All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten
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Reading: All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten Robert Fulghum

Most of you at some point in your life have probably read Robert Fulghum's essay that I used for our Whistlestop today, "All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten." Fulghum "received his Bachelor of Divinity at Starr King School for the Ministry in 1961 and was ordained as a Unitarian Universalist minister. Fulghum served the Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship in Bellingham, Washington from 1960 to 1964, and the Edmonds Unitarian Universalist Church in Edmonds, Washington, where he is Minister Emeritus," Robert Fulghum - Wikipedia.

Fulghum says he learned it all in kindergarten. That he went to kindergarten may be thanks to another Unitarian, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody. Peabody became quite interested in the work of Friedrich Fröebel. An article on the website of the Boston West End Museum by Janelle Smart Fisher says that, "The 19th-Century German reformer and educator, Friedrich Fröebel, opened the first kindergarten in Blankenburg, Germany in 1837. He built upon the ideas of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, a Swiss follower of French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau who believed in the inherent goodness of children. During the 1830s and 1840s, Fröebel made a case for the importance of music, nature study, stories, play, as well as symbolic ideas like children sitting together in a circle. Fröebel founded the Play and Activity Institute, and coined the phrase "kindergarten," which translates to "garden of children." He also created a number of educational toys and believed in the value of free play in childhood learning.

"Following Fröebel's work, Margarethe Schurz founded a German-language kindergarten in Watertown, Wisconsin in 1856. After Elizabeth Peabody closed her book shop at 13 West Street and returned to her work in education, she met the Schurz family and was impressed with the kindergarten movement. Peabody studied Fröebel's methods and used her experience in education and launching schools to open an English-language kindergarten in Boston. After finding a suitable location at 15 Pinckney Street on the North Slope of Beacon Hill, she opened the first English-language kindergarten in the United States in 1860. Later In 1861, she moved the kindergarten to Winter Street.

"Peabody's kindergarten rooms were built at a child's scale with moveable furniture and areas for singing, playing, music, and movement. She firmly believed that a 'kindergarten pupil should be encouraged to grow organically, both physically, through play, and spiritually, through music and art.' The Winter St. kindergarten included daily instruction in French and charged tuition of up to $50.00 for a 40 week term.

"Together with her sister Mary, the widow of educational reformer Horace Mann, Peabody published the two-part book, *Guide to the Kindergarten and Intermediate Class* and *Moral Culture of Infancy and Kindergarten Guide* in 1863. Further influenced by Mann's belief that public education could create citizens who would celebrate democracy and work to eradicate

social injustices, Peabody became especially interested in the possibilities of universal free public kindergarten in less advantaged neighborhoods. In 1867 Peabody traveled to Europe to tour kindergartens there and to further research Fröbel's teachings. By 1870 she was a strong advocate for free early childhood education in American cities.

"Peabody continued to write about educational practices and spent the next several years supporting classrooms, training teachers, giving talks, and writing numerous articles and books on kindergarten theory and practices. As the effects of industrialization and urbanization on the youngest and poorest citizens became more apparent, she pushed even harder for tuition-free kindergarten. Though through her work the popularity of kindergarten grew around the country, Boston had only one public kindergarten class in 1879 that was ultimately shut down on educational and administrative grounds. While private and parochial kindergartens operated successfully, it wouldn't be until 1897 that Boston public schools officially added kindergarten classes.

"Peabody continued promoting child-centered education until her death in 1894. Two years later, The Elizabeth Peabody House (EPH) opened on Chambers Street as a kindergarten for the West End community and a tribute to the founder of the American kindergarten movement. EPH expanded the kindergarten when it later moved to Poplar St. In 1899, with district grammar school buildings overcrowded, the city opened another West End public kindergarten class in St. Andrew's parish house on Chambers St. Elizabeth Peabody's gravestone on Writer's Ridge in Concord reads: 'A Teacher of three generations of Children, and the founder of Kindergarten in America. Every humane cause had her sympathy, and many her active aid,'" Elizabeth Peabody's Kindergarten – The West End Museum.

Today is National Kindergarten Day. Why today? Because Friedrich Fröebel was born on April 21 in 1782. He founded the first play and activity institute called kindergarten in 1837. In 1892 followers of Fröebel establish a college of teacher education in London to continue his traditions. In 1965 in this country President Johnson's 'War on Poverty' led to the Head Start program — designed to help communities meet the needs of disadvantaged preschool children. And in 1982 Mississippi became the last state in the union to create a public kindergarten program. National Kindergarten Day (nationaltoday.com)

You can hear the influence of Fröebel and his Unitarian acolyte Peabody in the words of Unitarian religious educator Sophia Lyon Fahs in her 1952 book Today's Children and Yesterday's Heritage: A Philosophy of Creative Religious Development. She writes, "It is no longer reasonable to say that the most important data can be gathered from some one Scripture, or that books that talk about God or prayer, Jesus or Moses are religious books while books that acquaint children with baby animals, or fishes, or snails, with water and fire, concrete things in the child's immediate world are secular. The only appropriate limitation in the curriculum for a school of religion are to be learned from the children's interests and the abilities and the knowledge of the adults who guide them."

Fahs also writes, "Those of us who have been privileged to be associated with young children in our homes and in schools of religion where the young are encouraged to express their yearnings

freely, have often been amazed at the far-reaching implications of the questions even small children ask. A Vassar student followed a four-year-old boy about the nursery for a couple of weeks, listening to what he said and noting down his questions. Among the many questions she reported are the following: 'How thick is the sky? Is it different from the ground?' Does it hurt the ground to have holes in it?' Why are shadows there? Why are they crooked? When will they go away?' 'Where does light come from?' 'How does the clock know what time it is?' 'When am I not a little boy and am a big man?' 'Why is it when you have a birthday you are older?' 'What house was I in before I was born? I couldn't see then because I was in my mother's tummy. I couldn't hear or see anything when I was inside my mummy.' 'What is my back like? You can't see your own face, can you?' 'How do you see? If you are blind how do you not see? 'Don't you think it's funny about people's blood being inside their skin? Is my insides a pipe?' 'When I am asleep I have dreams and I see things. But how can I? 'My eyes are shut if I'm asleep, aren't they? But how can I see things in dreams unless my eyes are open? 'A voice is a fast thing, isn't it? Where is your voice?' 'Is it in your mouth? Are all the words stored up in your mouth? 'Why do I have two eyes when I can see with one? It would be better to have one of them in the back, wouldn't it? 'What does it feel like to be a worm?' 'What does a little stick of wood feel?' 'How does it feel to die?'

"An unusual child! Brilliant and imaginative! Yes, but in this exceptional child do we not have the potential wonderings of every young child? This boy's sensitive feelings were reaching out this way and that in an effort to know and identify himself with everything he touched. He was wondering about the mystery of the passing of time, and the mystery of sound and speech. He was wondering about his own birth, about death, about his power to dream. He was curious about his own body, inside and out, and about the things he could and could not do. He wanted to feel with the blind and the dead, and even with sticks and stones.

"Apparently he felt secure in the affection and understanding of his parents, but life was already much larger than his parents' arms could contain. He was feeling out for a security in a wider world, where he was realizing that he had, in a sense to face life alone. This larger security is what religious beliefs sometimes bring to young children. The very way children probe for understanding is evidence of the importance to them of some kind of over-all point of view.

"This urge to understand what life is all about is expressed not only in a young child's questioning, but also in (their) play. For adults, play is recreation, a way of escaping from the seriousness of the routines of living. But for the young child, …play is a way of experimenting with life, of digging deeper and exploring more widely into its meaning. A child's toys are (their) library, and (their) nursery and playground are (their) laboratories. …play is serious business-enjoyable, yes, but all-absorbing and filled with meaning. In …play the child tries to learn how it feels to be somebody else, or (the child) sets (one)self the task of reliving parts of (their) own experiences in order to know (one)self and others better.

"If then this interpretation of what children are really after in their early questioning is correct, we need not feel a need to hurry them faster than they naturally wish to go. Even though most of these queries may seem far removed from what adults call religion, yet we will realize that each

small bit of understanding gained will become a part of the child's philosophy of life when (the child) feels the need consciously to put everything together."

For Fulghum putting the pieces all together was an annual spring ritual. But at least one year he looked back to what he had learned in kindergarten to make sense of what he knew to be true in his adulthood. As he writes, "Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and equality and sane living.

"Take any one of those items and extrapolate it into sophisticated adult terms and apply it to your family life or your work or your government or your world and it holds true and clear and firm."

It is National Kindergarten Day. Find a blanket and take a nap. Have some warm cookies and milk. Play. Wonder. Hold hands with someone as you go out to face the world. Hold fast to the knowledge that you are loved.