

# *What They Dreamed Be Ours to Do*



Sojourner Truth



Women's Suffrage Parade, New York, Oct. 1917



Rev. Olympia Brown



Susan B. Anthony

The

*Hope their Hopes and Seal Them True*

Exercise the UnitarianUniversalist Fifth Principle  
“The right of conscience  
and the use of the democratic process”  
—Vote on November 4<sup>th</sup>

# MORNING CELEBRATION

October 19, 2008

**"Take Your Child to Vote" Day:** On Election Day, consider the words of Dayton, Ohio, *Daily News* reporter Scott Eliot, published on Tuesday, November 7, 2006 (Election Day): There's two things I hope you'll do ... The first thing is I hope you vote. The second is I hope you'll take your children [or your grandchildren or other close relatives or friends] with you to the polls, let them watch while you vote and talk to them about who you're voting for and why.

Think of it as a one-on-one civics lesson. It's really our best hope for intelligent, engaged citizens in the future, that they learn from adults around them that political participation is an important duty, a thoughtful exercise and that it actually can be exciting and fun. From "Faith In Action: Ideas"

## Call To Community

*Attuned To The Autumn Air by Susan Karlson*

We come together as the leaves turn ochre, bronze and crimson,  
the hues of fiery autumn.  
The daylight hours speed by like cyclists,  
Eager to reach some long awaited destination.  
Our lives, bound by the sun,  
Cirled by the moon,  
Occasionally come to a halt  
And we stop-  
For just a moment and breathe in the fall air.  
We are like children diving into a pile of dry leaves  
And we emerge  
To drink in the fullness of this hour  
And embrace the mystery of this day.

## Story For All Ages

### *Exercising the Right to Vote*

**Moderator:** Good morning. I'm the Moderator for this event this morning. We're here with the Rev. Olympia Brown and Susan B. Anthony who want to share the importance of getting out and voting on Election Day, November 4<sup>th</sup>. Olympia and Susan traveled a long ways from over a century ago to share with you their stories about how they struggled to get the right to vote for all women in this country and what they came up against in their time. After they speak, we'll hold a little election of our own. Both Olympia and Susan are inspiring but you'll get a chance to cast your ballot for the one that you think has the most inspiring story to tell about how they helped women achieve the right to vote almost a hundred years ago. Olympia, will you go first.

Adapted **from Olympia Brown: A Voice And A Vote**,  
Reprinted from **A Lamp in Every Corner: Our Unitarian  
Universalist Storybook** by Janeen K. Grohsmeyer (Boston:  
Unitarian Universalist Association, 2004).

### **Olympia Brown:**

Surely, Madame Moderator. Hello everyone. I am Olympia Brown. I'm visiting today because I really worked hard for two things in my life: one was Universalism, one half of the roots of Unitarian Universalism that you celebrate in this church and the other thing was helping women get the right to vote. I just wanted to talk to you today about how things were in my time because I've heard that there is a presidential election happening in a few weeks that is causing quite a stir.

Women weren't supposed to be ministers in my time. I went to St. Lawrence University in 1863 and was the second woman to be ordained by the Universalist churches that same year. I was the minister in five

different congregations over the next thirty-five years and I spoke from a pulpit like this one here. I had a voice and I used it everyday.

Women couldn't vote when I was born. We had no say about who was elected president, senator, or mayor of our towns. I had a lot to say about that. I worked hard so women of my time and women and girls today could vote. I traveled all over the state of Kansas in a horse and buggy giving speeches to convince people women deserved the right to vote. I wrote hundreds of letters. I spoke to representatives and senators in Congress and marched in parades. My friends like Susan B. Anthony and I worked hard to get women the right to vote. I had a voice and I used it everyday – everyday for over fifty years. In November of 1920 when I was 85 years old I finally got to vote for the very first time. The day I dreamed of when all women had the right to vote finally came.

So when November 4<sup>th</sup> comes around this year, remember my story and go out and vote. If you aren't old enough to vote yet, remember my story when you are 18 and always go out and vote because each of you has a voice and you need to use it everyday.

## **United States v. Susan B. Anthony - 1873**

By [Jone Johnson Lewis](#), About.com, adapted into a monologue by Susan Karlson

Hello everyone. Though I grew up as a Quaker, I attended the Unitarian church in Rochester, New York when I was older. I'm here today to tell you about a strange experience I had over a hundred years ago when women weren't allowed to vote in any election. The Fourteenth Amendment says that all people born in this

country are citizens and have certain rights. Each of us should have the right to vote in elections when we get to be a certain age. Many women were frustrated because we couldn't exercise our right to vote though we were citizens. Women in ten states banded together to vote in elections in our hometowns. Most of us were stopped at the door. But fifteen of us in Rochester, New York voted in the presidential election on November 5, 1872. Later that month, the person who registered us to vote and all fifteen of us women were arrested. I was the only one of the fifteen who refused to pay the money to get out of jail. The judge in my trial did not believe women should vote. He told the jury that that I was guilty and would not let me speak for myself. He sentenced me to pay a \$100 fine but I refused to pay it as well.

Olympia and I knew one another. In fact, I urged her to travel across Kansas and give speeches so women could gain the right to vote. I never got to legally vote like Olympia. During my lifetime, only four states granted women the right to vote and New York was not one of them. I was willing to risk going to jail and go through a court trial so women could vote. Many other women went to jail and suffered so that future generations of women could exercise their right to vote and be equal with men. On November 4<sup>th</sup> this year, remember my story and go to the polls and cast your ballot or if you are too young now, talk about voting in your schools and make sure you vote when you are old enough.

**Moderator:** You've heard the Rev. Olympia Brown's story and the story of how Susan B. Anthony went on trial because she voted in an election when women were denied their basic rights as citizens. Now it's time for you to cast your ballot and vote for Olympia Brown or Susan B. Anthony as the most inspiring Unitarian Universalist woman who worked tirelessly for women's

suffrage, women's right to vote. Once you've marked your ballots, fold them and pass them to the end of the rows and we'll collect them and let you know during coffee hour who won. Thank you for your attention and thank you, Olympia and Susan, for joining us today and telling us why you hope that each one of us will treasure our right to vote next month and in the years ahead.

### **For Further Reading**

Barry, Kathleen. *Susan B. Anthony: A Biography*. New York: New York University Press, 1988.

Flexner, Eleanor. *Century of Struggle*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1959, revised 1975.

Frost, Elizabeth, and Kathryn Cullen-DuPont. *Women's Suffrage in America: An Eyewitness History*. New York: Facts on File, 1992.

Harper, Ida Husted. *Life and Work of Susan B. Anthony*. 1898. Reprint. Salem, N.H.: Ayer Co., 1983.

Stanton, Elizabeth Cady, Susan B. Anthony, and Matilda Joslyn Gage. *History of Woman Suffrage*, Vol. 2, 1882. Reprint. Salem, N.H.: Ayer Co., 1985.

Source: [\*Women's Rights on Trial\*](#), 1st Ed., Gale, 1997, p.312.

### **Reading**

Excerpt from *Ain't I a Woman* by Sojourner Truth Delivered 1851 at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio

“Well, children, where there is so much racket there must be something out of kilter. I think that twixt the negroes of the South and the women at the North, all talking about rights, the white men will be in a fix pretty soon. But what's all this here talking about?

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and

planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me!  
And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as  
a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And  
ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen most  
all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's  
grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Then they talk about this thing in the head; what's this  
they call it? [member of audience whispers, "intellect"] That's  
it, honey. What's that got to do with women's rights or  
negroes' rights? If my cup won't hold but a pint, and your  
holds a quart, wouldn't you be mean not to let me have my  
little half measure full?...

If the first woman God ever made was strong enough  
to turn the world upside down all alone, these women together  
ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again!  
And now they is asking to do it, the men better let them."

### **Silent Reflection**

#### **Sermon *What They Dreamed Be Ours To Do***

The Rev. Susan Karlson

October 19, 2008

One of my favorite books, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* by Unitarian Universalist historian, James Loewen quotes Charles V. Willie: "By idolizing those whom we honor, we do a disservice both to them and to ourselves... We fail to recognize that we could go and do likewise."

It is important to look at historical figures like Olympia Brown and Susan B. Anthony as whole people—not just idealized figures. Olympia Brown and other suffragists apparently did not consider solidarity with working class women and housewives.<sup>2</sup> Women exploited in factories or businesses might have found common cause with the middle and upper class educated women but classism divided their ranks, as it divides us still.

Abolitionists and women's suffragists originally teamed up. They often stood on the same platform speaking for universal voting rights for all citizens. Yet along the way, women split into two different organizations because the Fifteenth Amendment passed establishing the right of African American men to vote in 1870 while White and African-American women could not vote until fifty years later. Native Americans and other people of color had to wait till even later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Even when many groups had the legal right to vote, policies and practices effectively prevented them from entering the polling booths.

I included the words of Sojourner Truth "Ain't I a woman?" because they are plain spoken and she had a way of cutting through the divisions and seeing the deeper aspirations and yearnings of the human spirit for decency and fairness. These yearnings inspire hope that each person has a vote and that vote counts.

Martin Luther King quoted Unitarian minister Theodore Parker when he proclaimed, "The moral arc of the universe is long but it bends towards justice." The American Voting Rights Timeline extends back to the original Constitution in 1776 and stretches out to recent decades. We haven't reached its endpoint. Seeing this long trajectory, we might cry out in frustration and defiance, "Yes, but how long! How long must we wait for this moral arc to bend!"

There are echoes of the fragmentation between African American men and White women in this presidential election. We heard the theme when Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton ran against one another as Democratic presidential hopefuls. Claims of racism and sexism polarized voters into factions—the call for unity lost on the campaign trail. There can be no mistake about racist slurs and prejudices emerging all across the country, focusing on everything from the preaching of Obama's minister to not correcting wild rumors about Obama being a Muslim or saying, "he's not one of us." More comments circulate about the anatomy of women

candidates and the wives of the candidates than any of the women's words or actions. Maybe we have to throw in ageism too. Sexism and racism are running in this election just as in the struggle for voting rights in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Susan B. Anthony, Olympia Brown, Sojourner Truth and scores of other women and some visionary men dared to dream that women could vote and be treated as equals. The 2004 film, *Iron Jawed Angels*, provided the original inspiration for this service. Only ninety years ago, women picketed the White House. They continued their long vigil in inclement weather, intending to stand in unity until women won the right to vote. They were arrested, beaten, and tortured for their efforts. Still they persisted with hunger strikes and other forms of civil disobedience until women finally could vote in 1920. Films like this one and the flurry of electronic mail it generates in this election year remind us of the sacrifice others made for freedom and equal rights.

Even in this historic election year that has garnered the interest of young adults, independents, and millions of others generally apathetic in elections, we must remember that the candidates are real people—each with his or her own flaws; each falling short of the ideal. They are quick to point out the other's shortcomings. The pundits say that the honeymoon period for the new president will be incredibly short. Americans expect the president to perform sleight of hand that will heal a broken economy, bring the troops safely home, address the uninsured, reverse global warming and perform other magic unparalleled by sorcerers and fairy godmothers of storybook legends.

We can't vote for a perfect candidate because none exists. We vote for the candidate that reflects our vision of the change we want to see. As in the abolitionist/suffragette era, our ideals break down—none of them can live up to our expectations. That's not why we vote.

*Lies My Teacher Told Me* describes the great deception we perpetuate in teaching our children about America's most public figures. We strip each of them of their humanity; they become the ideal as in Plato's philosophy. We like to think that our most famous men and women got it all right, but the truth is that any historical figure or any current public figure we could mention had his or her failings and successes. And because our public figures are not perfect—we can take heart and often learn more from their shortcomings than their glory moments.

The moderator of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Gini Courter, said this of Unitarian Universalist history—"the women of the Western Unitarian Conference and their Universalist sisters were empowered preachers and activists... You and I stand on the shoulders of ordinary men and women who were committed to doing extraordinary things... One hundred years from now, Unitarian Universalists will reflect on our contributions... We are ordinary people whose past and future call us to do extraordinary things."

What extraordinary work are you called to do? Each of us is an ordinary person with gifts and inherent promise. What will we choose to do with this precious life of ours? How will we change ourselves to create the society we want to see?

If not for the dreams of countless women like Olympia Brown and Susan B. Anthony, I wonder whether women would ever have won the vote. Would slavery have ended if abolitionists and leaders like Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglass and Nat Turner had not spoken up? Would we ever have looked at racism and oppression in this country without the Civil Rights movement? In spite of legal strides, women often receive less pay, and are overlooked for promotions today. People of color are still victims of racial profiling; hate crimes, disproportionate poverty and incarceration. How can a largely white, middle class association like Unitarian Universalism **resist** complacency? How can

each of us live out our religious principles and follow our calling? The suffragists and the abolitionists offer us an example. They consistently plodded on. Their faith in a changed society called them on over multiple lifetimes.

In this election season and with our heritage of suffrage, let's consider how we can "hope their hopes and seal them true". What sustains you throughout long years of struggle to reach your vision? Olympia Brown, Susan B. Anthony and Sojourner Truth's dedication and strength of character sustain me through long nights when I despair about what difference I can make. There are so many people who risked so much to realize their dreams. We are the beneficiaries of their efforts. Use the weight of your life, your vote, to pull that arc toward justice.

May we kindle the fiery spirit of courageous women and men in our hearts and make their determination our own as we approach another Election Day and the days that come after the inauguration. May your vision burn steadily before you and enable you to see the day when your own dreams are fulfilled. May it be so.

<sup>1</sup> Greene, Dana. *Suffrage and Religious Principle: Speeches and Writings of Olympia Brown*. Metuchen, N.J. and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1983, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Cote, Charlotte. *Olympia Brown The Battle for Equality*. Racine, Wisconsin: Mother Courage Press, 1988, 108.

### **Benediction**

Our lives are touched by the words and deeds of women and men who have gone before us.

Let us be aware of their many gifts,  
so commonplace now.

May we strive in our own way to expand those boundaries  
For the sons and daughters who come after us  
That those whose rights now are denied  
May know more freedom, peace and equality.

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