

# **Our Miracle Story: John Murray and Judith Sargent Murray**

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## **Sermon**

Universalism, in a classical sense, in its Christian origins, is sort of the flip-side of Calvinism. Calvinism says, excepting the relatively few who are among the elect, most people are destined to suffer the torments of hell, hopelessly separated from God, for eternity. Universalism can be just as deterministic. It says, you are all destined for Paradise; eternal life spent in the inexpressible beauty that is the presence of God...whether you like it or not!

And, as our eternal lives are in the hands of a loving God, so, too, in John Murray's story, everything that happens in this mortal life happens for a reason. Thomas Potter had no choice but to build that meeting house. John Murray was destined to shipwreck and end up on Potter's doorstep. And the wind would hold, unchanging, for as long as it took for Murray to preach the gospel of Universalism in that place.

But if Murray's was the first sermon preached on Universalism in Potter's chapel, starting a career that earned John Murray the title of "the father of American Universalism," it was apparently not the first time that the message of Universalism was heard in the United States...else, how could Thomas Potter be waiting for a minister to preach this particular gospel? He must have been somehow, somewhat, familiar with the message of Universalism already.

It turns out that he was a fourth-generation Quaker--indeed, Murray reports that the pulpit in Potter's meeting house was "rather in the Quaker mode," simply made and positioned close to the congregants--but Potter had most likely been influenced also by the Baptists in the area in which he settled, what is

now Ocean County, New Jersey. One of the Baptist groups were known as "the Rogerines," after their leader John Rogers, or as "the Quaker Baptists." This group, you guessed it, held to the view of Universalism.

Never formally educated, but deeply religious and incorrigibly curious, Potter was interested in talking about the beliefs that were taking shape within him, and often held discussions with others in the area who were so inclined, as well as visiting ministers. In fact, some of the inspiration for building the meeting house came from recognizing that his wife, Mary, was growing tired of hosting these discussions in her home. The other inspiration, of course, was his dream that a preacher of the Universalist gospel would one day preach from the pulpit there. And so, the story goes, that after seeing Murray's vessel stranded, and walking to meet him, he greeted Murray with these words: "I have longed to see you. I have been expecting you a long time!"

Now you can imagine this must have come as something of a shock to John Murray. Besides the fact that Thomas Potter was a complete stranger to him, Murray did not come to America to be recognized or welcomed. And, though he was indeed a minister and a proponent of the doctrine of Universal Salvation, he did not come to America to preach. He came to escape the suffering that he had endured in England--in the short span of a few years he had been voted out of his church for his Universalist beliefs; suffered the deaths of his infant son, his wife, one of his brothers, and three of his sisters; and experienced a series of health problems, depression, and financial catastrophe, eventually landing in debtors' prison--so he came to America, after his brother-in-law rescued him from prison with a loan, to leave those experiences behind as best he could, and he wanted nothing more than to blend in to this new world, to be unrecognized and unrecognizable, to disappear...As [he told fellow Universalist preacher James Relly](#), I want "to pass through life, unheard, unseen, unknown to all, as though I had never been."

This was not to be, and Murray must have realized it when Potter greeted him: "Welcome, friend, I have longed to see you. I have been expecting you a long time!" And then, not only to be "recognized" by this stranger, but to be invited to give a sermon at Potter's meeting house when all Murray wished to do was spend his days in obscurity. "My mind," says Murray, was "subjected to the most torturing reflections."

What were those torturing reflections, I wonder? Murray must have remembered his own journey to Universalism: Born in 1741, his father was a devout Calvinist. Not only was John threatened with an afterlife in hell, but he was beaten by his father for minor infractions on this side of the grave. And

somehow, Murray came through this sort of childhood to become an outgoing, cheerful young man, who, initially, did not stray far from the theology he had been taught. In fact, he felt it his duty to correct those who fell prey to heresy, not least of all the heresy of Universalism.

In his autobiography, [he recounts one incident](#) where a young woman who believed in Universal Salvation held her own against him in a battle of logic and semantics. Murray insisted, said the young woman, that unbelievers should believe that Jesus died for them, but at the same time insisted that Jesus did not come to save unbelievers, but only those who believed. So for the unbelievers to believe that Jesus died for them, when Murray himself insisted that Jesus did not die for unbelievers, was a contradiction. Rather, she asserted that Jesus *did* die for unbelievers, so to ask them to believe that Jesus died for them was not a contradiction but only a recognition of the truth, that Jesus died for all.

Murray became so flustered by their conversation, and embarrassed by her power with words, especially in the presence of members of his religious brethren, that he got out of the situation in the most cliché way possible. He pulled out his pocket watch, remembered a previous engagement, and excused himself from the situation. He was struck by the kind and joyful manner which she displayed at the end of their discussion just as she had at the beginning.

But, though he was obviously affected by this encounter, he did not convert on the spot. In fact, he felt an even greater motivation to counter this heresy.

As he sought to sharpen his theological skills, he felt that it was necessary to study the enemy's arguments. As he looked into the thoughts and preaching of James Rely, one of the most articulate and popular of the preachers of Universal Salvation in England, he was impressed in spite of himself with the power of Rely's reasoning. He and his first wife checked Rely's arguments against the Bible, prayed about the results, and found themselves more and more drawn to this doctrine. When they finally attended one of James Rely's services, Murray [told his wife](#) that it "was the first consistent sermon I have ever heard."

And soon, John Murray found himself to be a confirmed believer in Universalism. The next few years, however, held all of the tragedies that were mentioned earlier, testing Murray's faith and extinguishing his desire to preach at all.

So Murray comes to America to lose himself...and instead he is found. He is found by Potter, who seems to believe more in Murray's future than Murray does. He is found by the very message of Universalism he has professed and continues to profess even through the tragedies that life has brought. He is found by his destiny, one might say, with the benefit of hindsight, and if one believed in such things as destiny, and though he resists, as he resisted the message of Universalism initially, he also feels the pull of Thomas Potter's enthusiasm and certainty, as well as the series of unlikely circumstances that brought him to this place.

"The idea of a crowd, of making a public exhibition of myself, was, to my desolate, woe-worn mind, intolerable; and the suspense, in which I was held, was perfectly agonizing," he says, however, "I could not forbear acknowledging an uncommon coincidence of circumstances" which "pressed with powerful conviction on my mind..." Leading him to the place where he gives in. He says, like many prophets before him, I don't want to do this, I would give most anything not to do this, but if it be your will, God, let it be. And so it was...the UU miracle story...the wind held unchanging; Murray preached his sermon, to Potter's delight; and Murray continued preaching from that day onward in his adopted country.

But if he expected a kinder reception for his message in America than he had in England, he was quickly disabused of that notion. Though he would carefully stop short of proclaiming Universal Salvation explicitly, he would lay out the Biblical basis for it in his sermons and leave the congregation to draw the conclusion. This apparently did not fool anyone. Though he drew large crowds when he spoke, soon many pulpits were closed to him. Other clergy called his doctrines "pernicious" and "damnable." Orthodox believers found him dangerous. His meetings were disrupted. He barely escaped lynching more than once. In one instance, a stone came crashing through the church window behind him, narrowly missing his head and landing on the pulpit. Murray, barely missing a beat, lifted the rock so that the congregation could see it and said, "This argument is *solid* and *weighty*, but it is neither *rational* nor *convincing*."

In 1779, sixteen of Murray's followers in Gloucester, Massachusetts left the established Congregationalist church and built their own meetinghouse, the first Universalist church building in the United States, and invited Murray to become their minister. This small group would have a profound impact on church-state relations in the U.S. Forced to continue paying taxes to the established church, members argued that that was no longer their church, and that their new congregation was a distinct and legitimate congregation that didn't fall under the jurisdiction of the First Parish. Refusing to pay the taxes, in 1782 some members' possessions were seized and sold at auction, and one member spent a

brief time in jail. The Universalists sued under the Massachusetts Bill of Rights, and in 1786 the state's Supreme Judicial Court ruled in their favor. This was a huge first victory in the long campaign for the separation of church and state.

The other important event that happened in Gloucester was that John Murray met Judith Sargent, an ardent Universalist who took active part in the aforementioned court case and published her own Universalist catechism for the religious education classes. There was an instant bond between them and, though Judith was married to her first husband at the time, she wrote to John, saying that if there was neither male nor female in Christ, certainly there was nothing wrong with a friendly correspondence between man and woman "[mingling] souls upon paper," all with the strictest propriety, of course.

In 1786, John Stevens, Judith's husband, died. Two years later, as Murray was about to embark on a trip to England, he wrote Sargent a love letter, saying, according to Sargent, that "he had long loved me, even from the commencement of our acquaintance," and that he had held back for the obvious reason that she was married, but felt that now he must confess it to her and he now, with such romantic language, "presumed to calculate upon a favorable hearing." Judith and John were married upon his return to the United States.

Judith Sargent Murray, aside from her explicitly Universalist endeavors, was a powerful voice calling for the equal education of women and the recognition of women's voices in religion and society. She was most likely influential in Universalism being out front in the ordination of women in this country and the importance of her influence on and contributions to John Murray's work has not yet been sufficiently researched. Judith Sargent worked to educate throughout her life, teaching her children, nieces and nephews, and helping to start a female Academy in Dorchester, Massachusetts. She wrote at least three different series of articles, some under a male pseudonym, that were widely read, and she stopped writing for Thomas Paine's magazine when he insisted on editing her work, to his great irritation. She was strong and clear in her exposition of religious and social points.

She had found her way to Universalism before she met John Murray, and she continued in her early faith after he died, continuing to put her beliefs into action. Her daughter had these words inscribed on her tombstone: "Dear spirit, the monumental stone can never speak thy worth."

Universalism grew from that small group in Gloucester until, by the late 1840s, it became the nation's sixth largest denomination with a membership of approximately 700,000, about 3 percent of the U.S. population. Some say it's eventual decline was really caused by its successful integration into the pulpits of other denominations...but it seems to me that, if Universalism once quieted the talk about hellfire and damnation, the tide has turned yet again, and the messages from today's pulpits are increasingly divisive and judgmental. What is the state of Universalism today?

Listen to this, [from the Washington Times, April 21, 2004](#):

*A popular black preacher has been found guilty of the "heresy of inclusionism" after a year-long debate among his fellow bishops on whether non-Christians can be admitted to heaven.*

*Bishop Carlton Pearson, pastor of Higher Dimensions Family Church in Tulsa, Okla., was informed last month that he was preaching theological error and would not be allowed to preach at any of the churches connected to the Cleveland-based Joint College of African-American Pentecostal Bishops Congress. The Joint College numbers about 160 leaders of independent black churches.*

*"Inclusionism" is a doctrine that all people, not just Christians, are bound for heaven; that hell does not exist...*

*"We do hereby declare the doctrine of inclusionism is an unorthodox teaching and shall be classified as a heresy," said the Joint College in a statement March 29. Despite "repeated, compassionate and loving overtures," it added, Bishop Pearson refused to quit preaching that doctrine.*

Inclusionism...Universalism is still radical. It is still dangerous. It is still considered harmful, irresponsible, pernicious, damnable. Is that true? Will we let that stand? If we are the keepers of Murray's message for the 21st century, how will we seek to articulate that message? If we feel distant from the particulars of his theology, how will we adapt it to our own? Because I don't think we should let go of this tradition. The power of the affirmation in Universalism must be preserved; is needed now more than ever. It has the power to transform lives.

"Blessed are the people who know the joyful sound," said Murray. We know that sound. Now we have to let the world hear it...

**Closing Words** (#704, John Murray)

Go out into the highways and by-ways. Give the people something of your new vision.

You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women.

Give them not hell, but hope and courage; preach the kindness and everlasting love of God.

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*This sermon drew from many sources regarding the lives of John Murray and Judith Sargent Murray, most prominently:*

[Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith](#), edited by Ernest Cassara

The Murray/Grove web site: <http://murraygrove.org/heritage/index.html>

[Works by Judith Sargent Murray](#)

and [The Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography](#)