

The Spiritual Evolution of Lydia Maria Child

Telos Whitfield

Whitfield is a fourth-year student at Starr King School. In May 2005, this paper earned the Olympia Brown Award from the Unitarian Universalist Association, given annually for a sermon, paper or project on an aspect of Universalism. Whitfield originally wrote this paper for a Starr King class on Unitarian Universalist history.

“Religion is a universal instinct of the human soul; and the amount of it will never be diminished in the world.”¹

Written by Lydia Maria Child in 1878, this statement reflects her understanding of faith and the importance it played in her own life, as well as underscores her belief that there exists a set of universal laws underlying every religion. Child is best known for being a committed abolitionist and the author many books, including *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans*, a well-researched and compelling work that became a national anti-slavery text in the mid-1800’s and helped open people’s minds to the inherent evils of slavery. But, in addition to her more public presence as an abolitionist and popular writer, she was also a philosopher and independent thinker who left behind a legacy of important questions concerning Christianity and religion in general that are relevant in today’s society.

Born in 1802, Lydia was raised in a strict Calvinist household, but her independent spirit led her to question its doctrines from an early age. Living in a time when the vast majority of women were discouraged from pursuing any vocation other than motherhood, Child was an independent female voice – she published her first novel at age 22, became a newspaper editor in her early 20s and risked her standing as a literary figure when she became committed to abolition. Her deep religious convictions and evolving personal theology helped her to maintain a sense of her own identity, and to hold an unwavering commitment to social justice and cultural transformation.

Though she wrote her first novel, *Hobomok, A Tale of the Times*, as a novice writer and in the span of only six weeks, she boldly opposed strict Calvinism in the work and began her lifelong commitment to weaving justice issues into every work that she wrote. She encouraged liberal

Christian values in *An Appeal* and strove to awaken the reader's sense of justice toward African people through detailed historical descriptions and personal biographies that offered a personal view of slaves as individuals, worthy of equality and freedom. And, ultimately, in the creation of what she called her "eclectic Bible," *Aspirations of the World* was a reflection of Child's own spiritual evolution was evident in her writings throughout her life.

She was a great proponent of the power of morality to transform cultural ills such as slavery and discrimination against women, while realizing that if one was working within the literary world, there were frameworks that needed to be adhered to in order to create literature that would be acceptable. Due to her own sense of integrity and purpose that had been developed at an early age, Child was able to successfully orchestrate a balance of commitment to transforming cultural and societal norms, while nesting her works within acceptable and established literary forms; this meant that she was able to maintain the majority of her readership throughout her long writing career. The independent theological framework that she developed early in her life offered her the freedom to see her own spirituality as a journey and placed her outside the limited role that most women existed in at that time in America. Her knowledge of the existence of universal truths and her need to offer a grounding of morality to the larger world meant that she was continually searching for a way to balance her mind and her heart, her family and public life in a lifelong struggle that is relevant in viewing the evolution and ultimate union of the Unitarian and Universalist traditions.

Lydia Maria Child's journey of self-discovery and theological inquiry began as a child and ⁱ was already well developed in her teens. In a letter to her brother, Unitarian minister Reverend Convers Francis, at age 18, she writes: "You need not fear my becoming a Swedenborgian. I am in more danger of wrecking on the rocks of skepticism than of stranding on the shoals of fanaticism. I am apt to regard a system of religion as I do any other beautiful theory. It plays round the imagination, but fails to reach the heart. I wish I could find some religion in which my heart and understanding could unite; that amidst the darkest clouds of this life I might be ever cheered with the mild halo of religious consolation."²

Through tracing the development of Lydia's personal theology, one can see a progression of independent thinking and a rare sense of understanding about how the universe functions that was not tied to any religious doctrine, albeit possibly an Eastern philosophy, which Child would not have been exposed to until later in her life. She was developing her questions concerning religion from within a mind that was already strongly connected to her heart, though she might not have been consciously aware of this relationship. She held a continual desire to reconcile heart and mind that is evident early in her growth, as well as holding the belief that the heart is actually the force that should be allowed to lead in one's life. Through exposure to a rich library of books, discourse with her brother who was a Unitarian minister, as well as later involvement in Transcendentalist circles, her own theology evolved so that at age 32 her philosophy was as follows: "I believe it is more safe and useful to dwell upon the necessity of keeping the heart pure, than of enlightening the understanding. An uneducated man can more safely trust his conscience than to his understanding."³

Within much of her writing, one senses the commitment Child has to adhering to a moral code of honor and her belief that one needs to be guided by one's conscience and the principles outlined in the Bible, principles that she also views as universal and evident in other religions. In *An Appeal in Favor of that Class of Americans Called Africans*, she appeals to the reader's sense of morality and uses examples from Christianity throughout the text. Here she outlines a situation where West Indies missionaries had a hard time explaining the situation to Africans about to be taken as slaves: "If they urged the maxims of religion, the slaves might ask the embarrassing question, is not our treatment in direct opposition to the precepts of the Gospel?"⁴ One of the reasons this work made such an impact nationally may stem from the fact that it both appeals to people's hearts and minds, providing detailed and factual accounts of the history and treatment of slaves, as well as entreating readers to allow their principles to govern their actions. She felt that the American people had just not thought about slavery enough, and, if they did, they would begin to realize its inherent evil and their consciences would lead them to action. The basis of slavery is a prejudice "which is in fact opposed to the spirit of our religion and contrary to the instinctive good feelings of our nature. When examined by the clear light of reason, it disappears. Prejudices of all kinds have their strongest holds in the minds of the vulgar and the ignorant. In a community so enlightened as our own, they must gradually melt away under the influence of public discussion."⁵ Child's words illuminate her belief in the power of reason and the importance of knowledge and discourse.

As Child became more deeply involved in the cause of abolition, the violence and hypocrisy she witnessed within the larger society caused her to deepen her questioning of how Christianity was not heeding its own doctrine of morality. Her inner turmoil between what she knew to be true of Christian morals and what she witnessed in the outer society is revealed in this question to her brother in 1835: "What can be more beautiful than the spirit of love in the Christian religion? Yet where shall we find Moslem or pagan more fierce and unrelenting than Christians toward each other."⁶ Child struggles within herself about what she knows to be true and the hypocrisy she witnesses within the fabric of American society. She criticized the country's inability to stand by their morals in strong language that is evident in many of her letters: "A principle of despotism was admitted in the very formation of our government, to sanction which our consciences have been continually silenced and seared... The opinion of a great man stands in the place of truth; and thus the power of perceiving truth is lost."⁷

Throughout her abolition work and the creation of *An Appeal*, one sees her faith is inextricably present and that she has no choice but to risk her literary standing in order to help bring about an end to slavery. She is also grateful for the opportunity to use her writing abilities to work for justice, and, throughout the book, she encourages those reading to take heart that, indeed, the larger laws of morality will prevail over earthly wrongs. She presents the reality of the situation and encourages people to look to their faith for strength in combating slavery. "At times, discouraged and heart-sick, they will perhaps begin to doubt whether there are in reality any unalterable principles of right and wrong. But let them cast aside the fear of man, and keep their minds fixed on a few of the simple,

unchangeable laws of God, and they will certainly receive strength to contend with the adversary.”⁸ Her book is aptly named an “appeal” for that is what she does throughout the text; she appeals to her readers to awaken their compassion and use the power they can draw from their own sense of morality as a guide in combating what is inherently evil within the society. She points to the Quaker tradition as a model to follow and describes their annual meeting in 1688, when they refused membership to anyone who participated in slavery; she writes: “The Friends, — always remarkable for fearless obedience to the inward light of conscience — early gave an example worthy of being followed.”⁹ She believed people joining together with a common goal produces moral strength capable of shifting people’s attitudes and, ultimately, altering the behavior of society as a whole. In shifting the emphasis toward producing a culture of freedom, she felt that this would eventually bring about equality for everyone.¹⁰

In viewing Child’s literary contributions from a social and historical perspective, the author of *Cultural Reformations*, Bruce Mills, states that “in such a cultural analysis, Child’s writings became central, for they manifest the complex interplay between constraint and mobility; they are storehouses for societal tensions and resolutions.”¹¹ Child was familiar with the acceptable constraints of the Boston literary world at the time she was writing *An Appeal* and therefore sought to strike a balance between wanting to shift current attitudes toward slavery through an in-depth look at the history and nature of slavery, while keeping the writing in a style that would not completely alienate her readership. Although she did lose her social standing within some circles, did receive some negative reviews, and was forced to step down from her role as editor of the first publication for young people. Mills feels that she did accomplish this effort for she succeeded in creating a work that opened many minds to the evils of slavery on a national scale while maintaining much of her reader support. Child’s writing was accepted by literary and social critics of Boston because it embodied community values and encouraged a life of order and restraint. Though *An Appeal* did result in her losing social standing including entrance to the Boston Athenaeum, her readers remained committed to a writer who “still employed a calmer antislavery rhetoric and captured the spirit of restraint.”¹² At that time, the shared view toward literature was one of selective reading and the kinds of books recommended by “The Christian Examiner,” a publication which reviewed Child’s books, were “travel narratives, biographies, and historical fiction most aided American readers...”¹³ Of the books Child produced, not surprisingly many were historical novels and biographies, and she too promoted the current attitude of reading a select number of books, especially ones that helped to further one’s own knowledge of history and culture. Her belief that the mind needed to be balanced if not subordinated to the heart was evident in both her public writing and her letters. She writes that “if we often time commit good actions without time to reflect on their tendency, does it not argue a natural impulse to do good which takes root in the heart before we have time to calculate its growth?”¹⁴

Throughout Child’s life, she offers us insight into the ongoing spiritual dilemmas she struggles with. In a letter to her brother in 1856, she describes one of these faith crises: “I am

passing through strange spiritual experiences; not at all of my own seeking or willing. Ideas which formerly seemed to me a foundation firm as the everlasting hills are rolling away from under my feet, leaving me a ladder poised on the clouds... I have ceased to believe that any revelation written for one age or in one age can be adapted to all ages. I once thought that an inner spiritual meaning invested the Christian sacred books with a character infinite and eternal... Wander where I would, I found nothing inscribed on the walls but that everlasting duality of "Love and Wisdom." Every mineral said it, every flower said it, and the archangel said no more."¹⁵ In another letter written in the same year, she says that "most devoutly do I believe in the pervasive and ever-guiding Spirit of God; but I do not believe it was ever shut up within the covers of any book, or that it ever can be. Portions of it, or rather breathings of it, are in many books. The words of Christ seem to me full of it, as no other words are. But if we want truth, we must listen to the voice of God in the silence of our own souls as he did."¹⁶

Aspirations of the World, the last work that Child wrote before she died, both reflective of the development of her own universal theology, as well as offering insight into the ongoing theological debates that the world is still engaged in today. A radical collection of writings for anyone to produce at that time, *Aspirations of the World* is a compilation of religious sayings from all of the major religions that aptly reflects Child's lifelong search for a religion broad enough to encompass the universal truths she believed in. Within this text which Child called her "eclectic Bible," she sought to prove that all of humanity is connected in sacred relationship that goes beyond any one faith or philosophy. In her introduction to the book, she writes: "the fundamental rules of Morality are the same with good men of all ages and countries: the idea of Immortality has been present with them all; and all have manifested similar aspirations toward an infinitely wise and good Being, by whom they were created and sustained."¹⁷ In the introduction, she emphasizes that her intent with *Aspirations* was both to reveal that all people share a commonality in soul and body, and that she did not create the work to be read only by in the intellectual and learned segment of society, but wished the work to be accessible to everyone. Her humility and commitment to equality is also evident in her words, and her desire to explain that she did not want to weigh the pages down with an abundance of references and therefore hopes that her readers will trust in the authenticity of what is contained in the pages.¹⁸ In *Aspirations*, she seeks to both equalize all religions and to draw out the truths common to all. Child writes that there has been some inequality in the comparison of Christianity to other religions and with this book; she wanted to offer a collection of the best words from all of the faith traditions throughout history. "I have had but one object, and that a very simple one; namely, to show that the fundamental laws of morality, and the religious aspirations of mankind, have been strikingly similar always and everywhere."¹⁹

Her lifelong commitment to equality and justice is again evident within this work for she offers the reminder that without a full understanding of sacred imagery and symbols from other religions, it is easy to judge. She states that an "unwillingness to acknowledge whatever is good in religions foreign to our own has always been a very common trait of human nature; but it seems to

me neither generous nor just.”²⁰ Through creating *Aspirations of the World*, Child sought to remedy this injustice; to honor all religious traditions within the covers of one sacred text and to prove the existence of universal truths. The text contains ancient Egyptian stone inscriptions; words of Moses, Jesus, Confucius and Buddha; a multitude of great philosophers including Socrates and Plato; and writers, philosophers and theologians from her own era. Through the placing of inspired scholarly writings alongside religious texts, Child not only offers extensive evidence that universal truths exist within all faith traditions and also within the realm of philosophy, she has also equalized the sources from which sacred truth can come.

Child offers a valuable outlook on the evolution of theology in the introduction to *Aspirations* that mirrors her own lifelong process. “But though progress has been circular, it has not been on the same plane. The circles ascend perpetually; the ladder we climb is spiral; everything that is was evolved out of what has been.”²¹ She views her own theological evolution and that of society from a longer perspective that is evident within *Aspirations*. The work traces the progression of belief and seems to mirror her own outlook that society is indeed evolving, and that if we look to our sacred writings throughout history, we cannot deny our commonality that goes beyond national borders, religious doctrine and ethnic heritage. She suggests that if we examine closely our own hopes and fears, we will find that there is a both a common source from which we come and a path that only appears different when we simply view the outer circumstances. Child does recognize that this evolution is a gradual process, and that people do change over time; this reality is something that she must encompass with her own theological framework as she confronts her own frustration at current inequalities that continue to exist.²² Within this work as with other books she produced throughout her life, Child reveals her continued frustration at the hypocrisy she witnesses within Christianity. “The mournful truth is that its practice has been the reverse of its theories. It does great harm to the souls of men to make noble professions which they do not manifest in actions; and as the tallest mountain casts the deepest shadow in the water, so the higher the assumed standard the lower is the state of morals produced by a practical disregard of it.”²³ Throughout Child’s life, this frustration with Christianity and her society in general is apparent and still unresolved in her reflections in *Aspirations*. She describes with strong words how hypocritical it is for people to be celebrating the Declaration of Independence and singing Christian hymns while whole populations are being stolen from and lied to, and millions of people are still enslaved.²⁴

As an outspoken advocate for justice throughout her life, this call is emphasized in the section on Moral Courage where she quotes the 19th century American, Samuel Johnson: “The unbeliever is he who deliberately declines to speak what he thinks, or to trust humanity with what helpful truth has been entrusted to himself.”²⁵

Although she exhibits this deep frustration about the current state of the culture she lives in, she is also hopeful that religion can be a beacon of hope; but religion in the broadest sense that encompasses all traditions and reveals the common ground that all people already stand upon. For herself, she found solace within the creation of a theology broad enough to encompass all that she

knew to be true; through *Aspirations*, she sought to offer the larger society that she lived in proof that a universal faith existed. She also wanted to highlight the common human experience of searching for a greater presence that would give meaning to one's life, and assist in facing one's fears, and that people everywhere are searching. In the final words of the book, she offers an image of humanity searching for common truth: "all over the world, we see human beings, with one or another of these lamps in their hands, wandering through labyrinths of theory and fogs of superstition. Everywhere we hear voices of supplication; everywhere we see hands stretched toward the Infinite, 'seeking after God, if haply they may find him.' Let us recognize them all as fellow-pilgrims on the same mysterious journey; and let us give each other cheerful assurance that through the devious paths we are all being guided homeward by the Universal Father."²⁶

Child was one who had explored many sacred texts in search of inspiration, and though she was not always able to draw hope from the written word, she does end up creating *Aspirations of the World* – a text that offers the best that words can offer, and which seems to indicate that she did indeed find hope and solace within the confines of a book. In addition, with *Aspirations* she is hoping to offer a sacred text that highlights the universal truths inherent to all religions.

Child's inner life was one of continual and timeless conflict as she struggled to balance heart and mind, while refusing to succumb to the traditional roles that women were still bound to in the early to mid-1800's. Throughout her life, her focus on the development of a theology that provided personal solace and inspiration, as well as fueling her desire to contribute to the understanding that there exists universal laws of existence that went beyond the bounds of any religion. Child's early questioning of religion and development of her own personal theology continued throughout her lifetime, as did her own inner struggle concerning morality. Though she espoused the need for equality and the reality that all people were worthy of empathy, she is unseasonably strict with herself in this regard. On the day after a birthday, she doubts her own goodness and writes that "I have done many other things that I regret and am ashamed of."²⁷ The self-analysis and inner reflection that is apparent in her personal letters provide additional insight into the struggles she wrestled with throughout her life and also the depth to which Child pursued her own spirituality. Along with the inherent right to freedom and equality she felt every person deserved, she wholeheartedly believed in the importance of happiness and that it really didn't matter what you were doing as long as you were happy, a philosophy which parallels her belief in the importance of the heart as a leading force in one's life. In 1841, she wrote to a friend saying: "What do I care whether you have one room or six, provided you are happy? I want to know what your spirit is doing? What are you thinking, feeling, and reading?"²⁸ Here we see not only the importance of doing what brings happiness, but also that Child placed the value of books and literature as a vital partner in this process of discovery.

Throughout her life, but especially during her work to end slavery, she was acutely aware of the hypocrisy that existed within faith traditions, and she often wrote of this both in letters and in the works she produced for the public. At one point during the height of her work in abolition, she

writes to her brother in frustration that she feels the Unitarians are allowing their fears about how they will be perceived by outer society to guide their actions rather than their own inner sense of morality. She questions those who criticize Emerson as to how faithful and committed they actually are to the principles they espouse. She writes: “how absurdly the Unitarians are behaving, after all their talk about liberality, the sacredness of individual freedom, free utterance of thought, etc... If Emerson’s thoughts are not their thoughts, can they not reverence them, inasmuch as they are formed and spoken in freedom? I believe the whole difficulty is, they are looking outwardly to what the logical opponents will say, not inwardly with calm investigation...”²⁹

Within her writing, we see that Child was able to weave her knowledge of the subject and background information together into an emotional framework that appealed to the hearts of her readers. She became adept at creating works that fit within literary frameworks, while espousing rather radical views on how the current society needed to change. At her memorial service, she was described as “one who wrote from the heart as well as the head, and who held her literary reputation subordinate always to her philanthropic aim to lessen the sum of human suffering, and to make the world better for her living.”³⁰

Lydia Maria Child was one who did manage to balance her heart and mind throughout her life, and to leave a legacy of writing that reveals this relationship. What also comes through in her letters to family and friends is that she also grappled with an inner struggle concerning her own sense of morality and how best to fulfill her dual roles as wife and public figure when both worlds held such a strong pull. The sustenance that her own theology and faith provided was evident throughout her life, as was an inner strength that guided her in confronting difficult decisions.

In *An Appeal*, she says that “The only true courage is that which impels us to do right without regard to consequences. To fear a populace is as servile as to fear an emperor. The only salutary restraint is the fear of doing wrong.”³¹ Child did at times fear that she had not done what was right, or that she could have done more to further equality in the society in which she lived; but she represents a voice that rang out boldly in defense of justice at a time in the country when women’s voices were still rarely heard or heeded. She also leaves behind a rich legacy in her writing, most notably in the creation of a sacred text that begins with the first recorded words and offers proof that universal truths do exist and can bring about cultural change.

Bibliography

- Baer, Helene G.. *The Heart is Like Heaven*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964.
- Child, L. Maria. *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*. New York: John S. Taylor,
1836.
- . *Aspirations of the World*. Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1878.
- . *Letters of Lydia Maria Child*. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1882.
- . *Lydia Maria Child Selected Letters, 1817 – 1880*. Edited by Milton Meltzer and Patricia G. Holland,
and Francine Krasno, ass. ed.. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1982.
- Clifford, Deborah Pickman. *Crusader For Freedom*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.
- Emerson, Dorothy May, ed., and June Edwards and Helene Knox, cont. eds.. *Standing Before Us*.
Boston:
Skinner House Books, 2000.
- Karcher, Carolyn L., ed.. *A Lydia Maria Child Reader*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997.
- Meltzer, Milton. *Tongue of Flame*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1965.
- Mills, Bruce. *Cultural Reformations Lydia Maria Child and the Literature of Reform*. Boston: The
University of
Georgia Press, 1994.
- Osborne, William S.. *Lydia Maria Child*. Edited by Lewis Leary. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980.
- Quarles, Benjamin. *Allies For Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1974.
- Stange, Douglas C.. *Patterns of Antislavery among American Unitarians, 1831-1860*. Cranbury,
N.J.:
Associated University Presses, Inc., 1977.
- ¹ L. Maria Child, *Aspirations of the World*. (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1878), 49.

- ² ———, *Letters of Lydia Maria Child*. (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1882), 7.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 15.
- ⁴ ———, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*. (New York: John S. Taylor, 1836), 194.
- ⁵ *Ibid.* 207.
- ⁶ ———, *Letters of Lydia Maria Child*, 18.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 16-17.
- ⁸ ———, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, 209.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 213-214.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 216.
- ¹¹ Bruce Mills, *Cultural Reformations Lydia Maria Child and the Literature of Reform*. (Boston: The University of Georgia Press, 1994), 4.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 2.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.
- ¹⁵ Child, *Letters of Lydia Maria Child*, 74-75.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 78.
- ¹⁷ ———, *Aspirations of the World*, 1.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2-3.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 42.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 42.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 43.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 44.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 135.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 276.
- ²⁷ ———, *Letters of Lydia Maria Child*, 61.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, 34-35.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, xxiv.
- ³¹ ———, *An Appeal in Favor of That Class of Americans Called Africans*, 207.