

Our Mother-Ship
by Rev. Kevin Tarsa

A sermon delivered May 10, 2020
online via Zoom
to the Unitarian Universalist Community of the Mountains.

Mother’s Day Beginnings

Unitarian Julia Ward Howe is best known today for writing the lyrics of “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” [sing a portion], a song meant to spur on the Union troops in the Civil War. But in her time, Julia Ward Howe was known for her work to end slavery, to promote international peace, and to secure women’s right to vote. She hosted the first convention of Unitarian women ministers, and she was the first woman elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

She is also the founder of Mother’s Peace Day in the U.S, an anti-war event which was later turned into the Mother’s Day that we know. In her original proclamation Howe wrote,

“As men have often forsaken the plough and the anvil at the summons of war, let women now leave all that may be left of home for a great and earnest day of council . . . to promote . . . the great and general interests of peace.”

For Howe, Mother’s Day wasn’t about honoring mothers with flowers and cards and brunches, nice as that can be, it was about honoring the important life-saving perspectives and voices that women bring, perspectives and voices so often ignored, or discouraged and discounted, as they were in her marriage.

This Mother’s Day, I am, of course, glad to celebrate and appreciate each of you mothers and motherers, Happy Mothers Day! However, in this transformative, pandemic-suspended time my thoughts turn this morning to the root of Julia Ward Howe’s Mother’s Day, beneath the anti-war focus even, to the importance of the voices, perspectives, and leadership of women if we are to move into a more life-sustaining future.

I want to acknowledge up front both the narrowness of this female/male binary that does not serve those who do not identify as male or female, and that here I am, a male-identified person talking today about the importance of honoring the voices of women. I’ll come back to that....dissonance.

The 19th Amendment Nearby

I’ve been meeting with a group of almost all women to plan an event in August honoring the 100th anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment which guaranteed, on paper, the right of all women citizens of the United States to vote.

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The event is the vision of Nevada City mayor, Reinette Senum, whose hope has been that this community learn more of the untold stories of the suffrage effort – the painful stories, the hidden stories, including those related to racism - and that the community draw on that learning to envision a sustaining and sustainable future for Nevada County into the next 100 years.

In the late 1800s, Nevada City resident Ellen Clark Sargent served as treasurer of the National Woman Suffrage Association. She was a close friend of Susan B. Anthony, after whom our UUCM library is named. With Ellen’s urging, her husband, Aaron, a U.S. Senator in 1878, proposed a constitutional amendment giving women the right to vote. As you know, that amendment did not pass in 1878, but it was reintroduced *every year* for the next 40 years until – in the midst of the worst pandemic of that century, the worst on this continent since the smallpox epidemic that killed so many indigenous people - it took hold and was enacted in 1920 as the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution.

Our group started last fall planning a big, interactive three-day event at Miner’s Foundry for the amendment’s anniversary coming in August. And then... the corona virus arrived.

In our conversations, we navigated not only the sudden changes needed in our event plans, but also our individual unfolding reactions to the pandemic. We spoke of our personal fears, the dangers and the likely hardships ahead.

We spoke also of the potential transformation that could come from our world being shaken drastically enough to really change things. We spoke of opportunities opened by the upheaval to find truly new ways forward. We spoke of the vital importance of the vision, knowledge, skill and leadership of women in finding that new path forward and avoiding a return to business as usual.

In the process we became more clear about the focus for this now online event, an event that draws on local and national history to lift up the voices and leadership of women, including women marginalized in other ways, as we look for a path into the future that is more compassionate, more sustainable, and more just, to put it in the words of this congregation’s mission.

More information to come about that event, but today it inspires me to lift up a few of the known influences of women on our UU story – some of the mothers of our living tradition.

Judith Sargent Murray

Judith Sargent Murray, for example, a very early Universalist on this continent, essayist, poet, writer of likely the first play by any American author to be produced on stage, and with her essay, “On the Equality of the Sexes” in 1790, the first published American advocate for women’s rights.

Advancing the notion of “Republican Motherhood” she argued, very shrewdly, that “the success of the new nation required intelligent citizens—and since the education of patriotic sons rested with mothers, women should be educated.” She educated her own daughter at home and helped open a female academy south of Boston in 1802.

Her lifelong advocacy of women’s rights aligned with her Universalism, which claimed that if God loves everyone absolutely, who are we to see anyone as excluded from opportunity, or as higher or lower than any other person. Whether or not we hold a belief in God or divinity of any kind, it is a value to which we UUs still aspire and toward which UUs work to this day.

Sarah Alden Bradford Ripley

You have likely never heard of **Sarah Alden Bradford Ripley**, born three years after Murray’s essay on the equality of the sexes was published. Sarah, a scholar, did not leave writings behind, nor did she found institutions. Instead, she quietly influenced a generation of the coming Transcendentalists who did! Sarah taught and tutored and otherwise ran the household for the students at a boarding school run by her husband - students like young Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose views later shaped not only Unitarianism, but American culture broadly. Emerson and his friends vied for a place around her kitchen table to seek her wisdom, knowledge, and counsel as well as her food. Emerson wrote, “talk on what you will she can always give you a new idea – ask her any philosophical question, she will always enlighten you by her answer.”

Sarah embodied the explicit use of reason that came to characterize Unitarianism, the use of reason, no matter where it led. Ralph Waldo’s aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, who had taken Sarah under her wing earlier, credited Sarah with what she saw as Ralph Waldo’s downfall into what became known as transcendentalism.

Sarah Alden Bradford Ripley is an example of who knows how many women we will never know. Women denied the opportunity of professorships and ministries. Women whose scholarship was quietly channeled toward women and men who we do know and remember.

The Iowa Sisterhood

70 years after Sarah Alden Bradford Ripley was born, Universalist **Olympia Brown** became, in 1863, one of the first woman to be ordained as clergy with the consent of her denomination, consent denied her at first. Just 12 years after Olympia’s ordination, Julia Ward Howe was organizing that Women’s Ministerial Conference, and 21 Unitarian women were connecting with each other for mutual support as they served churches throughout the Midwest and plains states.

Known in time the **Iowa Sisterhood**, they took the hard jobs out on the rough and tumble frontier, a prospect that scared off most of the male ministers from the east. Not only did these women serve and found successful and rapidly growing congregations, they changed the nature of church in America, from a place where one heard liberal religious ideas to “a church that

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provided comfort, hospitality, community, education, cultural enrichment and social service (MB&P pg 74).”

Caroline Bartlett Crane

Caroline Bartlett Crane, for example, built huge new church building in Kalamazoo, Michigan, a building that looked not like a church, but like a very large home. She helped change the congregation’s name to “People’s Church,” which is still the congregation’s name.

Caroline wrote,

“This church cannot be a place where we are merely to come together once a week and enjoy our doctrine and congratulate ourselves that we have a faith free from superstition. We must do something for others, as well as for ourselves. And the more we have done for others, the more in the end, we shall find we have done for ourselves.”

These women held classes in reading, writing, sewing, finances, home economics, cooking. They put classrooms in their church buildings, as well as homelike parlors with fireplaces. They attended to the entire life of their members, not just their theological ideas and ideologies. You see their influence still in many protestant churches.

But by the turn of the century, as those areas of the country became more developed and appealing, and as the nation exerted a return to more masculine leadership in general, the men who held power in the institutions of the east withdrew their support and effectively pushed the women out of their ministerial roles and into retirement, or more often, into civic roles, where these women continued to invest in the strength and health of their communities.

130 Universalist and Unitarian women were eventually ordained in that era, but by 1960, there were no Unitarian women ministers, and only 3 women ministers serving Universalist congregations.

The UUA Merger

That was the reality the year before the 1961 merger of the Universalist Church of America and the American Unitarian Association which resulted in the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. Our association.

This Tuesday marks the 59th anniversary of that merger, a merger for which the Universalists and the Unitarians had top hammer out a set of principles that would be acceptable enough to members of both groups. Those original 1961 principles referred to “the dignity of man,” “ideals of brotherhood,” and “men of goodwill.”

So, in the late 70s, in the midst of second wave feminism, Unitarian Universalist women strategized about how to eradicate the sexism from their own religion, how to affirm women, and how to show respect for the earth while they were at it.

Their efforts led to a 1985 rewrite of the UUA purposes and principles, the addition of a seventh principle (“Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part”), and a push to update the UU hymnbook and its sexist language.

The Numbers

In 1972, at the beginning of that wave of feminism, only a couple dozen UU ministers were women, 3% of all UU ministers. Six years later, in 1978, the numbers had doubled - there were 57 women ministers, 6%. When I first joined a UU congregation in 1989 eleven years later, the numbers had quadrupled to 276, or 25% of UU ministers. Then by just 10 years later, in 1999, women outnumbered men in UU pulpits. In fact, it made the front page of the New York Times: the Unitarian Universalist Association became the first Protestant denomination in history in which congregations employed more female than male clergy in their leadership.

With the women ministers came more focus on shared ministry and collaboration, room for more varied senses of spirituality, more personal openness, a focus on relationships and connecting. They opened the way for Gay and Lesbian ministers, and eventually transgender, queer, and gender non-conforming ministers.

Three years ago, Susan Frederick-Gray became the first woman President of the UUA, a milestone guaranteed by the nominating committee’s commitment to force UUism across this threshold. They did it by nominating only women candidates for the role.

Since then, women and gender non-conforming persons have led the way in our Association’s significant and long overdue effort to decenter whiteness and to center the voices of Black persons, Indigenous persons, other People of Color, and other historically marginalized persons.

So What? Now What?

So, with that very little bit of UU herstory in mind and heart on this Mothers Day, I ask, “What does it mean?” and “Where is it leading?”

This is a much larger conversation, but I want to plant the seed for it today.

One of the messages I take from our history - as we find ourselves suspended in the significant disruption of this moment, aware of the enormous and growing disparities in wealth and power and aware of the destruction of our environment - is that if we want to find our way into a future that is meaningfully different from and better for more people than our past (a future that is genuinely more compassionate, more sustainable, and more just), it is women who can best lead the way, women, particularly marginalized women, and others who have been held out at the margins of society and power.

We who have power (we men), by virtue of the power we have been granted, cannot help, as leaders, but in subtle ways to feed a slide toward business as usual, no matter how progressive

and well-intentioned we are. It’s similar to what we are learning about what it means to be white in a culture that privileges and prioritizes whiteness. Even when we are trying not to, our behaviors often support and shore up the status quo.

I know, this a tough pill for men to swallow. You might ask, “Wouldn’t equal leadership be the true ideal, our vision of Beloved Community? Not either/or, but both/and? Wouldn’t it be helpful to be gender blind?”

Well, in theory, ...eventually, yes, that is the ideal. But to get there from here, to shift things, to avail ourselves of the opportunities at this particular threshold, it’s going to take some correction, and I believe that the role for us cis-gender men at this point in humanity’s journey, is to learn to stay in the room and be willing to be led.

On Men Leaving the Building

I’ve been thinking about this over the last couple of years as I’ve watched my white male colleagues of a certain age struggle with a sense of feeling lost as our Association seeks to decenter whiteness and traditional holders of power - to decenter white men, in effect - as women have now become the large majority of our seminarians and our ministers.

We men have been encouraged and trained to lead from front and center, and to do good in the world from that location. When we are not front and center, we’re not quite sure what to do.

I’m watching my white, male colleagues, many of whom deeply support the decentering of whiteness and maleness, decide that their job then, must be to get out of the way, to be helpful by leaving the room and making space for a new set of leaders.

But when we white men leave the room entirely, we take our power out with us, withdrawing it as a resource that could serve and support those new leaders. I believe that our job for the foreseeable future, our job as men and as white people, is to learn to stay in the room and be willing to be led by others and by their vision for the future.

Otherwise very little will really change.

To Be Continued...

I’m still figuring out what this mean and looks like for me. As I am wont to say, “to be continued.”

The Mother’s Day that we know, as lovely and loving as it is, bolsters the traditional roles and places of women and men in our society. Julia Ward Howe had a vision for Mother’s Day of women’s perspectives turning the status quo on its head. Many Unitarian, Universalist and Unitarian Universalist women before and since – including many of you, I know - have held hope for similar possibilities.

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This Mother’s Day, the disrupted state of the world may be opening up a rare opportunity.

May we answer the opportunity of this moment, knowing that what we introduce now might not get ratified for another 40 or 50 years. May we know that it is nonetheless, the important and the right thing to do.

So may we be.

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