



Schedule of Services

Services are held every Sunday at 10:30 at Kirribilli Neighbourhood Centre

6 April Martin Horlacher "Ethical Culture: A Philosophy for Humanity."
Ethical Culture is an ethical, educational and religious movement begun by Felix Adler in 1877. But, what are its core tenets? And just how might it compare with Unitarianism?

13 April Dr Max Lawson "The Spiritual Quest of Emily Bronte."
Although Emily Bronte's father, Patrick, was a member of the Evangelical wing of the Church of England to which her sisters Charlotte and Anne subscribed, Emily broke the mould. Not a Sunday-School teacher or a regular churchgoer like her sisters, Emily Bronte struck out on her own spiritual path as revealed in her poetry, and her novel Wuthering Heights. (1847)

20 April Rev. Geoff Usher "Easter Sunday: A Unitarian Perspective"
The idea of a literal re-awakening from the dead makes many liberal religious people ignore or reject the idea of resurrection entirely. Perhaps we are asking the wrong question if we ask it in those terms: Was the resurrection real? For us, as Unitarians, Easter can mean confronting the deep wounds and the hurts and scars we have suffered, and then allowing ourselves to be transformed anew.

27 April Alice Oppen "Family Planning for Disadvantaged Women Overseas."
Women's Plans Foundation is focussed on providing family planning as a component of overseas aid programs. Family planning can accomplish much for women in areas of poverty and disadvantage.

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**My Response to Audrey's article**

*Eric Stevenson*

**(In last month's Esprit, Audrey Lowrie responded to Morandir Armson's talk about mass killings, looking at why they happen and what does that say about the human moral framework).**

Dear Audrey, Because you addressed my additional question, "What can we do about it?" I thought I owed it to you to write something. It has also helped me to do so because, out of respect for you, I needed to get my mind around what you have written. You answered with an analysis of human being's capacity to exercise their free will and you approach the answer from two points of view – 'Freedom to' and 'Freedom from'.

By 'Freedom to' I take it you mean our capacity to act out of a desire to perform     **(Cont. p. 6)**

## May Sarton

May Sarton (May 3, 1912-July 16, 1995) left an impressive legacy of over fifty books, including novels, poetry, memoirs and journals. Her appeal lay in her ability to "sacramentalize the ordinary" by probing everyday subjects such as flowers, gardens, animals, changing sunlight and personal relationships in order to find deeper, universal truths. She examined such themes as the need for solitude, the role of the muse in the act of poetic creativity, and the role of the female artist in society.



Courtesy estate of May Sarton

Born in Wondelgem, Belgium, May grew up as an only child. Fleeing the German invasion in 1914, the Sartons eventually moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts where her father George Sarton, a noted historian of science, taught at Harvard University while continuing his research. May's mother, Mabel Elwes, had been a designer of furniture and fabric in Belgium, but after moving to the United States, Mabel made these artistic interests secondary in order to care for her husband and child. Although her parents were not connected with any church, Sarton as an adult felt that their teachings were not far removed from the religious views of the Unitarian Universalists. Interviewed in *The World* in 1987, she told Michael Finley, "My father and mother believed that, though Jesus was not God, he was a mighty leader, and the spirit of Jesus, the logos of him, is the worship of God and the spirit of man."

At the age of ten May was introduced to the Unitarian church by her neighborhood friend Barbara Runkle, whose family attended the First Parish in Cambridge. May was impressed by the minister, Samuel McChord Crothers, whose sermons she thought "full of quiet wisdom." One sermon in particular, she recalled in her memoir *At Seventy*, 1984, "made a great impression on me—and really marked me for life. I can hear him saying, 'Go into the inner chamber of your soul—and shut the door.' The slight pause after 'soul' did it. A revelation to the child who heard it and who never has forgotten it."

May's formal education began at the Shady Hill School in Cambridge, an open-air alternative school. She credited her love and appreciation for poetry to the genius of Agnes Hocking, poetry teacher and founder of Shady Hill. In the November 1978 issue of *Boston Today*, Sarton told Maureen Connelly that Hocking "did not tell us about poetry, but made us live its life." May later attended Cambridge High and Latin, graduating in 1929. Her first published poems, a series of sonnets, appeared in *Poetry* magazine in December 1930—when she was just eighteen years old.

Although she had a scholarship to Vassar, college was not Sarton's choice. She had dreams of becoming an actress even while continuing to write. She had fallen in love with the theater after seeing actress Eva Le Gallienne perform in "The Cradle Song." Much to her father's concern, May did not attend college but worked as an apprentice actress for Le Gallienne's Civic Repertory Theatre in New York, 1929-33, and later as director of her own Associated Actors Theatre, 1933-35. When the Great Depression and lack of funding brought about the demise of these efforts, Sarton withdrew into exhaustion. "All this was a kind of education," she later judged, "different perhaps from college, but I believe now immensely valuable for me as a writer, and I do not regret it."



Throughout her time in the theater, Sarton had continued to write poetry. Her first book of poetry, *Encounter in April*, was published in 1937. During the early years of writing

poetry and novels, Sarton held a number of varied jobs, from film script writer at the Office of War Information to part-time instructor at Harvard, Wellesley and Radcliffe. In 1940 she undertook the first of what were to become annual poetry reading and lecture tours at colleges throughout the United States.

It was on one of these trips to Santa Fe, New Mexico that Sarton met Judith Matlack, the woman with whom she would share her life for many years and with whom she found the greatest stability and companionship. In spite of early love affairs with men, it was with women Sarton found her muse. In the journal *At Seventy* Sarton wrote, "Judy was the precious only love with whom I lived for years, the only one. There have been other great loves in my life, but only Judy gave me a home and made me know what home can be." It was for Judy and their life together that Sarton wrote the poem "A Light Left On," which appeared in the volume *Land of Silence*, 1953.

In 1954 Sarton wrote her first memoir, *I Knew a Phoenix*. This and subsequent memoirs brought her a tremendous audience of readers and correspondents. Her novel, *Birth of a Grandfather*, 1957, and her acclaimed book of poetry, *In Time Like Air*, 1958, were each nominated for National Book Awards. *In Time Like Air* was one of the few volumes of her verse to receive a warm initial reception from the majority of critics.

After the death of her parents, Sarton lived in an old house in Nelson, New Hampshire, 1958-73, which she made the subject of her second memoir, *Plant Dreaming Deep*, 1968. Scholar Carolyn Heilbrun wrote of this book that it affected "more single or lonely lives than any other memoir published in recent years." *Journal of a Solitude*, 1973, Sarton's second memoir, was written to counteract the benign picture projected in *Plant Dreaming Deep* by unveiling some of her more painful emotions.

*Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing*, 1965, is often referred to as Sarton's "coming out" novel and one she admits she could not have written while her parents were alive. With its re-issue in 1974, to which Carolyn Heilbrun contributed an important introduction, Sarton's work gained academic recognition, especially by feminist critics. Subsequently her work began to be studied in literature classes and college women's studies programs. Although she appreciated the recognition, Sarton believed that the label "lesbian writer" might limit and distort perception of her work. She wanted to be read as a writer who dealt with themes of universal interest. She had, in fact, already written novels about family and married life.

The women Sarton loved were the catalyst for her poetry. In the presence of the muse and in the creative act of writing poetry, Sarton found a "spirituality." In her June 1974 article "The Practice of Two Crafts" for the *Christian Science Monitor*, Sarton says "Perhaps every true poem is a dialogue with God" and "when we are able to write a poem we become for a few hours part of Creation itself."

In *Journal of a Solitude* Sarton describes what she meant by prayer. "If one looks long enough at almost anything, looks with absolute attention at a flower, a stone, the bark of a tree, grass, snow, a cloud something like revelation takes place. Something is 'given' and perhaps that something is always a reality outside the self. We are aware of God only when we cease to be aware of ourselves, not in the negative sense of denying self, but in the sense of losing self in admiration and joy."

As an adult Sarton did not become a member of any Unitarian church nor did she regularly attend religious services. She believed, however, that the Unitarian Universalists helped her "get over the hump" from small poetry audiences to larger engagements. In 1972 at the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly, Richard Henry, minister from Denver, presented a special service based on Sarton's work, "Composing a Life," to an audience of five hundred.

Following this event, other large audiences gathered at various Unitarian Universalist churches to hear Sarton speak. In 1976 Sarton was invited to lecture at the Unitarian Universalist Thomas Starr King School of Religious Leadership in Berkeley, California, from which she also received an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters. In 1982 she delivered the Ware Lecture, "The Values We Have to Keep," to the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly. President Eugene Pickett introduced her as "our poet." In addition, she received Ministry to Women Award from the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation.

In spite of these positive associations, Sarton could be critical of Unitarians. "I feel them a little sentimental," she wrote in a letter in 1978. "Perhaps because the emphasis is almost entirely on human relations." When she read her religious poems at the Unitarian church in Brattleboro, Vermont, she was not satisfied with their reception. "I suppose it went all right," she recorded in *Journal of a Solitude*, "but I felt . . . that the kind, intelligent people gathered in a big room looking out on pine trees did not really want to think about God. His absence . . . or His presence. Both are too frightening."

Sarton's work and life strayed beyond the boundaries of traditional faith. Writing in 1948 (a passage first published in *May Sarton, Among the Usual Days*, 1993) she observed that "At its best the Catholic mind seems to me much wiser than the Protestant, wholer and saner and also more gentle, more human. But I also think it is almost impossible to be a converted Catholic. The strain of belief is too great and one has to accept too many impossibles. The essential Christian wisdom . . . after all . . . comes back to what one can dig out of oneself."

If Sarton can be labeled at all, she was a humanist. She told Michael Finley, "We're humanists, you see—the extreme right considers us devils, and that's something else in our favor." Sarton was less interested in organized religion than in something she saw as broader—the spirit, or perhaps humanity. Terms such as God, Christ, heaven and hell were used only metaphorically in her writing. Yet a sense of the transcendent animated her work. In *Journal of a Solitude* she wrote, "There is really only one possible prayer: Give me to do everything I do in the day with a sense of the sacredness of life. Give me to be in Your presence, God, even though I know it only as absence."

In her poem, "Of Prayer," Sarton wrote

It is a mistake, perhaps, to believe  
That religion concerns you at all;  
that is our own invention,  
Longing for formal acceptance  
To a formal invitation.  
But yours to be the anarchist,  
The thrust of growth,  
And to be present only in the  
Prayer that is creation,  
In the life that is lived,  
Love planted deeper than emotion,  
Pure Idea that cannot break apart,  
Creator of children or the work of art.

In sympathy with beliefs of Teilhard de Chardin, Sarton was convinced that constructing a soul is the great human enterprise and responsibility. In order to compose a life, like composing a poem, one must remain transparent and allow life to flow through oneself. In *Journal of a Solitude* she wrote: "One must believe that private dilemmas are, if deeply examined, universal, and so, if expressed, have a human value beyond the private. . . I am willing to give myself away and take the consequences, whatever they are."

During her last two decades in a house near the sea in York, Maine, Sarton remained productive as a writer, even after her life had become constrained by illness and physical challenges. During the 1980s Sarton wrote three novels, a book of poetry, and a journal, *At Seventy*, 1984. Reflecting on growing older she wrote, "I am more myself than I have ever been." After a stroke in 1990 Sarton was unable to write or concentrate for several months. Partially recovered, she used a tape recorder to dictate subsequent journals, affirmative works celebrating her love for life even in the shadow of death. On the videotape *Signs of Love: Honoring the Final Voyage*, her friend, Susan Sherman, related, "I think in a very important way May was ready to die. But the truth is, she was not ready to stop living." In her work Sarton provided fresh insight into solitude, the process of mythologizing one's own life and the seeking of truth within oneself. Recalling her childhood minister's admonition to "Go into the innermost chamber of your soul and shut the door," she spent a lifetime seeking the solitude that would allow her to probe within. Solitude, she learned, was "No shelter but a grave demand,/ And I must answer, never ask." ("Moving In," *Cloud, Stone, Sun, Vine*, 1961). Thousands of her readers believed that she understood them and that she had become their closest friend. Despite her neglect by the literary establishment, these readers have kept her books in print. "There are never more than a few in any generation who can share the world of the spirit with us, to make us know that we are greater in thought or feeling than we believed we were," wrote William Drake in *Forward into the Past*, "but May Sarton is one, and we are grateful

photo: Don Cadoret.



[Richard Henry](#) and Susan Sherman provided kind assistance in the preparation of this article. Full bibliography can be found at: <http://uudb.org/articles/maysarton.html>

CREDIT LINE: From the biography of May Sarton written by [Lenora P. Blouin](#) in the Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography, an on-line resource of the Unitarian Universalist History & Heritage Society.

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Mrs. Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing by May Sarton

May Sarton's ninth novel explores a woman's struggle to reconcile the claims of life and art, to transmute passion and pain into poetry. As it opens, Hilary Stevens, a renowned poet in her seventies, is talking with Mar, an intense young man who has sought her out and whose passionate despair reminds her of herself when young. Mar has had an unhappy love affair with a man. Bewildered by both his sexuality and his writing talent, he flings his anguish against Hilary's brusque, sympathetic intelligence.

http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/575764.Mrs_Stevens_Hears_the_Mermaids_Singing

Journal of a Solitude by May Sarton

"I am here alone for the first time in weeks," May Sarton begins this book, "to take up my 'real' life again at last. That is what is strange—that friends, even passionate love, are not my real life, unless there is time alone in which to explore what is happening or what has happened." In this journal, she says, "I hope to break through into the rough, rocky depths, to the matrix itself. There is violence there and anger never resolved. My need to be alone is balanced against my fear of what will happen when suddenly I enter the huge empty silence if I cannot find support there."

http://www.goodreads.com/book/show/845386.Journal_of_a_Solitude

Now I Become Myself

Now I become myself. It's taken
Time, many years and places;
I have been dissolved and shaken,
Worn other people's faces,
Run madly, as if Time were there,
Terribly old, crying a warning,
"Hurry, you will be dead before--"
(What? Before you reach the morning?
Or the end of the poem is clear?
Or love safe in the walled city?)
Now to stand still, to be here,
Feel my own weight and density!
The black shadow on the paper
Is my hand; the shadow of a word
As thought shapes the shaper
Falls heavy on the page, is heard.
All fuses now, falls into place
From wish to action, word to silence,
My work, my love, my time, my face
Gathered into one intense
Gesture of growing like a plant.
As slowly as the ripening fruit
Fertile, detached, and always spent,
Falls but does not exhaust the root,
So all the poem is, can give,
Grows in me to become the song,
Made so and rooted by love.
Now there is time and Time is young.
O, in this single hour I live
All of myself and do not move.
I, the pursued, who madly ran,
Stand still, stand still, and stop the sun!

May Sarton

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### My Response to Audrey's Article (cont.)

according to our capacity to act out of a desire to perform according to our moral values. Why is it so difficult? The short answer seems to be that ethical behaviour requires more energy. As you say, it makes use of the frontal lobes of the brain whose activities are impeded by "stress, lack of sleep and poor diet" simply because the human brain needs nurturing and refuelling. It also needs to be replenished by rest and recreation. It therefore stands to reason that the more a people's way of life supplies these ingredients, the more they are at liberty to think and act appropriately. You say that a less stressful lifestyle is

a big contributor to 'Freedom to' behaviour because it conserves the energy demanded of the brain for more humanitarian considerations.

By 'Freedom from' I think you are referring to our capacity to leave behind the subsistence cultures from which we have evolved and to deny our animal instincts. Because of developments in modern science we are no longer subjected to the simplistic cause-effect explanations of our existence, and are able to tolerate more readily the complex nature of human behaviour. Do you mean that in a more primitive culture we would have justified the use of violence to deal with the human "baddies" who live in conflicting cultures? (Bearing in mind the original title of this discussion, I presume it therefore means that I am free from the need to kill my neighbour who disagrees with me!) In support of this point of view you draw attention to the role which an emergent universal change is playing in assisting with our liberation. The free will required to break free from old societal imperatives has been helped as society has moved away from the old to new economies. Putting it crudely it has become advantageous for world trade for us to leave behind our tribal mentality and to behave in a mutually respectful way towards each other. It is good for business!

But you conclude with what I think is something better than an instrumental economic explanation. You suggest that the big driver for a better world will be the human predicament which is inevitably going to be the result if climate scepticism has its way. Experiencing a universal world disaster which negatively affects us all could be the powerful but painful motivator for positive change. This answer involves selling an unpopular concept to which I am unquestioningly committed. But what if, in the terms of my first paragraph, the bad experience of enduring Climate Change becomes an inhibitor to 'Freedom to' instead of a means of creating neighbourliness and compassion? Nurturing the human brain in the midst of a global catastrophe and relieving it of the consequent stress seems to be a very important part of the solution?

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Concluding thoughts, Calvin and Hobbes.

Martin Horlacher A

Calvin and Hobbes has, for me, been something of a formative aspect of my life. Almost twenty-five years after first discovering it in a Hong Kong newspaper, I can still read it and be not only amused, but genuinely moved by the stories told over the course of the 3,160 separate strips that Bill Watterson drew over the course of a decade. And whilst it is primarily a funny creation, one that finely balances both humour and a small amount of pathos with style, it is one of the more sombre strips that remains my all-time favourite from the series. ,
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In 1995, Watterson published *The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book*, which reprinted selections from the strip's ten-year run with added commentary from the author. One of these was a Sunday strip whose first panel showed a very realistic sketch of a dead bird, lying on its side. The rest of the strip shows Calvin and Hobbes examining the body of a bird they've found in the garden of their house, which they surmise must have hit the window. And, this time, it's Calvin's turn to make a truly profound, philosophical statement: m
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"Once it's too late, you appreciate what a miracle life is. You realise that nature is ruthless and our existence is very fragile, temporary, and precious. But to go on with your daily affairs, you can't really think about that...which is probably why everyone takes the world for granted and why we act so thoughtlessly. It's very confusing". g
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As they get up and walk away together, Calvin adds: "I suppose it will all make sense when we grow up".

Hobbes replies: "No doubt". i
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And, in the final panel, both Calvin and Hobbes sit peacefully under a tree...and watch some other, more fortunate birds fly by, on their way to anywhere. b
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Underneath the strip, at the bottom of the page, Watterson's added commentary reads as follows: o
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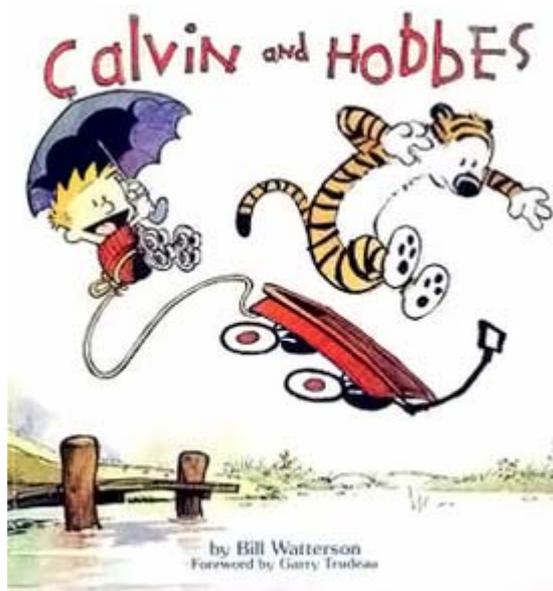
"Drawing is a way for me to muse about the nature of things, and I sketched a dead bird I found with reflections similar to Calvin's. Not many Sunday strips begin with a first panel like this, and I wondered if readers would find it offensive. In fact, I received several moving letters from people who had suffered losses and found the strip meaningful. Sharing with people, I'm always impressed by how they share back". n
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I don't think truer words could be said. And that's why I think that that one particular strip sums up what Calvin and Hobbes, as a strip overall, is about. I think that Bill Watterson perfectly captured something about the innocence of childhood – a much simpler, even simplistic, view of life, and an imaginary friend who, as an extension of yourself, helps you to see both the world and your place in it differently. Judging from what Watterson has written about his experiences creating the characters and the world they inhabit, I would say that the characters of Calvin and Hobbes fulfilled that role in his life – and, I would contend, they and the other characters that populate the strip also did that to some extent for me. ,
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I can't speak for everyone, but I can speak for me, and I think that, deep down somewhere inside me, there is still a bratty little six-year-old boy who wants things his way, and who feels that way primarily because he knows full well that he's just one little boy in a big, scary world. Yeah, I think I've got a little bit of Calvin in me. And I don't know if I've found my Hobbes yet, but I doubt he'll be a bipedal, anthropomorphic tiger who enjoys pouncing on me every time I walk through the front door of my house. w

And, if I'm lying awake in bed one night, wondering what the whole point of human existence is, and my "Hobbes" gives me a cheeky grin and says "tiger food" – well, that wouldn't be ideal...but, what the heck, I'll take it anyway.

Calvin's parents (drawings by Bill Watterson. Wikipedia)



The cover of *Calvin and Hobbes*, the first collection of comic strips, released in April 1987

A Garden Wedding

Clay Malcolm Preshaw and Melissa Hanna Cihal were married at Wendy Whitely Garden on Saturday, 15 March, 2014. Rev. Geoffrey R. Usher, Associate Minister of Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship, was Celebrant.

Congratulations and all best wishes to Hanna and Clay.

Would you care to join Spirit of Life Unitarian Fellowship?

Membership is open to all adults and includes this newsletter. Full membership \$50 concession \$20 . If you would like to join us as an active member of Spirit of Life, please ring **0466 940 461** or consult our website www.sydneyunitarians.org . Please note that all membership applications are subject to approval at a meeting of the Committee. Ask Rev. Geoff Usher or Ginna Hastings for an application form at the Sunday service.

If you have a news item or written article you believe would be of interest to the congregation, we invite you to submit it for Esprit.

It would be helpful if items for publication, including articles and talk topics with themes could reach Esprit editor by the 15th of each month: jtendys@bigpond.com or hand to Jan Tendys at the Sunday service.

Do you have a topic of a spiritual / ethical nature that you would like to share with the congregation? As Unitarians, we support an "Open Pulpit" and invite members of the congregation to lead the service if they so wish. *Please see Caz Donnelly at the Sunday service*

Fellowship contact 0466 940 461