



Reading

“A New Testament Woman” 1893 World’s Parliament of Religions, Rev. Marion Murdoch 1848-1943.

Rev. Marion Murdoch, a Unitarian minister ordained in 1885, was part of the Iowa Sisterhood. Life was rough in Iowa and the pay was poor. When the American Unitarian Association sent in male ministers from the east, they didn’t last long. Western women jumped at the opportunity to fill the empty pulpits. While there was gratitude for their service, many male leaders were very uncomfortable with them. This is an excerpt from a sermon Marion Murdoch delivered in 1893. She begins with a scripture passage from Paul’s epistle to the Romans:

Romans 16:1-2. “I commend to you our sister Phebe, who is a deacon of the church... that you receive her in the Lord as is fitting for the saints, and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a benefactor of many, and of myself as well.”

Paul’s reputation as an opponent of the public work of women is well known. For many centuries he has been considered as the chief opposer of any activity of women in the churches. But here ... we notice a digression from the general doctrines of Paul. By Paul’s own statement, Phebe was a deaconess of Paul’s church in Cenchrea.

It might be interesting to ask ourselves the question, ‘What... overcame this prejudice that he gave her a hearty testimonial?’ It is evident that notwithstanding all the obstacles which custom had placed about her, she had been actively at work. It is doubtful whether she even asked if popular opinion would permit her service. She was, we may imagine, full of enthusiasm for the faith, eager to lend a hand in the direction in which she thought her service was most needed. Knowing the prejudice of her time, she doubtless acted in advance of custom rather than in defiance of it. She was wise enough to know that if she quietly made herself useful and necessary, custom would stand back and Paul would come forward and recognize her.

Yet, notwithstanding [her work], and Paul’s plain encouragement of it, the letter of his hand was the rule of the churches for many centuries, and it forbade the sisters from uttering their moral or religious word or doing public service of any sort. But here and there arose the Phebes who asked no favors of custom but insisted on giving the service they could with such



zeal and spirit that people forgot there was sex in sainthood and whispered that perhaps they also were called of God.

But not until the inauguration of a radically new movement in religion were the official barriers in some degree removed. Not until the emphasis was put upon that divine love of God which would save all creatures, upon that mother heart of Deity which would enfold all its children; not until the emphasis was put on the spirit rather than the letter of the Bible and upon the free rather than the restricted revelations of God, and upon the Holy Spirit in the human soul, without regard to sex or time or place; not until all this ... did the Phebes ask or receive official recognition in the ministry. .. Our modern Pauls are now gladly ordaining them, and the brethren are receiving them. Now may they also be the glory of God and partakers of the Spirit ; now may the words of Joel be at last fulfilled: “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy”

God is our Infinite Mother. She will hold us in her arms of blessedness and beauty forever and ever.

Sermon

There are times when change happens like a sledge hammer. You fight and fight and fight, gaining ground inch by inch by inch. It’s an exhausting way to make change happen, but sometimes it’s what you need to do. There are other times when change happens in a much more subtle quieter way. You take on the appearance of normalcy while you move into possibilities that seem abnormal. Change happens silently and before you know it, nothing can ever be the same again. This is that kind of story.

When Louisa Hunt Safford watched her daughter Mary play on the banks of the powerful Mississippi River, it wasn’t just the river that made her nervous. It was the fact that her daughter wanted to play nothing but church. Mary’s favorite game involved dragging her father and mother to the river, sitting them down, and preaching for them. Her hands waved and her little voice rose and fell just like the preacher she listened to every Sunday in their Presbyterian church in Hamilton Illinois. Louisa tried not to be critical of her daughter. This was, after all, 1850. These were modern times. Shouldn’t women be able to do more than raise children? And what harm could come by indulging her? She was just a child. But really, Louisa wanted her daughter to have a life as free from difficulty as possible. She undoubtedly knew that the women’s suffrage movement was well underway. Many considered the suffragettes a laughing stock. Most thought that giving women the right to vote was against the natural order of things. Women belonged in the private world of the



home, not the public world of government and business, and the consequences for women who crossed that line were harsh. What was more public than ministry? She hoped Mary would grow out of the fantasy and be content to work in the church kitchen and pray from the pew.

And besides, Louisa had her husband to worry about. Stephen had faced church council more than once defending himself against charges of heresy. He believed that the Bible was not the literal truth of God. He welcomed Darwin’s theory of evolution as a wonderful opportunity to bring science and faith together. Stephen planted in his little girl the spirit of questioning and progressive thought. Although he died when Mary was 9, his library of radical writings deeply influenced her.

As you can probably imagine, most people did not understand Mary. But one girl, Eleanor Gordon, couldn’t stay away. They became best friends. As they grew into young women, Mary and Elenor realized they were not meant to be married to men and promised each other they would never part. So began a union that had its ups and downs, not unlike a marriage, even suffering a divorce like separation in later years. But as young women they lived as one, and although family circumstances made it impossible for either to go to college, they self-educated and got involved in progressive life in Hamilton. In fact, they were the driving force for the establishment of liberal community in their town.

It’s hard for us to imagine what life was like back then. This was the frontier. Life was rough, difficult, unpredictable. As populations grew and land became scarce, settlers pushed west into Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, Missouri, Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska, the Dakotas. . How many of you know the series Little House on the Prairie? This is the story of the mid-west, of pioneer families pushing the frontier in search of land. It’s also a story of church expansion. Every church knew that westward expansion meant church growth. You had dislocated people, new towns, and a rough undeveloped culture. It was church pay dirt. The Presbyterians, the Methodists, the Baptists, even those stodgy scotch sipping Episcopalians wanted a piece of the action.

So did the Unitarians. The American Unitarian Association established the Western Conference and sent ministers from the east to start new congregations in the wild west. It would be an understatement to say that they failed miserably. Eastern Unitarian ministers were embarrassingly unsuited to evangelism, considering it beneath them. They tended to be somewhat upper crust, and when faced with rugged conditions, rough culture, and poor pay, those poor things crumpled like paper dolls in a rainstorm! Their Boston style ministry was totally out of place. They considered writing and preaching their main job. Their sermons were intellectual, unemotional, very long, and assumed a highly educated audience. When you weren’t studying or preaching, you hung out with other ministers in book filled studies with plenty of



alcohol. All of this, the preaching, the studying, the old boys club, and the churches they served, were held together by years of tradition.

In the west, that tradition didn't exist. New social connections were built from scratch. People came to church looking not just for a sermon, but for a sense of belonging. They came because they were lonely and worn out by frontier living. These eastern ministers didn't understand that. By the 1870s, Jenkin Lloyd Jones, secretary of the Western Conference, realized that Western church planting had failed. Few eastern ministers lasted more than a year. He tried getting western ministers to go to these frontier churches, but they preferred cities like St. Louis and Chicago and their financially stable churches. They didn't want the struggle of frontier living.

And then, Jones met Mary Safford and Elenor Gordon. By now Mary was in her early 20s and still, all she wanted to do was be a minister. Jones was dealing with a church in Humboldt Iowa that was about to close. He saw Mary's enthusiasm, her ability to build liberal community. Mary and Elenor understood frontier life and liberal religious theology. Mary was an excellent speaker and Elenor could teach like nobody's business. He realized it was super non-traditional, but Jones had a strong wife and understood in a way that few men did that women could be much more than society let them. He invited Mary to Humboldt to be the minister. She didn't blink at the pay. He arranged for Elenor to be Humboldt's school principal.

And this is what they did. They worked 70 hour weeks starting ladies groups and Sunday school, and Bible study classes. Elenor served the school by day and the church by night. Mary spent her weekdays visiting families, and offering counsel to the sick and troubled, and organizing organizing organizing. She raised money. She visited every family that moved into the area, carrying with her Unitarian literature and an invitation to come to church. She spent Saturday night writing her sermon. Mary's sermons were incredible. They were down to earth and inspiring. She took tired Bible verses and reinterpreted them and made them feel alive and brand new. God had never felt so real, or so loving. The crowds came first for the novelty of a woman minister, they stayed because she was good. She spoke to them not at them. Soon attendance was over 300 a Sunday.

Jenkin Lloyd Jones was ecstatic. Mary and Elenor had succeeded where so many failed. Were there other women waiting in the wings? When word got out about Mary and Elenor's success, women came out of the woodwork as if they had been waiting for this opportunity all along. They contacted Jenkin Lloyd Jones. They showed up in Humboldt. They showed up at Meadville Lombard Seminary. Mary and Elenor took on students and got them their own churches. This growing group of women ministers, who called themselves the Iowa Sisterhood, started new churches and saved churches that eastern male ministers had driven into



the ground. And then they got to work on the conference. Women secured voting rights at Western Conference meetings. They took over the evangelizing department and worked on Sunday school curriculum development. The Western Conference became the most successful conference in the country and it was almost completely run by women.

And they did this all in the context of an incredible theology that they developed to help to make sense of what they were doing in these non-traditional roles. They made the abnormal normal in a most gentle way and this theology has deeply affected Unitarian Universalist congregations to this day. You know how I started this sermon by saying that there is change that is forced, and there is change that slips in so silently that you hardly notice it? Well, the Iowa Sisterhood was the kind of change that slipped in so silently that once you noticed it nothing could be the same again. You heard some of this in our reading from Marion Murdoch, who was a student of Mary Safford and succeeded her in Humboldt. What these women did was wrap themselves in the feminine. They didn't try to convince anyone that they could do what men could do better. They didn't loudly push. They'd seen the suffragettes try that and fail. They just silently walked over the boundaries and said they were doing this work in the fullness of their womanhood. Mary Safford, for instance, presented herself as a religious housewife taking care of her religious home. The parishioners were her children and her sermons were a way of teaching her children not unlike a mother would sit her children down in the kitchen and teach them the ways of life. These women ministers took care to present themselves as femininely as possible in dress and behavior because they were all too aware that they faced ridicule and shame and the ever present danger of not being taken seriously. So even though they did what male ministers did, and in this case did it better, they often said they had no desire to move into male territory, but rather to fully live the female. They disarmed many who might have criticized them and in the process they dramatically changed the way we understand ministry and church. Ministry was no longer simply about preaching, it was about building community. They moved ministry away from the lone leader model and into shared ministry that empowered the whole church. Not that they didn't claim their authority. They didn't outright fight for it. Ministers like Mary Safford just acted like they already had it.

So when you look at this church today, and all the ministries we have – hospitality, pastoral care, covenant groups, religious education, social events, even the way we raise money – our way of doing church as community started with the Iowa Sisterhood. How often do you hear this called our religious home? That's how many of you are thinking of this place as you decide what your pledge will be for the coming year. This started with Mary and Elenor heading to the Iowa frontier and creating a church that helped people find meaning, purpose and a place to call their own. Church was no longer just about ideas, it was about life and love and relationships.



“The Iowa Sisterhood”
Rev. Krista Taves
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Emerson UU Chapel, Ellisville MO

Unfortunately, the story of the Iowa Sisterhood ends badly. They were so successful that male ministers suddenly found these churches very desirable. The east had always found the success of these women a deep embarrassment, and when the American Unitarian Association found a way to displace them with male ministers, they did. By World War I, the Iowa Sisterhood had dissolved and it would be another 50 or 60 years, when the women’s movement broke into North America, before women would again move into the ranks of Unitarian ministry.

But the impact of the Sisterhood did not die. Our religious communities forever changed how they understood themselves. They were places of friendship, fellowship, community, encouragement, and the grassroots of change and justice.

May it always be so. Amen and blessed