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The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Chico

“What Will Save Us:
Pearls of Wisdom from John and Abigail Adams about
Raising Our Children and More”

By Richard Burrill

I want to invite you to ponder with me what IS the essence of the American character. Which values won out and became the matrix of our cherished American values? I believe the Adams family can help us.

Not, mind you, the 1964-1966 television sitcom, black comedy, horror comedy, “The Addams family. No, I’m talking about the family of Adamases who lived on their “nearly” self-sustaining farm in rural Braintree, Massachusetts, ten miles south of Boston. Their farm, mind you, is today inside the city limits of Quincy, Massachusetts.

On March 2, 2014, our very own Rev. Dennis Daniel led us in his sermon titled “Survival of the Family in a Global Economy.” You remember it? Its message was that “family and its attachments, with “loving” values, are what will save us.” “In the conclusion of his sermon,” Reverend Daniel said: “I recommend . . . the values that poet, Kentucky farmer, and environmental activist Wendell Berry spelled out . . . which grow primarily in families and communities and which serve to anchor us in our movements: (1) compassion, (2) magnanimity (3) courtesy (4) mutual obligation and dependence, and (5) imagination.

If we had John Adams and Abigail Adams back with us again, in the flesh, what gems of advice would John and Abigail make about Wendell Berry’s five values? How close or different would have been their list? From reading and rethinking both David McCullough’s Pulitzer Prize winning *John Adams*, 2001 and Lynne Withey’s *Dearest Friend, A Life of Abigail Adams*, 1981, I did find related parallels.

I invite you to join me to identify those universal values --which grow primarily in families and communities-- that will sustain us and save us all.

JOHN ADAMS (1735-1826)

- Nine years difference in age when they married Oct. 25, 1764. He was 28, she was 19.
- A Yankee farmer's son
- McCullough (2001:111) tells us that Adams was called "Mr. Round face" and "stout."
- He loved to talk" (McCullough 2001:17).
- "Dismounted, he stood 5'7" or 5'8", though verging on portly, he had straight-up, square shouldered stance, and was surprisingly fit and solid" (McCullough 2001:18).
- His deepest responsibility was to serve his "new country" honorably
- John Adams "never owned a slave as a matter of principle, nor hired the slaves of others to work on his farm, as was sometimes done in New England" (McCullough 2001:134). His parents did have African American women from broken families as paid servants.

ABIGAIL ADAMS (1744-1818)

- 5'1" dark hair with piercing dark eyes
- She was a prisoner of the times in which she lived.
- Two black slaves, one named "Phoebe," were part of the Abigail's father's William Smith household in Weymouth (McCullough 2001:56), who were freed according to his will when Parson Smith died in 1783. Slavery was abolished in all of Massachusetts by the Supreme Judicial Court vis-à-vis the application of three related cases that spanned 1781 to 1783.
- She enjoyed being part of the "busy world."
- Forceful personality . . . voluble and outspoken, never afraid to assert her opinions whether in the company of friends, family, or heads of state (Whitney 1981:ix).

Author Lynne Withey in her book, *Dearest John*, tells us that as a child, Abigail was given the nickname of "Nabby."

Nabby, in particular, spent every moment she could snatch from her household chores sitting by the library fire and reading Shakespeare or Alexander Pope or even John Locke. Her mother thought such reading was a waste of time for girls, but her father encouraged it. To the casual visitor Nabby appeared to be a shy, demure child, but her parents and others close to her knew better. She was stubborn and determined; obedient to her parents but clever at getting her own way. A close friend, exasperated by her love of argument, once said, "Nabby, you will either make a very

bad, or a very good woman.” With a child’s logic, she saw no conflict in becoming both a good housewife and an educated woman (Withey 1981:4).

The Adamses Five Children

I include values that the parents used in rearing their five children. I say five, but their third born, named Susana Boylston Adams, died in Boston in February 1770, at a little over the age of one (McCullough 2001:65). This was one month before the remembered Boston Massacre occurred. On March 5, 1770, one among six colonists mortally shot by British soldiers was part Native American and part African, named Crispus Attucks [AD’icks], a runaway slave probably from Farmington, Massachusetts (Weatherford 1991:279-280).* He is remembered today in most U.S. history textbooks as the first “patriot” to die in the struggle for American independence.

The children:

Naby Adams or Abigail Adams Jr. (born 1765, one year after the parents married) - fought and lost from breast cancer, died at age 48.

Quincy Adams (born 1767 when . . .) became 6th US President. He married Louisa Catherine Johnson in London, the daughter of the American consul, in London, and they reared four children mostly while living in London and Paris, France.

Charles Adams (born Nov. 1770) was Harvard’s first stalker. He disappeared for a time, fell into bankruptcy, left his young family derelict and hungry, and succumbed to Alcoholic’s disease. What were Charles’s parents’ reactions to the “negative karma” he sowed? (see below).

Thomas Adams (Born 1772) lawyer in Philadelphia. He and Ann Harrod had seven children.

*Attucks has been called mulatto. But his surname is a clue why he is usually cited as of the Natick tribe, and described as “stout”. On the night of March 5, Attucks carried ‘a large cord-wood stick’ at the front of a crowd protesting on the Boston public square protesting against British colonial policy. When the British soldiers fired on the crowd, Attucks dropped after the first volley, with two musket balls lodged in him. He died immediately.

Wendell Berry's first value listed:

(1) COMPASSION

Compassion includes having respect for another, having appreciation for another. But how and when do humans learn to appreciate?

Question: Dear John. I understand that in 1755, you were a schoolteacher in a one-room schoolhouse for small charges, both boys and girls, in Worchester [Woo-stah], Massachusetts. What say you about what to do to be a good teacher?

Answer: "A teacher ought to be an encourager. They respond more to encouragement and praise than to scolding or "thwacking." (McCullough 2001:38)

As a teacher myself, I finally had an "Aha! moment" one day when I pulled out from my teaching handouts and reread the venerated poem that has circulated world-wide, titled "Children Learn What They Live."*

I reread the seventh couplet of the poem: "If children live with praise, they learn appreciation." Bingo! This is what John Adams summed up was the best gift a teacher can gift a student "encouragement and praise," said John Adams. It goes without saying that John and Abigail, as parents, did the same for their children. They gave them "encouragement and praise" (see below). John's father was pivotal about who he became. At first John wanted to be a farmer. Early on there was a teacher that little John Adams did not like. As soon as the father learned this, the next day he put his son "in a private school down the road where, kindly treated by a schoolmaster named Joseph Marsh, he made a dramatic turn and began studying in earnest (McCullough 2001:34).

* "Children Learn What They Live" was composed by Dorothy Law Nolte, 1954. There are many versions worldwide of Ms. Nolte's poem. She was a family counselor. She first composed her poem, apparently 14-lines in the beginning, which was published in the *Torrence Herald* in Southern California. In 1972, upon discovering how "big" her poem had become, Mrs. Nolte copyrighted it. Two related books have resulted: Rachel Harris, *Children Learn What They Live: Parenting To Inspire Values*, 1998; Dorothy Nolte and Rachel Harris *Teenagers Live What They Live: Parenting To Inspire Integrity and Independence* (Workman 2002).

Question: Dear John, By what principles do you raise a family?

Father and mother were hardworking and frugal of necessity, as well as by principle. "Let frugality and industry be our virtues," John Adams advised Abigail concerning the raising of their own children. "Fire them with ambition to be useful," he wrote, echoing what had been learned at home. (McCullough 2001: 32-33)

And so it was in Adams's family, I paraphrase McCullough. The men were all farmers who, through the long winters, in New England fashion, worked at other trades for "hard money," which was always scarce. The first Henry Adams to arrive from England in America in 1638, and several of his descendants, were maltsters, makers of malt from barley for use in baking or brewing beer, a trade carried over from England. John Adams's father was known as "Deacon John." He was a farmer and shoemaker, a man of sturdy, unostentatious demeanor, He played the part of a solid citizen," as tithing man, constable, lieutenant in the militia, selectman, and ultimately church deacon (McCullough 2001:30).

For me, compassion involves the art of proverbially "walking in the other's moccasins." It involves building a trusted relationship with those who can help me understand their perspective. I like the fact that John Adams saw it necessary to "fathom the labyrinth of human nature" as defined in the great books. I wish John and Abigail had addressed in some manner the indigenous Wamanoag confederation of Massachusetts Bay. But they were oral exclusive cultures without written languages. They had applied philosophers of the land but the language barrier was the biggest problem, I am guessing. Adams prized the Roman ideal of honor, vis-à-vis Cicero, Tacitus, and others in Latin, and Plato and Thucydides in the original Greek, "which he considered the supreme language" (McCullough 2001:19).

Having compassion supersedes having tolerance, but falls short of having **empathy**. Approaching empathy is epitomized I believe by my testimonial I wrote and placed on the back of one of my earlier books about other languages titled *Language Treasures Aha!* I wrote:

"I learned long ago that people of another language and culture see something we 'outsiders' don't see. Each discovery of this whetted my appetite to collect more examples, and to even try to find out why they see it differently."

As anthropology instructor, I have been forever interested in how and when human beings learn appreciation, acquire compassion, as well as advance to having empathy for others.

The second value that may save us all is:
(2) MAGNANIMITY. I immediately associate this value with being bigger than the situation done for the common good. In US history I think of Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address in 1864 with the magnanimous call:

"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds."

Do you know that these words of Lincoln's hallowed speech are inscribed on the north facing wall inside the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC.? On the memorial's interior's south facing wall are the Gettysburg Address's words --all 272 of them-- including "It is for us the living rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced" --November 19, 1863.

Of John Adams and Abigail Adams, I believe Abigail was the more magnanimous of the two of them. About their second son --that middle child- Charles Adams, for instance, who became a "graceless" alcoholic, John Adams disowned him. Indeed, John Adams declared "I renounce him (McCullough 2001:529), about whom he never changed his mind. Abigail described her son as "graceless" but she NEVER disowned him. Charles died on November 30, 1800 of "dropsy," but likely of cirrhosis as well (McCullough 2001:555).

In 1809, at age 74, eight years after being President with Thomas Jefferson his Vice President, John Adams acted in magnanimity when he "addressed a short letter to his friend Mr. Jefferson" (McCullough 2001:600) done largely due to the prodding of the Adamses' life-long friend, Dr. Benjamin Rush. Rush said he was moved by a dream he had, that they had reconnected.

Interesting that David McCullough (2001:47) wrote about John Adams's writings that he "was perfectly honest with himself." This leads to the following.

Question: Dear John, What resolves in life for self-improvement, did you declare?

• "Honesty, sincerity, and openness, I esteem essential marks of a good mind." [Therefore] men ought "to avow their opinions and defend them with boldness." (McCullough 2001:42)

Being overly proud and conceited --having that kind of vanity, John Adams saw was his chief failing. "Vanity, I am sensible, is my cardinal vice and cardinal folly." Therefore, he vowed to reform himself accordingly. (McCullough 2001:42)

“A puffy, vain, conceited conversation never fails to bring a man into contempt.”(McCullough 2001:42) [And] “I must own myself to have been, to a very heinous degree, guilty in this respect.”

- When John Adams was only twenty-one years old, he wrote on July 21, 1756:

“I am resolved to rise with the sun and to study I will rouse up my mind and fix my attention. I will stand collected within myself and think upon what I read and what I see. I will strive with all my soul to be something more than persons who have had less advantages than myself. (McCullough 2001:41)

Question: Dear John,

How do you stay centered, even when **you are** the butt of public scorn? (Here is John Adams diary entry:

“The only way to compose myself and collect my thoughts is to set down at my table, place my diary before me, and take my pen into my hand. This apparatus takes off my attention from other objects. Pen, ink, and paper and a sitting posture are great helps to attention and thinking.” (McCullough 2001:66)

The next value to weigh is:

(3) COURTESY

What comes immediately to mind for me about “courtesy” is twofold: (1) practicing the “Golden Rule” (Matthew 7:12), and (2) courtesy as being the “foundation of friendship.”

From teaching comparative religions as a course, I learned that all of the major religious traditions in the world include “their version” of the Golden Rule. It IS, in fact, a universal teaching of humankind.

Abigail Adams’s New England way of saying the Golden Rule is: “Doing unto others as we would have others to do to us.”(Underscore mine)

English schoolmaster Richard Francis *Weymouth’s New Testament* (1903) version reads:

Everything, therefore, be it what it may, that you would have men do to you, do you also the same to them; for in this the Law and the Prophets are summed up.

“How Abigail Used the “Golden Rule” To Convince Her Neighbor”

In a letter, Abigail recounted a crisis that arose when the youngest of her hired hands, James Prince, a free black boy she had taken under her wing in Philadelphia, came to ask if he might attend evening classes in town at a new school for apprentices. Abigail, who had taught him herself to read and write, warmly approved, but was soon asked by a neighbor to withdraw James. If she

did not, she was told, the other boys would refuse to attend and the school would close.

“Had James misbehaved,” Abigail asked. “No,” she was informed, “It is because he is black.”

But “Did these other boys object when he attended church?” Abigail asked them. She saw the need to investigate herself and learned, “No, they did not.”

Abigail concluded: “The boy is a freeman as much as any of the young men, and merely because his face is black is he to be denied instruction?” she asked. “How is he to be qualified to procure a livelihood? Is this the Christian principle of doing unto others as we would have others to do to us?” (McCullough 2001:480)

I see that John Adams paired “courtesy” with “friendship.” That courtesy is the foundation for establishing friendships and for keeping and maintaining relationships. Courtesy is close to “having respect. In a marriage, if one of the two has lost respect for the other that important “friendship” is in trouble! And I underscore the widely known fact that John and Abigail Adams were best friends, as well as husband and wife.

Question: Dear John, What is your chief source of happiness?

- “Friendship is one of the distinguishing glories of man From this I expect to receive the chief happiness of my future life.” (McCullough 2001:47)

In contrast, Abigail Adams remembered what her father, the Reverend John Smith, taught her when growing up, to “never speak unkindly of anyone.” Abigail added that he taught the family we “must never speak unkindly of anyone. Say only handsome things, and make topics rather than persons your subjects” (McCullough 2001:56)

Our fourth value is:

(4) MUTUAL OBLIGATION AND DEPENDENCE

About male versus female breadwinners, this has somewhat changed since Abigail Adams’s life-time. Biographer Lynne Withey (1981:xiii) wrote:

“Abigail Adams was, in many ways, a prisoner of the times in which she lived, and her views on women’s role in society and on politics reflect that fact.” Abigail “believed that women were the intellectual equals of men and had a right to an education; she hint that they also had the right to vote”

Yet she also believed that women by nature were fundamentally different from men and were best suited to be housewives and mothers. To her way of

thinking there was nothing inconsistent about those views. Women had a clearly defined role caring for their homes and families, just as men had their role as breadwinners. Families needed both to survive, and families were the cornerstone of society.

About percentages of female “breadwinners” in American families over time, a March 29, 2013 Pew Research Social & Demographic Trends reported:

A record 40% of all households with children under the age of 18 include mothers who are either the sole or primary source of income for the family, according to a new Pew Research Center analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau. The share was just 11% in 1960.

The fifth and last value is:

(5) IMAGINATION

John Adams’s life began when born an English colonist in New England in 1735. He outlived his loving wife, who passed on October 28, 1818.

He was eighty-nine years old and in relatively good health at the Adamses’ Old House in Quincy, when he learned on Feb 14th, 1825, that the deciding vote in the U.S. House-decided election went to his son, John Quincy Adams, to become the sixth President of the United States. Speaker of the House Henry Clay had used his influence. On March 4, 1825, inside the Hall of the House of Representative at the Capitol in Washington, he took the oath of office, administered by Chief Justice John Marshall (McCullough 2001:639-640).

John Adams died on the same day as did Thomas Jefferson, on July 4th of 1826, on the nation’s fiftieth birthday!

- At Monticello on the evening of July 3, Jefferson awakened and uttered the declaration “This is the Fourth of July.” Told that it would be soon, he slept again. Jefferson died at approximately one o’clock in the afternoon, July 4

(McCullough 2001:646).

- In his room at Old House (Peace Field) in the late afternoon on July 4th, 1826, John Adams stirred and whispered clearly enough to be understood, “Thomas Jefferson survives.” At About 6:20 PM his heart stopped. John Adams was dead (McCullough 2001:646).

- Standing president John Quincy Adams (McCullough 2001:647) wrote: “That John Adams and Thomas Jefferson had died on the same day, and that it was, of all days, the Fourth of July, could not be seen as a mere coincidence: It was a ‘visible and palpable’ manifestation of Divine favor.”

[Backtracking with John Adams in Europe in 1779 or 1780]:

“Delightful as it was to stroll the gardens of Paris, enticing as were science and the arts, he, John Adams, had work to do, a public trust to uphold. The science of government was his duty; the art of negotiation must take precedence (McCullough 2001:236).

“Then, in a prophetic paragraph that would be quoted for generations within the Adams family and beyond, John wrote to Abigail on May 12, 1780:

“I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history, naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain.” (Italics by this editor) (McCullough 2001:236-237).

Question: Dear John, What is an aid for loneliness? John Adams used his vast imagination when he responded: “You will never be alone with a poet in your pocket.” Adams was fired by an inexhaustible love of books and scholarly reflection (McCullough 2001:19).

In 1772, for example, when off on the life of the legal circuit, Adams carried in his saddlebag one copy of *Don Quixote De La Mancha* by Miguel de Cervantes. (McCullough 2001:69)

- “Hunger is the best sauce in the world”

Surely John Adams’s opponents would have loved Sancho Panza’s assessment of his friend Don Quixote as totally accurate about John Adams, that:

“He’s a middle-headed fool, with frequent lucid intervals.”

Burial: In the family crypt below the United First Parish Church with Unitarian Universalist Congregation, in Quincy Massachusetts. Not only is Abigail Adams buried beside her husband but also along with their son, the sixth President and his wife, John Quincy and Louisa Catherine Adams.

I bid well to all of you. Thank you for being such an inviting and encouraging audience.

* * * * *

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CHILDREN LEARN WHAT THEY LIVE

If children live with criticism,
they learn to condemn.
If children live with hostility,
they learn to fight.
If children live with ridicule,
they learn to be shy.
If children learn with shame,
they learn to feel guilty.
If children live with tolerance,
they learn to be patient.
If children live with encouragement,
they learn confidence.
If children live with praise,
they learn appreciation.
If children live with fairness,
they learn justice.
If children live with approval,
they learn to like themselves.
If children live with acceptance and friendship,
they learn to find love in the world.

-Anonymous no longer*

* There are many versions world-wide of “Children Learn What They Live” In 1954, family counselor Dorothy Law Nolte first composed her poem, apparently 14-lines in the beginning, which was published in the *Torrence Herald* in Southern California. In 1972, upon discovering how “big” her poem had become, Mrs. Nolte copyrighted it. Two related books have resulted: Rachel Harris, *Children Learn What They Live: Parenting To Inspire Values*, 1998; Dorothy Nolte and Rachel Harris *Teenagers Live What They Live: Parenting To Inspire Integrity and Independence* (Workman 2002).

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