

Oh, Olympia!
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It was just ten years after Sojourner Truth gave her famous “Ain’t I A Woman” speech at the Old Stone Church, a Universalist Meetinghouse in Akron, Ohio, that another fearless young woman strolled into the President’s office at St. Lawrence Theological School, a Universalist seminary in Canton, New York, to announce that she’d come to begin her studies for ministry.

President Ebenezer Fisher hadn’t expected the twenty-six year old who’d written the previous spring to actually show up for classes. He’d warned her the school had never had any female students before and doubted it was practical. “However, if you feel that God has called you to preach the everlasting gospel, you shall receive from me no hindrance but rather every aid within my power.” That was all the encouragement Olympia needed to go for her dream.

She inherited her spirited nature from her parents, who left their small farm in Vermont to homestead in the wilds of Michigan just a year before Olympia’s birth in 1835. She was only a girl when she killed a rattlesnake in the swamps that bordered their cabin. In that pioneer setting, her father built a schoolhouse on the property, while every evening her mother read aloud to the children from The New York Tribune, discussing politics and art and other highbrow matters. The maxim that children should be seen and not heard was one she never mastered.

She gained a passion for equality early on. As a youngster, she learned that her Aunt Pamela and Uncle Thomas in the nearby town of Schoolcraft operated a station on the Underground Railroad. Over 1500 former slaves passed through that home and Olympia talked with many, listening to their stories of hardship and bondage. She could never understand why anyone would be deemed inferior because of their skin color, or their sex for that matter. Her parents were both committed Universalists who instilled a belief that all people are acceptable in the sight of God.

Though unusual for the time, the family supported both Olympia and her sister in the decision to attend college. The problem was there were so few schools that would enroll women. Then they heard about a new institution in Massachusetts

called Mount Holyoke and with mounting hopes the two girls applied. They were disappointed to find it was more a finishing school than a bona fide university. One classmate described the regimen of rules and regulations that governed the campus:

We are not allowed to look out the window, nor speak loud in any room but our own; we must rise when the bell rings, retire when the bell rings, work and leave off working, go to the table and take our seats there when the bell rings ... Go not out of the house after tea without permission. Make no calls without permission.

Olympia bristled at discipline better suited to toddlers than young adults. And when a visiting professor opened his lecture on chemistry with the comment, "You are not expected to remember all this, but only enough to make you intelligent in conversation," she'd had enough. Where could she find a real education that treated her as the intellectual and social peer of men?

Antioch, a new coeducational college founded by the Unitarian layman Horace Mann, was the school of her choice. There were frequent lectures by world famous writers and speakers like Horace Greeley, Edward Everett Hale and Ralph Waldo Emerson. But Olympia began to wonder why only men seemed to address the students in this fashion. When she inquired whether women were ever invited to speak, the committee told her there were simply no women of sufficiently high caliber to be found. "But there are!" Olympia protested. Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Cady Stanton ... there were many to choose from. Yet the lecture committee persisted. No one would come to hear a female speaker and besides it wasn't proper.

But the issue was far from settled for Olympia. With other female students, she formed her own committee to bring a woman lecturer to Antioch. They invited Antoinette Blackwell, a graduate of Oberlin who had been ordained by a small congregational church in New York State. Though the synod refused to acknowledge her call (and though she soon switched her allegiance to the Unitarians) Blackwell had opened a door that had been closed since the earliest days of the church, when women missionaries worked alongside the Apostle Paul to spread the good news. Olympia had found her life work, her vocation, to preach the word that "in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female."

Which is how she came to be standing in Ebenezer Fisher's office as a prospective student of divinity in 1861, and how she came to be ordained by the New York convention of Universalists two years later, making history as the first woman in the United States to be elevated to the ministry of any recognized denomination. Yet she'd hardly settled into her first parish in the small town of Marshfield, Vermont, when she received a series of letters from Susan B. Anthony seeking to enlist her full time in the cause of women's suffrage.

Thus began a life long tension. Olympia knew she was born for ministry, and trained for it, but a pastor's life is not an easy one. Small town Vermonters could be prickly. (Believe me, I've lived there.) One or two complainers were more than enough to stir up trouble in a rural church, and Olympia spawned more than her share of disgruntled parishioners. The thought of gaining votes for women, on the other hand, fired her imagination like no other cause.

Her first foray into the field came just after the war had ended. The push was on to pass a constitutional amendment to establish civil rights for black Americans, and many hoped women would also win the ballot. Just such a law was being submitted for referendum to voters in the new state of Kansas. Olympia joined the fray.

For months, she traveled the frontier as a single woman, by buggy, wagon and stage, speaking in churches, court houses and whistle stops across the prairie. When women's suffrage went down to defeat, she was bitter, angry at the liquor lobby who feared that giving women the vote might mean closing the saloons and just as mad at the Republican Party who had ended by endorsing voting rights for black men only. The 14th Amendment singled out "male inhabitants" and "male citizens" for equal protection under law.

That was the beginning of the great crusade for women's rights. After spending years fighting for abolition and then supporting the war effort, women realized the time had come to fight on their own behalf. No one would give them equality. It was a prize to be struggled for and won.

No one fought harder than Olympia and the campaign took three generations. The nineteenth amendment guaranteeing women the right to vote

was finally ratified on August 18, 1920. She was one of few of the original suffragists who survived to cast a ballot in that year's presidential election. It was a momentous day when women went to the polls, but even then Olympia knew more was to be done. When the National American Woman Suffrage Association dissolved, its mission accomplished, she became part of the new organization that formed in its stead, the League of Women Voters. And in the final years of her life, she became one of the charter members of the American Civil Liberties Union and joined the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom to oppose the scourge of war. Into her ninth decade, she held fast to her motto, "Those who live in harmony with justice are immortal."

At the same time, Olympia never abandoned her primary devotion to ministry. Called to the Universalist Church of Racine, Wisconsin in 1878, she served for over 20 years. With her husband John Willis, who edited the local newspaper, she settled into a home overlooking Lake Michigan, and it was there she raised her two children, cooked, gardened and found a measure of peace and contentment amid the strains of a public life. Her niece Marcella remembered fondly visits to Great Aunt Olympia, who would skip down the sidewalk to greet her, and who even in her old age continued the voice exercises that had stood her in such good stead in the pulpit and on the rostrum, projecting out over the lake of an early morning, "Thy toiled and moiled and boiled the boy and found no joy," terrifying the children in the neighborhood but leaving Marcella with memories of a slightly eccentric yet boisterous personality.

Olympia was a pathbreaker. She was the first of her line, but at the time of her death in 1926, there were sixty women serving Universalist churches in the United States. Today, almost sixty percent of our clergy are female. Susan Frederick-Gray is the head of our association. I think Olympia would be pleased, for she always regarded equality as not only a political and social but also as a spiritual reality. Her life's aim was not merely to gain legal rights for women but to honor both sexes in their wholeness and bring them into realization of their partnership with each other and with the divine. For women's real power comes not from statute books or judicial rulings or even from economic leverage. It comes rather from the soul-force we see in characters like Olympia Brown: the courage, the faith, the persistence and unflinching integrity that never bend to circumstance but instead stamp those around them with their own hopeful and loving impress.

On the one hundredth anniversary of Olympia Brown's ordination in 1963, a bronze tablet was placed in Atwood Hall at her alma mater (alma mater, literally, her "nourishing mother") the St. Lawrence Theological School.

Preacher of Universalism
Pioneer and Champion
Of Women's Citizenship Rights
Forerunner of the New Era
The Flame of Her Spirit Still Burns Today