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The Many Faces of Olympia Brown

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Cox *wrote this paper in Spring 2001 for Dr. Alicia Forsey's Unitarian Universalist History class at Starr King School.*

Introduction

Universalist minister Olympia Brown has been enjoying a resurgence of popularity in recent years as Unitarian Universalist women reclaim their heritage as spiritual leaders and builders of the movement. On the 75th anniversary of her death, it is worth examining biographies of Brown to see how her portrayal changes over time and space. Several themes emerge: Olympia the reformer, Olympia the parish minister, Olympia the scholar, and Olympia the invisible woman. This study of Brown is meant to highlight perspectives and multiplicity, not to evaluate the quality or truthfulness of any of her biographies.

Olympia the Reformer

Brown's most widely read full-length biography is Olympia Brown and the Battle for Equality by Charlotte Coté, published in 1988. As one might guess from the title, women's suffrage and women's rights are a main focus of the book. Coté summarizes the triumphant close of the suffrage movement, to which Brown devoted many years. "They had visibly and vehemently protested their plight of second-class citizenship, focusing the attention of the nation and the world on a democracy that denied half its citizens the right to vote, much as it still denies them equal rights" (Coté, 172). One can discern here the parallels that Coté draws between Brown and the other suffragists of the early twentieth century and the campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment in the late twentieth century. The volume seems meant to inspire a new generation of women's rights activists. As a full-length biography, Battle for Equality also includes numerous details about Brown's parish ministry career and education, yet it seems clear that activism is the main focus of Coté's book.

The “Biographical Sketch” included in Standing Before Us: Unitarian Universalist Women and Social Reform, 1776–1936 spends a little over half of its space on Brown’s women’s rights work. June Edwards and Laurie Carter Noble use less militaristic language than Coté, referring to the “women’s rights movement” rather than a “battle” (Edwards and Noble, 252). The two writings by Olympia Brown included in Standing Before Us are an essay on “The Higher Education of Women,” which will be discussed in a later section, and her final sermon, “Opening Doors.” Both pieces speak to social reform, but not directly to women’s suffrage. (“Opening Doors” was delivered in 1920, soon after the 19th Amendment passed.) One wonders whether Brown herself thought of herself as a women’s rights activist or a soldier in the battle for suffrage. By contrasting Coté’s book with the sketch by Edwards and Noble, it is clear that the two identities are distinct perspectives.

The Social Reformer Personality

As an activist, Olympia Brown spoke out on controversial issues. Her biographers do not agree on the level of diplomacy she used. E. R. Hanson’s 1882 biography quotes a parishioner as praising her “spirit of work and tact in setting others at work” (Hanson, 492).

On the other hand, Brown’s daughter Gwendolen Willis speaks differently:

> She was not popular. She was indomitable and uncompromising, traits that do not lend themselves well to politics and leadership. She cared little for society, paid no deference to wealth, represented an unfashionable church, promoted a cause regarded as certain to be unsuccessful. She was troublesome because she asked people to do things, to work, contribute money, go to meetings, think, and declare themselves openly as favoring a principle or public measure. (Willis, quoted in Coté, p. 185)

Gwendolen was still young when her mother retired from parish ministry, and the Olympia Brown she remembers is the pure activist. This is the personality that comes through most strongly in Coté, who credits Willis heavily in both the book dedication and the author biography.

In Standing Before Us, the biographical sketch lies somewhere in between Hanson and Coté in terms of describing Olympia Brown’s tact. Edwards and Noble call her a “formidable woman,” “undaunted, resourceful, and determined to succeed” (Edwards and Noble, 252). They do not quite portray Brown as the brash, “troublesome” activist described by her daughter and by Coté. By quoting the Baltimore Sun obituary, Edwards and Noble show some of the other, less diplomatic Brown:

> Perhaps no phase of her life better exemplified her vitality and intellectual independence than the mental discomfort she succeeded in arousing, between her eightieth and ninetieth birth-

> days, among conservatively-minded Baltimoreans. (Baltimore Sun, 25 October 1926, quoted in Edwards & Noble, 253–254.)

The obituary only highlight's Brown's reception by conservatives, not the general public. Edwards and Noble reinforce this view of Brown's personal style as they write, "Olympia Brown certainly afflicted the comfortable during what were ostensibly her sunset years" (254). In this picture, Brown did cause anxiety, but only among "the comfortable," and mostly late in her life.

David Robinson writes that Brown had a "keen sense of denominational politics" and that she "had to be as careful and persistent in obtaining her ordination as in pursuing her education" (Robinson, 131–132). He translates personal style and tact into functions of intelligence, and finds her just as diplomatic in his 1985 perspective as does Hanson in her 1882 perspective.

The level of tact biographers find throughout Brown's life seems to relate to the phase of her life on which the biography focuses. Hanson and Robinson relate more information about Brown's education and earlier career in parish ministry. Coté focuses on Brown's activist career and the end of her life. By reading several biographies, one gets a sense that Brown's personality changed over time.

Reform and Parish Ministry: Where to Find a Balance?

Russell Miller mentions suffrage work and Brown's writings on women's rights (Miller 1979, 566–567). He also mentions Brown's involvement in the World's Parliament of Religions and The Columbian Congress of the Universalist Church, which other biographers overlook (Miller 1985, 122). In the two, thick volumes of The Larger Hope, Miller has the space to deal with a complex picture of Universalism in America, and mentions Brown several times.

Miller points out that women in Brown's own time were busily preserving their stories for posterity, biographies were not merely the result of later research. One of the books he references is E. R. Hanson's Our Women Workers, which contains biographical sketches of 146 women (Miller 1979, 535). Hanson's book was published in 1882, during the middle of Brown's pastorate in Racine, Wisconsin. Hanson uses Brown's married name, Olympia Brown Willis, and devotes a generous amount of space to her biography. She writes, "Mrs. Willis is an able Woman Suffragist, but she considers this subject incidental to what she was sent to do" (Hanson, 430). Brown left parish ministry in 1887 to devote more time to suffrage work (Coté, 125).

Hanson's de-emphasis of this aspect of Brown's life could be an attempt to avoid controversy. She spends the first two paragraphs of Brown's biography on apologetics, proclaiming that "The object of this book is not to advocate or oppose a Woman Ministry, but to chronicle what women have done, and to do the fullest justice to their work, to 'naught extenuate nor set aught down in malice' " (Hanson, 427).

On the other hand, Hanson does not shy away from relating the story of Brown's four-month campaign for suffrage in Kansas. She writes, "My reader must remember that in 1867 political influence was more or less against the movement, and no preparation for the presentation of this subject had been made previous to her campaign, and yet one-third of all the votes cast were for Woman Suffrage" (Hanson, 430). If "political influence" is no longer against "the movement," perhaps Hanson did not consider suffrage to be a controversial subject.

Another explanation might be that she emphasizes Brown's work within the Universalist church because that is the focus of the book, hence its full title: Our Women Workers: Biographical Sketches of Women Eminent in the Universalist Church for Literary, Philanthropic and Christian Work. More recent biographical collections such as Standing Before Us often emphasize work done outside the denomination, actions that non-Unitarian Universalists might have heard of.

A third explanation is that Hanson had access to the living Olympia Brown, and may have known through correspondence about what was important to Brown herself at that moment in 1882. While Edwards and Noble spend one sentence on Brown's six-year pastorate in Weymouth and a paragraph on the four-month leave of absence she took from the Weymouth congregation to campaign in Kansas (252), Hanson devotes about the same amount of space to each (429–430). Perhaps Brown put her suffrage work and her parish ministry on a more equal footing.

David Robinson's account of Olympia Brown in The Unitarians and The Universalists approaches her careers in both parish ministry and suffrage as aspects of social reform. Of her resignation from the pastorate in Racine, he writes, "In a sense that change of career directions was actually a fulfillment of a life whose direction had been toward liberation. The weight of what she considered regressive religious belief was oppressive, as was the weight of sexual discrimination. Her career was a battle against both of them" (Robinson, 132).

Brown herself saw continuity between equal rights and other social reforms. Her address to the World's Parliament of Religions, "Crime and its Remedy," reasons that women who are enfranchised, educated, and respected will bear and raise children who grow up to be better citizens

(Brown 1893, 104–105). Her sermon "Opening Doors," the last one she ever delivered, delights in advancement of science and society, especially the passage of the 19th Amendment. In the sermon, Brown advocates for an end to war and the creation of the League of Nations, and speaks of the continuing social relevance of the Universalist message. The frequently-quoted "Stand by This Faith" passage is taken from this sermon (Brown 1920, quoted in Coté, 193–197).

Olympia Brown was a social reformer throughout her life. How that is treated by biographers depends on the era of the biography, what kind of reform the biographer wishes to inspire in the reader, and whether the biographer has an interest in the history mainly within or outside of the Unitarian Universalist tradition, as well as many other factors.

Olympia the Parish Minister

Brown's career as a woman parish minister was, of course, ground breaking and can therefore not be completely separated from her progressive ideas about gender equality.

Even E. R. Hanson writes that "When Olympia Brown began her work, it required fortitude, persistence and conviction of duty of the highest kind to persevere. Prejudice was encountered which can now scarcely be imagined" (Hanson, 428).

Still, biographers occupy a wide spectrum between acknowledging the prejudice that Brown encountered during her parish ministry career and focusing on the prejudice rather than the career.

Hanson, perhaps hoping to ruffle as few feathers as possible, does not dwell on the prejudice exhibited by her fellow Universalists. She quotes one of the parishioners from Brown's first settlement in Weymouth, Massachusetts:

> When Rev. Miss Brown came among us, the society was in a poor and unhealthy condition; but as soon as possible she went to work, and she was an earnest worker, totally unselfish, doing everything in her power for the advancement and best interests of the society. When at the end of more than five years' faithful labor Miss Brown sent in her resignation, it was not received until a consultation had been held with her, and they were assured that she felt it her duty to go, and then, reluctantly. (Hanson, 429)

This passage shows how Hanson focuses on Brown's abilities in promoting the Universalist church, rather than on the reluctance she encountered from biased parishioners.

The Battle for Equality indicates a great deal of opposition to the idea of a woman minister from some members of the Bridgeport, Connecticut, church, Brown's second settlement. This congregation also claims fame as being the home church of showman P. T. Barnum, who supported Brown's ministry (Coté, 110–113). Hanson gives no indication of the gender controversy, citing only a flowery compliment by an anonymous Bridgeport parishioner (Hanson, 429–430).

At Brown's third and final parish settlement in Racine, Wisconsin, she repeated her performance from Weymouth as a revitalizing force. Hanson relates that a member of the Racine church writes, "The field was by no means a promising one when she entered it." Under her leadership, the Racine congregation completed a "thorough renovation and repair of its church building" (Hanson, 431). The quoted parishioner, identified as Hon. A. C. Fish, mentions "the inevitable prejudice against a 'woman preacher,'" but does not go into detail on that topic.

Coté, while interested in portraying each conflict in the "Battle for Equality," takes time to fill in such details as the way Brown bravely forded rivers to make pastoral calls (Coté, 118–119). She writes of Brown's humor and skill at raising funds for the Universalist church:

> It was said of her that when the church was in need of additional money, she was not above asking that the rich be more generous in their contributions, and she would say, "Mr. Barnum, I mean you." According to the report, Mr. Barnum never failed to oblige her. (Coté, 106)

Miller goes into some detail about the challenges that Brown faced in the parish in terms of membership and physical plant. But, where Hanson and Coté give Brown credit for the organizing and fund raising that turned her congregations around, Miller implies that the difficulties were solved by magic:

> Perhaps she felt she had been given too gloomy or one-sided a picture of her experiences, for a few weeks later she was looking on the brighter side. She acknowledged that while at St. Lawrence a few of the students and some of the faculty had supported her. There were, indeed, many faithful Universalists in her Weymouth congregation, and the debt which she reported earlier had been paid off. (Miller 1979, 552)

Note the passive voice in Miller's last sentence. He manages to devote a respectable amount of space to the places and dates of Brown's parish ministry career, along with the prejudice she encountered, without saying much about how she actively worked to overcome obstacles.

Edwards and Noble deliver the dates and locations of Brown's three settled pastorates without comment, detailing neither the challenges offered by each congregation nor the way Brown handled them. These most recent biographers do not elaborate on the connection between Brown's career in parish ministry and social reform, aside from her work in women's rights (Edwards and Noble, 252–253). One gets the impression that Edwards and Noble regard parish ministry as a distraction from Brown's more important work.

But, as Robinson notes, "Brown recognized that ordination was important to her mission" (Robinson, 132). In addition to speaking and writing on women's rights and suffrage during her parish career, she also preached on other social issues. For instance, her address to the Universalist Congress in 1893 focused on prison reform and the abolition of capital punishment as an outgrowth of Universalist theology (Brown 1894, 308–322). Robinson summarizes, "Brown was a determined woman, a skillful preacher and organizer," equally covering the bases of activism and parish ministry (Robinson, 131).

Given that Brown's career in parish ministry lasted a healthy 24 years, one assumes that her concerns extended beyond women's rights and raising funds. Future biographers may wish to study her tenure as an ordained, fellowshipped parish minister in more depth.

Olympia the Scholar

Enough has been written about Olympia Brown's education and her views on education to warrant examination.

The Battle for Equality fills in many details about Brown's education. Her mother, Lephia, was a great believer in education for girls. Lephia instituted daily discussions on articles in The New York Weekly Tribune, and prioritized school work over household chores on the busy frontier farm (Coté, 13).

While Olympia was attending Antioch college, her parents moved to the nearby community of Yellow Springs, Ohio, and soon re-created the intellectual buzz that had characterized their house in Michigan:

> Their home became the center for many student gatherings, particularly among the young radicals. Olympia delighted in the discussions and debates on politics, education and many controversial issues as did her mother, who must surely have felt some twinges of regret that she had never had the opportunity to engage in such activities when she was young (Coté, 42).

Miller acknowledges Brown's educational attainments at Antioch and St. Lawrence, but does not speak of them with admiration. In a section of The Larger Hope on Universalist educational institutions, he writes:

> It may not have added to the prestige of the school, but Fisher, when he did attempt to recruit students [to Canton Theological School], emphasized not only the constant need of ministers, especially in rural churches, but the fact that the school's admission standards were quite flexible... But three years of training prepared them adequately, in his estimation, and it was much cheaper than preparatory school, followed by four years of college and at least two years of theological school... College graduates could complete the course in two years, as did Olympia Brown, the first woman in any denomination to be regularly ordained who had completed a formal course of theological instruction (Miller 1979, 458–459).

One imagines that Miller meant to honor Brown by mentioning her barrier-crossing step in becoming educated and ordained. Yet, by speaking of her theological education in such terms, Miller does not agree with Coté's portrayal of a bright woman from a studious household.

In addition to Brown's own education, biographers take note of her educational theories. Cassara and Miller both reference Brown's article, "The Higher Education of Women," which is excerpted extensively in Standing Before Us (Brown 1874, 246–251; Cassara, 212–213; Miller 1979, 545). In this article, Brown argues that educational opportunities should be extended to women because, among other reasons:

> The position of wife and mother will be far better filled by one whose mind is enlarged by a great knowledge of affairs and whose character is matured by the discipline of life, than by one whose sympathies and whose knowledge extends no farther than the half dozen or more rooms which she calls her home. (Brown c, 250.)

Brown addresses several objections to higher education for women in her article. She shows how her own education in rhetoric combines with a sense of humor:

> But, says some objector, women will no longer be angels when bought into contact with the rude world. Alas! The United States of America in 1874 is not a favorable place for angels, nor are the men of the nineteenth century suitable companions for them. An angel in American society at the present time would be sadly out of place and very uncomfortable. (Brown 1874, 250)

Another objection Brown addresses is over the link between academic education and physical health in women. She quotes "President Angell, of the Michigan University" as an expert on the effect of education on young women. Brown writes:

> He says, "Any lady who can endure the draft that modern dress and society make upon her can certainly endure any college course so far as physical endurance is concerned ... nor has it actually been the case that they have been impaired in health by the course." (Brown 1874, 249)

Brown's physical health is frequently mentioned by biographers in connection with her education. Hanson writes that Brown was "possessed of an unusual amount of vigor. She takes a good deal of pride in referring to her abounding health, whenever she hears a reverend gentleman complain of lassitude or indisposition. She attended school in her native place until she learned every thing the school at that time could give to so active a brain" (Hanson, 428). Why are these two sentences written together, with no paragraph break between them?

Miller lends some insight as to why education and physical health are an issue in writings by and about Olympia Brown. He reports that a book by Edward H. Clarke called Sex in Education; or, A Fair Chance for the Girls was "one of the most widely read and warmly debated books on the 'woman question' in the 1870s." Clarke argued through five case studies that education had a debilitating effect on the physical and mental health of young women (Miller a, 544). In response, Julia Ward Howe solicited information from a much wider data set, surveying graduates of several colleges that educated women. Olympia Brown wrote the report for Antioch College (Miller 1979, 545).

The Battle for Equality makes frequent mention of Brown's love of physical exercise, especially during the chapters dealing with her years in college and immediately after seminary. Brown adopted the "Amelia Bloomer" dress while an undergraduate, finding it "comfortable and practical" for active campus life (Coté, 42). Coté continues, "No athletic classes were scheduled for female students at Antioch College, and they soon began to take long walks in the area to get their exercise" (42).

After graduating from seminary and supplying the pulpit in Marshfield, Vermont, for a short time, Olympia spent several months in Boston. "She enrolled at once in Dio Lewis's gymnasium classes and began the exercises that were to develop her shoulders and chest." Brown also heard lectures at the gymnasium from such luminaries as Bronson Alcott (Coté, 63–63). Thus The Battle for Equality continues the tradition of Hanson and Miller in linking physical exercise and education in Brown's life.

These three biographers in 1882, 1979, and 1988 connect education and physical health. On the other hand, when the biographical sketch in Standing Before Us was published in the year 2000, women who grew up enjoying equal funding of boys' and girls' sports mandated under Title IX were old enough to hold doctorates. This may contribute to the decision of Edwards and Noble to ignore the issue of Brown's vigorous physical health. No mention of the health-education connection can be found in their sketch (Edwards and Noble, 251). Times change, and so do the interests of biographers.

Olympia the Invisible Woman

Equally as interesting as what is said about Brown by her biographers is what is not said by her contemporaries. The mention of her name is conspicuously absent from two books in particular. One, A Brief History of the Universalist Church for Young People, was published in 1905. The other, Memoir of Ebenezer Fisher, published in 1880, details the life of the president of Canton Theological School soon after his death.

L. B. Fisher wrote A Brief History of the Universalist Church at the request of the Young People's Christian Union, the Universalist youth group. He mentions Olympia Brown neither in the passage on Canton Theological School nor in an entire chapter on "The Women of The Universalist Church" (Fisher 160–162, 167–178). Fisher calls "the woman ministry" in the Universalist Church "new and unfamiliar," over forty years after Brown's ordination (Fisher, 168). He honors Maria Cook as the first fellowshipped woman preacher (Fisher, 167). According to The Larger Hope, Cook was not ordained, had not gone to theological school, preached for about three years, and burned her letter of fellowship "because she believed it had not been sincerely offered" (Miller 1979, 546).

While Cook's accomplishments are notable, compare her with Olympia Brown, who attended a Universalist theological school, was ordained, and served as a parish minister for over two decades. One finds the omission of Brown from the history very curious, indeed. Brown had obviously not left the Universalist church or her sense of religious vocation when she retired from her pulpit in 1887, because she is listed as "Rev. Olympia Brown Willis" in the collection of sermons and speeches from the Columbian Congress of the Universalist Church, published in 1894.

Perhaps the explanation for Brown's absence lies in the popularity of the suffrage movement in 1905. L. B. Fisher does not emphasize voting rights as an extension of the work in the church, although he does write that "A liberal church will certainly desire to give every woman the same privilege it gives any man, of self realization and expression in the way the Lord calls" (Fisher, 168). Church privileges, however, are different from secular politics. At the time A Brief History was

published, Brown was in the thick of the suffrage movement, and had been president of the Federal Suffrage Association for two years (Edwards and Noble, 253). As Coté points out, popularity of the women's suffrage movement ebbed and flowed. One cannot always discern what risk an author was taking (or thought he was taking) by allying with or ignoring the women's suffrage movement at any given time.

Another mysterious absence of Olympia Brown is found in Memoir of Ebenezer Fisher by George H. Emerson. When this volume was published in 1880, Brown was engaged as a successful parish minister in Racine, Wisconsin, performing feats of organization of which her theological school could be proud. Emerson mentions minute details about the opening and operating of the Canton Theological School around the time Brown attended, including a whole chapter on the calling of a professor of languages and his subsequent departure. The school's enrollment was not large; five people graduated in 1861, the spring before Brown arrived (Emerson, 145). Emerson mentions several prominent graduates, but not the first woman to be admitted to (and to graduate from) a Universalist theological school (147).

Emerson is certainly aware of the presence of women at Canton Theological School, and of the importance of women in its support. He writes, "Is it not true that in the days of its tribulation God watched over it, and raised up strong men and women to be its protectors?" Note the specific inclusion of women (Emerson, 169). In the chapter titled "Within the Home," in which the important contributions of Ebenezer Fisher's wife are acknowledged, Emerson makes a joke about the inclusion of women students at the annual Thanksgiving dinner that Dr. and Mrs. Fisher hosted.

Indeed, Mrs. Fisher may be the key to Olympia's exclusion from the pages of the Memoir. In The Battle for Equality, her response to Brown's ordination is recorded "in strong words. 'You will see now the consequence of this. Next year there will be fifteen women in the class and then women will flock to the ministry' " (Coté 59–60). If Ebenezer Fisher's wife collaborated extensively with Emerson in preparing the Memoir (and it is difficult to say if she did), her personal feelings about women in the ministry may have influenced the editing.

Students of history can learn a great deal from what is called "the null curriculum," those points which are instructive in their absence. Examining the places where Olympia Brown might have been mentioned and was not can yield a greater understanding of how she was received in her own time.

Conclusion

Olympia Brown was a complex, talented, vigorously active woman whose life was long enough to encompass several complete careers as a minister, mother, and activist. Just as modern Unitarian Universalists find sources of the living tradition in several places, so must the student of history seek out a multiplicity of identities in the prophetic women and men whose words and deeds inform that tradition. This paper has served as an example of a such a study.

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