

“The Love Life of Unitarian Universalists”

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First Parish in Needham

Reading: “Fall of the Evening Star” by Kenneth Patchen

<p>Speak softly; sun going down Out of sight. Come near me now.</p> <p>Dear dying fall of wings as birds Complain against the gathering dark . . .</p> <p>Exaggerate the green blood in grass; The music of leaves scraping space;</p> <p>Multiply the stillness by one sound; By one syllable of your name . . .</p>	<p>And all that is little is soon giant, All that is rare grows in common beauty</p> <p>To rest with my mouth on your mouth As somewhere a star falls</p> <p>And the earth takes it softly, in natural love . . . Exactly as we take each other . . . and go to sleep.</p>
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Reading: From *Prophetic Sisterhood* by Cynthia Grant Tucker

Our next reading comes from a biography of several women ministers who lived at the end of the nineteenth century. They became ministers at a time when women were expected to live “lives of quiet desperation” in the home.

Their biographer writes: “In the judgment of [these women ministers], the female pastor was best off avoiding marriage entirely and not inviting its conflicts and disappointments. Love had its price in any committed relationship . . . but, given the usual structure of heterosexual partnerships, the married minister was likely to have extraordinary problems. In explaining why they themselves chose not to marry, they cited competing demands of homes and congregations and spoke skeptically about the commitment of women who split their attention as if they had part-time jobs. Both occupations . . . were too sacred to be shortchanged in this way, and any woman who was fit for the pastor’s profession should understand this. . . .

“[And yet, these women pastors] traveled together as friends and colleagues, nursed each other through illnesses, pooled their skills to revive failing congregations, and marched side by side for suffrage. At the end, when death divided them, they wrote their sisters’ memorials and bravely delivered the benedictions.”

Last week I told someone that my sermon today would be the *Desperate Housewives* version of Unitarian Universalist history. That being said, I think it is only appropriate that I start with a story from the popular television show *Desperate Housewives*. Actually, a First Parish person—who I think enjoys silly TV shows as much as I do—helped me remember this anecdote.

In this episode, Lynette, a mother with four young children, is struggling with breast cancer. Her friend Bree agrees to take her to church, which viewers realize is a rather conservative Presbyterian congregation. In the middle of the service, Lynette raises her hand. She shouts to the minister: “Why do bad things happen to good people?” Why would God take away a mother of four young children? The scene ends with Bree counseling Lynette that she may want to try some other congregations in the area, like the local Unitarian Universalist church that allows that kind of questioning. Apparently “anything goes” there.

Don’t get any ideas. We can have a discussion during coffee hour, but I kindly ask that you refrain from hand raising during the service, please!

Aside from the hand raising, I think that this rather trivial TV moment actually is quite poignant. When I was working as a chaplain last summer, I sat with people who had similar questions. A man who was losing his wife to a rare disease. A mother whose daughter was riding a bike when she was hit by a car, putting her into a coma. A wife whose husband was burned beyond all recognition in a fire. What does this mean? Where was God in this? Why would this happen to someone who was loved so dearly?

These are the smaller questions that do not often make it into our history books. In fact, I have sometimes had the impression that many Unitarian Universalists think that our history can be summed up as “such and such believed this, wrote this, and founded

this.” That is the language of history; many books about our past are written in this voice. But our spiritual journeys are formed in the crucible of our personal lives. Theology and action are shaped by love and loss, joy and tragedy in our private moments. Like Lynette from *Desperate Housewives*, we show up at church—ready to raise our hands or not—with deeply theological questions that are formed by our personal lives. These questions about God and life intersect with the bliss and the pain of loving. Those smaller moments that are more quiet and often ignored are the ones that I want to look at today.

Mary Safford and Eleanor Gordon grew up in the mid-nineteenth century on the Western frontier of Illinois.¹ Their families embodied a forgotten experience of the frontier, which is religious radicalism. Eleanor had an uncle who was a self-described spiritualist, another who called himself “a radical Unitarian,” and an aunt who called herself a “Channing Unitarian.” Many do not realize that the frontier was full of pockets of liberals and radicals; Eleanor’s family experience was not at all uncommon.

Eleanor and Mary grew up at a time when women had one role prescribed to them: being in the home. Even amongst their liberal family members, this is what was expected of them. But the two women hatched different plans. As they came of age, they foreswore marriage. They promised that they would stay together and support each other for the rest of their lives.

And Mary announced that she was going to attempt the impossible. She was going to become a minister.

¹ For more on the Iowa Sisterhood, please see Cynthia Grant Tucker’s *Prophetic Sisterhood: Liberal Women Ministers of the Frontier, 1880-1930*.

Now at the time Mary announced this, it might have been similar to announcing that she was going to sprout wings and fly to mars. This simply was not expected and it was not done. However, the Unitarians at the time were failing miserably with convincing their male Harvard graduates to leave for these Western outposts. What was worse, these young Bostonian men had no idea about the needs of the frontier communities. So the leaders of the Western Conference of Unitarians thought, “What do we have to lose?” They gave Mary her first church in Humbolt, Iowa, for a wage far beneath that of her male contemporaries. Eleanor moved with Mary and took up the position of principal of the local school.

Little could the Unitarians have anticipated, Mary was not good at what she did. She was extraordinary. She was better at preaching, organizing, and attracting members than many of her male colleagues. She and Eleanor turned the church in Humbolt into a bastion of religious liberalism before they moved on to do the same in other frontier communities.

Mary and Eleanor were a team, a pair. They swore that they were chaste their entire lives, and never admitted to having a romantic relationship with one another. But they were clearly in love with each other. When they faced the scorn of family members for refusing marriage, they had each other. When they faced the disdain of a society that never heard of a female minister before, they were there for each other. They took care of one another when they were sick. They celebrated the joys of their accomplishments together. The intensely lonely work of being a minister on the frontier was eased by their companionship.

Mary and Eleanor were trailblazers. But other women, equally extraordinary, quickly followed suit. To accomplish their work, these women also often worked in

pairs, refusing to marry. They would take in younger talented women and prepare them to be future ministers. They formed a tight-knit group known as the Iowa Sisterhood, where they supported one another emotionally and financially. Their love lives were extended across a network of other women, a network that allowed them to make a way where there was no way. They became family to one another, a family that allowed them to pursue work the world had never seen before.

John Murray was raised in eighteenth-century Ireland by strictly Calvinist parents.² Accounts that Murray gave of his childhood are quite dreadful. He was not allowed to play, laugh, or smile for fear of punishment from his father. Any expression of joy meant that one was not contemplating with all seriousness the coming of the next world. The orthodoxy of his time understood human beings to be elected before their birth either to heaven or to hell. There was nothing that a person could do to change his or her fate. Because Murray enjoyed certain parts of growing up and being alive, he believed that he was damned to hell for most his childhood and young adulthood.

After John's father died, he took off to England. There he fell in love with a young woman named Eliza Neale. Here's where the *Desperate Housewives*-style melodrama starts. Eliza's grandfather thought John was a vagrant ne'er-do-well. There was no way that his granddaughter was going to run off with this Murray guy. So he devised all kinds of schemes to thwart John's affections. He sent the lovesick Calvinist fake letters supposedly signed by Eliza, telling John that she wasn't interested so he

² For more on John Murray, please see Clarence Skinner and Alfred Cole's *Hell's Ramparts Fell: The Life of John Murray*.

should buzz off. John would sometimes stand outside Eliza's house all night hoping to get a glimpse of his loved one. Her grandfather had him arrested.

Six months later, Eliza came of age. She took off with John, prompting her grandfather to tear up his will and disinherit her. Penniless but determined, the two moved in with one of John's relatives. They started a business. They got on their feet. According to his biographers, John had never been happier. It was during this time that John and Eliza began to think more deeply about the religion they had grown up with. They questioned whether they were predestined for hell. In fact, after meeting a man named James Rely, they questioned whether anyone was destined to eternal punishment in hell. They slowly made their way to Universalism, believing that God would save all of his children before all was said and done.

John and Eliza did not live happily ever after. They had a son who died before he was one year old. Eliza was beside herself with despair. She slipped into a period of despondency. Her health quickly declined, and not long after she died. John was left alone, abandoned—those he loved the most were dead. Life as he knew it was over. Believing that England had nothing left to offer him, John decided to pack his things and move to America, the New World.

For anyone who has experienced a terrible loss, the feeling of being alone is one of the most overwhelming and terrifying. The lives of the people that we love are stitched intimately into our own. When those stitches are ripped out, the isolation that we experience is inconsolable. It's an abandonment that strikes us to the depths of our soul. I can only imagine the long boat ride to America, with the loss of John's wife and son weighing heavily on his mind. He was suspended just above the depths, between his past

and his future. He had nothing to think of but all that he had lost. And perhaps the glimmer of some future possibility that he could not imagine.

John's boat had to stop prematurely in Philadelphia before it left for New York. The captain said that, as soon as the wind would change, they could finish the journey. In the meantime, John met a man named Thomas Potter. This farmer had built a chapel on his land, praying for years that a preacher would come to fill the pulpit. The moment he saw John Murray, he insisted that John was the preacher sent by God. John was skeptical. He told Potter that if the wind did not change, he would preach that Sunday. The wind did not change. After that first sermon, John went on to become the celebrated preacher of Universalism.

Some people believe that the miracle in this story is that the wind did not change, allowing John to preach for the first time in America. I think that the miracle was that there was a community waiting to embrace John and his message in his darkest moments. I think that the miracle was that John was able to hold on to a message of God's love even after he was abandoned by the people that he loved most. John felt that he had been caught as he was falling into his deepest moments of despair. From this experience he would come to preach his message of Universal salvation that would eventually change the face of American religion.

In our reading for this morning, Kenneth Patchen writes about "the dying fall of wings as birds / complain against the gathering dark." Sometimes this gathering dark is what stands against the love lives of Unitarian Universalists. It is a world that struggles to quiet the message and the work that our forebears sought to embody with their lives. Their loved ones, in these moments, gave support, hope, and strength in dark times.

At other moments, this gathering dark comes from within those love lives. It is the death of the ones that we love, or the breakup of a marriage, or any number of little tragedies that afflict us and those close to us. It would be impossible to name one way that our love lives impact our words and actions in the world. There are as many messages as there are ways to love.

Indeed, there are several stories that come to mind when I think about the love lives of Unitarian Universalists. Today is Emerson's 205th birthday. As many of you know, his first wife died when Emerson was only in his twenties. Charles Dall, the former minister at First Parish in Needham, took off to India on Unitarian missionary work. His wife, Caroline, was apparently happy to see him go. They never divorced, but they saw each other no more than a few times before they both died. And then there is the inspiring story of the Sharps, who left together for Nazi territory. Together they created an underground Unitarian operation that saved Jewish children and adults from certain death in National Socialist hands.

When Lynette from *Desperate Housewives* raised her hand in church to ask why bad things happen to good people, her question only made sense in the context of her personal struggle with cancer. So it is with the patchwork of experiences that are the questions, answers, words, and deeds of Unitarian Universalists. These are deeply impacted by the quiet moments in our personal histories, by whom we have loved and whom we have lost. These are the stories that are often forgotten with the passage of time, but that are just as important as what was believed, written, and founded.