

Discussion Guide for Video

Long Strange Trip, Part 5: Evolution, 1861-1960 (01:05:07)

Opening and Chalice Lighting

Introduce the chalice lighting words by noting that the video highlights Unitarian and Universalist women of the 19th century who worked hard in their time to make the world a better place. Say that this poem, written by Julia Ward Howe after Mary Livermore's death in 1905, speaks to the power of what Livermore and other reformers and activists offered to the world:

The darkening of a brow below'd
The silence of a voice of cheer
That roused, reminded and reproved
For many a day, in many a year.

She stood beside the beds of pain
Where fainting soldiers scarce drew breath
She won them back to life again,
Or smiled away the pangs of death.

When Duty bade the woman speak,
How bravely did she heed the call!
With presence resolute, yet meek,
She graced the temple and the hall.

...

For every earnest word she spake
Shall in Time's furrows ripen seed;
The labor shall our world awake,
To take deep thought for human need.

We meet in sorrow at her grave,
Right lovingly we say farewell;
All richer for the life she gave,
All poorer for its broken spell.

Light the chalice in honor of all the women reformers whose labor awakened the world.

Discussion Questions

Choose among these questions and lead a discussion:

- Which events or stories highlighted in the video surprised you? Made you feel proud, or, not so proud? Which events or stories intrigue or unsettle you?
- Which people, stories, and events in the video strike you as important pointers to Unitarian Universalism as we know it today?
- The video describes continual interplay and conflict between advocates for new ideas and approaches and guardians of deeply held ideas, values, and ways of doing things. Is a similar tension part of Unitarian Universalism as you experience it today? Are such conflicts inevitable? What might be some positive results of the clash of ideas and approaches?
- The film lifts up the Sanitary Commission and thousands of volunteers who helped with nursing, nutrition, and sanitation in the Civil War, describing this work as the world's first health and social welfare project on so grand a scale. What skills and connections evident in the Sanitary Commission's work enhanced or enabled the reform work that went on in the decades after the Civil War? How does the story of the Civil War change

in your mind when you include the work of Sanitary Commission volunteers, many of them our religious forebears?

- We count among our religious forebears women on both sides of the bitter debate about whether to support suffrage for Black men after the Civil War and leave the women's suffrage fight for another day. In what ways does our society continue to pit the needs and interests of one marginalized group against those of another- and at what cost?
- Have we achieved full equality in our ministry for people of all genders? What challenges experienced by some of our forebears may be experienced by women ministers even today?
- Why do you suppose that the more liberal religious ideas and approaches came out of the Western Unitarian Conference?
- The writings of our religious forebears about evolution refute the widespread cultural notion that religion and science necessarily conflict. What is the role of science in your religious thinking? In the practice of your congregation? Where do you find the teachings of science and religion intersecting with one another?
- Unitarian John Haynes Holmes argued against a long-held Unitarian idea that people are “saved” by moral character and good works, holding that religion should concern itself with the political and social struggles for justice rather than with individual. How do our congregations today balance individual character and spiritual development with social justice work?
- Clarence Skinner argued that Universalists have always believed in the common destiny of humanity, that we are all saved together, rather than as individuals. How does the idea that humanity has a common destiny provide a theological basis for social justice work?
- The issue of race was paramount in our society during the 19th and early 20th centuries, yet does not play a large role in our denominational history during this period. Given our strong history of engagement with other social issues of the day throughout this period, why do you suppose that is so? What bearing does race have on our movement today?

Closing Reading

Share these words by Clarence Russell Skinner, written near the end of his life:

[Faith] is an expression of unconfined zeal of spirit. It is for unsundered persons. Faith tries wings, follows illusions, challenges, urges, fails, conquers. It is more than the assurance of things not seen — it is an adventure after them. Belief digs itself into the trench of creed. Faith knows no horizons, can not live in crypts, behind padlocks. Faith is for eager and audacious persons. When belief takes the place of faith, creeds become paramount. When faith is dominant, deeds become the test.

Extinguish the chalice.