

**“Olympia Brown --- Religious Innovator, or Feminist Reformer:  
Which Came First?”**

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Introduction: The General Background on Universalism and Reform Advocacy

History matters. Our history teaches us about people and events that came before us, and this inspires our own lives. Our Unitarian Universalist history also matters, inspiring us as modern people of faith. Our UU history --- in theory --- helps us avoid mistakes of the past. Our UU history helps us find connections: history is important spiritual practice.

One of the more compelling questions current in free religion is that of the relationship between our radical theology --- past and present --- and our work in the world. That is, as we engage in social and political advocacy, how are we simultaneously present as people of faith? Are we intentional about carrying particular theology or theologies with us when we engage in reform work in the world? The inverse question naturally arises: how does our work in the world influence and strengthen our theological understanding of who we are as people of faith? How do we moderns stand on the theological and reform shoulders of many who came before us? Rebecca Parker recently illustrated this question in her analysis of Universalist Hose Ballou’s 1805 *Treatise on Atonement* as an influence on our current campaign for Standing on the Side of Love.

Universalists and Reform

In considering the history of reform work as practiced by Universalists, historian Ann Lee Bressler, in *The Universalist Movement in America 1770-1880*, suggests that in many aspects of nineteenth-century reform work, Universalists were moderate reformers, in their timing in engaging in any particular reform effort as well as in the effectiveness of changes they instigated. It was largely in the area of women’s rights, asserts Bressler, that Universalists --- individually and denominationally --- were leaders. Grounded in love, hope, optimism, and equal opportunity for all, most Universalists supported women’s equal access to education, career opportunities, property ownership, and more. Bressler is firm to underline that Universalists supported not a call to the sentimental feminism with which Ann Douglas characterized liberal faith of mid-century, but a genuine expression of support for women to advance personally and professionally, certainly an inspiration for modern gender advocacy. Writes Bressler (88-91): “The denomination was the logical home for the advocates of women’s full development....The progress of women and the cause of Universalism went hand in hand.”

Cross-overs between liberal religion and women’s rights is not surprising. That the earliest women in ministry came from the same region of up-state New York as the first Women’s Rights Convention in Seneca Falls in 1848 is certainly no coincidence. Even so, the relationship between women, religion, and reform was extremely complex. Invariably women religious reformers, even in Universalism, were ‘stepping out of their place,’ (116) the theme of Susan Hill Lindley’s study of early women in ministry. Additionally, there was a distinct contingent of the women’s rights movement that was vocally anti-church, especially in the early years. Activists such as Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and even Susan B. Anthony regarded religion as one of the causes and sustainers of gender inequality. However, even the most anti-church among them accepted a renegade religion like Universalism. The denomination’s decentralized authority made forays into ordained ministry relatively easy, and exposure in Universalists pulpits helped women gain attention as public speakers. Universalists’ support of women, including into ministry, partially explains the growth in numbers in the denomination from the 1840s on. That three Universalist ministers --- Olympia Brown, Phebe Hanaford, and August Chapin --- eventually collaborated with Cady Stanton on *The Woman’s Bible* (1895), the first publication of feminist Biblical criticism, suggests some eventual coming together on some common ground on the issue of women, religion, and reform.

On multiple fronts, then, Universalist women were committed to both denominational work and women's rights. Their dual engagement offers many compelling illustrations of the topic I raised at the start of this paper: the mutual influence and relationship of liberal theology and liberals' work in the world. Especially among Universalist women ministers, suffrage advocacy in turn fed their capacity to effect reform within clerical leadership of the Universalist denomination, so that by 1920, the year of the vote, Universalists enjoyed the largest number --- approximately 110 --- of ordained women of any American denomination.

### Olympia Brown

To illustrate the connection between faith and advocacy in one person, I want to consider the life of one of the best known of our feminist reformers, Olympia Brown. We tend to know Olympia for one or two well-repeated historical sound-bites --- that she was the first American woman ordained to ministry, and that that ordination was with 'full denominational authority.' Still, we should look beyond that single event of 1863, and even beyond her sixty-three years in Universalist ministry, to appreciate the significance of her wide influence on American life. Olympia's life illustrates well the connections between faith and advocacy within one reformer, splitting her professional life as she did between service to Universalist congregations and leadership of suffrage organizations. Universalism was the logical religious home for someone like Olympia Brown: it enabled her to engage both life passions.

Somewhat surprisingly, according to her daughter Gwendolen, toward the end of her life Olympia actually questioned whether she made the right decision to divide her life work as she did. However, without doubt, Olympia Brown, recognized by historians of gender studies as much as by religious historians, inspires many in our ministry because she did have her feet in both worlds. (By the way, most of her papers reside not in the Divinity Library at Harvard University but in the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women.)

Who was Olympia Brown? Was she first a person of strong faith, or first a feminist reformer? My answer to that question is that she was both: her faith rendered soul to her reform work, and advocacy experience gave her tools to successfully institute reforms for women and men in Universalist ministry. It seems clear that she would not have had success in ministry without success in advocacy, and her advocacy without a grounding in faith would have been soul-less. In the words of historian Dana Greene (4), "In her mind there was no discontinuity between the general goals of spreading Universalist principles as a minister and the realization of a particular goal, the equality and liberty of women, through suffrage work."

Olympia's multi-faceted life parallels the lives of many other early women ministers --- Unitarians, Methodists, Congregationalists, as well as Universalists --- who were also active in the women's rights. The names of Revs. Antoinette Brown, Lydia Jenkins, Augusta Chapin, and Phebe Hanaford --- to name just a few --- also figured prominently in suffrage meetings and feminist conventions. Many of these early women ministers faced resistance even from their supporters. For example, Antoinette Brown, ordained to ministry ten years before Olympia under local polity of the Congregational Church in South Butler, New York, encountered resistance from Christians who didn't want women, and from feminists who didn't like religion. I am inspired by these many pioneers, as I pursue ministry in this modern denomination with a proud history of radical women in ministry, but a denomination with still more work to do to realize women's power on par with our male colleagues.

To illustrate how Olympia Brown's life was a total package --- faith and advocacy mutually intertwined --- I first offer an overview of her life. May the facts speak for themselves to illustrate an integrated life. Then words of Olympia herself, as well as several historians of women in ministry, substantiate further the balance of faith and advocacy in Olympia's remarkable life.

### Olympia Brown Biography

Olympia's life was a total 'loyalty to truth' --- as she called it --- manifest through religious work, women's advocacy, and of course family life. I will summarize her life events chronologically, but on the handout, I've arbitrarily categorized these for this quick survey of her two careers in the context of family life. I suggest that it was during the decade of the 1860s, that first decade of her ministry, that she experimented with how to balance dual service to Universalism and women's rights, and found it a feasible way to order her life. [I have no evidence for the following comment: I wonder if Olympia and other early women in Universalist ministry had not broken the ordination glass ceiling, would they have remained as dedicated as they did to the Universalist denomination, or would they have allied with their anti-church colleagues who decried religion's discrimination against women?]

Olympia was born in Michigan in 1835, the eldest of four children of Universalist parents. Her mother, a woman of energy and optimism, conveyed to her children Hosea Ballou's teachings of universal divine love. Her parents' belief in equal education for their three daughters and one son equipped Olympia to become a teacher by the age of fifteen. In 1854, at the age of nineteen, Olympia studied at Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in Massachusetts but found it too religiously conservative. Then from 1856-60, she attended Antioch College, founded in 1853 on the principle of equal education for women and men. Unitarian reformer Horace Mann was Antioch's president and Olympia heard lectures from the likes of Horace Greeley and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Near the end of her Antioch studies, Olympia engaged Rev. Antoinette Brown to speak at the college. Subsequently, realizing women could occupy pulpits, Olympia reported her own call to ministry. Her political advocacy also began around this time: in spring 1860 the campus was buzzing with news of the impending Civil War and she notes her first call to political involvement.

The year following graduation, 1860-61, she campaigned for property rights for women in Ohio. Perhaps realizing the potential of the pulpit to grant women public voice and also to follow her call to ministry, in spring 1861 she applied to both Meadville (Unitarian) and Canton (Universalist) theological schools, and was the first women to enroll at Canton, at St Lawrence University, in fall 1861. She graduated in July 1863, after being ordained in June by the Saint Lawrence Association of Universalists in Malone, New York. (Note that at this time, Universalists usually ordained ministers at the congregation or association level .... state and national conventions generally accepted recommendations from lower levels. In another paper, I call for a re-evaluation of this quality of 'full denominational authority' that we attribute to Olympia's ordination.) After graduation she served two churches part-time in Vermont for a few months, but resigned to return to her family in Ohio for the 1863-64 church year.

In summer 1864 she accepted her first settled ministry in Weymouth, MA. This began a twenty-year period of actively serving parish ministry and suffrage work. The years of the Weymouth ministry were happy ones: she relished the novelty of being the first woman minister. She preached two sermons a week and learned to preach off manuscript. During the Civil War, women's rights work was suspended, but then in 1866 Olympia was introduced to Anthony and Stanton in New York City at the annual Women's Rights Convention and then toured New York State with Anthony. The next year they persuaded Olympia to campaign for woman's suffrage with Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell in Kansas, where Olympia said she was introduced to hard politics. To do this work, the Weymouth congregation granted her a four-month sabbatical, suggesting how congregations also regarded gender advocacy as ministry. In 1868, wanting to separate the issue of female suffrage from that of suffrage for recently freed slaves, she founded the New England Woman Suffrage Association, and remained active in both the American Woman Suffrage Association and the National Woman Suffrage Association, both founded in 1869. Better opportunities for parish ministry seemed likely in 1870 when she accepted a call to Bridgeport, CT. In 1873, she married John Henry Willis, from the Weymouth church. Their son

John was born in 1874 and daughter Gwendolen in 1876. The Bridgeport congregation was more conservative than that in Weymouth and as Olympia's family grew, so did opposition to a minister with children. She left Bridgeport in 1876.

From ordination on, she participated fully in denominational activities. She published countless reports, essays, speeches, and editorials in denominational newspapers and journals, speaking for Universalism generally, as well as for woman's ministry. She was a colleague to many well-known reformers: the Beecher family, Frederick Douglass, Julia Ward Howe, Mary Livermore, P.T. Barnum (her parishner), and more. Olympia also mentored many other women, most famously Phebe Hanaford: Olympia offered the Hand of Fellowship in Phebe's ordination service in 1868. Universalists may have been accepting of women but still Olympia endured much negative criticism: from the fact that she did not change her name when she married, to comments about her speaking voice, to the larger issue around 1870 of a denominational backlash to the 'Woman Ministry' question. She also realized well that male ministers occupied the more prosperous Universalist pulpits.

In 1878, her family moved to Racine, Wisconsin so that Olympia could serve Church of the Good Shepherd. In Wisconsin, she continued her dual service to Universalism and women's rights. In 1884 she was elected president of the Wisconsin Suffrage Association, a position she continued for twenty-eight years. Retiring from the Racine congregation in 1887 at the age of fifty-two merely shifted the scope of her ministry entirely to suffrage. There is no evidence that she was disillusioned as a parish minister: there was just so much suffrage work to do. During the 1890s she became increasingly alienated from some other women rights advocacy and in 1892, in an attempt to keep the suffrage question from becoming a state-by-state issue, she founded the Federal Suffrage Association. Unfortunately, the following year the death of her husband required her to redirect some of her energies to running his company, the Racine Times Publishing Company. When her mother died in 1900, Olympia sold the company. That gave her freedom to return to parish ministry on an *ad hoc* basis. Re-focus on the parish was a good thing, for she continued to feel that women's rights was in a 'desert' (her word). (Stanton died in 1902 and Anthony in 1906.) Finally new leadership of Alice Paul and Lucy Burns re-energized suffrage initiatives. Olympia and Antoinette were two of only a handful of the original suffragettes alive to vote in 1920.

Her last six years, divided between Baltimore and Racine, were content years. Never one to accept status quo, and detesting growing militarism in the world, Olympia become involved in peace work. Also, around 1925 she completed the first half of an autobiography. With her daughter, she enjoyed a trip to Europe in 1926, at the age of 91. Later that year she died in Baltimore at the home of her daughter.

Her entire life, Olympia Brown was both: a person of faith, and a person of reform. It is difficult to say which came first. As Bressler (96) notes about Mary Livermore, so too with Olympia --- the work of reform was virtually identical with the work of religion.

#### Theological grounding and reform work: an integral life

In addition to these life events, the words of Olympia herself and of historians of women's ministry, further affirm this 'total life' reading that I am promoting in this paper. Future historical research on Olympia would be well served by a similar integrated approach.

Of the historical and biographical work to date, that of Dana Greene, in my view, offers the most accurate interpretations of Olympia's contributions to American life. Based on Olympia's essays and sermons in particular, Greene illustrates how Universalism grounded virtually everything that she did. Greene wrote: (8) "An understanding of Brown's indomitable will and unflagging constancy only becomes intelligible within the context of her larger world view which was

shaped by her religion. Universalism provided Brown a vision of the future, a basis for action, and an unrelenting commitment to the establishment of principle.”

In a similar way, Gwendolen saw her mother first and foremost as a person of faith. Her deep grounding in Universalist courage and hopefulness helped her mother overcome much disillusionment, in church and in suffrage work. “A liberal religion was basic,” she wrote. “Freedom of religious thought and a liberal church would supply the groundwork for all other freedoms.”

That Olympia acquired skills of persuasion from both women’s rights advocacy and theological discourse is suggested in countless documents, speeches, and essays where she argues for woman’s place: woman’s place in ministry, woman’s place in the world. For example, in a speech of 1869 before the Ministerial Union advocating ‘Woman’s Place in the Church,’ Olympia based her argument in part on feminist understanding of Jesus’ character. He (75) ‘foreshadowed a new type of manhood with moral power and spiritual discernment.’ But Olympia also claimed qualities of leadership inherent in woman. She continued (73): “Society needs woman’s influence, the church needs her. If, as some claim, she has more of intuition, more of spiritual vision, than man, the church needs that; if she is more apt to teach, more sympathetic and gentle, the church needs those qualities; and we want all these different gifts, the firmness, the decision, the power of argument, the force of logic, the pure thought which is said to characterize man, and also the spirituality, the moral force, the tact, the keenness of perception, which are usually attributed to women. If man and woman are counterparts of each other, unlike in mental capacity, and differing in their experiences, then we cannot get our greatest power or do our full work until man and woman cooperate, each supplying those qualities which are deficient in the other.”

She was impatient with male domination of ministry. (74) “Ministry today is too much composed of men who are trying to put on feminine gentleness and spirituality. We want no monstrosities in the ministry, no men with feminist souls: let us have the strongest, bravest, best thought for which the masculine mind is capable, and too the loftiest inspiration, and the clearest vision, which has been given to woman; and then, if we have sentiment, it will be genuine, healthful, life-giving.”

Even in her autobiography, written at the end of her life, she continued to lament male dominance. (43-44) “There is certainly room for women in the ministry. It is often said of a preacher, ‘He is a good preacher but no pastor. He does not call upon his people.’ This is because... the same person is not usually suited to both pastoral work and pulpit service. Many of the larger churches now have two ministers for this reason. One of these should be a woman.....But woman are not urged to enter the ministry ... Ministers are themselves largely responsible for the limited number of women who enter the ministry.”

At Phebe Hanaford’s ordination, Olympia advised her new minister colleague: (67-69) “As a woman, you stand in some sense as a representative; as one of the earliest to assume the high office of the preacher, it is yours to maintain the position in which you now stand. Remember the ... scripture: ‘Let no man despise you.’ ... Assume every day every prerogative which pertains to the minister....”

Olympia also used comparable methods of persuasion acquired from both advocacy and scriptural interpretation to argue for the church supporting women’s suffrage. “Why should the Church advocate woman’s suffrage? Because it cannot do its full work for Christ while more than half of its members have no votes and are mere silent partners. Second, because when all its members have a voice in public affairs, it will become an important factor in our national life. This will command respect .... This will add dignity to our pastors, who now share in the humiliation of woman’s disfranchisement, because their constituency is so largely

disfranchised.... The church must ask for all its members a right to cast a vote on all matters of public interest and demand for its women the character and the respect which enfranchisement alone can confer.”

Woman’s suffrage was Olympia’s main reform effort, but we cannot discuss her as a reformer without briefly also considering her advocacy for woman’s higher education. For Olympia, access to education was a moral issue because it enabled the pursuit of other reforms, and thus, she argued, education was also a theological issue. In 1874 she published an often reprinted essay in *Ladies Repository* on “The Higher Education of Women.” There she wrote: “Higher education looks to the supremacy of all that is noblest and best in human nature: it means that quickening of the moral sense, that opening of the spiritual eye which makes one not merely an efficient worker in the business of the world, but one of the immortals, a companion of the angels. In the higher education of women we seek that which shall make them noble characters.”

### Final truths

In the end, Olympia herself may have offered the best analysis of her life. Neither part --- not the minister, not the reformer --- not alone, not together --- carried the full truth. The full truth, she suggested, was beyond denominational or reform identity. It was about more than the tenants of a religion, more that the actions that secure political success. The highest religion was truth itself.

In her final sermon, “The Opening Doors,” Olympia’s vision of this higher truth had come into focus. She delivered this sermon on September 12, 1920 to the Racine congregation thirty years after she left its pastorate. This sermon followed the victory of the vote, that she devoted over sixty years of her life to achieving. Through thick and thin, she said in the sermon, the early teachings of Universalism remained with her.

More important, her life of struggle that ended in victory helped her understand Universalism as a source of higher truths. Universalism led her to something higher than religious reform or women’s rights: it led her to the Church Universal, to a realm in which there were no distinctions between religion and advocacy, between sacred and secular, between male and female, a realm committed to a higher unity. She wrote that Universalism was “the grandest system of religious truth that has ever been revealed to man. The doctrine for which the world waits. ... Every nation must learn that the people of all the nations are children of God and must all share the wealth of the world.... Universalists ... must ever teach this great lesson.”

Words of this final sermon are known to many of us, but they may take on new meanings heard in light of Olympia’s integrated life context that I hope I have adequately argued for in this paper. “Stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it. There is nothing in all the world so important to you as to be loyal to this faith which has placed before you the loftiest ideals, which has comforted you in sorrow, strengthened you for noble duty and made the world beautiful for you. Do not demand immediate results but rejoice that you are worthy to be entrusted with this great message and that you are strong enough to work for a great true principle without counting the cost. Go on finding every new applications of these truths and new enjoyments in their contemplation, always trusting in the one God which ever lives and loves.”

### Olympia’s networks

Olympia Brown’s ninety-one years of life has inspired many other women, in and out of ministry, in and out of church. How many Unitarian, Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist women stand on her shoulders? How many other denominations advanced woman’s ministry following the example of the Universalists: Unitarians, Methodist, Baptists, Congregationalists, and more. These sister changed the face of liberal church-going: by the early twentieth century the meaning of ‘church’ had come to include social reform, children’s education, pastoral care, and much more.

### Conclusion

Olympia Brown's life inspires us moderns today. Her life demonstrates what it can look like, an integration of theological grounding with work in the world, so that one's theology inform one's work, which in turn informs one's theology, and so on, and so on. Olympia's life as a woman minister in Universalism also inspire modern women ministers to celebrate our foremothers' and forefathers' many accomplishments in breaking gender barriers. Her life also inspires us to realize that there is still much more work for us today to reach full gender equity in Unitarian Universalism. Finally Olympia's life reminds us that in all this work --- for faith, for reform --- that there is something yet greater than projects, initiatives, and reform agendas. There is a higher truth, a unity amidst all our diversity, that is the ultimate calling for us trying to live lives of goodness and bring about transformation in this world.

Words of Dana Greene can sum up our view of Olympia Brown. (13): "Hers was an unbending loyalty to truth, a total dedication to living out her Universalist beliefs in the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the liberty and equality of all people. In retrospect one can see that her life was of a piece. Her early concern for the degraded condition of woman, her career as a minister, her dedication to the cause of female suffrage, and finally her commitment to curbing militarism, all spoke of her loyalty to truth. It was such loyalty which prodded her to action and gave her a vision for solace when her commitment could easily have flagged. Her life manifests the fruitfulness of religious insight in providing the goals and ideals of reform in American history and stands as a confirmation of her hope that --- in the words of Olympia's favorite quote --- 'she who works in harmony with justice is immortal.'"