

## **Before Clarence Skinner: Rediscovering Early Universalist Radicals**

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Keynote Address delivered at the joint annual meeting of the New York State and Pennsylvania Universalist Conventions, Binghamton, NY, 8 Oct. 2011.

One hundred years ago, Clarence Skinner declared that Universalism was at the forefront of social revolution. The “traditional Protestant church,” he said, was dying and deservedly so. But Universalism was uniquely suited to “meet the demands of the new age, because it is the product of those forces which created the new age.” Universalism had prepared the way for a social rather than individual gospel, Skinner explained, by teaching that all people had a common destiny of salvation. “Never was there such a bold proclamation of brotherhood as this; never such implicit faith in the solidarity of the human race.” Universalist beginnings, he said, were “linked with the stormy days of political and industrial revolution,” and Universalist “prophets” had been “stoned in the streets” for daring “to challenge the olden tyrannies of ecclesiastical authority.”<sup>1</sup>

Skinner’s Unitarian friend John Haynes Holmes shared his revolutionary vision but had a different sense of his denominational heritage. Classic Unitarianism, in his view, was a faith of individual virtue as far removed from a true social vision as its evangelical opponents. In its emphasis on character

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<sup>1</sup> Social Implications of Universalism, 5-6, 11, 38.

development, Holmes explained, “liberalism, like orthodoxy . . . is essentially an individualistic religion. . . . We desire to save ourselves.”<sup>2</sup>

Contemporary Unitarian Universalists, in my experience, remember our heritage in much the same way as Skinner and Holmes. We think of our Unitarian forebears as *intellectual* radicals, perhaps, but as too enmeshed in economic privilege to commit to social radicalism. It was the Unitarians, after all, who forced Holmes out of the denomination because of his staunch opposition to World War I, while the Universalists made the equally pacifistic Skinner dean of one of their seminaries. The Universalists, we like to think, are the REAL radicals in our family tree.

But when we look beyond our denominational walls and consider how non-UU historians have told the story of religion and social justice in the United States, the situation changes. Suddenly, Unitarians are everywhere and Universalists disappear. Histories of abolitionism and women’s rights are chock full of Unitarians, even if they are not always identified as such. Unitarians play leading roles in the standard histories of pacifism in nineteenth century America, and in the story of John Brown’s very non-pacifist raid on Harpers Ferry. The utopian socialists at Brook Farm, most with Unitarian backgrounds, are far better remembered than their more enduring Universalist counterparts at Hopedale. The twentieth century story of racial justice is also dripping with Unitarians, from NAACP founding members John Haynes Holmes and Mary White Ovington, to civil rights martyr James Reeb, Urban League chairman Whitney Young, and student-activist-turned D.C. mayor Marion Barry. Apart from Adin Ballou, Universalists are either not mentioned or not identified as Universalists in histories

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<sup>2</sup> Revolutionary Function, 10-11.

of American radicalism. You would be hard pressed to find anyone, not a Unitarian Universalist, who has ever heard of our beloved Clarence Skinner.

I've been aware of this discrepancy for some time, but it was the invitation to be with all of you today that really prodded me to think it through. I now think I know why the Universalist contribution to social justice has been overlooked by outsiders, and I'd like to share my hypothesis with all of you. Before I do that, I'd like to say a few things about my own standpoint to avoid any misunderstandings. I identify personally as a radical and as a Unitarian Universalist. As a radical, I believe that the old ideals of liberty, equality, and solidarity have not yet run their course. We have more work to do to bring them to fruition, and that work involves conflict and struggle. As a Unitarian Universalist, I believe that Unitarianism and Universalism fit well together, and that together they fit very well with radicalism. I first came to Unitarian Universalism because I was looking for a tradition that would honor my own desire to place radicalism at the center of my personal faith. However, I do not assume that all of you share these perspectives. I know that many Unitarian Universalists are politically liberal or moderate or conservative rather than radical, just as many radicals hold other faith commitments. I know that there are many Universalists who have not felt fully honored by the UU marriage. In lifting up some strands of the Universalist heritage that I personally cherish, I do not mean to deny the broader complexity of Universalism. I do hope to convince you to cherish Universalist radicalism as much as I do, but I don't assume that you already do just because you are here.

So, then, why have Universalist radicals disappeared from the broader story of American radicalism? Here's my hypothesis. In United States history, there have been two paths to social justice. Especially in the nineteenth century,

Unitarians typically followed one; Universalists followed the other. And while US historians have paid attention to both paths, they have tended to notice the *religious* dimension only of the first path. The other path, the one that Universalists took, has been regarded as “secular” if not “anti-religious.” And so Universalists have disappeared.

The first path, the one typically taken by early Unitarians, centers on ethics. It is the story of people who’ve asked, “How *should* we use the power that we have?”

The path more typically taken by early Universalists centers on empowerment. It is the story of people who’ve asked, “How *can* we get more power?”

The ethics question comes naturally to highly educated ministers who serve prosperous congregations, or who are sent by prosperous denominations to serve impoverished communities. Since ministers of this sort have done lots of important social justice work, it is easy to imagine that their story is THE story of religious radicalism in the United States. But it is not.

The empowerment question, by contrast, comes naturally to people who feel excluded from powerful institutions, including powerful *religious* institutions. These folks’ style of radicalism can be perceived as “secular” or “anti-religious,” but it often reflects a kind of religion that has less to do with established, institutional power, and more to do with the *self*-empowerment of individuals and communities. One name for this sort of religion is MAGIC. I’d like you to consider the possibility that MAGIC might be the hidden key to early Universalist radicalism—perhaps even to early Universalism as a whole.

Let me stress that magic, as I understand it, is not necessarily supernatural or anti-scientific. Contemporary pagans define magic as “changing consciousness at will”—as a set of practices that align our consciousness with the deep structures of the cosmos. Alchemy is a good example: alchemists performed chemical experiments that they hoped would turn lead into gold, but the real point was to transform their own characters, symbolically, from leaden into golden. Prior to the modern period, magic and science were thoroughly intertwined. They went their separate ways only with the emergence of experimental techniques that sought to abstract consciousness out of the scientific method. Many scientists today, influenced by process philosophy, are trying to knit the two back together.

What distinguishes magic from other forms of religion is its worldliness: people use magic to gain health or wealth in the here and now, rather than to score spiritual points in heaven. The “prosperity gospels” promulgated by conservative Christians and New Age gurus are among the most visible forms of magical religion in our society today. Now, I personally do not much care for prosperity gospels. But that’s no reason to dismiss magic as such. Part of my distaste for prosperity gospels is a function of my own privilege: because much of my own spiritual work involves freeing myself from the constraints of wealth and education, it is hard to remember that others may have an equally compelling spiritual need to overcome poverty and ignorance. And part of it is a sense that many prosperity gospels don’t really enrich anyone except the hucksters who sell them. That’s just to say that they are *bad magic*—magic that doesn’t really work—rather than that magic is bad.

The history of Universalism is full of *good* magic. It is full, first of all, of people whose practice of alchemy, homeopathy, astrology, and mesmerism

empowered them to fight for the rights of workers, women, persons enslaved and imprisoned. It is full, as well, of people who dreamed of a “science of society”—a realignment of social structures to correspond more fully with the justice embedded in the universe. The “science” of Karl Marx, and before him of the utopian socialists Robert Owen and Charles Fourier, was a form of magic—and all three had a disproportionate share of Universalist disciples. Perhaps the most basic form of good magic is “consciousness raising.” Again and again, people who lack institutional authority have discovered their *own* power by coming together, sharing stories, discovering commonalities, and claiming new identities. Some of the first “consciousness raising” sessions in US history happened in Universalist churches.

Unitarian Universalists have the great good fortune to have inherited both a Unitarian tradition that emphasizes the ethical use of privilege and a Universalist tradition that emphasizes magical empowerment. In saying this, I do not mean to reinforce the old half-truth about privileged Unitarians and working class Universalists. Early Universalists were, on average, neither especially privileged nor especially oppressed. And since most people are privileged in certain respects and oppressed in others, there is no sure way to predict who will be attracted to ethics and who to empowerment. One of the most enduring magical traditions in the United States, Freemasonry, is generally associated with the ritual self-empowerment of middle-class white men. It is worth noting that many of the founders of Freemasonry in the US were also founders of Universalism.

Universalism had an early and enduring affinity with magical empowerment because it was born in opposition to established churches. As individuals, Universalists may have been socially privileged, but as Universalists they lacked

the privilege that goes with state-sponsored religion. This was significant in an era when churches were among the most powerful institutions in society.

The only established churches that survived the American Revolution were the Puritan churches of New England—the churches that would soon go their separate ways as Unitarian and Orthodox Congregational. These churches produced the nation's most hidebound conservatives, but they also produced idealistic ministers determined to use the privileges of establishment for the broader good. Along with the Quakers, these folks built the white abolitionist movement and the most significant peace movements of the early nineteenth century. To the extent that the women's rights movement grew out of abolitionism, they deserve credit for it as well.

Other social change movements took their start from the critique of established religion. If religious establishments were as oppressive as European monarchies, what about other forms of concentrated power? What about the ancient power of husbands over wives? What about the new power of capitalists? Such questions gave rise to the American labor movement and its socialist and anarchist offspring, and to some of the earliest expressions of women's rights. The people drawn to these movements were religiously diverse. Some belonged to small, intense "sects" that feared the prestige of established churches. Some were Freethinkers who gathered on Sunday mornings to sing songs and talk about the evils of religion. And a great many were Universalists. I'd like to share the stories of some of these Universalists.

Many of the stories start in Philadelphia. First Universalist of Philadelphia brought the diverse Rellyan, Pietist, and Baptist strands of Universalism together in a special way. It was born amid the heady atmosphere of Revolutionary-era

Philadelphia, and fully absorbed Philadelphians' pride in their revolutionary heritage. Radicalism in Philadelphia took many stripes. It was home to deist admirers of Tom Paine, to Quaker activists determined to end slavery and war, to Priestleyan Unitarians, and to a dizzying array of German speaking religious refugees. German Pietists cherished the hidden teachings of scripture and the hidden traditions of alchemy and astrology. They believed that the world itself was an emanation of the divine: one gained power by getting in touch with one's inner divinity. This world view lent itself to belief in universal salvation, since it was hard to see how God could fail to achieve ultimate reconciliation with God's own substance in the world. And so it was that George De Benneville, perhaps the first to preach universalism in Philadelphia, had pietist roots.

The congregation itself was organized by Elhanan Winchester, a transplanted New Englander who blended De Benneville's theology with his own Baptist tradition. He forged close ties with the Rellyan followers of John Murray and with the Unitarian disciples of Joseph Priestley, who for a time shared the Universalist church building. Among the spiritual eclectics drawn to Winchester was Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Like De Benneville and Priestley, Rush was a scientist, and his science hadn't quite broken free from magic. His magical vision was also evident in his approach to social justice. Rush was probably responsible for the earliest statement of Universalist "social teaching"—a list of "Recommendations" appended to the Articles of Faith endorsed by the Universalist Convention hosted in Philadelphia in 1790, which called for the gradual abolition of both slavery and war.

Around the same time, Rush came up with an idea that has been resurrected in most subsequent generations. Why not have a department of peace as well as a



department of war? Rush's proposal illustrates how "magic," understood broadly, is connected to empowerment. For him, peace was about more than saying no to war—it was about building up an educated and prosperous community through village schools and a national university. Rush also believed that peace would be possible only if we changed our consciousness by using symbols and ritual. He called for an end to military uniforms and militia drills because these tended to "fascinate the minds of young men." His peace office would be filled with symbolic pictures of lions with lambs and Native Americans with Kentucky frontiersmen, and every day "young ladies, clad in white robes," would "sing odes, and hymns, and anthems" to peace. It is tempting to laugh at this—and yet this is the sort of magic that has been used to glorify war for thousands of years.

A new epoch in Universalist radicalism began in 1818, when Abner Kneeland was chosen as minister of the Philadelphia congregation. Kneeland built the congregation to a membership of 1600 during his seven year ministry, organized a daughter church in the North Liberties neighborhood, and launched a discussion society to help local artisans polish their speaking skills. From this society emerged some of the most important labor leaders of the city and the nation.

First was William Heighton, an immigrant shoemaker from England. In speeches at the church, Heighton counseled workers who felt they were losing ground. "When we look around us, my fellow workmen, we behold men on every side, enjoying wealth in all its luxuriant profusion . . . while we, comparatively, receive nothing but . . . crumbs." Heighton's remedy was a patriotic class consciousness. The working men had been denied the promise "that all men were created equal," but they could regain it by joining a citywide union federation,

educating themselves at the Mechanics' Library Company, and flexing their political muscle by voting only for workers and their declared allies.<sup>3</sup> Soon the "Working Men's Party" reached other cities—the first class-conscious political party anywhere in the world.

Heighton has not been perceived as a "religious reformer" because he was so hard on the clergy. They were, he said, "idle accumulators" who refused to honor the gospel call to hold "all things common." But his low expectations for the clergy did not apply to the men who filled the pulpit of First Universalist. At least three took up the Working Men's banner. Abner Kneeland himself had left both Philadelphia and Universalism prior to Heighton's speech, but he soon emerged as a party leader. Kneeland was a devotee of Robert Owen and Fanny Wright, British socialists who traced social injustice to bad institutions rather than original sin, and hoped to usher in the millennium by creating new institutions. Universalists were attracted to this vision both because they cherished social solidarity and because their hostility to established churches primed them to consider the Owenite critique of private property and traditional marriage. When Owen launched his community at New Harmony, Indiana, a former Universalist minister named Robert Jennings was among the first to sign on. Jennings helped edit the community newspaper and establish its school, as well as conducting debates with local evangelicals. Kneeland joined the cause when Wright began calling for the creation of local congregations of "Free Thinkers." As leader of the Boston society, he gained fame as the last person in the United States to be tried for blasphemy—tried, I should note, by a Unitarian prosecutor and judge. Kneeland also tried his hand as a utopian, launching the Salubria community in Iowa.

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<sup>3</sup> Philip S. Foner, ed., *William Heighton: Pioneer Labor Leader of Jacksonian Philadelphia* (New York: International Publishers, 1991), 70, 74-75, 84.

While Jennings's and Kneeland's Owenite connections led them out of the Universalist fold, Kneeland's successor Theophilus Fisk was so orthodox that he led the way in booting Kneeland out. But he was equally committed to the cause of labor. By the 1830s, he was in Boston declaiming against preachers who opposed the ten hour day: "How deeply injured is the cause of the Redeemer of his friends, by misguided advocates."<sup>4</sup> Fisk's assistant Abel Thomas also wound up in Massachusetts, where he helped launch the *Lowell Offering*, the first journal for female millworkers. The *Offering* created what may have been the first space for consciousness raising by female industrial workers.

Universalist interest in utopian community continued strong into the 1840s. Most of you are doubtless familiar with the "Practical Christian" community at Hopedale launched by Adin Ballou and several other veterans of the Restorationist controversy. Universalists were at the forefront of the Alphadelphia Community in Michigan, one of roughly two dozen communities modeled on the theories of Charles Fourier. Fourier's socialism involved a magical version of Christianity: Fourier believed that the social world was governed by laws of "attraction" as systemic as Newtonian physics, and that these laws would lead to justice if people followed their inmost passions. This viewpoint was anathema to orthodox Christianity, but at Alphadelphia it coexisted with universalism.

When Fourierist communities collapsed, seasoned activists poured back into the mainstream labor movement. Many were inspired by the writings of the most unusual radical to come out of Philadelphia Universalism. In 1844, twenty-two year-old George Lippard published a book called *The Quaker City; or The Monks of Monk Hall*. It was a sensational book, filled with tales of murder and seduction.

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<sup>4</sup> Lazerow 137.

But it also expressed Lippard's solidarity with the urban masses who were struggling build power in the face of industrialization. The book sold more copies than any previous American novel, and brought Lippard to the attention of the radical editors Charles Chauncy Burr, then minister of the North Liberties Universalist church. Lippard soon folded a Universalist vision into his novels, noting in one that "If there exists such a thing as Total Depravity on the face of the earth, you will find it in the heart of the man, who has so brutalized his nature, as to be able to believe the Dogma."<sup>5</sup>

At one working men's convention, Lippard compared himself to Jesus as he promised that "the regeneration of the workers, from the anguish of physical suffering, shall prepare the way for the spiritual redemption of all mankind." He also urged his hearers to remember that the "holiest word of all, without which all other words are vain," is "BROTHERHOOD."<sup>6</sup> More than a half century before Skinner published the *Social Implications*, here we see a vigorous assertion of solidarity as the heart of faith.

Lippard was convinced that magic was the way to achieve brotherhood. He was fascinated by the alchemical traditions of Pennsylvania pietism, by the rituals of Freemasonry, and by old stories about a secret, Rosicrucian brotherhood of initiates committed to the well-being of humanity. Soon he modeled his own labor union, the Brotherhood of the Union, on the Rosicrucians. American workers needed a secret society, Lippard said, in order to combine resources, avoid reprisals, and clothe their radical vision in "shades of mystery" that would be acceptable to an age that was "not prepared for the full force of the truth."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 387-88.

<sup>6</sup> Lippard, "Valedictory of the Industrial Congress," in "Editor's Department," *Nineteenth Century* 2 (1848): 187-88.

For Lippard, the great secret transmitted by the Rosicrucians was that Jesus himself had been a Working Man, made divine precisely by his solidarity with his fellow workers. This idea would later be a commonplace among socialist and anarchist agitators, who spoke freely of Jesus as “the world’s greatest, most sublime agitator” and “the world’s supreme revolutionary leader.”<sup>ii</sup> As far as I’ve been able to determine, Lippard was first to articulate this idea.

Lippard never lost his taste for the sensational, and in this respect he made another important contribution to our social justice tradition. Long before the social gospels popularized the notion of “social sin” and “social salvation,” Lippard prepared readers for it by presenting urban squalor as the product of secret societies gone bad, of diabolical brotherhoods in alliance with capitalist monopolists. What’s more, Lippard saw social sin from the perspective of the sinners. Even his heroes are beset with compulsive, addictive desires; even his villains possess benevolent impulses that they cannot smother. He described one villain as still open to “some pure Spirit,” and scolded believers in “Total Depravity” for doubting the plausibility of this. Lippard’s universalism, in short, invited even the fallen to join the cosmic struggle against injustice.

A similar invitation came to the tens of thousands of Universalists who were drawn into the spiritualist movement—probably the most dramatic outpouring of radical magic in US history. Spiritualism spoke to people where they hurt—promising them renewed connections to loved ones who had died too soon. At the same time, it renewed their commitment to radical struggles in the here and now—for many of the spirits came bearing testimony against slavery, against patriarchy, or against capitalism.

It was no accident that Universalism, which had always had an ear for empowerment, responded more enthusiastically than any other tradition to Spiritualism's call. The call first came from the self-empowerment of a group that we sometimes forget to see as marginalized: teenagers. The Fox sisters of Hydesville were 12 and 15 when they began interpreting messages from the spirits of the dead; Andrew Jackson Davis of Poughkeepsie was a teenager when he made clairvoyant contact with the spirit of Emanuel Swedenborg. For them and for countless mediums who followed, speaking for the spirits generated the strength to speak for oneself. The most radical women of the age began as trance lecturers. They were joined by Universalist ministers who had long dabbled in mesmerism and other magic practices. John Murray Spear, who with his brother Charles was already established as a champion of prisoners, electrified radicals of all stripes with spirit messages from the likes of George Washington and John C. Calhoun, both of whom had apparently repented of their slaveholding after entering the spirit realm.

It would be tempting to tell the story of spiritualism as one of magic becoming unhinged from ethics, and thus from social responsibility. Victoria Woodhull, who briefly galvanized the Spiritualists, the women's rights activists, and the Marxists into a single revolutionary movement, was also willing to turn all three into vehicles for her vast personal ambition. John Murray Spear, for example, steadily turned his attention from prisoners' rights to his dream of creating a "New Motive Power," or perpetual motion machine, using a blueprint conveyed by the "electrizing" spirits of Benjamin Rush, John Murray, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. Spear was a vigorous critic of patriarchal marriage, yet his own practice of "free love" largely meant discarding wives and lovers for ever younger women. Another Universalist turned spiritualist, Thomas Lake Harris, launched a

series of utopian communities in which sexual magic sometimes morphed into sexual exploitation.

Yet the most radical criticisms of spiritualist excess came from other spiritualists. When some spiritualists said that spiritualism was the foundation of all social change, Andrew Jackson Davis replied that it was really a door into the broader task of helping all of “oppressed humanity . . . find a voice.” Adin Ballou, who identified as *both* a Christian and a Spiritualist, as well as *both* a Unitarian and a Universalist, insisted that even if Spear found a perpetual motion machine, it would not inaugurate the “moral and social revolution desired” because “God does not accomplish such changes by such means.” Better to stick to the everyday magic of radical organizing, advised Ballou. “Why should they wait to see mountains removed by spirits in a moment—mountains which after all will have to be removed by the shovelful?”

In Ballou, and in the many Hopedale children who led that community’s journey toward spiritualism, we can see a helpful blend of Universalist empowerment and Unitarian ethics. Like most early Universalists, Ballou was self-educated, but his abolitionist and pacifist commitments linked him to astonishingly privileged reformers. When the Restorationist controversy pushed him out of Universalism, the Unitarians took him in. The marks of privilege are evident in his rebuttal to Spear. To say that mountains of injustice must be removed by the shovelful assumes that we already have the power to lift a shovel, and that our industry is likely to be rewarded. For those who could not make those assumptions, Spear’s style of magic may have appealed more.

This is a Universalist paradox: successful practices of empowerment can create privilege and thus turn Universalists into Unitarians. Just as it happened for

Adin Ballou, so it did for Thomas Starr King: this self-educated son of a Working Men's activist became the great planter of Unitarianism in California, the loyal Republican who kept his adopted state in the Union. Horace Greeley, who rose from printer's apprentice to become the most influential newspaper editor in the country, never forsook the Universalism of his youth. But he did make it his life's work to mediate between grassroots empowerment movements and the political establishments of the Whig and Republican parties.

Another mediating Universalist was Mary Livermore. At the dawn of the Civil War, she was the wife of a Universalist minister and editor living in Chicago. Passionately committed to the cause of freedom, she wanted to do her share for the war effort. She found a way in the Sanitary Commission—a network of women who raised money, sewed uniforms, and nursed soldiers. Such practices were magical for the women who soon gained the confidence to advocate on their own behalf. This didn't always sit well with the generals, and so the government organized a committee of men to oversee the women. You may not be surprised to hear that it was a committee of *Unitarian* men, headed up by the number one Unitarian of his generation, Henry Whitney Bellows. As the head of the Sanitary Commission in Chicago, Livermore was the point of contact between Bellows and the women at the grassroots, and she managed to work well with both.

After the war, Livermore led the women of the Sanitary Commission into the campaign for women's suffrage. She continued to mediate between the power elite and the grassroots. She aligned with those suffragists who were willing to cooperate with Republican Party politicians. She served as an officer of the massive Women's Christian Temperance Union, home to women of all ideologies who opposed alcohol. But she also served as vice president of the tiny, radical



Society of Christian Socialists, reporting that “no movement has ever before so taken possession of me and filled me with such buoyant hope.” And she never forgot the importance of empowerment. As the “Queen of the American Platform,” her favorite speech was “What Shall We Do with Our Daughters?” a passionate plea for comprehensive women’s education. Fully empowered women, Livermore knew, would transform the human understanding of how to use power wisely.

Many of Livermore’s metaphorical daughters became Universalist ministers. Women’s ordination was a potent symbol of empowerment. Women became ministers by inspiring one another, mentoring one another, and befriending one another. Denominations and seminaries played a secondary role, often as obstacles rather than allies. Yet it is noteworthy that Universalism threw up fewer obstacles than other Protestant denominations—in part, perhaps, because Hosea Ballou’s skepticism about the “learned ministry” had not entirely died out. The logic of self-empowerment had not quite died out.

The fact that Universalism had more women ministers than other Protestant denominations suggested that it might also be classified with the other religious that *did* enjoy female leadership. The so-called “metaphysical” traditions of Spiritualism, Theosophy, Christian Science, and New Thought had female founders and female leaders at the local level, often understood as teachers or healers rather than “ministers.” These women used various forms of magic to empower people who lacked money, education, or health. These practices ranged from séances with spirits of the beloved dead to the use of mental healing techniques to overcome chronic illness and societal prejudice. The earlier purge of anti-Christian spiritualists notwithstanding, all these practices were widespread among Universalists. At the turn of the century, Universalist conference centers

like Ferry Beach often played host to New Thought gatherings—indeed, Ferry Beach hosts the “Psi Symposium” for metaphysicians even today.

The alliance between Universalist women ministers and their sisters in the metaphysical traditions was especially evident in the *Woman’s Bible*, edited by Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the 1890s. A stalwart of women’s rights ever since Seneca Falls, Stanton had long dreamed of bringing together a team of women ministers and biblical scholars to expose the sexism inherent in scripture and propose alternative translations and interpretations. But Stanton’s support for the Free Thought movement made her too hot to touch for most Christian women. The Orthodox and Unitarian women she invited to be part of her project, including even Antoinette Brown, found excuses not to be involved. But three Universalist ministers said yes: Olympia Brown, Phebe Hanaford, and Augusta Chapin. Along with their New Thought sisters, they offered a counterpoint to Stanton’s sheerly negative criticism of the Bible. Beneath the sexist surface of the Bible, they said, a seeker might find inspiring poetry, prophetic solidarity with the poor and the widowed, and hints of a God who was Mother as well as Father. Such reading for the Bible’s hidden messages was a way to unleash its magical power.

Magical empowerment were also cherished by those Universalists who turned to the socialist movement at the beginning of the twentieth century. By 1908 at least one out of fifty Universalist ministers identified with the party—a small percentage, but five to ten times the ratios in mainline denominations. Universalist Socialists included Alexander Kent of Washington, DC, the only male minister to publicly endorse the *Woman’s Bible*, as well as the state superintendent in Kansas. Rev. Charles Vail, one of Phebe Hanaford’s successors in Jersey City, wrote several introductory manuals of socialism. Vail proudly declared that he was

a “Scientific Socialist” and that socialism “stands for one of the highest ideals of which it is possible for the human mind to conceive.”<sup>7</sup> Echoing Karl Marx, he taught that socialism would come only when an empowered proletariat overthrew the entire capitalist order. Vail’s books, published just before socialists united in a single national party, earned him a slot as the party’s “national organizer” and as its candidate for governor of New Jersey.

Vail was by no means the only minister to reinvent himself as a socialist party leader. Within a few decades, former Presbyterian minister Norman Thomas emerged as the party’s perennial presidential candidate. But after his stint with the party, Vail did two somewhat surprising things. First, he returned to parish ministry—serving, perhaps ironically, at the Pullman Memorial Universalist Church in Albion, New York. Most other Socialist ministers eventually felt they had to choose between their denomination and their party. As a Universalist, Vail never did.

Second, even as Vail continued to publish on Marxism, he also wrote about the secret meanings of Freemasonic rituals and the “fundamental unity” underlying the savior stories of Jesus, Krishna, Buddha, and Quetzalcoatl. All religions, Vail believed, could be traced to a single Brotherhood of Initiates who had handed down the ancient wisdom of Atlantis. Such ideas were not all that uncommon among socialists of Vail’s generation, who may have been attracted to practices that would give them strength for the coming fight with capitalism. Vail believed that each age has its own “great World Teacher,” and that the one coming would help to break down the old economic order.

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<sup>7</sup> *Modern Socialism*, 6.

Another Socialist who was fascinated with esoteric magic was Edwin Markham, who became the party's poet laureate for his evocation of the working man's struggle in "The Man with the Hoe." Reflecting on the Millet painting of a farm worker, Markham suggested that the worker bore "the burden of the world" on his back, and even in his silence "cried Protest to the judges of the world." In another poem, Markham sounded the theme of "brotherhood," proclaiming that "blind creeds and kings have had their day" while heroic workers were "star-led to build the world again."

Markham shows how Universalist magic empowerment often comes full circle. As a young man in California, he learned his socialism from aged Thomas Lake Harris—the spiritualist and communitarian who had abandoned the Universalist ministry many decades before. As a mature radical, Markham joined the Universalist church in Brooklyn, New York. That's why we so often quote his poem, *Outwitted*:

He drew a circle that shut me out—

Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.

But Love and I had the wit to win:

We drew a circle that took him in!

This poem has all the magic of Universalism embedded in it. "Casting a circle" is the most basic form of magic in many traditions. Universalists cast circles because we have been cast out—cast out of established churches, cast out of capitalist monopolies, cast out because of our race or gender or sexuality. When we are cast out, when we are told we are not part of the human family, we feel powerless. When we are cast out, even when we simply *feel* cast out, there is no

question of ethics, no question of using our power rightly, because we don't know we have any power to use.

But when we cast circles—whether by joining hands at the end of worship, by marking the four directions in a solstice ritual, or by occupying Wall Street—we create our own power and rebuild the human family. We can cast our circles as widely as we want, even to the point of declaring, like Clarence Skinner, the solidarity of all humanity.

And there is no better time than now for us to practice some old-fashioned Universalist magic. Consider this: Universalism shrank and Unitarianism grew in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s—economic boom years, when Americans streamed through universities into the middle class. It was a time for ethics, and Unitarianism delivered, forming a generation of mostly white activists who reached out to their black brothers and sisters in the south, and who helped end the most unethical war in US history.

But now it is time for empowerment. Median income is at 1997 levels, and going down. Fifty million Americans are poor, and many of them are in our congregations. Our fields are poisoned with pesticide, our tapwater is poisoned by hydrofracking, our politics is poisoned by our lack of hope.

In times like these, we must remember that empowerment is religious work. Ethics without empowerment cannot speak to the unemployed. It cannot speak to gay and lesbian youth who've been taught that the deepest parts of their identity are sinful. It cannot speak to teenage moms who believe it is their fault that they've been abandoned by their boyfriends, abandoned by their schools, abandoned by our welfare system. It cannot speak to immigrants who've been told that they're

welcome to clean our toilets and pick our tomatoes, but not to build our future. Ethics without empowerment cannot speak to a generation of Americans who have no reason to believe their lives will be better than their parents' lives.

And that's why we see so many people casting circles today. That's why we see Carlton Pearson in Tulsa, once the most popular black televangelist in the country, walking away from the closed circle of Oral Roberts University to cast a universalist circle wide enough for Oral Roberts's gay son *and* for his mostly white Unitarian Universalist sisters and brothers.

That's why we see queer people casting the magic circle of marriage around themselves, in states where it's legal and states where it's not.

That's why we see Van Jones in Oakland and Grace Boggs in Detroit casting circles of healing on vacant lots, turning them into organic gardens, places of good work and good health for inner-city youth.

That's why we see courageous immigrant children who refuse to hide, who cast their circle around Harvard University or the University of California, saying "This is my home and I have a right to be educated!"

And that's why so many Unitarian Universalists are putting on our magic yellow shirts, our Standing on the Side of Love shirts, and joining the circle. Because those yellow shirts are not really about ethics. They aren't really designed for privileged people who feel powerful and want to share our power with the downtrodden. If we felt so powerful, we wouldn't need to wear a silly yellow shirt. If we felt so powerful we wouldn't need to "go to Phoenix" or to agonize about going to Phoenix or to fight about going to Phoenix or to shout Hallelujah! about going to Phoenix. We do these things because we feel cast out. We do these things

because wearing a yellow shirt and going to Phoenix are magic—magic that we hope will cast a circle big enough to join us to all the beautiful people who are already empowering themselves in every corner of this world.

That’s the magic of universalism, the magic that William Heighton and George Lippard and Mary Livermore have passed down for us to use today. So go ahead and cast your circle.

A puzzle: *Social Implications* was published in 1915 by the Universalist Publishing House or Murray Press, in Boston. But the copy on Google books implies it was printed by “Vail-Ballou Company” in Binghamton and NYC. Company launched in Binghamton in 1911. In 1921 this company had a strike in Binghamton; spokesperson at that time was W. R. Lockwood.

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<sup>i</sup> *Quaker City Weekly*, June 30, 1848, in Reynolds, *Lippard*, 205; *Quaker City Weekly*, June 2, 1849, in Reynolds, *Lippard*, 210, 212.

<sup>ii</sup> Powderly cited in Robert E. Weir, *Beyond Labor’s Veil: The Culture of the Knights of Labor* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1996), 74; Debs cited in Upton Sinclair, *The Cry for Justice: An Anthology of the Literature of Social Protest* (self published, 1921), p. 345; Nick Salvatore, “Preface to the Second Edition,” *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), xvi.