

Up from the Realms of Barbarism
(c) Sylvia Stocker
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“I never deliberately chose the profession of ministry; from the moment I believed in Universalism,
it was a matter of course that I was to preach it.” – Rev. Augusta Jane Chapin

Opening Words and Chalice Lighting Words of Lynn Gardner

Can you hear them?
Can you hear the whispers of the ancestors?

We remember.
Their stories are ... in our bones, in the air we breathe.

Their stories are in the touch of a calloused hand,
in the melody of songs we hum while washing dishes;
in remembered faces.

We hear the whispers of the ancestors
how their stories touch our lives
and call us into becoming.

Story (adapted from *Standing Before Us: Unitarian Universalist Women and Social Reform*, edited by Dorothy May Emerson.

On July 16, 1836 – 181 years ago today, a baby was born in Lakeville, Livingston County, New York, who would grow up to be a remarkable Universalist leader. Augusta Jane Chapin was the second woman ordained to the Universalist ministry. From the get-go, she was bright and engaged. She started school at the age of 3. Quick to learn and thirsty for knowledge, her education was fostered by her father's very large library.

When Augusta was 6, the family moved to Michigan. During her lonely childhood there, she spent many hours reading and memorizing passages from the New Testament and *Pilgrim's Progress*. At 14 she became a teacher. At 16, she started college.

Turned away by the University of Michigan, which did not accept women students, Augusta instead attended Olivet College, a Congregational college with rigorous and conventional religious training – a vast departure from the theology to which Augusta had been exposed thus far. At Olivet Augusta had a crisis of faith. She was tormented by the doctrine of eternal punishment. Suffering her doubts quietly and alone, she consulted only the writings of orthodox commentators and applied her own thinking to the question. In the end, by the age of 17, she rejected orthodox theology, and she had adopted the Universalist theology that all souls would eventually find salvation through the grace of God.

From there, her fate was sealed. She knew she was meant to preach Universalism. She later commented, “I have no recollection of ever considering the question of whether I would preach or not ... From the moment I believed in Universalism, it was a matter of course that I was to preach it.”

“A matter of course.”

Leave aside the fact that she had never known a woman minister in her formative years.

Leave aside the fact that the first woman ordained to the Universalist ministry was Olympia Brown, who was ordained in 1863 – the same year Augusta Chapin herself was ordained.

Augusta, with no example set out before her, and against the norms of the times, which relegated women to the church kitchens and quiet pews, understood her calling and took it up. She began, first, as an itinerant, circuit riding minister – much like some of the early ministers who filled the pulpit of our church – going from town to town, preaching in various Universalist churches. She served churches in Michigan, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, California, Nebraska, Massachusetts, Iowa, Illinois, and New York. When she served in Iowa City, she helped a discouraged congregation rebuild their church, which had burned – a story that warms my heart particularly.

Augusta Chapin also taught English literature and was a popular lecturer. She was suffragist, too, being one of the charter members of the American Womens Suffrage Association. In 1870, when she served as delegate to the Universalist Centennial Convention, she proposed an amendment to an article concerned with bestowing licenses to preach. Chapin proposed substituting the word “candidate” for the word “brethren” in that article. Her amendment passed. Thereafter, people seeking a license to be a Universalist preacher were to be called the non-gender-specific word “candidate” instead of the patriarchal word “brethren.” Today people training for the ministry are still called candidates. Our student intern, Claire, is a “candidate” for the UU ministry, thanks to Augusta Jane Chapin.

Augusta Jane Chapin was a member of the organizing committee for the first World Parliament of

Religions in 1893 – considered to be the cradle of both the ecumenical and interfaith movements. At the parliament, she chaired the Women's General Committee.

When Augusta Jane Chapin died in 1905, *The Universalist Leader* published her obituary, saying, “Thus passes one of the earliest and most conspicuous of our women preachers; one who by her ability and consecration and her broad-minded sympathies with every good cause, commanded universal respect and won enduring friendships.”

Reflection: Up from the Realms of Barbarism (c) Sylvia Stocker

From an address of the Universalist Centennial, Gloucester, MA, September 1870. The words of Augusta Jane Chapin: <Note: this was written just a handful of years after the end of the Civil War.>

I am delighted with the work that woman has found it her privilege and within the scope of her ability to do during this jubilee year of our great church. It is peculiarly fitting that women should work with enthusiasm and with zeal, that we may bless the church with our abundant offerings upon the altar of truth. Universalism, the great principles of truth that we received with the doctrine of the great redemption, has made woman what she is; has done for women all that has brought her up from the realms of barbarism, I might say, to the proud position that she occupies today.

The great principle of the Gospel, “There is neither male nor female, bond nor free, Jew nor Gentile, but ye are all one in Christ Jesus,” is the uplifting principle that has blessed the world and brought woman up from the condition of slavery and ignorance to her present position; when multitudes of our best schools open wide their doors to her, and when she no longer ignorantly looks on that which is happening under the sun but looks over the world with comprehensive views and sees with clear vision all that is done. She sees what the errors of the past have been; she sees what the needs of the future are, and she sees that one of the great needs of the time is that she shall come up to perfect comprehension of her own influence in the world.

We have been told what that influence is. Let us, sisters, use our influence to its widest power. To this gospel of the great salvation which has done so much for us, which comforts every mother's heart in the hour of bereavement, which blesses the world, and comes to every needy heart with a benediction which to the poor, the suffering, and the tempted is just what they need, and which glorifies all the blessings of our prosperous hours – to this faith, it is peculiarly proper that woman should consecrate herself.

When, after long struggles, through ways of darkness, with no one to counsel, a child in a school of an opposite faith, I came to a knowledge of this great truth, it seemed to me a foregone conclusion that there could be nothing in this world for me to do but to give my powers and my life to the promulgation of the great, the glorious truth, which is the one thing which this world needs to bring to us the dawn of the millennium morning, when upon every tented field that can be found upon the face of this whole earth there shall come forth, not conquering hosts, sweeping over the earth, and bringing bloodshed, suffering and ruin in their train, but the armies of the Prince of Peace, as they come from this tented field.

And I look to the influence of woman in the future, added to the influence of our brother man, who has so long and so grandly worked, – I look to her influence and to her work, as she shall wisely use the abilities which God has given her.

Some of you may be wondering why I'm not preaching about Henry David Thoreau this morning. He was a Unitarian and his 200th birthday was on Wednesday. What's Chapin's 181 years to Thoreau's 200? What's Chapin's second place claim on Universalist women's ministry to Thoreau's founding membership in the Transcendental Society? What's Chapin's forgotten sermons to Thoreau's *Walden*? What's Chapin's relative obscurity to Thoreau's fame?

People do still visit Walden Pond in Concord. Most seek only a summer swim, but some *do* walk around to the other side to view the site of his cabin in the woods. I've done it myself several times. I've visited his grave at Authors' Ridge in Sleeping Hollow Cemetery in Concord, where he lies near Ralph Waldo Emerson, Louisa May Alcott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and various associated family members, many of them luminaries in Unitarian history.

Thoreau's reverence for the natural world might save us now. Thoreau's ability to march to the beat of a different drummer might inspire us to follow the high road in these alarming and dangerous political times. Even, consider this: This past week, John Kaag and Clancy Martin wrote this about Thoreau in an article published in the NYT:

“... It's easy enough to fall into the impression that Thoreau was the only person at Walden, that the pond was a pristine tract of wilderness.

It wasn't.

Walden was just beyond the bounds of civilized convention – which meant that it was a place for

outcasts.

Thoreau knew this, and willingly lived among them, those who had been barred from the inner life of many wealthy suburbs of Boston.

The self-imposed austerity that we often associate with Thoreau's tree-hugging ways was, in fact, a means of understanding those individuals who had to eke out a meager existence on the outskirts of society.

This does not make Thoreau a saint, but it does suggest an intimate connection between Thoreau's retreat to the woods and his ability to understand those suffering under the conditions of oppression.

Who were his neighbors? Kaag and Clancy list among them freed slaves – men and women alike. Irish immigrants, in the days when brogues weren't charming but were, instead, an invitation for abuse. The poor. The drunks.

“To take Thoreau's example,” write Kaag and Clancy, “is not simply a matter of appreciating the natural world, of taking careful note of every woodchuck and birch. It also involves looking into the trees, into the near darkness, to discern the hidden, human figures who silently abide there. And slowly disappear.”

Happy birthday, Henry! 200 is a respectable age, and your life gave us much to think about.

But today I chose to focus on the more obscure Augusta Jane Chapin for a few reasons: First, women have historically been some of the hidden, human figures who silently abide and whose stories slowly disappear.

Second, I am a word person, as many of you know, and those words “up from the realms of barbarism” were too compelling to pass up. Even more, the notion that *Universalism* had brought women up from the realm of barbarism made me stop and think.

Third, we have something to celebrate today.

But first, barbarism.

Women's lot in Chapin's time was pretty grim. Women's lives were governed entirely by the preferences and decisions of the men who had control over them – their fathers, their husbands, even

their sons. The doors of education remained closed to them for the most part. They couldn't vote. Chapin herself, though a devoted and hardworking suffragist, died in 1905, before the 19th amendment to the Constitution gave women the right to vote. Very little in the way of economic opportunity was available to women – women's work, though never ending, was not compensated. Women were meant to keep their heads down and keep quiet .

I suppose it *is* barbaric to keep people oppressed like that. It is barbaric to expect people to perform the critical work of child bearing, child rearing, and keeping a home humming along, all the while minimizing the contributions of those undertaking that work. It is barbaric to deny people the chance to grow into their own true selves, developing their native talents and acquiring the skills that will enable them to bring their gifts to the world.

How interesting that Chapin saw Universalism as an antidote to that barbarism. Nowadays it's probably hard to really understand how exciting Universalism was back then. But Universalism's loving theology made a real contrast to the Calvinistic theologies of the day – theologies that held out heaven as the reward for the good and the faithful and eternal damnation for everyone else who slipped up. God's love saves everyone, the Universalists proclaimed. Chapin draws on Paul's letter to the Galatians (3:28) “There is neither male nor female, bond nor free, Jew nor Gentile, but ye are all one in Christ Jesus”

All are one. How freeing to believe God's love extended to all.

One can almost hear Chapin reply, if God loves everyone, then doesn't it behoove everyone to live into what they discern God's call to be? So if you are called to preach, you preach. Even though women have never been preachers in your experience. Even though the doors of the seminaries are closed to you. Even though most denominations would never welcome your message (and many still don't). Even though the way forward is far from obvious.

Augusta Jane Chapin was remarkable in her certainty and devotion. She was remarkable for pursuing her call, which was no simple thing in her day.

When someone takes up a new course, bush wacking where no trail has ever existed, they make the way for the rest of us. Now, we can't all be trailblazers. In fact, one thing that truly makes the trail is the traffic of all those who follow in the leaders' footsteps.

Years ago, when my family was vacationing at the pond where we used to rent a housekeeping cabin every summer, the owner of the cabins told us of a waterfall off in the woods. At that point, my family had been vacationing at that same spot for around 40 years. But that was the first I had heard of any

waterfall. (How easy it is to accept the world just as you see it, without thinking to look deep in the woods behind all those trees!)

Well, a small expedition of adults and little kids decided to create a trail to the waterfall. I wasn't among them, for reasons I no longer remember, but my husband and son were. So off they went with bow saws, pruning sheers, and hand clippers. A long time later they returned, tired but excited. Yes, they had found the waterfall. Yes, they had made a trail. Yes, they wanted to show me.

So I went along the roughly hewn trail, trusting in, and also marveling at, the route they had chosen. Eventually, off in the distance, I could hear thundering water. Closer and closer we drew to it, as the volume increased, and the air became cooler. And then we were there, looking up, up up at water cascading over a cliff – a beautiful waterfall that was fairly close to the camp I have stayed at for 40 years, but a waterfall I hadn't even known was there.

What I missed by simply waiting for the trail to be made was all the guessing and figuring and deciding: The trailblazers had to figure out each single step through the woods, because no one had done it before. Each twist and turn in the trail is there because they stopped to think, “Hmm, how shall we proceed now?” I, who came along behind them, could simply follow in their footsteps. But my footsteps, too, helped make clear the pathway to beauty, as have the many other footsteps that have trod that trail ever since.

Today I travel a path forged by my foremothers, like Augusta Jane Chapin. I cannot imagine all the steps she took, working her way through uncharted territory. I can only marvel and thank her. And follow in her footsteps.

Now, the celebration: In New Orleans in June, at General Assembly (GA) – the annual meeting of the Unitarian Universalist Association – our denomination elected, for the first time, a woman president. The Reverend Susan Frederick-Gray took office on June 24. Now, it was a foregone conclusion that we would elect a woman this time, because all of the candidates running were women. That's because the UUA's bylaws were recently changed so that the elected UUA Board of Trustees would put forward two candidates to run. (It used to be that anyone could run by getting enough people to sign nomination papers. You can still run that way – in fact, one of this year's three women who ran for president *did* do it that way – but the new bylaw aims at sidestepping that awful awkward hoping that someone good will step forward. Now, the Board cultivates good candidates from the get-go.)

In this first election under the new bylaw, the UUA Board made a conscious decision to lift up two women, because women candidates in the past, no matter how qualified, have always been surpassed

by the men running against them.

Now, you may have misgivings about such a system. I know I do, because it feels just a tiny bit manipulative and contrived. But I also know how hard it is to change. Sometimes you have to *effect* a change to make a change. Sometimes you have to look around to see who is missing or what factors are lacking in your decisions, and you have to make a conscious effort to bring those people or those factors in.

Because sometimes there is a waterfall just a short distance away, and no one will ever know unless you build the trail to get there.

For me, one of the church's callings is to make the trails to the waterfalls – the waterfalls of peace and justice, of harmony and sharing, of inclusion and acceptance. And doing that means always seeking to open our eyes wider, open our hearts bigger, and open our minds bigger.

And it means following in the footsteps of courageous visionaries who clear the way for us. We need our different drummers, and we need cultivate the wisdom to follow them when their road brings us to great new beginnings. I think that's the church Augusta Jane Chapin embraced. I know that church, *this* church, the one I treasure.