

Expanding Freedom?
Sunday, July 3, 2022
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavelly

I was a junior in high school in 1976 when the American Bicentennial was celebrated. I had an old-fashioned granny dress and lace up granny boots that I wore to march in the Bicentennial parade with my 4-H club. In the years leading up to the bicentennial my family went to see the movie musical 1776. It was fictionalized, but many of the points were historical, some of the dialogue even taken from letters between the historical figures. I remember a song featured in a debate over the Declaration of Independence's wording. "The majority of the Declaration of Independence was written by Thomas Jefferson. However, Congress continued to debate its points and made several changes to the original document. One of the major changes involved removing an attack on the institution of slavery," [The Main Issue Debated During the Second Continental Congress \(theclassroom.com\)](#). In the musical the southern colonies representatives sing a song to remind the north that they are far from innocents in the institution of slavery.

Edward Rutledge of South Carolina says, "Our Northern brethren. Feelin' a bit tender toward our slaves. They don't keep slaves. Oh, no. But they're willin' to be considerable carriers of slaves to us. They're willing—for the shilling! Or haven't you heard, Mr. Adams? Clink. Clink " and then the song begins,

"Molasses to rum to slaves
Oh what a beautiful waltz
You dance with us
We dance with you
In molasses and rum and slaves
Who sailed the ships outta Boston
Laden with bibles and rum
Who drinks a toast
To the Ivory Coast
Hail Africa, the slavers have come.
New England with Bibles, and rum..."

[John Cullum – Molasses To Rum Lyrics | Genius Lyrics](#)

The men of the Second Continental Congress had an opportunity to deal with the issue of slavery, but it wasn't taken.

The Unitarian minister Theodore Parker was not born until 1810 years after the Second Continental Congress. As an adult he would call for the abolition of slavery, an institution still in effect in this relatively new nation. The Quote Investigator notes that, "In 1853 a collection of "Ten Sermons of Religion" by Parker was published and the third sermon titled "Of Justice and the Conscience" included figurative language about the arc of the moral universe: (The sermon included these words,) Look at the facts of the world. You see a continual and progressive triumph of the right. I do not pretend to

understand the moral universe, the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. But from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.

“Things refuse to be mismanaged long. Jefferson trembled when he thought of slavery and remembered that God is just. Ere long all America will tremble,” [The Arc of the Moral Universe Is Long, But It Bends Toward Justice – Quote Investigator](#).

Parker said there was an arc of justice. I think more accurately it is a spiral. Slavery was eventually outlawed in the United States. The first section of the 13th Amendment to the Constitution says, “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction,” [U.S. Constitution - Thirteenth Amendment | Resources | Constitution Annotated | Congress.gov | Library of Congress](#). The period of Reconstruction lasted but a short time from 1865 to 1877, twelve years. Did you note that caveat in the amendment, “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, **except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted?**” All too soon loitering laws were put into place, black men arrested and sold out as labor. What followed Reconstruction were Jim Crow Laws. Reconstruction lasted twelve years, Jim Crow more than 100. The arc or spiral of the moral universe is long indeed, but there have always been people who believed enough to work to turn it back toward justice.

In 1940 even during the horror of the Holocaust of WWII in a New Year’s message Rabbi Jacob Kohn told his audience at Temple Sinai in Los Angeles, “Our faith is kept alive by the knowledge, founded on long experience, that the arc of history is long and bends toward justice. We have seen so many ancient tyrannies pass from earth since Egypt and Rome held dominion that our eyes are directed not to the tragic present, but to the beyond, wherein the arc of history will be found bending toward justice, victory and freedom,” [The Arc of the Moral Universe Is Long, But It Bends Toward Justice – Quote Investigator](#).

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King used the phrase the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice several times in his work for civil rights in the mid part of the twentieth century, and in 2009 in an article written by then President Barak Obama, Obama wrote, “But as I learned in the shadow of an empty steel plant more than two decades ago, while you can’t necessarily bend history to your will, you can do your part to see that, in the words of Dr. King, it “bends toward justice.” So I hope that you will stand up and do what you can to serve your community, shape our history and enrich both your own life and the lives of others across this country,” [The Arc of the Moral Universe Is Long, But It Bends Toward Justice – Quote Investigator](#).

In the mid-nineteenth century many of the women who worked for the abolition of slavery realized that while they were not enslaved, they were not entirely free themselves. Unitarian “Elizabeth Blackwell (February 23, 1821-May 31, 1910) was the first woman to earn a degree from medical school in the United States and the first woman to appear on the medical registry of the United Kingdom.” Carol Howard in the Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography says, (Blackwell) was also instrumental in opening the medical profession to other women through a distinctive combination of managerial and social vision,” [Elizabeth Blackwell \(uudb.org\)](#). Blackwell said, “I do not wish to give (women) a first place, still less a second one- but the complete freedom to take their true place, whatever it may be,” [Elizabeth Blackwell quote: I do not wish to give \(women\) a first place... \(azquotes.com\)](#). Unitarian Mary

Wollstonecraft (April 27, 1759-September 10, 1797) (was) a revolutionary advocate of equal rights for women, (and) was an inspiration for both the nineteenth-century and twentieth-century women's movements." Louis Worth Jones in the Dictionary of Unitarian and Universalist Biography says, "Wollstonecraft was not merely a woman's rights advocate. She asserted the innate rights of all people, whom she thought victims of a society that assigned people their roles, comforts, and satisfactions according to the false distinctions of class, age, and gender," [Mary Wollstonecraft \(uudb.org\)](https://www.uudb.org/). Wollstonecraft said, "I do not wish them [women] to have power over men; but over themselves," [Quote by Mary Wollstonecraft: "I do not wish them \[women\] to have power over m..." \(goodreads.com\)](https://www.goodreads.com/quote/mary-wollstonecraft/I-do-not-wish-them-women-to-have-power-over-men).

Power over ourselves. For women a large part of our freedom has been gaining power over our own bodies. I remember my mother's first little round box of birth control pills. My parents' family was complete. I also remember how ecstatic my mother was at needing a hysterectomy. I remember a coworker of mine when I was in my twenties working in Sequoia National Forest. She began feeling ill and eventually shared with me that she was pregnant. She had experienced a date rape at college by someone she had thought was a friend. She had not reported it. She had told only her best friend. She thought she would never have an abortion, but she went home and talked things over with her parents and friends and her eventual choice was to abort the pregnancy. It made me realize that none of us can truly know what we would do until such a choice is forced upon us.

My brother and sister needed help to conceive their son. Many people who have used in vitro fertilization in order to conceive are now concerned that state laws may outlaw the procedure because some fertilized eggs are discarded.

The overturning of Roe vs Wade means that some people are concerned that they will be forced to carry a pregnancy they do not want, and other people are concerned that they will be denied the right to a pregnancy they very much want.

American actress and activist Jane Fonda once said, "Reproductive freedom is a real danger for the patriarchy, because it means that women are empowered," [Jane Fonda Quote: "Reproductive freedom is a real danger for the patriarchy, because it means that women are empowered." \(quotefancy.com\)](https://www.quotefancy.com/quote/1111111).

Today many of us are feeling disempowered. A right we thought we had is endangered. There is fear that contraceptives will also be targeted. No woman can be truly free without the power to control our bodies and reproduction, but the arc of the moral universe is long, and it bends toward justice.

Women are not going quietly back to being kept barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen anymore than African Americans stopped fighting for their rights with the end of Reconstruction.

In 1776 our Declaration of Independence said, "We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness," [Text of the Declaration of Independence | Declaration Resources Project \(harvard.edu\)](https://www.harvard.edu/resources/declaration-of-independence). At the time that "Men" did not include blacks or Native Americans or women, and indeed, not even fully, unpropertied white men. It may feel like we are going backwards. I said I think that the arc of the moral justice is more spiral than arc. Sometimes we do go backwards, but I do think that the spiral is moving toward justice, and it is up to us to move it in that direction together.

A very young and brave activist in another country Malala Yousafzai said, "The extremists are afraid of books and pens, the power of education frightens them. They are afraid of women." And well they should be. Women have done much to bend the arc. The extremists in many countries around the world are gaining power, but we will not give up. We will say to all the autocrats we all have rights; a right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

May we work to claim those rights for ourselves and for all people. Amen.