

**A GREAT BUNDLE OF HUMANITY**  
**THE LIFE OF FRANCES ELLEN WATKINS HARPER**

A Sermon by The Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis, MD  
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**Sermon – Part I.**

I have a fantasy – but before you get too nervous about me sharing anything inappropriate – let me tell you that you probably have had the same fantasy at some point or another. It's a pretty common one – the subject of sci-fi movies; but the fantasy is to journey back in time and to be able to meet and interview and converse with people I admire and want to get to know better. This month's theme of journey is rich with possibilities, as we explore that as a metaphor for our own religious and spiritual journey. But this morning, I'm taking a different road – and bringing both black history and women's history month together and converging upon the biographical history of one woman, Frances Ellen Watkins harper, who lived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and whose words still speak to us today.

At this point in my ministry, I don't often do historical or biographical sermons because the days when congregations would see their minister as the primary educator and interpreter of history are long gone. At the same time, historians quickly discover that the history of a nation or a people or an individual is much like the way we experience our own inner lives.

We go through our days having thousands of discreet experiences, and few of them stand out as having any meaning for us *in and of themselves*. Each of them has meaning insofar as they relate to *our story* – to where we came from, how we were educated as to what our lives mean, and how we interpret our own place in the flow of time. In the same way, the facts of any individual life must be related to a larger story, a continuous composition of human existence that encompasses the communities with which the person identified, the political and social era in which the person lived, and the ongoing meanings for today and for tomorrow that we can draw out of the life this person lived.

The pioneering Unitarian educator Ellen Lyman Cabot once wrote: *We sometimes speak as if the past were over and done with: "That's past; that's out of date; that's ended." Yet try to obliterate in your thought all that is past. It is impossible, of course, because in doing so we obliterate ourselves. Without the help of what we call the past we could not live at all...The past, instead of being done with, is the real fibre of the world as we know it. Just as the food we eat nourishes us till it becomes what we act with, so the past is always what we think with.*

I find this especially true when I explore the life and times of a Unitarian or Universalist forebear of ours who does not fit the mould of the usual famous people from our history we like to celebrate. Frances Ellen Watkins Harper is such a person. Her life and work had almost been lost to us. Because so few of the stories we have from our history as a religious community are about black women, she is almost like encountering a unique recipe from a foreign country in grandma's old index file. As we hear more about her, she becomes more familiar, and we recognize in the expansiveness of her life some of the very best that we hope our faith embodies and inspires.

Let me tell you about her! Frances Ellen Watkins was born of free African American parents here in the slave state of Maryland, in the city of Baltimore, in the year 1825. Her

infancy was marked by tragedy that she could barely remember, the death of her mother when she was only three years old. Her uncle and aunt took the little girl under their wings and made sure that she received a formal education. It was a criminal act at the time to teach slaves to read or write. While free blacks did not fall under those statutes, you can imagine the difficulties associated with making sure black children could receive an education. Frances' uncle was the Rev. William Watkins, a well-known activist for black civil rights in Maryland, and he strongly influenced Frances' intellectual development. Rev. Watkins saw to it that she kept up with her studies at the Watkins Academy for Colored Youth, a free school which he himself had founded.

At the age of fourteen, Frances was employed as a nursemaid in the home of a white family. This family also encouraged her to further her education, and gave Frances free access to their library, which she enjoyed and benefited from greatly. Details of Frances' young adult years are scanty, but we do know she published her first book of poems written while she was in her teens, in the year 1845. It was called *Forest Leaves*.

By 1850, Frances had achieved some recognition in the African American community as a writer and teacher. In that year, however, Congress passed a law that would change Frances' life forever. It was called the Fugitive Slave Act. In the future, people in any state, free or slave, suspected of being a runaway slave could be arrested without warrant and turned over to a claimant on nothing more than his sworn testimony of ownership. A suspected black slave could not ask for a jury trial nor testify on his or her behalf. Any person aiding a runaway slave by providing shelter, food or any other form of assistance was liable to six months' imprisonment and a \$1,000 fine. Those officers capturing a fugitive slave were entitled to a fee and this encouraged some officers to kidnap free Negroes and sell them to slave-owners.

Frances decided she had to leave Baltimore and was offered a teaching job at a seminary in Ohio, Union Seminary, the precursor school to Wilberforce College. She was the first woman invited to teach there and her acceptance of the position was met with considerable protest. The principal of the school at the time was one Reverend John M. Brown – *yes, THAT John Brown*. He supported her hiring and became a friend. Nine years later, when he was in jail and facing execution for leading a group of abolitionists in an attack on the armory at Harper's Ferry, Frances would stay with and comfort his wife and family, and would write to John Brown these words:

*Dear Friend: Although the hands of Slavery throw a barrier between you and me,..Virginia has no bolts or bars through which I dread to send you my sympathy...I thank you, that you have been brave enough to reach out your hands to the crushed and blighted of my race. You have rocked the bloody Bastille; and I hope that from your sad fate great good may arise to the cause of freedom.*

In 1852, Frances took another teaching position in Pennsylvania. There she connected again with an old friend from Maryland, William Still, one of the principal conductors of the Underground Railroad. For the next two years, she lived in an Underground Railroad Station, where she witnessed the workings of the Underground Railroad and the movement of slaves toward freedom.

This experience had a profound effect on Frances, her poetry, and her later work as an activist. With outrage in her voice, she would often tell that story of the time in Philadelphia when, like Rosa Parks, she refused to give up her seat on a street car and move to the back, and the conductor sent the car back to the station rather than proceed any further. Frances threw her money on the floor of the car and walked off the train rather than subject herself to more abuse.

As a witness to and supporter of the Underground Railroad Station, she could hear the train of freedom coming. Let's hear it now:

**Choir: I can hear the Train A-Comin'**

It was during these years that she first encountered the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia, which became her home church. Frances published her second book, *Poems On Miscellaneous Subjects* in 1854 in a direct response to the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It would ultimately go through twenty printings. That same year she decided to accept an offer from the State Anti-Slavery Society of Maine to become one of their traveling representatives. She traveled New England, Ohio and Michigan on their behalf, sharing platforms with Frederick Douglas, Sojourner Truth, and William Lloyd Garrison. Frances' speeches included her prose and poetry, and combined the issues of racism, feminism, and classism.

Frances found love and marriage for herself with Fenton Harper. They were married in 1860. She slowed down her lecturing schedule, and the birth of their daughter Mary in 1862 temporarily put a hold on her activist career. Fenton also had three children from an earlier marriage. Together the family waited out the Civil War raging around them. Then tragedy struck again. In 1864 Fenton died suddenly, leaving Frances in debt. Her experience of being a widow with no rights before the law made an even fiercer feminist out of Frances Harper. She became increasingly vocal on feminist issues as she resumed her touring, lecturing, and writing. Frances began to form alliances with strong figures in the feminist movement, including fellow Unitarian Susan B. Anthony. In 1866 Frances Harper was invited to address the National Women's Rights Convention. She demanded equal rights for all women, including women of color. Like Sojourner Truth, Watkins called out the Suffragette white women who, in their quest for the vote, would ignore the realities of women of color. Here is a section from that speech:

*I do not believe that giving the woman the ballot is immediately going to cure all the ills of life. I do not believe that white women are dew drops just exhaled from the skies. I think that like men they may be divided into three classes, the good, the bad, and the indifferent. The good would vote according to their conscience and principles; the bad as dictated by prejudice or malice; and the indifferent will vote on the strongest side of the question, with the winning party. You white women here speak of rights. I speak of wrongs. ..Born of a race whose inheritance has been outrage and wrong, most of my life has been spent battling these wrongs. But I did not feel as keenly as others that I had these rights in common with other women, which are now demanded.*

*Talk of giving women the ballot-box? Go on. It is a normal school, and the white women of this country need it. While there exists this brutal element in society which tramples upon the feeble and treads down the weak, I tell you that if there is any class of people who need to be lifted out of their airy nothings and selfishness, it is the white women of America.*

She laid it down! Harper's eloquent efforts to raise consciousness on this issue ultimately earned her election as Vice-President the National Association of Colored Women in 1897.

Frances Harper spent the latter years of her life in Philadelphia, writing and working for the Bethel African Methodist Association, although she remained a member at First Unitarian Church. She was a committed liberal Christian and a temperance advocate, and brought both her faith and her temperance views into her lecture tours and social crusades. Harper published many collections of poetry, many of which were battle cries for justice wrapped in iambic pentameter. We took the words of one such poem, and our choir director, Len Langrick arranged

it to a hymn tune so that we can sing it today. It's called "Let Me Make the Songs" or Songs for the People. The tune may be unfamiliar to you – but with the choir's help, we can sing it together:

**Choir & Congregation: "Let Me Make the Songs" (4 verses)**

Let me make the songs for the people, songs for the old and young;  
Songs to stir like a battle cry where ever they are sung.  
Let me make the songs for the weary, amid life's fever and fret  
Till hearts shall relax their tension, and care worn brows forget.  
Our world so worn and weary, needs music pure and strong;  
To hush the jangle and discords of sorrow, pain and wrong.  
Music to soothe all its sorrow, till war and crime shall cease;  
And the hearts of all grow tender, girdle the world with peace.

Frances started to write her novels in 1869. Harper's best-known novel is *Iola Leroy*, or *Shadows Uplifted* in 1892. *Iola Leroy* was among the earliest novels published by any black women in United States. The book's heroine Iola, is a free-born mulatta. The book tells of her struggles of being separated from her mother, her search for work, and her experience with racist boundaries in nineteenth-century society. Iola embraces her black roots despite being able to pass for white. Like the rest of Harper's career, the book intertwines the issues of racism, classism, and sexism that otherwise may not have been recognized as related and intersecting. Frances Harper continued her work through her lectures and her writing until her death from heart disease in 1911.

Both literary critics, historians, and our own Unitarian Universalist church has re-discovered Francis Ellen Watkins Harper in the past decade. The critics and scholars generally regard Harper's work in terms of its tremendous historical importance. They have recognized anew her popularity in her own time. African American Unitarian Universalists honored her with a conference they called together in 1995 in Philadelphia. The highlight of that event was the restoration of the worn tombstone that marked her grave. It was a moving ritual for all involved, and it was capped with the reading of one of Frances' poems: "Bury Me in A Free Land":

Make me a grave wher'er you will,  
in a lowly plain, or a loft hill;  
Make it among earth's humblest graves,  
But not in a land where men are slaves.

I could not rest if around my grave  
I heard the steps of a trembling slave;  
His shadow upon my silent tomb  
Would make it a place of fearful gloom...

I would sleep, dear friends, where bloated might  
can rob no man of his dearest right;  
My rest shall be calm in any grave  
Where none can call his brother a slave.

I ask no monument proud and high,

To arrest the gaze of the passers-by;  
All that my yearning spirit craves,  
Is bury me not in a land of slaves.

Restoring the tombstones of one of our forebears may seem to have little meaning in the long run for the future of Unitarian Universalism – but I believe it is an act that carries with it some deep meanings for our future. If we are to ever become less monocultural, one of the ways we do that is to honor our spiritual ancestors that not only remind us of the church we have been, but that remind us as well of the church we want to become.

The Unitarianism of today would have looked very different from that of Harper’s time. Had Harper wanted to follow a path towards ministry or leadership in a Unitarian Church, it would have been nearly impossible for her. Although the Universalists ordained Olympia Brown in 1863, the first black woman to be ordained in Unitarian Universalism, Rev. Dr. Yvonne K. Seon, was not ordained until --1981. *1981, friends.* When you read the history of this Unitarian Universalism, and hear the stories of women and of people of color, you begin to understand just how deep and wide the resistance to change is – and of just how insidious the habits and defenses of white Unitarian Universalists has been and continues to be. And yet, women like Frances Ellen Watkins Harper and Rev. Dr. Yvonne Seon, Rev. Dr. Diane Arakawa and Rev. Dr. Sophia Betancourt continue to persist in offering their voices and their gifts to this faith. Will we listen to what they have to say?

While the actual novels and poems of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper may sound somewhat quaint to our ears when we hear them read today, there is nothing quaint about the courage, insight, and determination she exemplified in devoting her life to the causes in which she so strongly believed. Her Unitarian Christian religious understanding was the foundation of her life. The words she put into the mouth of one of the characters in her novel *Trial and Triumph* might well speak for her as well:

*“I know that Christ has been wounded in what should have been the house of his friends; that the banner of his religion which is broad enough to float over the wide world with all its sin and misery, has been drenched with the blood of persecution, trampled in the mire of slavery, and stained by the dust of caste proscription. I am not afraid of what men call infidelity. I hold that faith which I profess to be too true, too sacred and precious to be disturbed by every wave of wind or doubt...Let schoolmen dispute and contend, the faith for which I most ardently long and earnestly contend, is a faith which works by love, and purifies the soul.”*

Although she didn’t identify as a Universalist, her best known phrase also speaks to us today, when she writes: *...We are all bound up together in one great bundle of humanity, and society cannot trample on the weakest and feeblest of its members without receiving the curse in its own soul.*

### **Choral Response: Spiritual Medley**

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REFERENCES: Two books by Beacon Press have material by and about Frances Harper: Dorothy May Emerson’s *Standing Before Us* is an anthology of biographies and writings from Unitarian and Universalist Women who were social reformers.

Frances Smith Foster, the scholar who has had the most to do with the contemporary re-discovery of Harper, has just edited a new Beacon book of Harper’s serialized novels: *Minnie’s*

*Sacrifice, Sowing and Reaping, and Trial and Triumph.* Smith's collection of Harper's work *A Brighter Day* was published by Feminist Press in 1990.