to rest. Once she got to Europe, she got right back in the saddle again (out of habit, we must presume), resuming her process of inspecting jails and almshouses there as well. She traveled to England, Scotland, France, Austria, Italy, Greece, Turkey, Russia, Sweden, Denmark, Holland, Belgium and Germany. She had an audience with the Pope, who expressed an appreciation for her works and compared her to Saint Theresa. Between 1854 and 1856 she made an effective change in the way Europeans dealt with the mentally ill, as she had in the United States. All in a matter of just two years.

When the Civil War started, Dorothea was named Superintendent of United States Army Nurses. She carried out the enormous tasks that this job required but did not do a very good job working with people—she lacked the social skills of an effective administrator, with her impatience, her eccentricities and prejudices (such as her refusal to hire Catholics to be nurses), and her passion for autonomy. She was almost impossible to work with. Eventually, the surgeon general basically
fired her. The war over, Dorothea Dix, now sixty-four, resumed her activities, traveling as far as California to review asylums and deal with state legislatures, but the glory days were over. She lived her last few years at a hospital that she herself had founded, and sustained a voluminous correspondence right up till the end, saying to a visitor, "even lying on my bed I can still do something." 

Ironically, the many asylums that she founded were eventually seen to be part of the problem, not the solution, as mental illness; and today, as in her own day, nearly one-third of American jails regularly hold people who have mental illnesses, incarcerated on minor charges because there really is nowhere else for them to go. Dorothea Dix rejected the idea that medical welfare was charity. She insisted that it was a right. Today our society is still struggling with how to deal with those who suffer from both poverty and mental illness. Dorothea Dix was very much a woman of her times, and had many failings, but she was a crusader in a vitally important cause, who made a positive impact on more lives—and consciences—than can be counted.

We might suppose that to accomplish so much, Dorothea Dix must have had a supportive family. But no, far from it, her childhood was so painful to her that she told people, "I never knew childhood," and in her later years, when potential biographers were sniffing around, she took pains to destroy everything—every letter, every diary—that gave any clue as to her upbringing. 

What we know is that although her grandparents were quite wealthy, she was raised in poverty on the Maine frontier by a mother who suffered from what sounds like depression and a father who alternated between bouts of alcohol abuse and religious excess. An evangelical Methodist, Dorothea's father was a lay minister and backwoods missionary who obliged the family to live in poverty while he went off to preach to the unsaved. Arent Methodist, who saw human life as a desperate struggle between God and Satan, the Dixes believed a brutal discipline to be their solemn religious duty toward their children. "When Dorothaea was seven, her father began careening between violent extremes of alcoholic dissolution and abrupt religious frenzy...As a child, she had no way of escaping...in a climate where winter lasted half the year, wherever they went, the family was cramped together in one or two rooms." 

Dorothea eventually escaped, as a teenager, to the care of her grandmother and other relatives in Boston. But, in her soul, she never really escaped from those horrible scenes of drunkenness and religious fanaticism. The anger and rage that any child would feel as a result of such a family life was driven inward. Dorothea became a stern and strict teacher, always needing to be in control of herself and her environment. Her rage, lacking healthy outlets, often turned into depression; at times throughout her life, she was afraid that she would never escape from the bondage of what was then called "melancholy." But one thing always helped lift her up: her work.

What enabled Dorothea Dix to achieve her extraordinary success? Three things. First, her friends. She had only one truly close friend, Anne Heath, and they were friends for fifty years. In her younger years, Dorothea found heroes—men she admired, chiefly Unitarian ministers—and spent time with them to absorb their knowledge and philosophy. In her later years, Dorothea developed a knack for making friends in high places, for impressing them with her high ideals, and getting them to support her efforts.

The second thing that enabled Dorothea to achieve so much was her religion. Because of her dreadful childhood with those wild and emotional back-country Methodists, she sought out a more restrained, rational, and thoughtful religion, and found it in Unitarianism. Although her grandmother dismissed Unitarianism as just a passing fad, young Dorothea loved the sober new religion and read all the published sermons she could get her hands on. Twenty-two-year-old Dorothea told her best friend, Anne, that she had finally found "a church of my own." Among her mentors were: Henry Ware, Jr., who preached to his elite congregation about their obligation to the poor; and Joseph Tuckerman, our very first community minister, who did not just preach about rich people's duty to the poor, but immersed himself in the reality of poverty, visiting the poor in their homes and helping to provide for their material needs; and William Henry Furness, her minister during a time when young Dorothea lived in Philadelphia. Furness taught that the Christ of the gospels was not a spirit cloaked in human form but that he was essentially human. It was not so much that Jesus was merely human, he declared, but that all humans contained the spark of divinity. And most importantly, the leader of these Unitarian ministers as well as Dorothea's mentor, the frail and soulful William Ellery Channing, whose eloquent words on the duty of Christians to not just sit around and talk, but to press themselves vigorously into society, filled Dorothea with a burning desire to help solve the social problems of the age.

And a third thing that enabled Dorothea to achieve so much, and the one that I think is the most fascinating, was her own woundedness. Having been abused as a child, she set out to rescue children through education and charitable efforts—though she was a brutally punitive and controlling teacher who inspired terror in her young charges. Suffering terribly at times from depression, she felt an affinity with the mentally ill, and believed that sanity was a fragile and temporary thing. Near the end of her life, she wrote to a friend that the doctor had told
her she would never recover from her final illness, "but he comforts me with the assurance that I am in no danger of ever losing my reason."

A teacher of mine at seminary often said, "Where your deepest wound is, there is your greatest gift." Could the resolve, the grit, the tenacity, the unflagging passion that Dorothea Dix employed to bully a dozen state legislatures into passing bills to establish asylums—could that resolve even have existed if she had not been deeply wounded? Have you known passionate reformers in your own life—animal rights activists, for instance—and it has always been my observation that the ones I knew personally had been abused or neglected as children. Do those who advocate passionately and self-sacrificially for the helpless and voiceless of our world do so because they identify so closely with the helplessness and muteness of the victims they try to help?

Reading Dorothea Dix's biography, it is clear to the modern reader that she would have benefited enormously from ordinary psychotherapy; she would have been able to get rid of some of the terrible memories of her childhood, learned to channel her anger appropriately, perhaps to live a well-rounded life, with healthy relationships and a measure of joyfulness. And had that been so, if her wounds had been healed, would she have had the resolve she needed to accomplish all that she did? Without the driving force of her depression and despair—depression that disappeared when she mounted into a coach or boarded a ship and took off on another crusade—without that driving force, would we ever have heard of her?

And conversely, if Dorothea Dix had not had the religious context of Unitarianism to help her turn her anger into accomplishment, would she simply have succumbed to depression? Would she perhaps have turned into one of those pathetic wards of the state that she so pitied?

Is the pain of the unhealed psychic wound necessary to drive some among us to great efforts, great accomplishments? Is resolve that is based on woundedness well rooted, or are its roots shallow and its fruits ultimately harmful? Is resolve, in the end, more important than wholeness? And what of our lives, our precious unrepeatable unique lives? Is it more important, ultimately, to have made a mark, to have changed an unjust situation for the better, to have created something beautiful or significant, to have righted a wrong—or to be happy, normal, well-rounded, our contented lives obscure, our ends unheralded by history? These are questions that, if they are important to us, must be answered in the private closets of our own souls.

May you be blessed with peace and with the measure of resolve that enables you to do that which you are called to by the spark of divinity that dwells within you. Amen.

Note: This is the second award-winning sermon by this author. See her Reflections following her first sermon in this collection.

3. Dix, quoted by Gollaher.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
MSUU, the Ministerial Sisterhood of Unitarian Universalist, is an organization founded in 1974 to support women in ministry. Ten years later they created a sermon contest to inspire preaching about women and women's issues. In her ministry, Editor Dorothy May Emerson seeks to empower groups and individuals to actualize their dreams. By editing Glorious Women she helped MSUU tell its story and share these award-winning sermons with the world.

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