

**The Story of Maine's Oldest Sunday School**  
Sermon by Rev. Peter T. Richardson, Sunday, © April 26, 1992  
First Parish Unitarian, Kennebunk, Maine



Meeting house of the First Parish Unitarian in Kennebunk as it is today.

As was the custom our second minister, Nathaniel Fletcher, got into his chaise and drove to Portsmouth, New Hampshire, for his annual pulpit exchange with Dr. Parker of the South Church, Unitarian. But this time he discovered a bold innovation underway in our sister church there, the institution of a Sunday School. Fletcher became very excited with the possibilities this would have for Kennebunk and when he came back he sat down with two men in the Parish and they agreed that we should try the idea here.

If you look at the portraits in the Parlor downstairs, pick the two sternest ones and you have the two founders of our church school, Deacons John Lowe and Daniel Sewell. Since it was the first Sunday School to be organized in Maine it was the first in Kennebunk as well. They wrote a release for the Kennebunk Gazette:

To all who regard the sanctity of the Lord's day, and the importance of instructing youth in the principles of the blessed religion of Jesus Christ, --

You are invited to send your children to the Meeting House in this Parish, to receive instruction in the Scriptures of truth, in a manner best suited to their ages, circumstances, and capacities. Those who are able are desired to bring a Bible, or testament and primer, or any book containing the Assembly's Catechism, and any other Christian catechisms on hand. Books will be provided for

those unable to procure them, and for such this instruction is more specially designed.  
Kennebunk, May 14, 1819.

The language of this press release sounds rather harsh and alien today, but it was rather typical of country Unitarianism in 1819. Channing who wrote the words of our Responsive Reading had earlier in 1813 coauthored a catechism of his own, a method of instruction he later rejected. The idea of Sunday Schools was only about ten years old, set up by the Unitarians in and about Boston. It was a brave experiment.

And it was popular in Kennebunk. In the first year it grew to have 30 teachers and 216 children! Picture the old balconied church with classes in the box pews all around the perimeter of the meeting house. They began and closed with the singing of hymns and recitations in a large group. Four books were used: (1) the Bible, (2) the New England Primer, (3) Cumming's Questions (a catechism) and (4) a hymn book by Isaac Watts. One of the leaders of the Sunday School gave careful attention to detail and at the end of the year he summed up the total production of the school this way:

Number of verses recited from the Bible,	31,725.
Number of verses from Watts' Hymns,	22,652.
Number of answers from different Catechisms,	63,519.
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Total	117,896.

They were rather busy! Of course rote memory is completely out of fashion today. For some of us the ability to memorize has so atrophied that we can't remember license plates or phone numbers. But in the nineteenth century people committed dozens of poems, hymns and verses to memory. After Julian Jaynes, a psychology professor at Princeton and author of the book, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, spoke here in 1978, in the question and answer period someone asked him what he thought of the idea of rote memory. His reply was striking! He said he felt it was important for children to memorize poetry for when they become elderly to be able to recall these old memories is "comforting" To be able to recall Tennyson or Blake or Swinbourne at an appropriate time in the family conversation, reinforces the role of wisdom for that percentage of our elders who may have lost much of their short memory. While it doesn't teach you how to think or the rules of logic, it may be that the foundation for increased quality of life when we are old can be established when we are very young. But even the mention of memorization today brings scorn and ridicule from educators. And after all, if we expected our children to remember things we would have to know them too!

Rote memory continued among the Baptists longer than among us. When I was a child I memorized the Ten Commandments, Psalms 1, 23, and 121, the Third chapter of Ecclesiastes, Micah 6:8, the Beatitudes, the Prayer of Jesus, the Great

Commandment and the Golden Rule. My grandmother knew all of these plus reams of Tennyson, Pope, Swinbourne, Blake, Longfellow and Whittier.

While we could revive a justification for memorizing verses and poems, to memorize answers to catechism questions is a terribly un-Unitarian kind of thing to do. It enforces adopting the beliefs of others as your own, what Emerson called "secondhand religion." It discourages thinking for yourself in religion, the need for creating a response to religious truth congruent with your uniqueness as a person. In the words of Channing:

The great end in religious instruction is not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own. . . . Not to burden the memory, but to quicken and strengthen the power of thought.

For nearly a decade our Sunday School had a monopoly in Kennebunk, but in 1828 the Congregationalists organized a church here and shortly afterwards the Baptists as well. It became important to organize a more denominationally specific approach and in part to accomplish this our church organized the Unitarian Sunday School Society in 1829. This organization of women met at least fortnightly for 91 years when it merged with the Afternoon Alliance in 1920. It seems to be a consistent pattern that Women's groups in this church organize and keep going for just short of a century. They don't die but they fade into another women's group which in turn has a good prospect for lasting just short of a century itself.

What a century it had! In the early years its primary purpose was literally to clothe the poor children of the town. They made some of the clothes themselves and raised money for others by embroidery and needlepoint and the manufacture of paper lanterns. They held the first church fair in 1839.

Other projects included the founding of the Sunday School Library in 1831, the remains of which can still be seen in the Nursery Room. In 1832 a group picked what they felt were the most important hymns for children to memorize, had them printed and mounted them on cardboard. In 1840 they branched out and bought the huge pulpit Bible we still have up here. They paid \$16.00 for it. In 1845 the Sunday School Society bought hymn books and new catechism books. This kind of teaching continued for most of the nineteenth century here.

Our third minister, William Wadsworth Wells, wrote an essay a week for the Sunday School teachers and we have a book in the Archives which contains more than a year of these. Sample titles of his essays are: The Omnipresence of God, On the Expediency of Natural Theology Making a Part of Sabbath School Instruction, On the Doctrines of Religion, Should Presents be Offered to Children as Rewards for Good Action?, Upon the Indiscriminate Reading of Children's

Books, On Teaching Children Controverted Doctrines, On Love to God, On Universal Benevolence, On Teaching Children to Pray, On Devotion, Cultivation of Gratitude as Leading to the Love of God, On Teaching Children the Duty of Self Examination, On the Use of Hymns, On Some of the Duties Which Sabbath School Teachers Owe Each Other, On the Advantages of Visiting Our Sabbath School Scholars, and On the Effect of the Teacher's Example Upon the Children. This is a wonderful crossection of the concerns of Unitarians for their children's religious education in 1830.

In 1855 George W. Bourne, from our church, gave a major address before the Maine Unitarian Association annual meeting. He defined as the purpose of a Sunday School,

"The Sunday School is intended for moral, religious training, the inculcation of spiritual truth, to show the young the way to Heaven."

This goal of the church school and the methods employed in 1819 continued right through the fiftieth anniversary in 1869 and through most of the century.

One innovation that broke this pattern was the first Christmas Tree in Kennebunk which was set up in the middle of the Sunday School Room downstairs by the minister, Joshua Swan, in 1857. The lights were joyful and he composed an original hymn for the occasion. This tradition of an annual Christmas party continued for 134 years until last Christmas when we celebrated the Hannukah festival instead! In the early part of this century William Barry, the architect, was asked to play Santa Claus, which he refused to do. But he would come as the Christmas Elf instead terrifying the children and singing "Ta Ra Ra Boom De E" as he came roaring in. He was a short wirey man, not a jolly type, and came in all wound up with energy.

The first youth group was apparently organized in 1869 as the Young People's Guild. In 1895 the youth purchased new seats for the Sunday School Room, folding settees with leather board backs. In 1926 the youth organized again as the Young People's Religious Union and of course in more recent times as the Liberal Religious Youth. Those of you who have been to the front cellar where the furnaces are located have spotted some painted walls dating from the sixties when the youth of the church had what they called the "Happy Heretic Coffee House." Today our youth are affiliated with Young Religious U Us and have been busy decorating the new basement room below the addition.

I have referred to the Sunday School Room several times and some of you may not know where that is / or was. In 1838 the meeting house was floored over at the balcony level and worship was brought upstairs. Below us was created the Vestry, now called the Parlor, and the Sunday School Room, now called Parish Hall. For 150 years that was it for space and many hundreds of children were

crowded together there for generations. By 1988 we considered it to be an ecclesiastical slum and it was the major motivation for building the new addition.

In 1931 the much loved wife of the minister died and a member of the Alliance commissioned Mildred Burrage to paint the mural of miscellaneous Palestinian scenes across the north wall of the Sunday School Room. Long before George Bourne in his speech in 1855 had emphasized the importance of environment of the room, that the walls should evoke the lessons being presented. Now near the end of an era here it was. It was more than we bargained for. Burrage went on to become one of the most renowned Maine artists of the century and the mural it seems is a good example of American Impressionism as the artist had studied with Monet before painting it.

The minister himself at the time was rather discouraged with attendance both upstairs and downstairs. He exhorted in his annual report that the parents set a good example for their children by being present themselves. Since 1866 the Sunday School had been held during the hour before church and in 1931 it was switched and held during the hour following worship to see if things could get better.

Apparently they didn't and at last in 1943 the model of how to conduct children's programs changed and the first Religious Education Committee was organized. Three of the original members are still active in the church almost fifty years later: Ruth Rankin, Susan Shields and Ted Kingsbury. Things started small for of the four teachers two were the minister and his wife. But this is when the words, Sunday School, began to wane and the words, Church School, began to come in. A decade later we were in the 1950's when Church School were bursting at the seams everywhere and churches were building wings to hold them. Here we grew rather well, the minister announced that we were a church of "full family participation" (he hoped) but teachers and children were still confined to the spaces downstairs. The church drifted back into its preferred pattern of rather relaxed standards of attendance. The church school didn't quite completely make its transition to a full modern approach. On Children's Sunday in 1958, for example the Beginners Class sang "Jesus Loves Me," not exactly in the Theological mainstream of Unitarianism at the time. The Primary Class recited "Individual Prayers" and the Senior Class recited "Bible Facts." But the New Beacon Series was coming in and the influences of the philosophy of Sophia Fahs, head of the Education department in Boston can be seen.

When you look back and see that nearly a century was spent in the mode of a scripture based classical Unitarianism, and then another sixty or so years were spent in what you might call a culturally defined Christian Unitarianism, and now a very different globally based orientation, or one that aspires to be globally based,

you see the acceleration that characterizes our lives today. The last two decades have been pretty revolutionary and exciting, and particularly the eighties when we built a building that gave us space to treat our children right. We are living in a pioneer age, walking on new ground. Unitarian Universalists everywhere are trying on experiments for grounding our children in their inheritance, world around, Chinese and Japanese, Indian, Middle Eastern, African, Latin American, European, North American. Our children here have been fortunate to have the people that they have had working with them in the time I have known our Church School.

This morning I have given only a tiny sketch of an important story. In 1994 Maine's oldest Church School will be 175 years old. I hope you will tell the story in all its rich detail and drama. Had Paul not written about his churches in Ephesus and Corinth, if Lao Tzu had not left a copy of his book with the gatekeeper, the world would not have had important testimony about its own emergence. I feel the same way about the Church School in Kennebunk, Maine. In increments, something here is emerging, and it will be important to tell its story. By 1994 the outlines of the emergence here of something new will be even bolder. I hope you will send me a copy!