

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

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.