

LUCY STONE: MAKING HER OWN WAY

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Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

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Contemplation: Words by Lucy Stone.

From her early life:

In education, in marriage, in religion, in everything disappointment is the lot of women. It shall be the business of my life to deepen that disappointment in every woman's heart until she bows down to it no longer.

We want rights. The flour-merchant, the housebuilder, and the postman charge us no less on account of our sex; but when we endeavor to earn money to pay all these, then, indeed, we find the difference.

From "The Progress of Fifty Years," a speech given in the last year of her life:

I think, with never-ending gratitude, that the young women of today do not and can never know at what price their right to free speech and to speak at all in public has been earned.

Reading: from "The Progress of Fifty Years," a speech delivered by Lucy Stone in 1893, the year of her death.

Fifty years ago the legal injustice imposed upon women was appalling. Wives, widows and mothers seemed to have been hunted out by the law on purpose to see in how many ways they could be wronged and made helpless. A wife by her marriage lost all right to any personal property she might have. The income of her land went to her husband, so that she was made absolutely penniless. If a woman earned a dollar by scrubbing, her husband had a right to take the dollar and go and get drunk with it and beat her afterwards. It was his dollar. If a woman wrote a book the copyright of the same belonged to her husband and not to her. ...The law gave no right to a married woman to any legal existence at all. Her legal existence was suspended during marriage. She could neither sue nor be sued...While the law dealt thus with her in regard to her property, it dealt still more hardly with her in regard to her children. No married mother could have any right to her child, and in most of the states of the Union that is the law today. But the laws in regard to the personal and property rights of women have been greatly changed and improved, and we are very grateful to the men who have done it.

Sermon

It was the early 1970s. I was a single mother with a son and daughter in their early teens. I was a high school teacher and the sole support of our little family. My son Scott, decided to take on a paper route for a little spending money, delivering the early-

morning Seattle paper, spending several door-to-door evenings a month collecting from his customers.

One evening shortly after he began, our doorbell rang. There was a strange man there, introducing himself as from the newspaper Scott delivered. I was mildly mystified, but invited him in (the kids were there, too) and we sat down in the living room. He coughed a little, then got to the point: “Well, you being a single mother and all, we’d like to have a man sign for you, to guarantee the Scott’s receipts.”

At first I looked at him blankly, because I really didn’t get what he was saying. When I asked for clarification, he more or less repeated what he had said, and when I stared at him wide-eyed with dawning understanding, he hurriedly added, “You could just get one of the neighbors or something, couldn’t you?”

With a certain amount of outrage, I said, “I have been responsible for my kids for many years now. I have been a high school teacher for nearly ten years, the past five in the Edmonds School District. I’m not going to go begging anyone else to sign for my obligations. I’m just not going to do it.” He sort of skulked out (to his credit, I think he was embarrassed by the whole thing), and I heard no more of the issue as long as Scott was delivering papers.

I was middle class, educated and long accustomed to tackling the obstacles that single parents run into. I was able to look the guy in the eye and say “Heck no, I won’t go,” understanding even in those pre-feminism-of-the-70s days that he did not have a leg to stand on.

But I just let it slide, and did not do anything more about it. I knew that it was an outrageous policy, and I didn’t storm into their offices, or write a letter to them (or the other paper), or make any kind of fuss in the name of justice. I knew that there were other women, less privileged than I, who were probably more easily intimidated, or whose straits were more desperate, who swallowed their pride in fear of losing a precious little pittance that could buy groceries or pay part of a utility bill. Their God-given right to be treated with respect was the same as mine. And I knew that I needed to exercise my responsibility to speak out—but I didn’t.

Even now, I wonder if I—you—we—speak out as we should about the various inequalities we know about. We know that there is still general prejudice and stereotyping of single parents. We know that “welfare reform” of one kind or another generally spells more difficulty for poor parents—especially mothers—and their children. We know that all people may have been created equal, but they are not treated equally, in law and in society. Knowing all this, I wonder if we do enough.

This particular round of wondering has been prompted by reading about 19th-century human rights champion, Lucy Stone. Stone was born in 1818 and died in 1893—her last words to her daughter were, “Make the world a better place.” Just as she launched into her lifetime of fearless human rights work, hired as an organizer by the Anti-Slavery Society, she said, “I expect to plead not for the slave only, but for suffering humanity everywhere. Especially do I mean to labor for the elevation of my sex.” (Internet: “Lucy Stone Quotations”)

Always an independent and stubborn person (some would say “defiant”), as a child Lucy vows that she will eventually learn Greek and Hebrew so that she can translate the Bible for herself—she refuses to believe that it is as anti-woman as she has been taught. She knows she wants to go to college, so she approaches her father for the

funding he had given her brothers for their education—only to be met with a flat-out refusal and the advice so common in those days, that women should “stay in their sphere.” Which is to say, the household: plenty of work but no legal existence, dependent on a man for all matters financial and legal, even decisions regarding her children.

Lucy Stone will have none of it, thank you, and continues relentlessly badgering her father. He finally gives in just a little: he consents to loan her money for her education, money she will in fact pay back. As a result of the time it takes to work while attending various institutions, she is 25 by the time she enters Oberlin College in Ohio, the country’s first college to admit both women and African Americans. Four years later—a stellar student in spite of working the entire time she attended Oberlin—she is asked to write a commencement address for her class. The only hitch is that a man has to deliver it, since it is against the college rules for a woman to debate or speak in public. (Stone had organized an off-campus debate group in her spare time at college.) Not surprisingly, she refuses.

She gives her first public speech upon returning to Massachusetts, the first woman in that state to receive a college degree. It is on women’s rights, delivered from the pulpit of her brother’s Congregational church in Gardner, MA.

Lucy Stone is ready to take on the world! When she is hired by the Anti-Slavery Society, she is unambiguous about her passion to speak out for all human rights, slaves and women alike. William Lloyd Garrison—a fairly rare breed of abolitionist, who also believed in women’s rights—says of her, “She is a very superior young woman, and has a soul as free as the air, and is preparing to go forth as a lecturer, particularly in vindication of the rights of women. Her course here has been very firm and independent, and she has caused no small uneasiness in the spirit of sectarianism in the institution.” (Internet: “Lucy Stone – A Soul As Free As the Air.”)

Undaunted by the “uneasiness” of narrowly-focussed abolitionists, she organizes her speaking into two ventures: on weekends she delivers anti-slavery oratory, and on week days, she delivers of her passion for women’s rights, and charges admission to these rhetorical, justice-seeking events. (She earned \$7000 in three years with her women’s rights talks.)

Abolitionists are not the only ones she makes “uneasy.” “...people tore down the posters advertising her talks, burned pepper in the auditoriums where she spoke, and pelted her with prayer books and other missiles.” (Leslie Wheeler, “Lucy Stone: Radical Beginnings,” in *Feminist Theorists: Three Centuries of Key Women Thinkers*.)

She organizes the first National Woman’s Rights Convention in 1850, featuring the most brilliant, determined and strongest-willed women of the day. Newspaper commentary is worse than scathing. One calls the gathering a “hen convention” and says, “When a hen crows like a cock it is time to cut her head off.” The *New York Herald* calls it a “hybrid, mongrel, piebald, crackbrained, pitiful, disgusting, and ridiculous assemblage....May God have mercy on their miserable souls.” (Internet: “Women’s History, Lucy Stone”)

Further, she has made good on her determination to learn Greek and Hebrew, and she challenges church rules that she finds unfair to women. Too radical for even the relatively liberal Congregationalists, she is expelled by them, and joins the Unitarians.

With all this radicalism burning in her breast, you can imagine how Stone feels about marriage—as in, “No, thank you!” But she meets her soul mate and her activist match when she meets Henry Blackwell, a businessman seven years her junior, who falls deeply in love with her. Two years of courtship and friendship later—including Blackwell’s rescue of a fugitive slave, impressing her with his integrity of principle and action—she accepts. Not in the ordinary way, of course. She writes to him, “A wife should no more take her husband’s name than he should hers. My name is my identity and must not be lost.” True to form, he replies, “I wish, as a husband, to renounce all the privileges which the law confers upon me, which are not strictly mutual. Surely such a marriage will not degrade you, dearest.” (Internet: “Lucy Stone – A Soul As Free As the Air.”) The two of them sign a remarkable pre-nuptial document declaring their mutual protest against the anti-woman marriage laws of the times. Its final paragraph eloquently declaims:

We believe that personal independence and equal human rights can never be forfeited, except for crime; that marriage should be an equal and permanent partnership, and so recognized by law; that until it is so recognized, married partners should provide against the radical injustice of present laws, by every means in their power... (Internet: , “Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell – Marriage Protest”)

Not that it makes her life any easier. Her property remains in her name, and, in a primarily symbolic gesture, she refuses to pay her taxes in New Jersey because women cannot vote—no “taxation without representation.” In a widely-publicized event, the authorities seize her goods, and her friends have to buy them back for her.

There is much more of interest in Lucy Stone’s life: the birth of a daughter, Alice Stone Blackwell, to become a well-known feminist herself; her sisters-in-law becoming the first congregationally-ordained woman minister and the first women to receive licenses to practice medicine in the United States. Even the intriguing fact that, later in life, she becomes associated with the conservative arm of the suffrage movement, wishing to keep the causes of African American and women’s issues together—therefore not opposing the Reconstruction amendments, which grant voting rights—regardless of “race, color, or previous condition of servitude.” But not gender.

However “conservative” her later positions were considered by her more-to-the-left suffragist friends, though, Lucy Stone led a life dedicated to the furthering of human rights for all people. She never wavered from the words of her shining example, William Lloyd Garrison: “Wherever there is a human being, I see God-given rights inherent in that being, whatever may be the sex or complexion.” (Internet: “Women’s History-Lucy Stone”) In her “The Progress of Fifty Years” speech, given at the 1893 World’s Fair, shortly before her death, she said, “Now all we need is to continue to speak the truth fearlessly, and we shall add to our number those who will turn the scale to the side of equal and full justice in all things.” (Internet: “Lucy Stone-The Progress of Fifty Years-Columbian Exposition-World’s Fair 1893”)

Which brings me back to my earlier wonderings and musings. Could I have made a difference in that newspaper’s outrageous policies if I had, say, taken it to my Unitarian Universalist congregation and gotten help in speaking up? After all, our religious convictions call us to precisely such actions.

What have I done lately to further the humane treatment of people not always treated humanely by the powers that be? Some things, to be sure. But, for example, I have not gotten around to weighing in with legislators against the possibility that there will be an unnecessary cap on the number of poor children can receive health benefits in our state. Same with expressing my support of a proposal that will allow people with disabilities to work and also receive Medicaid.

What have you done lately? In what ways have you lived your faith?

Reflecting on Lucy Stone's marital relationship with the remarkable Henry Blackwell, I wonder if all my important relationships are conducted with the utmost respect and equality (within the bounds of age and authority). How about yours?

Few of us will live with the unabashed passion for justice that Stone carried with her. But looking back upon such a life—such an unwavering determination to speak truth to power in spite of personal inconvenience, adverse legal action, and downright persecution—we can vow to live more in the egalitarian spirit of Stone's life. We can examine our hearts to see if we bring our full presence and respect to partners, friends, the children in our lives. We can look around and see the need for that letter to the editor, that contribution of time and/or money to those institutions striving to make systemic change (I think of United Vision of Idaho, for example). We can know the issues and stay in the forefront of justice, equity and compassion.

Lucy Stone did. Upon her death in 1893, she became the first person in New England to be cremated.