

*International Women's Day—100 Years<sup>1</sup>*  
*Rev. Myke Johnson*  
*March 13, 2011*  
*Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church*

This week we are celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> International Women's Day! This week has also been a week of many tragedies, setbacks, and losses. What can we do when our hearts are heavy? We must come together to draw inspiration from being together. And perhaps we can draw some inspiration from women of the past and present as they faced the struggles of their time.

LESSON FOR ALL AGES Interview with Rev. Olympia Brown<sup>2</sup>

Rev. Myke: Good morning everyone! We have a special treat today. We have a visitor--one of our Universalist ancestors—one of the very first women ordained as a minister, in 1863. She also worked all her life to help women get equal rights. Her name was Olympia Brown, and she agreed to come to our sanctuary today so we could learn about her life and what it was like for women 100 years ago. Rev. Olympia was born in 1835 on a farm in Michigan, and lived until 1926. 100 years ago she was 76 years old. Welcome Rev. Olympia Brown!

Rev. Olympia: Thank you!

Myke: Let's sit down, shall we?

Olympia: It is wonderful to be here! Though I have to say right out that I am worried about what is happening in Wisconsin. I lived for many years in Wisconsin, you know. I am not surprised that the people have taken to the streets! Wisconsin was always a strong union state.

Myke: So when did you live in Wisconsin?

Olympia: I served the Universalist church in Racine, Wisconsin from 1878 to 1887, and then I stayed for many years after. Racine was a run-down little church when I got there—in fact, that was the only reason I could serve that church. You see, the pulpits of all the prosperous churches were already occupied by men; all the young men coming into the ministry wanted to go to those churches. When I was first ordained, I was the only woman minister in the denomination... All I could do was to take a place nobody else wanted, but there's a positive side to that. I had a chance to really make a positive change, and that was very rewarding.

Myke: Well they were lucky to have you. I understand you were a brilliant preacher. Was Racine your first church?

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2 Details of Rev. Olympia Brown's life were drawn from *Olympia Brown: The Battle for Equality* by Charlotte Coté. Details about her connection with Lillian Stevens from Elizabeth Oatley, who played the part of Rev. Brown in our skit.

Olympia: No, actually, my first church was in Weymouth, MA, in 1864. It too was a small struggling church, and had been without a minister for quite a while. I convinced the Universalist headquarters to send me there for a trial sermon, and then the congregation liked me so well they agreed to make me their minister.

Myke: So how did you decide to become a minister, when all of the other ministers were men?

Olympia: Well, first of all, my parents were Universalists. I was the oldest of 3 girls and 1 boy, and we were home-schooled when we were young. My mother, Lephia, taught me her Universalist values, plus a love of education, and a sense of my own dignity and worth as a woman.

Myke: So she helped you believe in your possibilities!

Olympia: Yes, she did. My sister and I wanted to go to college, and we went to Mount Holyoke for one year. But we were very disappointed. They put all sorts of restrictions on the women, and they preached the Calvinist doctrines about sin and damnation and an angry God. We didn't believe in that! But there was a positive side. It helped me to put into words my own Universalist beliefs. I was able to tell people that I believe in a God of Love who cares for everyone, and isn't going to send anyone to hell. Our God inspires us to work for the dignity and worth of every person.

Myke: So you were already starting to preach among your classmates!

Olympia: Well, you might say that, but they weren't listening. So I looked for a place where I could really get a full education. I went to Antioch College, and graduated in 1860. While I was there I decided to become a minister, and my parents were very supportive, so I began to look for a theological school. After many rejections—because I was a woman, of course—I was finally accepted at St. Lawrence University theological school in Canton, NY. It was quite a new college and they were accepting women.

Myke: And how was it for you?

Olympia: I had a hard time with some of the men there, but there were many more who became my friends. I knew I would have to work hard to reach my goal, so even while I was in school, I looked for opportunities to preach. I started in a small congregation during my winter break. Usually, a church would be reluctant, but they would give me one chance. Then once they had experienced my preaching, they would be enthusiastic. It was like that all through my ministry. I had to hear many people saying "no" before some people would say "yes"—for my ordination, and for the parishes I worked in. But it was worth it.

Myke: How long did you work in ministry?

Olympia: I was in three churches, for a total of over 20 years. During that time I was also working for the right of women to vote. That is called suffrage. In 1884, I became president of the Women's Suffrage Association in Wisconsin, and in 1887, I decided to devote myself full-time to women's equality. I left my role as pastor, but stayed on as a active member in my congregation. I devoted myself full-time to the ministry of social justice for women. And I kept doing that for the rest of my life.

Myke: We have many people in our church who care about social justice. Do you have any advice you can give us for today?

Olympia: Well, one thing to remember is that it takes a long time to make a change. We worked for seventy years before women won the right to vote. So "Keep at it," and don't get discouraged when things aren't moving yet. I am so thankful that I was a part of bringing new opportunities for women to live full lives. I lived a full life while I was doing it, too-it was a wonderful adventure.

I also want to thank my husband, John, and my children, and my mother, who came to live with us. She took care of the children while I worked. I couldn't have done it without their love and support. No one can do the work of justice alone. In fact, it was during this time that I met and worked with Lillian Stevens, who lived right here in Portland. She became the vice-president of the National Women's Christian Temperance Union. Our two organizations often worked together for social justice.

Myke: Well thank you Olympia! We are very glad that you worked so hard so that women could live full and equal lives. And I understand you were protesting at the White House even when you were in your eighties!

Olympia: Absolutely! In 1913 Lillian and I were both part of a march on Washington that was the biggest protest Washington has ever had. And I am headed to Wisconsin right after the service to help out over there.

Myke: Well before Rev. Olympia goes, members of the choir have a song to share, that she will recognize. It is a Universalist hymn from 1893.

("Rise Up! Rise Up! Oh Woman," 1893, by Ada Bowles/music by GJ Webb)

## SERMON

Rev. Myke Johnson

This has been a week of devastation, loss, and discouragement. We all mourn the tragedy of the earthquake in Japan, the lives lost, and destruction of people's homes and livelihood. And in our own country, I am mourning the actions of the Republican politicians in Wisconsin and Michigan. I don't usually address partisan politics in my sermons, but their behavior this week has been beyond the pale.

In case you have been hiding out from the news, a brief summary: the Republican leadership of the Wisconsin State Senate was trying to pass a budget bill stripping public employees of the right to bargain collectively through unions. For the last three weeks they couldn't get a quorum because the Democratic state senators left the state in protest. So Wednesday night, they held a closed door meeting, took out some fiscal provisions of the bill, and then decided they could pass it without a quorum. Which they did, while thousands of protestors filled the halls of the state house and the streets of Madison.

Ohio has passed a similar bill. And in Michigan, my original home state, a bill was passed that gives the governor the power to appoint fiscal managers for any local government that he determines is in financial trouble: that manager would have the power to dismiss elected officials, break contracts, and even dis-incorporate the town or city, totally circumventing the democratic process. All this on the heels of a budget bill that cuts taxes for corporations while raising them for senior citizens and poor people.

The good news is that people have taken to the streets. Thousands upon thousands of them. There haven't been these kind of protests by union workers and their allies for many many years. Teachers, firefighters, ordinary folks are showing up to make their voices heard. So that gives me some hope.

But deep in my heart I feel so angry about all of this. And the sheer weight of it—the greed, the power grab, the assault on ordinary people's lives—is a heavy burden on my heart. It is not that I am completely surprised. I have been talking for a while about how our economy can't keep on as it is going. The divide between rich and poor is growing ever wider. And the very basis of our economy is reaching its limits—we can't keep growing and growing on an earth with natural limits. Our economy is not sustainable. A system that is reaching its limits is going to be chaotic. So the fact that conflicts are breaking out should not be a surprise.

But nonetheless, there is a heaviness I feel that has made it hard to write or find inspiration. It finally came to me that all I could do is share what is in my heart. To share this grief and this anger and this weariness. Because weariness articulated becomes somewhat more bearable after all.

Originally, I was planning to talk about some of the issues that women are facing in our country and around the globe. But today, it would seem too heavy to bring even one more struggle to our table. Perhaps it is enough to notice that the majority of teachers are women—that many government workers are women—and so when we talk about reducing teacher pensions, or worker benefits or salaries, we are talking about the lives of working women and their families.

In the midst of this discouraging time, I want to call to mind some amazing women who are bringing forth beautiful possibilities even so. I want to remember that change is born in the midst of chaos, from creativity and the capacity to think outside the box. Just as our foremother Olympia Brown thought outside the box when she determined to become a minister, and then to work for the vote for women. Thinking outside the box is not so easy when day to day life is filled with all the things we do just to get by, to pay the bills, and take care of our families. And yet it was women in the most difficult straits, who were able "to make a way out of no way."<sup>3</sup> It helps me to expand my imagination, just to hear about what these women are doing.

The first woman I am thinking about is Dr. Vandana Shiva of India. A scientist, activist and writer, she was educated as a physicist, but left academia because of the way that science and technology were serving the interests of the powerful. She founded the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology, which has been working with poor farmers in India to create sustainable, multi-crop, small farm agriculture as an alternative to industrialized agriculture.<sup>4</sup> Oxfam International notes that women produce more than half of the food grown in the world, yet the system is stacked against them.<sup>5</sup>

The so-called *Green Revolution* in India was a disaster. It brought mono-crop, oil dependent, agribusiness which grew products for international trade rather than local consumption, forced the people off their land, and depleted the soil. Dr. Shiva has been working with local farmers to protect biodiversity, and promote organic gardening. She has also been active in the effort to protect the rights of farmers to grow their own seeds, against the increased global corporation patenting of seeds, and development of seeds that self-destruct and do not reproduce themselves.

When I think about Dr. Vandana Shiva, I think about how all of us who plant small gardens are doing something for food resilience and biodiversity—especially when we help to preserve heirloom seed varieties. Can you imagine it? What if every family had a small food garden? In India, Dr. Shiva's organization is helping to create markets for farmers and promoting tasty, healthy, high quality food for consumers. They have connected the seed to the kitchen, biodiversity to gastronomy, and joined hands with the Slow Food movement to celebrate the quality and cultural diversity of their food.

She writes: "The future of our world depends on how we steward our land, soil, water, and seeds, and pass them on to future generations." When the people start growing the food we need, or when we buy food from farmer's markets and local stores, the power of the agribusiness industry is undermined. Change begins to happen in such a system, by the cumulative effect of these many small actions. It is beautiful and possible.

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3 This phrase comes from the resilience and strength of African American women.

4 <http://www.vandanashiva.org/>

5 <http://www.oxfam.org/en/iwday>

On another continent, I am inspired by the work of Dr. Wangari Maathai of Kenya. In 1976 she began a movement with women in Kenya to plant trees in order to conserve the environment and improve their quality of life. The country had been deforested by colonization. Trees upheld the fertility of the soil, and the preservation of streams and springs, and were needed for food and firewood. The Green Belt Movement has planted more than 45 million trees, and it also has empowered the women and their communities to stand up for their rights, to free political prisoners, and broaden democracy in Kenya.<sup>6</sup>

During many years, Dr. Maathai was derided for her work—her husband divorced her, she lost her university job and housing, she was jailed, beaten, and threatened with death for her protests of the government in power. But she kept going forward with her vision. In December 2002, she was elected to Kenya's parliament with an overwhelming 98 percent of the vote. In 2004, she received the Nobel Peace Prize; since then, she has used that celebrity to work around the world on environmental and justice issues.

Dr. Maathai's work shows us once again how many people taking small actions in the service of a vision can create big changes. There is a parable she heard on a trip to Japan in 2005, and then retold many times: "A big fire was destroying the forest. All the animals fled, except the hummingbird. It flew to the river, picked up one drop of water in its tiny beak, flew back, and poured that drop on the fire. Again and again it returned to the river, each time scooping up a single drop and pouring it on the fire. The other animals watched from the far shore, laughing and mocking. The harder they laughed, the harder the hummingbird worked. 'Just what do you think you're doing?' the animals asked. Without stopping her work, she answered calmly, 'I'm doing what I can.' That's all any of us can do: what we can," Maathai says.<sup>7</sup>

Sometimes all the bad news can distract us from holding fast to the work we *can* do. The bad news can distract us from our visions of how we hope the world might be. We can get overloaded by the media reports on so much suffering around the world, and become immobilized by our compassion. We must not forget that each one of us has a tiny bit of water to offer those who are suffering nearby. Each one of us can plant some seed, or tend a tree; these life-giving actions feed our souls as well as our bodies.

There is one more woman I would like to remember today. She's not famous or world renowned. On a very personal note, Margy and I got a call on Friday to tell us that Margy's closest friend Maureen had died suddenly in her sleep. We have felt devastated by this loss, and our house has been full of grief. We are going to Boston tomorrow to help prepare a memorial.

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6 <http://greenbeltmovement.org/index.php>

7 <http://greenbeltmovement.org/a.php?id=114>, "Force of Nature," by Judith Stone, *O magazine*, May 12, 2005

But today I am remembering that Maureen Ann McCarthy was also a woman who lived outside the box. She was one of the very few women to work in the male-dominated trades on the railroad. That was how she and Margy met each other—they were both working as carmen at the Boston & Maine Railroad in the late 1970's. Their job included welding, carpentry, sheet metal and brake work, driving fork lifts, and inspecting both freight and passenger cars. They suffered discrimination and harassment from many of the men with whom they worked. But they helped to break down doors and change perceptions about women in the trades. Maureen had a great sense of humor, a heart full of compassion, and an irrepressible spirit.<sup>8</sup>

You won't ever read about it in a history book... but that is how change happens too. In quiet ways all over the world, there are many women, and men, who take a risk to do something they believe in. There are setbacks and defeats, of course. But sometimes there are successes when we least expect it. When we join dream to dream, and risk to risk, and action to action, a beautiful shift begins to take place.

So let us keep dreaming, and risking, and acting, with courage and boldness in our lives. Blessed be...

#### HYMN

And now let us join in our final hymn, on the insert in your program.

This hymn is a Universalist Hymn published in 1917, and I chose it because it shows how our Universalist ancestors were already moving beyond gender stereotypes in their understanding of God, and finding strength for the work of justice. This hymn was probably sung by Rev. Olympia Brown. In 1917 she was 82 years old and was protesting at the white house in support of the vote for women. They finally won the vote in 1919. We can be proud of our Universalist ancestors. ("The Motherhood of God," by Julian S. Cutler, music by John Zundel)

#### CLOSING WORDS

Our closing words were preached by Rev. Olympia Brown in Racine Wisconsin<sup>9</sup>, shortly after the passage of the Constitutional amendment acknowledging women's right to vote.<sup>10</sup> Through all her work, she was sustained and empowered by her Universalist faith. She said:

"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, that you are strong enough to work for a great true principle without counting the cost."

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<sup>8</sup> These details from my partner Margy Dowzer.

<sup>9</sup> #569 in *Singing the Living Tradition*

<sup>10</sup> Details of the occasion learned from a sermon by Dorothy Emerson, <http://www.frsuu.org/o-sermon-emerson.htm>