

“Radical Revolutionaries—Then and Now”

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If you’ve not yet noticed, we are approaching the 250th Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence this summer. The celebrations arrive amidst a moment of great political and economic uncertainty—perhaps not unlike the many questions that swirled in 1776.

Looking back from the point of view of those who know the outcome, we might miss how confusing and contested of a time it was. Even after the war, as the new federal government began to function, it wasn’t clear that the ideals which had cost so much would hold.

In a 1789 letter, an elderly Benjamin Franklin wrote: *“Our new Constitution is now established, everything seems to promise it will be durable; but, in this world, nothing is certain except death and taxes.”*

Even for the long-devoted Franklin, the future was not certain. Nor had the process of charting a course to political change been clear. Did you know that Franklin disapproved of the 1773 Boston Tea Party? Fearing the outbreak of war, Franklin wrote to the Patriot leaders in Boston urging them to repay the East India Company and denouncing the destruction of private property as an act of *“Extremity.”*

Where do you think you would side? With the Patriots storming the harbor or with Franklin denouncing the act as extremism?

Or what about the practice of tar and feathering? Would you be in the streets adding your own feathers to the sticky tar on the shirt—or skin—of a tax collector? Or would you be shaking your head in disgust at the newspaper etchings that depicted feathered bodies being forced to drink tea—like the [one I included](#) in this week’s e-news?

250 years after the Revolution, we casually teach children about tar and feathering, which, especially on bare skin, constituted a form of torture, inflicting severe burns and pain. And we buy tickets for the privilege of tossing tea into the harbor at the Boston Tea Party museum. Lauding such actions as patriotic, we forget how contentious these actions were during the Revolutionary Era. In a world turned upside down, choosing right action was not always clear.

In such an era of tumult, hope and fear collided. Within this context, a young woman of 23 fell ill in Rhode Island in the fall of 1776. When she suddenly recovered, she claimed to have been reborn as a genderless messenger of God. Rising from her sick bed, Jemima Wilkinson, shed her name and feminine dress, instead adopting the genderless name of “Universal Friend” and donning a gender-bending clothing style of a masculine robe with flowing, unbound hair. Universal Friend began to preach as a minister, proclaiming a message of God’s love for all who would repent, assuring listeners, “There is room enough.” In contrast to the Calvinist message that God only elects some to heaven, Friend preached that God had room enough for all who repented. The choice lay with each person.

Universal Friend arrived in a revolutionary moment strewn with tremendous economic and political uncertainty as well as a spirit of possibility. As Thomas Paine wrote, “*We have it in our power to begin the world over again.*” In her new book, *Not Your Founding Father: How a Nonbinary Minister Became America’s Most Radical Revolutionary*, author Nina Sankovitch argues that Friend’s radical voice resonated in such a moment. By emphasizing the free will of each person to choose repentance, Friend’s message aligned not only with a longing for spiritual freedom, but also for expanded political agency as well. As Sankovitch writes, “*It was a revolutionary concept, the ability to choose one’s own fate.*” (47)

Committed to the value of each person’s agency, Friend required any who entered the Society of Universal Friends to free their enslaved persons. And they did. While the community was predominantly white, a handful of Black folks belonged, living equitably among the white members. So also, women and men both participated in leadership—with women often holding key positions in both religious leadership as well as practical and financial matters. Friend also did not grant higher status to those who were married or to those who were not. Celibacy was an option but not required.

In all these ways, the minister sought to build a community that fully lived out the promise of the Revolution of freedom and equality for *all*. As Sankovitch writes, “*Friend’s underlying goal was one that Americans hold close to our hearts: How to create a practical, functioning utopia. A world in which all its citizens have hope.*” (5)

Do you have hope today?

I’m a Gen-Xer. As such, I admit that I carry a healthy dose of cynicism often attributed to my generation. Or, as I prefer to think of it—a sense of *realism*. Utopian promises of ideal communities make me squirm with distrust. Something *will* go wrong, I think. Something *always* goes wrong. We are, after all, still human. How idealistic are you? Or, how cynical?

While we may not be living in a time of Revolution, there is much that is unraveling, faltering, and becoming dismantled in our national and global political and economic systems. As people drawn to a liberal faith like Unitarian Universalism, we are likely people who hold some degree of optimism that positive change is possible. Like Friend, we are inheritors of a religious tradition that underscores our agency to choose our spiritual—and political—destiny.

And yet, with so much going wrong right now, we may feel our faith in positive change eroding. We may feel a tug towards cynicism or even despair.

In such moments, radical voices may seem out of touch, unrealistic, or just plain annoying. *Be independent from the King?! Yeah right, most would say in 1770. Abolish slavery?! Not a chance most thought when Garrison founded *The Liberator* in 1831. Grant women the right to vote?! Very few thought it possible at the time of the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848. Give land back to Native communities?! A minority view even today—though it is happening.* Again and again during the process of change, early disruptors of the status quo can seem to be unrealistic idealists or even unhinged extremists.

Do you have a typical response to social change? Are you more likely to be at the front lines, somewhere near the edges, or holding back from getting involved?

Some years ago, I reconciled myself to realizing that I am generally *not* a radical. Not only am I shaped by that Gen-X realism, I'm also a middle child inclined to a place of negotiation and compromise. And yet, over the years, I have also come to appreciate the importance of radicals to push society out of its comfort into imagining new possibilities and starting new conversations. I try to listen to radical points of view as critical articulations of hope.

In many ways, Unitarian Universalism is a radical religious tradition. Looking back, we take pride in our embrace of abolitionism, women's suffrage, civil rights, abortion access, and gay rights. We celebrate our affiliation with Transcendentalism, the embrace of other religions, respect for science, and inclusion of atheists and religious humanists within our ranks. And yet, are you aware that within this larger UU story, First Church in Boston, well, has a reputation for consistently being on the conservative side in times of change?

In coming to First Church three years ago, I was aware of this reputation. But I was also curious. Because while the "recent" history of the last couple hundred years signaled a heritage of relative conservatism, First Church was founded by radicals. Could the boldness

of those founding radicals who left England to create their own utopian “City on a Hill” still be in the DNA of the church?

To be clear, there is plenty to question regarding our Puritan founders, especially in their actions towards enslaving Black and indigenous folks. Without forgetting these questions, could there also be an inheritance of risk-taking that we might claim? Could we be shaped by more than the cautious Brahmin instincts to preserve the “best” of cultured city life? Must we avoid entanglements with the hot-button issues of our day as members of this church 50, 100, or 200 years ago once did? For example, you may not have known how radical it was for us to collaborate with the UUA to host a service celebrating the 200th Anniversary of the American Unitarian Association two weeks ago. When this Association was created, then First Church Boston minister Nathaniel Frothingham would not even utter the word Unitarian from the pulpit. Nor would First Church minister Rufus Ellis attend the meetings that created a wider Unitarian National Conference in 1865. *Must* our actions today be dictated by patterns of the past or can we choose new paths?

While First Church Boston has practiced a significant degree of parochialism and conservatism in the last 200 years, First Church minister Charles Chauncey was a force to be reckoned with before and during the American Revolution. Rallying people to the cause of Revolution as well as to a theological revolution of universal salvation, Chauncey was a bold leader in many ways—and in other ways, such as enslaving a woman named Phyllis, he helped to preserve an immoral and unjust status quo.

The contradictory commitments to freedom in Chauncey’s life underscore the radicalness of Universal Friend’s life. Like Chauncey, Friend challenged Calvinist assumptions that granted salvation only to a few. Unlike Chauncey, Friend more consistently sought to *live* the vision of each person’s inherent worthiness. At a time when gender widely restricted what a woman could do, Friend chose to live beyond the expectations of gender. As politicians founded a nation extolling the virtues of freedom while preserving enslavement and denying women’s suffrage, Friend required all be free and extended leadership to women. And, as the new president George Washington sent a newly created American army to expel Native Americans from their lands in the Northwest Territories, Friend spoke up for the land rights of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (Iroquois) in western New York.

In each generation, we have a choice on how we will respond to the issues and questions of our moment. We face these choices as individuals as well as an institution. The Constitution which Franklin believed would be durable at the time of its creation is being sorely tested today. Will democracy and a government by the people and for the people be

effectively sustained? I know many of us are actively fighting to preserve a society and political system that gives voice and vote to each citizen.

And, 250 years after Universal Friend chose to live beyond a gender binary, this same choice remains contested today. Will gender ideology continue to restrict the hopes and agency of women, of men, of transgender and nonbinary folx? Must we all remain locked within a world of two genders—or might we make space for people who wish to live genderless, who ask us to use gender-neutral pronouns like they/them?

“Room enough,” Universal Friend preached. A simple, radical vision. Yes, perhaps “room enough” is even *utopian*. Maybe it is still a vision we strive towards, even if imperfectly. If you read all the book *Not Your Founding Father*, then you would learn that plenty did go wrong in the Society of Universal Friends—including resignations, betrayals, and acts of self-interest at the expense of the community. And some of what went wrong can also be attributed to choices made by Universal Friend, an imperfect leader with a stubborn streak. Likewise, this church, its members, and its ministers, including me, sometimes have made mistakes and shown poor judgment.

Nothing is certain except death and taxes, wrote Franklin. You cannot be certain that you will always do the right thing. We cannot be certain that together as a church or as a nation we will always do the right thing. In fact, chances are that we’ll sometimes disagree on whether an action is laudable or extreme.

And yet, still we can have hope. We can listen to the voices of radicals who call us to truly live our ideals. We can imagine the possibilities of dwelling in a society where there is “room enough” and promises of freedom and equality are fully realized. *How* we move toward this remade future may vary—some on the streets, others on the phone, and still others through quiet prayer.

Perhaps we are not all radicals or revolutionaries, but may there be room enough for each of us as we move together towards a more loving, equitable future for all.

Amen. Ashé. May it be so.