



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

“P. T. Barnum: The Legend & the Man”

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

7 October 2018

frederickuu.org

A few months ago, Deb, our Music Director asked me if there was an upcoming Sunday when choral selections from the musical film *The Greatest Showman* might fit thematically with my sermon topic. The movie is quite good in many ways, although it is not particularly historically accurate. Since it stars Hugh Jackson and Zac Efron, I like to think of it as “What if Wolverine and that kid from *High School Musical* started a circus!” When Deb first asked me about the film, I had not yet seen it—but I did know that it was loosely based on the life of P. T. Barnum (1810-1891). So I told her, “I think we can make that work, because conveniently, **Barnum was a prominent Universalist.**”

Indeed, the reason I knew that he was a Universalist is that when I first took a graduate class in UU history, one of the required readings was Barnum’s pamphlet “Why I Am a Universalist,” which he published in 1890, the year before he died. “It sold 100,000 copies in its first three years, and continued circulating well into the twentieth century.”

A few days ago, we passed the **248th anniversary of John Murray preaching the first Universalist sermon in America.** (You will hear more about that occasion as we approach 2020, which will be the 250th anniversary.) And I find anniversaries to be auspicious times to reflect on our UU heritage.

And while we UUs are sometimes guilty of claiming famous people as “one of us” even if they had only a passing association with our movement, in the case of P. T.

Barnum, he was an active and avowed Universalist. But Barnum's Universalism was not how I first heard about him. As is likely the case with quite a few of you, my earliest association with P. T. Barnum was as the founder of what came to be known as Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. (How many of you attended at least one of their big top events?) Although that circus closed its doors for the last time last year in May 2017, the so-called "Greatest Show on Earth," founded in 1871, did have an impressive run of 146 years.

As explored in A. H. Saxon's book P. T. Barnum: The Legend and the Man (Columbia University Press, 1990), numerous legends have grown up around Barnum—some at his own encouragement. But historians have worked to separate myth from reality through studying his private letters, surviving diaries of people close to him, and his own personal records (7).

To begin to tell you some of his story, Phineas Taylor Barnum's life spanned most of the nineteenth century. He was born in 1810 in Bethel, Connecticut, and died in 1891 in Bridgeport, Connecticut at the age of 80. He was named after his maternal grandfather, but to avoid confusion between him and his grandfather, he was never called by his biblical first name of Phineas. Instead, they used his middle name Taylor. This choice led his closest childhood friends to call him by the nickname "Tale," which seems quite prescient given his lifelong love of tall *tales* (26).

I should hasten to add that he inherited this tale-telling habit from his family of origin. Some of you may also come from a family of pranksters, but P. T. Barnum's family practiced some "next level," hardcore practical jokes. I'll give you one early example from his childhood. When he was born, his grandfather "Phin," after whom he was named, gave him a welcome-to-the-world present: the deed to "Ivy Island" on the edge of Bethel, Connecticut.

From as young an age as he could remember not only members of his family, but also everyone who knew him in Bethel, would regularly tell him that he was "the richest child in town, because he owned all of 'Ivy Island,' the most valuable farm in Connecticut." When he was twelve, he finally set out to visit this fabled place. To his shock he discovered that, "Ivy Island" was both almost inaccessible, and all-but-barren, and he didn't actually own all of it—just some of it. **"And having spent some eight**

years preparing this joke, the good folk of Bethel then spent the next five years laughing over it” (29). I should hasten to emphasize that this was not a one-time occurrence. By the age of twelve, “Barnum had already been witness to, and either the butt of or an eager participant in hundreds of other practical jokes” in and around his family (30). From this childhood heritage, Barnum gained much experience at observing and staging elaborate hoaxes designed to create confusion and suspense, hoaxes which fooled audiences, and led to surprising, entertaining, often funny final reactions and impacts.

Fast forward two decades, and Barnum—now married with young children and in search of a way to support his family—had an idea for how to revitalize New York City’s American Museum. The good news is that the museum was for sale. The bad news is that the asking price was \$15,000 and he was almost broke.

Nevertheless, he impressed the museum’s owner with his sales pitch. And the owner replied, “If you only had a piece of unencumbered real estate that you could offer as additional security, I think I might venture to negotiate with you.” As you can guess, a particular piece of legendary real estate sprung readily to mind: the deed to Ivy Island. The quick summary of what happened next is that Barnum paid off his mortgage for the museum in less than two years, and “within a few more years, thanks to this purchase made possible by Ivy Island, had become one of America’s richest and most celebrated showmen” (31).

And that is typically how the story is told. But there are a few more important details that usually get left out. It turns out that when Barnum offered Ivy Island as collateral, he didn’t even still own his original part of the island, having sold it a few years earlier for \$60 to his half-brother. Fortunately, he was able to buy it back quickly for the same price. Moreover, in addition to the deed to Ivy Island, he also sweetened the pot with two other pieces of land, including his own home. “The combined value of this property was appraised at \$2,000—not such bad collateral after all when one considers that the [museum’s owner] retained title to the Museum’s collections until Barnum had repaid the money advanced on his behalf” (31-32).

Fortunately, a gift for practical jokes was not the only thing Barnum inherited from his family. Although Barnum’s earliest religious experiences were of strict conservative

Christianity that taught the “total depravity” of human beings, a fatalistic predestination, and a general hellfire and brimstone worldview (47), his grandfather—the same one who gifted him part of Ivy Island—introduced him to the theologically liberal tradition of Universalism (49).

Now, it is important to be honest that converting to Universalism did not instantly turn young Barnum into a paragon of virtue. In the ensuing decades, he went on to engage in a **significant number of acts that nowadays are seen ranging from morally questionable to morally reprehensible:**

- His treatment of animals at times included behavior that was increasingly decried as inhumane and cruel.
- He increasingly became infamous for his exploitation of physically-atypical human beings such as the dwarf Charles Stratton, whom Barnum marketed as “General Tom Thumb.”
- He knowingly misled audiences about his exhibits, from the so-called “Feejee Mermaid” to the African American woman Joice Heth, whom he exhibited as the alleged 161-year-old “nurse” of George Washington (10).
- And prior to the Civil War, when slavery was still legal in the South, for a time owned an enslaved man who served as his valet (84).

These are merely a few of many more examples.

And while he has been **falsely accused of coining the phrase, “There’s a sucker born every minute.” He never said that. He justified his behavior to himself with his belief that his customers always got “at least their money’s worth”** (335). He believed that even if they were deceived, at least they were *entertained*. And the greatest support for that contention is that even though people often realized mid-way through one of Barnum’s exhibits that they had been deceived on one or more levels, they nevertheless kept coming back to future shows (12). And all the related controversies mostly cause more people to come and see for themselves what all the fuss was about (11). Frankly, it’s all quite a bit too similar to our Reality TV show culture and Reality TV show president for my comfort. But it does invite us to confront some troubling aspects of human nature (74).

For me, the takeaway from studying Barnum's life is to consider how much worse his life would have been without the influence of Universalism. One of the most central—and the most difficult—aspects of the Universalist side of our UU heritage is literally the “*Universal*” part: that everyone—universally, without exception—has inherent worth and dignity. When we mess up, there are consequences. But the Universalist perspective is that **no one is ever beyond the chance of redemption.**

In the case of Barnum, although he did many despicable things, his legacy is more complicated than simply being a villain. Without the influence of Universalism, he may well have remained an unapologetic capitalist, content with making as much money as possible through whatever means necessary. But through his long involvement with Universalism, he grew increasingly compassionate. One example is that at the far-too-young-age of seven, he was taken with his family to witness a public execution. He did not have the capacity at the time to fully comprehend what he was seeing. But over time, the memory began to haunt him. Many Universalists have historically advocated against the death penalty, and in Barnum's case, “in later life, while serving in the Connecticut legislature, he was a staunch opponent of capital punishment” (32).

Another example is that despite being very much a product of his time in regard to African-American rights prior to the Civil War, the abolitionist movement increasingly called on his conscience. And in the late 1850s, Barnum's political allegiances began to shift, crystallizing in his support for Abraham Lincoln in the 1860 presidential election (216). Indeed, before the end of the Civil War, **he ran for office so that he might personally vote “for the then proposed amendment to the Constitution of the United States to abolish slavery.”** And as best we can tell, this choice was not mere political opportunism: “Barnum proved himself an astute, hardworking member of the legislature” (218).

Regarding women's suffrage, he was never as fervent a supporter as he was for the abolition of slavery (37). But notably **for six years, “from 1869 to 1875, his pastor at Bridgeport's First Universalist Society was the Rev. Olympia Brown...the first woman in America to be ordained by full denominational authority.”** Regarding her experience of Barnum, Rev. Brown wrote in her autobiography that he “often made

some complimentary remark as I came down from my pulpit” (60). In turn, “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.’ ...Mr. Barnum never failed to oblige her.”

But when her ministry was threatened over a controversy related to her allegedly spending too much time advocating for women’s rights and not enough time focused on the congregation itself, Barnum did not come to her defense. He didn’t want to get pulled in to church politics. Although he and Brown remained on friendly terms throughout the controversy, sadly she was eventually forced out, and moved to another congregation in Racine, Wisconsin, a congregation now known as “Olympia Brown Unitarian Universalist Church” (61-62).

There is so much more to say about P. T. Barnum, but I hope I have given you a sense of the complexity of his life, as well as the ways that Universalism influenced him for the better. In return,

At his death Barnum left the Bridgeport Universalist society a legacy of \$15,000. He was just as generous a supporter of causes endorsed by the national Universalist movement. He gave its newly founded institution of higher education, Tufts College, \$50,000 to establish a Museum of Natural History; and later he gave Tufts another \$100,000 to build two wings to the museum.... He did not neglect other Universalist educational projects either such as St. Lawrence University and Lombard College. When he died his will stipulated \$7,000 for the Universalist Publishing House, \$5,000 for the Connecticut Universalist Convention, \$1,000 for the Chapin Home, and \$500 for the Woman's Centenary Association.

Keep in mind that all those numbers are from the late nineteenth-century. One dollar back then was worth thirty times today’s dollar in purchasing power.

But regardless of whether you came away loving, hating, or having mixed emotions toward P. T. Barnum, the story does not end there. In the same way that *Universalism* challenged P. T. Barnum to open his heart and mind to the needs of others, I invite you to consider the following words from [Diana Eck](#), a Professor of Comparative Religion at Harvard University, words that challenge us about the similar

role *Unitarian Universalism* at its best can play in our lives today. This quote is from a sermon Dr. Eck preached a few years ago at the Unitarian Church of All Souls, New York. These words remain relevant today for the role we Unitarian Universalists might play today amidst our politically polarized society:

The world has need of your theology. If there ever were a time that we need to spin out a new fabric of belonging and a wider sense of “we” for the human community, it is certainly now... In a world divided by race, and by religion and ideology, the very presence of a [religious movement] like yours—committed to...the love of neighbor and service to humanity—is a beacon. The Unitarian Universalist theology (and yes, you have one) does not reduce the mystery of the divine, the transcendent, but amplifies it, broadens it to include the many, many ways in which the divine is known and yet unknown. Developing a consciousness of our growing religious interrelatedness, developing a moral compass to give us guidance in the years ahead—these are among the most important tasks of our time. You have a theological orientation toward oneness and mystery...that is essential for the world of religious difference in which we live.... In this era, Unitarian Universalism is not the lowest common denominator, but [one of] the highest common calling[s].