

The Unsung Transcendentalist

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Emerson. Channing. Thoreau. Parker. Horace Mann. Bronson Alcott. The list of Unitarian thinkers, the great 19th century Transcendentalists, still rings with reverence into the 21st century.

Even those who haven't read Emerson's essays have heard of "Self-Reliance." Thoreau lived by Walden Pond, which has signs telling us so. Horace Mann promoted the idea of universal public education. Bronson Alcott, father of Louisa May Alcott, started the first school in America that set out to teach children how to think. Their contemporary and friend, Nathaniel Hawthorne, wrote a book nearly every high-school student in America is required to read, *The Scarlet Letter*.

These men are famous beyond their own lives, and their influence not only shaped our world but continues to shape it, and us. Yet there was a Transcendentalist whose influence was pervasive in Transcendentalist circles; one Transcendentalist who inspired these great men, who published their books and gave them advice about their essays. One who is unsung, almost unknown, yet whose influence is in some ways even more strongly felt today.

How many of us, assembled here today, went to kindergarten?

Elizabeth Palmer Peabody² brought the idea of kindergarten (German for "Children's Garden") to the United States. She wrote about kindergarten, campaigned for public kindergartens, and established a free kindergarten for poor children in Boston. But the kindergarten campaign came at the end of Elizabeth Peabody's life. It was much earlier that she became one of the most influential, the most inspirational, of the Transcendentalists.

Elizabeth Peabody came from Salem, Massachusetts. She lived for 90 years that spanned the 19th century: 1904-1994. Her father was a doctor and her mother a schoolteacher. She had two sisters. Sophia married Nathaniel Hawthorne; Mary became the wife of Horace Mann.

But Elizabeth. Ah, Elizabeth. She was a precocious student. At the age of seven her parents' dinner table discussions sparked her interest in theology. She argued with her parents about the idea of heaven and hell and whether Jesus was fully human. Elizabeth was certain that Jesus was a human being; it would take another decade before she could persuade her mother.

During the summer when her local minister worked in his garden early in the morning, she joined him to discuss theology. At the age of 12, she began teaching herself Hebrew so that she could read the Hebrew Scriptures in the original language. When William Ellery Channing visited and preached as a guest speaker, she was enthralled.

At the age of 13 she had the opportunity to visit Boston in the company of a family friend who attended the church where Channing was minister. In those days, Channing and the church were not officially Unitarian. He wouldn't preach his famous sermon on Unitarian Christianity until nearly two years later. But at the time of Elizabeth's visit, he was on the inexorable trajectory toward the

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² The biographical information included in this sermon is based primarily upon two books, Megan Marshall, *The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism* (2005); and Louise Hall Tharp, *The Peabody Sisters of Salem* (1950). On the UU Historical Society's website is Susan Ritchie's short biography, at <http://www25.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/peabodysisters.html>.

idea that reason and inspiration were both required in religion, and that people must be free to ask questions and to think in new ways.

Channing found young Elizabeth Peabody as fascinating as she found him. He didn't realize it then, but at the age of 13 Elizabeth had already read nearly all the books Channing routinely recommended for his students at Harvard Divinity School. Had Elizabeth been a boy, he would have seen her as a promising candidate for the ministry. But at the time it wasn't even imagined as a possibility. Neither Elizabeth nor Channing would have thought of it.

Just a few years later, after her family moved to Lancaster, Massachusetts, Elizabeth began her own school for the local children. She was good...so good that she was invited to start a school in Boston for the children of family friends. Channing sent his seven-year-old daughter to the school. At the age of 18, Elizabeth Peabody was living in a boardinghouse, supporting herself, and doing her best to continue her education by reading on her own.

Thanks to the close connection with Channing, now regarded as a founder of American Unitarianism, Elizabeth met the President of Harvard University and was given free run of his library. She took full advantage. To improve her Greek—over her lifetime she would be able to read and write ten languages—she sought a tutor. She found Ralph Waldo Emerson (she called him “Waldo”). He was a Harvard student only a year older than herself. They began meeting once a week. Several months later, when she inquired what she owed him for their sessions, he told her frankly that she owed him nothing, because he was learning from her. That began an intellectual and creative friendship that lasted for the rest of their lives.

Channing was a continuing influence. Every Saturday she met with her own students to discuss theology, and on Saturday afternoons she talked with Channing about the ideas they had discussed. The influence wasn't a one-way street. On Sunday mornings, when Elizabeth attended church, she often heard Channing say from the pulpit the ideas that she had discussed with him the day before. It thrilled her to think that he thought her ideas worth mentioning.

So here was this 18-year-old girl, in her first year of practical independence, plowing through the private library of Harvard's president, talking weekly with Emerson and Channing, and developing her own ideas. She wrote two influential essays during the next few years. One was a paraphrase of the Gospel of John. The other was “The Spirit of the Hebrew Scriptures.” That's the one she began thinking about when she was 12, back when she decided to learn Hebrew to understand the bible better.

In these essays, and particularly in the Hebrew Scriptures essay, Elizabeth Peabody developed what she considered her philosophy: that morality is innate; that everyone has the ability to experience inspiration toward the good; that every human being has both the power and obligation to choose what is good. Rejecting the idea of original sin as a blight on all the generations since Adam and Eve, she proposed that humans were not born evil. Instead, she thought, humans are born imperfect yet with an innate capacity for good. It was new. At the time, it was heretical. And she called it Transcendentalism.

She was 21. She showed her essay to Channing, who showed it to Emerson. The ideas began to spark. Transcendentalism was born.

It's nearly impossible to convey in a few short minutes the pervasive influence Elizabeth Peabody had on 19th century thought.³ Before she was 30, she had established herself in Boston as the owner of a bookstore specializing in foreign books of philosophy and theology. The bookstore was a springboard for new ideas, and the young intellectuals of Boston's 1830s and 1840s met in the upstairs parlor to discuss books and essays. Elizabeth had designed the bookstore's content to appeal to Transcendentalists, and its layout to accommodate meetings and book discussion groups. She intended the bookstore to be the focal point of the intellectual movement, its headquarters and gathering place, a continuous generator of new ideas and attractor of new thinkers.

At an early point in the development of this circle of Transcendentalists, Waldo and Elizabeth were both published authors with one book to their credit. Emerson's "Nature" had sold only a few copies. Elizabeth's "Record of a School" was a best-seller.

One of the things Elizabeth Peabody did during the early part of her life was to edit Channing's sermons for publication, sometimes transcribing them herself. She became a book publisher herself. She organized and edited Emerson's essays. She published the Transcendentalist magazine, "The Dial"; Emerson, Margaret Fuller, and Elizabeth all served as editors. She gave Nathaniel Hawthorne advice about dealing with his publisher. She published Emerson's controversial "Divinity School Address" when no one else would—its ideas were just a little too open even for Unitarians.

Why is it that Elizabeth Peabody's influence was so pronounced at the time, and yet today we hear little about her?

One of the pervasive realities of Elizabeth's time was the role of women in American public life. She knew from early childhood that she could not go to Harvard Divinity School. All around her were ministers, relatives, friends who made theology their professional life. During the summer when Elizabeth was 13, she shared her first ideas that later became her essay on "The Spirit of the Hebrew Scriptures." In response to horrified comments from some of the adults who heard Elizabeth's ideas, her parents prohibited her from reading any theology books for an entire summer. She was allowed to read only the New Testament.

So she read it 30 times, and emerged from that summer with heretical ideas about the Gospel of John. Eventually it became obvious that no one could stop Elizabeth from being a theologian. But it was also obvious that no one would arrange for her to attend Harvard Divinity School. It wasn't even a consideration.

She was female.

Channing, who exchanged ideas with her so eagerly, advised her not to attempt to "distinguish herself" in public life, but to find a way to be of service. She was of service, especially to him, in transcribing his sermons. He was her mentor; she admired him, and basked in his respect. Of course he was older, and had already been an established minister and leader when she was only a child, so it was natural that she looked up to him.

She followed Channing's advice (to be "of service") and was instrumental in supporting the young intellectuals of the Transcendentalist movement. Her relationship with Emerson, her contemporary, might be expected to be different from her relationship with Channing. Emerson, about ten years

³ Unitarian minister Theodore Parker called her "the 'Boswell' of Transcendentalism." Marshall at 412, citing F.B. Sandborn, *Recollections of Seventy Years* (Boston 1909), v. 2, p. 548.

into their friendship, organized the Transcendentalist Club. It met for nearly a year before the first women were admitted: Elizabeth, her sister Mary, and Margaret Fuller.

In the early part of her life, Elizabeth herself struggled with the discontinuity between her innate intellectual abilities, which would have led a young man into ministry, and her innate physiology—the fact that she was a woman. Although she could not stop her relentless, active, questing mind, she spent many years feeling that she had to apologize for it. Even when she was able to say that a woman should be allowed to do whatever her mind and temperament suited her to do, she could not help but stand in awe of men who should have stood in awe of her.

It is some indication of the power of Elizabeth's ideas that Emerson, in particular, treated her as an intellectual equal. Emerson married Elizabeth's friend Lidian Jackson, and Elizabeth often visited their home in Concord. Before her marriage, Lidian was, like Elizabeth and her sisters, like Margaret Fuller, one of the bright intellectual lights of their circle of friends. But after her marriage, Lidian absorbed herself in home and children, backing away from her own intellectual life and gratefully leaving Elizabeth the long philosophical discussions with Waldo. Elizabeth relished their conversations; they were food and drink to her. But Elizabeth noticed Lidian's retirement; and she noticed that Emerson didn't find Lidian's behavior all that unexpected.

Elizabeth Peabody never married. It may be that visits to Waldo and Lidian confirmed in her mind the idea that it wasn't possible to be a married woman and also have a vibrant intellectual life. The mid-19th century was an era when *unmarried* women, like Elizabeth (they were often called "Boston women") began pursuing the life of the intellect, modestly making names for themselves at a time when women's roles were narrowly confined.⁴

Looking back from our perspective in the 21st century, we are aware of the vast changes that have taken place in the role of women in American society. Over the last century, American women began to enter many professions once barred to them because of their sex. But the story of Elizabeth Peabody's life is more than a moral lesson about the the 19th century's treatment of women.

It raises a fundamental question for every one of us: How do we see others? Do we see them as they are, with their own remarkable talents and experience? Or do we see them through a social filter that sorts people into categories and roles? The way Channing saw Elizabeth Peabody, whose role was to be of service; the way Emerson saw his wife, Lidian, whose role was wife and mother.

It's inevitable that each of us has a filter to our understanding of others, a lens that alters what we see. It's a filter that comes in part from our own unique experiences in life, from our genetic make-up, from our families of origin, but for the most part it's a filter our culture engrains in us. If we wish to understand ourselves at all, we must strive to understand others. To understand others, we have to see them as they are, beyond our filters. Humanity, in all its beautiful complexity, is before us.

Elizabeth Palmer Peabody. I sing the unsung transcendentalist...

May we all seek to *transcend* our culture and upbringing, and see each other as we truly are.

⁴ It may be that Elizabeth's support for the Transcendentalist movement, and in particular her habit of fostering women's discussion groups and engaging with other intellectually active women, supported the development of this culture in Boston in the mid-19th century. The term "Boston women" was used to describe unmarried women living together and supporting themselves through their intellectual work. Marshall, at p. 262, notes: "By federal law, married women could not hold property or control their own money."