

“To April’s Breeze Unfurled”

It all started on this day, before the crack of dawn. Eight hundred British soldiers under the command of General Thomas Gage had been tramping through the night, ordered to capture the stores of gunpowder and muskets that the Americans had mustered in Concord, where their Provincial Congress had been meeting. What the Redcoats didn’t know was that William Dawes and Paul Revere were riding ahead of them to alert the local militias. In Lexington, Revere found two sentinels standing guard outside the house where John Adams and John Hancock were both asleep that night; the guards warned him not to make any noise that might waken the slumbering men. “Noise!” Revere exclaimed. “You’ll have noise enough before long. The regulars are coming!”

By 2:00 a.m. about one hundred and thirty men had gathered on the Lexington green. They were under the command of Captain John Parker, a forty-five year old veteran of the French and Indian War. While Hancock and Adams made a hasty escape through the woods, Parker’s drummer beat out the alarm. How the fighting started is uncertain. Both Minutemen and Redcoats were under orders not to fire. What’s known is that the Americans were sorely outnumbered and outgunned. When the British gave their victory salute half an hour later, eight Americans were dead, most shot in the back.

The first to respond to the ringing of the bells in Concord was William Emerson, the minister. He was soon joined by his neighbors and by the remnants of the militia from Lexington. When the British entered the town, the Americans withdrew to a hill overlooking the Old North Bridge. The Redcoats began to ransack the town in search of the guns they believed were hidden there. When they set fire to the Liberty Pole and a plum of smoke began to rise over the housetops, the Americans lost patience. As the Americans advanced, the British soldiers crowded at the end of the bridge, firing warning shots and then a direct volley into the American ranks. The Minutemen returned fire, and the British broke and ran.

A few days later, Emerson wrote in his journal, “This month remarkable for the greatest events taking place in the present age.” The men who were there were not only the founders of our country, but also the forbears of our faith. The First Parish where the Provincial Congress met and began plotting the network of Minutemen who peppered the Redcoats all the way back to Boston is today the Unitarian Church of Concord. John Adams and John Hancock, who were sleeping in the neighborhood, were both baptized in the First Parish of Quincy, Unitarian since 1750. Paul Revere, who cast the first bell to hang in the steeple of this historic meetinghouse, was also a Unitarian, and William Dawes, who rode that night, is in the burying-ground of King’s Chapel, which went Unitarian the same year the U.S. Constitution was ratified. Reverend Theodore Parker, the great nineteenth century abolitionist who used to write his sermons with a loaded pistol on his desk to protect the African Americans in his congregation from the slave catchers, and whose portrait hangs in our foyer, was the grandson of Captain John Parker of the Lexington regiment. And William Emerson, the minister who inhabited what’s called “the old Manse” and who shouted to his countrymen, “If we die, let us die here,” as he saw the British coming, was the grandfather of another famous clergyman

whose picture is in our entry, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who would memorialize his ancestors' deeds in his famous Concord Hymn:

By the rude bridge that arched the flood,
Their flag to April's breeze unfurled,
Here the embattled farmers stood
And fired the shot heard round the world.

It was the beginning of the American Revolution. And if there are holy days on our Unitarian Universalist calendar, April 19th would be one of them. If we celebrated saint's days, those days would have to include the patriots who were ready to lay down their lives for the ideal of self-government and for the proposition, enunciated by another well-known Unitarian, that all people are created equal.

What a day in our spiritual and political history! This day belongs to us and, in a larger sense, we belong to this day and the story it tells—how ordinary citizens took destiny in their own hand and stood up to mightiest empire on earth, motivated not by their pocketbooks or hope for gain but ready to give their lives, fortunes and sacred honor in defense of ideals worth fighting for. No one should take legacy that away from us.

What a desecration, when Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols chose April 19th to do their deadly work fourteen years ago in Oklahoma City. Dorrie Senghas, a beloved member of this congregation who was alive at that time, expressed her sense of dismay that something sacrosanct had been violated. She'd grown up in the village of Concord and remembered:

*The cannon roared at sunrise, we unfurled flags from every porch,
In my childhood, this day belonged to all of us,
Under the arching elms, not yet in leaf,
The lilacs yet to bloom, chill giving way, mud letting go of crocuses
We marched for love of our great past,
Proud people of this ancient town in the long shadow of the farmers
Who won our liberty.*

Her poem concluded with a sense of outrage:

*Choose your own day to wreak your evil deeds.
Do not take mine.*

No, don't take our day away from us. And don't let a bunch of flag-waving fanatics take our Revolution, either, claiming that it was all about founding a "Christian nation" rather than establishing a land of diverse faiths, with conscience the only king. Unitarianism is an outgrowth of that tolerant, democratic spirit. Those who rebelled against the dominion of absolute monarchs also revolted against the absolutism of a church that claimed to have all the answers and make all the rules.

And yet April 19th was only the beginning for a revolution that was cultural rather than

military. John Adams mused that “I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy. My sons ought to study mathematics and philosophy ... in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, [and] music.” And just as the founding generation threw off the external restraints of foreign rule, so their grandchildren proceeded to internalize freedom of the spirit.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, who fired the opening salvo in that war, represented the third generation of ministry in his family. His father, son of the William Emerson who rallied the defenders of the bridge in Concord, preached the sermon at installation of our first minister here in Burlington, in 1810. But the weight of social and family expectations lay heavy on the young man and after much soul-searching he made a hard decision to leave the ministry to be true to his own character and convictions. Self-liberation became Emerson’s credo and lifework after that, and his motto “Trust Yourself!” became the watchword for an entire generation.

Bronson Alcott, for example, applied the doctrine of trusting human nature to education. Instead of the rote memorization standard in other classrooms, he engaged the children in dialogue. “About twenty children came the first day,” remembered Elizabeth Peabody, his assistant in the school. “Mr. Alcott ... asked each one separately, what idea he or she had of the purpose of coming to school? To learn; was the first answer. To learn what?” After the three “R’s” had been covered, at least one of the children ventured, “to behave well,” whence the conversation flowed into an examination of what it meant to feel rightly to think rightly, and to act rightly. Some other questions Alcott explored with his students:

What is wisdom?
Are you what you want to be?
Who is the best person in the world?
What makes us good?

“Simple as all this seems,” remembered Peabody, “it would hardly be believed what an evident exercise it was to the children ... Every face was eager and interested.” What she was describing was the first instance of child-centered learning, the philosophy that still underlies our UU approach to religious education. As her friend and mentor William Ellery Channing put it, “The great end in religious instruction is not to stamp our minds upon the young, but to stir up their own.”

Peabody was probably more than half in love with Channing. Her two sisters would marry famous Unitarian gentlemen—Mary wed Horace Mann while Sophia married Nathaniel Hawthorne—but Elizabeth devoted her energies to more heady pursuits. She was editor of the Transcendentalist journal the *Dial*, probably the first to translate Eastern scriptures like the Upanishads and Lotus Sutra for American readers, and out of Peabody’s Boston bookstore Margaret Fuller organized the first consciousness raising groups—whole series of conversations designed for women—on questions like “What were we born to do? How shall we do it?,” questions Fuller said, “which so few ever propose to themselves ‘till their best years are gone by.” For many women, the

discovery that they possessed lives and opinions of their own, independent of their husbands and families, was electrifying.

Yet “Trust Yourself” had implications far beyond gender politics. For Henry Thoreau, living on Emerson’s woodlot at Walden Pond, it meant fidelity to one’s own sense of right and wrong, even when that meant breaking the law. The famous exchange between the two men in the Concord jail probably never took place. Henry, who refused to pay a tax to support the Mexican War, was supposedly visited by his friend after being sentenced to spend a night behind bars. “Henry, what are you doing in there?” Emerson is said to have asked. “Waldo, what are you doing out there?” Thoreau reportedly answered. Actually, both men were opposed to the aggression against Mexico, which they saw as a subterfuge for extending slavery, and Emerson was ready as any to pay for his beliefs. So when James Sanford, one of the ‘secret six’ who was plotting with John Brown to instigate a slave uprising by seizing the federal armory at Harper’s Ferry, visited Concord to raise funds for the scheme, Emerson was the biggest contributor.

These were women and men who were as radical in their own way as the Minutemen were in theirs. Their little town of Concord was at the epicenter of a seismic shift whose aftershocks are still being felt today, from children’s rights to women’s rights to civil rights. They demonstrated how a small group of people acting boldly on their beliefs can make a lasting change in society. And they would not have been at all surprised at the result, for they believed totally in their own power to transform the world.

Those early Unitarians remind us where every revolution has to start—from inside ourselves. For while April 19th marks the day the farmers first discharged their muskets, the uprising against tyranny began much earlier. As John Adams remarked, “The Revolution was effected before the war commenced. The Revolution began in the hearts and minds of the people.” It started when the settlers of the New World began to think of themselves as an independent people rather than as English colonists. It gained a foothold when they learned to conceive of themselves as self-governing citizens rather than subjects of a foreign crown. It won its chief victories in the collective consciousness rather than by martial combat.

And that is where this liberal faith of ours will continue to have its impact. For ideas are powerful things, and history has proven that people will sacrifice for principle more readily than for comfort or security or worldly gain. Our principles are as strong as they were two centuries ago. Respect for human rights, equality of opportunity, the guarantee of religious liberty, protection for dissenting opinion and the freedom to be different ... it’s a precious heritage we claim. The challenge for us is to keep the faith in a time when the fight for liberation has taken on new dimensions ...

*When the gap between rich and poor has never been wider,
When an economy of unbridled materialism is imperiling the planet,
When the United States still spends more on its military than the next eighteen
countries combined, and puts more its own citizens behind bars than any other nation*

on earth,

We need a revolution in values. We need people of conscience who can speak truth to power, and a moral community that calls America to live up to the dreams of its framers. We need this Society, and the world needs our vision.