

Fifty Years as a Spark-lighter ~



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Delivered at the Annual Meeting of the
Liberal Religious Educators Association
(LREDA), June 1984.

As I look at the title I have given, Fifty Years as a Spark Lighter, I realize that this presentation could easily be the report of a life-long pyromaniac. And in a way it is, for I have spent over half a century trying to kindle the spark and fuel the flame of our religious faith. My devotion to and enthusiasm for this pursuit is not unlike that of the more destructive maniac.

I became an addict after reading a magazine article on methods of education. The title was Education--A Stuffing or a Kindling? It pointed out so clearly the contrast between my own experience in Sunday School and the new (at that time) child-centered approach to education that I desperately wanted to become a kindler.

It may be hard for some of you to realize that although Channing had used those words years before, RELIGIOUS EDUCATION as we know it today is a fairly recent innovation, as are many other improvements we take for granted.

Does it surprise you to learn that when I was a child, groceries, ice, coal, vegetables, were all delivered to our homes by horse and wagon? Although we had electric lights and traveled by electric cars, there were as yet no electric refrigerators, no radios, and certainly no televisions. I was ten years old when my family bought our first automobile (the first in the neighborhood!), and when my mother and other women were allowed to vote for the first time. On Sundays families either walked or took the street-car to church. Sunday School was different, too!

Come with me now on a nostalgic trip back to the modest little brown-shingled church on Boston Avenue near Tufts College in Medford, Massachusetts, where my own spark was kindled and fed.

Years before, my grandfather Adams had joined several other families from the East Cambridge Universalist Church and moved "out into the country". There they built the church where I was christened, grew up and was married.

Step into the vestry with its yellow-buff walls and abundance of varnished woodwork. The sunny windows of pebbled glass spread a warm light. Here, on a Sunday morning, the minty smell of home-made paste mingles with the aroma of coffee from the kitchen, where the brown-stained muslin coffee bags are forever drying draped over the tops of two huge urns.

Here is the kindergarten room, next to kitchen, where nearly everything is the color of those coffee bags.

We are seated once again in the circle of little wooden chairs singing, "Jesus Loves Me, This I Know" or "Lit-tle Drops of Wa-ter, Lit-tle Grains of Sand". Dressed in our Sunday best, we listen politely to stories of "Samuel and Eli" or of "Daniel in the Lion's Den" and we are given folders with colored pictures to take

home. AND if we have learned the weekly "memory verse" we are given a tiny card bearing the verse. When we have earned five of these our further reward will be a larger card with a colored and embossed picture. (Still vivid in my memory are the colors and the feeling of my favorite, "The Good Shepherd." Jesus is reaching down over a brown rocky cliff toward a little white lamb (who is forever out of reach) while a lovely blue sky shines overhead.)

Several other classes are gathered around the vestry at tables supported by saw-horses. Their activities include pasting pictures in their workbooks, filling in the blanks left in the narrative, or taking turns reading paragraphs from the course book. (As a slow and methodical reader, how well I remember that form of torture! The awful threat of that unfamiliar word which would prove my undoing! I never remembered a word of what I or anyone else read.)

Ah, memories! Who of us, who has suffered through one, can ever forget those travesties on childhood called "Children's Concerts", which were a part of every holiday celebration?

Four or eight-line "poetic" jingles, usually ending up with "on this happy Easter Day", were handed out to each child according to age and ability. It then became the parents' responsibility to see that these couplets were properly memorized. Then, at four o'clock on the appointed Sunday afternoon, friends, neighbors, and relatives filled the pews to hear each child "speak his or her piece" in honor of the holiday.

More often than not these lines were literally extracted, word by word, in stage-whispered promptings, from poor youngsters suddenly struck dumb by the public exposure. Meanwhile, suffering parents in the congregation tried to restore family pride by whispered assurances to those in the pews nearby that "she knew it perfectly just before we left the house". The little extrovert had a heyday; but the shy little girl who, in her nervousness lifted the hem of her dress to her mouth exposing her bloomers, was greeted with waves of laughter.

Yes, religious education as we know it today was scarcely a dream back then. Sunday school was a duty carried out, often with grim determination, by someone called a superintendent. Classtime was sandwiched in between opening and closing exercises which were read verbatim from a Sunday school hymnal compiled by people who thought they knew what was "good for children". In fact, the whole approach as I recall it, was rather like stuffing children with what adults thought was good for them. There was very little kindling.

Yet, the church was a friendly place to be and through the years we earned our way bringing our pennies, learning our verses, saying our pieces, until we were big enough to set tables and wash dishes, to help with the church fair, to lead our first devotional service as a member of the Young Peoples' Christian Union, to sing in the choir, to give the sermon on Youth Sunday and to take on the sober responsibility of church membership.

Somehow, by my fifteenth birthday, a tiny spark must have been kindled, for my requested present was a leather-bound Bible with a concordance. Proudly, I took it to Ferry Beach the following year for my first week of teacher training, which included a Bible course by Gertrude A. Earle.

A few years later when our Sunday school superintendent was married and moved away, and no one else wanted the job, I eagerly volunteered. Many a lunch hour during my four years at Massachusetts College of Art in Boston was spent dashing down to 14 Beacon Street to talk to Susan Andrews and Dora Brown at Universalist headquarters. 16

When I was married and moved to Lexington it was obvious that if Stan and I were to support ourselves with our traveling marionette show I must not get involved in church duties. BUT, right around the corner was a little white octagonal church named after Charles Follen, a dear friend of Channing's, AND the young minister was a former classmate of mine. It wasn't long before I was teaching and superintending again.

Only at denominational levels did one talk of religious education. Locally, Sunday school remained a duty performed by the church. There were all kinds of rewards for attendance, based on the premise that no child in his or her right mind would want to come. We gave out celluloid (an early plastic), then copper, then silver, then gold pins followed by wreaths and bars that attached year after year making the proud wearer look like a much-decorated admiral of the fleet. In addition, each Sunday classes with perfect attendance were asked to stand and receive the praise of their elders. There were rally Sundays and folksy cards to absentees and large attendance charts bristling with stars, all focused on getting the children to come.

I longed to make some changes. What if we could set up a program so interesting that the children would want to come? My dream was to do away with those expensive attendance awards and use the money on new curriculums and creative supplies.

My early attempts at liberalization were viewed with suspicion by the conservative people in the community church. However, after I had served a proper apprenticeship sewing aprons, baking pies, painting furniture and sorting rummage, I dared to strike out more boldly toward my objective. Openly, I ran a foodsale to send me to Star Island Religious Education Week. It was there that my little liberal spark began to glow in the presence of people like Frances Wood and Angus MacLean, of Sophia Fahs, and Jo and Larry Gould.

I became a follower of the gleam. Inspired by their example, I too, wanted to be a kindler of the religious flame in children. On a shining day, vivid in my memory, I stood on the lichen-covered rock by the chapel door on the highest point of Star Island, where I could see the lovely blue ocean all around, and there I dedicated my life to the sharing of this light that seemed so alive within me. I affirmed my idealism and consciously accepted the responsibility of being perceived as a model by those whose lives I would touch. I prayed that I might be sincere and loving and that my childish optimism and sense of humor would sustain me through most of my difficulties. As you can see I have come through with my little light still aglow.

It is hard to know when the religious spark is first born. We can only provide the atmosphere for it to happen. I suspect that a tiny sort of spontaneous combustion takes place within the warmth of a loving community and that exposure to wonder causes it to glow

a little. Surely the awareness of being consciously alive in an exciting world, and able to make choices, must fan it to a tiny flame. A feeling of sympathy for those who suffer and a longing to help should add fuel to it, and a passion for justice may bring on a real conflagration. But the simple attributes of love and understanding can provide a steady dependable flame to light up a whole life.

There are many advantages to being my age besides riding public transportation for a dime. I have lived long enough to see and affirm the results of our efforts.

In 1961 I left Follen Church and served the Winchester Unitarian for thirteen years. Nine years ago I returned to my family church. As some of my former "children", now married and with families of their own, returned for the holidays and learned that I was back they sought me out to tell me that only now do they realize and appreciate that growing up in the church family made a real difference in their lives. Now they want their children to have the same opportunity. They even remembered worship services from fifteen years before!

It does make a difference! It does work! So when your own spark seems to flicker, just remember that you are making a difference in many lives.

Our profession is a demanding one. We need plenty of understanding and support from each other and from our families. I have enjoyed using all the talents I was born with, but most of my skills and wisdom have been gained from you and your predecessors. We depend on each other. A single ember soon fades. Together we share and refuel our light.

I am blessed with a dear and supportive husband, a beloved daughter and son-in-law, and two grandchildren who are emerging as young adults with sound values.

My 50 years as a spark lighter have proven to be a wonderful investment returning the most golden of dividends. At times I feel so full of golden treasure that I must glow in the dark!

So I've given up becoming a scholar. As long as I live I'll be an enthusiast for life, gratefully savoring its wonder, its beauty and color, its challenges and surprises.

If I have lighted a few sparks I am grateful. I intend to keep right on trying. I hope to kindle a few more and fan them into the flames of our living religious faith so well symbolized by our flaming chalice. That flame is essential to me. I want us to interpret it for ourselves and for our children and youth. It can mean our passionate commitment to justice and freedom, the light of truth, our dedication to the highest good we can know, our reverence for life on this planet, the soul's inexpressible longing, an all encompassing love...

I want to see that symbol come alive, in living color, flaming red, giving light, warmth, courage, hope and love to a trembling world.

And I want our children and youth to know its meaning and follow its gleam.