

## ARC BENDERS – Sept 17 2023

*By Marsha Mates*

### ***Take-away message: We can ALL be arc benders***

Good morning. My name is Marsha Bates and my message today focuses on Unitarian Universalists who dedicated their lives to social justice causes. . . who blazed trails and whose work contributed to bending the arc of the moral universe toward justice. Thus the title of my message: UU Arc Benders.

Dr. Martin Luther King used the ‘moral arc of the universe’ phrase in more than one speech. When asked by discouraged civil rights activists in Selma , ‘How long will we have to keep marching and protesting and asking for just laws and treatment?’ King answered ‘How long? Not long because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.’ (*Sadly, 60 years after King’s death, we are still fighting for just laws and fair treatment for all.*)

### **Origin of the phrase: Theodore Parker:**

When I was first trying to understand the context of Dr. King’s use of the phrase, I did what every curious person who lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century does: I started googling. And google led me to a transcript of a 2010 NPR broadcast where Melissa Block interviewed Professor Clayborne Carson, the founding director of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute at Stanford University.

According to Carson, Dr. King had taken words from an 1853 sermon that had been given by none other than Theodore Parker ... A Unitarian pastor who is one of our Unitarian-Universalist heroes! Parker’s words:

*I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.*

### **Unitarian-Universalist Arc Benders**

When researching UU heroes and heroines for this message, I found many who dedicated their lives to making their community ... our country ... the world a better place for all humankind.

How did they ‘bend the arc’?

- Some by words: orators, authors, journalists
- Some by activism: protesters, marchers, champions of varied causes: peace, women's rights, racial justice, economic justice, democracy, health equity, education
- And they made sacrifices: some lost their lives; some lost their jobs and livelihood; others were jailed... all because they dared to stand against the social norms of the day.

Today I want to share stories about a few UU arc benders.

### **Maria Cook, Trailblazer for Women**

**Maria Cook** lived from 1779 to 1835 and was the first woman to be recognized as a Universalist preacher despite the prevailing opinion that women should not preach. That opinion was based on a verse in the Gospel of Paul that says *'...he suffered not a woman to preach nor to usurp authority.'*

She gained a reputation as a powerful, intelligent speaker and a respected minister. However, a naysayer (likely a Gospel of Paul believer) convinced authorities that Ms. Cook could not support herself and would eventually become a ward of the state. That was not true ... Maria had an ample inheritance from her father.

Maria Cook was feisty ... she refused to get in the constable's wagon when he came to arrest her. He finally carried her (in her chair) to the wagon, had to carry her into the magistrate's house, and finally, carried her into the jail where she was sent for contempt of court because she refused to answer questions. She was imprisoned for several weeks ... quite comfortably because the jailer's family lived in the building. She ate meals with them, moved about the building as she pleased, and preached to her fellow inmates.

After she was released, she gave up preaching and lived a reclusive life until her death. But this person of privilege broke a glass ceiling ... bending the moral arc of the universe toward equality for women.

**Lydia Maria (Ma-rye-uh) Child** lived from 1802 to 1880. She was an author, abolitionist, and activist. As a young woman, she joined a Unitarian church which transformed her outlook on life.

At age 22 (1824), she wrote the first historic novel published in the US. It was a bit shocking ... it involved an interracial marriage between a white woman and a Native American. Nonetheless, it launched Ms. Child's career as a best-selling author.

She founded and edited the first children's periodical in the US and published a popular self-help book ***The American Frugal Housewife***, which offered advice on things such as eliminating bed bugs, curing dysentery, and how to roast a goose! By

age 30, she had become something unheard of in the 1800's: a self-sufficient female author.

But that changed in 1835 when, at age 33, she published ***An Appeal in Favor of the Class of Americans Called Africans***. In it, she documented the history, economics, and cruelty of slavery, accusing Northerners of being complicit in the survival of slavery and advocating for immediate emancipation of the enslaved.

As a result, Maria Child's books no longer sold, subscriptions to her children's periodical plummeted, and she could not get editing or writing assignments ... she was too controversial. She and her husband were plunged into poverty...but they continued in their efforts to end slavery.

Also, Lydia Maria Child wrote the poem 'Over the River and Through the Woods' ... which I suspect all of us have sung around the holidays.

**Henry Bergh (1813-1888)** was a Unitarian who lived a privileged life. His father was a prominent shipbuilder. The business shortly was sold after his father's death and Henry lived a life of leisure ... attending opening night plays, frequenting high society parties, traveling extensively in Europe.

When Bergh was in his 50's, President Lincoln appointed him to a diplomatic post in Russia. One morning, Bergh tried unsuccessfully to intervene when he saw a horse being beaten unmercifully by its owner; So Bergh went home and changed into his diplomatic garb. When the owner realized Bergh's diplomatic status, he stopped the beating. This incident convinced Henry Bergh that his life's work would be prevention of cruelty to animals.

In 1866 Henry Bergh founded the American Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. Bergh worked to get legislation passed making it illegal to mistreat animals. He walked New York's streets looking for mistreated animals and would notify authorities who would fine or arrest the perpetrator. (*His nickname became 'The Great Meddler'.*)

Later, in 1874, after learning about a small child who had been flagrantly brutalized, Bergh and his associates founded the New York Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

### **Susan B Anthony – abolitionist, women's rights, equal pay for equal work**

**Susan B Anthony** was born in 1820. Anthony's family attended the First Unitarian Church of Rochester; they were attracted to the congregation's social justice activities.

Anthony started her abolitionist work at age 16 when she collected petitions against slavery in response to a gag rule that prohibited anti-slavery petitions in the US House of Representatives. By the age of 31, she was a key organizer of an anti-slavery

convention in Rochester. And she was part of the underground railroad; one of her diary entries reads: 'Fitted out a fugitive slave for Canada with the help of Harriet Tubman.'

In 1872, Anthony was arrested in her hometown of Rochester for voting in violation of laws that allowed only men to vote. She was convicted in a widely publicized trial. After she refused to pay the fine, the authorities declined to take further action. (That's because the case had been tried in a federal court; if Anthony had appealed her conviction, the case would have gone to the Supreme Court and the State was afraid the Supreme Court would rule in Anthony's favor.)

In 1878, Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton arranged for Congress to be presented with an amendment giving women the right to vote. It became known as the Susan B Anthony Amendment and was eventually ratified as the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1920.

Anthony died in 1906, 14 years before the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment was ratified.

### **Emily Greene Balch – 1946 Nobel Peace Prize Winner**

Another of our UU heroines, **Emily Greene Balch**, won the 1946 Nobel Peace Prize! Balch was born in 1867 and died in 1961. She was born into privilege ... her father was a prominent Boston lawyer. Balch was a member of Bryn Mawr's first graduating class and later taught at Wellesley, attaining a full professorship in 1913.

But when WWI started in 1914, Balch became convinced her lifework lay in furthering humanity's effort to rid the world of war. She was a delegate to the 1915 International Congress for Women held in The Hague. While there she played a prominent role in founding the organization which is now known as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. When she returned to the US from the Hague, she campaigned against the nation's entry into World War I.

Between the two world wars, Balch helped with many League of Nations projects. She warned against fascism and criticized western democracies for not stopping Hitler's and Mussolini's aggressive policies.

However, the excesses of Nazism caused Emily Balch to amend her strong pacifistic views; she advocated 'the need to defend the ...fundamental human rights, sword in hand...'.

At the same time, she concentrated on generating ideas for the peace that she hoped would follow, advocating for internationalization of important waterways, of aviation, and of certain regions of the world.

When Balch received the 1946 Nobel Peace Prize, there was no congratulation from the US government: at the time she was considered to be a dangerous radical.

During the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, there were many UU activists. After learning about the murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson, a young black farmer who was participating in a peaceful protest, Unitarian minister **Rev. James Reeb**, was one of many who traveled to Selma to support the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Selma to Montgomery march. He and two other white UU ministers were clubbed by three white men; Reeb died.

**Viola Liuzzo** was another UU civil rights martyr. In 1964 she began attending the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Detroit, where she found a faith matching both her ideas and her longing to be of service. After seeing TV reports about the horrors inflicted on protesters in Selma, Viola drove there to help in the civil rights efforts.

On March 24<sup>th</sup>, 1965, Viola joined the thousands of demonstrators as they marched the last few miles from Selma to Alabama's capitol building in Montgomery. After the march, she and a fellow civil rights volunteer, Leroy Moton (who was Black), drove some marchers from Montgomery back to Selma. During the return journey to Montgomery, a car with four white Klansmen pulled beside Viola's car, shot and killed her. Moton was unhurt.

Viola was 39 years old and mother of five when she was murdered. She was the only white female protester to die in the civil rights movement.

After her death, false rumors were spread that she was a member of the Communist party and that she had traveled to Selma to have sexual relations with men in the Civil Rights movement. Years later, Liuzzo's children learned that J. Edgar Hoover had orchestrated that smear campaign to divert attention away from the fact that one of the four men in the Klansmen's car was an FBI informant.

Despite that smear campaign, memorials honoring Viola were held, tributes poured in and plaques dedicated to her and other civil rights martyrs were erected.

So why are some people arc benders? What prompts them? In this morning's reading, Professor Goodman mentions 3 motives: empathy, moral principles/spiritual values; or self-interest. I think that our UU values drive many of us ...

- our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- our belief that justice, equity and compassion should be applied in our human relations
- the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all
- the importance of respecting the interdependent web of all existence ... of which we are a small part

We have had and have arc benders amongst us here at All Faiths:

- Bob Moore, Ariel Hoover, and Joan Marshall work to educate people about environmental issues ... and urge us to take action
- Frankie Jennings is carrying on her and Roy's mission of providing tutoring services to low income children
- Barb McFarlane and Judy Alberda, participate in the annual census of homeless people, and organize the collection of bikes for the homeless
- Ed Kleinow and Mary Corrigan launched 'And Literacy for All', a non-profit dedicated to bridging the reading gap in Lee County.
- Sharon Gray works to get us and others in the community to sign petitions to get initiatives on the ballot
- Regina Kilmartin attended dozens of city council meetings to influence the passage and implementation of the Affordable Housing Ordinance

I hesitated to start naming specific congregants because so *many* of us work on social justice issues...but I don't think you want to sit there for 15 more minutes!

The point is, each of us can be an arc bender. By being **active** in our Social Justice teams ... Racial Equity, Rainbow Connection, Heart for the Homeless, Climate Action Team, Lee Interfaith for Empowerment (LIFE). ... by supporting Operation Joy that Annaleigh Hudanick organizes, by bringing food and clothing every third Sunday so Joyce Schaffer can take them to McGregor clinic.

My participation in All Faiths' LIFE activities has given me opportunities to bend the arc by helping to influence people in power here in Lee County to take actions that make our community a better place for all its citizens. It allows me to act on my concerns ... not just talk about the injustices that grate on my soul.

I urge each of you to become someone who ACTS on the convictions you hold about injustices you see in our community, our state, our country, and the world. By working together, by being arc benders, we can make the world a better place...by helping to bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice.