

*What Is a UU?*  
October 5, 2014

When I first planned this sermon, I assumed it would be an overview of Unitarian and Universalist history and theology. I would start with the 4<sup>th</sup> century bishop Arius, who argued that Jesus was the Son of God, not God, but lost out doctrinally in the religious politics of his time; I'd continue on to the next great unitarian heretic, the 5<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Pelagius, who argued that human beings have free will and can affect their own destiny (he lost out too), through the Reformation, on to the Puritans, the rise of Enlightenment thought, and the growing belief that human beings are not inherently sinful, powerless creatures, but inherently good with the power to choose right or wrong and so influence their own destiny. With mention of William Ellery Channing who claimed the name Unitarian for us, of Emerson and other Transcendentalists, I'd describe the growth of the Unitarian movement in this country. Then I'd backtrack and pick up the tale from the Universalist side, how they were pious Methodists in England who read their Bibles and saw there no doctrine of hell or eternal punishment, but only the good news of a God who loved everyone through this life and the next; how John Murray brought that gospel to this country and founded the first Universalist Church in America up the coast in Gloucester; how that tradition spread among the farms and factory towns of New England and the west, carried by circuit riding preachers; how over the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the two strands became closer in their theology and in their work for justice, and finally merged their overarching structures in 1961 to work together. At the end, you might have been impressed with my learned explication, but you wouldn't have understood much better what it means to be a UU. So I'm not going to do that.

Instead, I want to talk to you about *Little Women* and *Little Men*. How many of you have read those books at some point? Seen the movies? The musical? These novels were written in the 1860's and 70's by the Unitarian author Louisa May Alcott. Though the books never mention anyone going to church, they are imbued with Unitarian and Universalist understandings of what it means to be human.

Start with the titles: Children's books of earlier years portrayed just that – children who were already little women and little men. Heroes and heroines of earlier books were moral types – often the rich, selfish child and the poor but noble child who showed him or her how to live a good life. As Alcott parodies them “all the naughty boys [were] eaten by bears or tossed by mad bulls, because they did not go to a particular Sabbath school, [and] all the good [children], who did go, [were] rewarded by every kind of bliss, from gilded gingerbread to escorts of angels, when they departed this life with psalms or sermons on their lispng tongue.” There's no change, growth, or development in such stories. The characters are set and the novelist simply moves them around. But Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy of *Little Women* and the boys of *Little Men* aren't miniature grown-ups. They don't yet deserve those titles. The girls desire to be kind and loving, but Meg is vain; Jo ruled by her quick

temper; Beth imprisoned by her self-consciousness; Amy lazy and self-centered. They are real adolescents when the book begins. Over the course of the novel, they grow into themselves, becoming women. They embody the Unitarian understanding that our own choices guide our destiny. We are not predestined to heaven or hell in another world; rather we create heaven or hell here on earth for ourselves and one another by what we do and say.

In one episode, for instance, Jo is furious with her youngest sister Amy – justly I always believed when I read it as a child (I also had a younger sister) – because Amy was angry at Jo for leaving her home when she and a friend went to see a play, and so she burned Jo’s only copy of the novel she was writing. The girls’ mother advises Jo not to let her anger rule her, but Jo is too far gone. “You wicked, wicked girl! I never can write it again, and I’ll never forgive you as long as I live,” she tells Amy. The next day, Jo’s heart hasn’t changed, but Amy’s has. So when Jo and their friend Laurie go skating on the river, Amy follows, hoping to apologize. “Jo heard Amy panting ..., stamping her feet and blowing her fingers, as she tried to put her skates on; but Jo never turned, and went slowly zigzagging down the river, taking a bitter, unhappy sort of satisfaction in her sister’s troubles. She had cherished her anger till it grew strong, and took possession of her... As Laurie turned the bend, he shouted back: ‘Keep near the shore; it is not safe in the middle.’ Jo heard, but Amy was just struggling to her feet and did not catch a word. Jo glanced over her shoulder, and the little demon she was harboring said in her ear: ‘No matter whether she heard or not, let her take care of herself’.... Jo was just at the turn, and Amy far behind, striking out toward the smoother ice in the middle of the river... Jo ... resolved to go on, but something ... turned her round, just in time to see Amy throw up her hands and go down, with the sudden crash of rotten ice, the splash of water, and a cry that made Jo’s heart stand still with fear.” Laurie and Jo manage to get Amy out of the water and home, but Jo realizes that her temper could have caused Amy’s death. Later she confesses the story to her mother, who doesn’t yell at her, but shares her own struggles to control her temper and offers Jo comfort and guidance.

In this episode, you see the Unitarian Universalist understanding that no one is all good or all bad, embodied in both Jo and Amy, and our belief in the power of human forgiveness. In Mrs. March’s handling of her daughters, you see her faith in the power of each individual to see and choose the right course of action and her trust that the desire to act in love will ultimately win out. Notice that she doesn’t punish either Amy or Jo. She reasons with them, relying on their own consciences to show them the way. For we believe that fear of punishment in this life or the next is not the way to promote lives of justice and compassion.

In its use of the Bible too, *Little Women* shows a Unitarian Universalist sensibility. On Christmas morning, as the book begins, each girl finds under her pillow, “that beautiful old story of the best life ever lived,... a true guidebook for any pilgrim going the long journey.” Notice there’s nothing about doctrine or miracles –

the New Testament here is the story of a human being living a life of love and justice, one that others can take as a model. But they don't just rely on the story of Jesus. The girls draw inspiration also from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Longfellow's poems and hymns. For we believe that revelation is not sealed, that just as the Bible was written by inspired men and women, so are other works of many languages, traditions, and times equally inspired and inspiring.

And the book also shows our understanding that our religion should permeate all our action – that we should live according to our ideals every day of the week, not just on Sunday. As an old Unitarian prayer, which Louisa May Alcott would have known, put it: “O teach us how to thank thee as we ought; to show forth thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives; by giving up ourselves to thy service, and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days.” Notice that the desire to live justly comes not from fear of what may come, but from gratitude for the love and goodness we have already received.

Later in the book, Jo comes to the realization that her work is not in accord with her values. She has been writing sensational stories of murder, adultery, and violence to make money. A conversation with a friend helps her to see that “they are trash” (her words). She exclaims, “I’ve gone blindly on, hurting myself and other people, for the sake of money; I know it’s so, for I can’t read this stuff in sober earnest without being horribly ashamed of it.” She burns her manuscripts, but then considers what to do with the money she received for the published stories. She decides she can keep it since she hadn’t done “much harm yet” but goes on, “I almost wish I hadn’t any conscience, it’s so inconvenient. If I didn’t care about doing right and didn’t feel uncomfortable when doing wrong, I should get on capitally. I can’t help wishing sometimes that father and mother hadn’t been so particular about such things.”

But she grows up to be just as “particular about such things.” *Little Men* is the story of a school for boys that Jo and her husband run. Most of the boys are orphaned or neglected. Many never have known love or care or lost it at an early age with the death of a parent. It is from Jo and her husband and the other adults at the school that they learn that they are loved and loveable.

The book opens with the arrival of a new boy 12 year old Nat. His mother died when he was very young, and he has lived since then in a drafty basement room with his father who beat and cursed him. After his father dies, a benefactor sends him to Jo’s school. On his first night, fed, warmed, and surrounded with kindness, Nat breaks down. “My dear, what is it?” Jo asks. “You are all so kind – and it’s so beautiful – I can’t help it.” Nat sobbed. Later, after hearing his story, Jo assures him, “My child, you have got a father and a mother now, and this is home. .. This place is made for all sorts of boys to have a good time in, and to learn how to help themselves and be useful men, I hope.” Here the Universalist good news shines through: that we are all loved always. Like Nat, offered love as he shows up on the doorstep, we don’t have to prove ourselves first. Even when they find out

that fear has taught Nat to lie, Jo and her husband do not stop loving Nat or believing in his goodness – they just keep loving him and trying to help him learn that he doesn't need to lie. By the end of the story, Nat has learned to trust this love and to live out of it. Gratitude for this new sense of abundance pours out of Nat, who is a gifted violinist, when he gets up to play at the school's Thanksgiving dinner. "A new and lovely melody... one of those songs without words that touch the heart, and sing of all tender homelike hopes and joys, soothing and cheering those who listen to its simple music" sounds from his instrument. Afterward Laurie, commenting on the change in Nat, asks Jo, "What magic did you use?" "I only loved [him] and let [him] see it," she answers. And the book closes with these words: "love is a flower that grows in any soil, works its sweet miracles undaunted by autumn frost or winter snow, blooming fair and fragrant all the year, and blessing those who give and those who receive."

People sometimes say because Unitarian Universalists have no set doctrine and recite no creeds that we have no beliefs. But that is not true. We believe that each of us is loved and lovable; that we receive that love from many hands and gain understanding of it from many voices; and that the purpose of our lives is to pass that love on to others. This is our good news.

- Pamela M. Barz

