

Olympia Brown: A Universalist Origin Story

UU Church of Vancouver

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Reflection on the Theme by Brett Raunig

This month's theme is creation. I wasn't sure what or how to write about it. As I thought about it, I started to think back to what I had been taught and how my beliefs and the subject have evolved over the last 50 years. I was raised Catholic and throughout my early education, I was taught the Adam and Eve story. What I remember most about this was the depiction of Eve being tempted by an evil snake to eat the forbidden fruit.

I didn't really start to question this story until I got into college and started my degree to become a Biologist. I was exposed to a different story about how we all came to be. This story, however, was more rooted in science. It spoke of Darwin, the Big Bang, and how all life had evolved over millions of years to adapt to the surrounding changes occurring on Earth.

Science became my go-to story as I continued to travel through my 20s and 30s and for the most part, I had let go of religion except during the holidays to appease my parents. I still sometimes wondered about what I had been taught early on and the concept of God, but I had no place to expand or examine both beliefs.

This all changed when I met Wendy. Early on she was raised Jehovah's Witness but when her parents divorced her mom exposed her to the Unitarian Universalist faith. We started to explore this place because we both liked the openness of a place where all beliefs were welcomed.

Looking back, I never thought about how the story of Adam and Eve influenced my thoughts about men and women. However, I did notice that men were the only ones allowed to preach in the Catholic Church. I also saw how my mom struggled to succeed as a stock broker in a field dominated mostly male roles.

I feel lucky my path led me to a place where I could get the courage to ask Wendy out for coffee. Wendy and I have two beautiful daughters (Elle) and (Mya) whom some of you have met. Both are pursuing careers in Nursing. My family and these experiences have forced me to think more critically about stereotypes, discrepancies with equal pay, and equality. We are here with you all today to explore this history with Stephani and to write a story where all are celebrated.

Rev. Olympia Brown: A Universalist Origin Story © Rev. Stephani M. Skalak

I don't know about all of you, but sometimes, especially here lately, I can get to feeling really overwhelmed by the state of the world. It's easy to become frozen with indecision. There are so many issues to care about and each one of them on their own – much less taken all together – can seem insurmountable. I think that it can be helpful to remember we are not alone in this struggle toward a Beloved Community.

There are countless people around the world right now at this moment, struggling to forge a more just world, in ways both big and small. But we are not alone in history, either. Our ancestors are with us in this struggle. Our children and their children are with us in this struggle.

The Rev. Olympia Brown is a spiritual ancestor of ours, a Universalist. I want to tell you a bit about her today, because she is part of our UU creation story. She worked tirelessly, stitch by stitch, and she took great risks, too. She helped not only Universalist women, but all American women, ascend new heights.

She was born in 1835 in Michigan. Her parents were farmers and life-long Universalists. It was important to them that their daughters be educated. Educating daughters was not something that was a given. But the Browns were so dedicated to this idea that Asa, her father, built a schoolhouse on their family farm. And then, with little Olympia in tow, he drove his horse and buggy from door to door, from farm to farm, raising funds to hire a teacher and drumming up enrollment for the school. This may be where little Olympia learned to be so persuasive and persistent. So she had a good start in life.

Eventually Olympia wanted to go to college, which not many women did at the time. She enrolled at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in Massachusetts. Mt. Holyoke had been educating women for more than 20 years at that point. But... when she got there, all she found were wagging fingers:

“Young ladies are not allowed to stand in the doorway”

“Young ladies are not allowed to linger in the halls”

“We never examine young ladies in Algebra”

Then she enrolled in Antioch College in Yellow Springs, OH.

Horace Mann – the great education reformer, himself a Unitarian – was president of the newly formed College and it was advertised as a “great experiment” in coeducation of men and women. She loved it there! Not that there were no difficulties or controversies. Olympia was often frustrated because there were many rigid rules in place to ensure the rigorous moral standards of the day, rules that sometimes interfered with her getting all the educational benefits that the young men got. That said, Olympia had such good things to say about her experience there, that she convinced her parents to relocate to Ohio, so that all of her sisters could be educated there as well.

In her last year of college, Olympia invited Rev. Antoinette Blackwell Brown (no relation) to speak at Antioch. That was a game-changer for Olympia. She wrote later that "It was the first time I had heard a woman preach and the sense of victory lifted me up. I felt as though the Kingdom of Heaven were at hand."

So, she set her sights on divinity school. She wanted to be a minister. Meadville Theological School in Pennsylvania – a Unitarian seminary – turned her down flat. They straight up scoffed at the idea of a female minister. Said that would be ridiculous. Which I find especially amusing since I just graduated from there last year – it's Rev. Kathryn's alma mater, too. But they weren't as open-minded in 1860.

Oberlin College accepted her application, but then they explained to her that she wouldn't be allowed to speak. Because while Oberlin admitted women, allowed them to attend lectures, they believed that women should be seen and not heard. Oberlin had many female students at the time—more than one third of the student body—but their their female students were there "to be trained to serve as discrete, genteel, pious, and frugal wives for ministers."

Finally, Olympia was got in to the Universalist Theological School of St. Lawrence University. She got an acceptance letter, and along with it, she also received a letter from Ebenezer Fisher, the president of the school. Mr. Fisher wrote to her that while he personally, did not think women had any business being in ministry, that—and I quote—"[he] would leave that between [her] and the Great Head of the Church." Olympia Brown thought about that for a hot second and decided that she agreed! God was and should be the final authority on women being ministers.

Mr. Fisher was very surprised when Olympia showed up for school that Fall. He had intended for his letter to discourage her. He thought that she would know that God agreed with him, not her. So the only place that said yes, also said point blank to her face that they didn't really want her there. But she didn't let that stop her. She showed up ready to work just as hard as anyone else. Harder, even!

Throughout her time there, she was mocked and hazed by her classmates. Her classmates! Who were all aspiring Universalists ministers! In particular, they would make fun of her speaking voice during her sermons, standing outside her bedroom window at night, mocking her in falsetto voices.

On top of that, she had an uphill battle to convince the faculty to award her a degree at all. But she convinced them all, stitch by stitch. She graduated from St. Lawrence in 1863, the first woman to do so.

Later that same year, she was ordained as a Universalist minister. In other words, she convinced another reluctant group of men to approve of her – she used the strength of her arguments and sheer grit. She persisted. She prevailed. She was the first woman to achieve full ministerial standing recognized by a national denomination.

If you are wondering about Rev. Antionette Brown that I mentioned earlier, the difference is that Rev. Antionette was ordained by a single congregation and her ordination was not recognized by the greater denomination. Which means that her ordination would not have necessarily have been recognized by any Universalist congregation other than the one that had ordained her. There were a handful of women ordained by single congregations. But before Rev. Olympia, no woman had ever won the approval of the denomination as a whole.

In 1864, Olympia was called to be the minister of a struggling Universalist congregation in Weymouth Landing, Massachusetts. Pretty much all of the congregations that she served in her lifetime were struggling, in one way or another. In her autobiography she wrote: You may wonder why I could only find work "in run-down or comatose churches," The pulpits of all the prosperous churches were already occupied by men. She had to compete with all the fresh, young men coming out of seminary. "All I could do was to take some place that had been abandoned by others and make something of it, and this I was only too glad to do."

In Massachusetts, Olympia came to know several prominent women's rights activists, such as Lucy Stone (who was mentioned in our reading today) and Susan B. Anthony. She became active in the women's suffrage movement. In 1867, she took a four month leave of absence and traveled to Kansas to give speeches in support of women's suffrage. There was a ballot measure there that was coming up for a vote.

She was invited to do this speaking tour, told that it would all be lined up for her, but it turned out that almost nothing had been done. The dates and towns were established, but no transportation, no lodgings, no advertising for the speeches, often halls hadn't been booked. And to top it all off, everywhere she went, there were protesters, determined to disrupt her speeches. They were angry about the idea of women voting. That sounds dreadful! It sounds like thankless work, at great personal risk.

She gave more than 300 speeches in a four month span. In the end, only one-third of the Kansas votes were in favor of women's suffrage. Some would have seen that as a failure. But you know what? She saw that as a major victory. She convinced thirty percent of those men to vote for women's suffrage. It was an improvement! Stitch by stitch, y'all. She went back east well pleased and fired up to continue the fight for women's suffrage.

Eventually, at the age 53, she gave up being a minister and instead devoted herself full time to the cause of women's rights, focusing especially on suffrage and access to higher education. She worked tirelessly, but by the last decade of the 1800's it seemed like the fire had gone out of the movement. Things languished there for a bit.

By that time, she had spent more than 30 years working for women's rights. I wonder, did she ever feel overwhelmed? Like she couldn't take another step? Did she think that she couldn't see the way forward? What an amazing capacity to tolerate frustration she must have had.

The movement got a new infusion of energy a few years later from the likes of Alice Paul and Lucy Barnes. Their Women's Party in the early 1900's was rowdier than the previous generation had been. They were more confrontational and took the message out of lecture halls and into the streets, where they were often met with violence, with harassment from both men who had organized an opposition and the policemen who should have protected them. Despite being in her 70s and 80s by that time, Rev. Olympia was right in the streets with them. She said, "I belonged to this party before I was born." She stood in front of the White House and burned Woodrow Wilson's speeches, denouncing him for failing to back the suffrage amendment.

On November 2, 1920, Rev. Olympia cast her vote in the first American election to allow women voters. Having seen the goal that she had worked for decades come to pass, she promptly began working for world peace as a member of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. She was 85 years old. Sewing future generations – us! – a parachute by hand.

Isn't this such a beautiful ending to this story? It is so satisfying that she got to see that day. To cast her vote!

But of course, we know that that wasn't the end of the story of fighting for women's rights. It was just the end of the story of Olympia Brown's part in fighting for them. It's an origin story, not the whole story.

On August 26, 1920, twenty-six million adult women in America, were made eligible to vote in a national election for the first time. But two months later, on that November day when Rev. Olympia cast her vote, only about seven million of them did.

There was widespread voter suppression. Because, of course, there was already a very successful apparatus in place to suppress voting: Jim Crow Voter Suppression, already targeting black men, was weaponized against all women, but especially women of color, of course. The same kinds of strategies that we are seeing today to intimidate voters in districts with high concentrations of persons of color, or poorer persons, were used against women then.

And the right to vote, well it's a threshold right, a toe-hold. The whole point is that theoretically, with the right to vote, you can influence other unjust policies. Policies around education and property rights. Policies around consent and bodily autonomy. Policies around equal pay. But those milestones came much later, and some of them we are still working toward.

On the centennial of Rev. Olympia's ordination, a plaque was dedicated in her honor at St. Lawrence University (where she had been so hazed), which reads, in part: "Forerunner of the new era. The flame of her spirit still burns today." That flame is a torch that she has passed to us, her spiritual descendants. And which we will one day pass on to the next generation.

Olympia Brown's story is an origin story that we can be proud of, that we can take heart from. She put in the hard work, stitch by stitch. She kept her eyes on the horizon. She knew that a partial victory was still a victory, but she also knew that there was always more work to do.

We don't have to solve all the world's problems _right now_ and we certainly don't have to do it alone. We just have to find that flame in our own spirit, pick a good cause that we are fired up by, and do our part, stitch by stitch, even when it is risky. And when we experience frustration, failure, or obstruction, we need to remember that we are part of a very fine historical tradition.

I pray that it be so. Amen.