

The Story of the First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

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First Unitarian Society of Ithaca

Rev. Jane Thickstun

Part I Rev. Thickstun

A hundred and fifty years ago, this congregation was established as the “Church of Christian Unity.”

The year before, Ezra Cornell had founded the university named after him with Andrew Dickson White, who became its first president. The university was unique in its time in that it was non-sectarian—and this was controversial. Area sectarian colleges actually sent agents to Albany to fight Cornell’s land grant proposal. But while the founders wanted a university unaffiliated with religion, they still thought it would be useful to have a liberal church in town.

A. D. White saw science as rescuing humanity from ignorance and bad behavior, but thought that it would “go hand in hand with religion.” He believed a pure religion, seen as simply “a recognition of a Power in the universe, not ourselves” as the source of goodness would grow stronger and stronger.

The two men encouraged the establishment of a Unitarian church, and the American Unitarian Association in Boston helped it get started with guest preachers. The AUA helped out a lot in the early days.

In 1873 the first building was built at 314 East Buffalo Street. Unfortunately, it burned down after just twenty years, but immediately the congregation built a new one, this one. Both were designed by William Henry Miller, the first graduate of Cornell’s College of Architecture and Ithaca’s most noteworthy architect. He designed many of the buildings at Cornell, as well as the high school (now DeWitt Mall) and many nice homes. The house across the street, built by him, is now a B&B named after him.

Some Ithaca residents weren’t happy about liberal religious thinking, and someone wrote to the Ithaca Journal protesting the aid the church was receiving from the Presbyterians, Baptists, Congregationalists, and Jews. A Roman Catholic responded “Let us assist them in erecting the church to save those who will not go to your church or mine.”

John W. Scott was the minister of the congregation when the old building burned and the new one was built. But he is better known as the inventor of the ice cream sundae. The story goes that on Sunday, April 3, 1892 after church, Scott went down to Platt & Colt Pharmacy, and with Chester Platt created the first historically documented sundae. They put cherry syrup and candied cherries on top of ice cream and called it “Cherry Sunday.” A number of other towns in America claim to be the birthplace of the ice cream sundae, but an ad for the Cherry Sunday in the Ithaca Journal two days later is the oldest-known written reference to a sundae, and I dare say that establishes us as the winners in the battle. And Walt told me that there is a ride at Disney

World about Food Wars, where Ithaca is featured as the birthplace of the ice cream sundae. (So that really seals it!)

An important member of this congregation from this era is Anna Botsford Comstock. She was brought up Quaker, and made a life-long study of nature. After graduating from Cornell, she married John Henry Comstock, her entomology instructor. He got her interested in insect illustration. Throughout her life, Comstock illustrated her husband's lectures and publications on insects. She wrote and illustrated a number of books, including the novel, *Confessions to a Heathen Idol*, which was written under a pseudonym. It was a pretty controversial title and topic at the time.

Our pamphlet about her says that she was “one of the great spirits of this church. She served as trustee and was a perennial teacher in the church school.” She and her husband were both very active in the congregation.

Comstock is most famous for being one of the first to bring her students outdoors to study nature. She felt it would make them better people if they could be exposed to nature early in life. Starting in 1897, she taught nature study at Cornell. Comstock was the first female professor at Cornell. However, she was denied full professorship for twenty years until 1920. The stained glass on the Buffalo Street wall of the sanctuary depicts her with her students out in nature. It was given by Alma and George Russell in 1939 in memory of Anna Botsford Comstock.

Part II Walt Peck

Our church is celebrating its 150th anniversary. 75 years ago, in 1940, in this very same sanctuary, we were celebrating our 75th anniversary. But ‘celebrating’ may not be the best way to describe what was going on around here about then. Despite a succession of successful and top-flight pastorates, despite the active support of the denominational headquarters in Boston, and despite the presence of a large, renowned non-sectarian university up the hill, times were bleak for the First Unitarian Society of Ithaca. The Depression had depleted the endowment funds. Worship attendance was hovering around 70. The entire Sunday School program was able to fit in one classroom. And pay for the organist was not just cut; it was eliminated! She was now a volunteer.

Things were so bad that the congregation met with the President of the American Unitarian Association, Frederick May Eliot, begging for more money. And the Board of Trustees considered shutting the whole place down. From what I can tell, the only part of the church that was thriving was the “Women’s Alliance”, which had 60 members and was responsible for everything from the Church Bazaar to overseeing the janitor and keeping the church clean to providing flowers for the ill. They even provided boutonnieres for the ushers. Other than the boutonnieres, things were looking bad. And then, to make matters worse, two pastors left, in quick succession, to join the War effort, to serve their country as military chaplains. The church, though expressing great pride in this sacrifice, was at loose ends. Almost as an afterthought, we turned to a grad student who, on the side, was serving as the minister at the little Forest Home Methodist Chapel on the edge of campus, which is still there. His name? Ralph Helverson. When he was offered the position by the Board of Trustees it was “for one

year, more or less as seems expedient". Not exactly a ringing endorsement!

But then the church thrived. By the time Ralph left seventeen years later in 1959, attendance had nearly tripled. The Sunday School program had expanded to over 200 children, so many that the congregation found it expedient to rent four rooms on Sunday mornings from the YMCA that was then next door. At one point, the parents of potential Sunday School enrollees had to put their child's name on a waiting list. Finances recovered, youth programs flourished and our campus ministry thrived. All this motivated the congregation to purchase what we now call the Parish House in 1958. The world seemed to be our oyster and we, we were sailing with the wind to our backs.

Though much of our success must be ascribed to the good times enjoyed by liberal Protestants in general in the post-war era, I think we need to give Ralph quite a lot of credit as well. He was widely commended for his work by members of our congregation. Dale Corson, later President of Cornell and, during Ralph's tenure at our church, Chairman of our Board, and not a man to bestow false praise, waxed enthusiastically about Ralph's pastoral work, urging the church to do whatever it took to keep him. The American Unitarian Association thought enough of Ralph's writing ability that they published a compilation of his essays as one of their early Meditation Manuals. And when he left in 1959, he did so to accept the call to First Parish Church, Unitarian, of Cambridge Massachusetts, right there by that bastion of Unitarianism, Harvard University. And he stayed there until his retirement in 1977.

All this is well and good, but the thing that impresses me the most about Ralph's importance to our congregation is what happened after he left. For we then struggled. No, we never really had to consider closing up shop after Ralph's departure, after all this was still the Golden Age of Prosperity for Liberal Protestantism, the 'Great Decline in Mainstream Churches' that continues today, was not yet in motion. But, after Ralph's departure, conflict festered and there were a series of short, quick pastorates. For whatever reason, the times they were a-changing.

Part III Rev. Thickstun

The 1960's were as tumultuous in this congregation as in the nation. There were several very short, conflictual pastorates after Helverson, and then Rev. Dick Gilbert served here from 1965 to 1970 when he went to the big church in Rochester. Members worked hard to protest racial segregation and the Vietnam war.

We even hosted a group that did counseling to talk young men out of registering for the draft. It was called the Selective Service Counseling Center, and they had a sign out front on Aurora St. The Selective Service office, the government agency that registers those young men for the draft, sent a letter asking us to take down the sign. Their office was a few doors down and they didn't have a sign, so the men were stopping in here instead!

Then one day in March of 1965, right after services let out, a runaway truck came barrelling down Aurora street from 96B on South Hill. Somebody commented that it was "lucky that no one was hit." It seems buildings were spared as well, unlike our more recent runaway truck episode.

The 1960's clash of cultures played out in the congregation. There was a conflict between the

old-school idea of church and the newer, more experimental, '60's style church. You heard from Walt about the Women's Alliance, which was responsible for "everything from the Church Bazaar to overseeing the janitor and keeping the church clean to providing flowers for the ill." They were the old guard. The custodian had an apartment in the building, and in 1973 the custodian and the Women's Alliance came into conflict. It appears people had been partying in the building, and the old guard wasn't happy about it. The custodian was asked to leave.

There were a few great gifts to the congregation in this period. In 1964, Hazel M. Hauck, an active member in the Society, donated a piece of land that we call "Hazel's Back Yard. It is a sacred trust and there are certain policies in place to maintain it as a natural area. Members and friends of The First Unitarian Society of Ithaca can visit this site as a place of quiet contemplation and we can have our own cremated remains, and those of our loved ones, placed at this spot. Be sure to check out the plaque on the wall with the memorials. These people were as important to this congregation as you are. They deserve to be known.

Another benefactor was the local artist, J.O. Mahoney. Mahoney was an eccentric character, a well-known painter, and on the faculty at Cornell. His house on Twin Glens Road was a work of art in itself. "Many would say that 45 Twin Glens Road was J.O.'s major achievement and his major act of self-disclosure," according to an article about him. Having spent time in the 1930's in Rome, Mahoney was in love with all things Italian. When he died in 1987, he left his extravagant home and furnishings to this congregation. It paid for the huge renovation that connected our three buildings. The large painting in the garden entrance is one of his.

Part IV Walt Peck

I spent a lot of time this summer at Cornell's Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection. Why? Because that's where our church's archives are kept and I, along with noted local historian Carol Kammen and other members of the congregation, are working on a book about the church's history. And I had the time of my life! I am responsible for everything from 1940 until today. I spent countless hours poring over old records.

The stories read like a soap opera. I would be reading along and, well, things were looking troubled; say, a minister was on the hot seat and it was only a matter of time. And then, I would turn over another piece of paper and "Bam", there's the letter of resignation! Or the organ was getting worse and then even worse and committees are formed and consultants are called in and then, there it is, in black and white, a new organ to be enjoyed by all. And some people, it would turn out, did not enjoy the organ after all.

Like I said. Fun. But that hasn't been the best part of my excursions into the past. I have been here for a while, having joined the church in 1981, when I was just a 22 year-old grad student. And, at least at one time, I never met a committee that I did not like, so I have served on a lot. And have gotten to know a lot of people.

As I read the records of our past, I could almost smell the presence of these folks. Join me as I go down memory lane through the papers and the people in the archives. Those of you who have also been for a while, be prepared to smile. The rest of you, stay with me, there is a point behind

my reminiscing.

Martha Ferger's passion for social justice springs from the page. Dick Gilbert's calm wisdom is soothing, even regarding matters that are fifty years old and forgotten by everyone, except maybe me. Jack Taylor's eagerness for detail is apparent in his very first correspondence. The passion of Joyce Barney for education is as delightful then as it is now. Dale Corson is, well, Dale Corson and it is easy to remember why Cornell University called on him to take over as President after the 1969 student uprisings. And then there is Frank Eldridge.

For those of you that don't know of Frank, he was our organist from 1946 until his death in 1993. Forty-seven years! In addition to being our organist, he was our Minister of Music and, for his day job, was a music professor at Ithaca College. For the first twenty or so years, he spent much of his time with us lobbying for a new organ. Which, he did indeed eventually get (!); the organ dedicated to him which you see right there in front of you. But whether you loved organ music or could leave organ music, no one did not admire Frank. He was a kind-hearted man with a gentle, unassuming way about him. And yet he was a passionate man as well, passionate about music, about his students, about the environment, and, yes, about this church. And he was here for a very long time.

He came from a very long-lived family and, by the time I knew him, he was not a young man. And yet, I suspect we all thought he would go on forever. One Sunday in 1993, for some reason I was serving as the equivalent of today's Celebration Associate. Frank had taken ill and was not to be at the organ that day, a highly unusual occurrence; an occurrence so rare that it needed some explaining. I was told by folks who presumably knew better than I did that Frank would be fine and to please share that with the congregation. So I did. And I was wrong. Frank died soon after. Ever since, I have regretted doing that, for, rightly or wrongly, I had raised false hope. To this day, when visiting people facing trouble I take great care to offer no meaningless platitudes that all will be well. Life is too uncertain for that.

Frank's loss hit the congregation hard. I guess we just did not realize how important he was to us. And Atsuki was important to us. As was Ralph Helverson. And so are each and every one of the people in the archives. And so are each and every one of the people who are remembered on the Hazel's Backyard Memorial Wall. And, I hope, so are each and every one of you.

Oliver Sacks, the noted writer and neurologist, died in 2015 of a rare form of melanoma. During the year or so that he struggled with his final illness, Sacks wrote a little set of reflections published in his book Gratitude.

"There will be no one like us when we are gone, but then there is no one like anyone else, ever. When people die, they cannot be replaced. They leave holes that cannot be filled, for it is the fate- the genetic and neural fate- of every human being to be a unique individual, to find his own path, to live his own life, to die his own death.

Sacks continues: "I cannot pretend I am without fear. But my predominant feeling is one of gratitude. I have loved and been loved; I have been given much and I have been given something in return. Above all, I have been a sentient being, a thinking animal, on this beautiful

planet, and that in itself has been an enormous privilege and adventure.”

That sums up nicely how I feel about this church. Its history permeates the very pews. We, the people of this congregation, have left our smell in the woodwork. We have given much. And we have been given much in return. We cannot be replaced.

I lied a few minutes ago when I told you that my work in the archives was unalloyed joy. I do, I must confess, have a great measure of fear mixed in. Two kinds of fear, actually, one silly and one maybe not so silly. Let's start with the silly one. Remember how I told you that the character of the people leapt off the page? I have been here a long of time. I am on many of those pages! I can only pray that my character appears a little more sterling to some future historian than I know it to be. Be careful, the future is watching!

Okay, that is a minor little petty fear. Here's the more important fear: these people about which I read and about whom I will be writing, they lived or are living lives just as full, just as multi-dimensional as the next person, as you and I. To represent them fully, to know them fully, is impossible. But I can hold them lovingly and with grace. And with gratitude. May we all go forth holding each other and the whole world with love, with grace, and with gratitude.

Amen. Please rise for the final hymn, “There is a Stone”, written by Polly Joan, a one-time member of our church.