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**Mary Moody Emerson:
Ralph Waldo's "First & Best Teacher"**

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This morning is the fourth part of an ongoing Mother's Day sermon series on "**Founding Mothers of Unitarian Universalism.**" Three years ago, we focused on **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 "**the first significant work to take the liberal side in the question of Women's Rights since...Mary Wollstonecraft,**" who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* fifty years earlier. Fuller was also "America's first female foreign correspondent." Tragically, she died in a shipwreck on her trip home from Europe when she was only forty years old.

Two years ago, we reflected on the lives of three "**Peabody Sisters**": **Mary Peabody** (1806 - 1887), an important educator who married the politician and educational reformer Horace Mann; **Sophia Peabody** (1809-1871), a talented painter who married Nathaniel Hawthorne, the novelist whose best-known work is *The Scarlet Letter*; and **Elizabeth Peabody** (1804 - 1894), the author or translator of a half-dozen books, who also became the publisher of many Transcendentalists under her own imprint. She was also the celebrated founder of kindergartens in America.

Last year, we explored the life of **Julia Ward Howe** (1819-1910), who "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." She was also president of the New English Woman Suffrage

Association, and helped found Mother's Day through her famous Mother's Day Proclamation for Peace.

In future years, I look forward to telling you about some of our other founding mothers, 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; **Olympia Brown**, another Universalist who in 1863 became the first woman to be ordained with full denominational recognition; and **Sophia Lyon Fahs** who revolutionized twentieth-century UU Religious Education.

In these history-based sermons, my intent is not to overwhelm you with names and dates. Rather, my hope is that your takeaway will be that as Unitarian Universalists, **"We stand on the shoulders of giants," many of whom were pathbreaking women.** Retelling these stories helps us further inscribe them into our sense of who we are—and who we might become, individually and collectively—through allowing the lives of our ancestors to inspire us to live with more courage, freedom, and compassion in our time.

This year, our focus is **Mary Moody Emerson** (1774-1863), **Ralph Waldo Emerson's aunt, whom he called his "earliest and best teacher."** I'll be drawing from a landmark biography written in 1998 (Oxford University Press) by an English and Women's Studies professor named Phyllis Cole, which helped further raise awareness about Mary's influence on Waldo's life. I will follow Cole's choice to break the scholarly convention of referring to Ralph Waldo by his last name "Emerson" and of "Aunt Mary" in relationship to him—and will instead refer to both by their first names (vi).

Relatedly, I realized recently that I never ended up preaching a sermon on Ralph Waldo Emerson a few years ago that was planned and then unexpected delayed. So I will plan to preach a sermon likely in the next year on Emerson. But it is equally significant that, **"A full generation before Waldo's early manifestos, Mary's Almanack was claiming a life of solitude and an experience of God through nature and the imagination. Her letters then formed the matrix of his thought,** both early in life and through the years of his landmark literary utterance" (v).

However, prior to the influence of Second Wave Feminism in the 1960s, which led to a revolution in women's studies, Mary's influence on Waldo had not been extensively explored.

Emerson himself “partially acknowledged” his intellectual debt to Mary, but **the full depth of his debt has become increasingly apparent in recent studies of Mary’s Almanack**, her decades-long personal journal, begun at age twenty (93). The Almanack was thought lost or destroyed, but in 1981 Dr. Cole rediscovered it in a box of uncatalogued Emerson family papers in the Harvard University Library (v):

Constructed from letter paper and bound with thread, the Almanacks are hand-made booklets...running to over one thousand pages, and they display multiple genres, including letters...spiritual diaries, and original compositions; their content, however, largely consists of commonplace book quotations from and commentary on her extensive reading. Although Mary published essays during her lifetime, these miscellaneous Almanacks represent her most experimental expressions as a writer.

She often shared pieces of her Almanacks with friends, and there are even periodic notes to “any Nephew who may read this.” Her Almanacks are in the process of being published online in free digital edition.

Waldo’s own extensive journals include significant sections in which he transcribed letters from Mary and excerpts from her Almanacks that she let him borrow. Indeed, there were many occasions in which he begged her to share more of her Almanacks with him (9). And in 1837, the year after he published his breakthrough essay “Nature,” **he listed Mary in his journal as one of his “seven more vital ‘benefactors’”** (9).

There are also multiple instances in which Emerson published revised versions of pieces of Mary’s writings—which was often “cryptic” and “fragmentary”—without attribution of his intellectual debt to her (9, 164). One of the most ironic examples is from a passage in his 1859 essay “Culture” about solitude. In writing about the virtues of being alone, he was drawing directly from his *relationship* with his aunt, the opposite of solitude. Moreover, the wisdom was from *her* direct experience of solitude, not his own. “Because Mary had been unwilling or unable to publish, her words did not to him count as written text, but occupied the category of ‘living wit,’ like conversation, protected by no authorial right” that Waldo recognized (181). There is much more to say here about how **Waldo’s writings about self-reliance also “forgot to**

mention that he depended daily upon his wife, his mother, three servants, and a gardener,” but I can get to that in the sermon about him ([Brock and Parker](#) 33).

There is also much more to say about Mary’s legacy, but before continuing on that track, allow me to share some of the details of her life. She was born in Concord, Massachusetts in 1774, two years before the American Revolutionary War (57). To give you only one example of how remarkable her feminist independence was, given the patriarchal home into which she was born, she writes of the following as of one of her earliest childhood memories:

I remember my Father’s punishing me once. I was two years old and when I came into his study **I wouldn’t make my curtsy...so he whipped me.** Mother came in and asked why he had punished me. He said, ‘Because she wouldn’t make her duty on coming into the room.’ ‘What! Whip a child two years old for that!’ My Father said, ‘**My dear, since you have interfered I must whip her again,**’ and he did.” (69)

Mary’s father died the same year as this incident from an illness. Her mother, struggling to care for five children alone sent Mary to live with various relatives during her childhood (83). This early distance from her family of origin increased Mary’s independence, although there were also times when the distance caused her sorrow (83).

As Mary began to come into her own, she never expressed romantic interests (93). And **she turned down at least two enviable marriage proposals** (101). Mary wrote of feeling “sick” in regard to the thought of marriage, and stuck to a “permanent vow of non-compliance” (101).

She was drawn instead to independence. And although she only had a few months of formal schooling, she cultivated a lifelong journey of self-directed learning. Fortunately she had access to an excellent public library, and read widely, including many cutting-edge books at the time on theological liberalism (95). She also loved poetry, particularly Milton and Wordsworth (96, 152).

To give you a taste of her writing style, she wrote about her favorite poets that

Solitude which to people, not talented to deviate from the beaten track (which is the safeguard of mediocrity) without offending, is to learning and talents the only

sure labyrinth (though sometimes gloomy) to form the eagle wings which will bear one farther than suns and stars. (178)

Her writing style is idiosyncratic and somewhat difficult to follow, but it also reflects her peculiar genius and the originality of her insights.

There were also ways in which her independence kept her from being fully comfortable in either the traditional orthodox camp or the new more progressive Transcendentalist movement of her nephew. She was too innovative and free-spirited to be fully comfortable among Calvinists, but there were aspects of traditional Christian theology that she continued to value that kept her from fully embracing her nephew's Transcendentalism. In many ways, **“she belonged to both sides and neither”** (102). This dynamic contributed to a growing divide between Mary and Waldo. But even as the two were never as close in later years as they were in Waldo's childhood and young adulthood, her Almanack continued to influence him (201-205).

I'll share just one more famous story from near the end of Mary's life. One evening, Bronson Alcott was hosting a conversation on the topic of “Private Life” at Waldo's house, while Waldo was away lecturing. Among those present in addition to Mary were Henry David Thoreau, his sister Sophia, and other usual suspects from Transcendentalist circles. **When one man in attendance proceeded to hijack the conversation and pontificate about moral relativism in a way such that neither Alcott nor Thoreau could mitigate, Mary intervened.** Here's a description of what ensued, as recorded by the journalist Franklin Sanborn, who was also part of Transcendentalist circles:

Rising from her chair at the west side of the room, and turning her oddly-garnished head toward the south side, where the offender smilingly sat, she clasped her little wrinkled hands and raised them toward the black band over her left temple (a habit she had when deeply moved), and began her answer to those doctrines of Satan, as she thought of them. She expressed her amazement that any man should denounce the Moral Law—the only tie of society, except religion, to which, she saw, the speaker made no claim. She referred him to his Bible and to Dr. [Samuel] Clarke (one of her great authorities from childhood) and she denounced him personally in the most racy terms. She did not cross the room and

shake him, as some author, not an eye-witness has fancied—but she retained her position, sat down quietly when she had finished, and was complimented by the smiling [target of her words], who then perhaps for the first time had felt the force of her untaught rhetoric. (294-5)

She may have been unschooled in formal rhetoric, but a lifetime of independent inquiry, reading and conversation had made her a formidable intellectual interlocutor.

In her final years, Mary become increasingly involved in the Abolitionist movement. Both the anti-slavery movement and women's leadership in that movement gave her new hope for an increasingly equal role for women in the future (268). And although Mary grew increasingly ill, she was likely well enough on New Year's Day 1863 to comprehend the sea change of President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation taking effect. **Mary died a few months later on May 1, 1863 at the age of 88** (305).

Six years after Mary's death, when Waldo himself was sixty-five and near the end of his public speaking career, **one of the last lectures he ever wrote was in her honor. He titled it "Amita," which is Latin for "aunt."** (3-4). Years earlier he had written a series of biographical essays on *Representative Men*, meaning exemplary archetypes of their time and place. At that time, all his examples were famous European men. With "*Amita*," he expanded his scope to include Mary:

It is a representative life, such as could hardly have appeared out of New England; of an age now past, and of which I think no types survive. Perhaps I deceive myself and overestimate its interest. It has to me a value like that which many readers find in Madam Guyon, in Rahel [Varnhagen], in Eugénie de Guérin, but it is purely original and hardly admits of a duplicate. Then it is a fruit of Calvinism and New England, and marks the precise time when the power of the old creed yielded to the influence of modern science and humanity. (3)

Here we see Waldo putting Mary in the same class as three famous independent, intellectual women: a heretical French mystic, a German-Jewish letter-writer and saloniste, and another French mystic known—as Mary was—primarily through her journals and letters.

And Waldo was far from Mary's only public admirer. Elizabeth Peabody also expressed

her esteem for Mary. Elizabeth both *celebrated* that Waldo had extended the Emersonian talent inherited from his aunt, and *lamented* that Mary's talent remained buried in many ways due to her gender. **In 1910, a young Virginia Woolf, only in her late twenties at the time, also became aware of Mary's genius and influence on Waldo. Woolf incorporated this insight in her study of the "Creative life and domestic contraction of women" (6-7).**

On this Mother's Day, the life of Mary Moody Emerson is an invitation to honor those of our foremothers who taught us to question received tradition and to pay attention to the wisdom of our own firsthand experience.