

## UNITARIANS WHO SHAPED OUR COUNTRY

A Sermon By  
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Introduction: Susan

Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth president of the United States, was not a Unitarian. He never joined a church, although he visited many of them, but his belief in each person's ability to create his or her own religious philosophy is why he is listed as a "borderline Unitarian" in Gwen Foss' *Who's Who of U.U.s.* There were, though, six Unitarian or Universalist Presidents of the United States, men who brought a belief in the principles of freedom, reason and tolerance to the shaping of our country.

John Adams was the second president, Thomas Jefferson the third, and John Quincy Adams the sixth, so these three Unitarians influenced our country in its very early stages. Millard Fillmore was the thirteenth president, serving seventy-five years after the founding of our country. Chester A. Arthur was the twenty-first president, and was the lone Universalist among them, serving in the later half of the nineteenth century. And finally, William Howard Taft, the twenty-seventh president, served near the beginning of the twentieth century.

It has been a hundred years since the last Unitarian or Universalist served as President. I think we could use some leadership that cares about UU principles and purposes, but who knows if that will every happen again.

Since tomorrow is President's Day, Margaret and I thought it would be interesting to explore a little of the lives of these founding fathers. She chose Millard Fillmore and William Howard Taft. I decided that since women still have not been allowed to serve as President, and by "allowed" I mean today that voters don't approve women, I would pick women who shaped our country either beside the President, such as Abigail Adams, or who challenged the laws of our country, such as Susan B. Anthony.

Comments: Margaret:

Although our UU principles weren't formulated until much later, they were implicit in the lives of these earlier presidents. I've tried to identify which ones seemed especially important to them.

### **Millard Fillmore**

Before starting my research, I knew almost nothing about Millard Fillmore. Besides the fact that he was a Unitarian, I couldn't recall anything about him. I thought I remembered that he was a member of the Whig party (he was), but that was all. So here's some of what I found out.

Millard Fillmore was our 13<sup>th</sup> president, serving from 1850-1853. He was not elected to the presidency, but, as Vice President, was thrust into the role when President Zachary Taylor died unexpectedly.

Like some of our other presidents, Fillmore came from humble beginnings. His family was very poor, and he had only a few months of formal education. He did fall in love with one of his teachers, Abigail Powers, who was only a year or two older than he was, and later he married her. At the age of 14 he was apprenticed by his father to a woolworker. He worked 2 years until he was able to buy himself out. After that he was self-educated, reading law with a local attorney on his own time, doing clerical work and sometimes teaching school to support himself.

His early religious upbringing was conservative, but when he and his wife moved to Buffalo in 1830 they joined the Unitarian Church. We may infer that they were seeking for something meaningful that they hadn't found in their earlier religious experiences. In 1832 Fillmore was elected to Congress and served 3 terms.

Fillmore was a man who often exceeded expectations. When he was elected State Comptroller in New York in 1847 he developed a currency system that anticipated the National Banking Act of 1863. During the fierce controversy over admission of free and slave states to the Union, he was regarded as a healer and chosen by the Whig party as Vice President on Zachary Taylor's ticket. As Vice President, he turned out to be a very able leader of the Senate.

During his term as President he helped secure federal land grants for railroads, expanded foreign commerce, and authorized Admiral Perry's famous expedition to Japan in 1852, which opened up that country to the world. But the most important achievement of Fillmore's term in office was pushing through the Compromise of 1850. This included the controversial Fugitive Slave Act that provided federal help to owners of runaway slaves. Although this may seem unethical on Fillmore's part, he believed strongly in states' rights, and as President felt it was his obligation to support them. He didn't approve of slavery, but thought it was impossible to eradicate. He took legal advice before signing to make sure the act was indeed constitutional. So he was a man of principle, even though this particular principle was later discredited by the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation. And--who knows?--perhaps it was the best thing for the country at the time.

Fillmore was not nominated by the Whig party in 1852. In 1856 he became a candidate of the Know-Nothing party, running a distant third in the election. A bit of trivia--he was the last of our presidents to be neither a Republican nor a Democrat. After his term was over,

he retired to Buffalo where he was Chancellor of the University of Buffalo and founded the Buffalo General Hospital and the Buffalo Historical Society.

Reports of Fillmore tell us that he was a gracious and courteous person, not because of his social standing or education, but from a personal openness and lack of affectation. In modern parlance, he was a man comfortable in his own skin. Modesty was also one of his traits. When offered a degree from Oxford University in 1855, he declined it, saying he had neither the literary nor scientific accomplishments to deserve such an honor. And, since it was in Latin, he didn't want to be the possessor of a degree that he couldn't read. Fillmore's life seems to me to exemplify best these two UU principles: a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; and the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

### **William Howard Taft**

I knew more about Taft than Fillmore because he came from my home state of Ohio, and his family has been active in Ohio and national politics for at least 5 generations. Taft's father served as Secretary of War under President Grant, numerous members of his family have held public office, and the present governor of Ohio is his great-grandson.

William Howard Taft was brought up as a Unitarian and remained one all his life. He was graduated from Yale University, second in his class, and then earned an LLB from Cincinnati Law School. He held a number of government positions in Ohio: Assistant Prosecutor of Hamilton County, Collector of Internal Revenue, Judge of the Ohio Superior Court. Then in 1890 President Benjamin Harrison appointed him Solicitor General of the U.S. In 1892 he was appointed to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit, where he eventually became Chief Judge. From 1896 to 1900 Taft also was Dean and Professor of Constitutional Law at the University of Cincinnati. He married his high school sweetheart, Helen Herron.

In 1900 Taft chaired a commission to organize a government in the Philippines, which had just been ceded to the U.S. Then he became its first Governor General. One thing that the Filipinos loved him for was that he negotiated with the Pope to purchase land owned by the Catholic Church, which he then sold to Filipinos on easy terms. Taft hadn't wanted this office; he would have preferred to be Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, a position he had always aspired to. But when it was offered to him in 1903, he reluctantly declined it because the Filipinos begged him to continue as Governor General.

Taft served as President Theodore Roosevelt's Secretary of War from 1904 to 1908, working closely with the president, who entrusted him with a great deal of responsibility. In 1908 he was elected president on the Republican ticket, defeating 3-time candidate William Jennings Bryan.

Taft believed strongly in the Law, but he was not a particularly effective politician, lacking some of the diplomatic skills of his predecessor, often managing to alienate those

on both sides of an issue. During his administration, believing monopolies were injurious to the country, he initiated 90 antitrust suits. Other accomplishments of his presidency were strengthening the Interstate Commerce Commission, establishing a postal savings bank and a parcel post system, and expanding the civil service. He supported the 16<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution, allowing a federal income tax, and the 17th, providing for direct election of senators. During his administration Arizona was admitted to the union (95 years ago this month), and also New Mexico. Believing ardently in world peace, Taft strongly supported international arbitration as a means to achieving the goal. Taft and Roosevelt had a falling out in 1912 that divided the Republican party, resulting in the election of Democrat Woodrow Wilson.

After retiring from the presidency, Taft served as Professor of Constitutional Law at Yale, was elected President of the American Bar Association, founded the League to Enforce Peace, and served as co-chair of the National War Labor Board in 1914. Although he was always an advocate of peace, he felt that once in the war, the U.S. should give its best effort to winning.

While President, Taft had appointed 6 justices to the Supreme Court. In 1921, another vacancy occurred, and President Warren G. Harding appointed Taft to the court as Chief Justice, thus fulfilling his lifelong ambition. He served 9 years, until 1930, when he resigned for health reasons and died a few months later. His funeral service was held in All Souls' Unitarian Church in Washington.

A bit of trivia. Taft was the largest president we've ever had, standing 6 feet tall and weighing 350 pounds. He got stuck in the White House bathtub several times until a large custom-made tub was installed for him.

Taft's life seems to me to exemplify best these two UU principles: justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; and the goal of world community, with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

Comments: Susan

### **Abigail Adams**

Abigail Adams was the wife of a president, John Adams, and the mother of a president, John Quincy Adams. Though she was born the daughter of a liberal Congregational minister, she and John were active in the First Parish Church in Quincy, Massachusetts, which was early Unitarian by 1753. This was still seventy-five years before the founding of the American Unitarian Association, and many congregational churches were developing Unitarian doctrines. Abigail expressed one of her religious views in a letter to her daughter-in-law in 1818: "When will Mankind be convinced that true Religion is from the Heart, between Man and his creator, and not the imposition of Man or creeds or tests?" ([www.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/abigailadams.html](http://www.uua.org/uuhs/duub/articles/abigailadams.html))

Abigail is known for her prolific correspondence with her husband, and she had great influence on him. They shared a conviction that slavery was an evil threat to democracy, and she lived her conviction, standing up to neighbors who objected to her teaching a black servant boy to read and write.

Abigail believed that women should be more than companions to their husbands, that they should educate themselves and be responsible in guiding their family affairs. She advocated for women's property rights and more educational opportunities for women.

In one of the most famous of her letters, she says to her husband in 1776, twenty years before he was to become president, “—and by the way in the new Code of Laws, which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or Representation.” ([www.uuquincy.org/projects/stamps/3abigailadams.htm](http://www.uuquincy.org/projects/stamps/3abigailadams.htm))

It seems to me that Abigail Adams held a deep belief in our first UU principle: “The inherent worth and dignity of every person,” and wanted blacks and women to be free and respected.

### **Susan B. Anthony**

A year and four months after Abigail Adams died, Susan B. Anthony was born, February 15, 1820. Women still didn't have the rights that Abigail had in mind, and Susan grew up to become the leading suffragist of the nineteenth century. Her family was liberal Quaker and her father was shunned by the other Quakers for “citing a firm belief in ‘complete personal, mental, and spiritual freedom’ in his home.” ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Susan\\_B.\\_Anthony](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Susan_B._Anthony))

Susan's family also attended the Unitarian church at times, were friends with the Rev. Samuel May of the Syracuse Unitarian Church, and in her later years, Susan attended the Rochester Unitarian Church.

In the economic depression of 1839, Susan began to teach to help support her parents, and eventually became headmistress of the Female Department of the Canajoharie Academy. Since male teachers made about four times what women teachers did, Susan was naturally inspired to fight for equal wages.

In 1849 she quit teaching, moved to the family farm in Rochester and started participating in temperance conventions. She also spoke out against slavery. With her friend, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, also a Unitarian, Susan B. traveled the United States

speaking on women's rights. The two women formed the National Women's Suffrage Association in 1869.

Susan cast a vote in the presidential election in 1872. She was arrested and pled not guilty, stating that the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment entitled her to vote as a person who was a citizen and could not be denied the privileges of being a citizen. She said, "It was we, the people; not we, the white male citizens; nor yet we, the male citizens; but we, the whole people, who formed the Union. And we formed it, not to give the blessings of liberty, but to secure them; not to the half of ourselves and the half of our posterity, but to the whole people – women as well as men. And it is a downright mockery to talk to women of their enjoyment of the blessings of liberty while they are denied the use of the only means of securing them provided by this democratic-republican government – the ballot." (wiki)

The judge had written his opinion even before she spoke out, and fined her \$100 which she refused to pay and no one ever pursued it.

Susan B. Anthony died March 13, 1906, fourteen years before the Nineteenth Amendment was passed, giving women the right to vote. She is the first woman to be honored on a United States coin.

The UU Principles of "Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations," as well as "the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process..." are ones which I think Susan B. Anthony most expressed in her life. A hundred years after her death we are finally witnessing a woman running for President. One of these days, perhaps Presidents Day will hold meaning for citizens of both genders, and freedom and equality will be real, not just professed, values of this United States of America.