



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

**Founding Mothers of UU:
The Doctors Blackwell & Reproductive Justice**
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frederickuu.org

This sermon is part of our ongoing Mother's Day series on "Founding Mothers of Unitarian Universalism":

- Quite a few years ago now, we began with [Margaret Fuller](#) (1810-1850), who along with Emerson and Thoreau is one of our three most important Transcendentalist forebears. Her 1845 pamphlet *Women in the Nineteenth Century* was a significant contribution to the women's equality movement.
- Next, we moved to the three [Peabody Sisters](#), especially Elizabeth Peabody (1804 - 1894), an author herself, who published many Transcendentalists under her own imprint, and also become the celebrated founder of kindergartens in America.
- Then we explored the life of [Julia Ward Howe](#) (1819-1910) about whom it is said that she "had six children, learned six languages, and published six books." She was most famous for writing the lyrics to the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," and helped found Mother's Day itself through her famous Mother's Day Proclamation for Peace.
- We have also focused on [Mary Moody Emerson](#) (1774-1863), Ralph Waldo Emerson's aunt, whom he called his "earliest and best teacher,"
- as well as [Louisa May Alcott](#) (1832-1888), best known as the author of *Little Women*. At the time of her death in 1888, "she was the country's most popular author, and had earned more from writing than any male author of her time."

- [Olympia Brown](#) (1835 - 1926), a Universalist who in 1863 became the first woman to be ordained with full denominational recognition.
- and [Lydia Maria Child](#) (1802 - 1880), a pathbreaking activist for social justice in the nineteenth century.
- Last year our focus was on [Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin](#) (1900 – 1979), “a woman of many firsts: the first to receive a Ph.D. in astronomy from Radcliffe College, the first promoted to full professor at Harvard, and the first to head a department there. And, in what has been called ‘the most brilliant PhD. thesis ever written in astronomy,’ she was the first to describe what stars are made of.”
- In future years, I look forward to telling you about some of our other founding mothers, such as:
 - **Judith Sargent Murray**, an early American advocate for women's rights, who was married to John Murray, the founder of the Universalist half of our movement;
 - **Sophia Lyon Fahs**, who revolutionized twentieth-century UU Religious Education; and
 - **Sarah Ripley**, an American educator and noted scholar at a time when women were rarely admitted to universities; and
 - **Frances Harper**, one of the first African American women to be published in the United States.

My intent with this quick summary is not to overwhelm you with names and dates. Rather, I hope your takeaway today will be that, as Unitarian Universalists, we are lifted up “on the shoulders of giants,” many of whom were pathbreaking women. Retelling these stories of our UU ancestors allows their lives to inspire us to live our UU values today.

In that spirit, for this Mother’s Day Sunday, we are going to explore the fascinating life and legacy of the Blackwell sisters, particularly Elizabeth Blackwell (1821-1910), who was **"the first woman to earn a degree from a medical school in the United States and the first woman to appear on the medical registry of the United Kingdom"** ([DUUB](#)). If this service leaves you curious to learn more, it was

inspired by a biography of the Blackwell sisters published last year, titled *The Doctors Blackwell: How Two Pioneering Sisters Brought Medicine to Women and Women to Medicine*, by Janice Nimura.

If you were to visit New York City today, and make your way over to Greenwich Village and then to 58 Bleecker Street, you would find the following plaque:

Site of Elizabeth Blackwell's Infirmary for Women and Children

In this building, **the first female doctor in America, Elizabeth Blackwell, established the first hospital for, staffed, and run by women.** The New York Infirmary for Women and Children opened on May 12, 1857, a date which was also the birthday of Blackwell's friend and collaborator Florence Nightingale [who was a Universalist!]. Groundbreaking at the time, the hospital provided free medical care for indigent women and children, and offered clinical experience and instruction for women determined to expand their skills as physicians.

This historic building is a stop on the “Civil Rights and Social Justice Map” created by the The Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation. When the plaque was dedicated, they sold white t-shirts with black and hot pink writing that said “ELIZABETH BLACKWELL: OG MD,” claiming her as the Original Gangster of medical women (1).

To share some of her story, come with me back 165 years to May 12, 1857, when the official grand opening was held for that same building on the corner of Bleecker and Crosby Street. In Elizabeth’s own words, there were two purposes that her medical practice would offer, purposes unavailable elsewhere: First, “to allow women to consult doctors of their own sex, free of charge,” and second, “to provide the growing number of female medical students with the practical experience denied them by established hospitals.”

As impressive as Elizabeth Blackwell was, the Board of Trustees of the infirmary feared being perceived as too radical, and only allowed her to speak briefly that day. Although Elizabeth Blackwell was really quite conservative for the most part, the main speech was delivered by Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, perhaps the most widely admired clergyperson in New York at that time. That painful sexist microaggression marred the

otherwise triumphant occasion—just one of many “acts of exclusion” endured by Elizabeth and Emily in blazing a path for others to follow (2-3).

To tell you a little about how they reached that particular paradigm-shifting day, Elizabeth was born in 1821 and Emily five years later in 1826. There were nine Blackwell children in all. In 1832, when Elizabeth was eleven years old, the whole family immigrated from England to the U.S (5). For whatever confluence of reasons, none of the five Blackwell sisters married, although their four brothers did.

Interestingly, two of those brothers married pathbreaking women. Samuel Blackwell married Antoinette Brown, the first woman in the U.S. to be ordained a minister. And Henry Blackwell married Lucy Stone, a prominent social justice activist—and another candidate for a future Founding Mothers of UU sermon, since she too was a Unitarian (10)!

Elizabeth does not seem to have been bothered by being single. If anything, she was annoyed by the preponderance of heteronormative models in which almost every piece of artistic and cultural material centered on romantic and idealized stories of women wives and mothers. Indeed, at the young age of seventeen, Elizabeth wrote, “I wish some skillful pen would produce an interesting old maid’s life” (13).

In the broadest and best sense of the word, the two sisters were mothers to their many patients, as well as to their many female medical students. Elizabeth said it this way in 1855, in a pamphlet she wrote titled “On the Medical Education of Women”: **“The woman who cares but for her own children is a feeble caricature of womanhood, not its true representative.”** She argued that the fullest expression of motherhood must extend outside the home into all areas of society (196).

I also want to share with you some interesting insights about the Blackwells’ connection to the *Unitarian* half of our Unitarian Universalist heritage. In 1839, when Elizabeth was eighteen years old, she was drawn to the Unitarian preaching of William Henry Channing, the nephew of the famous William Ellery Channing, who preached the influential Baltimore Sermon on “Unitarian Christianity” (22).

By the next year, all three of the eldest Blackwell sisters had become Unitarians. And through their relationship with the younger Channing, they were introduced to the Unitarian reform movement of Transcendentalism. Elizabeth, in particular, was drawn to

the writing of two of our Unitarian forebears, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller.

It is not insignificant that in 1841, six years before Elizabeth would apply to medical school, she read Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance." I'll limit myself to sharing only two quotes:

- "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string.... Insist on yourself; never imitate.... That which each can do best, none but his Maker can teach him."
- "Is it so bad, then, to be misunderstood? Pythagoras was misunderstood, and Socrates, and Jesus, and Luther, and Copernicus, and Galileo, and Newton, and every pure and wise spirit that ever took flesh. To be great is to be misunderstood."

Such words helped reassure and embolden Elizabeth as a woman seeking to shatter the glass ceiling of medicine.

Likewise, it is not insignificant that in 1845, two years before Elizabeth would apply to medical school, she read Margaret Fuller's new book, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, which even negative reviewers agreed was "the first significant work to take 'the liberal side in the question of "Women's Rights" since the day of Mary Wollstonecraft," who wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* fifty years earlier (Marshall 224). Here too, I'll limit myself to two representative quotes:

- "We would have every arbitrary barrier thrown down. We would have every path laid open to Woman as freely as to Man" (230).
- "I think women need, especially at this juncture, a much greater range of occupation than they have, to rouse their latent powers. If you ask me what offices they may fill; I reply—any. I do not care what case you put; let them be sea-captains, if you will" (Nimura 27).

Keep in mind that this book was particularly significant because it was published in 1845, three years *before* the first women's rights convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848. Also significant, Elizabeth applied and was accepted to medical school in Geneva Medical College in upstate New York in 1847, a year *before* that convention. Fuller and Blackwell were both ahead of their time.

The final decision to admit Elizabeth Blackwell to medical school turned on a vote by the then all male class of students. As it turned out, many of the men who

voted unanimously to admit her did so on a lark, in the spirit of mischief as a sort of surprise practical joke on the faculty (DUUB). But Blackwell made the most of her opportunity, and more than rose to the occasion.

She graduated as a medical doctor in 1849, just before her twenty-eighth birthday. Her younger sister Emily graduated from medical school five years later, in 1854 (Nimura 3). I should also add about Elizabeth's later work in England, and her recognition as the "first woman to appear on the medical registry of the United Kingdom," that she is more accurately:

the first *acknowledged* female practitioner. Half a century earlier, in 1812, the University of Edinburgh had conferred a medical degree on James Barry, a slim, smooth-cheeked young man, who went on to spectacular success as a high-ranking military physician. Not until his death in 1865... was it discovered that Barry was originally female" (240).

That precedent is all the more significant in this age of attacks on transgender rights.

To share one more story about Elizabeth's connection to Unitarianism, in 1850, as a freshly minted physician, she visited her home country of England for some further studies, and had the opportunity to visit her childhood minister. He remembered christening her when she was a baby, and the rumors had reached him of her late teenage conversion to Unitarianism. Writing home about this meeting, she said:

"I told him my religion was certainly a little peculiar; but nevertheless it was a very good and indeed very strong one—and he didn't seem much troubled about the state of my soul; indeed, I believe that, on the whole, he considered that it was a little safer than most of the ladies' of his acquaintance!" (DUUB)

Now, there is much more that is interesting to say about Elizabeth Blackwell and her sister Emily, as well as their sister Anna, particularly regarding Anna's work as women's rights activists, and her involvement with the Unitarian utopian community of Brook Farm, which we have explored in a previous sermon.

For now, regarding the legacy of the Doctors Blackwell, let me say this: both Elizabeth and Emily died in 1910 within a little more than three months of one another, at the ages of 89 and 83, respectively (267). By that time, six decades after Elizabeth

had become the first woman to earn a degree from a medical school in the United States, **the sisters had lived to see a time when “there were more than nine thousand women doctors in the United States, about six percent of all physicians.** Today thirty-five percent of physicians—and slightly more than half of all medical students—are female (268).

Before concluding, I don't feel I can talk this morning about the first woman medical doctor in the U.S.—which had been my planned topic for today for more than a year—without bringing up last week's leaked draft of Justice Alito's version of a possible Supreme Court majority opinion in the *Dobbs v. Jackson's Women Health Organization* case, which in its current form would overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

I've spoken previously at length on reproductive justice. In addition to leading a six-week class inquiring into the topic a few years ago, I preached a sermon in 2013 titled "Did You Just Send That Woman to a Church to Get Help with An Abortion?" and in 2020, another sermon titled "Trust Women: Bodies, Laws, & Reproductive Justice." Both of those sermons are available in our online sermon archive if they would be of interest or help to anyone, as are all my sermons. I plan to preach again about reproductive justice in January on the 50th anniversary of the *Roe v. Wade* decision.

For now, I will say that I do find the verbal framework and terminology of “reproductive justice” useful when articulating the contentious issues within this ongoing debate. As defined by the SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, the term “**reproductive justice**” is **"the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities."**

I am also aware that with Unitarian Universalism, there is room for a spectrum of positions in regard to reproductive justice. Everyone is not in the same place on these issues. Indeed, Dr. Elizabeth Blackwell personally understood her Hippocratic Oath as preventing her from assisting with or performing abortions. She often described herself as **“too conservative for the reformers, too progressive for the conservatives”** (Nimura 235).

In contrast, many women physicians today who have followed in her footsteps (and some during her lifetime) have understood **access to abortion to be essential for comprehensive and equitable reproductive care** (Nimura 138). And as my colleague, The Rev. Dr. Susan Frederick-Gray, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, said in a [statement](#) released last week

we know **the most damaging impacts of overturning *Roe* will be felt by people of color, young people, poor and working class people, and those living in rural areas.** As Unitarian Universalists, we believe that all bodies are sacred. Every person has the right to determine if, when, and how they want to have children. As people of faith, this commitment is part of our sincerest religious values: Unitarian Universalism *proclaims* that all individuals and communities have the right to self-determination, safety, and the resources that are necessary for health and sustainability.

We also hold in our hearts the potentially disastrous future implications that overturning *Roe* could have for marriage equality, birth control, and other reproductive justice issues ([Vox](#)).

If you are feeling overwhelmed individually by this potential sea change in women's rights, my first advice to you, as with all social justice issues, is to **"Stop being one person."** If you want to take action with money, one option is to go to abortionfunds.org to help ensure that everyone who needs an abortion can afford one. If you want to volunteer time, two options are the Liberate Abortion Coalition (liberateabortion.org) and SACReD (the Spiritual Alliance of Communities for Reproductive Dignity), which is building a multi-racial, multi-faith movement of congregations across the country that publicly proclaim their support for reproductive dignity (justtx.org/sacred). All of these are linked in our most recent e-newsletter.

Even during the darkest times, we UUs can let our little lights of justice shine, inspiring and giving others permission to do the same.