

UU Ancestors: Fredrick May Eliot

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“Unitarians face a new age! Let them be true to their traditions of courage and faith, let them stand together in the bonds of a free religious fellowship, and the outcome must be victory. We have enormous resources in the treasury of the spirit with which to meet a compelling and exacting challenge.... There are no limits to what Unitarians can be and do, provided they will unite!

The present mood of our Unitarian fellowship is, I believe sober optimism, based upon a profound faith in the ultimate triumph of the religion of the spirit, expressing itself first in a quiet resolution to put our own house in order...as the necessary preliminary to a forward movement, and then moving out to play its part in the world with a deep renewal of the missionary impulse as the driving force of its growing life.”

These were the words of Fredrick May Eliot from a report of the first Commission on Appraisal, which he chaired. What may be surprising is the context in which he wrote them. The year was 1937;

the height of the Great Depression. The Commission on Appraisal was a committee formed by the Unitarians to assess where the denomination was and to give some direction as to where to go. Churches were closing around the nation, and things looked bleak. Then here comes this force of nature, a man filled with vision and optimism for the growth of Unitarianism, for they had yet to merge with the Universalists. A New Englander from one of the most august lineages in Unitarian history, transplanted to St. Paul Minnesota, points the direction of where the Unitarians should go for the remainder of the twentieth century. This would be so in no small part because the next year Fredrick May Eliot would be elected President of the American Unitarian Association.

Fredrick May Eliot was born September 15, 1889 in Dorchester Massachusetts. His father was a Unitarian minister. Actually his family was full of them. His grandfather was William Greenleaf Eliot, one of the pioneers of Unitarianism in the Midwest who founded the church in St. Louis. To this day, Eliot Chapel in St. Louis is named in his honor. Then there is the case of one of the largest Unitarian Universalist churches in America today in Portland Oregon. Fredrick's uncle Thomas Lamb Eliot famously started that one. A distant cousin of Fredrick's was Charles Eliot, once President of Harvard. Then there was his first cousin Tom who was a bit of a black sheep. Tom didn't become a Unitarian minister; he wrote poetry. But he went by the name "T.S. Eliot."

As one might imagine, Fredrick May Eliot attended Harvard Divinity School and was the associate minister in Cambridge Massachusetts in 1915. There he worked under his mentor Samuel Crothers. But only a year later in 1916 he left to be the minister at Unity Church in St. Paul Minnesota. There he would serve for twenty years. He met his wife Elizabeth there and they had two boys.

If you ever have the opportunity to visit Unity Church in St. Paul Minnesota, I recommend it to you. Not only because my friends Rob and Janne Eller-Isaacs are the co-ministers there! Actually I visited Unity Church last year, and you definitely can feel the history; especially Fredrick May Eliot's legacy. While Eliot was minister at Unity Church they built what they call the bell tower with rooms that serve as meeting rooms now, and also where the youth meet. Only this is a youth room as you have perhaps never seen before. It has an elaborate stained glass window of St. Martin of Tours in it, and it looks and feels like a gothic chapel. The window is dedicated to Charles Ames, one of the many luminary ministers to serve at Unity Church, and is a story unto himself. But the bell tower is as much a memory for Eliot as it is Ames.

Shortly after arriving at Unity Church, Eliot went with the American Expeditionary Force to Tours France. He served as a chaplain in a hospital for veterans of World War One. By war's end the average age of the "man" in the trenches fighting for France was fourteen. It was

a war that literally wiped away an entire generation of Europe's sons. So Eliot would minister to these teenagers who had witnessed ghastly things, and he would sing to them. He would sing what we know as hymn number 409 "Sleep My Child". A song I will not sing for you because I almost always tear up when we sing it for our child dedications. But if you get a chance, read the lyrics; they are very moving. Before leaving to go back to Minnesota, Eliot wrote to his congregation that he had for too long neglected the ministry of youth. When he returned he would meet every Sunday with the Tower Club, as the youth group was known both then and now, and when they met they would always sing "Sleep My Child."

Fredrick Eliot's theology is one that was frequently subject to debate. During the time that Eliot came of age as a Unitarian minister, there was a theological controversy raging. Of course there usually was among the Unitarians. This one was the "Humanist Controversy." Humanism, or the idea that the best way of understanding the world comes through human knowledge and reason rather than divine revelation, was just starting to come into its own right about the time of Eliot's ministry in St. Paul. He was accused of being a Humanist, and one of his sermons appeared in a collection called Humanist Sermons. However he would agree that Humanism relates to inner feelings as well as to the intellect, and so Unitarian theists and even Christians found him sympathetic. Later in the essay on Leadership in today's reading for

example, Eliot goes on to describe how Jesus Christ is an example of the kind of leader that Unitarians could and should emulate. He starts with good old fashioned Humanist individualism; we are our own men and women. And he winds up with, “Look to Jesus as a moral exemplar to follow”; a very Unitarian Christian position to take. Indeed much of Fredrick May Eliot’s theology that he lays out quite thoroughly in Fundamentals of Unitarian Faith I would characterize as Channing taken to the extreme. He talks about God, but defines God strictly in naturalistic ways. What he defines as God is an experience of harmony with nature or the universe. Because he walked this middle way between the two sides of Humanism and Theism, everyone sort of saw in Fredrick May Eliot a little bit of their own theology. This would serve him well in his aspirations of leadership among the Unitarians.

Eliot was a born leader. He was offered many different jobs in his days as minister in St. Paul. First Unitarian Chicago wanted him. He was asked to head up the Department of Religious Education at Unitarian headquarters. He was offered a joint appointment at Harvard along with succeeding his mentor at the church in Cambridge. There was even a movement among some lay people in St. Paul to get him to run for mayor. He turned all of them down. Eliot loved the church in St. Paul. But times were hard, and I am sure those offers must have been tempting. The roaring twenties gave way to the Great Depression,

and there were many hardships for the Unitarian churches, as there were for everyone back then.

The Unitarians that emerged from the nineteenth century into the twentieth were a pretty individualistic lot; even more so then than now. There was a loose connection between churches, what we would probably call a denomination or association. This was set up as the American Unitarian Association. But about all it did was publish materials, such as the hymnal. There really was not any coordinated effort or energy among churches locally or nationally.

One day, back in the midst of the Great Depression some Unitarian ministers got together for a meeting and they were doing what we Unitarian ministers have always done when we get together in groups: complain about how the denomination is being run! Some traditions never die. He was talking to James Luther Adams, the famous Unitarian minister, teacher and theologian, and finally they ended their gripe session with that age old question, “Now what are we going to do about it?!” A more practical ending than how we ministers usually wrap up those conversations. They decided to start a committee, a commission, to examine the problems Unitarians were facing, and to come up with a vision for how to move forward. I opened my sermon with a quote from this Commission’s report entitled Unitarians Face a New Age. This report thrust Fredrick May Eliot into national prominence and everyone agreed that he should be the next President of the AUA.

Fredrick May Eliot served as President of AUA from 1937 until his death in 1958; making him perhaps the closest we Unitarians have ever had to a Pope! There are term limits on the Presidency now. He was President of the Unitarians during World War Two and the decade after it which happened to be the time of the fastest growth and expansion of Unitarianism in our history. Imagining Unitarianism before Fredrick May Eliot's Presidency is a little like trying to imagine what my grandma's house was like on the first day she moved into it. My mind cannot conceive of that day. My grandma's furniture was there from day one of my childhood and surely it must have always been there, looking the way it did when I remember it, smelling the way it did when I was a kid. So too, much of what we take to be the furniture of Unitarian Universalism today really came about during Eliot's twenty years as President. The first Commission on Appraisal, I have already mentioned. One of the first things he did was reorganize and coordinate the meager resources of the Association. He set up local centers for congregations in a particular area to work together; what we now call Districts. He was the first to attempt that continuous battle of leading independent individualist Unitarians; what his successor John Beurhens once referred to as "herding cats." Eliot knew that by consolidating infrastructure the Unitarians could do amazing things working together; just as his commission had claimed.

This desire to build connections with others of like-minded values was a theme of Eliot's life. He worked closely with the Society of Friends who were anxious to get people out of Czechoslovakia before the Nazis could get them. Inspired by the Friends Service Committee, he urged the formation of the Unitarian Service Committee, which later became the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee or UUSC, to assist Czechs and then Jews from escaping Nazi Europe. It is from the UUSC that the tradition of lighting a chalice emerged. It was a symbol to the people escaping that the house with a chalice lit in it was affiliated with the Unitarians and was therefore safe. Shortly thereafter the practice became widespread among us in worship.

Following the war Eliot was concerned that there were Unitarians all around the world, and in remote parts of the country that were disconnected from each other. Even those independent Unitarians need to feel some connection to the wider association as well as to their own tradition and religious heritage. Thus began an effort to bring church to people where they were, even if it meant doing it by mail. These days we use the internet and the World Wide Web along with chat rooms and Facebook, but it is still called the same thing now as it was in the forties: the Church of the Larger Fellowship.

And he never forgot about those kids in Tours or his youth up in that bell tower in St. Paul. We need a new curriculum to nurture these kids, something more than just memorizing Bible passages. A

curriculum that updated the old Beacon series and was focused on kids, and how they learned. So he hired a graduate of Union Theological School, a woman at the spry age of 61 who had studied education under John Dewey himself, and as it would turn out revolutionize Unitarian religious education singlehandedly. It was of course Sophia Lyon Fahs and her “New Beacon Curriculum.”

We need to get our message out in the world, just as Eliot said in Unitarians Face a New Age. We are poised to be a player in the world, he claimed then. A small publishing company called “Beacon Press” was transformed from a side lark to a publishing giant for the Unitarians. Two decades after Eliot’s death, Beacon Press would be the first to publish the Pentagon Papers. While that act was revolutionary at the time, it was actually rather par for the course for Beacon Press who had a long tradition of pushing the envelope with their publishing choices. They would also expand the “Christian Register” the precursor to the UU World.

With the innovations of expanded religious education materials, the publishing arm to send them out, and the Church of the Larger Fellowship up and going, Unitarianism was now extraordinarily mobile. You could start a Unitarian group anywhere, and that is just what happened. Small churches, called Fellowships, started popping up all over, and in the Midwest in particular. The Fellowship Movement required no minister—just a group of lay people using the

denomination's materials. This movement ushered in the largest expansion of Unitarian growth ever in history. Eliot's vision had come to fruition. From the dark days of the Depression and the rise of Nazism, to the heady days of the Fellowship movement and its unprecedented growth and vitality, Eliot's vision of a connected and growing Unitarian faith had been born.

In the fifties Fredrick May Eliot had a dream of liberals coming together. A new vision of liberal faiths that had similar values connecting and consolidating their resources in the face of McCarthyism and Communism alike. Eliot started the Council of Liberal Churches in 1953 to explore consolidation of the Unitarians with other denominations including the Universalists, the Quakers or Society of Friends, and a Humanist group called the Ethical Union Society. The Council of Liberal Churches was short lived, but it got two of the groups seriously talking about coming together: the Unitarians and the Universalists. Like Moses who sees the Promised Land but does not enter it, Eliot died only three years before the merger of the Unitarians and Universalists in 1961.

In his sermon that was included in the anthology of Humanist sermons, entitled Humanism and the Inner Life, Eliot writes: "Each of us must stand on his own feet, and make his way onward; but we are not alone in that struggle. The road is thronged with pilgrims, and we may cheer each other with words and songs of hope at every stage of the

journey. And at times there will come floating back to us, from the far distant horizon ahead, the echoing songs of those who have gone before us—the pioneers in whose footsteps we are marching, whose brave example we are trying to follow, whose triumphant progress will keep us steadfast to the end.” May it be so for us as well. Amen Blessed Be.