

CLARA BARTON: OUR CURIOUS AND DIFFICULT SAINT

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This morning, I am going to share the story of one of our foremost Unitarian Universalist “saints,” Clara Barton.

Now... when most people use the word “saint,” what first comes to mind is the Roman Catholic Church, which has a whole constellation of officially recognized and canonized saints so designated over the centuries of that faith tradition. Curious about the exact number, I went on-line and discovered that there are more than 10,000 Roman Catholic “saints”...more than 10,000 – yikes, that’s a lot of awfully good people!

But Roman Catholicism isn’t the only religious organization with a propensity to idolize and honor its heroes of faith. Though we in the “free church” most decidedly have no formal “canonization” procedures like the church in Rome, Unitarian Universalists will – at the drop of a spiritual and institutional hat – proudly rattle off a long list of Unitarian and Universalist heroes of the past – noble and noteworthy folks from our faith tradition whose goodness and contributions to humanity make them remarkable. We even have an entire website devoted to our UU “saints!” All you have to do to read about – are you ready for this number? – 346 famous and fabulous Unitarian Universalists is to go to www.famousuus.com.

Here you will find a long and noble list of Unitarian Universalists who have made incredibly noteworthy contributions to humanity – to the arts and literature...science and medicine... politics and education...philosophy and theology...philanthropic and humanitarian endeavors ...and social and governmental reform. Just go online to “read all about us!” We are very proud of our long list of Unitarian Universalist “movers and shakers”...all who have, over the more than 500 year history of our faith, made noble and noteworthy contributions to human betterment, thought, and culture. For better or worse, dear friends, we Unitarian Universalists are proud, inveterate name droppers. We love to talk about our “saints”!

But over the years, as I have thought about this very liberal tendency of ours to “canonize” our “UU heroes,” I have come to realize that there may be a grave spiritual danger in being so ready to put our outstanding ancestors up on a high pedestal. My fear is akin to what the Music Director in the last church I served – a wonderful guy named Clif Hardin, back in DC – said to me a few years back, when the Roman Catholic church bended its arduous canonization rules to quickly make Mother Theresa an official “saint” of their church: *“I was so upset when they made her a saint,”* he said to me. *“Why?”* I queried, *“Don’t you think she deserves it?”* *“Oh, no, it’s not that,”* Clif responded, *“I think she was an astoundingly noble person who led a rare and beautiful and compassionate life...the problem is that if we all start thinking of her as a ‘saint’ -- thereby turning her into some sort of spectacular, superhuman, sacrificial being -- then we can successfully distance ourselves from her life and her work, and give ourselves permission not to live as compassionately she did.* Then Clif concluded, *“Turning someone into a full-blown ‘saint’ keeps us (living as we do our far-from-extraordinary and imperfect lives) from truly calling ourselves to live as nobly and compassionately as they did.”*

I was so struck by the power and rightness of this observation. Religious people, whether Roman Catholic or Unitarian Universalist, ought to be very careful about the process, formal or informal, of “canonizing” some great person of the past into pure and lofty “sainthood.”

Because putting someone high up on a pedestal of extraordinary human nobility and achievement might just might have the unintended consequence of permitting ourselves to psychologically distance our own lives and behavior from those whom we have enshrined as “heroes.”

Let me say this just a bit differently...if we Unitarian Universalists fall victim to creating a “super-human gap” between ourselves and those we think of as the “heroes” and “saints” of our faith, we may disempower those truly noble lives from usefully informing and instructing our lives as we strive to be better and more noble in the days and years ahead.

Nonetheless, with all this appropriate caution about “canonizing” saintly people of the past, today I want to tell the remarkable story of a true UU hero of the 19th (and a bit of the 20th) century. Clara Barton, a Universalist – the “*Angel of the battlefield*” as she came to be known by both the Union and Confederate soldiers of the American Civil War – was founder and long-time President of the Red Cross...articulate activist who led the fight to get the U.S. Senate to ratify the Treaty of Geneva to regulate war...tireless advocate for women’s rights and suffrage and universal education for all children...friend and ally of the freed slaves...and courageous worker her whole life long on behalf of downtrodden and suffering human beings wherever she found them.

As I read several biographies about her in preparation for my sermon this morning, I was amazed and awed by all she was able to accomplish during her long life, and how strong and principled and purposeful was her character. Her friend the Grand Duchess Louise thought of Barton as “*one of those very few persons whose whole being is goodness itself.*” And after she (at age 68 no less!) brought aid to the many thousands who suffered after the terrible Johnstown, Pennsylvania, flood in 1889, the local paper rhapsodized: “*We cannot thank Miss Barton in words...hunt the dictionaries of all languages through and you will not find the signs to express our appreciation for her and her work. Try to describe the sunshine. Try to describe the starlight. Words fail.*” Sounds a lot like a saint, doesn’t she? But I’m ahead of myself. Let’s go back to the beginning, and tell the story of this long and courageous and compassionate life.

On Christmas Day in 1821, Clara Barton was born into a devoutly Universalist family in North Oxford, Massachusetts, the youngest of five children. Her brothers and sisters were all much older than she, and so, as she later described it herself, “*I had no playmates, but in effect six mothers and fathers*” who constantly instructed and taught Clara things they thought she should know. The Universalist church in the town also played a central role in her childhood, and although late in her life she also became somewhat interested in the spiritualist and Christian Science movements, as far as we know she remained a Universalist for her entire life. As one biographer describes her early religious influences, “*On Sundays, Clara sat in the Barton Family pew...in the plain white colonial [Universalist] church. That God is love, and all lives a precious gift never to be destroyed, were teachings of the church [that were] impressed upon her mind at an early age, chiefly because [these Universalist teachings] so fully governed her father’s actions.*” By the end of this sermon -- when you have heard the full story of all this compassionate woman accomplished on behalf of humanity, you will all fully understand the central role these Universalist beliefs, which were instilled in her at an early age, played in her life.

A shy and insecure child, Clara turned to books and the life of the mind. Intellectually bright and precocious, Clara was an avid student and learner, so much so that by the age of 16, with hardly any formal education, she passed the Massachusetts teacher exams, and began to teach at the local school! For the next 15 years, with some formal schooling at a Universalist college blended in, she taught at various schools in Massachusetts, and then took a position in

Bordentown, New Jersey, at a tiny school for the affluent children of the community. Although there was a law in New Jersey requiring free education for all, the local school committee only accepted students who could pay, and this Clara knew was wrong. She singlehandedly lobbied – or was it hounded, for she was a very strong and purposeful person? – she singlehandedly lobbied the school committee until they agreed to provide the resources for what was to be the first free school for all children in the state. The school, which began with six students, quickly grew to 600, at which point the school committee (comprised, of course, of all men) said it was “*too large for a woman to manage*,” and so they made Clara assistant to the new male principle they brought in. This, of course, deeply offended her, and she soon resigned and moved to Washington, DC, to visit her sister Sally.

For a while, she contented herself with witnessing Washington’s convoluted political process – spending long hours in the Senate’s gallery, attending lectures, and listening to debates over slavery and other issues. “*But it was not Clara Barton’s nature to be idle.*” In her 80’s, she wrote in her autobiography, “*You have never known me without work, and you never will. It has always been a part of the best religion I had.*” She took an unchallenging job copying letters at the Patent Office (such low-level jobs were the only work available to women in Washington then), and was quickly promoted to the position of “Confidential Secretary,” but she still found herself bored, discriminated against and underutilized. Then, the Civil War broke out, and Clara wanted to help in this great national effort.

As one biographer puts it, “*The conflict...provided her with an outlet for her [prodigious] energy and satisfied her longing to lose herself in her work and to be needed.*” For a year, she contented herself with soliciting supplies for wounded and ill-equipped soldiers, and was able to attract massive contributions and supplies. But then, as the horrible effects of battle were reported in Washington, she began driving wagon teams of horses herself, and going right into the thick of the battle, aiding wounded and dying soldiers directly.

For the rest of that terribly bloody war, Clara Barton – who, as I have said, came to be called the “*Angel of the Battlefield*” by the soldiers she ministered to – was eventually named Supervisor of Nursing for the Army of the Potomac and was on the field of battle, offering nursing and food and compassion to Union and Confederate troops alike. And that is a terribly important part of the story – in spite of her fierce Union loyalties and passionate opposition to slavery, her compassion was extended to all who suffered! True to her Universalist upbringing, she saw and served the humanity in every last soldier in need. She knew deep to her heart the rightness of our first modern-day Unitarian Universalist principle, “*The inherent worth and dignity of every person.*” Today, as American soldiers continue to be involved in armed conflict in both Afghanistan and Iraq, and as several other bloody wars and civil wars rage around the globe – we would do well to spiritually remember the unchanging truth that war always causes untold suffering on all the persons it sweeps into its terrible jaws. May we in these violent times, like Clara Barton, never forget the universal humanity and worth of human persons everywhere, even – perhaps most especially – those we imagine to be “our enemies.”

But back to her Civil War story. One biographer writes, “*Bravery and [tirelessness] were conspicuous elements of Barton’s Civil War service.*” At the battle for Chantilly, Virginia, one surgeon recounted, “*When the railroad cars whistled up to the station, the first person on the platform was Miss Barton, again to supply us with every article that could be thought of. She [stayed] there till the last wounded soldier was placed on the cars...she worked for five days in the pouring rain with only two hours of sleep.*” One battle account said that she had been working so long around the wounded and dying that she had to periodically pause in the field hospital and wring the heavy blood from the lower portion of her dress so that she could easily

move her feet among the men. In another battle, a biographer writes, *“She built fires, extracted bullets with a pocket knife, made gallons of applesauce, baked pies, drove teams [of horses] and performed last rites.”* Her tireless and multi-faceted efforts in unbelievably horrible situations were amazing to all who witnessed them, and her notoriety and fame spread all across the nation.

When the terrible war ended, an exhausted Clara Barton declared, *“I saw many things that I did not wish to see, and I pray God I may never see again...I have labored up to the full measure of my strength.”* But this remarkable woman was by no measure done with her life’s work.

In spite of her exhaustion and weakness, almost immediately, with the full support of the federal government, Barton organized an office to locate and account for the many thousands of missing soldiers. In addition, as one biographer put it, *“Barton’s perceptive and sympathetic nature led her to foresee innumerable social problems after the Civil War”*...she was concerned with the precarious situation of the newly freed slaves...fought vociferously for full women’s rights, including the all-important right to vote...worked on behalf of humane prison reforms...led a tireless campaign to persuade the United States Senate to ratify – which it did, finally, in 1882 – the Treaty of Geneva, which established universal, humane rules for the conduct of war...traveled to Europe to learn about the International Red Cross, and then did humanitarian work with them in the Franco-Prussian War, which lasted until 1871...and, finally in 1881, with the full support of President James Garfield, founds (with a few friends and allies) the American Association of the Red Cross, the organization which she would tirelessly serve as President for the next 23 years until her retirement at the age of – are you ready for this? – 83! For the last decades of her life she lived at a curious, rambling home that is now a National Park Service Site in Glen Echo, Maryland:

This massive structure which served her both as a home, and as a warehouse for tons of Red Cross Supplies. Talk about not having sufficient “boundaries” around your work life, this amazing, utilitarian building overlooks the Potomac River near Washington, DC, and is located less than a mile from the River Road UU congregation, the last congregation I served before coming here to UUFVB. It is a wonderful historical site I urge you to visit the next time you are in Washington, DC. As you walk the hardwood floors and the dark Victorian rooms, you can almost imagine Miss Barton presiding over the solitary life and the complex organization she so diligently built.

Even after she left the Red Cross, as an aged woman in her 80’s, spending time between her home in Glen Echo and a summer home in her birthplace of North Oxford, Massachusetts, she could not stop herself from continuing to be a force for change and good in our society. In 1905 she helped form the National First Aid Society *“which helped establish community aid programs,”* spoke regularly at women’s suffrage conventions, and continued to lecture and write, up to the very end of her life in 1912 at the age of 90, on a variety of humanitarian and human rights issues.

Is there any denying that this powerful and principled woman – who never married nor seemingly had time for a family – led a remarkable, and exemplary life? Here are some of the adjectives (I offer them in no particular order) which biographers have used to describe her: courageous, fascinating, bold, introspective, loyal, intelligent, kindhearted, serious, idealistic, angelic, tenacious, conscientious, determined, resourceful, sensitive, strong-willed, unflappable, unyielding, honest, disciplined, self-confident, witty, compassionate, self-denying, persuasive, brave, loving. Now there’s a typical UU personality profile, don’t you think? As amazing as it seems, Clara Barton was, all these things, and more. But was she a saint? Please recall that

my sermon title today is “Clara Barton: Our Curious and Difficult Saint.”

I use the words “curious” and “difficult” to describe her because frankly there is more to her story than laudatory greatness – much more! Like so many heroes of human history, Clara Barton had her share of personal weaknesses, blind spots, excesses and flaws. Listen now to some of the “less than glowing” adjectives (again, in no particular order) which biographers also used to describe this complex woman: troubled, rigid, insecure, edgy, self-conscious, pessimistic, self-absorbed, neurotic, difficult, sickly, unpredictable, restless, opinionated, demanding, shaky, self-absorbed, vain, shortsighted, lonely, eccentric, depressed – again, a typical UU personality profile, don’t you think? But seriously...this rather painful list points out that Clara Barton was a curious and complex person who, in addition to accomplishing so much greatness, also lived with a great deal of pain, struggle and sadness .

The same can be said of other outstanding heroes of history, like John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Mahatma Gandhi, who all had character and behavioral flaws which have eventually come to light, despite their obvious greatness and contributions to humanity.

Let’s take a little deeper look at the way this great humanitarian really struggled in her life, because it is important for us to remember that “saintliness” usually arises out of ordinary and ambiguous human personalities.

First, because it is noteworthy, let’s look at the physical and mental problems that plagued her for her entire 90 years. Like her Mother (Sarah) and her sister (Dolly), all her life Clara struggled with depression, and with what were called in that day “nervous disorders.” Often -- just after she had almost singlehandedly successfully managed some disaster, battle or crisis with incredible fortitude and strength – she would almost totally collapse, often requiring months of Doctor-ordered rest, occasionally in a sanitarium, the 19th century’s way of describing a mental hospital. For all her strengths in the face of adversity and humanitarian achievements, she was neither physically nor mentally stable. This was a woman who did not – apparently -- know how to practice appropriate self-care, and as a result had an erratic and uneven life of achievement and illness.

She also was more than a little enamored with her own fame, reputation and notoriety, and was prone to both self-aggrandizement and self-pity. As one biographer noted, “*Several times she [even went as far as writing] flattering articles about herself (in the third person) which she then submitted to various periodicals. In one, written during the Franco-Prussian War, she revealed the way she hoped the public would view her: ‘Miss Clara Barton, scarcely recovered from the fatigues and indispositions resulting from her arduous and useful duties during the war...was found again foremost bestowing her care upon the wounded with the same assiduity which characterized her among the suffering armies of her own country.’*”

Lastly, on the troubled side of this complex person, Clara Barton also struggled to maintain many of her human relationships. While characteristically loyal to her birth family and an inner circle of friends, people who worked for her found her difficult and demanding. She was a perfectionist, did not know how to delegate responsibility to others, and could tolerate no one she perceived as a rival. As a result there was, over her lifetime, a constant and disruptive turn-over of people and professionals around her...and she often found herself isolated, lonely and alone.

So that’s pretty much the whole, complicated story of this remarkable woman. She was, without doubt, one of the greatest and most heroic human beings alive in the 19th century, known

around the world for her compassion and humanitarian deeds...and at the same time she was a person of fear, erraticness, weakness and difficulty.

So...with this full and fascinating story told, we now arrive at the question that must always be answered when we tell the story of some hero of human history. What can we take from this life that will make us better and more noble people ourselves? What is it about the way she lived that can inspire us to be more fully and finely human?

Well, it's possible that we will be variously inspired by different aspects of her remarkable story but, for my part, I am first moved by both her courage and her clarity of purpose. Clara Barton was a woman who knew – deep to her own heart – what she was called to do in life, and then proved herself brave enough to get up and do it, in spite of the many and real obstacles that put themselves in her way. No one would have blamed Clara Barton had she given up in the face of some of the incredible hardships she faced over her lifetime. but she never did. She just kept her eye on what she felt her life's work to be, and did it with incredible fortitude and bravery. That inspires me.

But even more than her courage and clarity of purpose, I am inspired by something I believe she got from her religious faith...her Universalist faith...our Unitarian Universalist faith. And that, dear friends, was her powerful and steady Universalist impulse of heart to bring compassion and care to all who suffered. I believe it was the 19th century Universalist idea that all persons are children of God – precious children of this creation and therefore deserving of our protection and care – that inspired and sustained her humanitarianism. This impulse of the heart was no doubt instilled in her both by the Universalist church of her childhood, and by her father who was said to embody this spiritual quality of human compassion and care for all. I too never want my heart to wander from this core affirmation of our Unitarian Universalist faith. I pray that this idea – about our radical human interconnectedness that leads us to radical caring for one another – will always burn at the very center of my heart, and show me the way to compassionate and generous living.

Do I need to tell you that the Universalist impulse of heart that drove Clara Barton to Goodness and Mercy is an endangered spiritual commodity in today's world? Many are the voices, both here in America and around this globe, which give us spiritual permission to distance ourselves from many of our less fortunate human brothers and sisters, and spiritual permission to turn an indifferent eye away from their suffering.

I have said it a hundred times from this pulpit, and I will say it again on this morning, when we remember the life of our local and most difficult UU saint. If humanity is to survive on this planet with a quality of life worth having, human hearts everywhere must truly begin to know and trust and serve our universal connectedness. May we – almost a century after the death of Clara Barton – live our lives evermore in service of that Universalist impulse of heart, which American and Universalist poet Carl Sandburg sang at the very end of his epic poem, "*We, The People*":

*There is only one horse on the earth
and his name is All Horses.*

*There is only one bird in the air
and her name is All Wings.*

*There is only one fish in the sea
and [the fish's] name is All Fins.*

*There is only one man in the world
and his name is All Men.*

*There is only one woman in the world
and her name is All Women.*

*There is only one child in the world
and the child's name is All Children.*

*There is only one Maker in the world
and [that Maker's] children cover the earth
and they are named All God's Children.*

Amen.

Footnote: The unattributed quotations in this sermon are from the Official National Park Service biography of Clara Barton, available at the Glen Echo site, published in 1981.