



Theodore Parker: The Best Hated Man in America

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Two weeks ago, Sharon spoke of Theodore Parker and asked you if you knew of him. Few did and she suggested that she and I had our work cut out for us. I said I was willing to take the first stab at introducing you to him and him to you. But as the days progressed, I wondered if I had the knowledge to do him justice. I thought how best to tell you of this brief but powerful and history-changing life. And then, I bethought of myself that I should ask someone who knew him better, and who would that be more than his wife? So this, I imagined, is what she would tell you.

You think you knew him. But you did not know him like I knew him; like a wife knows her husband and her best friend. You think you knew Theodore Parker as a radical, a trouble-maker, if you were one of those who stood against him. Or you think you knew him as a savior, if you were one of those who were transformed by his voice, his ideas, his enthusiasm. But I, Lydia Cabot Parker—Mrs Theodore Parker—say *You did not know him like I did.*

Yes, I will tell you about my husband, the man who, at one time you called ‘the best-hated man in America.’ I will tell you about the anguish he felt over the way his colleagues turned their backs on him. I will tell you of the hours he spent in research and study so that nothing he spoke in public could be said to be untrue—and how you said it anyway. I will tell of the passion he had for this faith and his beloved Unitarian Church—a love that few would equal or understand. I will tell you of the sacrifices he made. You said he came to Boston to make his mark on history; but I will tell you he was a simple man, a man of the land, who would rather have been back in West Roxbury, tending his garden, but for the call of God.

Shall I start at the beginning on the farm in Lexington, Massachusetts, where he was born the last of ten children to John and Hannah Parker, nine of whom survived infancy? Or shall I begin at the end where he died on foreign soil in vain hope of finding some cure for his illness in an ocean voyage to Europe? Shall I speak of his studies and his writings? Shall I tell you of his lectures, attended by thousands, when Unitarian ministers refused to exchange pulpits with him lest he indoctrinate their puny congregations of forty or fifty souls? I will tell you all of these things in good time as they occur to me. He was my life and thus his life is part of mine and lives within me, mixed with my own memories. Forgive me, then, if I do not follow the years’ unfolding in absolute order, for memories are not stored in the heart in such a plodding manner.

I met Theodore when he was a teacher—and a student. He had long ago known he would be a Unitarian minister. And, he had already decided he would not follow the cold, formal style of preaching that was prevalent among the Unitarian ministers he knew. Such a style could reach the mind, he said,

but not the heart. He rather liked the gospel which Hosea Ballou was preaching in the new Universalist chapel. He decided he would make the Unitarian message hopeful like that.

But there was little money in the family for college. Still, he had set his sights on Harvard and would take any path that led that way. He had thirst for knowledge—great thirst. He had passed his entry examinations and registered himself at Cambridge as a non-resident student, thereby avoiding tuition. He was already educated enough to become a teacher of youth and when his Uncle Peter Clarke invited him to Watertown to open a school, Theodore came. It is where I was living, at Mrs. Broad's boarding house. John Cabot, my father, of Newton was connected to the Cabots of Boston. You may have heard of them.

Watertown was a quiet old village of some two thousand people, spread out along the banks of the Charles River, midway between Cambridge and Waltham. Coincidentally, it had been founded by Sir Richard Saltonstall, in whose ship the first Parker came to America. Theodore also had a room at Mrs. Broad's. He volunteered to teach a Sunday School class at the same church where I, myself, taught. He would walk me home from church each Sunday, along the elm-shaded river road, out to Prospect Hill, where we would stop to talk.

We were opposites in everything but philanthropy. But I think he did not need learning from me; he needed my sympathy and my faith in him. He said I looked like his mother; even acted like her a little. He said I would make an ideal minister's wife. But we knew that was far in the future. How I admired him for his ambitions and his talents. I have to admit I did not always understand them. When I returned to Boston that first summer, he wrote to me. He wrote long letters setting out the books I must study, saying things like, "Homer is the only royal road to poetry." But he also said the things a woman wants to hear. In one letter he wrote to me, "I love my books the more, my school the more, mankind the more, and even God the more, from loving you." Within a year we were engaged, obtaining the blessings of both families.

The Rev. Convers Francis of Watertown promoted Theodore's education, lending him books from his library and encouraging him to study only the best and brightest minds of the ages. He read Herodotus and Thucydides, and the Greek dramatists as well, and translated Theocritus and Pindar. He read the misanthropic Lord Byron with mingled feelings of delight for the art and disapproval of his morals. He studied Hebrew and Syriac. He wrestled with Hegel and Kant. He began to entertain a severe doubt of the inspiration of the Bible and authenticity of the miracles. But these doubts only made him study the more.

Finally, the Rev. Francis gave Theodore letters of introduction to Harvard and off he went to Divinity School. I save the letters he wrote to me from there, reading them so much over and over I committed them to memory. "Nothing is too much for young ambition to hope," he wrote, "no eminence too lofty for youth's vision. . . . No situation can be more honorable, no task more pleasant, no prospect more celestial, than that of a virtuous, faithful clergyman."

He was a prodigious student. His classmates later told me that he had huge charts hung on his walls containing all the important dates in history, which he proceeded to memorize. He showed me the many journals he kept during those years. He must have stayed up half the night to have both studied and then written out his experiences and his responses to all he was reading. In addition to his own studies he tutored two students in Hebrew, one in Greek and one in German. He picked up languages as if they were pieces of candy to be savored and devoured. He learned Italian, Portuguese, Dutch, Swedish, Danish, Arabic, Persian, Coptic and he dabbled in African dialects and took a fling at Russian, which he claims he had difficulty pronouncing.

I tell you these things not to brag upon my husband, but to assure you that the comments he was later to make to the world were not idle speculations from an untutored mind. They were truths

exquisitely drawn from his vast knowledge of the world and history; from the interpretations of scholars who had preceded him; and from careful study of every word and nuance. He wrote to me once that an immense change had taken place in his opinions and feelings upon all points of inquiry since he entered Harvard. Later, the Unitarians, long known for their snobbery over their clergy's fine educations, called him "overly intellectual." Hypocrites! I know that is unkind, but it is true, nonetheless.

Rev. Francis allowed him to practice his preaching in his own pulpit in Watertown. Theodore looked down on all the dear faces he loved, including his Uncle Clarke and Mrs. Broad and their familiarity made him less nervous and his preaching improved. But finding a pulpit of his own when he was done with school was a different matter. I think they were afraid of his learnedness, these rural parishes that might have invited him to speak; afraid that he would think himself above them, which wasn't true. Finally, he found a position in Barnstable.

Duties were light and he had time to explore the strange life of the coastal fisherman—strange, that is, to a Lexington farmer. He also had time to continue his studies and within his first year he had completed a two-volume translation of De Wette's *Einleitung*. He longed to be less isolated and though we were eager to be married, he left Barnstable after a year and followed the route of supply preacher while he searched for a permanent parish. He accepted a call in West Roxbury and we were married that April. After he died, I discovered this promise to me written in his journal: *to promote her piety, to bear her burdens, to overlook her foibles, to love, cherish and ever defend her, to remember her always most affectionately in my prayers: thus, God willing, we shall be blessed.* This, of course, he copied from the Codex Matrimonianus, but I am pleased to say that he did not fail in these duties as a husband.

How did the controversy start, I am often asked. How did it end upon Theodore's shoulders? Why wasn't Waldo Emerson tarred with the same criticism? Wasn't Theodore merely, in the beginning, supporting what Emerson had told the Harvard graduates in his now infamous address—to preach from the fire in their belly and not the tepid ashes of their brains? But Mr. Emerson merely shrugged his shoulders at criticism and went on to other provocations. He had quit the church by then and was free from all the politics of staying in its bosom and fighting for what was right.

It was all about Transcendentalism. Mr. Emerson didn't invent it. Neither did Theodore. Neither did Margaret Fuller, nor Henry Thoreau. But it was what they had all been thinking about separately. *Intuitive truth. An inner knowledge of faith. That the mark of God was on all things, including man. Including individual reason, which was capable of interpreting God's messages.* That was what the ruckus was about. That God is in each of us as in all things in nature. That we can understand God's hope for us and read the messages he embedded in all of nature.

It was their intellectual reason and curiosity that encouraged them to question—to question the stories of miracles, as they had already questioned Jesus's divinity. They questioned the Messianic prophecies. They questioned the submission of man. They saw man as divine, for God is in him, as in the flowers and the beasts. They said that man could come to know himself directly, not through society or the church; that he should walk upright, not bowed down by the weight of conventions; that he should feel a kinship with nature and with God. That was the good news. Theodore had already written long before the controversy these words: *We see the Christianity of the Church is a very poor thing; a very little better than heathenism. It makes Christianity a Belief, not a Life. It takes religion out of the world, and shuts it up in old books, when, from time to time, it seeks to evoke the divine spirit as the witch of Endor is fabled to have called up Samuel from the dead.* Transcendentalism, in their minds, brought life back to religion; brought religion back to life.

Their detractors feared they would provoke rampant individualism. What nonsense. Did they not trust themselves? They feared the death of Christianity. "They think," Theodore wrote to his friend

Ellis, “that chaos is coming back; the world is coming to an end. Some seem to think the Christianity which has stood some storms will not be able to weather this gale; and that truth . . . will have to give it up now. For my part, I see that the sun still shines, the rain rains, and the dogs bark, and I have doubts whether Transcendentalism will overthrow Christianity this time.”

Do you know what shunning is? Do you know how painful is its torture, to be turned away from the door of human congress; to be denied access to the place where you might state your own truths and opinions? Imagine it. This is what they did to Theodore. When it was the custom for ministers to march from pulpit to pulpit at the invitation of their friends; to spread their messages to wider and wider audiences; to share the inspiration of their calling with one another, they refused to exchange pulpits with Theodore. Oh, his congregation in West Roxbury loved him. They loved his messages and the care he gave them in their lives. But his colleagues feared him, and in their fear, they punished him.

Theodore longed for Boston like a horse longs for water at the end of a hard ride. He had prepared himself to preach in the great churches. Every word he spoke from the pulpit was supported by study and his great intellect. But every access to the audiences of this great jewel of a city was denied him. He took to deviousness. He began to write tracts and articles under the name of Levi Blodgett. *How do men come to have any Religion?* Levi asked. And he gave them the answer, as if they were blind and deaf. *Religion is innate; the existence of God, the assurance of immortality, were given in human nature.* The truths of Christianity, he wrote, are intuitive truths; not dependent for their authority upon the evidence of miracles or upon any other evidence. If religion is innate, it is superfluous to bolster it up with miraculous proofs; and if it is not innate, no miraculous proofs, if contrary to reason, will be accepted. *Christianity is merely one of many religions, he told them, and is subject to the same tests of its authority that we apply to others. And Christ himself, the highest type of religious leader, was not infinitely perfect; he did not exhaust God's creative power, and why cannot we believe that God who created him cannot create even greater Christs?*

Of course, his scholarliness and the tartness of his tongue showed through the mask. Soon all of Boston knew that Levi Blodgett was none other than Theodore Parker of West Roxbury. He was a busybody, they said; an upstart; he needed to be put in his place. His place, according to them, was not in the church. They asked him to resign. He refused. They could not make him resign. The Unitarians did not have trials for heresy, though they spoke the word often enough.

As he had done in the past, Theodore turned to his studies and his writing. He began to examine Christianity more closely, both its writings and its histories. He began to examine what was permanent in Christianity and what was mere transience, like the supposed miracles, supported by ignorance. “If it could be proved that Jesus never lived,” he insisted, “still Christianity would stand firm and fear no evil.” What was eternal, he insisted, was the moral element of religion.

Oh, the outrage. The Rev. Mr. Lothrop of the Brattle Street church, preached against him from the pulpit. A layman wrote to the newspapers: *I would rather see every Unitarian congregation in our land dissolved and every one of our churches razed to the ground, than to assist in placing a man entertaining the sentiments of Theodore Parker in one of our pulpits.* Ignorant fools!

But, you know the story. He quit his parish in West Roxbury and we came to Boston on our own. We had not been blessed by God with children of our own and it was easy to move our household. Theodore rented theaters and halls and the people came to hear his message of hope and reason, filled with life and with glory, as they never came to church to hear their own ministers. At one time, preaching at the Melodeon Hall, he entered seven thousand names to his parish register in one night. Seven thousand!. He took the opportunity speak at the Thursday lectures, a great institution of Boston. And when he was banned from them, the people refused to hear any other speakers. The Thursday lectures were allowed to die; but Theodore's fame continued unabated.

I kept in the background through all of this. I did not understand the controversy nor the cruelty of colleagues. I did not take part in the debates. My contribution was to support Theodore and to soothe him when he was hurt and anguished. We adopted a young boy to fill our house with laughter, but I think Theodore never got over the pain of our not being able to have our own children. But he loved the boy, as he loved his work, with every fiber of his being.

It was his work—and the strain of rejection, I believe—that killed him. He did not take care of himself. He accomplished so much, writing so many books, touching so many hearts. But he broke his own heart with keeping dreadful hours and maintaining a deep longing for acceptance. He had made it to Boston, and Boston loved him. He returned that love by working even harder. The world loved him. Scholars wrote to him from all over Europe. When his health began to fail, when he gave in to the debilitations of consumption at the tender age of 50, he was known worldwide as a social reformer, an ethical scholar and a beloved preacher.

Even on the ship on the way to Europe where he hoped to find rest and a cure, he wrote and published another book—the memoirs of his own ministry. It told of his work for the regeneration of society, and that was what would last; it told about his books, and that was how he would be remembered. It was filled with all the particulars of his public life, so that men could say, *There is the Parker we heard at the Music Hall; there is the Parker who barnstormed through the West; there is the Parker of the Vigilance Committee.* It was a faithful report; to read it, you would think you were hearing him again.

But you—even you who have read it—did not know him. You did not know his strength and his courage, his tenderness and his compassion. You did not know how rich was his life, and how happy and loving in his closest relationships. He was independent and self-sufficient, practical as only a Yankee can be. He did not even like to travel outside of his beloved Massachusetts. But he died in Florence, Italy—too soon, too soon—away from America and Boston. He was a beloved man, who you, who were not privileged to live with him, can never entirely know or understand.