

## Pastries, Politics, Faith and Fellowship: 150 Years of UU Women's Heritage

September 16, 2018

Rev. Dr. Roger D. Jones

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

CELEBRATING 150 YEARS IN SACRAMENTO IN 2018

Hymns: #108 When Our Heart Is in a Holy Place;  
#86 Blessed Spirt of My Life; #121 We'll Build a  
Land. Vocal solo: "Mystery" from *Missa Gaia*.

Remembrance: Unitarian Women in Early Santa  
Cruz, by Sangye Hawke [printed at end]

Chalice Lighting words about Elizabeth Palmer  
Peabody and Rev. Olympia Brown [printed at end]



THE LATE PHYLLIS GARDINER

### Sermon

This room, this gathering, this congregation is filled with stories. Every person in every seat here on this morning has an amazing wealth of stories and connections to others' stories. One reason we come together is to learn and share our stories.

Today I'd like to give just a few stories of women in this congregation's history. It was back in 1868 that 17 families signed an "article of agreement" to "associate ourselves in a body

corporate," to be known as the First Unitarian Church. The purpose of the church reflected the language of those times: "the worship of God and the service of Men." The first bylaws provided for a board of seven trustees, and it allowed that three of them could be women. Perhaps it was radical to allow for *any* women trustees, given that women in the U.S. could not vote for another half-century.

An early project of our Unitarian women was publicized in local newspapers in 1889. For several days, the ladies hosted a holiday bazaar, with booths displaying various goods for sale. There was a different entertainment or educational program every night. Admission was a quarter and a dime for kids. It's worth noting we had no church building then, so the ladies had to schlep everything to rented space downtown.

The most notable relic of our church from that era is a cook book held in the California History Room in the State Library. It's too rare to be checked out, but we have pictures of it. The title is *Cookery in the Golden State*. Its subtitle says it is "a collection of choice recipes tried and approved by the Ladies of the Unitarian Society" in Sacramento. Today at the reception you can pick up a few of the printed recipes for pastries, and enjoy refreshments, thanks to Sandra Navarro and Kim Marta from our Anniversary Committee. Wanting to be authentic, we did consider making use of the 1890 recipes, some of which use organ meat and wild game... but for today, we decided to serve contemporary snacks.

Two decades later came the first women's organization in this church. The Women's Alliance began in 1911. It was a chapter of the National Alliance of Unitarian Women. Our Sacramento Alliance has been in continuous existence ever since then. However, it's taken on different activities over the century, changing in response to changes in our church and in the larger society. For example, for a while now it has *not* been limited to women only.

For many decades the Alliance met every week in the afternoon, often in a member's house. The very first meeting of the Alliance was attended by four women on March 16, 1911, at the home of Mrs. C. R. Ross—back then, married women were known by their husband's names, so I'm not sure

what her first name is. At the meeting they set membership dues and an initiation fee. They adopted a constitution, no doubt using materials from the national organization. They set up three committees for starters: entertainment, work, and flowers for Sunday services. The Alliance provided food for our Sunday school, held parties for church members to get acquainted and raised money by holding bake sales in local stores. They also made aprons and kids' rompers, and sold them. In addition to fundraising events, the group made a yearly pledge to the church.<sup>1</sup>

In its first decade the Alliance grew by a factor of 10. That is, in 1923 it had 241 members, but the congregation had only 47 members. Alliance membership was open to the public, and many non-Unitarian women joined it for its programs of "artistic, literary and aesthetic merit."

In the 1930s the country suffered through the Great Depression, with deep unemployment and loss of wealth. Even though this congregation had had a building of its own since 1915, it had only part-time ministers. In the year 1934-35, there was no minister at all and no record of regular services. The Alliance, however, had two meetings per month. Also, a women's devotional group met weekly in members' homes, for sharing prayers, hymns, and readings of short published sermons.

Following the Second World War, as families brought us the Baby Boom, our congregation expanded. The Alliance raised money for the relief of the suffering survivors of the war in Europe; it learned about foreign policy, and it made its voice heard on local issues and state politics. It had book discussions and heard from guest speakers. The Alliance hosted coffee hours after church. Its members raised money by hosting church dinners and bazaars, art shows and craft sales. At just one meeting in 1954, the women did all these things: they planned a bazaar, voted on reserving a booth for the next year's county fair, appointed a committee to find rides for members, enjoyed luncheon together, crafted covers for the Alliance membership directory, and discussed proposals for revisions to the Charter of the United Nations. Whew!

In the 1960s, the Rev. Dr. Ford Lewis asked: would the Alliance host get-acquainted

receptions for him and newcomers every Sunday? As they did with all decisions, Alliance members discussed his request at a business meeting. By vote they firmly decided that his request was a *bit much*. So they offered to host a gathering for him just one Sunday a month.

For its first half-century, our Alliance was filled with women who didn't work outside the home, including single women and mothers with babies. In the 1960s they made several tries at a second group which would meet on weeknights in addition to the morning Alliance. In our church newsletters an Evening Alliance was advertised, on and off over the years, but it never achieved permanence like the daytime Alliance.

In the 1960s, 70s and 80s, more women entered the full-time workforce. Anna Andrews, for example, joined the Alliance in 1962, on her arrival at USS. Her former husband preferred solitary pursuits, Anna told me, "like fishing or hunting or drinking." Hence, she said, "I had to have an outlet for my energy." She raised her kids and worked as the Director of Religious Education at USS. Yet after her divorce, she had to take a full-time job at the Capitol building. Like many women, Anna wouldn't be back at the Alliance until she retired.

In interviews with me and earlier ones recorded in church archives, several women recalled the busy times of Alliance activities in the church and beyond—field trips, art and craft exhibitions, concerts, a spring luncheon and fundraising banquets. Another aspect of the busy Alliance was a detailed committee structure and constitution, an elected board, voting on a yearly budget, and the reading of the prior meeting's minutes aloud at every meeting.

By the early 2000s, this level of infrastructure had become hard to sustain, and burdensome on volunteers. For example, one woman was Alliance Treasurer for 13 years; another one, for 17 years! The crunch came in 2005. Virginia Dunstan was leaving her term as Alliance President and joining the USS Board of Trustees. Nobody was available to succeed her. The members had a strategic planning session, facilitated by Carol Houseman, who was not an Alliance member. Carol told me she had expected a "group of weary warriors." Instead, she

encountered “a very engaged group.... They wanted to keep the group alive and were very willing to make some changes to do so.”

From their work together emerged a slim new operating structure, suitable to modest goals for sustaining its programs. No dues anymore, just a \$3 donation each time you show up. No constitution or meeting minutes, and very little committee work!

Instead of elected officers, a team of two or three members is now entrusted with selecting program speakers, publicizing them, and recruiting help for coffee and refreshments. It seems to have worked! In recent years, Thursday morning attendance has ranged from a few people to a few dozen people, and not only women.

The Alliance continues to provide a place for fellowship, friendship, learning and philanthropy. At its May gathering, by consensus the group decided to give most of last year’s accumulated contributions to the congregation’s Anniversary Gifts project, which is for a permanent patio cover structure. For over 117 years the Alliance has adapted with changing circumstances, trying new approaches and letting old ways go. The changes didn’t come easily, yet a sense of shared purpose and a spirit of cooperation have brought the Alliance forward as the program of greatest longevity in this congregation’s life.

Especially for educated women of middle and upper-middle classes who have been socially liberal and religiously liberal, the Alliance has been a place of longtime friendships and mentoring relationships. It has been a leadership incubator for many women. Given that women have been denied authority in many parts of American society, including in religious leadership, women’s groups like the Alliance have provided a safe space and a power base for women in their congregations and in their larger communities.

One example who comes to mind is Phyllis Gardiner. She died in 1983, so I never knew her, but her involvement shines through the stories of the Alliance. She wrote a book about her family’s history, entitled *The Hyatt Legacy*.<sup>ii</sup> Her dad, Edward Hyatt, was a science teacher in Riverside County (and orange farmer) and then was the county superintendent of schools there. The family moved up to Sacramento when her father was

elected as the State Superintendent of Public Schools. Her mother, Maggie Hyatt, served as Edward’s Chief Deputy, perhaps in an unpaid capacity. Sometimes Maggie would contradict him at public press conferences.

Hyatt was a Republican and a reformer. He got the State to distribute free textbooks to all elementary schools. He supported campaigns for city playgrounds and mosquito control. He opposed cigarette smoking and the drinking of alcohol. He promoted Prohibition, though he died in 1919, a few years before the sale of alcohol was outlawed in the U.S. Hyatt also advocated for sex education in public schools—this was the early 1900s! He was opinionated about other educational reformers [openly critical of Maria Montessori as she traveled the U.S. to promote her method, for example], but he was quite certain about his own reformist ideas.

Like both her parents, Phyllis was also opinionated. All her older siblings had gone to Stanford—eight of them; she followed her friends to UC Berkeley. After college, she came back to Sacramento, and joined this church at age 23. She started our Alliance’s bridge group, helping many women find their entry point into the Alliance. After her husband passed away, Phyllis brought her black Labrador retriever to church—long before we had a dog policy. Like her parents, she was a liberal Republican. (Remember, she died in 1983.) Like her parents, she was against alcohol, and by force of will, she kept it away from church activities. The Gardiner prohibition at UUSS obviously ended sometime after her death.

In the 1960s, she was outraged that people from privileged classes in this area had access to birth control and information about it, but poor women and girls did not. So, she began organizing a local chapter of Planned Parenthood. Phyllis chaired the steering committee for it, and her Alliance friend Evelyn Watters was the secretary. They had the support of Dr. James Affleck, a physician in our congregation, and the Rev. Dr. Ford Lewis led its advisory board. After her death, a room at the local Planned Parenthood office was named after Phyllis Gardiner. In these times, when politicians around the country condemn and interfere with access to reproductive and sexual

health care, we can be inspired by her outrage and her courage.

Of course, there are many more mentors, leaders, quiet role models, sweethearts, and prickly personalities in our heritage--and still among us today. There are people of all genders who enrich our days, nourish our congregation, and make our world more beautiful and kind. I'm sure you know of many, and I hope you'll talk about them, starting with our honorary reception today.

One of many folks I did know and now remember fondly was Thelma White, an Alliance member who died a few years ago. It was Thelma who alerted us to the appeal and the availability of Camp Norge as a better place to have our all-ages camp every June. Her membership in the Sons of Norway made it possible for us to get a reservation there. It also was Thelma who started the all-ages December holiday potluck party, with the singing of carols around the piano, the making of holiday decorations, and trimming the Christmas tree. We will resume this all-ages party on December 7, a Friday night.

The presence, personalities and commitments of the Unitarian Universalist women we have known or learned about are not merely historical figures. They are prods to the conscience. Their lives remind us that everybody can leave a legacy for others. By our choices, deeds, words and presence, we all shape our legacy.

Perhaps we don't know what the longer-term effects of our actions will turn out to be, but that doesn't mean we won't have an effect. As we give thanks for the gifts of those we've known, and as we give thanks for the gifts of those we'll never know, we can remember this.

We can live our days knowing our deeds matter to so many people. Amid our mistakes and imperfections, we can live with humility, gratitude and generosity. We can reflect and pay attention to the ways that we show up, listen, speak, give, receive, and love. Are we not blessed to have this opportunity? Are we not blessed? Amen.

### Remembrance:

#### Unitarian Women in Early Santa Cruz

by Sangye Hawke, Student Minister

Congratulations Sacramento UUs! 150 years of UU presence in this amazing place. Did you know Santa Cruz County beat you by two years? It's anniversary was in 2016. It is not a coincidence that both the Unitarian church and the city of Santa Cruz celebrated their sesquicentennial in the same year. We owe this feat to two Unitarian sisters from Massachusetts.

Can you imagine how two very proper Unitarian sisters felt, landing into a town of about 800, half of which were white men? Most thought they were sex workers, when they weren't actively defrauding the established Spanish and Mexican landowners or wearing linen tablecloths over their faces and harassing migrant laborers returning to their housing after a long day at the railroads.

Santa Cruz, like Sacramento, was a prosperous town on the banks of a river, one lined with tanneries and lime kilns that discharged their offal into the river's waters with fragrant regularity and then, because of the rivermouth's proximity to the ocean, the waters were subject to tidal action, back flowing and flooding into the downtown streets with fragrant, chunky regularity. Winter was yet to happen.

Despite these conditions, these proper Unitarian Massachusetts ladies, named Alma and Harriet, walked the clap boarded sidewalks, hearing the pleas of the only other faith in town, the Methodists, to be alcohol-free. On their walk, Alma and Harriet counted 15 bars, two breweries, a guns/ cigar/blacksmith fix-your broken-wagon-wheel-while you wait place, and then after admiring the water channels flowing across the Catholic mission front yard, saw their congregation rebuilding their earthquake ravaged adobe church.

With a sigh, Alma and Harriet were not going to hide in the boarding house of bachelors where their new spouses insisted they stay while they were trying to find alternate housing, but instead lifted up their silk skirts, navigated the puddles and after watching the opening of the town's first community hall, decided that Santa Cruz needed a good baking. In true Unitarian spirit, they booked a weekly meeting, advertised in the local paper and greeted their new community with a mighty array of baked goods followed by live music.

Never underestimate the power of UU hospitality! I like to think these gatherings altered the Confederate leaning city of Santa Cruz towards a more humanitarian and Union view of the Civil War affected California. Alma and Harriet's newly formed "Ladies Aid Society" began raising money to support Union soldiers because they knew a fellow Unitarian, Reverend Dr. Henry Bellows' was trying to establish The Sanitary Commission, an organization devoted to medical war time care. As a result, their efforts made the papers. California was responsible for \$485,000 in contributions, 100k of which came from San Francisco area alone.

But Alma and Harriet didn't stop there. In 1862, flooding and heavy rains damaged businesses and homes beyond repair, displacing poorer residents and creating widows of many women. Unlike their Latina Rancho land grant counterparts, white women were not allowed to own land or own and run businesses. Many widows were taken advantage of by unscrupulous men, leaving them homeless and bankrupt. Alma and Harriet, now prosperous and out of the boarding house, helped these women by providing shelter and advocacy, laying ground for women's rights, in particular the right to represent themselves as executors of their husbands' estate.

But the legacy they left to the city was the influence they had on their husbands, who signed the deed to create the first public cemetery in a county whose burial places were dominated by religious and economic exclusivity.

Its name was Evergreen Cemetery. People of color, sex workers, suicide victims, paupers and the

Chinese could be laid to rest alongside other Unitarians, some even sharing each other's plots. The city was responsible for managing this place and allowed free religious expression, including elaborate Chinese and Freemason funerary rituals on the site. Eight years later, in 1866, no less than four of the six City Trustees were Unitarian, founding both the city and its church that year.

But it was Harriet, after the death of her sister Alma, who kept on believing in the power of a great bake. Her hospitality extended into building housing for migrant workers, most of whom worked on her extensive land. She also provided food, clothing, and medicine, and a living wage, all in defiance of the pressures of the era of anti-Chinese and anti-foreign immigration policies.

Tea and cake, Harriet and Alma knew, could launch a city, a church, and inspire social justice. Keep up the good work UUs!

#### Invocation and Chalice Lighting Words

*My name is Rosalie*, and this morning I am speaking for a Unitarian woman named Elizabeth Palmer Peabody. She was born in 1804 in eastern Massachusetts and lived there until she died 90 years later in 1894. She was a good student—so good, that as a teenager she began teaching in a girls' school run by her mother. As an adult she started a foreign language bookstore in Boston. Intellectual discussions took place among women and men at her store.

She is best known as the founder of the Kindergarten movement in the United States—starting the first one in 1860. She spent the next thirty years training teachers and starting schools. She said we should not punish or scare children into goodness; we should encourage and support their goodness. Elizabeth Palmer Peabody said the natural activity of childhood was an expression of the Divine Spirit, which lives in everyone.

*My name is Lottie*, and this morning I am speaking for a Universalist woman named Olympia Brown. She was born in 1835 in the south-western

corner of Michigan. She rode to high school on a horse. At her school she was disappointed to learn that girls were not allowed to give speeches. In college she met the first woman minister in the country, a Congregational minister. Olympia decided she wanted to be a minister. She was the first woman to attend a Universalist theological school. Then she was ordained as a Universalist minister in 1863. She led congregations in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Wisconsin. When her kids grew up, she quit parish ministry to work for women's rights. She did that for almost 40 years. She died at age 91, six years after women had gained the right to vote in the U.S.

Ginny Johnson: The words for our chalice lighting are Olympia Brown's words:

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<sup>i</sup> These and many other details about the USS Alliance and the history of women's involvement in American religion can be found in Chapter 2 of my Doctor of Ministry thesis, *From a Culture of Conflict to a Renewal of Covenant: A History of the Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento* (2017).

Stand by this faith. Work for it and sacrifice for it. There is nothing in all the world so important as to be loyal to this faith which has placed before us the loftiest ideals. [It] has comforted us in sorrow, strengthened us for noble duty, and made the world beautiful. Do not demand immediate results but rejoice that we are worthy to be entrusted with this great message, that you are strong enough to work for a great true principle without counting the cost. Go on finding ever new applications of these truths, and new enjoyments in their contemplation--always trusting in the one God, which ever lives and loves.

<http://www.uuss.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Diss-for-Print-Roger-Jones-04-14-2017.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> Phyllis H. Gardiner, *The Hyatt Legacy* (New York, 1959: Exposition Press). Her narrates the arrival of her ancestors from Ohio and the lives of her parents. All of references herein to her family's life come from this book.