

## Remembering Rev. Caroline Bartlett Crane

Readings from 'The Individual Factor in Social Regeneration' by Caroline Bartlett Crane  
'What the Heart Cannot Forget' by Joyce Sutphen  
'To the Ancestors,' a traditional poem of the Dogon people of Mali

Once upon a time, a sixteen-year-old girl attended worship and it changed the course of her life. It was the first sermon by a Unitarian minister she ever heard. She later wrote, 'in this sermon, I found all my doubts and problems solved... it was like a message from heaven.... I walked out of the place as if in a dream; did not stay to be introduced to the preacher, but escaped in a period of intense exaltation to the refuge of my room.' Later 'when my father sought for me, in reply to have I liked the sermon, it must have seemed to him a little like one of my old sleep-walking trances; for I said to him, "Father, I am going to be a Unitarian minister."' <sup>1</sup>

This story happened in the early 1870s and the girl in question was Caroline Bartlett Crane. To us today, it was no surprise that she realized that dream. We are devoting our service today to remembering her life and legacy, and over a century later, her story is not as surprising as it was at the time. Caroline's dream to be a minister was shocking at the time – and there was no certainty that she would realize it. The ordination of women, was new and novel. The education and training needed to become a minister was expensive and Caroline's family did not support it, but nevertheless she persisted. She taught school, became a newspaper reporter, and then, took ministry postings in out-of-the-way places like Sioux Falls, Dakota Territory, and later Kalamazoo, Michigan.

She came to Kalamazoo in 1889. The congregation was struggling then. They had not been able to recruit or afford a full-time minister in six years. The Sunday school had not met in four years. There were doubts about whether the church would survive, whether there would be a community for religious liberals in Kalamazoo. In these moments of uncertainty, there are several options. The church could have kept on with its present course, hoping for new results. They could have given up and disbanded or merged with another congregation. Or they could have tried a brave new thing. In 1889, that brave new thing was to call a woman minister. Now, it wasn't as though there were hordes of men clamoring for the job. It was a small job in a small place. Most Unitarian ministers were trained out east and were hesitant to come here. Their new woman minister, who was then known as Caroline Bartlett, only took the job because she thought she would be able to work here on the weekends and study at Chicago Theological Seminary during the week. That's what the denominational leaders who encouraged her to come here told her she could do. That is not what happened. When Caroline Bartlett came to Kalamazoo—and saw there was a lot of work to do here. The church and the city needed her too much for her to only be a weekend minister.

Caroline was a novelty—at the time there were only six women clergy in Michigan. Huge crowds came to her first services. Many people liked what they heard and joined the church. The

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<sup>1</sup> My sources for this sermon are the history DVDs produced by members of People's Church and *A Just Verdict: The Life of Caroline Bartlett Crane* by O'Ryan Rickard (Kalamazoo, MI: New Issues Press, 1994).

membership swelled. The Sunday school reopened. Caroline served the church well and the church did well.

Caroline Bartlett Crane was in Kalamazoo at a hopeful time for religious liberals in the Midwest and around the world. Midwestern Unitarians were discarding creeds and becoming less Christian, growing into new identities based on shared ethical commitments and values, much to the dismay of Unitarians on the east coast. The Parliament of the World's Religions, held in Chicago in 1893 brought religious leaders from many wisdom traditions together in the same place for the first time ever. People were hopeful that dialogue and connection across religious lines would bring peace and understanding to the world. And Caroline Bartlett Crane, along with most of her Midwestern Unitarian colleagues, as well as many others, in other places and denominations was devoted to the social gospel movement. This was a movement that was a driving force in liberal Christianity for a generation. It asserted that God was at work in the world, seeking to care for everyone and that humans must partner with God to bring about the kingdom of heaven on earth. It used the still-emerging tools of sociology and social work and the ideas of socialism to challenge vicious capitalism with no safety net that left so many people broke, broken, discarded and discounted. The horrors of the first world war brought an end to this movement, but the social gospelers did achieve great strides in worker's rights, women's suffrage, care for the poor, temperance, and more. They shifted the culture to an understanding that we have an obligation to the those who struggle.

All of that was part of the religious climate when Caroline preached the words that Laura read earlier, 'this church cannot be a place where we are merely to come together once a week and enjoy our doctrine and congratulate ourselves that we have a faith free from superstition. We must do something for others as well as for ourselves. And the more we have done for others, the more in the end, we shall find we have done for ourselves.'

Or to say that in a modern way, the church should a beloved community embracing and serving our diverse world. That is our mission statement now.

There are a few direct connections between us today and People's church during Caroline Bartlett Crane's ministry. The first is the name People's Church. Caroline encouraged the church to adopt this name and we have had it ever since. She advocated for this name because of her understanding of what the church is for – we are here to serve all people, not just the people who claim membership here.

She also adapted our Bond of Union from another Western Unitarian document and encouraged the membership to adopt it. This Bond of Union is still what members sign when they join our church. It concludes with 'We base our union upon no creed test but upon the purpose herein expressed and welcome all who wish to join us to help establish truth, righteousness and love in all the world.' It is a powerful idea that every member of People's Church for the past 125 years as affirmed this idea.

It is said, history doesn't repeat itself, but it rhymes. Our work together as a congregation so often rhymes with the work and ministry that this congregation was doing 125 years ago. This is

both reassuring, as though we are a tree, growing ring by ring, different but also rooted in the same place and the same identity. This is also heartbreaking, as Caroline Bartlett Crane and the church then worked hard to solve problems that still go unsolved.

Just as our mission statement rhymes with Caroline Bartlett's mission for the church, so do many of our ministries and program – and so does the work of many of us beyond the church. During Caroline Bartlett Crane's ministry the church started the first kindergarten in Michigan, open to the community. The public schools later started offering the program and the church donated all of its classroom supplies. We continue our commitment to children, within these walls, with our religious education classes and our child dedications and beyond, through our partnership with Lincoln School.

We also echo that earlier time by providing education that our public schools can't. Here, we offer comprehensive sexuality education rooted in science and values of inclusion, justice, self-worth, health and responsibility through the Our Whole Lives program. This, like kindergarten, is a public good, but our public school teachers are not legally allowed to provide comprehensive sexuality education. State laws ban them from speaking the truth about risks and prevention of sexually transmitted infections and pregnancy. I long for the day when that changes and when we can give up this program so it can be offered on a larger scale to everyone. Until that day, we will keep teaching our children and hope that they continue to teach their friends and speak up in classes when teachers are legally required to share information that is not scientifically accurate.

Caroline Bartlett Crane was dedicated to the expansion of suffrage to women, lobbying locally and on the state level to allow women to vote. I see that echoed in the hard work that so many of you did for the passage of amendments 2 and 3, which will end gerrymandering and make it easier for people to vote. While the congregation did not take a public position on these amendments, I know that many of you worked very hard for their passage. You are continuing the legacy of Caroline Bartlett Crane.

Caroline Bartlett Crane and People's Church also sought to care for those in need. At that time, there was a county poormaster who oversaw the money distributed to the poor in Kalamazoo. He was corrupt, used cruel and harsh language when speaking to the people he was employed to care for, and refused to give money to some people who were deserving. Caroline led a successful effort to get him fired by the county board, which was later overturned in the courts. At that time, the church also had a vocational training school for young men, helping them to learn skills like carpentry. While our echoes of this work are not direct service and vocational training, we do partner with Ministry with Community, Open Doors, ISAAC, the YWCA and others to care for those who need care and assistance. And so many of us support these and other worthy organizations, do the work of love and justice in our lives and relationships, and strive to hold our public officials accountable. It rhymes.

We also echo Caroline and her church in the way that we seek to do justice and attend to our interior life. We seek to balance our work in the world with our spiritual practice. We know that

the means are the ends and we must attend to our own righteousness as we seek to establish truth righteousness and love in all the world. We seek to go on our way rejoicing in all we do.

And there are ways that the ministries and programs and events of 125 years ago are not echoed now. The church opened a women's gymnasium program, because there was no good place for women to exercise in town – the men could use the YMCA. The church also opened a school of household science for young women where they could learn sewing, cooking and other skills. Caroline took some of those classes herself.

One of my favorite stories from Caroline Bartlett Crane's ministry here happened on New Year's Eve 1896. Caroline invited the whole congregation to a reception at the church, saying that they had thrown her several receptions over the years and she wanted to return the favor. Caroline introduced a musical program and while the musicians were playing, Caroline went home, changed into a wedding gown, and came back to the church. When the concert was over, one of Caroline's mentors in ministry and announced that Caroline was to be married – right then. The organist began to play and Augustus Warren Crane, a doctor who was pioneering the use of x-rays in medicine, walked down the right aisle and Caroline entered from the left. They exchanged vows, the mentor offered a prayer for their marriage and pronounced them spouses. I don't know what we could do that would echo a surprise wedding, but I'd love to hear your ideas.

Out in the foyer today, you can see the silver pieces that the congregation gave to Caroline and Augustus to celebrate their marriage. Look for the inscriptions that say which committees offered which pieces. While you are there, I also encourage you to talk to the members of the archives committee about their important work preserving the material history of the church. We need more people to join us in this work. Let them – or me—know if you might be interested.

Every time I learn about the history of this church, I think about what sort of future ancestor I hope to be. I have no idea what People's Church might be like in 125 years, but I hope it exists and tells stories about us. How will we be remembered? For the bazaar? For our sexuality education? For something that seems to be a small detail now but will rhyme across generations? May we all, here and in the other parts of our lives together, strive to be the future ancestors that our descendants – the future church, our future family, our future neighborhoods, our future workplaces, our future community organizations, will claim proudly and see as an inspiration.

May it be so. May we make it so. Amen.