

Learning from a Universalist Forebear: Dr. Benjamin Rush  
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Tri-County Unitarian Universalists  
Summerfield, FL  
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County  
Eustis, FL  
Rev. Cynthia A. Snaveley

In our Unitarian Universalist history there are two eighteenth century Pennsylvanian Universalist physicians, Dr. George DeBenneville and Dr. Benjamin Rush. Today I would like us to consider Dr. Rush.

In his biography of Rush on the Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography Charles Howe writes, "In his time Rush had no peer as a social reformer. Among the many causes he championed—most of them several generations in advance of nearly all other reformers—were prison and judicial reform, abolition of slavery and the death penalty, education of women, conservation of natural resources, proper diet, abstinence from the use of tobacco and strong drink, and the appointment of a 'Secretary of Peace' to the federal cabinet," [Benjamin Rush \(uudb.org\)](https://uudb.org/benjamin-rush)

But Rush was not perfect. Our Whistlestop/Interlude video notes that one might call him a savior or a murderer. Howe explains in his biography. "After earning an A.B. in 1760 from the College of New Jersey, Rush studied medicine, 1761-66, under Dr. John Redman in Philadelphia. On Redman's advice, he continued his studies at the University of Edinburgh, where he received an M.D. degree in 1768. He did further training at St. Thomas's Hospital in London, 1768-69. In Edinburgh he embraced a new explanation of disease, taught by the prominent instructor, Dr. William Cullen. Rejecting the older theory, based upon the balancing of the four humors, Rush believed that the root cause of disease was 'irregular convulsive or wrong action,' especially of the blood vessels. The therapy he recommended to restore the circulatory system to normal was blood-letting.... During the great yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia in 1793 Rush worked tirelessly and heroically to care for patients and to curb the spread of the disease, at the same time keeping detailed records. In the face of widespread criticism he persisted in promoting drastic purgation and radical blood-letting as a means of treatment. 'The more bleeding, the more deaths,' one critic complained, not without cause," [Benjamin Rush \(uudb.org\)](https://uudb.org/benjamin-rush). Rush would never be disabused of his belief in blood-letting's effectiveness. Indeed, he insisted on the treatment for himself during his final illness. This part of Rush's history might serve as a caution to all of us to be open to the possibility that we might be wrong.

In a 2019 article in the American Psychiatric Association News "The Life of Benjamin Rush Reflects Troubled Age in U.S. Medical History' Aaron Levin writes that, "(Rush) returned (from his studies in Edinburgh) to become the colonies' first professor of chemistry at the College of Philadelphia. (Benjamin Franklin was the first president of the school's board of trustees.)

Less than three weeks later, he was called out on his first psychiatry case, a Capt. John Macpherson, who exhibited symptoms of what today would be called mania and paranoia. He also cared for Macpherson's distraught wife, thus learning a lesson about the need to care for the families of patients.

Rush argued for consideration of the whole person. 'Knowledge of the mind opens to [the physician] many new duties,' Rush wrote. 'It is calculated to teach him that in feeling the pulse, inspecting the eyes and tongue, examining the state of the excretions, ... he performs but half his duty in the sick room,'"

[The Life of Benjamin Rush Reflects Troubled Age in U.S. Medical History | Psychiatric News \(psychiatryonline.org\).](#)

Rush would have an even more direct link to the treatment of mental illness when his son John was committed to a hospital after killing a good friend in a duel. In an article entitled “Benjamin Rush and His Insane Son” by Eric T. Carlson, M.D. and Jeffry L. Wollock, M.A. posted on the National Library of Medicine webpage, they write that Rush wrote to Thomas Jefferson in 1811, “My son is better. He has become attentive to his dress, now and then opens a book, converses with a few people, but still discovers, with a good deal of melancholy, alienation of mind upon several subjects, particularly those which associate with the cause of his derangement. He is now in a cell in the Pennsylvania Hospital... And here Rush repeats what he had said the previous April “...where there is too much reason to believe he will end his days.

"Benjamin Rush never knew the outcome of his son's case, for he died on the 19<sup>th</sup> of April, 1813. John Rush, as his father predicted, never left the hospital, and died there, after a residency of 27 years, on August 9, 1837," [Benjamin Rush and his insane son. - PMC \(nih.gov\).](#)

Carlson and Wollock begin their article noting how commonplace dueling was in the early days of our country. Gun violence took its toll even then.

Howe in his biography writes, “A pioneer in the study and treatment of mental illness, Rush insisted that the insane had a right to be treated with respect. He protested the inhuman accommodation and treatment of the insane at Pennsylvania Hospital. When he received an inadequate response to his complaints from the hospital's Board of Managers, Rush took his case to the public at large. In 1792 he was successful in getting state funding for a ward for the insane....

(Unfortunately), Part of Rush's treatment of people with mentally illness was based upon his idea of the cause of physical disease. One of his prescriptions for a patient was ‘bleeding . . . strong purges—low diet—kind treatment (ok there), and the cold bath.’ Anticipating Freudian analysis by a century, Rush also listened to his patients tell him their troubles and was interested in dreams. He recommended occupational therapy for the institutionalized insane. His Medical Inquiries and Observations, Upon the Diseases of the Mind, 1812, a standard reference for seventy years, earned him the title of ‘the father of American psychiatry,’” <https://uudb.org/articles/henrybergh.html>.

A piece on Rush on the Dickinson College website begins, “The college's founder, Benjamin Rush, was acutely interested in the issues of slavery, abolitionism, and racial difference. His deep-seated faith in the power of rationality to dispel injustice and undeserved privilege led him to reject notions that others used to support inequality. For Rush, human beings were naturally disposed toward freedom, and he regarded African Americans as capable of shouldering the responsibilities of freedom. ‘I need say hardly anything in favor of the Intellects of the Negroes, or of their capacities for virtue and happiness,’ he wrote, ‘although they have been supposed by some to be inferior to those of the inhabitants of Europe. The accounts which travelers give of their ingenuity, humanity and strong attachments to their parents, relations, friends and country, show us that they are equal to the Europeans.’ For Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, all men were created equal, including those enslaved.

“For Rush, slavery was not simply unjust; it was a transgression against natural law and a blight against God.... He believed that the new nation could not continue to maintain such a scourge without a

reckoning. 'Remember that national crimes require national punishments,' he wrote about slavery, 'and without declaring what punishment awaits this evil, you may venture to assure them that it cannot pass with impunity, unless God shall cease to be just or merciful.'

"Rush, therefore, was a committed and prominent abolitionist. In 1787, he joined the Pennsylvania Abolitionist Society, not only as a powerful advocate but also as an author of its new constitution and as secretary and later president. He maintained close contacts with Philadelphia's African American community, including helping found the city's first black church," [Benjamin Rush, Race, Slavery, and Abolitionism | Benjamin Rush | Dickinson College](#).

But unfortunately the Dickinson article does not end there. It continues, "But this fairly straightforward narrative of Rush's views on African Americans, slavery and abolitionism is complicated by other facts. Rush bought (and enslaved) a child ..., William Grubber, whom he owned until he freed him for compensation in 1794..."

"Rush also mixed his views on race with his interests in physical science and his firm religious beliefs. Eager to prove that all human beings 'descended from one pair,' Adam and Eve, he came to think that the disease of leprosy caused the blackness in skin color. A cure, therefore, would change Africans' skin color 'back' to white, thereby allowing Rush to support his Christian creationism, to counter those who argued that blacks were naturally disposed to enslavement, and to support their future assimilation as full citizens..." [Benjamin Rush, Race, Slavery, and Abolitionism | Benjamin Rush | Dickinson College](#).

Rush was a flawed man, but one who seems to have mostly tried to do what was right. And sometimes he was right. Howe writes in his biography, "Rush made many contributions to medicine that have stood the test of time. He advocated the simplification of diagnosis and treatment of disease. 'Let us strip our profession of everything that looks like mystery and imposture,' he wrote. He was an early advocate of preventive medicine. In particular, he pointed out that decayed teeth were a source of systemic disease. He promoted inoculation (sic) and vaccination against smallpox," [Benjamin Rush \(uudb.org\)](#).

I have said little on Rush's political involvements, and there is a reason. Again, from Howe's biography, "Rush was a delegate to the Continental Congress convened in 1775 and a signer of the Declaration of Independence the following year. During the Revolutionary War he served briefly as surgeon-general of the armies of the Middle Department. Finding the army hospitals corruptly and incompetently managed and frustrated that his office did not give him power to reform them, Rush wrote letters of complaint to Congress and to General George Washington. He resigned after Washington accused him of personal disloyalty.

"In 1787 Rush and James Wilson led the Pennsylvania convention that ratified the federal constitution; two years later they led a successful campaign to develop a more liberal and effective state constitution. This was Rush's last involvement in politics, for which he had developed an intense dislike," [Benjamin Rush \(uudb.org\)](#).

So, what do we learn from this Universalist forebear? I would say, "Strive to do what you think is right, but be open to listening when someone says you are wrong. Hold your beliefs lightly, being always open to change. Don't become obsessed with an answer to the point that you cannot/will not change your view.

Rush is our Universalist forebear, but before I end, I would like to pay tribute to another doctor this week. She was not a Unitarian Universalist. Indeed, she spent five unsuccessful months as a nun with the School Sisters of Notre Dame [Susan Love - Wikipedia](#). But as Dr. Susan Love died last Sunday, I thought it fitting to recognize her as I speak so much about medicine. According to Wikipedia, She “was an American surgeon, a prominent advocate of preventive breast cancer research, and author. She was regarded as one of the most respected women's health specialists in the United States. Love is best known for pioneering work fueled by her criticism of the medical establishment's paternalistic treatment of women. She was an early advocate of cancer surgery that conserves as much breast tissue as possible. She also was among the first to sound the alarm on the risks of routine hormone replacement therapy (HRT) for menopausal women....Love fought to expand the rights of same-sex couples as parents. In 1993, Dr. Love and Dr. Helen Cooksey made history by getting approval for the first joint adoption by a gay couple from the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, a state that did not recognize same-sex marriage at the time. The couple married in San Francisco in 2004....In 1996, she retired from the active practice of surgery to dedicate her time to finding the cause for breast cancer. According to The New York Times, Love sought "not so much to cure the disease as to vanquish it altogether by isolating its causes and pre-empting them at a cellular level,” [Susan Love - Wikipedia](#). She was not a Unitarian Universalist but she shared our values, and isn't that what matters most?