



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Olympia Brown:
Founding Mothers of Unitarian Universalism

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

12 May 2019

frederickuu.org

This sermon is part of an ongoing Mother's Day series on "Founding Mothers of Unitarian Universalism":

- We began with **Margaret Fuller** (1810-1850), who along with Emerson and Thoreau is one of our three most important Transcendentalist forebears. Her 1845 pamphlet *Women in the Nineteenth Century* was a significant contribution to the women's equality movement.
- Next, we moved to the three **Peabody Sisters**, especially Elizabeth Peabody (1804 - 1894), an author herself, who published many Transcendentalists under her own imprint, and also become the celebrated founder of kindergartens in America.
- Then we explored the life of **Julia Ward Howe** (1819-1910) about whom it is said that she "had six children, learned six languages, and published six books." She was most famous for writing the lyrics to the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," and helped found Mother's Day itself through her famous Mother's Day Proclamation for Peace.
- We have also focused on **Mary Moody Emerson** (1774-1863), Ralph Waldo Emerson's aunt, whom he called his "earliest and best teacher."
- Last year we explored [Louisa May Alcott](#) (1832-1888), best known as the author of *Little Women*. At the time of her death in 1888, "she was the country's most popular author, and had earned more from writing than any male author of her time."

In future years, I look forward to telling you about some of our other founding mothers, such as:

- **Judith Sargent Murray**, an early American advocate for women's rights, who was married to John Murray, the founder of the Universalist half of our movement;
- **Sophia Lyon Fahs** who revolutionized twentieth-century UU Religious Education; and
- **Lydia Maria Child**, a strong advocate for social justice in the nineteenth century.

In this summary, my intention is not to overwhelm you with names and dates. Rather, I hope your takeaway will be that as Unitarian Universalists, we are lifted up “on the shoulders of giants,” many of whom were pathbreaking women. Retelling these stories of our UU ancestors allows their lives to inspire us to live out UU values today.

In that spirit, our focus this year is on **Olympia Brown** (1835-1926), drawing from Charlotte Cote’s biography [Olympia Brown: The Battle for Equality](#). (Mother Courage Press, 1988). If you visit St. Lawrence University, a historically Universalist liberal arts college in upstate New York, you will find a plaque honoring her as a distinguished alumna from the class of 1863. The plaque reads:

She was the first woman to be graduated
by the theological school and St. Lawrence University.
Her Universalist ordination in 1863
made her the first woman in our country
to achieve full ministerial standing recognized by a denomination.
Preacher of Universalism
Pioneer and champion of women’s citizenship rights
Forerunner of the new era
“The flame of her spirit still burns today.” (Cote vii)

To share with you the story behind that plaque, I will begin with her family.

Her parents were pioneers. They were married in 1834, and soon joined a wagon team heading west from Vermont to the Michigan Territory. Olympia was born a year

later in 1835, and her parents' frontier courage and fortitude helped form her own indomitable spirit (5).

Her aunt (her mother's sister) was another significant early influence on Olympia's lifelong commitment to social justice. Her aunt and uncle lived in nearby Schoolcraft, Michigan, and their house was a station on the Underground Railroad. Over the years, they helped feed, shelter, and hide nearly 1,500 African Americans who had escaped enslavement and were on their way to Canada (9-10). Those were the stories Olympia Brown grew up hearing.

Her aunt and mother also supported the equality of women, based in their Universalist beliefs that all humans beings are equally worthy of divine love (11). They instilled these values in young Olympia Brown, and she put those values into practice — against the grain of a sexist society — throughout her life.

At every school she attended, she resisted any ways that girls were treated as inferior to boys — and would show that she was capable of memorization, confident public speaking, or any other assignment that some people had tried to reserve for boys alone (21).

Olympia did well in school, and was infuriated to learn that there were almost no colleges at that time that would admit women. Then in 1854 when she was nineteen years old, she received the welcome news of her acceptance to Mount Holyoke, a women's-only college. The reality, however, of her first year there was disappointing. The rules were absurdly strict, and the curriculum was not sufficiently challenging (21-28).

After a frustrating freshman year, she transferred to Antioch College in Ohio (34-35). Even at this comparatively more progressive college, she and some other classmates noticed that all the major guest speakers were men. So Olympia led an effort to bring Rev. Antoinette Brown to speak on campus on a Saturday and deliver a sermon nearby on Sunday. Rev. Antoinette Brown (no relation to Olympia) was the first woman she had ever heard preach. Olympia was deeply moved and wrote about the sermon: "The sense of the victory lifted me up. I felt as though the Kingdom of Heaven were at hand" (41).

Hearing a woman minister strengthened Olympia Brown's call to ministry, but as she neared the end of college, she was disappointed to be declined admission from every seminary to which she applied. Many rejection letters explicitly said, "We do not believe ladies are called to the ministry" (46).

Then came unexpected good news: an acceptance letter from St. Lawrence, the Universalist Theological School in upstate New York (51). They had no idea at the time they would later hang a plaque in her honor. Indeed, soon after that generic admissions letter, a personal letter arrived from the president of St. Lawrence regarding her being their first female student:

It is unlikely that there will ever be any others. However, if you feel that [God] has called you to preach the everlasting gospel, you shall receive from me no hindrance but rather every aid in my power.... I do not think women are called to the ministry, but I leave that between you and the Great Head of the Church."

Olympia thought, "That is exactly where it should be left" (52).

And in 1861 at the age of twenty-six, she arrived on campus. The president greeted her with surprise. He confessed, "I really was not expecting you.... I thought my letters would discourage you." Clearly, he did not know Olympia Brown (53). If there was an opening door, she was going to enter.

Over the next two years, she did well in her studies. She was able to find a local congregation willing to hire her as a student minister (56). And, to the president's credit, he was true to his word and participated in her ordination in 1863 (59).

I should clarify that it can be confusing to keep straight Antoinette Brown and Olympia Brown, both of whom were pathbreaking women in ministry. Here's the gist:

- In 1853, an autonomous congregational church in upstate New York ordained Antoinette Brown, making her the "**first ordained woman minister in the country.**" That is a landmark achievement, but her ordination was only recognized by that local congregation.
- A decade later, when the St. Lawrence Association of Universalists ordained Olympia Brown in 1863, her ordination was recognized by other Universalist congregations,

making her the **“first woman in the U.S. to be ordained by full denominational authority”** (60).

After her ordination, she spent many years serving Universalist congregations as well as significant time and energy advocating for women’s right to vote. In particular, she spent four months in the summer of 1867 traveling around Kansas to promote women’s suffrage (74-75). “Often she had to get up at four o’clock in the morning, eat a hasty breakfast, then set out on an eight or ten hour drive to get to a meeting forty or fifty miles away” (81). At those meetings, she was a powerful and persuasive speaker.

Here’s one brief example of her words:

This is the great argument in favor of the enfranchisement of women; it is not so much the repealing of wicked laws, or the establishment of justice, although these are important, as it is that **women should gain that self-respect and independence which is the characteristic of the free.**

(Emerson 250)

I should hasten to add that, a few years later, she did marry a supportive man and become the mother of two children, but she remained the Rev. Olympia Brown (110). And on the occasion that someone referred to her as Mrs. Willis, it was said that she made her name and title clear in a way that people rarely made that mistake twice (Cote 111).

In 1887, when she was fifty-two years old, she resigned from serving her fourth congregation to work again full-time for women’s suffrage (125). I’ll limit myself to only one of the many remarkable stories of her decades-long activism. A month after the end of World War I, she and the other suffragettes were outraged at President Wilson. He regularly called himself the head of the “greatest democracy on earth,” but half of U.S. citizens—the *female* half—could not vote.

On a December day in 1918, the suffragettes were burning copies of Wilson’s speeches. And:

A hush fell over the crowd as a small, aged woman moved from her place in the shadows toward the urn in the brilliant torchlight. They recognized this veteran as the eighty-three-year-old Reverend Olympia Brown, a friend and colleague of Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton

[both of whom had died more than a decade earlier.] She held aloft a sheaf of papers. It was the speech Wilson had made on his [recent] arrival in France. As she thrust the papers into the flames, she cried out in a firm, clear voice vibrant with emotion, “America has fought for France and the common cause of liberty. I have fought for liberty for seventy years, and I protest against the President’s leaving out country with this old fight here unwon.” A moment of silence—then...the crowd burst into applause and continued to cheer as her companions helped her down from the base of the statue. (1-2)

Less than two years later on August 18, 1920, the final state needed to ratify the Nineteenth Amendment finally fell into place, securing women’s right to vote.

And on September 12, a few weeks after that historic victory, Rev. Olympia Brown at age eighty-five was invited to return to the pulpit of the last congregation she had served as minister, the Universalist Church of Racine, Wisconsin. That morning she preached what we now know was her final sermon. She titled it “The Opening Doors.”

In her introduction she said:

It is now nearly thirty-three years since I resigned my pastorate in this church. That is a long time and many things have happened, but **the grandest thing has been the lifting up of the gates and the opening of the doors to the women of America, giving liberty to twenty-seven million women**, thus opening to them a new and larger life and higher ideal.... It is worth a lifetime to behold the victory. (193)

Less than two months later, on November 2, 1920, millions of women in the United States did vote for the first time, and Rev. Olympia Brown was one of the first in line (167). *If there was an opening door, she was going to enter.*

She lived a few more happy years, and voted in a few more elections. Notably, in 1926 at the age of ninety-one, she visited Europe for the first time and spent several weeks touring. A few months after returning home, she died suddenly after a brief illness (174).

For now, I'll leave you with an excerpt from the conclusion to her final sermon. Reflecting on the Universalist values that had shaped her long life, she spoke words that remain famous almost a century later in our Unitarian Universalist tradition:

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 and
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.... (187)

That great true principle was Universalism: the inherent worth and dignity of every person—without exception. For the Rev. Olympia Brown, Universalism meant acting for the equality of women. As you reflect on our world today, what, in particular, does Universalism call you to do?