"We Are All Seekers"

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
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It's an understatement to say that education has been important in the Unitarian Universalist movement. I believe that Unitarian Universalism is what it is because of the long held values of cultivating our minds as well as our hearts. From the beginning of both the Unitarian and the Universalist denominations, religious education has been a key part of the story.

For example, the beginning of Universalism is linked with the rise of Sunday schools. Sunday schools began in the U.S. in the 18th century. The earliest schools were designed to provide literacy education to poor children who often worked the other six days of the week. Using the Bible to teach the students to read, the schools sought to educate children both for their religious edification as well as for their economic benefit.

One leader in the start of the Sunday School movement in the US was the Universalist Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence and a prominent physician. Together with two others, an Episcopal and a Roman Catholic, he helped to found the 1st ecumenical Sunday School for poor children in Philadelphia in 1790. Then in 1810, the liberal (soon-to-be openly Unitarian) church in Beverly, Massachusetts began Sunday classes specifically for the *religious* education of children. This move was <u>not</u> uniformly lauded, as critics feared that the church was encroaching on parents' territory to provide religious and moral instruction to their own children.

Yet, Sunday Schools—or Sabbath Schools as they were also called—continued to spread. In January of 1827, a group in Boston organized "The Sunday School Association" with the Rev. Joseph Tuckerman as its president. As a leader of this organization, Tuckerman supported the Boston area schools by training teachers and providing curriculum. Our morning reading came from an address William Ellery Channing gave to this organization in 1837. Notably this organization continues today as "the Unitarian Sunday School Association." Today it provides grants to develop curricula that complement the resources of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

But Unitarians didn't just support education—they also helped to *reform* education. Consider the story of Unitarian, Bronson Alcott, an innovative 19th century educator who taught in Boston. Alcott sought to draw out the innate capacity of the child to learn and to

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develop it. A contemporary of Channing, both men were formed by their Unitarian faith in the capacity of the human mind and character to be developed in knowledge and goodness.

Alcott did not venture into his project of educational reformation alone, but relied upon the help of several prominent women as teachers. Firstly, there was Elizabeth Peabody, also a Unitarian, who would go on to be known as the founder of kindergartens in the United States. The highly educated Margaret Fuller became Alcott's second assistant teacher. Fuller was a strong advocate for the education of women—providing college-level instruction for a women through a series of guided Conversations as well as writing fiercely for women's equality in her 1845 book, *Women in the Nineteenth Century.*

For a time, Elizabeth Peabody's sister, Mary worked at Alcott's school as well. After Mary's stint there, she taught her own group of students, wrote educational works for children and parents, and worked with Horace Mann in the newly created Massachusetts Department of Education. The story of Mary Peabody and Horace Mann took a romantic turn in 1843 when they were married. Mann, himself a Unitarian, is remembered as the "father of the American public school system" on a large bronze statue that rests on the lawn of the Massachusetts State House.

Why does all this matter? In my mind, the story of Unitarian Universalism is inseparable from the value we assign to education. This value is certainly inseparable from my own journey into Unitarian Universalism. Indeed, I have come to see my own journey as a mirror of the one our 18th and 19th century religious ancestors took towards a view of humanity and religion that fostered intellectual curiosity and the importance of education.

As many of you undoubtedly know, the earliest New England churches—and culture—were shaped by Puritan beliefs. These beliefs were themselves an offshoot of one branch of the religious Reformation in Europe. Namely, they were shaped by the teachings of John Calvin. Calvin's followers would bring his ideas and writings to England where they would blossom into the Puritan church, to Scotland where they undergirded the emerging Presbyterian churches, and to the Netherlands where they shaped the Dutch Reformed church. Notably, before coming to the shores of America, the Puritans first spent time among like-minded Calvinists in the Netherlands.

Where I grew up in Michigan, this Dutch branch of Calvinism is alive and well in the Reformed churches that dot the corners of towns like the Unitarian and Congregationalist churches here in New England. Grand Rapids, Michigan, where my extended family lives, is home to Calvin College and Calvin Seminary where they take their Calvin *very* seriously to this day. And so, I grew up in a culture fairly saturated with a Calvinist religious landscape and Calvinist culture. Even in my high school World History classroom, our study of the

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16th century European Reformation included a fairly detailed discussion of John Calvin's theological beliefs.

Top on that list of Calvinist beliefs is the idea of total depravity. Total Depravity is the notion that as human beings we are fundamentally corrupt. We are not born innocent, but already tainted by the impacts of sin flowing throughout the fallen and depraved human race. Foremost, this corruption decimates our moral capacity to be able to *choose* to do the right thing.

So, what does religious and moral education look like within this system? In short, Calvinists of the 18th century as well as the church I grew up in during the 20th century relied upon catechisms. I suspect that a number of you are familiar with catechisms—those little books that defined not only the proper religious *answers* that a child should know, but that often also defined the *questions* that a child should ask.

For example, the widely used Westminster Catechism begins with the question, "What is the highest and chief end of man?" (In essence, what is the purpose of human life?). The catechism answers, "Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and fully to enjoy him forever." Then, after each answer, there is a list of Biblical citations that support the answer. The role of education in this system is to memorize both the questions and the answers.

Answers are grounded in the Biblical text, because the doctrine of total depravity would teach us that we cannot trust ourselves to understand what is good or true, rather we have to be told what is right by a source outside of humanity...by a divinely revealed text. The only answers to be trusted are those given to us by a divine, and therefore uncorrupted source. As a corollary to this view, the role of the human mind is to be able to understand what God thinks . . . not to develop your own questions...and certainly not to find your own answers!

Growing up as I did as an intellectually curious young woman in a conservative Calvinist culture, I *deeply* felt the impact on this system upon my mind and my sense of self and of the world. Calvinism is a pretty bleak outlook that fosters a sense of self-doubt and anxiety about getting *the* right answer. It undermines playful inquiry and wonder that might lead beyond the boundaries of the acceptable knowledge.

Its this kind of Calvinist system that William Ellery Channing, Bronson Alcott, Elizabeth Peabody, Margaret Fuller, and so many other of our Unitarian ancestors resisted. NO, they said, we believe in the natural human capacity for good. We do *not* believe in total depravity. We believe that human nature and human will is innately good—albeit with a

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capacity for evil as well as for good. They said our will is *free* . . . not totally, hopelessly enslaved to moral corruption.

These beliefs in the freedom of the will and the innate goodness of humanity conflicted powerfully with the Calvinist thought of their day. Such different beliefs required a fundamentally different way of engaging education. To hear the shift they were proposing, listen again to Channing's words from the reading:

> "The great end in religious instruction, is, not to stamp our minds irresistibly on the young, but to stir up their own; not to make them see with our eyes, but to look inquiringly and steadily with their own; not to give them a definite amount of knowledge, but to inspire a fervent love of truth; not to form an outward regularity, but to quicken and strengthen the power of thought; not to bind them by ineradicable prejudices to our particular sect or peculiar notions, but to prepare them for impartial, conscientious judging of whatever subjects may, in the course of Providence, be offered to their decision; not to impose religion upon them in the form of arbitrary rules which rest on no foundation but our own word and will, but to awaken the consciousness, the moral discernment, so that they may discern and approve for themselves what is everlastingly right and good."

Wow. What a vision for religious education! For Channing, religious education is not about insuring children learn a pre-packaged, pre-approved set of beliefs, but about developing their innate ability to wonder, to ask questions, to learn to weigh options and then to decide for themselves what to believe, how to act. Not only *can* we trust children to be active participants in their own education, it is actually the goal of education to develop their capacity to ask questions, to reason, to weigh options, and to make their own decisions.

We can see this different approach to religious education alive and well in our own lifespan religious education program here at First Parish. As one example, look at our Coming of Age class for youth. Many religions have a class for youth as they stand on the cusp of adulthood—such as the Jewish bar/bat mitzvah or the Catholic confirmation. It's a moment where children are asked to proclaim a religious tradition to be their own, not simply inherited. In many religious traditions, this moment is marked by a deep preparation of learning about one's tradition—and, often, participating in a religious ceremony that has been closed off to them before this moment of transition.

In the Unitarian Universalist Coming of Age class, what do our youth learn to do?? They learn to form their own questions, their own answers. They learn that they are responsible not for mastering a set of doctrine or religious beliefs, not for memorizing a catechism or

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divinely revealed text, but for their own mind, their own character, their own decisions about what is right, what is good, and what is wrong, what is evil. They learn that they, like all of us, cannot be passive recipients of religious belief and moral perspective. But that they must actively stand up before others and speak out their credo, their answers to life's questions. What our youth learn is not a set of doctrine, but a way of being in the world—a way of being responsible as moral agents, as rational minds who are *capable* of asking questions, seeking answers.

Let me add, for those of you wondering about the role of specific content in curriculum, that I believe that being a responsible moral agent means being well informed about the world. It means that we should wrestle with how other people have framed and answered the questions of religion and morality. It means we should know the religious language and stories that have shaped and continue to impact both our own families as well as our wider U.S. society and religiously diverse world. We *all* need to be religiously literate and adept at weighing moral questions and ethical decisions. So, yes, I believe that there is much content to learn that will make us better at engaging with our own questions, with others who may think differently than ourselves, and with our widely diverse world.

As an example, I purposefully began this sermon with a bit of our Unitarian and Universalist history because I think that it's important that we know our own history and traditions. We are a part of tradition that very intentionally commits itself to education. We are part of a tradition that holds fast to the view that we have a responsibility to develop our own mind and character; that we are responsible to not only choose what we will believe, but also how we will act in this world.

My own questions about the Calvinist tradition and beliefs of my youth sent me searching for another way to understand the world. As I explored answers in and outside of religious traditions, I found my way to Unitarian Universalism. In its affirmation of the freedom and the responsibility of each person to wrestle with how to live ethically and meaningfully in the world, I found a tradition that I could fully embrace.

In Unitarian Universalism, we are all called to be seekers. We are called to be lifelong learners as we continue to wrestle with how to live ethically and meaningfully in our shared world. We are called to prepare our children and youth for what it means to live a free and responsible life. And so may we celebrate this day our rich tradition of education and recommit ourselves both to the support of the education of our children and youth as well as to our own ongoing journey of religious and spiritual development.

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