

**A sermon by Karen L. Esterl
Delivered on Association Sunday at
The First Existentialist Congregation of Atlanta**

So last year around this time, I spoke on the first Association Sunday about what it is and why we're involved. The day provides us an opportunity to explore our connection to other congregations across the United States (and even some in other countries) that have chosen to belong to the Unitarian Universalist Association.

That day, one year ago, holds a special place in my heart because that day Laura Arnold came to First E. I knew Laura from work, but we had never really communicated outside of the office. But she came to the service because she knew I was speaking, and we went out to brunch with some other folks afterward. And that night she sent me an email, which said this: "Question: How do you address God?" Yep, that was the whole email. This query led to conversation that led to spending lots of time together that led to dating that led to where we are now: in a happy, committed relationship. So, yeah, I've got a soft spot for Association Sunday. :-)

Congregations that "officially" participate in Association Sunday hold a special collection to raise funds so as to bring together many congregations' resources for greater effect. Worry not: we are not participating to that extent! But there are many congregations that are. As of October 7th, 512 congregations signed up to affirm our common bonds as an entire family of congregations.

Last year, Association Sunday raised over \$1.4 million to support efforts to Grow Our Numbers, including the initiation of the UUA's first national marketing campaign in over 50 years.

When I was at the General Assembly this summer, the Rev. William Sinkford, then the UUA president, talked about a successful ad campaign in *Time* magazine. *Time* surveyed its readers and found that the ad was the third most remembered of all the ads in the issue in which it appeared.

Nurture Your Spirit, Help Heal Our World

MY GOD IS BETTER THAN YOUR GOD.

Is this any way to talk about religion? Maybe you yearn for an open-minded, spiritual community where people respect each other's beliefs and worship together as one faith. Where no one's idea of God is better than another's. Welcome to Unitarian Universalism.



UUA.org/welcome

Over 1,000 congregations nationwide. We invite you to join us.

FREE DVD Offer!

For an introduction to Unitarian Universalism, visit UUA.org/DVD and request your FREE copy of the 30-minute DVD *Voices of a Liberal Faith*.

(while supplies last)



Contributions this year will help to "Grow Our Spirit" by supporting programs for lay theological education and excellence in ministry.

Though we're not taking up any extra collections, we *are* taking time to explore Unitarian Universalism. Last year I gave an overview of the tradition, so I'm not going to repeat that. Instead this year I'm going to focus on a particular Universalist preacher, Olympia Brown.

Olympia Brown is very cool, in my opinion, for an abundance of reasons:

1. She was the first woman to receive a degree from a regularly established theological school in the U.S.
2. She was the first woman to achieve full ministerial standing recognized by a denomination in the U.S. (though Antoinette Brown was previously ordained with lesser standing).
3. When she married John Henry Willis, she kept her maiden name. . .in 1873!
4. She was one of very few of the *original* suffragists who actually got to vote in the 1920 presidential election (when she was **85**).

Now that I've given a brief review of why she's awesome and why we should care about her, I'm going to explore more deeply her life, opinions, and work.

(I should also mention that I was having difficulty deciding on a title for today's talk though I knew I wanted to do something alliterative. I could get as far as "Wise Women Who," but I couldn't figure out the rest. My partner, Laura, helped me come up with the, "Wouldn't Wait." Just wanted to give appropriate credit! ☺)

"The ministry was the first objective of her life," wrote her daughter, Gwendolen Brown Willis, "since in her youthful enthusiasm she believed that freedom of religious thought and a liberal church would supply the groundwork for all other freedoms. Her difficulties and disillusionments in this field were numerous. That she could rise superior to such difficulties and disillusionments was the consequence of the hopefulness and courage with which she was richly endowed."*

Though she was a college graduate, Olympia was denied entrance to several theological schools. The trustees at the Unitarian School of Meadville, Pennsylvania, for example, "thought it would be too great an experiment" to admit a woman.* Oberlin was willing to admit her but told her she couldn't participate in the public exercises. She finally got into the Universalist Divinity School at St. Lawrence University, whose president, Ebenezer Fisher, wrote a letter of acceptance meant to dissuade her from accepting the acceptance, saying that he "'did not think women were called to the ministry. But I leave that between you and the **Great Head** of the **Church.**' This, Olympia thought, 'was exactly where it should be left. But when I arrived, I was told I had not been expected and that Mr. Fisher had said I would not come as he had written so discouragingly to me. I had supposed his discouragement was my encouragement.'"* (bold added)

After completing her degree, she convinced the Universalist denomination to ordain her. At this time Unitarianism and Universalism were two separate denominations. Universalism's primary tenet was that an all-loving God would eventually save everyone, thus Universalists rejected belief in an eternal hell. When Olympia was ordained by this denomination in June 1863, Dr. Fisher—remember him? the guy who said he didn't believe women were called to the ministry?—participated in the ceremony.

Olympia became a full-time Universalist minister in Weymouth Landing, Massachusetts.

I think it's interesting that when Olympia later decided to marry, her mother and her friends advised her not to because they feared it would interfere with her ministerial career. Even today the likelihood of a mother providing more support for her daughter's career than her daughter's becoming married seems slim to me! Olympia must not only have been a remarkable woman herself but also have been surrounded by other remarkable women, like her mother. Despite her advisors' objections, however, Olympia did marry John Henry Willis, and the marriage fortunately was a help, not a hindrance, because he was fully supportive of her work as a minister.

This is not to say that she didn't encounter difficulties as a married woman attempting to balance work and family. For instance, when she was on maternity leave with her first child, a faction at the church where she was then minister in Bridgeport, Connecticut, began agitating for a male minister. "As she writes in her autobiography: 'although (or because) my parish gave me a vote of endorsement passed by a large majority, these enemies continued....calling in ministers from neighboring churches...promulgating the doctrine, "what you need here is a good man."'"*

She ultimately had a successful career as a minister, leaving Bridgeport and rejuvenating an ailing congregation in Racine, Wisconsin. She invited Julia Ward Howe, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony to speak there. Women began to vote and hold offices in the church under Olympia's ministry. Today the church is called Olympia Brown Unitarian Universalist Church in her honor.

Since the beginning of her ministry, she had also been involved in the suffragist movement, working with Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, and others. At age 53, she decided to become a part-time minister and to become a full-time activist for women's rights. She led the Wisconsin Suffrage Association for many years and served as Vice-president of the National Woman Suffrage Association. She worked unwaveringly to have women admitted to colleges and professional schools. She joined the militant Woman's Party in 1913, commenting, "I belonged to this party before I was born."*

In the fall of 1920, when women were finally able to vote for who would be the president of the United States, Olympia reflected on what had happened during her lifetime and commented, "the grandest thing has been the lifting up of the gates and the opening of the doors to the women of America, giving liberty to twenty-seven million women, thus opening to them a new and larger life and a higher ideal."

Once this victory for women was achieved, Olympia turned her efforts to promoting peace and was one of the original members of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.

She died in Baltimore at age 91, and the *Baltimore Sun* stated, "Perhaps no phase of her life better exemplified her vitality and intellectual independence than the mental discomfort she succeeded in arousing, between her eightieth and ninetieth birthdays, among the conservatively minded Baltimoreans."*

I find Olympia Brown and what she was able to accomplish amazing. With no desire to minimize her successes and the successes of her peers, however, I feel compelled to point out that her struggles continue to be mirrored in the experiences of many women today.

Consider, for instance, her difficulty getting access to the education she desired. Though for approximately the last 30 years women have made up the majority of entering college students, women still encounter many obstacles in their access to higher education. Gender disparities exist in many fields, such as math and science, which can then lead to differences in earning potential. "Furthermore," as per the website of Women In Government, a non-profit, bi-partisan organization of women state legislators, "women encounter other barriers in the areas of athletics, sexual harassment on campus, standardized testing, lack of knowledge of technology, and the maltreatment of pregnant and parenting students. Disparities may also exist in the distribution of financial aid, as most packages do not include allowance for dependent care, and women are twice as likely to have dependents and three times as likely to be single parents than their male counterparts. This places constraints not only on time, but the ability to simultaneously afford higher education and family expenses" (<http://womeningovernment.org/highered/faqs/>).

Women, of course, also continue, like Olympia, to encounter opposition to their being in the ministry. Some denominations, like the Roman Catholic Church, various Eastern Orthodox Churches, and the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, have continued to outright deny the ordination of women. Others, like the Southern Baptist Convention, once extended ordination but have since retracted it. Even in the denominations that have allowed female ordination, women still experience difficulties. For example, one study notes that it takes longer for a woman to find a job in ministry than it does a man (Chang [1997: 614-627], cited in Lehman). Even once she gets a job, the position is likely to be a "lesser" one—an assistant pastor rather than the senior pastor, for example.

"In first, second, and third-plus job placements, clergy men held more of the "desirable" positions than women. The differences appear right away in the first jobs clergy take after graduating from seminary" (Zikmund, et al, cited in Lehman).

	MEN	WOMEN
Senior or solo pastor		
First job	44%	18%
Second job	49%	19%
Associate/assistant pastor		
First job	32%	35%

Second job	13%	19%
Other parish (e.g., education)		
First job	6%	16%
Second job	10%	21%
Non-parish and secular		
First job	17%	30%
Second job	26%	37%

Women in the ministry are also not compensated at the same rate as their male peers. One study “found that in gross figures, and *in every denomination, the average salary of the men exceeded that of the women.* The magnitude of differences ranged from about 10 percent to over 30 percent” (Zikmund, et al, cited in Lehman).

Of course, gender inequity in pay is not restricted to the ministry. According to the National Organization for Women, “In 1963, the year of the Equal Pay Act’s passage, full-time working women were paid 59 cents on average to the dollar received by men, while in 2005 women were paid 77 cents for every dollar received by men. In other words, for the last 42 years, the wage gap has only narrowed by less than half of a penny per year.” Also, “For women of color, the gap is even worse – only \$.71 for African American women and \$.58 for Latinas” (<http://www.now.org/issues/economic/cea/who.html>).

Olympia’s struggles for women to participate in the political process in the US are not over yet either. Only 33 women have served in the US Senate. There are currently 14—yes, 14 out of 100. Women constitute over half of the population but less than 1/5 of the Senate. According to Gender Info 2007, a global database of gender statistics and indicators, an initiative of the United Nations Statistics Division, in 2007 the U.S. was ranked 85th among nations that have women in parliamentary seats in single or lower chamber. In other words, only 16% of the congresspeople in the House of Representatives were women, and there were 84 countries with higher percentages. We shared this percentage with the Czech Republic and Turkmenistan. Do you want to know who was above us? Well, not surprisingly, most of Europe. But so, too, were an abundance of Latin American, Middle Eastern, and African countries, including Afghanistan and Iraq. (<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/products/genderinfo/default.htm>)

Of course, we don’t want to vote for a woman merely because she is a woman. Right? But the lack of women in the government certainly does not point to a lack of qualified, intelligent, capable women. It points to a systemic discrimination against what our existentialist foremother Simone de Beauvoir called the second sex--discrimination that was as evident as racism in questions raised during the recent Democratic primary: “Who’s more electable? A black man or a white woman?”

Not only are Olympia’s struggles relevant to us, so too is the message she preached as a Universalist preacher. Universalism promotes redemption, not punishment; ultimate salvation, not damnation; forgiving love, not stern judgment. A Universalist perspective precludes religious fundamentalism and promotes instead inclusivity.

Let us remember Olympia Brown and be inspired by her—inspired to remove obstacles to education, to meaningful careers, and to political participation. Inspired to speak with clear voices what we consider to be meaningful and true and to promote understanding and loving-kindness in the process. And inspired to lead lives that could similarly move newspapers, once we have departed this world, to mention our vitality, intellectual independence, and ability to arouse mental discomfort in others.

* St. Lawrence University: Chaplain's Office website, <http://www.stlawu.edu/chapel/brown.php>

Lehman, Jr., Edward C. "Women's Path into Ministry: Six Major Studies,"

<http://www.divinity.duke.edu/programs/spe/resources/ppr/women.pdf>

(Chang, P. M. Y. 1997. "In Search of a Pulpit: Sex Differences in the Transition From Seminary Training to the First Parish." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36: 614-627; Zikmund, B. B., A. T. Lummis, and P. M. Y. Chang. 1998. *Clergywomen: An Uphill Calling*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox.)