

Phebe Ann Coffin Hanaford: A Pioneer Who Opened the Way for Other Women

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Phebe Ann Coffin Hanaford insisted her voice be heard. By deed and word from an early age she added her voice to other voices to support the nineteenth-century call for human rights. She fought for abolition of slavery and for woman's right to vote. She protested in our nation for woman's right to full participation in everyday life.

Almost a century after Hanaford's hard work on the issue, on October 27, 2016, *The New York Times* reported in an article on "politics, policy and everyday life," that "Women's voices are often missing and discounted in public affairs, even when they have seats at the tables of power. They speak less, make fewer motions and are more often subject to negative interruptions....Researchers have quantified how women's voices are underrepresented." – Marie Tessier from *The Upshot*

This paper responds to the influence of Phebe Ann Coffin Hanaford, a remarkable woman from Nantucket in her era and today. History seems little to remember her. Her voice deserves a seat at that table.

My research started fifteen years ago when I volunteered to write a paper for my ministry study group. The topic was Universalism. I proposed writing about a Universalist rather than Universalism; I proposed writing about a woman, and rather than a man. I chose Phebe Ann Coffin Hanaford for an odd reason: I liked her name; it scanned well, and she was from Nantucket. I read her writing, garden-fresh words, agreeable to our contemporary ear. I read her sermons, quite Christian and not for my ear, as well as her articles and poems. She wrote easily in poetry as well prose, and her letters to family, colleagues and friends were warm and compassionate. The Nantucket Historical Association holds the bulk of her writing; Andover-Harvard Theological Library holds some as well.

The UUHHS Convocation, *Beyond Boundaries*, where I was invited to participate this October, suggested an approach that was more than what I had been doing, recording her life. Closer examination of her gifts invited me to see her as Phebe Ann Coffin Hanaford, the pioneer. She lived as a pioneer, as minister, as companion, friend, and activist. She crossed frontiers of political correctness. She dedicated her life to paving a path for other women to enter the Universalist ministry, just as the Rev. Olympia Brown had opened the way for her.

In an article she wrote in 1890 for the prestigious woman's rights weekly, *The Woman's Journal*, she ended the piece: "seeing that other women are following in smoother paths because of our pioneer feet, let us thank God and take courage." She was asked in this article to reflect on her "Twenty Years in the Pulpit."

Some questions:

1. How did Phebe Hanaford get to be the person/woman/minister she was? Where did her confidence come from? Why did she see herself a pioneer?
2. Who were her mentors? Who were the people who encouraged her? What were the religions that nurtured her?
3. How did she make paths smoother for other women?

For how she got to be the woman she was, I turned to Sophia Fahs, religious educator, for guidance. It is important how we educate and nurture our children. Fahs drilled that into us a long time ago when she wrote:

It matters what you believe. Some beliefs are like walled gardens. They encourage exclusiveness and the feeling of being especially privileged. Other beliefs are expansive and lead the way into wider and deeper sympathies.

Faith believed nurturing our children was essential to growing our UU faith and creating a world, safe and compassionate. A key strength of Phebe's childhood was that she grew up in this environment. The culture was one of love and care, and education of mind, body and soul. She was precious in the eyes of that early nineteenth-century Nantucket community, as were others.

She was born May 6, 1829 in Siasconset, Nantucket. She descended from Peter Folger and Tristram Coffin, early settlers of Nantucket, and was nurtured by island values: courage, perseverance, confidence, and hard work. An even earlier ancestor was the Pilgrim who piloted the *Mayflower* to America. William Bradford writes of the Pilgrims that "they knew they were pilgrims and answered with answerable courage." Phebe knew she was a *pioneer* and answered with answerable commitment to that role.

She was born and raised a Quaker. Though her childhood faith would not serve her throughout her life, as she could not embrace pacifism during the Civil War, it encouraged in her a trait that did serve her life-long: a way to discern and follow her inner light. In an interview in 1896 by the magazine, *Godey's Lady's Book*, she says: "I did not think of adopting the ministry as a profession when I began to preach, but was led into it by inner promptings and providential openings. I think it a delightful occupation for those who feel called to it." She felt called to ministry. She reflects elsewhere using Quaker imagery about her choice to become a Universalist in the early 1860's. She writes: "I came out into the light and joy of liberal Christianity."



Phebe A. Hanaford • *From Shore To Shore And Other Poems* • 1871 • HathiTrust.org

In an 1890 *Woman's Journal* article, she reflects on her early years as a Quaker youth: "Born and reared as a Quaker on the Island of Nantucket, I had been accustomed through my childhood and youth to hear women preach. More women preachers there were than men. Many of them were island born.... Sybil Jones was an inspiration to many young hearts who would throng the Old Quaker Meeting House or the Athenaeum Hall."

Phebe practiced her preaching voice long before she became a preacher. Her uncle was the Brant Point lighthouse keeper. Afternoons she would visit him at the lighthouse and practice in that cavernous building what others would later call her "strong preacher's voice."

Phebe was well educated as all Nantucket children were, boys and girls together. She had a thirst for learning. The seeds of being a life-long learner were sown there, and the education served her well. She passed her ordination examination in 1868 on what she had taught herself without benefit of a formal theological education.

And the island women modeled independence. As their husbands and sons sailed the world in search of whales, they ably took care of business at home. Nantucket, called "The Far-Away Island," was anything but far-away. It was never isolated and it was fairly cosmopolitan. Its sailors brought home goods and stories from faraway peoples; main land Americans accepted speaking engagements at its Athenaeum. As a young woman Phebe was allowed to attend these meetings. An abolitionist beginning in her youth, she responded spontaneously to one speaker, Frederick Douglass. He so inspired her that she wrote an anti-slavery poem at age 13. The poem was published in the Nantucket newspaper.

Shame, shame the deepest will be thine,
Till Freedom's light on all shall shine.
Till black and white alike are free,
Blight will forever rest on thee.

But it wasn't only Phebe that Nantucket Island nurtured. Island values encouraged many strong, courageous, independent, and confident women. Maria Mitchell, the first woman astronomer to teach in a college, was her cousin. Maria would achieve what her male counterparts would achieve. Lucretia Mott, the abolitionist and woman's rights reformer, was also a cousin, about a generation older than Phebe. In fact, Lucretia's life inspired

Phebe's novel, *Lucretia, the Quakeress*, written in 1853. Phebe Hanaford was only 24 at the time. The book received good press. Hanaford would publish a total of fourteen books in her lifetime, both poetry and prose. In fact, she was an accomplished writer before she became a minister.

In 1865, shortly after the assassination of Lincoln she wrote a biography of him. It sold 20,000 copies. In 1870, while new to the rigors of ministry, she wrote *The Life of George Peabody*. Phebe admired Peabody who died in 1869. He dedicated his life to benevolent acts and Phebe dedicated this book to Peabody, the "father of modern philanthropy."

No book, though, was better received than Phebe's ground-breaking book covering sketches of prominent American women of the first two centuries of the Republic. *Daughters of America*, copyright 1882, was published in 1883. It offered short biographies of women's commitments in every profession: religion and spirituality, poetry, art, science, lecturing and preaching. The volume is a "who's who" of remarkable American women. Hanaford included Margaret Fuller Ossoli whom she viewed as the "grandest woman of the nineteenth century." Julia Ward Howe, of whom she said, "The world hath need of such as she and the country can ill afford to lose a woman at once so sweet and strong." Ward was a good friend to Phebe, as well. She wrote of Olympia Brown because "She took to the ranks of the ministry as well furnished intellectually as any man ever was." And Dorothea Dix she called "a woman of mercy." The book sold 100,000 copies. The quantity confirms a hunger in people to hear about women and women's high place in American life. America was in the midst of the Woman Movement, which advocated among other things for women's right to vote.

In the frontispiece Phebe quoted Jesus Christ: "*O woman, great is thy faith.*" In the preface, she wrote:

Every woman is a daughter of Almighty God, as every man is his son. Each was created in the divine image, and for each the path of duty is the same. And the destiny is the same.... He has given to neither power over the other. Man was not made subject to woman, nor should woman be subject to man. Neither men's rights, nor woman's rights should be considered, but human rights. Men and women rise and fall together.

Her motive for writing this collection, she felt, was that "in these lives of usefulness are lives worthy of imitation."

She wrote prolifically, many articles, speeches about woman's rights, or the same speech repetitively given up and down the Eastern seaboard, hymns, and sermons. She delivered many sermons she proudly reported, sometimes three or four in a day, attesting to her stamina as a preacher, attesting to the fact that women work as hard as men.

In 1857, Phebe moved off Nantucket Island with her husband, Joseph, and two young children. They settled in Reading, Massachusetts, not far from the Northshore. The Northshore had a strong Universalist presence and active reform movement. She entered both, hungry to engage.

In these movements Phebe met women who became her close friends. One, Rev. Olympia Brown encouraged her path to ordination as a Universalist minister. Admiring Phebe's skills as an orator, Brown asked her to preach in her stead for one Sunday at the Universalist Church in South Canton. Subsequently, Brown recommended her to the Universalist Church in Hingham as their Sunday speaker. Phebe preached in Hingham for one year before, by mutual agreement, the church ordained and installed her as their minister. At the Ordination, taking place on February 19, 1868, Olympia Brown offered Hanaford the *Right Hand of Fellowship*, a long-standing ritual that welcomed a new minister into the fellowship of ministers. Brown spoke solemnly about Phebe's path ahead.

As a woman you stand in some sense as a representative as one of the earliest to assume this high office of preacher; it is yours to maintain. Show yourself worthy of this high calling.

Male ministers supported her as well. Eight male Universalist ministers from New England participated in the service, but all the hymns were written by women.

On the Northshore she also met Miss Ellen Miles. Ellen would be her soul mate, her help mate, and her partner through forty-two years until Ellen died in 1914. In 1870, when Phebe moved from Waltham to New Haven in her third ministry, Ellen moved with her. Joseph Hanaford remained in Reading; their daughter moved with her, their son was away at school. In 1874, when Phebe moved to the Good Shepherd Church in New Jersey, Ellen again moved with her.

About Reverend Phebe Ann Coffin Hanaford, it was said that she proves in her work that she is “a praiseworthy candidate for ministry.” Her congregations offer high praise for her ministry, her fine pen, animation, stamina, and voice. In Waltham in her first Sunday, her preaching received praise in the local newspaper. *The Waltham Free Press* wrote: “The Rev. Mrs. Hanaford of Hingham preached to a large audience in Rumford Hall on Sunday morning and evening and sustained herself admirably in the position so novel in the eyes of many in the audience.” When she left Waltham a year later, the congregation had this to say:

Resolved that in Mrs. Hanaford’s labors with us as a Gospel preacher we have been deeply gratified and have derived from them edification and spiritual profit. What is our loss is New Haven’s gain.

In New Haven in 1870, the Installation Service boasted a hymn by Julia Ward Howe. The last lines set forth a Woman’s Rights’ agenda.

And Woman, with unfettered hands, Keeps thine accepted priesthood here.

The Church professed its Universalism in its by-laws.

No funds shall ever be paid to any preacher unless he (sic) is a believer in the final holiness and happiness of all the human race.

Phebe fulfilled the charge.

When she left New Haven, her text for the last sermon she preached to them was from John 17:4 – “I have finished the work which Thou gavest me to do.” It is a well-crafted sermon. She uses Jesus as a model and defines the meaning of the words work and finished, and the obligations of those who are given the work to do.

While in New Haven, 1870 and 1872, she was chaplain to the Connecticut Legislature, an all-male body. She was proud to receive a check for the same amount that male chaplains got. When she moved to New Jersey her salary moved from \$2000 in New Haven to \$2500, a considerable sum for any minister, male or female. Being paid well was important to her.

In Jersey City, her ministry started out well. *The American Standard*, a Daily New Jersey newspaper, wrote regularly about church life. On her first Sunday, April 6, 1874, they said she “has preached to the congregation to the intense satisfaction of the congregation.” A week later the press praised her again.

Rev. Hanaford delivered two most eloquent sermons yesterday. She is one of the most captivating pulpit orators in the country. Her sermons consist of word paintings. Her style of delivery is animated. The attendance has so much increased because of her.”

And so the praise continued until 1877. In an article, one newspaper referred to Miss Miles as the “minister’s wife.” Some congregants objected. The Church Fathers proposed a choice to Phebe: “Miss Miles or us.” Phebe chose Ellen.

Some congregants also wanted a male minister in her stead. The newspaper recorded a church resolution: “that the Trustees of the Church be empowered to employ a male minister.” Some congregants objected, and Deacon Holden rose and said: “Every woman in this house has been insulted by that resolution.” In April 1877, the newspaper reported the church war continued. A vote was taken to dismiss Rev. Hanaford, with a result of 42 in favor and 41 against. The aggrieved part of the congregation set up a new church across the street and called

Rev. Phebe Hanaford as their minister. The first Sunday the Hall was packed, and the audience overflowed into the corridor. She stayed at the new church for six more years.

After that, she went back to New Haven and retired from ministry. Upon retiring, Phebe moved with Ellen to Manhattan. Courtesy of a fellow volunteer at Mount Auburn Cemetery, I was told: In the 1910 Federal Census in Manhattan, New York, Ellen is listed as partner to Phebe, who was the head of household.

In 1890 in a *Woman's Journal* article, Phebe lists her firsts: I was the

- First Universalist woman to be ordained in New England
- First to offer the ordination prayer at the ordination of a son
- First to officiate at the marriage of a daughter
- First woman minister to give the Charge to the Minister of a male colleague
- First woman to be chaplain to a state legislative body

She wrote "I list these things not alone to mark myself a pioneer, but also to show what woman can do hereafter." She believed "in days to come more women rather than fewer will enter the ministry." David Johnson confirms in *Shouting Singing: Celebrating 200 years of Universalism* that at the time that the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified, eighty-eight women were ordained to the Universalist ministry. Phebe and others led the way.

Twenty-five years earlier, Alice Severance had summed up the importance of Phebe's life in an article in *Godey's Magazine*. She wrote:

Mrs. Hanaford, as one perceives from her utterances, has entire confidence in the future of her sex; she is a woman of independent views, and has the courage of her convictions; she has well earned her laurels as a minister and her reputation as a woman of brains, benevolence, and independent views. She is no strait-laced Christian, but a woman of broad views and far-reaching philanthropy.She affords an example of what a woman of heart and noble purpose can accomplish.

At the end of her life Phebe was living with her granddaughter, Dionis Coffin Santee. Before her death, Phebe told Dionis that she was satisfied that she would be leaving this world a little happier and a little better because she had lived and worked in it.

Her obituary read:

Rev. Phebe A. Hanaford, Universalist minister, writer, a **pioneer** in the movement for equal rights died this morning at 8 o'clock at the home of her granddaughter, Mrs. Santee. The funeral will take place tomorrow from the home of her granddaughter. Rev. William Wallace Rose of the First Universalist Church of Rochester will officiate at the services.... Mrs. Hanaford was "best known nationally because of her close relations with all the leading suffragists of the period...at a time when the dawn of equal rights was obscure."

Phebe believed that of the "great questions that agitate the mind more or less, there is none more important than suffrage for women." Her labors, though, were for more than suffrage; she labored for women's equality and women's rights, and for women's voices to be heard.

Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton preceded Phebe in death. She conducted both graveside services. At Stanton's service she prayed: "*Our Father, Our Mother: we commit the spirit of our beloved one, assured that all is right where thy rule extends*" And that was what she believed! She, too, would be there some day.

Ellen Miles was buried in Waltham at Mount Feake Cemetery in a family plot; Phebe Ann Coffin Hanaford was buried in Orleans Cemetery, Phelps, New York. There was no headstone at Rev. Hanaford's grave. That was remedied by the Unitarian Universalist Women's Heritage Society. They placed a stone there in the late twentieth century.

**The Reverend
Phebe Ann Coffin Hanaford
1829-1921
Ordained to the Ministry February 19, 1868
Universalist Church Hingham Mass.
Author, Preacher, Lecturer
Life-long worker for reform**



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