

A Call to Courage

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The late nineteenth century in America was a time of great upheaval. Economic expansion in the 1870s and 1880s was accompanied by mass speculation in railroad companies seeking expansion into the American west and then in other industries like steel and timber (and later petroleum) directly tied to a booming population expanding into sparsely-populated territory.

Great wealth was amassed by a select few leaders of industry, derisively called “robber barons,” who built great mansions and greater monopolies. Their names still resonate in American society over a hundred years later: John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, Cornelius Vanderbilt II, J.P. Morgan.

Economics professor Brad DeLong writes, “even though the base of their fortunes was the railroad industry, they were for the most part more manipulators of finance than builders of new track.” The real money, you see, was to be found in selling railroad securities to the public. The fortune of the robber barons, DeLong writes, “came from profiting from a shift—either upward or downward—in investors' perceptions of the railroad's future profits. It was the tight integration of industry with finance that made the turn of the twentieth century fortunes possible.” (DeLong)

And in order to keep this integration free from governmental interference, the captains of finance amassing all of this wealth had to be ruthless and corrupt. They kept politicians well-funded and in their back pockets at all times. De Long quotes industrialist Collis Huntington, who in 1877, seeking to justify the bribe money he freely distributed in the halls of Congress wrote, “If you have to pay money [to a politician] to have the right thing done, it is only just and fair to do it....” (DeLong)

Mass speculation in shaky business propositions soon led to collapse, as one railroad after another over-reached, over-borrowed, over-spent and went bankrupt. The Philadelphia and Reading Railroad, the Union Pacific, the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe and the Northern Pacific Railroads all failed. Banks who had backed them failed as well, many of them in newly-formed western states. By 1894, unemployment in the United States climbed above 18%, and the nation was in the grip of a depression that would last at least the next three years.

Amidst this economic upheaval was great political change as well. Women were organizing for the right to vote as well as for equality in the home—the Seneca Falls Conference in 1848 began a movement that reached a fever pitch as the decades wore on. Ellis Island was opened to help deal with the millions of immigrants landing on our shores. Workers were organizing into unions so that collectively they could have a voice and access to power, leading to often-violent clashes with corporate executives.

And the population of the United States, spurred by the existence of railroads and the promise of land, began to move westward; seven new states were admitted to the Union in the last eleven years of the nineteenth century.

Amidst all of this upheaval, Unitarians faced the challenge of responding to a new societal order. Long the religion of the New England elite, Unitarians had emerged from several internal theological and organizational controversies as a diverse and sometimes confused religious group.

Transcendentalists and free religionists had challenged Unitarians to expand their reach by abandoning creedalism and the necessity of a belief in God and turning instead towards shared ethical ideals. Traditionalists had insisted that the basis for the faith needed to remain a theistic one.

In the midst of this debate, a regional split emerged in Unitarianism: between western radicals and New England conservatives. Jenkin Lloyd Jones and William Channing Gannett emerged as the leaders of the Western group of Unitarians, based in Chicago.

With the leadership of the Western Unitarian Conference came a push to expand Unitarianism with the expanding country.

At just about that time, two young women who had grown up on neighboring farms in rural Western Illinois decided to devote their lives to ministry and teaching. Mary Augusta Safford and Eleanor Gordon had been deeply influenced by Unitarian thinkers like William Ellery Channing and Theodore Parker, inspired by transcendentalists like Margaret Fuller and Ralph Waldo Emerson, and encouraged by liberal family members to study and gather women together for intellectual pursuits. As young women, they dreamed up a lifelong partnership: Safford as preacher and pastor, Gordon as educator, and committed their energies to making this dream a reality.

In 1874, they met the Rev. Oscar Klute, who had been called to the Unitarian church in Keokuk, Iowa, just across the Mississippi River from Hamilton. Klute became a regular speaker at the women's literary society, and, in 1879, encouraged them to start their own congregation in Hamilton.

This new and growing congregation (by the end of its first year, an average of 150 people attended worship each week) led by a dynamic woman minister came quickly to the attention of Jenkin Lloyd Jones, who was having a lot of trouble fulfilling his plans for westward expansion of Unitarianism. Small salaries, combined with the harshness of rural frontier life, made it next-to-impossible for Jones to recruit ministers—most of whom were trained at Harvard and unwilling to leave the safety of Eastern cities for anything less than the most prestigious Western pulpits.

Jones decided to take a chance on Mary Augusta Safford, and supported her ministry in Hamilton. Soon enough, he convinced Safford and Gordon to leave Hamilton for Humboldt, Iowa, halfway between Des Moines and the Minnesota border. In that rural prairie town of 600 people, a new Unitarian congregation had gathered and was seeking a minister. Safford accepted the call, and Gordon became principal of the town's school.

The Unity Church in Humboldt ordained Mary Augusta Safford to the ministry in June of 1880.

Over the next forty years of her ministry, Safford and Gordon would help found and serve congregations in Sioux City and Des Moines, Iowa, and later in Orlando, Florida.

Safford and Gordon were not alone in their pursuit, though they were among the first to be tapped by Jenkin Lloyd Jones to serve the congregations of the new American West. In her groundbreaking biography *Prophetic Sisterhood*, Cynthia Grant Tucker traces the lives of some 21 women ministers who together, under Safford's leadership, made up what became known as the Iowa Sisterhood. Let me tell you about a few more of them.

Caroline Julia Bartlett served in Sioux Falls, South Dakota before being called by the struggling and tiny First Unitarian Church of Kalamazoo, Michigan in 1889, which she reinvigorated and led through a change in identity

to become the People's Church of Kalamazoo, which they remain today. She served the Kalamazoo congregation for ten years, before retiring to begin a family with her new husband, Augustus Crane.

Marion Murdock became the first woman to graduate from Meadville Theological School in 1885. From there, she was called to serve the congregation in Humboldt, Iowa (after Mary Safford) and then as an associate pastor to Caroline Crane in Kalamazoo. There, she met Florence Buck, who became her life partner.

Florence Buck, inspired to enter the ministry by Crane and Murdock in Kalamazoo, convinced Jenkin Lloyd Jones to get her accepted to Meadville Theological School. Her ministry took her and Murdock to Cleveland; Mount Pleasant, Michigan; Kenosha, Wisconsin (where Murdock served just across the state line in Geneva, Illinois); and then truly to the West to start and serve congregations in Palo Alto and Alameda, California. Later, she would move back across the country to Boston to direct the American Unitarian Association's department of religious education.

Eliza Tupper Wilkes was born in Maine and moved to Iowa to attend college. There, she became a Universalist, and was called to enter the ministry. After serving Universalist congregations in Manasha and Neenah, Wisconsin and Rochester, New York, she and her husband moved west. In Colorado Springs, she became a Unitarian minister, later serving briefly in Sioux Falls and then as a circuit riding preacher for five congregations in South Dakota and Minnesota.

These were an amazing and groundbreaking group of women, who faced great obstacles to their ministry. Meadville Theological School was not thrilled to admit women to study there, but they understood that it was the right thing to do. In admitting women at a time when Harvard steadfastly refused to, Meadville became a center for the liberal Western Conference's ministers to be educated.

But the largest obstacle that the Iowa Sisterhood faced were the Unitarian congregations of their day, who, along with the conservatives at the AUA in Boston were generally uneasy with the thought of women serving as ministers. In order to heed their calling to the ministry, the women of the Iowa Sisterhood had to do things that male ministers were unwilling and unable to do.

And that, in those days, was plenty. Eleanor Gordon lamented this as she and Mary Safford tried to find ministers to serve the congregations that they started and nurtured.

Cynthia Grant Tucker quotes her as having written to the AUA headquarters the following letter: "What is the matter with our younger ministers?" she wrote, "They do not look for a place where they may wrestle with superstition, ignorance, materialism, godlessness, but where there is a church built, where the work had been done, where everyone is saved, where all they have to do is write an essay once a week...."

But the women ministers of the frontier were willing to serve those tiny, struggling congregations. And, in time, they proved to be the right choice for those congregations.

This was so precisely because they were willing to do the hard work of organizing a community. The male ministers who were their counterparts were, as Gordon pointed out, more interested in preaching than in organizing, in teaching, in providing pastoral care, or in creating programs that would serve the needs of people merely scratching out a meager existence on the prairies of Iowa, South Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Illinois.

Though some of their colleagues inspired congregations to work for justice, few Unitarian ministers in the East were interested in a religion that went beyond the intellect. The religion that they worked for was an academic exercise in theology, and not a lived experience.

The Iowa Sisterhood did not have the luxury of engaging in such abstraction. They served in places where people needed fellowship with one another, where children needed education, and where public services were few and far between. They served people whose livelihoods were tied to the land.

Willing to do the work to give these people a religion that would be concrete and life-affirming, these women flourished on the American frontier. Their congregations grew and they moved on to other pulpits.

This story, as inspiring as it might be, doesn't have a very happy ending. As the population of the United States moved west, the congregations these women served increased in size and prestige. Towns grew into cities, and railroads connected everyone in the Midwest to the urban center of Chicago. Soon, male ministers from the East were more than willing to take the pulpits that existed only because of the efforts of the Iowa sisterhood. By the 1920s, women found it harder and harder to find congregations. The number of women in the Unitarian ministry dropped, and would remain low for decades to come.

But the impact of the Iowa Sisterhood's courage in following their call to the ministry remains in our faith movement today. Because they were already breaking so much ground by merely stepping up into the pulpit, these women ministers were able to create a new kind of ministry in the congregations they served.

It was a ministry that focused as much time on teaching as preaching, on pastoral care as on theological thinking, and on building relationships with the community around it as much as building relationships within the congregation. Tucker writes that "while most of their brothers, especially those in the older, more citified parishes, were satisfied with being pulpit professors on Sundays, the women believed in making the church a learning place all through the week."

Kalamazoo's Unitarian congregation changed its name to People's Church precisely because the congregation saw itself as a place for all of the people of Kalamazoo. The congregation's website boasts that in 1896, at the height of Caroline Crane's ministry there, the church hosted some 118 meetings a month.

That's almost four meetings a day—of community groups, a free public kindergarten, sewing, cooking and carpentry classes, a women's gymnasium club, a literary club for African-American residents of the city, and classes taught by Rev. Crane herself on things like Eastern religions.

Mary Safford and Eleanor Gordon's partnership mirrored this new ministry well. Safford was a preacher and pastoral caregiver, Gordon was a teacher and organizer. Together, they were able to found schools as well as congregations, organize community dinners for congregations of people struggling to make ends meet, and make their congregations centers where people could learn home economics as well as Transcendentalist philosophy.

Since arriving here last year, I've had many discussions—mostly with the Wednesday Minister's lunch class—about why our religious movement is not more widespread in our society. It's a good question, and I think for an answer, we can look to the difference between the congregations founded by the Iowa sisterhood and those led by most of the men of their era.

In the early- and mid-twentieth century, the intellectual elite, urban, upper-class model of Unitarianism re-asserted its hold on our denomination. In the end, the traditionalists in Boston had more money and more power than the liberals in Chicago. While throughout the Midwest, small towns still boast Unitarian Universalist congregations, their influence was not widespread in our faith movement.

I believe that Unitarian Universalist congregations lost the down-to-earth ministry of the Iowa Sisterhood and their allies like Jenkin Lloyd Jones at a great price. Too many of our congregations closed their doors, became closed clubs for people with the luxury of being able to sit around thinking about abstract notions, and disengaged with their communities' needs.

Today, we find ourselves in a delicate time—a time that could bring either peril or opportunity. Once again, the nation's economy is teetering on the edge of a bubble. Once again, great wealth is being amassed in the hands of the few at the expense of the many. Once again, our denomination is looking at the best ways to expand the message that we have for our world—that people can come together in free religious community without agreeing on one right way to think.

We would do well to look to the Iowa Sisterhood for inspiration in this time. To seek to serve the needs of all people in our community. To provide ministry that helps people live their everyday lives. To combine a thirst for knowledge and a reverence for reason with the practical understandings of what it means to sustain a community of relationships. And to dedicate ourselves to doing the things that take hard work, perseverance, and a steadfast courage to follow our call. May it be so.

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