



Preaching a Feminist Gospel

Clay Nelson © 13 August 2017

As anyone in my line of work knows, there is a vast body of religious humour. Every faith and denomination has theirs. Generally, they are not nasty. They are the kind of jokes we tell on ourselves, self-deprecating humour that reveals something about who we are, including our foibles.

As a Unitarian, I have a rich body of humour to draw upon. For a small denomination, we laugh at ourselves a lot. One that tickles me goes like this: A group of children in a Unitarian religious ed class were trying to determine the sex of a rabbit. “There’s only one way to decide,” said one child, “let’s take a vote on it.”

I was only going to share one but then remembered this one:

A visitor to a Unitarian Universalist church sat through the sermon with growing incredulity at the heretical ideas being spouted. After the sermon, a member asked the visitor, “So how did you like it?”

“I can’t believe half the things that minister said!” sputtered the visitor in outrage.

“Oh, good—then you’ll fit right in!”

For those that have been Unitarians awhile, a lot of these are old jokes, but recently I thought I’d heard a new one. It was a recent headline in the papers, “Unitarian Universalists elect first woman president”. What’s the punchline, I wondered? How could the most progressive of liberal religious traditions just now get around to breaking the glass ceiling for the top job? Remember, the Universalists were amongst the first to ordain a woman in 1863; the Unitarians followed suit in 1871. I don’t know the answer, but I think historians will tell us years from now that this election marked an important transition in the direction of our religious tradition. Why do I think so? Because Unitarian and Universalist women have been shaping who we are for some time.

There are so many women who have played a role in who we are it is difficult to choose, but it has to begin with Mary Wollstonecraft. According to the *Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography*, Mary was a revolutionary advocate of equal rights for women, an inspiration for both the nineteenth-century and twentieth-century women’s movements. Wollstonecraft was not merely a women’s rights advocate. She asserted the innate rights of all people, whom she thought victims of a society that assigned people their roles, comforts, and satisfactions according to the false distinctions of class, age, and gender.

Born in England in 1757, she endured a difficult upbringing, denied the opportunities bestowed on her brother for education. It was Mary’s genius that allowed her to rise above these handicaps and transform her experience into a dream of a reordered society.

From 1782 until 1785 Wollstonecraft was a congregant at the Unitarian chapel at Newington Green, during which time she was influenced by its minister, Richard Price. Through her friendship with Dr

Price she entered a circle of intellectuals and radicals, including Joseph Priestley, Thomas Paine, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Blake, and William Godwin.

In response to criticism of Price in Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Wollstonecraft immediately wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*. This work was overshadowed by another response to Burke, Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, which followed several months later. In *Rights of Men* Wollstonecraft presented her vision of a society, based upon equality of opportunity, in which talent—not the wrongful privileges of gentility—would be the requisite for success. Paine and Wollstonecraft were accused in the press of seeking to “poison and inflame the minds of the lower class of his Majesty's subjects to violate their subordination.” When Paine was later burnt in effigy for his support of revolutionary France, there was public talk of subjecting Wollstonecraft to the same treatment.

Wollstonecraft decided to devote her next treatise to women's rights, a topic that had never before been dealt with at any length. The resulting *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) was, in part, her response to Jean-Jacques Rousseau who, in *Emile* (1762), had recommended that girls be given a different education from boys, one that would train them to be submissive and manipulative. In *Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft argued that the rights of man which she had previously espoused applied equally and unconditionally to women as a just God could not have created one human being superior to another. She sought to overturn centuries of Judeo-Christian teaching that women, having no separate moral identity, depended upon their husbands for a spiritual relationship with God. Wollstonecraft boldly declared that all people—men, women, and children—have a right to an independent mind. She envisioned a society in which women could be educated and work alongside men as co-equals in every pursuit. She advocated equal citizenship for both sexes, giving everyone “a direct share in deliberations of government.” Wollstonecraft opposed war and all forms of oppression. “Let there be no coercion established in society,” she said, “and, the common law of gravity prevailing, the sexes will fall into their proper places.” An advocate of universal self-reliance and responsibility, she did not wish that women should exercise “power over men,” only “over themselves.”

The historian Henry Noel Brailsford, considered the *Rights of Woman* “perhaps the most original book of its century.” “What was absolutely new in the world's history,” he thought, “was that for the first time a woman dared to sit down to write a book which was not an echo of men's thinking, nor an attempt to do rather well what some man had done a little better, but a first exploration of the problems of society and morals from a standpoint which recognised humanity without ignoring sex.”

Wollstonecraft embraced a religion that combined faith with reason, morality with knowledge, and which placed no limits on human inquiry. “I submit to the moral laws which my reason deduces,” she said. “It is not to an arbitrary will, but to unerring reason.” She rejected the notion that the faculty of reason is exclusively a male attribute. “Who made man the exclusive judge?” she asked. She sensed the presence of the God in nature and recorded a mystical experience in which her “soul rested on itself, and seemed to fill the universe.”

I have devoted so much of this sermon to Mary because she brought both mind and heart to Unitarianism and was the first to preach a feminist gospel. Unitarian and Universalist women have continued to preach it until the present day.

The next woman to pick up Mary's mantle was Margaret Fuller. According to Susan B Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Margaret “possessed more influence on the thought of American women than any woman previous to her time.” Author, editor, and teacher, Fuller contributed significantly to the American Renaissance in literature and to mid-nineteenth century reform movements. A brilliant

and highly educated member of the Transcendentalist group, she challenged Waldo Emerson both intellectually and emotionally. Women who attended her “conversations” and many prominent men of her time found Fuller's influence life-changing. Her major work, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, published in 1845, profoundly affected the women's rights movement which had its formal beginning at Seneca Falls, New York, three years later.

Her book was her major gift to the times. A manifesto for the women's rights movement, it revealed Fuller's enormous knowledge of literature and philosophy as she described the oppression of the female sex through history and advocated equal status for women. Years later Horace Greeley wrote, “If not the clearest and most logical, it was the loftiest and most commanding assertion yet made of the right of Woman to be regarded and treated as an independent, intelligent, rational being, entitled to an equal voice in framing and modifying the laws she is required to obey, and in controlling and disposing of the property she has inherited or aided to acquire . . . hers is the ablest, bravest, broadest, assertion yet made of what are termed Woman's Rights.”

Fuller's feminist gospel continued the work of Wollstonecraft in shaping Unitarianism, for she brought heart to her rational religion. While part of the Transcendentalist scene, Fuller wrote her personal credo. She wished to be a Christian “in full possession of my reasoning powers.” She believed in Christ “because I can do without him . . . but I do not wish to do without him. He is constantly aiding and answering me.” But Christ was not enough. She wrote in 1842, “We have all had the Messiah to reconcile and teach, let us have another to live out all the symbolical forms of human life with the calm beauty and physical fullness of a Greek god, with the deep consciousness of a Moses, with the holy love and purity of Jesus.” She did not reject the church as did some Transcendentalists, but she joined them in finding that “nowhere I worship less than in places set apart for that purpose... The blue sky seen above the opposite roof preaches better than any brother.”

By the mid-19th century, thanks to such women as Wollstonecraft and Fuller, reform was in the air. It was a time when many Unitarian and Universalist women, not the least of whom were Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B Anthony—and in this congregation, our first woman chair of the Management Committee, Harriet Morison, a leader in our country's fight for women's suffrage—began to put their feminist gospel into practice.

There are so many to choose from to give flesh and blood to a feminist gospel, but the story of Olympia Brown, the first woman ordained to the Universalist ministry captures the courage and fortitude of these women. Her story is recounted in *UU World*.

On a crisp autumn morning in 1861, Ebenezer Fisher, president of the Theological School of St Lawrence University, heard an authoritative knock at his door. On opening it, he was surprised to see a diminutive young woman holding a suitcase. What he could not know was that this small, softly-spoken woman would become one of the most formidable forces in the American women's suffrage movement. Brown would dedicate herself to assuring that women could take their rightful place in the ministry and in every facet of American life.

The encounter with Fisher tells us a lot about Brown. Every other theological school she applied to rejected her. Only Fisher offered her admission, adding this caveat: “I do not think women are called to the ministry, but I leave that between you and the Great Head of the Church.” And that is exactly where Brown thought it should be left.

She left her home state of Michigan for Canton, New York, announcing to Fisher on her arrival that she would be enrolling at the Universalist divinity school. The president was confused; he thought he

had written her a pointedly discouraging letter. “Well,” she told him, according to her autobiography, “your discouragement was my encouragement.”

One of Brown’s first challenges at divinity school was her high, thin voice. For amusement, her classmates, all men, would gather under her window and recite her sermons in high falsetto voices. In class, a seminarian denigrated these sermons as being passably written, but asserted that “they could hardly be called sermons.” But the ridicule simply spurred her on.

Brown not only graduated from divinity school, she convinced the Northern Universalist Association to ordain her at its meeting in Malone, New York, on June 25, 1863.

As for her voice, in 1864 Brown enrolled at the Dio Lewis School of Speech, where the school’s founder developed a series of exercises to help build her lung capacity. Brown did the exercises throughout her life and became a powerful public speaker. Neighbours in Racine, Wisconsin, where she was minister of what is now the Olympia Brown UU Church, often heard her in her garden, reciting her sermons and speeches to the flowers.

While Brown was still in her first ministry in Weymouth Landing, Massachusetts, a meeting with Susan B Anthony persuaded her to work for women’s suffrage. A skilled organiser, for many years she balanced her home life with her duties as a minister and suffragist. She raised a son and a daughter and had a loving and felicitous marriage to Henry Willis. At 52, she left full-time parish ministry to work for getting women the vote. After the 19th Amendment passed in 1919, she was one of the few “early pioneers” who was still alive to cast her vote. The last years of her life were devoted to working for world peace, and she became a member of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom.

Considering this history, it is surprising that following the passage of the 19th amendment Brown worked so hard to pass there was a drastic decline in the number of Unitarian and Universalist women being ordained. The General Superintendent of the Universalist Church wrote in 1935 of “a tremendous prejudice against women ministers... [A]t the present time I find it is practically impossible to get any women minister a hearing at any salary whatever”. This was reflected not only in the US but in Britain. New Zealand was the exception. In 1929, our congregation called Wilna Constable, the first ordained woman of any denomination to serve a New Zealand church. Amongst her achievements was championing a bill in Parliament to allow women ministers to officiate at weddings.

However, in the US, by 1950 there were no Unitarian women settled as ministers and the Universalists had only three. By 1968, only 2% of Unitarian and Universalist ministers were women. In the mid-1970s the ordaining of women exploded, in part because of *second-wave feminism*. While first-wave feminism had focused on suffrage, inequality and property rights, second-wave feminism broadened the debate to a wide range of issues: sexuality, family, the workplace, reproductive rights and legal inequalities. In the UUA this second-wave forced clergy to examine personal patriarchal attitudes and systemic patriarchy in the denomination. Today over 60% of UU ministers are women. This in part explains why it took so long for a woman to be elected President. The other part is that a generation gap had to be leapt.

Unitarians of the 50s and 60s were escaping churches. They defiantly testified about the doctrines they no longer believed in. This older generation tends to shun rites, symbols and most religious language. Today they are the conservatives who fidget with sweaty palms as a new generation of clergy, who are predominantly women, come into leadership eager to explore new spiritual frontiers. Like Wollstonecraft and Fuller, they remind men and women to bring heart into our rational religion.

They are eager to experience the presence of God, the goddess or some other god to be named later. God language doesn't particularly trouble them.

Time will tell how these Unitarian Universalist women will shape our living tradition, but with a woman now at the top, they will continue the long tradition of preaching a feminist gospel which has enriched us for over 200 years. And that's no joke.