



## UNIVERSALIST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF HAVERHILL

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“In Her Footsteps: The Legacy of UU Women and Social Change,”  
a sermon given by Nancy Rusk  
on March 13, 2011

Good morning. It is good to be here in community with you! I want to thank the Haverhill Sisterhood for their organization and participation in this morning's service. And thank you Di Kinsman for the beautiful flowers and banner on the altar as well as the ministerial stoles. These stoles are a symbol that ministry belongs to all those who participate in the life of the church.

Nearly 100 years ago, religious educator and American philosopher Ella Lyman Cabot wrote: “We sometimes speak as if the past were over and done with: ‘That's past; that's out of date; that's ended.’ Yet try to obliterate in your thought all that is past. It is impossible, of course, because in so doing we obliterate ourselves. Without the help of what we call the past we could not live at all. The past, instead of being done with, is, then, the real fiber of the world as we know it. Just as the food we eat nourishes us till it becomes what we act with, so the past is always what we think with. . . .”

What does your Universalist Unitarian history mean for you? Is it important? Does it add texture and color to your faith? When I found Unitarian Universalism back in 1990, I celebrated in finding a liberal faith tradition that opened its ears and heart to the world around it. I found a tradition made up of political and spiritual movers and shakers dating back centuries. I found a legacy.

What does this word legacy mean? I took a look in the dictionary and discovered first a simple meaning: anything handed down from the past, as from an ancestor or predecessor.

From the law dictionary, it gets a little deeper: A will or testament, a legal declaration by which a person names one or more persons to manage their estate and provides for the transfer of property at death.

To embrace our faith tradition fully then, is to embrace and become stewards of its rich legacy. Otherwise, we are the summer relatives who visit the cousins at their beach cottage, but fail to truly embrace the responsibility of ownership. We can relish it, enjoy the company, but we fail to embrace all that is- including the responsibility?

When I came to this liberal religion, I was in search of a faith tradition and community that would motivate and support me in my belief that we are called to change the world and make it better. I am not talking about in big grandiose ways, but in ways that help our light burn brighter from right where we are. I believe there is power when our deeds and actions are guided by our faith and our beliefs. So for me what was also important was to find a vital community of faith that would

be supportive in living a life that counted, and lived with intention. And this was what I found when I came to Unitarian Universalism.

Due to our history here at UUCH, we call ourselves Universalist Unitarians because this church held for decades, before the merger of the two traditions in 1961, a strong Universalist community that still speaks from the walls of this building. I urge you to take the time to come and sit in the silence of this church and listen to what those who have gone before you have to say.

March is Women's History month. Many women around you have gathered to learn about the rich UU history or legacy that has been bestowed upon us. Back to borrowing that law definition: We have been entrusted to manage the great estate of the women who fought and struggled before us, out of their faith, to make the world a better place for all peoples. Knowing our own history and understanding ourselves as a historical movement is very important to the present and the future of a healthy and thriving spiritual tradition.

Recently Ginny Wright a long time member of the church wrote from her new home in Colorado: "Carry on....love UU Church of Haverhill as I did and it will continue to flourish."

We have reason to take pride in the history of our tradition, from all those who have gone before us, who have asked and considered the hard questions deeply and well. Without our history we would lack affiliation with our UU heroes and mentors. Our history and our herstory builds continuity for us.

Universalist and Unitarian women have helped lead the way for one progressive reform after another: abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, appropriate services for those living with mental illness, changes in industry, reproductive rights, and civil rights, to name just a few. There are many notable women pioneers from our traditions who led the way in their advocacy for the inherent dignity and worth of every human being.

Many of these women were married to Universalist and Unitarian men who themselves were ministers and or activists in the social concerns of the day. Together as couples they formed impacting and strong co-ministries.

Judith Sargent Murray (1751–1820) was an early American advocate for women's rights, an essayist, playwright, poet, and letter writer. She was one of the first American proponents of the idea of the equality of the sexes. Her essays championed the new republic, considered citizenship, virtue, and philanthropy; decried war and violence of any kind; and discussed Universalism. She was married to John Murray considered the founder of American Universalism and for whom our Murray Room is named.

"The idea of the incapability of women, is, we conceive, in this enlightened age, totally inadmissible; and we have concluded, that establishing the expediency of admitting them to share the blessings of equality, will remove every obstacle to their advancement."

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A little later we see a large number of Universalist and Unitarian women enter the abolitionist and women suffrage movement.

Lucy Stone, (1818 – 1893) was a Unitarian and the first woman in Massachusetts to graduate from college. She was called "the morning star of the women's movement" because she was one of the first to give public speeches on women's rights. In fact, she gave her first lecture on women's rights in 1847, the year before the famous "first" women's rights convention in Seneca Falls. Lucy went on to become a leader in the movements to end slavery and to gain the right for women to vote. She was determined to do whatever she could to make the world better. "Make the world better" were in fact the last audible words said by Lucy Stone.

"Now all we need is to continue to speak the truth fearlessly, and we shall add to our number those who will turn the scale to the side of equal and full justice in all things."

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Julia Ward Howe (1819-1910) a writer of poetry and plays wrote the Civil War anthem: The Battle Hymn of the Republic in 1862 with hopes of keeping the war focused on ending slavery. She was married to Samuel Gridley Howe, educator of the blind, who was also active in abolitionism and other reforms. A Unitarian, she was part of the larger circle of Transcendentalists. She was active in the women's rights movement later in life, playing a prominent role in several suffrage organizations. Julia was a Unitarian Christian who believed in a personal, loving God who cared about the affairs of humanity. She believed in a Christ who had taught a way of acting, a pattern of behavior, that humans should follow. She was a religious radical who did not see her own belief as the only route to salvation. She like many others of her generation, had come to believe that religion was a matter of "deed, not creed."

When suffragist Mary Livermore, a Universalist died in 1905, at age eighty-four, Julia Ward Howe eulogized her in a newspaper tribute. Describing Livermore's emergence as a public figure and political activist, Howe spoke of the centrality of the Civil War in that process. The war, Howe said, gave Mary Livermore a new sense of the moral power of women. As an activist, organizer, and spokeswoman for the U.S. Sanitary Commission (a forerunner of the Red Cross), Livermore's wartime experiences convinced her that women should have legal and political rights for themselves.

"It was not Lucy Stone who converted me to Woman's Suffrage," she told an audience of woman's rights activists in 1870", nor even my own husband, who had been talking it to me for fifteen years. It was the war and the strength of character which it developed in our women.... Knowing, then, the qualities of woman and her courage and bravery under trials, I can never cease to demand that she shall have just as large a sphere as man has."

Margaret Fuller faced numerous obstacles to establishing herself as a journalist and editor. She landed some impressive jobs for example – with the Transcendentalist journal "The Dial," her friends included Horace Greeley and Ralph Waldo Emerson. However, she lived at the edge of poverty all her life. She accepted her marginal status and took many risks, including marriage to a young Italian revolutionary. Margaret Fuller, her husband and child all perished in a shipwreck in 1850, along with her journals from Italy. She was forty years old.

"What woman needs is not as a woman to act or rule, but as a nature to grow, as an intellect to discern, as a soul to live freely, and unimpeded to unfold such powers as were given her when we left our common home."

By the turn of the century, a small group of Unitarian women ministers known as the “Iowa Sisterhood” kept liberal religion alive in a conservative backwater. The Iowa Sisterhood exercised resourcefulness to prevail against a conservative environment. They founded their own churches and mentored other women ministers as their successors. They saw themselves as missionaries even to their own people.

A little later women were to take on other roles changing the face of education. Sophia Lyon-Fahs (1876-1978) was a Unitarian Educator. She helped to revolutionize American children's religious education. In the late 1920s, as the debate about Fundamentalism raged in Protestant circles, Fahs sided with the Liberals.

"A modern faith, she argued, must take science and modern attitudes seriously; faith, she believed, is rooted ultimately in a person's own experiences.

Fast forward to more our own recent history. Janet Bowering was the first woman minister of our congregation, and among the first UU ministers to officiate at same sex unions. She helped open the church basement to the first Mitch's homeless shelter, and planted a seed for the MLK breakfast co-celebrated with our neighbors across the street. Followed in kind by Delight Reese who encouraged the church to open its doors to the Drop In Center

Wendy von Zirpolo previously our Director of RE and intern helped lead UUCH through the process of becoming a welcoming congregation. She was ordained here in 2005 and has gone on to a distinguished career as a UU minister. Recently she was involved in protesting the Arizona immigration law. She was arrested as she put her beliefs into practice during a peaceful demonstration wearing her “Not all who wander are lost” t-shirt.

While we might look back at the women who have spoken today and call them feminists, perhaps it is clearer now to understand that fighting oppression is the real work of feminism. Out of experiences of disappointment and discrimination have come compassion and a clear sense of just how related we and all oppressions really are. We live in a global society. The world is getting smaller--our clothing comes from afar, by pushing buttons we can talk to people in China and Japan, the internet brings the world to our office. And yet poverty continues to exist in our country, oppression reigns in Uganda, and Sudan, war continues in Iraq and Afghanistan, homelessness exists in our communities, AIDS is still pandemic. There is still work to be done. What is encouraging is that we also now have more sophisticated tools that we can use to bring people of faith together to make these changes to fight oppression, to act from our principles not for ourselves but for the souls of all peoples.

Olympia Brown said it so well:

“Stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it. There is nothing in all the world so important as to be loyal to this faith which has placed before us the loftiest ideals. Which has comforted us in sorrow, strengthened us for noble duty and made the world beautiful. Do not demand immediate results but rejoice that we are worthy to be entrusted with this great message. ... 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 loves.”