

Judith Sargent was born into an affluent family in Massachusetts in 1751. Her father was a successful merchant. It is said she was the eldest of eight children. However, being eldest in age did not protect her from the customs of the day which dictated that girls were to be cultured in the domestic arts, rather receiving a formal education. Thus it was she learned needle crafts and household economy. Her formal education was limited to learning to read at the elbow of what she called a poorly schooled old woman. Judith wrested the remainder of her education from books in the family library. In the same years, her brother, Winthrop, was being tutored by a minister preparing him for a Harvard education.

Judith prevailed upon her parents to hear the poems she wrote, and her loving folks saw her intelligence in them, but, did not relent in their determination to prepare Judith for life as a wife and mother. Using the education afforded him by his sex, Winthrop went on to notable service in the Revolutionary War, and then served as governor of Mississippi from 1798-1801. At the age of eighteen Judith married John Stevens, son of a shipping family. She later confessed that though she did not feel passion for her husband she found herself consoled by living up to her duties to the fullest extent possible.

In 1770, her father, also Winthrop Sargent read the words of James Rely, and he became convinced of the truth of the Universalist gospel. Then, he gathered friends and family around to discuss Rely's ideas. Judith was soon convinced of the self-same truths. Four years later, Winthrop Sargent heard John Murray preach and brought him to Gloucester to speak to a few 'warm Christians' there. Freedom of religion wasn't quite what it has since become, and in 1778, Judith and the other self-proclaimed universal salvation believers were excommunicated from the Gloucester parish. Judith was helping to raise two young women, relatives of John Stevens, and she was

successful enough in her instructions that in 1782 she printed a Universalist catechism for children, making her the first Universalist woman published in America. In that same year, the town seized articles of value from Universalist believers to sell at public auction. The Universalists had, contrary to prevailing law, refused to pay taxes to the town parish, and the town was determined to have its funds. The struggle to establish dissenting churches, and to be freed of taxes normally paid to the town parish continued for many years, and Universalists in Gloucester and elsewhere saw their freedoms granted and then curtailed by turns.

Judith Stevens and John Murray had begun corresponding in 1774, when first he arrived in Gloucester. She looked to him as a spiritual guide and an intellectual inspiration. John Stevens found himself in increasing debt during the years of the Revolutionary War, and finally escaped to the West Indies in 1786. He soon died, ending a marriage that spanned 17 years. Judith wrote she intended to keep herself a widow and support herself at sewing or whatever tasks she might find. But, John Murray had other thoughts. Not too many months passed in her widowhood before John Murray confessed he had been attracted to Judith even while she was still married. As a dissenting preacher, John Murray's future in New England wasn't looking too bright at the time. Still, he wrote to Judith asking her to marry him just before he fled to England for his own safety. He left before receiving an answer from Judith. No ill fate befell him either on his journey, or on British soil, and when his preaching was at last declared legal he returned and the couple was wed on July 5, 1788.

John Stevens must have been supportive of Judith's intellectual pursuits and her religious beliefs. It was while she was married to him that she wrote and published an intense catechism in Universalism. And, it was when she was

twenty-three (and she had been John Stevens wife for just five years) that she began keeping letter books – copies of the letters she wrote to others. This practice has sometimes thought to have been reserved for males, but, Judith thought highly enough of her ideas to preserve them for future generations. Also, while married to John Stevens she published an essay under the pen name of Constantia. As the essay exhorted parents to value daughters as much as sons, Constantia was not invited to submit further works. Though John Stevens might have enjoyed companionship with an independent woman, and encouraged her beliefs, it was in the years of her relationship with John Murray that Judith blossomed as a writer. As the years passed, she published more essays supporting the equality of the sexes and promoting equal education for boys and girls. She became a playwright, and when public performances were legalized in Boston (1795), one of her plays was the first to be staged at the Federal Street Theatre.

The catechism Judith wrote holds little fascination for most of us today, as the matters it addresses do not occupy our minds overmuch, nor are we threatened with legal actions for our religious belief or non-belief. The questions her charges are supposed to pose delve into the most problematic areas of theology, and stay in those murky waters for many exchanges. Though the first question starts out simply enough: “I wish my Preceptor would inform me to what purpose I came into the world?” And the answer is short and direct. “Your heavenly Father, my child, certainly placed you here for his glory and your own good.”

She offers an engaging illustration when a few questions later the imaginary child asks: “Am I ... to conceive of Father, Son and Holy Ghost as three persons?” In response she recounts the story of an apocryphal Native American who could not, for all he tried understand the mystery of the unity in the Trinity. “... With

tears of sorrow he sought his God; at length he rose from his knees in rapture, hasted to his spiritual guide, ‘I have found it, Sir! I have found it! The rain is water, the hail is water, the snow is water, yet they are all one water ...’ Soon the questions turn to talk of the sin of Adam, death and universal salvation, all essential questions for Universalist believers, but, not one imagines too much on the minds of young children even in the 18th century. The author comes around again and again to difficult passages in the Bible which might be interpreted as counter to the idea of universal salvation, but, she counters objections with passages that assert all shall be made righteous, and indeed all the world (even those who repudiate God) will be redeemed in the fullness of time. Her charge asks, “How ought I to conceive of water baptism?” She carefully explains that water baptism was for those under the law, but, the present age dwells in grace. Even the command which comes from the lips of the risen Jesus to ‘go forth and baptize’ is understood in this light. The child learns, “He does (enjoin baptism) but water is not here mentioned. No, it was his own baptism to which he refers...we have the answer of a good conscience, not by the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but, by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.” (It would have been news to the Universalists I served at Milford that they were not to baptize with water, for one of their prized possessions was a carved and inscribed baptismal font which had a place of honor in the sanctuary.)

After careful discourse on several topics related to death and salvation, Judith Stevens is able to quickly dispense with the question, “What does a Christian conceive of hell?” when she answers, “As a place of darkness from which he is exempt, by the son of man’s descending into it.”

But, among Judith Sargent Murray’s best remembered writings are those which exhort parents to give their daughters an ample education. As Constantia, she wrote first of the

fate of the poor young girl whose parents withhold all talk of her comely appearance and great talents lest she become enamored of herself. This young woman, Constantia tells us, will follow the first rascal who tells her she is great and ‘she will soon fall a sacrifice to some worthless character, whose interest will lead him to the most hyperbolic lengths in the round of flattery.’ Then, she takes up the topic of how she would teach her daughter. “... I would, from the early dawn of reason, address her as a rational being; hence I apprehend the most valuable consequences would result: in some such language as this (s)he might from time to time be accosted. A pleasing form is undoubtedly advantageous, Nature, my dear, hath furnished you with an agreeable person, your glass, were I to be silent, would inform you that you are pretty, your appearance will sufficiently recommend you to a stranger, the flatterer will give more than mortal finishing to every feature; but, it must be your part, my sweet girl, to render yourself worthy of respect from higher motives: you must learn ‘to reverence yourself,’ that is, your intellectual existence; you must join my efforts, in endeavouring to adorn your mind, for, it is from the proper furnishing of that, you will become indeed a valuable person ...”

The need to educate young women and the equality of men and women were topics to which she returned time and again. She wrote early -- publishing *On the Equality of the Sexes* two years before Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women*. She also wrote some of her stirring arguments for the equality of women under a male pseudonym. By this deceit she hoped to get her writings under the eyes of those who would reject out of hand any writing by a woman. She wrote strategically and carefully, working around Biblical passages with an agile mind. In a letter appended to *On the Equality of the Sexes* she dissects the story of Adam and Eve and the forbidden fruit. Reviewing the facts of the story, she finds that the snake appeared to

Eve in the guise of an angel. Eve plucked the fruit because indeed she wanted to improve her mind – to have the knowledge of good and evil. But, Adam, Judith reminds us, the very person who heard the injunction against eating the fruit, departs from the path of righteousness because of his attachment to Eve. This Judith points out is the very motivation often ascribed to women; but, here it appears in the very first man. The lesson is obvious. Women seek after knowledge as much, or more, than men. Men are swayed by their softer feelings as much, or more, than women.

How lucky we are to be so far removed from a day when it took an ingenious mind to prove that men and women were equals; that women and men are equally deserving of educations to improve their intellectual abilities. But, wait, didn’t we hear just last spring, from a young woman named Emily, a member of our University UU’s, who had to defy her parents to claim her right to an equal education with the males in her family? Yes, we did. We surely did.

We inhabit a world where an argument that is over three hundred years old is as new as the latest crop of graduating college students. A debate that might have been settled long decades ago is still with us. The Equal Rights Amendment has not yet been ratified by the requisite 38 states ... and Florida has yet to ratify. A bill introduced this year ‘died in committee.’ So, how old is the history of women struggling to prove themselves equal? How new is the prejudice that women aren’t quite as equal as men? It seems we don’t have to go very far to find the answers to those questions.

Our history lives with us and in us. May we live up to the heroines of our history. Today and tomorrow.