

## My Early Experience

Br. Austin:—I would like to compare the present improved and progressing state of our denomination with its condition in my earlier years. In Feb. 1813 my parents, with their young family, removed to the town of Paris, Oneida co., N. Y. In a small school-house situated in what is now Sauquoit village, they, probably for the first time, listened to a discourse by a Universalist preacher—either Rev. Paul Dean or Rev. Ebenezer Lester. I attended the meetings of the latter several times, in company with my parents. However good the sermons may have been, my mind was not sufficiently matured to appreciate them. I often heard opposers converse with my parents on the subject of their faith. The latter very seldom met with Universalists to hold friendly converse with. There were some, however, in the vicinity, though none in our immediate neighborhood. I recollect our good father, Rev. Mr. Underwood, and his lady, visited us once, and my mother invited in some of her neighbors, and he delivered an address. Such occasions were golden privileges to my parents, and highly appreciated by them. From all I heard and saw, I gathered that they (my parents) believed the whole human family would eventually be saved from that fiery pit about which I had heard so much. But how it was to be effected was more than I could learn. I supposed, however, there was a literal place of fire and brimstone to be saved from.

In the summer of 1814 I was at the house of a Presbyterian lady, when I accidentally heard her remark to a person present, “this little girl’s mother is a *Universalist*.” She then related a very affecting story of two men who neither believed in God or hell (the latter she seemed to consider as important as the former). They mutually agreed that the one which should leave this world first, if there were any hereafter, [w]ould return and inform the other what was his situation in that other world. The result was, the friend who died first was permitted to return, but said he must hasten back to his destined place of torment. To my dear mother I again went. Her opinion, in my mind, would settle the matter. I related the sad tale. “Mother, “ I said, “do you believe he was in *hell*?” “I presume he was,” she replied, “if he disbelieved in the existence of God.” She explained no farther. I have since learned that she at that time was a Restorationist, of the Winchester school. Thus was destroyed the small hope I had gained, of an escape from the awful fate which I feared awaited me.

I could not describe, were I to attempt to, the terrors of my mind, especially after attending a funeral. I mostly went to the Methodist meeting—sometimes to the Baptist, and occasionally to the Presbyterian. I thus early (at that age of 14 or 15 years) discovered the peculiar features of Calvinism and Arminianism. The former seemed to portray the character of God like a powerful and cruel tyrant! But still I could not look upon the views which the latter gave him with any degree of respect, inasmuch as they described him as desiring to save all, but in consequence of man’s [sic] stubborn will he could not. This seemed too much to me like weakness. Neither of those views of my heavenly Father were satisfactory. But I had not heard any other explanation of his character that I had been able to comprehend. I not infrequently heard people talk in prayer meetings, and declare how much they enjoyed themselves, since they had “renounced the world,” as they expressed themselves. But I noticed they would generally close their remarks by saying, “it was, after all, very hard to live a christian life—it was very pleasant to live in sin, but they must give up every earthly pleasure,

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and be despised”—and all because they were christians. This seemed very strange to me; but as they were people much older than myself, I supposed it must be so, because they said it. This was not all; they said we must not yield to reason, because that was carnal, and therefore it would be very wicked to reason on the subject of religion! I could not understand what I must do. I tried to love my heavenly Father, but could never feel any pure *respect*, even, for a being possessing a character as described by Calvinists or Arminians.

In the summer of 1817, a pamphlet fell into my hands. This has, to me, always seemed providential, as my mind was then in a proper state to receive truth, and I drank in its instructions immediately. The title of the pamphlet was “The Female Christian, or Lucy Barns.”

The author is said to have been the daughter of Rev. Thomas Barns. It consisted of letters written, while in a state of feeble health, to her friends. After her death they were published. While attending the State Convention at Victor, N. Y., some years since, I saw her sister, who arose in the Conference meeting and addressed the people a short time. The pamphlet was written in a style adapted to my capacity, and was the first Universalist work I had ever read. It was like an angel’s visit to my mind. My doubts and fears were all dispersed. In the arguments of that little book I beheld a God worthy of my best affections, my most ardent love and devout gratitude. In Him I could view a kind Father and Friend, to whom I could go in confidence, in the deepest affliction, at all times. This faith never left me. Though I have passed through many severe afflictions, yet it has ever been my soul’s anchor. Not my Friend only, but a sure Friend to the entire human family. I feel there is no other faith that can give that firm, abiding confidence in our heavenly Father, at all times, which ours does. Then is it not most glorious? I [w]ould assuredly be the most thankful of beings, that my heavenly Father thus early in life dispelled the dark clouds of partialism from my mind, and caused me to view his character in a more truly glorious light. I could never have wished to *conceal* my faith in the ultimate holiness and happiness of all, notwithstanding it brought much censoriousness upon me.

In that early day it was considered almost a crime to avow faith in Universalism, and remarks such as these were frequently made, often accompanied with more opprobrious epithets—a *woman* to be a Universalist!” It was by many considered a foul blot upon the reputation of a female to profess belief in this doctrine. But I thought that as it was a truth of so much importance, that our heavenly Father sent his son into the world to proclaim it, and that as he suffered martyrdom to establish and defend it, I should not, through fear of what man should say to me, deny it. I felt that it would be denying my Lord and Master to profess belief in any other form of religion, notwithstanding the epithets heaped upon me by opposers. I did not wish to intrude my opinions upon others; but if attacked, I considered it my *duty* to defend them, so far as I had the ability to do. My only regret is that I have not always sufficiently honored his cause. “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” We are too liable to forget to watch, and sometimes, ah, many times, sink into the sleep of indifference.

I thought the arguments contained in the above mentioned little book sufficiently conclusive to convince the world of the truth of Universalism. But I did not then know the world, as I have since learned it. I did not know with what tenacity the majority of

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mankind cling to a faith seemingly the more firmly believed, the more misery it produces! Neither did I know how pertinaciously they would fondle and hug the viper that was stinging and gnawing to the very heart's core of their happiness—and yet, poor souls, they seem to know it not!

L[asira] I. Torrey

Grand Marsh, Wis.

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Transcribed on 3 Oct 2011 by Karen E. Dau of Rochester, NY