

Famous Unitarian Universalists: P.T. Barnum

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This morning I am continuing an ongoing series that I try to do at least once a year: to highlight the life and memory of a famous Unitarian or Universalist. I find that looking at the specifics of some person's life, how they interpreted and lived our liberal faith, can be more helpful than a series of abstract ideas, no matter how pretty they may be. Thus by looking at the lives of well known Unitarians and Universalists we might be inspired to live as they did, or perhaps reflect on the issues that were important to them in their lives as still relevant to ours. Someone once called these ancestors a "great cloud of witnesses" that watch over us, metaphorically speaking. We are their descendants so long as we are living out the faith that was so precious to them. I could not help but think that our own Russ Peterson is now among that cloud of witnesses. So it is fitting that today we remember those people of our tradition who, like he did, inspired us to live and move and have our being in a larger religious framework than we might have otherwise of had.

Phineas Taylor Barnum is among that cloud of witnesses. Granted he is in many ways an exception to most of the famous UUs I normally talk about. He was a lay person for one. He was not a professional theologian, but a very religious man. In the late nineteenth century, Universalism is estimated to have been the fourth largest denomination in the United States. Barnum was one of the richest men in the world, and certainly the most famous, around the time of the Civil War. He was not intellectually on par with Channing or Emerson or Murray or Skinner, but none of those guys ever had their lives made into a Broadway musical now did they! PT Barnum was a philanthropist who gave not only to the Universalist Church, but also helped to found Tufts University, originally a Universalist school which housed a Universalist seminary. Although it is now independent, “Jumbo” the elephant remains the mascot of Tufts.

PT Barnum was born on July 5, 1810 and died April 7, 1891. He was raised in a conservative Calvinist home in Bethel Connecticut. His father was an inn keeper, and Barnum followed him into business. He owned a small general store in Bethel when he was 25 years old. It was during this time that he met his wife Charity—whom he was married to for 44 years. In 1834 he moved to New York City, and bought the Scudder Museum of Scientific Oddities. This he renamed after himself, of course, and began expanding it.

Barnum's museum was at first just a room full of medical oddities; genetics gone awry. Cows with five legs and things like that. But PT Barnum never thought small a day in his life. He kept expanding it until he had all kinds of rooms and curiosities. It included the first aquarium in the United States. His biographers describe the museum this way:

“Barnum opened his museum on January 1, 1842 to create a place where families could go for wholesome, affordable entertainment, but his success drew from the fact that he knew how to entice an audience. Its attractions made it a combination zoo, museum, lecture hall, wax museum, theater and freak show, that was, at the same time, a central site in the development of American popular culture. Barnum filled the American Museum with dioramas, panoramas, “cosmoramas,” scientific instruments, modern appliances, a flea circus, a loom run by a dog, the trunk of a tree under which Jesus’ disciples sat, a hat worn by Ulysses S. Grant, an oyster bar, a rifle range, waxworks, glass blowers, taxidermists, phrenologists, pretty-baby contests, Ned the learned seal, the Feejee Mermaid, a menagerie of exotic animals that included beluga whales in an aquarium, giants, midgets, Chang and Eng the famous Siamese twins, Grizzly Adams’s trained bears and performances ranging from magicians, ventriloquists and minstrels to adaptations of biblical tales and “Uncle Tom’s Cabin.”

PT Barnum was the master of, what in his day was called humbug, but today we would call “hype.” I think modern equivalent would be celebrities who are famous for no particular reason other than they have a reality TV show. In his day, he originated carnivals and freak shows promising exotic or even magical things inside which were almost always fakes. Those things that were not, such as little people or bearded ladies, modern science has now an explanation for. But Barnum did not hesitate to, shall we say, bend the truth a bit in order to entice the public into his galleries. Indeed, he would play a part in a number of “hoaxes” that would trick and possibly entertain people. One of the most famous was the Giant of Cardiff. If any of you are fans of the “Simpsons” there was an episode inspired by this event. The story goes like this:

The giant was the creation of a New York tobacconist named George Hull. Hull, an atheist, decided to create the giant after an argument at a Methodist revival meeting about the passage in Genesis 6:4 stating that there were giants who once lived on Earth. Hull hired men to carve out a 10-foot long, 4.5-inch block of gypsum in Fort Dodge, Iowa, telling them it was intended for a monument to Abraham Lincoln in New York. He shipped the block to Chicago, where he hired a German stonecutter to carve it into the likeness of a man and swore him to secrecy.

Various stains and acids were used to make the giant appear to be old and weathered, and the giant's surface was beaten with steel knitting needles embedded in a board to simulate pores. In November 1868 then Hull transported the giant by rail to the farm of William Newell, his cousin. By then, he had spent \$2,600 on the hoax.

Nearly a year later, Newell hired Gideon Emmons and Henry Nichols, ostensibly to dig a well, and on October 16, 1869 they found the giant. One of the men reportedly exclaimed, "I declare, some old Indian has been buried here!" Newell set up a tent over the giant and charged 25 cents for people who wanted to see it. Two days later he increased the price to 50 cents. People came by the wagon load.

Archaeological scholars pronounced the giant a fake, and some geologists even noticed that there was no good reason to try to dig a well in the exact spot the giant had been found. Yale palaeontologist Othniel C. Marsh called it "a most decided humbug". Some Christian fundamentalists and preachers, however, defended its authenticity.

Eventually, Hull sold his part-interest for \$23,000 to a syndicate of five men headed by David Hannum. They moved it to Syracuse, New York for exhibition. The giant drew such crowds that showman P. T. Barnum offered \$50,000 for the giant. When the syndicate turned him down he hired a man to model the giant's shape covertly in wax and

create a plaster replica. He put his giant on display in New York, claiming that his was the real giant and the Cardiff Giant was a fake.

As the newspapers reported Barnum's version of the story, David Hannum was quoted as saying, "*There's a sucker born every minute*" in reference to spectators paying to see Barnum's giant. Over time, the quotation has been misattributed to Barnum himself. Hannum sued Barnum for calling his giant a fake, but the judge told him to get his giant to swear on his own genuineness in court if he wanted a favorable injunction.

On December 10, Hull confessed to the press. On February 2, 1870 both giants were revealed as fakes in court. The judge ruled that Barnum could not be sued for calling a fake giant a fake.”

While this story is amusing to us now, it does demonstrate the lengths that folks like Barnum would go through to pull off these events. And how much money one could make by doing so.

PT Barnum's museum in New York burned down, and he lost everything. Many people took some glee in seeing his misfortune. But never daunted, Barnum decided to take the show on the road, and thus, at the spry age of 61, he entered the circus business.

In many ways Barnum's circus was simply his museum touring the country. Eventually in 1881 he merged his circus with his largest

competitor, James Bailey to form Barnum and Bailey's circus. It would not be until a decade after Barnum's death that his circus would join with the Ringling Brothers. While PT Barnum never said, "There is a sucker born every minute." He did coin the term "the Greatest Show on Earth" to describe his circus.

Toward the end of his life, Barnum started to atone for some of his past excesses. He was a prolific author. His favorite subject was himself and his life. He wrote a book on hoaxes and how to figure them out, such as séances. And one of the subjects that he writes about is his Universalist faith.

In our modern reading today, Barnum talks about the love of God as the foundation of the New Testament. Certainly that can be seen in passages such as the one I read from first John. He believed that every soul was a child of God, connected to God by God's love. This was a fairly sophisticated statement of Universalism at the time. Also impressive in Barnum's pamphlet is his use of the Bible. He believed that rather than picking out specific bible verses and flinging them at each other in some sort of scriptural tit-for-tat, that what he looked to was the general trend of the Bible's teaching. Again few believers even today take such a well-thought out view of the biblical text. To him this pointed to a God that was ever-loving and forgiving.

One can perhaps speculate as to why Universalism was so appealing to PT Barnum. Certainly in his youth he opposed the conservative Calvinists of Connecticut because they would ban gambling and thought that museums and other forms of public entertainment were corrupting for the soul. But Barnum had a political side of his own. He was twice a state representative in the Connecticut legislature and the mayor of Bridgeport Connecticut. While serving in the state legislature, Barnum was a strong supporter of the 13th Amendment of the Constitution. Constitutional amendments, you will recall, have to be ratified by three fourths of the state legislatures. In debating the issue of abolishing and prohibiting slavery, Barnum proclaimed that the soul of a black man and the soul of a white man were the same eternal soul that God had made. Essentially the same argument he makes in “Why I Am a Universalist.”

And it is here that we come to the heart of Universalism really: that God loves us all. That is what the author of First John says, and that is really the centerpiece of Universalism. Heaven is not a place up in the sky; it is a status of our heart, mind, and body right here and right now. So too would be hell. The religious life, then, is lived perfecting and striving to make our life and especially the lives of those around us, resemble heaven more so than hell. One would think that this doctrine would argue against taking a mummified monkey’s body and putting a fish’s tale on it, and charging people money to see your strange

concoction, but apparently it didn't for Barnum. The monkey/fish thing was call the "Feejee Mermaid" and it was one of his most famous exhibits. But Barnum's point in this morning's reading is still a good one: religion is about the spiritual legacy we leave behind.

Ultimately that is what we are all striving to do. Barnum's legacy no doubt is a mixed bag, but I dare say most of us will leave a mixed bag of a legacy behind us. Which is what makes someone like Russ Peterson even more great—to have lived so consistently according to his values, even if it meant not getting reelected as governor, even if it meant the President of the United States gets mad at you, he stuck to his guns. Preserve the environment. Protect birds and their habitat. Ensure that people decades and perhaps centuries after his life get to enjoy and thrive in our state. It's the best argument for eternal life that I know: to leave a legacy that matters.

May we remember all of those men and women in that great cloud of witnesses who inspire us to live out our faith in the best possible ways. May their lives be echoed in ours until we join them ourselves. Amen Blessed Be.