

“The Peabody Sisters and The Newness”

A Sermon at the First Parish
in Wayland, Massachusetts
by the Rev. Ken Sawyer
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In the course of a church year, the subjects of sermons in a typical UU church like this one are apt to vary widely, poetry one week, some current social or political issue the next, then some history, or maybe theology, some practical matter regarding human relations, nature, who knows.

Such eclecticism does mean, though, that you may have made a special effort to be here this morning because you heard that I have been taking on some contemporary issues and those are the sermons you prefer -- whereas I, having been taking on some contemporary issues, figure it's time for a sermon on some part of our history. What I've had in mind are the Transcendentalists, or more broadly, “the newness,” as it was known at the time, the incredibly creative period in the decades preceding the Civil War, much of which took place in Boston, Concord, and Salem.

I have mentioned the Transcendentalists before, since they played an important role in Unitarian history as well as in the history of American literature and ideas. I have preached on Margaret Fuller, Thoreau, Theodore Parker, and of course on more than one occasion, on Emerson.

But the focus shifts somewhat if the subject is the whole range of people involved in the newness, not just the chief spokespersons but others in their camp, or at least in agreement with them on many important social issues and philosophical opinions.

This broader set of characters show up in a wonderful book that came out last year, *The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism* by Megan Marshall. By Romanticism she isn't referring to novels about love but about the philosophical outlook that spread to New England from England and Germany, “born of a widespread yearning for spiritual and intellectual transcendence...” [xx]

Here is one good description I took off the web: “Romanticism [was an] attitude or intellectual orientation that characterized many works of literature, painting, music, architecture, criticism, and historiography in Western civilization over a period from the late 18th to the mid-19th century. Romanticism can be seen as a rejection of the precepts of order, calm, harmony, balance, idealization, and rationality that typified Classicism.... It was also to some extent a reaction against the Enlightenment and against 18th-century rationalism and physical materialism in general. Romanticism emphasized the individual, the subjective, the irrational, the imaginative, the personal, the spontaneous, the emotional, the visionary, and the transcendental.

“Among the characteristic attitudes of Romanticism were the following: a deepened appreciation of the beauties of nature; a general exaltation of emotion over reason and of the senses over intellect; a turning in upon the self and a heightened examination of human personality and its moods and mental potentialities; a preoccupation with the genius, the hero, and the exceptional figure in general, and a focus on his [or her] passions and inner struggles; a new view of the artist as a supremely individual creator, whose creative spirit is more important than strict adherence to formal

rules and traditional procedures; an emphasis upon imagination as a gateway to transcendent experience and spiritual truth...; and a predilection for the exotic, the remote, [and] the mysterious....” Many would suggest that our own age in America is a Romantic one in that sense.

It is not uncommon to credit the Transcendentalists and their allies for accentuating if not generating this outlook in America. Megan Marshall’s contribution is to highlight the role that many played in the newness by telling about the Peabody sisters and their friends and partners.

Let me confess, reading her book is a guilty pleasure. She manages to mix solid historical research with stories of the sort that draw readers to *People* magazine, I think, and even to the tabloid press. The book really isn’t about Transcendentalism as much as it is about how three bright sisters each tried to figure out her place in life, when women were assuming more influence in society, and even some freedom of choice about how to spend their adulthood – but were still constrained, by economic forces, for example, and by the roles offered by partnered love.

As Marshall writes, “to all three sisters, [marriage] seemed at times a prime obstacle, a fate to be avoided for its risks and restrictions.... Gaining proximity to powerful men and with it the potential for influence ... was one choice. But it was not the only one ... for a woman who wanted, as Elizabeth [Peabody] ultimately vowed, ‘to be myself and *act*....’ The Peabody sisters struggled with the dilemma, and each one found her own set of answers.” [xvii]

Elizabeth, the oldest, would develop many deep relationships, and come close to marriage, but instead have a single life of extraordinary accomplishment. She was first a fine teacher, and drew in the next oldest, Mary, considered the most beautiful of the three, who discovered she enjoyed teaching and flourished – but eventually married a man of prominence and with him accomplished much, including three children. Sophia, the youngest, an artist, was plagued with illnesses that kept her largely an invalid until another prominent man arrived and she subsumed her life into his, again with three children.

But along with all this domestic drama, there is a deep, dark family secret that their mother only tells two of the sisters after they’ve grown, and the other not at all – that their Aunt Sophia – one of their mother’s sisters -- was not fathered by their grandfather but by a boarder, who later became their uncle, having married another of their sisters, with whom he eventually essentially adopted his wife’s sister, who was also his child.

Marshall is also able to describe in startling, even discomfoting detail the romances of the three sisters, because these people wrote so many letters and kept journals, which over twenty years she perused. There was an evening when Horace Mann, a deeply depressed young widower, finally opened up and told his grief to Elizabeth Peabody in what must have been a moment of incredible intimacy, trust, and privacy. Or so Mann must have imagined – though thanks to Elizabeth’s report of the occasion to her sister Sophia, we can all now eavesdrop.

Elizabeth had waited until her sister Mary and others had left the boarding house parlor to go to bed, leaving her alone with Mann, who “‘drew me nearer & throwing his arm around me let the tears flow. [Then he] laid his head upon my bosom and begged my pardon for taking such a liberty with his grief.’ Elizabeth assured him that he had done

nothing wrong. Indeed, she told Mann, she too ‘*needed a friend to my shattered mind and nerves.*’ That night the two formed a pact.... Horace Mann, by Elizabeth’s account, was relieved: ‘Again, again, and again he pressed me to his heart, and with floods of tears, *thanked me.*’” [252].

But wait, you say – Horace Mann? Wasn’t he a nationally famous educator, congressperson, the first president of Antioch College, and a crusader for many of the causes of that day? Well, yes, eventually, but back then he was a boarder in a house owned by the mother of James Freeman Clarke, where Mary and Elizabeth were also living.

I think it is one of the appeals of this period that the cast seems so stunningly small at times. James Freeman Clarke – I just preached on him last spring. He was the innovative Unitarian minister of the Church of the Disciples in the South End. He would end up conducting the wedding of Horace Mann and Mary Peabody.

Yes, that is how things worked out. It looked like Elizabeth might have found a partner in Mann, but it was not to lead to their marriage. Elizabeth had a remarkable capacity for developing close ties with interesting men and women, drawing out their abilities. She was amanuensis to William Ellery Channing, the founder of American Unitarianism; and the recorder of Bronson Alcott’s lessons to the children in his school, which were published. She developed a very close friendship with the radical Unitarian minister, Transcendentalist and abolitionist Theodore Parker. She started her own publishing company to bring out the work of people she was promoting, and was the final publisher of the Transcendentalist journal, *The Dial*. She established a bookstore downtown which both carried all the Tracendentalist works and was the hang-out for that distinguished crowd. She started having “conversations” for women, and idea that was picked up famously by Margaret Fuller, who held her own at Elizabeth’s bookstore. The back room at the bookstore was the scene of the wedding of Horace Mann and Mary Peabody.

But Mann’s choice of her sister Mary was not the main disappointment in Elizabeth’s romantic life – meaning romantic in the usual sense. Because there was also Nathaniel Hawthorne, like her from Salem, a somewhat reclusive young man who lived at home and wrote short stories. And was stunningly handsome. Elizabeth cultivated his writing career, as well as a very close personal relationship. They had a private agreement that they would marry. But then on one of his visits to see Elizabeth at the family home, he met Sophia, her sister, an artist who had long been plagued with migraines and other often-debilitating illnesses.

Well, you can imagine where this is going – up to the altar three years later for Nathaniel and Sophia, who then set up house at The Manse in Concord, which they had rented. The rental agent, who gave them the tour, was Ralph Waldo Emerson. I told you, the cast is small.

But what do any of them have to do with us? Here is where I get, first, to put in a good word for the Peabody sisters, Horace Mann, and others who remained Unitarian, even ardently so, when many with similar ideas took Transcendentalism to be an alternative to Unitarianism and not its cutting edge. Emerson was inactive for a while after he resigned from the Unitarian ministry; Bronson Alcott was a lapsed Episcopalian; Thoreau explicitly denied he was a member of the Concord church, though sometimes we claim him anyway. We often claim Hawthorne, too, though I was amused by a one-

sentence reference I read: “Because he didn’t attend church, Hawthorne is claimed by Unitarian Universalists.” Still, he was baptised at our Salem church, and married by a Unitarian minister to a Unitarian.

But Horace Mann was notoriously Unitarian. As Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, he advocated nonsectarian religious education. “Mann believed children in public schools should be taught the ethical principles common across Christianity but not those doctrines about which different sects disagreed.... He was criticized both by those who felt his approach to be anti-Christian and also by those who felt his ‘common denominator’ approach to Christianity were simply reflections of his own liberal interests in Unitarianism and phrenology.” [Susan Ritchie, U U Historical Society]

Later, at Antioch, even though he had joined the Christian Connexion, the folks who founded the school, “he quickly fell under the suspicion of the more conservative members of the faculty, who accused Mann of trying to make Unitarians of the entire student body.... Feelings were eased somewhat when Mann [helped] orchestrate a dramatic Unitarian bailout of the college’s shaky finances. Mann uttered perhaps his most famous words to Antioch’s graduating class of 1859, two months before his own death; ‘be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity.’” [Ritchie]

Among those we claim as our own, Mann was one of the real ones – along with being Mary Peabody’s husband. And “each of the Peabody sisters maintained lifelong affiliations with Unitarian churches, even as they moved in Transcendentalist circles where such support was sometimes unpopular. Once [Emerson’s wife] Lidian ... expressed to Elizabeth Peabody that she was grateful to Unitarianism for only one thing: it had led to Transcendentalism. Elizabeth responded without equivocation: as far as she was concerned, Unitarianism was ‘terra firma.’” When Horace Mann died, Mary came back east and bought a house in Concord where she lived with Elizabeth, the two of them continuing “to be involved in an enormous variety of reform activities including women’s rights, world peace, and Native American rights.” [Ritchie]

But maybe you’re still wondering about Horace Mann and phrenology. Among the many causes that were taken up by many of these progressive souls was science, the use of science to better the human condition and help individuals reach their potential. And the science most on many of their minds was phrenology, the science of determining character, personality, or ability by measuring the shape of a person’s head. It was taken very seriously for quite a long time, before it became obvious it was nonsense.

In a time of newness, all sorts of newness may arise, some of which may prove to be of truth and benefit, some of which may – like phrenology -- turn out to be hooey. And then there are ideas about which one might best just shrug, like Graham crackers as the all-purpose food, or health strategies like hydrotherapy. By far the most foremost among the iffy causes was temperance, which grew only more fervent as the century progressed. No doubt it did some good in discouraging alcohol abuse and providing public water fountains, though its eventual legislative triumph, Prohibition, was a failure.

But among the social causes that got bundled up with the theological outlooks of Transcendentalism – the trust in intuition, emotion, individuality, and freedom from traditional constraints – were some that look very good in hindsight, like women’s rights, opposition to slavery, and less rigid styles of education. I haven’t even mentioned that

Elizabeth was the first and leading proponent of kindergartens in America, establishing the first one.

She and her sister Mary were among the last of their generation to survive – Elizabeth the longest, until 1894. One of their biographers, Susan Ritchie, says “Until the end the Peabodys believed in the justice of [their] causes and remained convinced of the power of their optimism.” [Ritchie]

I don't always feel that optimism, and I don't always feel the Transcendentalists' Romantic belief in “the individual, the subjective, the irrational, the imaginative, the personal, the spontaneous, the emotional, the visionary, and the transcendental.” Of course, often I do. But not always. And I value a religious heritage – ours, as Unitarian Universalists -- that holds on to outlooks like theirs and raises them up – again and again – to stretch us and empower us to appreciate and embody the many ways that you and I and all of us together can carry on the legacy and hopes of Unitarians before us, like the Transcendentalists, like the Peabody sisters, like all who find hope in the best of the latest newness.