

**oUr edUcators**  
A Service by Fritz Hudson  
February 25, 2006

Chalice Lighting

*We need a new profession or vocation,  
the object of which shall be  
to wake up the intellect in those spheres where it is now buried in slumber -*

*(a)gifted (person), with (her or) his heart in (this) work  
to spread useful knowledge and quickening truth  
by frank and friendly intercourse  
by forming the more teachable into classes,  
and giving to these the animation of (her) or his presence and guidance.*

*(Such a) gifted (person), so devoted, might impart a new tone and spirit to a considerable circle."*

William Ellery Channing.

Introduction: Our First Gardener

How many of you attended kindergarten? Think back to what you did in kindergarten. Of all the things that you did in kindergarten, what did you like most?

(Congregational Response)

Some of you know that the word kindergarten hasn't been part of our English language for very long – for less than 150 years in fact. It was borrowed from another language. Let's see who the youngest person is who knows what language it comes from. Who wants to guess?

(German)

It actually comes from two German words: *garten* means the same as the English word it sounds like – it means garden. And *kinder*, in German, means children. Way back in 1859, 147 years ago, an English speaking person who was just a year younger than I am (pretty old), heard this word for the very first time in her life and had to ask "Kindergarten. What is that?" And her German friend answered, "A kindergarten is a "garden whose plants are human." Today I want to tell you what lead her to this conversation, and where it took her.

Elizabeth Peabody was her name. She was born more than 200 years ago near the city of Boston, all the way in the far corner of our country. She was very bright girl. Her father was a doctor; her mother was a school teacher. But it those days even the children of school teachers didn't enter school until they were eight years old. From the age of eight on, Elizabeth received a very good education in her mother's school. When she reached 16, however, her schooling was over.

Only boys were allowed to go to college then. Is that fair? No. It's un-Unitarian, in fact. It's against our religion – our principle of "equity". But that's the way it was. The only way for a bright girl to continue her education after age 16 was to read books on her own and to pay private tutors to study with. So Elizabeth did. And the only way for her to continue with schooling was to become a teacher herself, and open her own school as her mother had. So Elizabeth did.

For the next 40 years, Elizabeth taught in many schools. She helped a man named Bronson Alcott create a new kind of school where the teachers sat with the students in a circle and explored their thoughts by talking back and forth. In all schools before then, the teachers stood in front of the students seated in rows and directed their reading of books, or trained them to memorize and repeat answers to the teachers' questions. Elizabeth wrote a book about this new kind of school. She then got it printed so it could introduce this new schooling method to other teachers. That was only the first of many books she published. Elizabeth set up a store where the educated people of Boston could always find the newest books published both in our country and in other countries, in many languages. Elizabeth herself, with tutors, learned to read eight languages other than English. To her bookstore she also brought many famous educated people to teach classes for adults. Soon she herself was teaching classes and giving speeches for adults all over the area, far beyond Boston.

By the time Elizabeth Peabody reached the age of 55 she was a famous teacher, writer and speaker. And then one evening she was invited to dinner in a friend's home. Her host had four children, all younger than six years old. And they made noise and fought with each other and wrecked havoc in the house until some other guests arrived, a German man and woman with their six year old daughter Agathe. Elizabeth was astounded at what happened next. "Little Agathe had the effect in the house of a calm coming upon the storm of young life." Elizabeth said to Agathe's mother, your "child is a miracle – so childlike and unconscious, and yet so wise and able, attracting the children – who seem nothing short of enchanted." And Agathe's mother responded, "No miracle, only brought up in a kindergarten." And how did Elizabeth respond? ("What's a kindergarten?") And what did Agathe's mother answer? ("a garden whose plants are human.")

Agathe's mother told Elizabeth that kindergartens were first created in Germany by a man who first was a botanist and forester. He knew how to help plants and trees grow in the outdoors. He decided that children could be helped to grow in similar ways. He watched what they did naturally, by themselves, their playing. Then he helped them organize their play to learn from it. He did a lot of his teaching out of doors, helping the children learn, and learn from, plants and animals. Learning about kindergartens in this way started Elizabeth Peabody out on a whole new life.

After reading the German teacher's book about his school (in German of course), Elizabeth opened the first English speaking kindergarten in our country. When she felt she needed to learn more about how play and nature can teach, she traveled to Germany. She observed their kindergartens, and she brought German teachers back to our country to train our teachers. She wrote her own book about how to create kindergartens. Then she began to travel all over our country to give speeches about kindergartens and help them get started. Thirteen years after she opened her private kindergarten, she convinced the first public school to add a kindergarten, in

the city of St. Louis, closer to us here in Nebraska than to Boston. She got the U.S. Senate to order 20,000 copies of her kindergarten booklet printed, to be distributed by the U.S. Bureau of Education. Fifteen years later than that, when Elizabeth was 84 years old, she could still publish her "Lectures in the Training Schools for Kindergartners."

So all that fun you had in kindergarten, and everything you learned there? – I want you to know that it is a gift to you, and to almost all American children now, from Elizabeth Peabody. Oh – and one more thing I want you to know. Elizabeth Peabody was a Unitarian.

**Parting Song:**

*Above the generations the lonely prophets rise,  
While truth flares as a daystar within their glowing eyes;  
And other eyes beholding are kindled from that flame;  
And dawn becomes the morning, when prophets love proclaim.*

Sermon: *oUr edUcators*

*We need a new profession or vocation –  
to wake up the intellect in those spheres where it is now buried in slumber -*

I first found these words in William Ellery Channing's works, and read them here, five years ago. We were then in the run-up to a second school-tax levy lid vote in that year. Our Lincoln school board's first proposal, to raise the lid, had been soundly rejected by the voters that fall. Now they were asking us just to approve keeping the current levy lid, to prevent it from reverting to the minimum authorized statewide rate. Channing's words are from a speech delivered in 1837. The state legislature of Massachusetts then was debating whether to create a statewide board of education to set program standards for the common schools, and to employ a board secretary to ride from town to town to cajole and assist the schools to meet those standards. As the most prominent minister in Boston, the acknowledged "father" of American Unitarianism, Channing's support for this legislation carried weight. It was adopted. And as it turned out, the man who was then appointed the first secretary of this new Board of Education, who resigned his seat as President of the Massachusetts Senate to take the position, was also a member of Channing's own church. His name was Horace Mann.

Five years ago, I wondered aloud here whether our then Lincoln Superintendent of Schools, Phil Schoo, could carry the mantle Mann had fashioned for those who succeeded to his work. Ten years into his service as School Board Secretary, Mann had told the citizenry of his state: "Last year's tax – for the current expenses of the schools, was less than one mill and a half on the dollar. – no man was obliged to pay more than one six-hundred and sixty-sixth part of his property for this purpose. – Three times more than is now expended – four and a half mills on every thousand – would defray every expense and insure the result – to secure – the diffusion of almost universal knowledge and virtue, and the suppression – of ignorance and vice. Regarded merely as a commercial transaction – whose elements are dollars and cents alone – there is not an intelligent capitalist in the state would not --- assume the whole of it, and pay a bonus for the privilege."

We voters approved retaining that levy rate five years ago. So Phil carried Mann's mantle well enough. And this year, without any sermonic help from me at all, our new Superintendent, Susan Gourley, has successfully led us to an even higher percentage vote approval for a school bond issue. Horace Mann's model for educational leadership, the model shaped by our faith, is being well-followed among us today. For that we can be both grateful and proud, I think. But we are calling out now, as Channing did back then, for another "gifted (person), with (her or) his heart in (this) work to spread useful knowledge and quickening truth," as director of our own church's growth and learning program. And we have a sterling model in our heritage for this work as well.

I want to lead up to this model for our work by noting first some of the broader models of our faith in education. Elizabeth Peabody, of course, is one. And there is more to her story than I've told so far. Peabody was more than just a Unitarian church member. Her life first crossed with William Ellery Channing's when she was just 8 years old and Channing was a guest preacher in her home church, in Salem, Massachusetts. She later wrote, "I was thrilled as never before by the thought of a man's communing with God, face to face; and years after – I recognized how it had given me a sense of the eternal." (Bruce Ronda. Elizabeth Palmer Peabody: A Reformer on Her Own Terms. p.47) Channing first became aware of Elizabeth five years later when a visit to Boston allowed her mother to bring her to bring her precocious thirteen year old to a "women's conversation" at Channing's church. Afterward, the startled Channing reported to his sister, "a child (Elizabeth) ran into my arms and poured out her whole heart in utter confidence of my sympathy." (ibid.) That began an intimate relationship which ended only with Channing's death 29 years later. When Elizabeth moved to Boston as a young teacher, she joined a group which met regularly in Channing's study to discuss education. She recorded the minister saying, "The common management and domination of children (is) the opposite of education. It ignore(s) the child's consciousness, instead of drawing it out and making it understand itself, to the end of giving it the clew of self-direction." (p.88-89) Years later, when Peabody met Horace Mann as a new widower who moved into the same boarding house where she lodged, it was she who arranged for him to talk with Rev. Channing about his grief. Mann eventually was remarried to Elizabeth's sister Mary. Elizabeth, as a young woman, also got to know Ralph Waldo Emerson when he was a fresh Harvard graduate. On her young teacher's income, she contracted with Waldo to tutor her in Greek. A year later, when she asked him for a bill, Emerson refused to charge Elizabeth. He had taught her nothing, he said; she'd learned it all herself. (p.55) Years later, Elizabeth Peabody, the publisher, became editor and distributor of both Channing's sermons and Emerson's Transcendentalism journal, The Dial. Her culture-shaping final career as kindergarten movement leader grew out of this rich history in our faith.

I want to just mention here the connection of two early twentieth century educational innovators with our faith. Their deeper stories are still waiting for me to explore and relate at a future time.

John Dewey, the philosophy professor first at the University of Chicago and then at Columbia University, is often thought of as the father of "pragmatic" or "progressive" education. His religious upbringing was in the other side of the Unitarian-Trinitarian controversy, in the congregational churches of Vermont, and his adult life had not strong church dimension. In 1933,

however, at the height of his renown as the shaper of modern American education, Dewey agreed to have his name appear as one of the original 34 signatories of the Humanist Manifesto, shaped by leading Unitarian ministers of that time. Dewey's public association with this movement revealed the spiritual wellsprings of his work. It also gave the Manifesto much broader serious attention in our culture. (Jay Martin. The Education of John Dewey; William F. Schulz. Making the Manifesto.)

Roscoe Pound, as Dean of the Harvard Law School from 1916 to 1936, oversaw the creation of modern legal education. His philosophical roots were in John Dewey's pragmatism, but his religious roots are less clear. What I know is that Pound's mother Laura was educated at Lombard College in Galesburg Illinois, brought there by her Universalist minister uncle. (Paul Sayre. The Life of Roscoe Pound.) Lombard College now survives in its merger to form our Meadville-Lombard Theological School in Chicago. I know that Pound was born here in Lincoln in 1870, the same year tht our church was founded as the First Universalist Church, and that the Pound family, chiefly Roscoe's sisters (significant educators here in Lincoln in their own right) show up in our church records over the years. I look forward to learning more of how our faith and the shaping of modern legal education may have intertwined.

In the discussions on education held in William Ellery Channing's office those many years ago, Elizabeth Peabody noted that the minister though that the best reading for the young would be "Plutarch's Lives and other biographies – because the immediate causes of historical events are to be found in gifted, energetic persons." The gifted, energetic person I want to raise as the model in our search for a religious education leader was named Sophia Lyon Fahs. How many of you know her name? (~30 of 150 attendees). How many of you have read her books or even taught her courses: *Beginnings of Earth and Sky*, *Beginnings of Life and Death*, *How Miracles Abound*, *From Long Ago and Many Lands*, *The Church Across the Street*, perhaps? (~5) Let me tell you something of her story.

Sophia Lyon was born in China in 1876, the child of Presbyterian missionaries. Into early adulthood she planned her own career as a Christian missionary. In 1901, she entered the University of Chicago to train for this work, she thought. She had been warned of the University's radical intellectual atmosphere, but she confidently wrote her sister, "Many skeptics are sent out from there who were formerly professing Christians. They, however, had not found, I believe, the real fundamental Christian life." (Sophia Lyon Fahs: Liberal Religious Educator. Edith Fisher Hunter.) What she found there was the "scientific and historical" study of the Bible, led by the then President of the University, William Rainey Harper, and the development of the progressive education movement, lead by Professor John Dewey. At Chicago, Sophia met and married a fellow missionary-in-training, Harvey Fahs. Because his health was precarious, however, Harvey first took a position in the Methodist Church's National Missions Office in New York City. And Sophia continued here studies at Columbia University's Teacher's College, whose faculty John Dewey joined soon thereafter. Over the next nine years, five children were born to Sophia and Harvey. Harvey's health proved to be irremediably fragile so he settled into a career of missionary support work. Sophia spent the next twenty years alternating her attention

to her formal educators at Columbia and her children, "the most potent source of my own education (and) unwittingly my major teachers."

Sophia's daughter, Lois Fahs Timmins, has written,

- "My mother was a professional Sunday School teacher. Since she had no money for sitters, she took the children with her to whatever Sunday School she was teaching at. When she worked at the Presbyterian Church, I was a Presbyterian. As second graders, each pupil memorized all seven verses of "Fling Out the Banner," and we sang it with gusto. With each verse we could recite, our teacher stamped another black cannibal on our orange headband. (?as objects of missionizing?)

- When she worked in the Baptist Church on Park Avenue, I became a Baptist, I always marveled at the baptismal ceremonies, but my early intellectual curiosity focused primarily on imagining the locker room facilities that would go along with it.

- Later when she was director of the Junior Department of the non-sectarian Sunday School at Union Theological Seminary, I became a born-again non-sectarian. We built a model of Solomon's temple, attended services at the Baha'I temple, and celebrated the Succoth at the Jewish synagogue. We learned about Buddha, Confucius, Zoroaster, and Mohammed – along with many religious rules for good living. – We researched the relationship between religion and science when we wrote personal letters to great scientists to ask them if they believed in God: If so, why? And if not, why not? ("The Longest Sunday School Lesson," The World April 1992 pp.11-13)

From this child's eye account, you can trace the evolution of Sophia's approach to religious education. At Columbia, she observed teachers at the Horace Mann School, the College's laboratory school, and learned to focus her efforts on creating experiences for her Sunday School students. She had discovered that primitive people developed their religious ideas as they reacted to the natural world around them. She asked, 'What if today's children were allowed to express freely their reactions to the same primary phenomena – birth and death, sun and moon and stars, dreams, shadows, wind and rain? Should this not be the beginning of their religious education, with study of stories and people from long ago or far away coming only later?'

Sophia completed her master's degree at Columbia and then a divinity degree at Union Theological Seminary, at the age of 50. Immediately she was asked by the faculty to join them as a lecturer in religious education. Over the next ten years her writing and teaching became known to Unitarians. In 1930 she was invited to be a leader at a Unitarian religious education conference at Star Island off the New Hampshire coast. In the next few years she consulted with a Unitarian Association committee discussing new directions for the denomination's curriculum – something beyond the Bible-based approach which until then we had shared with "liberal Christians." In 1937, then, at the age of 61 (six years even older than Elizabeth Peabody when she started her kindergarten crusade) Sophia Lyon Fahs was appointed Editor of Children's Materials for the American Unitarian Association. And thus began the approach to children's and youth education which is at our core still.

- *Beginnings of Earth and Sky*,  
- *Beginnings of Life and Death*,  
- *How Miracles Abound*

- *From Long Ago and Many Lands,*
- *The Church Across the Street.*

These and many other works Sophia Lyon Fahs produced for us. She published her last work Worshipping Together with Questioning Minds in 1965 at the age of 89. She died in 1978 at the age of 101.

Each year at our General Assembly the most attended presentation is the Ware Lecture, named for Henry Ware, the professor whose appointment to the Harvard Divinity School faculty ignited the Unitarian-Trinitarian Controversy in 1805. This year's Ware lecturer in St. Louis on Saturday, June 24 will be the poet Mary Oliver. You are thinking about going, aren't you? Over the past 30 years, the second most attended presentation, and often the more provocative, is the Fahs Lecture, named for Sophia. This year's Fahs lecturer in St. Louis will be Rev. Dick Gilbert, minister emeritus of our church in Rochester New York. Over our 30 shared years in our ministry, I've gotten to know Dick at conferences in Oxford England and elsewhere, and indeed sitting together at Fahs lectures. I got to know him best in the night we spent in a group under arrested by the Philippine military in the midst of their conflict with revolutionary insurgents. Dick's Fahs lecture will be called "Growing People of Prophetic Fire." General Assembly registration opens this Wednesday on the UUA website, [uua.org](http://uua.org).

Yesterday, our Religious Growth and Learning Director search team – Geri Cotter, Scott Pearson, and I – interviewed our top three applicants for our position. All three of them are experienced UU educators. We have a *very* hard choice to make. We now expect to gather more information over the next week before selecting a candidate. We will present our candidate for our RGL constituents' response at a Saturday gathering which we'll schedule and announce as soon as possible.

Our model for our search will be Sophia Lyon Fahs – not her age necessarily, or her religious experience, or even her education, exactly. Our model will be her spirit. For just as William Ellery Channing those many years ago:

*We need -(a)gifted (person), with (her or) his heart in (this) work  
to spread useful knowledge and quickening truth  
by frank and friendly intercourse  
by forming the more teachable into classes,  
and giving to these the animation of (her) or his presence and guidance.*

*(Such a) gifted (person), so devoted, might impart a new tone and spirit to a considerable circle.*

### Chalice Extinguishing

*Let us go our ways now, knowing not the answer to all things,*

*Yet seeking always to learn, and to teach, just one thing more.*

John Brigham