

## **“150 Years Since...”**

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with Janet Hiller as Olympia Brown

Unitarian Universalist Church in Meriden  
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It's November 4, 1979. For the past few years, you've been on staff at the US Embassy in Teheran. For the past several months, your anxiety has risen to what is now a fever pitch. Your government has welcomed the Shah of Iran to take refuge in your country, since he is suffering from terminal cancer. Your government has supported operations covert and otherwise that kept him in power until his countrymen finally succeeded in revolting against this man who sent anyone who countered him to their deaths or worse. As revolutionaries of all ages fill the streets of Teheran, enraged at the actions of the United States, anyone who looks American—whatever that might be—is in mortal danger.

On this day that so many Americans connect with Election Day back home, a vanguard of Iranian revolutionaries storm the US Embassy. “Oh my God, our fate is sealed!” you scream silently as you work frantically with your colleagues to shred the thousands of documents marked “top secret” before the worst happens. The worst minus one happens. You're taken hostage along with more than 50 of your Embassy colleagues.

Fast forward. Somehow, through the shenanigans of a fellow hostage, you manage to escape, along with five others. You find your way to the Canadian Embassy, where the Ambassador welcomes you warmly. You are given sanctuary. You eat well, drink well, but do not sleep well. How long can this go on before the game is up, before the Revolutionary Guard discovers the six of you?

How to rescue you? It's the question on the front burner at the State Department back home and at millions of US dinner tables. An exfiltration specialist from the CIA is called to the inner sanctum of State Department bewilderment. Tony Mendez comes up with a scheme that is nothing shy of preposterous. The decision is made. Mendez's plan is the “best bad idea.” He will arrange with Hollywood moguls and a brilliant makeup artist the ruse of a film production company making a science fiction movie on location in Iran. The six American hostages at the Canadian embassy will be issued Canadian passports and will adopt new identities as the film crew for “Argo.” The consequences of not succeeding are ghastly; the risk of failure is high.

You perhaps know what happened; and all this did happen, with every possible heart-stopping close call, before Tony Mendez boards a Swissair flight with the six hostages in his company. It's an airborne Exodus.

Ah yes, you perhaps recognize the plot as that which morphed into the Best Picture at this year's Academy of Awards. Some of us saw the film. Some of us even remember when the real story broke in those harrowing days of the Iranian Revolution and American non-diplomacy.

Now why, on this Sunday before the eve of the Jewish Passover, would I cite this modern-day story? Because it may be easier to identify with the slavery to freedom narrative of less than half a century ago than to identify with the oppression, the anxiety, the fear, and the leadership required to lead a people from that ancient captivity into the light of freedom narrated in the Torah and distilled in the Book of Exodus.

When Jewish families gather around the Seder table tomorrow evening, they will tell the story once again, tapping any of thousands of versions of the *Haggadah*, “the telling.”

“Why is this night different from all other nights?” the children ask year after year. It was the night *before* the exodus, the night *before* the flight, a time of gathering up the frightening strands of the unfamiliar, of what surely were angry railings against this lunatic Moses who couldn’t possibly lead them out of this land of bondage, and Egypt was at least familiar. So too did those six hostages in the Canadian embassy behold Tony Mendez as some lunatic fringe who had the gall to ask them to trust him.

The critical difference is that the Jews understand the Exodus at the heart of Passover as God acting in history, as God intervening in the affairs of a people in whom He had vested interests. Tony Mendez surely didn’t assume that God was intervening on his behalf, but it took profound courage and resolve to lead his small band of captives to freedom.

The narrative of slavery to freedom is as ancient as we are. Liberation is costly. The exodus, the liberation of the Jews, was not over on the other side of the Red Sea. Forty years they wandered in the wilderness, like a river unsure of its course. They were sidetracked, lured by idol worship, grew impatient with their leaders, quarreled among themselves, and wondered again and again why they had given up the familiarity if not the servitude they had known in Egypt. For those six hostages of 30+ years ago, the foray into the marketplace of Teheran the day before the ride to the airport probably felt like forty years. Liberation is never a once and for all happening.

Close your eyes, just for a moment... Recall a time in your life—maybe it’s now—when you’ve felt captive, immobilized, seeing no way out of a circumstance that bound you, that haunted your every thought, your every move, your every breath. “Oh my God, how did I, how will I, ever feel free? I’m broken. I’m like a slave. Freedom, liberation, wholeness, are impossible.” And then...something happens, someone happens. The hard lock on the prison door is unlocked. All you need do is step out. It’s terrifying. This is your moment to move out of your zone of brokenness, out of your zone of suffering, out of your zone of enslavement, into what you have fantasized. But it’s terrifying. At least in here, inside this horrific place, I’ve become at home, horrifically at home. Will I step out into the light of day, or will I embrace my state of bondage? Will I believe in wholeness and walk toward it, or will I retreat into the brokenness of my familiar?

Liberation, exodus, a journey to freedom is profoundly communal and profoundly personal. It’s like a spiritual “big bang,” a new world coming into being out of who knows what. It calls for immense trust, courage beyond what we imagine possible, and deep listening to what all of us yearn for—wholeness, wholeness.

Each of us is intimately familiar with this narrative. We've likely lived it time and time again. Perhaps you're on such a journey this very morning. You're not alone.

Just a few days ago one of you wondered aloud what "the grand narrative" of Unitarian Universalism" might be. Our roots run deep in the teachings and traditions of Judaism and Christianity. We tap the truths of Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, and earth-based religions, each with mesmerizing stories that speak century after century to humankind's search for meaning and wholeness. The narrative of *Argo* is distinctly secular. The Story of the Exodus is distinctly religious. Their commonality lies in a journey from captivity to liberation and in the centrality of ordinary individuals who rose to extraordinary acts of leadership for the journey at hand.

This journey, this surge of courage and perseverance in the soul and psyche of individuals who were no more and no less than human, constitute the grist of "grand narrative." One tale is distinctively secular; the other, distinctly religious. Both are profoundly spiritual, grounded in personal struggle, ultimate resolve, and moral ambiguity. Moral ambiguity? The hostage crisis itself was precipitated by a revolt rising from the oppression of those who became the oppressors in the account popular in this country. The *Haggadah* of Passover is the telling of how an angel "passed over" the homes of the Jews, while slaying the firstborn of every unsuspecting Egyptian family. Grand narratives seldom have smooth edges.

What qualifies as "a grand narrative" if not "the grand narrative" of this faith that we share? What is our *Haggadah* that we might tell and re-tell our children and our children's children? I believe it unfolds in the lives of "prophetic women and men of all ages," who have resisted oppression personal and communal; who have put their lives on the line and have given their lives in the name of Love that liberates; and who have dared to raise their voice, walk the walk, and lead the willing along that harrowing path from brokenness to wholeness.

**Janet:**

"It is now nearly thirty years since I resigned my pastorate in this church. That is a long time and many things have happened, but the grandest thing has been the lifting up of the gates and the opening of the doors to the women of America, giving liberty to twenty-seven million women, thus opening to them a new and larger lie and a higher ideal."

The voice of Olympia Brown, preaching in the Universalist Church, Racine, Wisconsin, on September 12, 1920. It had been 57 years since her ordination as a Universalist minister at the age of 28. If you visit Atwood Hall on the campus of St. Lawrence University in upstate New York, you can find a bronze tablet, which bears the following inscription:

OLYMPIA BROWN  
1835-1926  
CLASS OF 1863

SHE WAS THE FIRST WOMAN  
TO BE GRADUATED BY  
THE THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL  
AND  
ST. LAWRENCE UNIVERSITY

HER UNIVERSALIST ORDINATION  
IN 1863 MADE HER THE FIRST  
WOMAN IN OUR COUNTRY TO  
ACHIEVE FULL MINISTERIAL  
STANDING RECOGNIZED BY A  
DENOMINATION

PREACHER OF UNIVERSALISM  
PIONEER AND CHAMPION OF  
WOMEN'S CITIZENSHIP RIGHTS  
FORERUNNER OF THE NEW ERA

“THE FLAME OF HER SPIRIT STILL  
BURNS TODAY”

One hundred fifty years have passed since Olympia's ordination as a Universalist minister at the age of 28. In this month that has so recently been designated Women's History Month, I hold up the life of Olympia Brown as a love journey of family bonds, intellectual curiosity, strength of will, friendship, perseverance, high risk, multi-faceted ministry, and equal rights for women.

Born in 1835 in the tiny Michigan village of Prairie Ronde, Olympia learned from her father, Asa, and her mother, Lephia, what it took to persevere. Her parents had migrated a year earlier from the Green Mountains of Vermont and set to work as farmers tilling the far richer soil of the upper Midwest. The eldest of four children, Olympia was curious and imaginative, playing in the woods and forbidden swamps and exploring to her heart's content. Early on she learned about equal rights, with her maternal aunt and uncle operating a station on the Underground Railroad in the nearby village of Schoolcraft.

So dedicated to education were Olympia's parents that her father took the lead in building a schoolhouse after the brand new Michigan legislature introduced a public school system. It was there that Olympia cultivated a lifelong penchant for learning, teaching, and advocacy for girls and women to enjoy the same rights as boys and men.

As a young woman of 19, Olympia and her sister and a friend headed east to Mt. Holyoke College. Eager and confident, they were unprepared for the rigidity of rules and religion in place at this college. Each young entrant was expected to classify herself as a “professing Christian,” “hopefully pious,” or simply “hopeless.” Raised as a Universalist by her mother, this did not sit well with young Olympia. She and her sister were subjected to one hellfire sermon after another. Desperate, she wrote to Universalist headquarters in Boston for books that would help her refute what she was hearing. She asked a question that would guide her lifelong:

**Janet:**

“Why don't preachers dwell on God's love when that was such a motivation behind Christ's teaching?”

Olympia left Mt. Holyoke and entered Antioch College the following autumn. Headed by the progressive Boston educator, Horace Mann, this co-educational institution held promise. At Antioch Olympia met a well-known advocate for women's rights. During a lecture visit by Antoinette Brown (not a relative, by the way), Olympia arranged for her to preach a Sunday sermon. Not long before this time, Antoinette had sought ordination as a Congregational minister and was refused because of her gender, but her penchant for preaching was undiminished. Olympia heard her and was electrified.

Through unfolding friendships, a dedication to women's rights, and a fascination with religious exploration, Olympia moved into a life that took her to St. Lawrence University's theological school and through years of perseverance led to her historic ordination as a Universalist minister. It was a life that called her to preach as a minister and lecture as a suffragette across the country on behalf of women's rights and to join the feminist ranks of Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Antoinette Brown who had become Antoinette Brown Blackwell. En route Olympia married and had children and grandchildren.

In that sermon delivered in the autumn of 1920, Olympia preached Universalism as "the grandest system of religious truth that has ever been revealed to man."

**Janet:**

"Stand by this faith which the world needs and which you are called to proclaim.

... We shall speak the language of Universal love, and it will be heard and the message will be carried far and wide.

... Work for it and sacrifice for it. There is nothing in all the world so important to you as to be loyal to this faith which has placed before you the loftiest ideals, which has comforted you in sorrow, strengthened you for noble duty, and made the world beautiful for you. Do not demand immediate results but rejoice that you are worthy to be entrusted with this great message and that you are strong enough to work for a great true principle without counting the cost. Go on finding ever new applications of these truths and new enjoyments in their contemplation, always trusting in the one God, which ever lives and loves."

Hers was "a grand narrative." On the morning of November 2, 1920, at the age of 85, Olympia Brown, along with her lifelong friend Antoinette Brown Blackwell, cast her first vote in a presidential election. She would live six more years. In her last year, at the age of 91, Olympia Brown traveled with her daughter to Europe and had an absolutely smashing good time.

From captivity in Egypt, we walk with Moses—but also with Sarah, Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel. From the tarmac of an airport in Teheran, we board a flight with Tony Mendez, an airborne Exodus from another captivity. From the margins of the sanctuary, we who are women walk with Olympia Brown into the ministerial rite of passage that is ordination. From the margins of citizenship, we who are women step with Olympia Brown into the polling booth to cast our vote. And from longstanding oppressions that hold some of us in a captivity that wrenches our souls, we consider what it takes to set forth on that long hard journey, a journey with no guaranteed outcomes, but a journey in which every step allows us to gather the fragments of our broken selves into a new being, free and whole.

So may it be. Amen.

**Sources:**

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