

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST LUMINARIES AND IDEAS!

Introduction

This morning, I would like to share some of our history as a movement, working again on the question from whence did we come? I have mentioned fairly often our theological roots deep among the early followers of Jesus, on the Unitarian side the Jewish oriented monotheists who saw Jesus as important, a prophet or even the son of God, but not co-equal with God, and on the Universalist side, those who found a message that Jesus had come to save not just an elect few, but all persons who would immediately or soon return to a loving God. These ideas continued to appear throughout Christian history, though both were voted heretical at church Councils in the 4th and 6th Centuries. Today, we honor and learn from many religious and philosophical traditions, including Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Earth-Centered religions, as well as Humanism both secular and religious, as we honor theists as well as atheists who can support the values expressed in our UU Principles. There have been many persons who have particularly expressed the highest values of our tradition, some who have shaped our movement, others our nation, and yet others our world. This morning I will name some of the names, and give a bit deeper consideration to a few.

Michael Servetus

Michael Servetus was the brilliant and courageous theologian, editor, and medical doctor and researcher who first expressed modern Unitarianism in the reformation period. Condemned by the inquisition before escaping, only to be condemned again by a council under Calvin in Geneva, Servetus was burned at the stake along with his books outside Geneva in October 1553.

What made Servetus such a danger to the church? He had dared to question the Trinity, the doctrine that voted Jesus co-equal with God at the Council of Nicaea in 325. Growing up in Spain, Servetus had watched Jews and Muslims condemned by the inquisition for denying the Trinity. This had led him to careful study of the Bible in which he discovered no Biblical basis for

Trinitarian doctrine. As a 20 year old, he had dared to write of his findings, sending his book to the Pope in hopes that good people of conscience would no longer be condemned for their unwillingness to accept the doctrine of the Trinity.

Servetus, went into hiding for two decades, becoming a prominent editor and renowned Doctor under the name Michel de Villeneuve. Not least among his many successes was the discovery of pulmonary circulation. He lectured on geography, astronomy, and mathematics at the University of Paris after editing Ptolemy. He might have lived long and well for this and other accomplishments, but for his stubborn commitment to righting some of the wrongs perpetrated by the inquisition. He was pushed to renew theological studies by a request that he edit a new edition of the Pagnini Latin Bible. Failing in his efforts to convince Rome, he soon began a correspondence with Calvin over the matter of the Trinity. Perhaps more brilliant and accomplished than the other 16th Century reformers, our stubborn Unitarian forebear Servetus died for his heretical and unorthodox views, especially of the trinity.

A number of European religious thinkers helped to keep Servetus' ideas alive and to help spread anti-trinitarianism. Among those who particularly helped promote Unitarian ideas were Georgio Biandrata, Francis David, Laelius and Faustus Socinus, John Biddle and Theophilus Lindsay. In America, a similar strain of anti-trinitarianism was growing in the congregational churches of New England. William Ellery Channing accepted the name Unitarian for the Liberal Congregationalists in 1819, while transcendentalists Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker soon pushed the Unitarians toward a more heartfelt and socially just religion. As I have addressed Channing, Emerson and Parker in other sermons, I will focus on others today.

Unitarian and Universalist Social Justice Reformers

As both Unitarian and Universalist ideas were beginning to inspire ministers and congregations in the late 18th Century in America, a number of ministers and lay leaders began to engage in some of the more difficult problems of the times, including slavery, education for all, medical and mental health care, poverty, and women's rights.

Born in Pennsylvania in 1745, **Dr. Benjamin Rush** became one of the most prominent physicians in Philadelphia, a strong advocate for independence, and a champion of civil rights. Representative to the Continental Congress, signer of the Declaration of Independence, abolitionist, organizer of Sunday Schools for the poor, Rush pushed Universalists to actively engage in abolition and other social justice efforts.

By the time of the Civil War, medical care and mental health care were still very primitive. Two Unitarians and two Universalists were among the reformers that made a significant difference in caring for the wounded and the mentally ill of that period and beyond. Unitarian Minister **Henry Whitney Bellows** created the U.S. Sanitary Commission, a relief organization set up to assist and oversee care for the wounded through hospitals, care homes and emergency services. One of his two key assistants during the war was Universalist **Mary Livermore**, who later became better known for her work for women's suffrage and other social causes, often along with her husband, Universalist Minister Daniel Livermore. Educator and advocate for Prison and Mental Health reform, Unitarian **Dorothea Dix** accepted the position of Superintendent of U.S. Army Nurses during the Civil War, organizing first aid stations, training, field hospitals, and procuring supplies. Her work intersected with the work of **Clara Barton**, who would later found the American Red Cross. Barton, also an educator, had by her nature often taken care of others through injury and illness, so that when she became aware of the need for medical supplies for the wounded she organized contributions and set up supply trains, going herself to the front to help care for the wounded. All of these individuals continued to work for social justice throughout their lives.

Many Unitarians and Universalists worked for abolition and then for Civil and Voting rights for Black men. Several of our strongest feminist leaders agreed to advocate for black men to vote before continuing their efforts for suffrage. Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony along with many others made suffrage their lifework. Since many of these women have been memorialized during Women's History Month services, I will not go into detail about them today.

Unitarian US Presidents

While not every Unitarian or Universalist has been interested in running for elective office, the vast majority of UUs have been and are civic minded. For such a numerically small movement, we can claim an inordinate amount of influence especially in the early years of the United States. Three of the first 6 U.S. Presidents were Unitarian or in the case of Thomas Jefferson, deistic but Unitarian leaning. 2nd President John Adams and 6th President John Quincy Adams were Unitarians, while 3rd President Jefferson considered himself a Unitarian on his own, not having a congregation near his home. 13th President Millard Fillmore and 27th President William Howard Taft, who later served as Chief Justice also were Unitarians. Among the deists and other Founding Fathers, were many Unitarian Christians, Episcopalians, and others, but no Christian Fundamentalists, for that movement only came early in the 20th Century.

Other UU Public Figures

Due to time constraints, I cannot list every prominent person who we claim among Unitarian Universalists, but I do want to list a few more of the scientists, authors, editors, lawyers, legislators, performers and others who shaped American History (some are English):

Abigail Adams, Jane Addams, Louisa May Alcott, Horatio Alger, Jr., P.T. Barnum, Bela Bartok, Alexander Graham Bell, Elizabeth Blackwell, Wm Cullen Bryant, Cher, Norman Cousins, e.e. cummings, Clarence Darrow, Charles Darwin, Charles Dickens, Edward Everett, Fannie Farmer, Robert Fulghum, Buckminster Fuller, Horace Greeley, Edvard Grieg, Nathaniel Hawthorn, Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. & Sr., Julia Ward Howe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Horace Mann, John Marshall, Herman Melville, Paul Newman, Florence Nightingale, Linus Pauling, Elizabeth Peabody, Lydia Pinkham, Beatrix Potter, George Pullman, Carl Sandburg, Margaret Sanger, Arthur Schlesinger, Albert Schweitzer, Rod Serling, Samantha Smith, Adlai Stevenson I & II, Charles Sumner, Henry David Thoreau, Kurt Vonnegut Jr., Josiah Wedgewood, Frank Lloyd Wright, Andrew Wyeth, Owen Young, and Whitney Young, Jr.

Early American Unitarian Ministers

I have already mentioned Channing, Emerson, and Parker and addressed their history more completely elsewhere, but I would like to mention one other early Unitarian Minister, a preacher and scientist who found his way to America, Joseph Priestly. Among his many accomplishments, Priestly discovered Oxygen. His laboratory and house were burned in England, and he decided to come to America, settling in Philadelphia and helping start Unitarian Churches.

Early American Universalist Ministers

George de Benneville was born in London in 1703 of a noble family. A vision during his youth led him to believe in universal salvation. He was imprisoned and almost executed in France for preaching Universalism. His interests were broad and among other things he became a physician. Eventually he was convinced to come to America in 1741 where he continued to care for the sick and spread Universalism, settling about 40 miles NW of Philadelphia but preaching and visiting in various places including Indian communities and taking annual trips west to spread Universalism.

John Murray was born in 1741 in a village 50 miles from London, but was caught up in the Methodist revivals while living near Cork, Ireland. He became an active Methodist and lay preacher in England, but later fell under the influence of radical Universalist, James Relly, when he was asked to reclaim a wayward Methodist who had been drawn away. Murray became a Universalist, but soon was confronted with the illness and death of a child and his wife, landing him in debtor's prison. When he was released he decided to come to America and never to preach again. On the way to New York, the ship was becalmed off Barnegat's Light New Jersey, where he went ashore to seek provisions. Murray ran into Thomas Potter, who had built a chapel and was waiting for the right preacher. He convinced Murray to preach if the wind did not change, which it didn't so he re-converted himself. The wind changed after the service, and Murray went on to become the great evangelist of Universalism, eventually settling in Gloucester, MA and later moving to Boston where he died in 1815. Though his beliefs were somewhat more

conservative than later Universalists, he was responsible for evangelizing much of New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania and New England beginning in 1770.

Hosea Ballou was the mostly self-educated son of a Baptist preacher and farmer who came under the influence of Universalist preacher Caleb Rich in a neighboring town. Ballou's own studies of the Bible eventually led him to become a Universalist. Later somewhat spontaneously ordained by Elhanan Winchester at a Universalist Convention in 1794. Ballou became a powerful preacher, and by 1805 had written a *Treatise on Atonement* which among other things argued for a Unitarian understanding of God. Within ten years Universalism essentially became Unitarian under Ballou's influence. Known as an ultra-universalist for believing that all souls returned to a loving God immediately after their death, he influenced most but not all Universalists, with some splitting away for a time. He was the most important Universalist Minister in the 19th Century.

One other Universalist Minister, **Olympia Brown**, is notable for her commitment in obtaining a Bachelor's degree and then seeking admittance to seminary, finally convincing St. Lawrence to admit her. Against significant opposition over being a female, she graduated and was ordained in 1863 as the first female minister of any denomination. She faced continuing opposition from men throughout her career and later devoted herself full-time to suffrage.

California Unitarian and Universalist Thomas Starr King

I want to conclude this brief anthology of UU Luminaries, with a Minister credentialed as both a Unitarian and Universalist who happened to speak in Stockton as well as most other cities in California and to end his career as the minister of the Unitarian Church in San Francisco. Thomas Starr King was the son of a Universalist Minister and had first been credentialed as a Universalist and then a Unitarian. Barely 5 feet tall, 35 year old Starr King arrived in San Francisco with his wife Julia and daughter Edith on April 28, 1860 after the harrowing passage down from Boston, across Panama by rail, and up to San Francisco on the dirty old and tired steamship, Sonora.

His small stature and frame notwithstanding, from his first sermon on Starr King's eloquence and effectiveness as a UU Minister was evident. He quickly helped turn around the circumstances of the San Francisco church and almost as quickly began to influence citizens of the city and state through lectures and public speaking opportunities. By the time the Civil War broke out Southern influences were pushing for California to align with the Confederacy. Starr King took up the cause of the Union, traveling and speaking up and down the state in favor of the Union. Starr King delivered at least one of his speeches in Stockton in early March 1861.

Thomas Starr King, Minister of the Unitarian Church of San Francisco, was credited by way of his lectures around the state with keeping California on the side of the Union. He helped California raise a million dollars for the US Sanitary Commission, and held fundraisers for many worthy local causes. His herculean efforts left Starr King sick and exhausted. He died in the beginning of March, 1864 at the age of 39 and was buried on the church grounds.

When California sent its 2 Statues to the Statuary Hall in the Capitol in Washington, Starr King's likeness kept company with Fr. Junipero Serra for most of the 20th Century, only to be replaced recently with a statue of Ronald Reagan.

Conclusion

These men and women I have mentioned today were some of our religious forebears. Courageous rebels, heretics, and persons committed to living out their beliefs. Some crossed oceans when ships were slow and dangerous while others undertook mission journeys on foot or horseback, many were abolitionists and reformers, yet others pushed against sexual boundaries. Each left a mark on our movement and on our nation. For each of them and for so many other lives and stories, we are profoundly grateful. May we find inspiration in these stories to build up our congregation, our community, and shape a healthier world!

So may it be! Amen!