



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Lydia Maria Child
Founding Mothers of Unitarian Universalism
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Quite a few years ago now, we began this annual sermon series on Founding Mothers of Unitarian Universalism with:

- [Margaret Fuller](#) (1810-1850), who along with Emerson and Thoreau is one of our three most important Transcendentalist forebears. Her 1845 pamphlet *Women in the Nineteenth Century* was a significant contribution to the women's equality movement.
- Next, we moved to the three [Peabody Sisters](#), especially Elizabeth Peabody (1804 - 1894), an author herself, who published many Transcendentalists under her own imprint, and also become the celebrated founder of kindergartens in America.
- Then we explored the life of [Julia Ward Howe](#) (1819-1910) about whom it is said that she "had six children, learned six languages, and published six books." She was most famous for writing the lyrics to the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," and she helped found Mother's Day itself through her Mother's Day Proclamation for Peace.
- We have also focused on [Mary Moody Emerson](#) (1774-1863), Ralph Waldo Emerson's aunt, whom he called his "earliest and best teacher,"
- as well as [Louisa May Alcott](#) (1832-1888), best known as the author of *Little Women*. At the time of her death in 1888, "she was the country's most popular author, and had earned more from writing than any male author of her time."
- Last year was **Olympia Brown** (1835 - 1926), a Universalist who in 1863 became the first woman to be ordained with full denominational recognition.

In future years, I look forward to telling you about some of our other founding mothers of UU, such as:

- **Judith Sargent Murray**, an early American advocate for women's rights, who was married to John Murray, the founder of the Universalist half of our movement;
- **Sophia Lyon Fahs** who revolutionized twentieth-century UU Religious Education; and
- **Frances Harper**, one of the first African American women to be published in the United States.

My intent with this quick summary is not to overwhelm you with names and dates. Rather, I hope your takeaway will be that **as Unitarian Universalists, we are lifted up “on the shoulders of giants,” many of whom were pathbreaking women.** Retelling these stories of our UU ancestors allows their lives to inspire us to live our UU values today.

In that spirit, our focus this year is on **Lydia Maria Child** (1802 - 1880), a pathbreaking activist for social justice in the nineteenth century. There was a time spanning many decades when she was a household name:

- William Lloyd Garrison, the prominent journalist and abolitionist, called her **“the first woman in the republic.”**
- U.S. Senator Charles Sumner cited her as an inspiration for his commitment to racial equality and consulted with her on how to shape legislation related to Reconstruction following the Civil War.
- Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a leader in the women’s suffrage movement, held Child’s book *History of the Condition of Woman* as a touchstone resource in the struggle for women’s equality. Notably, that book was published in 1835, thirteen years before the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls in 1848 (Karcher xi).
- John Greenleaf Whittier, an abolitionist and one of the fireside poets, said that, **“Whenever there was a brave word to be spoken, her voice was heard and never without effect”** (Clifford 1).

I could continue listing many more accolades along those lines.

She was also a direct influence on many of our Unitarian forebears of the time, including the famous ministers William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker as well as our Transcendentalist forebears such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller. And there are lots of fun facts about her such as that she wrote the lyrics to the song “Over the River and through the Woods,” which Nick played as our Introit. If this sermon leaves you curious to learn more, historian Deborah Clifford wrote an excellent and accessible biography of her titled *Crusader for Freedom* (Beacon Press, 1992). And if that book still leaves you hungry for more, the English professor Carolyn Karcher has written a much larger tome titled *The First Woman in the Republic: A Cultural Biography of Lydia Maria Child* (Duke University Press Books, 1998).

For now, let me start at the beginning. Lydia Francis (as she was known at birth) was born in 1802 in Medford, Massachusetts. (She later gave herself the middle name Maria [*muh-rye-uh*], which became her preference.) She was the youngest of seven children. Both of her parents had grown up in difficult economic circumstances in the aftermath of the Revolutionary War, but over time her father established a successful bakery business (Clifford 5-6).

Her closest sibling was her brother Convers, who was six years older (7). And even though she showed an early aptitude for learning, she realized in elementary school—when she noticed that boys and girls were divided into separate rooms—that she was not going to have an equal access to the educational privileges granted to her brother (12). Keep in mind that she was growing up in the early 1800s; it would be more than a century until 1936 when the first woman was admitted to Harvard (13).

In 1811, when she was only nine years old, her situation became even more difficult when Convers left home for college, her favorite sister left home to get married, and her mother spent most days in bed due to a terminal illness (15). Her mother died a few years later in 1814, when Child was only twelve years old (17).

Child persevered, and in particular continued to educate herself throughout her life. Indeed, we have a letter that she wrote the next year when she was fifteen years old to her brother Convers (who was then near the completion of his studies at Harvard Divinity School) in which we can see her radical perspective on the world beginning to sprout. She both praises Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, saying, “I never read poem that

displayed...a more vigorous genius,” and then adds, **“But don’t you think that Milton asserts the superiority of his own sex in rather too lordly a manner?”** Even more impressively, she proceeds to cite specific textual references to support her point (1).

The good news is that when her brother was called to serve as the minister of the Unitarian congregation at First Parish of Watertown in Massachusetts, she was able to go live with him, which she did in 1821 at the age of nineteen (Clifford 34). (This congregation was established in 1630; it’s one of the oldest Unitarian Congregations in the U.S.)

In particular, living in her brother’s parsonage meant she had access to his personal library, which would eventually grow to more than 7,000 volumes (Karcher 15). Her love of books and learning would soon blossom into a lifelong practice of writing. Over more than fifty years, from 1824 to 1878, she published more than thirty books. A volume of her collected letters, gathered by her friends, also became an additional posthumous bestseller (606).

Her literary career started fairly early: in 1824 at the age of twenty-two, she wrote her first book, *Hobomok*, in six weeks. It is now remembered as the **“first New England historical novel”** (Clifford 40). Keep in mind, as one critic wrote, that her earliest publications came at “the very dawn of American imaginative literature....” At the time Child’s first book was published, “Emerson was twenty-one, Hawthorne twenty, and Thoreau a boy of seven” (41). This was also a time when a woman publishing anything was a radical act (43).

It is also significant that she was willing to throw caution to the wind from the very beginning: one of the major plot points in Child’s first novel involves an unapologetic and loving relationship between a white woman and a Native American man. She believed rightly that there is only one race (the human race), and that interracial marriage was a way to build bridges across artificial social divides (96). Even with these controversial choices, the novel ended up with some important positive reviews and gained Child invitations into some of the upper echelons of Boston society (45, 48).

At this point, Child was moving from strength to strength and had impressively become financially independent as a single woman in the early 1800s. The hard truth is

that that trajectory ended for one major reason: in 1828, at the age of twenty-six (four years after her debut as an author) she got married (Karcher 79).

Although her husband was well intended, I could spend the rest of this sermon detailing his numerous ill-advised money-losing ventures (Clifford 69). Suffice it to say that her earnings could rarely keep up with her husband's debts (81). And they spent a significant portion of their married life in poverty (122).

Keep in mind that at this time, marriage meant that her husband had completely legal ownership of everything. She couldn't sign a contract without his consent, and all her earnings were his—even the clothes on her back (72). Part of why that dynamic is so devastating is that a year after she was married, she published a bestselling handbook titled *The Frugal Housewife* (76). In the first year that book sold six thousand copies, and it earned more than \$2,000 total in the first two years (Clifford 78, Karcher 127).

Another significant factor was that Maria Child's income was soon significantly reduced from her progressive stances for social justice. In particular, in 1833, she published a powerful pro-abolitionist book titled *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans* (99). As a result of her bold stance for racial equality, "Sales of nearly all her books fell sharply" (104). She, however, remained undaunted.

Instead of stopping after receiving negative consequences from her stances for racial justice, she spent the next few years writing an influential book on another controversial topic: women's equality. Her book *The History of the Condition of Women in Various Ages and Nations* was published in 1835 (110). I'll share with you just one related quote: "**Society can never be established on a true and solid foundation so long as any distinction whatsoever is made between men and women with regard to the full and free exercise of their faculties on all subjects, whether of art, science, literature, business, or politics**" (Karcher xiii).

Around this time it was becoming clear that her chosen religion was what we would call today *social justice*. She believed, as we would say, in "deeds not creeds" (95). Particularly in the abolitionist movement, she finally found what she had been looking for: "**a community of believers, women as well as men, who shared her**

passion for truth and freedom and with whom she could labor and prove her faith by her works..." (107).

There is so much more to say about Lydia Maria Child, but before I pivot to my conclusion, I want to briefly mention two of her other books that I find particularly fascinating. The first was published in 1855 in the middle of her life, and was titled *Progress of Religious Ideas through Successive Ages*. Quite radically at the time, she sought to present each of the world's religions *on its own terms*, without showing favoritism to any of them (Karcher 374).

More than three decades later, in 1878, when she was seventy-six years old (almost at the end of her life), she extended this project in her final book titled *Aspirations of the World*. She nicknamed this book her "Eclectic Bible," and she includes passages from "modern thinkers like Thomas Paine, Emerson, Carlyle, and Theodore Parker" as equally significant to excerpts from all the ancient scripture which she sets in their respective historical contexts (595).

It is said that, as they grow older, some people mellow or grow more conservative. In the case of Lydia Maria Child, it is clear that **with age, she only grew more radical** (532).

Toward the end of her life, things did also improve both emotionally and financially in her final years with her husband (Clifford 291). She additionally lived another eight years after his death before her own death from a heart attack in 1880 at the age of seventy-eight.

At her funeral, a friend and fellow abolitionist said that, "**We felt that neither fame, nor gain, nor danger, nor calumny [false and defamatory statements] had any weight with her.... She was ready to die for a principle and starve for an idea**" (296). Along these lines, I described her earlier as a *pathbreaking* activist for social justice in the nineteenth century, and she truly was. As one of her biographers wrote, "**There was no script for such a life**" as the one she led (2). She helped blaze a trail for justice and equality that future generations continue to travel.

For now, I'll end with three brief quotes from Maria Child that encapsulate some of the advice she might give us today if she were alive during this pandemic.

1. She might tell us what she often told herself and other activists in her own day: **“In toiling for the freedom of others, we shall find our own”** (2). I love that. It was so clear to Maria Child that her liberation was bound up in the liberation of all—that no one is truly free until we all get free.
2. Or maybe she would tell us that regardless of whether those currently in power are acting rightly, **“All we can do is follow, patiently and fearlessly, every principle which we clearly perceive to be true”** (Karcher 616).
3. Finally, she might tell us that our **“highest aspirations are prophecies.”** (616). Child knew that our highest aspirations are prophecies of what might be—glimpses of the better world we might build if we turn our dreams into *deeds*.

Today, as we join the outcry against ongoing racial injustice—from the horrific modern day lynching of Ahmaud Arbery to the disproportionate impact of Coronavirus on indigenous nations and communities of color—let us remember that we are part of a long line of activists for peace and justice who came before us. More is possible today because of the activism of Maria Child and others in the past. Our call, in turn, is to do our part to extend the struggle for peace, liberty, and justice that even more might be possible for future generations.

And as we reflect on how we each feel called to act within our spheres of influence, let us hold in our hearts the example of Lydia Maria Child. She truly lived the words of the prayer we heard earlier: “Let it at least be written down in history that with our last breaths we fought for the world that ought to be.”