

"THE CANDLES OUR ANCESTORS LIT: OLYMPIA BROWN"
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I have often wondered why Unitarian Universalists spend so much time talking about "famous UU's." Sometimes we get so carried away talking about famous UU's that we start wildly claiming people as UU's who most likely never in their wildest dreams considered themselves Unitarian Universalists. I've heard it claimed often that Lincoln was a UU, although there is scant evidence that he was. Even more absurd, I've heard people claim that Gandhi was a UU. Though he may have expressed some ideas similar to our own UU beliefs, there is no evidence that he ever considered himself a UU.

So why do we UU's spend so much time talking about real and imagined historical UU figures? I think partly it is because we thirst for legitimacy. It is tempting and helpful to be able to say to somebody who is inquiring about Unitarian Universalism that people like John Adams and Susan B. Anthony and Ralph Waldo Emerson and Thomas Jefferson were Unitarians or Universalists. This is especially helpful when the person asking us about Unitarian Universalism is confusing us with Rev. Moon's Unification Church. "See, we're not Moonies. We're legitimate! Great people like Anthony and Emerson were UU's."

A second reason for our dwelling on famous UU's is that we need to have stories to enliven our faith and to inspire us. We don't have stories about saints to provide this function. We need such stories, though, so we have created our own UU saints. We turn to their life stories to find hope and inspiration and guidance. In telling their stories, we learn more about our faith and its rich history.

I believe that telling and re-telling the stories of our UU heroes is a good thing to do. It is a way of observing and celebrating the candles our ancestors lit for us. The candles still burn brightly; the light they provide continues to light our way. From time to time, then, I will do a sermon focusing on one of our great UU ancestors. Last year I talked about the Unitarian transcendentalist and abolitionist, Theodore Parker. This year, I would like to tell you about the life of Olympia Brown, a Universalist minister who worked tirelessly for fifty-five years for the right of women to vote. I am particularly interested in Olympia Brown for a couple of reasons: she shares a birthday with my daughter; and, like me, she was born and raised in western Michigan, lived in New England for awhile, and settled finally in Wisconsin. If you know anything about my history, this will sound familiar!

Olympia Brown was born in 1835 near the small town of Schoolcraft in the territory of Michigan. She was born into a proudly Universalist family. Although there was no Universalist church anywhere in the vicinity, they often talked at home about their faith. More importantly, they strived always to live their faith. Olympia's aunt and uncle, for example, operated an Underground Railroad stop in their home in Schoolcraft. Over the years, they and Olympia's family helped nearly 1500 ex-slaves escape to safety. Olympia often talked to the escaped slaves and heard their stories of horror and courage and hope. She learned early on about terrible injustices and the call of her Universalist faith to do what she could to fight injustice.

From her earliest childhood days, Brown got a strong message from her mother that all people--black and white, male and female--were created equal by the one, loving God. But from an early age, Brown discovered that many doors were shut to her because of her sex. In her high school in Schoolcraft, for example, Brown was angered to learn that in spite of her quick mind and gift for speech, she was excluded from debate and oral recitations solely because of her sex. She argued unsuccessfully with her teachers against this barrier. She discovered as she continued her education that she had to make the same arguments at each school she attended. Though she seldom won, she kept on fighting. She learned at a young age about how to keep on

fighting for what is right in the face of defeat after defeat. This perseverance would help guide her through her long, difficult, fifty-five year struggle for voting rights for women.

Although few girls in Olympia Brown's time even made it to high school, she had an intense desire to continue her education after graduating from high school. With her mother's enthusiastic support, she convinced her father to let her go on to college. She went to one of the few colleges for women in existence at that time: Mount Holyoke College in Massachusetts. Brown didn't much like Mount Holyoke because of an overly strict code of rules. Even worse, the primary goal of the college seemed to be to teach the young students to become proper, marriageable women.

Olympia Brown also chaffed at the college's goal of converting all its students to orthodox Christian faith. Entering students were classified as "professing Christians," "hopefully pious," or "hopeless." No doubt as a Universalist, Brown was classified as "hopeless." Being forced to defend her beliefs, Brown learned a great deal about Universalism and became ever more convinced of its validity. After hearing one sermon after another at the college chapel about human sin and God's eternal punishment, she asked, "Why don't preachers dwell on God's love when that was such a motivating force behind Christ's teaching?" Instead of seeing sin and damnation as the central part of Jesus' message, Brown saw God's love. Like all Universalists, she believed that every single human is saved by a loving God regardless of their particular beliefs. A loving God, she argued, would not send people to the eternal fires of hell. Brown received important encouragement from her mother to stand by her beliefs. Her mother wrote, "I have great confidence in your excellent plain common sense. Use it. Don't regard the notion sometimes advanced that it is wrong to use reason in religious opinions."

Greatly disappointed in Mount Holyoke, Brown arranged to transfer to the co-educational, non-sectarian Antioch College in Ohio. She found many more open doors there and was much happier. While at Antioch, she began to write essays attacking discrimination against women in education. In these years just prior to the Civil War, she also increasingly called attention to the link she saw in the way blacks and women were treated in American society. She argued against--as she would continue to do during and after the war--the oppression which was so crippling to both blacks and women.

Brown was frustrated that all of the guest lecturers at Antioch were men. Characteristically, she decided not simply to complain but to do something about it. She arranged for several lectures by prominent women. The lecture which most excited her was one given by the Rev. Antoinette Brown. Antoinette Brown (who was no relation to Olympia) was a minister ordained by a Congregational church. However, the Congregational denomination refused to recognize her or any other woman's ordination. In spite of this, Antoinette Brown did for awhile have a church to preach in. Her example greatly inspired Olympia Brown. Olympia decided upon her graduation at Antioch to become a minister.

Theological school after theological school turned down her application for enrollment. Finally, St. Lawrence, a Universalist theological school in Canton, New York, expressed a reluctant willingness to open its doors to women. St. Lawrence admitted Olympia Brown as its first woman student. During her time there, she was a very diligent and successful student. She often filled in for vacationing ministers in the area and quickly gained a reputation as a talented preacher.

In spite of this, St. Lawrence refused to ordain her upon her graduation. Brown, never willing to take no for an answer, petitioned to the Northern Universalist Association to ordain her. She travelled fifty miles to meet with the Association's ordaining council and somehow convinced them to ordain her. When she was ordained on June 25, 1863, she became the first woman in the United States to be recognized by a denomination as an ordained minister.

After her historic ordination, Brown filled in at two congregations in Vermont. As the only ordained woman minister in the country, her fame spread quickly. During her time in Vermont, she received a letter from Susan B. Anthony asking that she become part of Anthony's women's rights movement. Brown wrote back of her sympathy with Anthony's cause but reluctantly declined to get very involved until after she became more established in the ministry.

In 1864, Brown wrote to the elders of the Universalist church in Weymouth Landing, Massachusetts, expressing her interest in assuming its long vacant pulpit. The elders were not much interested in a woman minister, but they allowed that she could visit and preach a trial sermon. Knowing the powerful effect of her sermons, this was all Brown needed to hear. After the sermon, the congregation voted overwhelmingly to call her as its minister. She served there from 1864 to 1869.

With the end of the Civil War, there was an increased push for women's and blacks' voting rights. The issue of the vote for women was pretty much tabled by politicians during the war with the understanding that it would be revisited after the war's conclusion. However, resistance to the vote for women only grew stronger with time. Although an amendment to the U.S. Constitution was passed fairly quickly recognizing black men's right to vote, no such amendment was passed regarding women's right.

As Olympia Brown became more established and comfortable in the ministry, she became increasingly involved in the women's suffrage movement. She even spent four months traveling through the Kansas frontier in support of a state referendum giving women the right to vote. The referendum was decisively rejected in a vote. Interest in the suffrage movement soon waned, leaving only the diehards like Brown and Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton to work for the right to vote. No progress was made for decades. It is amazing to think that Olympia Brown started working in earnest for the movement in 1866, with the belief and the hope then that women would soon get the right to vote. She was at that time just thirty-years-old. The right to vote, however, would not come for fifty-five years, until Olympia Brown was eighty-five-years-old.

After building up the Weymouth Landing church, Brown accepted a call in Bridgeport, Connecticut. A number of men opposed to the idea of women in ministry spent the next few years doing whatever they could to make life miserable for their minister. Shortly before giving up on the Bridgeport church, Brown married John Henry Willis. They had a son and daughter in the mid-1870's. Going against the dominant custom of the time, Brown kept her original surname. Anybody who called her Mrs. Willis was quickly and sharply corrected. For example, she wrote this to a person who had arranged a speaking engagement for her and mistakenly wrote her as Mrs. Willis: "I received a letter inviting me, Olympia Brown, no one else, to speak. . . I, Olympia Brown, no one else, accepted that invitation and expect to be on hand to meet the engagement." She concluded her letter: "I shall be much obliged to you if you will see to it that my name appears on the program and is announced when I am introduced to the audience as ever, Rev. Olympia Brown, neither more or less."

Problems within the congregation continued to grow until Brown and her husband finally decided to leave in 1878. Brown heard about an opening in Racine, Wisconsin, and wrote a letter expressing her interest. The secretary of the Church of the Good Shepherd in Racine wrote back that "The Racine church is in a run-down and unfortunate condition. It is adrift, in debt, hopeless, and doubtful whether any pastor can again arouse them." This sounded perfect to Brown, who was always up for a challenge. She visited Racine and fell in love with the city and with Lake Michigan. She wrote back to her husband, "I believe this city will be a good place to live and raise a family." The congregation voted to call her after hearing a couple sermons, and she quickly revived its sagging fortunes.

After serving eight successful years at Racine, Brown reluctantly resigned in 1886 to pursuing full-time her dream of equality for women. She became president of the Wisconsin Woman Suffrage Association, a position she held for twenty-eight years. She founded the Federal Suffrage Association in 1892 to push for an amendment to the Constitution. During these years, Brown often preached at the Universalist Unitarian church in Mukwonago and even occasionally at Universalist churches in Columbus, Wisconsin and in Neenah. (I was surprised to learn of the Neenah church's existence. According to Deb Andrews, that church burned down at some point and the disheartened and struggling congregation disbanded.)

The woman's suffrage movement continued to flounder until around 1912. In that year, a suffrage bill passed the state legislature but was soundly defeated in a referendum. In the same year, though, the state of Kansas passed the same suffrage law Brown had campaigned for in 1867. Progress was still slow, however, on the national level. Brown and other feminists became increasingly distressed with the opposition voiced by the otherwise liberal President Woodrow Wilson. She and hundreds of other women started picketing the White House in 1916. Eighty-two-year-old Olympia Brown carrying a sign saying "We cannot any longer delay justice in the United States" drew a great deal of media attention.

With the coming of World War One, the suffragists were asked to suspend their efforts. Olympia Brown remembered the same thing happening during the Civil War. She and the others kept agitating, though. They even burned Wilson's speeches in an act of protest. After the war, Wilson finally relented and endorsed women's right to vote. Congress passed the amendment and submitted it to the states' legislatures. In August 1920, the final state needed ratified the amendment and it became law. In the presidential election that November, Olympia Brown and millions of other American women finally were able to cast a vote. Her fifty-year effort to open the doors finally succeeded. As she said in a sermon that year, "It is worth a lifetime to behold the victory."

Even at eighty-five, though, Olympia Brown's work was not done. Hardly pausing to savor the victory, she started working for an amendment to the Constitution guaranteeing equal rights for women. Her work was finally halted with her death at the age of ninety-one in 1926.

As we have discovered in recent years over and over again, none of our heroes is perfect. Like all of us, some of Olympia Brown's greatest strengths were also her greatest weaknesses. For example, her deep conviction that she was right kept her going through all of the disappointments, but it also could at times make her self-righteous. She often battled with the other suffragists--including Susan B. Anthony--and she had a hard time truly forgiving anyone who disagreed with her. Her determination and diligence were almost unparalleled. Every day, for example, she went into her backyard overlooking Lake Michigan to practice her elocution exercises. Her voice would boom out over the lake, scaring all of the children within earshot. She did this because she had been determined ever since she wasn't allowed to debate in high school to prove that women could speak as well as men.

To me, though, her greatest gift was the conviction with which she held her beliefs and her incredible perseverance. As the governor of Wisconsin said upon her death, she "never compromised with wrong." How many of us could have such deep convictions that we could work tirelessly for fifty-five years for a goal that was so incredibly elusive? How many of us would keep coming back and trying harder defeat after defeat? The courage and depth of Olympia Brown's beliefs and her perseverance are some of the candles she lit for us.

Olympia Brown is not as well known as other suffragists like Susan B. Anthony or Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Olympia Brown's fame has spread hardly beyond Racine and our denomination. Other than an elementary school in Racine being named the Olympia Brown School and the Racine UU church's decision to rename itself "The

Olympia Brown UU Church," her life has been little honored. This is partly due to Brown's focus on the Universalist ministry, which diverted some of her attention from the woman's suffrage movement. However, it was this very Universalist ministry which I believe propelled her into working for equality and which nourished her years of perseverant effort. Her Universalist faith told her that both men and women were created in the image of God and that God loved all people. "The foundation of democracy," she said in the last sermon she preached, "is the realization that every human is a child of God." She believed that God loved every person equally. With such an understanding, how could she not work to achieve the vision of equality? From her earliest days helping the runaway slaves to her work for the Equal Rights Amendment, she devoted her life to making sure the doors were open for all people.

Let me close with the words of Olympia Brown herself. They come from her last sermon, which she delivered shortly after the success of the suffrage movement in 1920. The sermon was appropriately entitled, "The Opening Doors."

Every nation must learn that the people of all the nations are children of God and must all share the wealth of the world. You say that this is impracticable, far away, and can never be accomplished. But this is the work which Universalists are appointed to do. Universalists, sometime, somehow, somewhere, must ever teach this great lesson.

We are not alone. There is always an unseen power working for righteousness. The Infinite is behind us. The eternal years of God are ours.

And that is the message which I bring to you to-day. Stand by this great faith which the world needs and which you are called to proclaim...

Here in Racine, we may illustrate the great principles of our faith by our charity, by our kindness and consideration for all. We shall speak the language of Universal love and it will be heard and the message will be carried far and wide...

Dear friends, stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it. There is nothing in all the world so important to you as to be loyal to this faith which has placed before you the loftiest ideals, which has comforted you in sorrow, strengthened you for noble duty and made the world beautiful for you. Do not demand immediate results but rejoice that you are worthy to be entrusted with this great message, that you are strong enough to work for a great true principle without counting the cost. Go on finding ever new applications of these truths and new enjoyments in their contemplation, always trusting in the one God which ever lives and love.

