

## Women's Work: The Female Transcendentalists and How We Read Them Today

I need to begin with a confession. Last summer I complained, in a Thoreau Society follow-up survey, about the lack of women as featured speakers on the program for Annual Gathering 2009. About six months later, I got a call from Mike Frederick asking me if I could give the keynote address today—an invitation I had never expected, and an honor I was deeply moved to accept. For as long as I've been part of the loose knit community of Transcendentalism scholars, a call to this particular moment in the pulpit at First Parish Concord has seemed among the highest tributes one could receive.

Mike explained the theme of this summer's Gathering—"Then and Now"—and I came up with what seemed like a pretty straightforward topic: "Women's Work: The Female Transcendentalists and How We Read Them Today." I took it as my mission to bring forward some of the unsung, or under-sung, women of the movement—women like Caroline Sturgis, Caroline Healey Dall, Sarah Alden Bradford Ripley, Lidian Emerson, Elizabeth, Mary and Sophia Peabody—many of whom made up the "circle of friends," that, as Ralph Waldo Emerson recalled shortly after her death, Margaret Fuller "wore . . . as a necklace of diamonds about her neck." Women who Emerson, even *then*, seemed inclined to make anonymous, writing that "They were so much to each other, that Margaret seemed to represent them all."

My plan was to pluck the diamonds off that necklace and talk about *their* work as individuals, and about the work done—frequently, but not only, by female scholars—in recent years, to recover and interpret their contributions to Transcendentalism. Then and Now.

But about a month ago, I got curious about the history of women keynote speakers at Annual Gatherings and inquired of Mike Frederick about what he knew. Mike went to the archives, and consulted Charles Phillips and Tom Blanding. What we found out—to all of our surprise—was that the last, and probably *only* time a woman had been invited to give a major talk at Annual Gathering was in 1985. That was Joyce Carol Oates. I began to feel I had a different mission here today, one, frankly, I feel hardly adequate to fulfill.

I want to say that I don't think this dearth of female speakers was the result of any kind of intentional omission on the Society's part. Of course Thoreau, a male writer, would naturally attract male scholars and enthusiasts—along with, of course, many female devotees and scholars who have studied his work and expanded on or challenged the scholarly record over the years. Certainly there have been wonderfully gifted and active female leaders of the Society during the seven decades since it was founded in 1941—women whose names I'd like to mention now in tribute—Gladys Hosmer, 1965-66; Anne McGrath, 1980-81; Ann Zwinger, 1982-84; and Beth Witherell, 1996-2000.

Still, the focus of my talk began to shift as I realized there were really two “thens” I wanted to speak about—the moment of Transcendentalist flowering in the 1830s and '40s, and *also* the moment of a rise to feminist consciousness in the 1970s and early '80s that I see, in hindsight, as the backdrop and impetus for the “*now*” of the truly superb, sophisticated scholarship on Transcendentalist women that we are blessed with today. As I read over Joyce Carol Oates's 1985 address—a paean to the author of *Walden*, “the quintessential poet of evasion, paradox, [and] mystery,” she called Thoreau, who nonetheless “asserts himself with such force that the reader is compelled to react”—her lecture began to shine out like a beacon from that

second “*then*,” a marker of where we were twenty-five years ago and how far women scholars—“women’s work”—has come to get to where we are today. Now.

Joyce Carol Oates began her 1985 talk, which was reprinted in *The New York Times Book Review* and as an introduction to the Princeton paperback edition of *Walden*, by recounting her personal history as a reader of Thoreau. “So intimately bound up with my imaginative life is the Henry David Thoreau of *Walden*, first read when I was fifteen,” she told her audience, “that it is difficult for me to speak of him with a pretense of objectivity.” Although she went on to read other works by Thoreau after that, and to teach *Walden* many times as a college professor, “It is the *Walden* of my adolescence I remember most vividly,” she said, “suffused with the powerfully intense, romantic energies of youth, the sense that life is boundless, experimental, provisional, ever-fluid and unpredictable, the conviction that, whatever the accident of the outer self, the truest self is inward, secret, inviolable.” She noted, too, how certain of Thoreau’s “pithy remarks” had become so deeply internalized as to feel almost as if they were her own “inventions.” She cited, in particular, a favorite—“Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes.”

Joyce Carol Oates was fifteen and reading *Walden* in 1953, a year before I was born. When I first read *Walden*, also at fifteen, the year was 1969, the occasion—a required 11<sup>th</sup> grade course in American lit. In that year, Thoreau was best known as the writer of “Civil Disobedience,” and my high school classmates and I in Pasadena, California, were eager to read a classic text by the radical who had invented the style of protest we practiced when we walked out of our classrooms on Moratorium Day, October 15, 1969, in opposition to the Vietnam War, and who served as inspiration for certain young men like my brother, who’d drawn a low draft

number, in campaigning to achieve Conscientious Objector status. I was lucky to have the kind of histrionic high school English teacher who could make you love whatever book you were reading with the sheer force of *his* assertion. He was even able to make us love and remember forever *his* favorite line from *Walden*, which I recall him pacing the room and ranting– “I was determined to know beans.” That line–“I was determined to know beans”–in our 11<sup>th</sup> grade American literature course, took us straight on to Melville with *his* determination to know whales, and maybe took *me* all the way to “now”–and my determination to know the Peabody sisters, and *their* sisters in Transcendentalism–although we read no women writers in that high school course.

Back then– at the start of our second “then”– in 1969, it was still a few years before anyone–any woman–would think to ask publicly, as Oates did, in a brief digression in her 1985 speech – “Did Woman exist for Thoreau except as a projection of his own celibate soul, to be ‘transcended’?” “Though a radical thinker in so many other regards,” Oates observed, apologetically, “[Thoreau] is profoundly conservative in these matters.” Offering evidence of what she labeled his “crude and unexamined” “classic misogyny,” she quoted Thoreau’s distinction between *spoken* and *written* language–“The one [spoken language is]. . . a sound . . . almost brutish [that] we learn . . . unconsciously, like the brutes, of our mothers,” Thoreau wrote, whereas “The other [written language] . . . is our father tongue, a reserved and select expression, too significant to be heard by the ear.” Classic misogyny, crude and unexamined–no doubt about it. But Oates left things there and went on with her praise of the writer and his work.

I had not thought of or heard any questions or observations like that *then*, in 1969. So when I visited New England briefly for a family wedding, the summer after my first reading of

*Walden*, the summer before my senior year of high school, I insisted that my grandparents, who sponsored the trip, my first cross-country airplane flight, drive me out to Concord in their rented car to see Walden Pond on the way to the wedding in New Hampshire. I still have the roll of poorly composed overexposed photographs I took then—fascinated most of all, as a visitor from the arid “Southland,” as Southern California used to be called, by the lush green landscape and what seemed like water everywhere, the ample Charles, the sleepy Concord, the wind-ruffled Pond. Like so many other pilgrims to Walden before and since I was shocked to find a crowded public swimming beach at one end—it was hot and I hadn’t thought to bring a bathing suit!— and to find—now gone but there “then”—the Walden Breezes hot dog stand and trailer park. But this rather jarring first-hand view of Walden taught me, if I hadn’t already known from high school English class, that everyone can find something in—or at—Walden.

Another artifact of the “second *then*”— my tiny anthology of Thoreau’s “pithy remarks,” in Oates’ phrase— *The Natural Man*, purchased at the Thoreau Lyceum in 1978, on a day trip to Concord shortly after my graduation from college— it took me a while to get my B.A., and to get back to Walden. This little book has scarcely been touched. I’m surprised I even kept it all these years. In a newly feminized frame of mind, I had turned to the section on “Men and Women,”—Thoreau’s views on gender relations, I assumed—and was appalled to read the editors’ first selection: “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.” This was Thoreau on men and women? Inadvertently, the editors had turned Thoreau’s most quoted sentence into a misogynist quip worthy of a James Thurber *New Yorker* cartoon. But, even leaving aside that odd editorial choice, *The Natural Man*—as I skimmed through it at that particular moment in time, 1978—made it suddenly and abundantly clear that when Thoreau wrote about “men,” he meant “men *not*

women.” “The nature in *them* [women] is stronger, the reason weaker,” I read in my little book. Thoreau’s inspiring pronouncements were not, really, meant for me. Even Joyce Carol Oates’ favorite line, one I had quoted just a few years earlier when I wore nothing but jeans and flannel work shirts—began to seem a little off when applied to women— “Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes.” This was a time when women wanted *in* to the professions after centuries of exclusion— we wanted the chance to trade in house dresses or mini skirts or even flannel shirts and jeans for business suits, lab coats, ministers’ and judges’ robes, Ph.D regalia.

I was beginning to learn some of the hard realities about *women’s work*, women’s scholarly work—*then*. While still an undergraduate, I worked as a freelance research assistant for two women scholars who lived in the neighborhood of Harvard, who had earned their Ph.D’s in English some years before, halted their careers to raise children, and were then, in their 40s, trying to get back into the field by turning their dissertations into books. They both had publishing contracts, but they also had very demanding family lives. I would show up at their houses after my morning classes and stay long enough to witness the tumult of grade schoolers or teenaged kids returning home, hungry, tired, cranky, in the late afternoon, requiring my employers to drop everything just as we were getting to the heart of the work at hand. I sensed a hopelessness in these two women, as well as their nostalgia for the child-free years when they had pursued their scholarly loves. In one case— a love of Thoreau. It was in working for Mary Elkins Moller that I became familiar with the hulking, humbling volumes of the Houghton Mifflin facsimile edition of Thoreau’s journals. Polly Moller, as I knew her, seemed almost another person—calmer, more purposeful, happier—when she hoisted down one of these two massive books from the shelf for us to pore over, checking the accuracy of quotations and the

footnotes that I was laboriously ordering and re-ordering as she cut and pasted her manuscript together in the old way. Moller's *Thoreau in the Human Community* was published by UMass Press in 1980.

Looking at the book now, it's hard not to see reflected in Moller's somewhat strained argument for Thoreau as communitarian her own yearning to rejoin a community of scholars. But it is also easy to see how she must have felt herself to be only a tangential member of that community, even during the years when she was part of it as something of a pioneer female grad student in Harvard's English department. As I read over her acknowledgments page now, and see the list of her professors— I remember her drafting this page in eager anticipation of publication— she had been “fed by courses with” Kenneth Murdock, Perry Miller, Alfred Kazin, Edward Carter, Reuben Brower” in her grad student days, she wrote, and “when finally I got around to writing on Thoreau,” the “counsel and encouragement of” Kenneth Lynn and Joel Porte, and readings of her manuscript by Walter Harding and Alexander Kern—just the list of teachers, mentors, important names to credit—all of them male—conjures up that “second *then*,” and reminds me of where most of us women were at the time. There *I* was, anyway, one of three women at the bottom of the list, thanked as a “skillful and faithful” research assistant, just after Leone Stein, Moller's editor at UMass Press, and just before Jeane Morris, acknowledged “for patient and skilled deciphering and typing.”

If I had thoughts of going to graduate school, they died in those hours spent working for these two beleaguered independent scholars who never did find their way back into academe. This was even more discouraging than the letter received by Harvard's English literature grad students in the spring of 1975, warning that there were no jobs to be had and advising them that

love of literature was the only reason to continue in the program; if they'd been counting on work in the field, they might as well drop out and consider another profession. I remember vividly the shocked look on the faces of these women and men, only slightly older than me, when I saw them in class the day after the letter went out.

It was several years after I'd made up my mind to dodge graduate school that I received a phone call with the tragic news that the young female assistant professor I'd worked with on my undergraduate honors paper—on Dickinson and Frost—had committed suicide. She'd kept from me her bitterness about the profession during the year we worked together, but after I graduated and we saw each other now and then for lunch, I learned just how angry she'd been, as the token female assistant professor at Harvard—the first woman to be hired at that position in many years, if ever—about her treatment by other faculty members, and by the differently onerous experience of having been a female graduate student at Yale where she'd earned her Ph.D. In those days when there were so few women professors, it was essential to have a male professor as a mentor—and there *were* men who played that role judiciously and generously. And then there were some whose style of mentoring a woman would not welcome.

So I determined to become a writer. This was, not coincidentally, also a golden age for writing on women's lives by scholars in and often out of the academy. Bell Gale Chevigny's *Margaret Fuller: The Woman and the Myth* had come out in 1976; Paula Blanchard's 1978 biography made Fuller even better known to a general audience. When, in 1985, the same year as Joyce Carol Oates' speech, I started work on a biography of the Peabody sisters, it was with these and other excellent models in mind—Jean Strouse's *Alice James*, Gerda Lerner's *The Grimke Sisters*, Nancy Milford's *Zelda*—and with the motivation to bring out of that Emerson-

induced anonymity the women in Fuller's necklace. Fuller stood, then, as Representative Woman—not well enough understood herself, perhaps—there was room for more work on Fuller, and many took it up—but she was blocking our view of the other women.

I was married by then, and had a first child. Why couldn't I, like writer-mothers whose biographies I'd read, whose lives inspired me, from Harriet Beecher Stowe to Betty Friedan, take over the dining table and set to work? This was part of what was fascinating, working at that time: learning how women of the past worked, how women of the present did it too. I remember being inspired—or at least reassured—by an essay the novelist Anne Tyler wrote for the anthology *The Writer on Her Work*. Tyler's essay was called "Still Just Writing." The title was taken from a conversation she'd had with another mother when picking up her children from grade school. "Have you found work yet?" the mother asked, "or are you still just writing?" The question seemed to imply that writing wasn't real work, that the questioner imagined Tyler spending her days quietly at her desk without a care in the world. Tyler, as I recall, went on to describe in her essay what "still just writing" was really like: the challenge of trying to keep her plot and characters in mind while doing countless household chores, vacuuming, shopping, cooking, the constant interruptions for her children's illnesses and doctor's appointments, the prospect of a week of full time writing in the summer when her son was at camp, dashed when the boy broke his arm and had to be picked up early. That sort of thing—but Tyler seemed to have figured out some combination of zen acceptance and steely, even obsessive determination, that allowed her to rise above the miasma of childcare and housekeeping duties that had overwhelmed my two independent scholar employers—to pull it off, even if her process was a slow one.

For a biographer like me, writing at home where I was also working as a mother, there was an added risk—or temptation—the temptation to take advice from my subjects. I’ll have to confess—a second confession—I may have become a little too identified with the Peabody sisters, as I read page after page of their letters and diaries. In one letter I read, Sophia Peabody—a talented artist who had married Nathaniel Hawthorne and then pretty much stopped painting after their daughter Una was born, here in Concord at the Old Manse—in this letter, Sophia indignantly rejected her wealthy friend Caroline Sturgis Tappan’s offer to hire her a nanny, after the Hawthornes’ last child Rose was born, so that Sophia might get back to her painting. Sophia wrote back huffily in refusal, “My children are my works of art.” A big part of me wished Sophia had said yes to that offer of a nanny—as her biographer, I so much wished she had finished more paintings. As biographer, too, I heard this as Sophia’s proud refusal of further financial assistance from a friend who had already provided the Hawthorne family with a home in Lenox.

Yet I was also a writing mother listening to advice from a fascinating, articulate woman of the past I had come to know pretty well—I knew this was the way Sophia thought it was right to raise her children. And I remember thinking, too, how could I hire a nanny to care for my children—by then I had two wonderful daughters—in order to write about women who would never have done such a thing themselves? My logic might sound convoluted to you now, but that’s what I was thinking many days—when I might have hired babysitters to drive my girls to soccer and basketball practice and tournaments, choir rehearsals, violin and piano lessons—whatever it took to get the writing job done faster. I still think I was right to follow Sophia’s lead, though—that was the kind of parent I wanted to be, and I was lucky to have the opportunity—and a patient publisher, besides. Both Mary Peabody Mann and Sophia Peabody Hawthorne home

schooled their children till they were teenagers—I didn't go that far, although there were times when I considered it. In the end, of course, I came to understand that children are all too much like works of art: whatever one does to shape them, the great test of art or parenting is whether your creation achieves an autonomous life.

I was writing at home and without an academic institution for a base, but I was lucky to meet and be welcomed as a colleague by women scholars, scholars of Transcendentalist women, who were willing to help guide me in my work. I often felt I was meeting not just the scholars but—uncannily—their subjects, too, in these encounters. One of these women, the late Joan Goodwin, biographer of Sarah Alden Bradford Ripley, had her own remarkable story of persistence. Married in the 1950s to a Unitarian minister, Joan had taken an early interest in Sarah Ripley, also a Unitarian minister's wife, married in 1818 to the Reverend Samuel Ripley of Waltham. Joan began work on a biography when she had the time to do research, albeit on the side as a mother of small children. Then Joan's husband died, leaving her a widow with a need to support her young family. She took a job with the UUA writing Religious Education curricula and put aside her biography of Sarah Alden Bradford Ripley for decades—returning to it only about the time I met her in the 1980s. Whenever my spirits flagged during the twenty years I spent researching and writing *The Peabody Sisters*, I thought of Joan. Her book *The Remarkable Mrs. Ripley*, published by Northeastern in 1998, was a testament also to the remarkable Joan Goodwin, who never gave up, from the moment she experienced the “thrill of coming upon Sarah Ripley's lichen collection in one of the garret rooms” of the Old Manse in about 1958 till she had fully mastered the range of her subject's intellectual and spiritual life and human experience so as to capture Ripley on paper forty years later—the self-educated classical scholar,

gifted teacher in a college preparatory school for boys, intellectual peer of Emerson and any in the Concord circle, who was said to have “rocked a cradle, shelled peas, heard one boy recite his Latin and another, his Greek” all at the same time.

On the first day I visited the subterranean cage of an archive that was Special Collections in the Concord Free Public Library in the mid-1980s, I met Sarah Elbert, who had, a few years earlier recovered for publication Louisa May Alcott’s novella *Diana and Persis*, and gone on to write her important book on Alcott’s *Little Women—Hunger for Home*. Sarah Elbert was and is a star, and her warm welcome on that day, when I was only just starting my project meant a great deal to me. I did not then meet Leslie Wilson, who would later return to Concord to rejuvenate Special Collections and make it the state of the art archive it is now. But it was Leslie Wilson’s work that brought me there. I was looking for the catalogue she had compiled while working for the library during and shortly after her library school training. She’d noticed these odd labels on certain very old books still circulating to the general public, and identified them as the remnants of Elizabeth Peabody’s foreign subscription library of the 1840s that Peabody had donated to Concord in 1878. Leslie, as we all know, has made pretty much all of Transcendentalism—all of Concord’s history—her life’s work, but she and I have shared a special passion for Elizabeth Peabody—and *her* work. So, while Leslie has published numerous articles and books about Concord for general readers, my favorite of hers is a scholarly article called “‘No Worthless Books’: Elizabeth Peabody’s Foreign Library, 1840-52,” published by the Bibliographical Society of America in 2005. This article is beautifully written, highly informative and entertaining about the “atom of a shop” that Elizabeth Peabody maintained at 13 West Street Boston, which was also Peabody’s headquarters as publisher of *The Dial*, the home base for

Margaret Fuller's Conversations, the meeting place for reformers planning Brook Farm, and the informal wedding chapel for the marriages of Sophia and Mary Peabody to Nathaniel Hawthorne and Horace Mann. Wilson's article "No Worthless Books," also contains the best record of the range of literature read and prized by the Transcendentalists that we have today.

To read the work of Phyllis Cole on the women of the Emerson family— from Aunt Mary Moody to wife Lidian and daughter Ellen and honorary sister-in-law Elizabeth Hoar—is to enter a kind of Transcendental hall of mirrors—everything is familiar, but so entirely different when seen not just *from* the women's perspectives but seeing the women for themselves. Just to list some of the evocative titles of Cole's articles will give you an idea, if you don't already know, of the once hidden world she has brought into the light: "Men and Women Conversing: The Emersons in 1837," an analysis of the family talk that infuses Waldo's American Scholar Address, or "Pain and Protest in the Emerson Family," a study of the influence of Lidian Emerson's powerfully held and vehemently stated anti-slavery sentiments on Waldo. I hope one day all these essays will be gathered together into their own volume to complement Cole's excellent 1998 biography— *Mary Moody Emerson and the Origins of Transcendentalism: A Family History*.

Cole's work is also a story of long commitment—in an essay titled "Conversation that Makes the Soul: Writing the Biography of Mary Moody Emerson," she writes of striking "archival gold" when she discovered Mary Moody Emerson's manuscript diary in Houghton Library in 1981. This Almanack, which Waldo Emerson read and quoted and excerpted in his journals, turned out to be a thousand pages long, spanning the years from 1802 to the 1850s, and written in an extremely hard to decipher hand. This was the bedrock of Cole's biography of Aunt Mary. And, I should add, the Almanack is now—thirty years later—being digitized by Noelle Baker and

Sandy Petrulionis with the support of the Brown University Women Writers project.

Helen Deese, another of my colleague-mentors, found her “life’s obsession,” as she readily admits, in the diarist Caroline Healey Dall—the woman who really was there for everything, from early participation in Margaret Fuller’s Conversations and Elizabeth Peabody’s Wednesday evening open houses at 13 West Street as a teenager, through a life of anti-slavery and women’s rights activism, until Dall became self-appointed historian of these movements towards the end of the century. Deese’s one volume of selections from Caroline Dall’s journals, which cover the years 1838 to 1911, making Dall’s the longest running journals in American letters, was published by Beacon Press in 2005 under the title *Daughter of Boston*. Even more comprehensive selections are coming out under the imprint of the Massachusetts Historical Society—the first of a projected four volumes was published in 2006. Deese’s annotations are extraordinary, they allow you to read Dall’s journal passages as if you knew every single person, book, or event Caroline Dall knew, read, witnessed or participated in—but of course it’s the diary itself that sparkles. I’m going to read just a few snippets from the summer Caroline first began keeping a journal—1838. She was fifteen, the oldest of six Healey children, soon to become seven as Caroline waited anxiously for her mother’s time of confinement—when she would be expected to take over management of the household. Women’s work.

April 17, 1838. I shall never make an elegant seamstress, I am sure, for my sewing never suits mother. She was vexed with me, the other day because I did not take sufficiently short stitches in some I did for her, “Well!” said she at last, “I would learn to be a beautiful seamstress, if I never knew any thing else, Caroline!” My colour rose, and I said somewhat hastily, that “I considered

myself born for a better purpose.”

June 22<sup>nd</sup>. Had a birth-day present of a violent head-ache, and a dozen volumes of French literature. The last, was from my dear father, and the first, I trust—from my Heavenly Father. I am as grateful for one, as the other; the books will contribute to my advance in knowledge—and the pain contributed, oddly enough to drive away the blues, and restore the equilibrium of my reasoning faculties! I am sixteen years old today.

June 25. Was obliged to leave my desk—again, to make blanc-mange for Marianne [her sister aged ten]. I wish I was a man, in that case I might hope to make something of myself;—but being a woman I never can. Got a long lesson on Tytler’s *Elements of History, Ancient and Modern*—I congratulate myself upon my method of studying history—it is very effectual. Having read a chapter I go back to the head of it, and running my eye over the list of topics give in my own words, and with my book shut— a brief abstract of what it contains. Speaking of women—Artemisa’s counsel might have saved Xerxes, so *they* [women] *are* worth something!

July 9<sup>th</sup>. I am beset with anxieties. The care of the family,—at present very large—will soon fall upon me— I am anxiously awaiting mother’s confinement, the warm weather affects her—mentally as well as otherwise. One of the servants gave me six weeks notice today—it is *too* bad. I shall have no time to read, write or draw. . . .

July 24. Mother thinks that I hardly fulfil my duties, and father upon her motion, talked long, and

in a severely critical manner, to his poor child this evening. Among many faults for which he reproved me, he condemned my want of perseverance [this— in a girl who would go on to keep the longest running diary in American letters!]- “In this,” said he, “Ellen [her sister, three years younger] has greatly the advantage of you-!” Ellen! A child without a care—unless—her sash be of the wrong color—or her hair out of curl—! I burst into tears,— “Alas! My father,” I exclaimed, “no painful thoughts press upon her brain, no distracting cares are hers!”

August 1. The long-wished for crisis has come, has gone—and my anxieties remain. At dusk—last evening, mother called me to her chamber—and I remained with her, till the physician was called— At quarter past nine—she presented me with a little sister, I watched the nurse, as she cleansed and drest it, and could have dropt tears of blood, when I thought of its destiny. Poor child! May your lot be lighter than Caroline’s—may no thorns bestrew *your* path. This morning, mother is “as comfortable as we can expect,” but her low spirits remain.

August 4. My situation is a very trying one, I stand entirely alone— My mother sick, father pre-occupied—the charge of six children upon my hands, rebellious servants—and so on— so on. . . . I regret my quiet study, the pursuit of my *one* employment, the fast fleeting days of my youth, and the dark, deep void in my heart— Yet—this, and more than this, I will bear for my father’s sake—

August 6. I sent a letter to Anna [a friend] yesterday, but that is the only think I have done to please myself— since mother was confined. My dear father is as considerate as he can be, but he does not know how much devolves upon me— and to say the truth, I am nearly tired out. I am

sometimes ashamed of this pettishness, but is it not better to perform my duties cheerfully—and vent my rage in my Journal, than to neglect them, and smile upon these pages?

Well—I think we can all say that we’re glad Caroline Dall vented her rage in her Journal, and that Helen Deese chose to make it her “life’s obsession” to bring Dall’s journal to the reading public, now.

I don’t know whether my examples, here, of women scholars working on Transcendentalist women’s lives, offer any evidence that women work differently than men, or write with, what Carol Gilligan famously called “A Different Voice.” Maybe that issue can’t be resolved—or doesn’t, in the end, need to be. Men have done both foundational and innovative scholarship on the women of Transcendentalism, particularly on Margaret Fuller. Where would we be without Robert Hudspeth’s letters, Charles Capper’s two volume biography, Jeffrey Steele’s anthology with its passionate feminist introduction, Joel Myerson’s bibliographic work—and, going beyond Fuller, Joel’s labor of love, the twenty volumes of *Studies in the American Renaissance*, that annually brought so many important documents of women’s lives into print, making them available to readers *now*.

But I want to tell you about two important discoveries I made in the process of researching the Peabody sisters that I believe would never have come about if it weren’t for the somewhat improvisational way I had put my working life together as a woman writer.

Although I had a surfeit of correspondence from all three sisters to read, and important journals by Sophia recording her work on certain paintings and her recurrent illnesses, I was often frustrated that I had not been able to find the journals that Elizabeth Peabody sometimes referred

to having kept in her letters. Still, I started in to write the book, using what I had, working slowly through the years—*their* years and *my* years—amassing over four hundred pages, with the youngest sister Sophia still a teenager in my manuscript. This may have been at about the ten year mark.

Then, suddenly, my mother died, as the result of a fall. Here was another moment in my life where, you could say, I took my cue from the Peabody sisters and their women friends. There was a culture, I had learned, in which the death of a mother had profound significance. A woman's character was judged by how she responded to her mother's death. How she managed her grief over the days, weeks, and months to follow was closely monitored by the circle of friends who rallied in support. I won't begin to make generalizations about what kind of room our society, now, gives a grieving daughter to reconcile herself to the loss of her mother. But I will say that I gave more time and consideration to acknowledging the loss of my mother, to cultivating relationships with her grieving friends, than I might have allowed myself if I hadn't been steeped in this nineteenth century culture of valorized mourning. But that isn't really my point here. As a result of all this, I had interrupted my work on the Peabody sisters—and then, as I began to be able to turn back to writing, I tried to think of how I could reconnect with the Peabodys.

I went back to the archives at the Massachusetts Historical Society, where I'd already read every letter written by or to the Peabody sisters and their family members and friends. But there was a small set of reminiscences of Elizabeth Peabody written by her young female disciples in the kindergarten movement after her death. I'd read a few before, all of them glowing accounts of this silver-haired woman with the brilliant blue eyes and astonishing memory; they hadn't told me much I could use in my book. But what I wanted now was a feeling of contact, and I thought

reading a few more of these accounts by women who had actually known Elizabeth Peabody might help me connect again over the years. So— I filled out a call slip and was expecting the archivist to come back with a folder, maybe ten or twelve pages—and instead she came out wheeling a cart bearing two enormous manuscript boxes. The reminiscence, by Mary Van Wyck Church, turned out to be a full biography of Elizabeth Peabody, seven hundred manuscript pages long, written in about 1903, a decade after Peabody’s death, and never published. It was composed in a biographical style common in those times—the life and letters form—with long extracts from letters and journals making up the bulk of the text, interspersed with brief transitions like— “and then she moved from Salem to Boston.” I started reading and realized that most of these letters—and *all of the journals*—were documents I’d never seen before. No one had seen them for almost a hundred years, because—and this is a story for another time—they had been destroyed, I came to believe, when the decision was made, in 1903, not to publish this biography.

Copied out in this manuscript there was a spiritual autobiography written by Elizabeth in her twenties, recounting a childhood of rebellion against religious orthodoxy; there were long passages extracted from journals Elizabeth kept in the late 1830s when staying with the Emersons in Concord. Her first long visit was just after the Emersons’ son, little Waldo, was born—the new parents had counted on Elizabeth to come help out after the birth. In this journal of November 1836, long passages record conversations on literature and philosophy with Waldo, Sr., but now and then come lines like this—about women’s work—“the baby claims much attention while awake. . . am with the family constantly & have lately been sleeping with Lidian [who] cannot sit up. Every day is alike. I sit with Mrs. Emerson [Waldo’s mother] and take my turn with the baby.”

This was great stuff, if daunting—I knew I’d have to start over again with *my* biography, at

least on the chapters recounting Elizabeth's childhood. But in Elizabeth's journal of her second stay with the Emersons in 1837, I found the solution to my writing problem. Elizabeth was again having long talks with Waldo, recording his thoughts but following out hers as well. She puzzled over the powerful effect that her friendships with three particular men had on her—Nathaniel Hawthorne, who had become a close companion during the previous year, Horace Mann, whom she had known since they both had rented rooms in a Boston boarding house five years earlier, and Emerson, with whom she was staying and engaging in “Conversations that make the soul,” to borrow Mary Moody Emerson's phrase. Why was it that these “three great powers,” as she called them, had such an effect on her, Elizabeth asked in her journal.

It's interesting to consider just the fact of these friendships—these men were very different from each other, hardly knew each other at this point, and didn't much like each other when they finally did meet—as the result of Elizabeth's prodding. Yet Elizabeth Peabody was capable of befriending all three of them and seeing their incipient genius—at the time, Horace Mann was probably the best known, as a reform-minded politician—Emerson had published only *Nature*, and was just beginning his lecture career; Hawthorne had published only one volume of stories, *Twice Told Tales*. In her journal, Peabody answered her question—why am I attracted to these three great powers?—with another one: “Does the becoming interest the human heart more than the arrived?” And in *that* question I had *my* answer. I would write about the *becoming* of the Peabody sisters, their rise to influence, which also coincided with the rise of Transcendentalism. There was my narrative, and although I did have to throw away most of the four hundred pages I'd already written, and it took me many more years to finish the book, I always knew where I was heading and the work was productive.

The second discovery I want to tell you about—I think of as my soccer mom discovery. I mentioned that I was always hoping to find more artwork by Sophia Peabody. Right now, there are only four confirmed paintings, all landscapes, in the collection of the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, and a portrait bust of the blind and deaf girl, Laura Bridgman, in pretty poor condition at the Perkins Institute for the Blind. But over the years I traced any clue I had to other paintings, through occasional mentions of sales or gifts that I came across in the correspondence. I knew Sophia had sold a pair of landscapes to the Pickman family in Salem, and I happened to know a descendant of the Pickman family—the late Deborah Pickman Clifford, biographer of Julia Ward Howe, Lydia Maria Child, and Vermont historian Abby Hemenway. I asked her about the pair of landscapes and she told me that, while her mother still lived in the Pickman family manse and had a large art collection, these were more recent paintings—modern art that her mother had collected in the 1920s. She knew of no paintings in the family by Sophia Peabody.

Meanwhile, my older daughter was getting serious about soccer, playing on state teams and regional teams, and on one of these she had a teammate from Rhode Island—the toughest player on the team, foul-mouthed, always getting red cards—Cherry Pickman. When I was in the soccer world with my daughters, I sometimes brought along drafts of chapters to revise in the car when I'd driven a long way to a practice or tournament and expected to have lots of down time. But otherwise, I kept those two worlds quite separate—maybe following the Anne Tyler method of keeping my plot and characters alive and well in a discrete section of my imagination. For years, Cherry Pickman was on my daughter's team, and I never gave a thought to her last name—Pickman. But then one summer, a brutal hot July like this one, there was a tournament in Rhode Island and Cherry's family invited the team to their house for a picnic between games. I

walked into the house and saw right in front of me on the wall—a landscape, old, paint crackling, in need of cleaning. And suddenly I thought—Pickman. In fact these Pickmans *were* from the same family—my friend Deborah was Cherry Pickman’s great aunt, and, I was told—the landscape was one of a pair that had always hung on the staircase in the family home. In a recent dispersal of possessions, no one else had wanted the two—they weren’t part of the “valuable” modern art collection—and so one painting had come to the relatively distantly related soccer paying Pickmans in Rhode Island, the other to a sister in Jamaica Plain. Work still needs to be done to identify these paintings definitively as Sophia Peabody’s work—they look like her other landscapes, and there’s a potentially reliable provenance—but here was a discovery that I would certainly never have made if not for—being a soccer mom, driving the distance.

Well, here’s my third confession. Somewhere along the line I stopped reading Thoreau as a crude or classic or any other kind of misogynist. He became just part of the group, the Transcendentalists’ gang of rugged individuals, many of whom had unexamined prejudices. Yet they all had a lot to teach us or we wouldn’t be here today. I realized that, just like Walden Pond, Thoreau has something for everyone who comes looking, and you can find whatever you’re looking for in Thoreau. I’ve studied *The Natural Man* more closely, and you could even make the case, from certain quotations here, that Thoreau was a radical feminist: “Man is masculine, but his manliness (virtue) feminine.” Or: “I desire that there would be as many different persons in the world as possible; but I would have each one be very careful to find out and pursue *his own way*, and not his father’s or *his mother’s* or his neighbor’s.”

Thoreau wrote, “Every man . . . *tracks himself* through life, in all his hearing and reading and observation and travelling. His observations make a chain.” I’m willing to overlook those

masculine pronouns, *now*, and agree with him this time. I've given you a glimpse of the chain of my observations, today, along with some of the diamonds from Margaret Fuller's necklace. May there be more women in this pulpit in July over the coming years to give you theirs.