

Mission Peak Unitarian Universalist Congregation  
Courageous UUs  
Sermon by Ilze Duarte  
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As you may be aware, Unitarians and Universalists joined together as a single denomination in the United States fairly recently, in 1961. So, although I have titled this sermon “Courageous UUs,” three of the people I will be speaking about were Unitarians—Fannie Barrier Williams and the Sharps—and one of them, Thomas Starr King, was a Universalist minister who for a time also served a Unitarian congregation.

Thomas Starr King was born in New York City in December 1824. When he was a child, his family moved to Boston. Starr King wished to be a Universalist minister like his father and started his training early on, giving his first sermon at age 13. He couldn’t go to divinity school, however, because his father died when he was 15, and he had to work to support his mother and siblings. He continued preparing for ministry on his own, attending lectures at Harvard, and listening to as many preachers as he could. Local ministers were impressed by him and helped him along, especially by providing him with opportunities to preach. Starr King’s self-study and preaching experience allowed him to qualify as a Universalist minister.

At age 21, he became the minister at the Charlestown Universalist Church, where his father had preached, and a few years later he was called to Hollis Street Church in Boston. He married Julia Wiggin, and they had two children. Starr King was now supporting his new family as well as his mother and chronically ill brother. To supplement his income, he joined the public speaking circuit and was a frequent lecturer. He earned a reputation as a passionate, eloquent, and effective speaker. The lecturing and traveling, though, became too taxing on him, and he began looking for a position that would allow him to support his family and ease his lecturing schedule. He received offers from Brooklyn and Cincinnati but chose to go to San Francisco

because he felt that it was important and also a greater challenge to spread the values of a liberal faith in the west. He moved to San Francisco with his family in 1860.

He soon found himself involved in politics, campaigning for the election of Abraham Lincoln. He learned of secession movements in California, led in large part by Southerners who had been attracted to the state's many resources and hoped to use slave labor to develop new industries. Starr King felt compelled to speak against slavery and to advocate for the preservation of the Union, and so he returned to the lecture circuit he had hoped to leave behind.

He traveled all over the state of California, speaking with his usual passion and eloquence to large audiences of various faiths about the need to keep California a non-slave state. On various occasions he faced threats and intimidation. In letters to his friends, he mentions men who came to his lectures with guns and knives prominently displayed at their waists. He says he persevered, the men listened to him to the end, and no one was injured. Ultimately, Starr King's campaign was credited by many, including Abraham Lincoln himself, with saving California to the Union.

All through these efforts, Starr King continued devoting himself to his ministry. He pulled his congregation out of financial straits and grew its membership considerably. He raised money for flood and drought relief in nearby communities and for the Pacific Branch of the United States Sanitary Commission, which later became the American Red Cross. The hectic pace of Starr King's work all those years took a toll on his small frame. He came down with diphtheria and then with pneumonia in 1864. He died that year at age 39.

In 1864, Fannie Barrier was a bright, personable girl, who excelled in music and art. She was born in Brockport, New York, in 1855. Her father was a barber and part-time coal merchant. He was also a lay leader in the First Baptist Church, where Fannie's mother taught Bible classes,

and Fannie played piano during Sunday services. They were the only African American family in the congregation and in their neighborhood. Fannie later wrote that no one in her family ever met with overt racial prejudice in Brockport, and as a child she was unaware of the terrible treatment of Blacks in other parts of the country.

At 15 years old, Fannie Barrier graduated from the State Normal School, the first African American woman to do so. As a young adult, Fannie Barrier became more aware of sociopolitical affairs and more familiar with the work of Frederick Douglass, who was an acquaintance of her parents'. She learned that the federal government had been establishing schools to educate newly freed slaves and decided to take a teaching position in the south. (Her biographies don't say where in the south.) Fannie Barrier later wrote that she was not prepared for what she was going to find: daily humiliation, intimidation, and physical assaults.

She returned to the north. She went to Boston to study piano at the New England Conservatory of Music only to be asked to leave because students there objected to the presence of a black person. She found work as a teacher in Washington, D.C., where she met the man she would marry: Samuel Laing Williams, an African American law student. The couple moved to Chicago, where Samuel built a successful law practice and where he and Fannie collaborated with blacks and whites on many projects. They helped establish Provident Hospital and insisted that a black and white staff treat black and white patients. They also insisted the hospital provide a nursing school for black students who had been denied access to such training elsewhere.

The Williamses started a study club, and Fannie was its director of art and music. Fannie hoped to provide a bridge between their local club and the wider sphere of social activism, and so she decided to join the Illinois Woman's Alliance. She faced strong opposition from those in

the organization who didn't want a black woman among its members. But Fannie persisted and prevailed. She later became vice president of the organization.

Barrier Williams lectured frequently near and far. She spoke on the need for all women, and especially black women, to vote. To put her task in proper context, we need to keep in mind that she spoke to largely white audiences (and largely male too, I imagine), audiences unused to women speakers, to black women speakers, and were often hostile to her ideas.

Sometime around 1890, the Williamses joined a Unitarian church in Chicago. In Barrier Williams's lectures of the time we can hear echoes of the Unitarian faith. In her address "What can religion further do to advance the condition of the colored people?" her answer is: "More religion and less church. . . Less theology and more of human brotherhood, less declamation and more common sense and love for truth . . ." She urged ministers and others to "open every cabin door and get immediate contact" with Southern blacks and teach them "how a humane religion can impact their daily lives in positive, practical ways." She led by example: she helped establish local chapters of the National Association of Colored Women, which supported in particular those who had emigrated to Northern cities. These local clubs provided child care centers, classes, employment bureaus, and savings banks for black women.

Barrier Williams and her husband helped establish the NAACP, which was founded in 1909. In the following decades, she continued lecturing and wrote numerous articles for journals, newspapers, and books. Fannie Barrier Williams lived to be 89 years old. She died in 1944.

By that time, Waitstill and Martha Sharp had had the adventure of a lifetime. Waitstill Sharp, born in Boston in 1902, was a lawyer and Unitarian Minister. Martha Ingham Dickie was born in Providence, RI, in 1905. A social worker by training, Martha was involved with internationalist and peace groups. Waitstill and Martha met in 1927 and married the following

year. They had two children. After some time as a minister in Pennsylvania, Waitstill moved with his family to Wellesley, Massachusetts, where he was the minister at the Unitarian Church of Wellesley Hills.

The year 1939 would bring a drastic change for the Sharps. The American Unitarian Association (AUA) had become increasingly frustrated with the U.S. government over its refusal to offer asylum to those being persecuted by the Nazis. In January 1939, a senior leader from the AUA asked the Sharps to embark on a relief mission in Prague, which at the time was under threat of invasion by the Nazis. If the Sharps accepted the mission, they would have to leave their children, then 2 and 7 years old, in the care of friends from their congregation. The Sharps accepted the mission. In Prague, they joined a network of aid workers from other organizations and enlisted the help of many volunteers to form an underground passage for refugees.

The Sharps were warned that they would be followed by Gestapo agents. If caught doing their work, the Sharps would be jailed and likely killed. They quickly learned to disguise themselves and change routes to evade the agents. They were able to distribute money to those in need and smuggle refugees out of the country. Martha arranged for truckloads of milk and formula to be distributed to families in need. She also arranged for U.S. entry visas for intellectuals personally targeted by the Nazis because of their public denunciation of Nazi oppression.

Although the Sharps usually worked on individual cases, at one time Martha personally escorted a group of 35 refugees all the way to England. The refugees were journalists, political leaders, and orphaned children. Imagine how perilous this trip was: the group had to travel from Czechoslovakia to England—there was no way they could do so without traveling through Germany. Martha and her group narrowly escaped detection at least once.

Sometime later, Waitstill went to Switzerland for a conference. When he tried to return to Czechoslovakia, he was not allowed to enter the country. He sent word to Martha he was going to England, and she soon followed because she had been alerted there were plans for her arrest. The Sharps boarded a ship for their trip back to the U.S. in August of 1939. During the trip, the crew and passengers learned that England had declared a “State of War” with Germany, and the ship was now a potential target of German submarines. After long days of extreme tension, the ship made it safely to the U.S., and the Sharps were reunited with their children.

The next year, the Sharps were asked to return to Europe. This time they tried to decline but were not allowed to. Because Portugal was still somewhat neutral, the Sharps were sent to Lisbon to set up an office and then headed to the south of France, where Czech servicemen had sought refuge. The Sharps were able to smuggle many refugees from France to Portugal and then secure their safe passage to England and the U.S.

One rescue operation was particularly difficult. The Sharps were trying to escort out of France the writer Lion Feuchtwanger, known for speaking fiercely against the Nazi regime. There was a glitch in the rescue plan, and Martha decided to give up her train ticket to Lion. Waitstill continued on with him. The two men eventually hopped off the train, and Lion crossed over to Portugal on foot. Later, Lion and Waitstill reunited for their transatlantic trip to the U.S.

The Sharps returned to the U.S. for good a few months later. But their lives had been changed forever. They divorced in 1954 and rarely spoke about their missions in Europe. Their story became public only recently, when their grandson Artemis Joukowsky collaborated with Ken Burns to make a movie called Sharps’ War. We showed it here in Cole Hall a couple of years ago. I highly recommend it if you haven’t seen it.

As I learned about these four brave people, the causes they worked for, and the circumstances in which they did their work, it struck me that those were such different times, and yet, as a nation, we still face the very same issues. Many today are still loyal to the idea of racial superiority. Many are still averse to immigrants seeking refuge in our country. Many still believe violence is an acceptable response to differences of opinion.

It takes courage just to be living and to be fully present in the world. What kind of courage should we demonstrate as Unitarian Universalists today? I am not going to ask you to risk bodily harm. Separation from your family. Jail time. A threat to your very life. But I am going to encourage you to get out of your comfort zone and stand up for your principles. To each one of us this will mean a different thing.

It is up to each of us to listen to our hearts and decide how we want to live out our values. But I would like you to think about the things, great or small, that you can do to live out your values. To some of us, being here with each other every Sunday and reaffirming our values together is just right. We are here for you. To some of us, speaking up at town hall meetings, signing petitions, joining demonstrations, and even risking arrest feels right. If you need company and encouragement to increase your participation in social action, we are here for you. We are here to support each other in our own individual paths and in our collective efforts. We stand united. That is what we do best.