

Collective Liberation 19th Century Style: The Ministry of Joshua Young

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Imagine the most notorious train cargo of its time.

The body of a man executed for treason.

Imagine half the populace is simmering with vengeance and the other half – or perhaps not even that many – grieving the loss of a hero, whose passion for a righteous heaven on earth had enflamed their own.

And now, he had failed in his tragic, violent mission to free the slaves.

Imagine decoy boxes that look like coffins but don't contain the body.

Imagine careful attention to routes, even in the North, for even there this man has enemies.

Imagine making the slow journey from Charlestown, Virginia to North Elba, New York – in the uppermost corner of the Eastern part of the state, nearly to Canada.

Now imagine that you are an admirer of this man who sought to free the slaves by any means possible as you, too, had done within your own realm.

Imagine you are in Burlington, Vermont, and the train has just passed to the south of you. You just might be able to attend the funeral of this martyr if you leave NOW.

Imagine with you a fierce friend and a long horse ride.

Imagine a stormy night, that Lake Champlain is between you and your destination, not to mention a ferryman who refuses you passage because of the purpose of your ride.

Imagine you are the Reverend Joshua Young.

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Unitarians and Universalists have a mixed historical record on the abolition of slavery. We moderns have a tendency to claim our affiliation with those of our religious abolitionist ancestors and keep in the dusty corners those who advocated only gradualism, or who kept silent and profited from the cotton economy of the South.

Among those who supported the swift elimination of the institution of slavery, there were fringe elements. The ultimate embodiment of this was John Brown – not a Unitarian, but materially supported by people in our ranks, including a group of wealthy Unitarian men called the “Secret Six.”

John Brown is by all accounts a controversial figure – even now, 158 years after his raid on Harpers Ferry. People have strong feelings about what he did – not only in Harpers Ferry, but also about earlier, in Kansas, when he and his followers, fighting against the establishment of slavery in Kansas, he led raids that killed, then denied the extent of his role in it. Brown’s attempt to foment a slave rebellion at Harpers Ferry is considered by many, at best, misguided, and at worst, cold-blooded murder. It does not help that the first person to die in this ill-fated effort was a free Black man named Heyward Shepherd.

This sermon is not intended to persuade you one way or another about Brown but to shed light on the man who buried him with honor and dignity, providing pastoral solace to his grieving family.

Reverend Joshua Young’s small part in the John Brown narrative is not widely known. He’s not on Wikipedia and our own online Dictionary of Unitarian & Universalist Biography does not (yet) have an entry – though that my intention this summer is to remedy this. His name is not in the go-to book on the topic of those Unitarians who financially supported John Brown’s quixotic mission (Renehan’s Secret Six).

His story can be found in historical records about the Underground Railroad, in primary texts pieced together from the late 19th century, and in the troves of lay historians connected with two of the congregations he served, three of whom I thank: Elizabeth Curtiss in Burlington, Melinda Green and Steve Burne in Groton, Massachusetts.

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The basic facts of his life are these. Born in 1823. Graduated from what we now call Harvard Divinity School in 1848 and a year later, married Mary Plympton. He took his first pastorate in Boston, where he and Mary were co-conductors on the Underground Railroad. In 1852, Reverend Young was called to minister in Burlington, Vermont. The Youngs continued their activity as Underground Railroad conductors, though there were others in the area who were more directly involved. Burlington had become an important location on the path to freedom as it became essential to move once-enslaved African Americans up to Canada, since the North was no longer safe.

This was proved by the rendition of many African Americans who had escaped the South and had come to the North, including Anthony Burns. Anthony Burns was an escaped slave from Virginia who had been living in Boston since March 1854. Complying with the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, the authorities in Boston arrested Burns on May 24. Two days later, members of Tremont Temple (a Black church in downtown Boston), members of that Boston Vigilance Committee, involving several Unitarian ministers, and a crowd that swelled to 2,000 unsuccessfully attempted to free Burns from jail. In the melee, a deputy was stabbed and killed. The courts decided that Burns should be returned to his “rightful” slaveholder. On June 2, with 50,000 people lining the streets (hopefully in disgust), Burns was led in shackles to the ship that returned him to captivity.

It just so happened that Young, and nearly every other Unitarian minister in the region, was in Boston for professional meetings and witnessed this unjust act of rendition. Records show that many Unitarian ministers went back to their congregations and alerted them to what had just transpired.

With his long travels back to Burlington, Young was not preaching that first Sunday; his fiery sermon came the following week, preaching that the Fugitive Slave Law was “wicked and infamous – a dark deed of sin – an act of treachery” and that disobedience to this human-made law was obedience to God. He preached,

I have come back to fulfill a vow I then and there laid upon my soul, to plead the cause of the slave – the cause of human rights and liberty, with renewed zeal; to give whatever of talent God has bestowed on me, and whatever of influence I am permitted to exert, to the agitation and discussion of this evil, wrong, crime against man, sin against God – American Slavery.

But let us fast-forward five years to 1859 ...

That Young ended up officiating at the funeral of John Brown contains both elements of fate and serendipity. Like much of the nation, Young’s attention was drawn to the violent drama that took place at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia in the middle of October, when John Brown and his band of raiders attempted to foment a slave revolt to bring to an end American slavery. Many of Brown’s co-conspirators, including two of his sons, were killed in the unsuccessful attack.

Those captured alive, including Brown, were brought to trial and sentenced to death. Once Brown was executed, his body was transported to the small community of North Elba, New York, where the Brown family had a farm.

Joshua Young – racing against time, traveling through a dark and stormy night – arrived just *four hours* before the funeral’s appointed time to find himself the only clergy among those assembled. Abolitionist Wendell Phillips enlisted Reverend Young on the spot to conduct the funeral (Phillips did the eulogy). Young offered a prayer and benediction under the shadow of the large boulder that to this day, marks the gravesite.

Word of the funeral spread quickly, including to Burlington, because a newspaper published a transcript of Young’s words, including those spoken directly to the widow to assuage her grief. Reverend Young quoted 2nd Timothy chapter 4, saying that Brown had “fought the good fight,” elevating the mad abolitionist to martyr equal to Biblical Paul.

This did not play well back home.

Numerous prominent families in his congregation took great umbrage. Six left immediately. Others left at a slower pace. Others, according to Young’s *numerous* memoir-like accounts, practiced social ostracism against him and his wife. Young felt he had no choice but to resign. Here are his words from his letter of resignation in Burlington, just a few years after burying Brown:

I rejoice that no graver charge is made against me than that I have pushed the principles of general justice and benevolence too far, further than cautious policy would warrant and further than the feelings of some would go along with me. In every accident, which may happen through life, in pain and sorrow, in depression, in distress, I will call to mind this accusation and be comforted.

Some forty years later, Young wrote a stinging assessment of the reception he received from the congregation he had served for nearly a decade, noting that he made no apology for his sympathy with a “felon” nor bringing solace to that felon’s family in distress.

Young went on to serve other Unitarian churches, all in Massachusetts: one in Hingham, one in Fall River, and then finally, in December 1875, he arrived at what would be his final pastorate: the then sleepy little town of Groton, which I served as an Intern Minister.

Towards the end of his long tenure serving in Groton, Joshua Young had another opportunity to say words of honor, solace, and witness in North Elba. Forty years after Brown was buried beneath that giant boulder, in 1899, the bodies of raiders at Harpers Ferry were located and disinterred. The locations of the unmarked graves of these men had been either lost or kept secret to protect them from vandals. The bodies were transported north and buried with respect next to Brown.

Five years later, in 1904, Reverend Joshua Young died and was buried in Mount Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Just last March, to my great joy, I was able to visit his gravesite.

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As Unitarian Universalists, our faith comes from six sources, the second of which is, “Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.” Words and deeds from over 160 years ago are aptly termed, “prophetic” when they still speak to us, they still *preach* to us.

In 1854, Young preached these words: “To plead the cause of the slave is to plead our own cause, to vindicate your claim and mine to the inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

This is what we moderns call “collective liberation,” a notion expressed in countless liberation movements over the centuries, uttered, enacted, and embodied right now by those on the cutting edge of continued efforts toward racial justice and liberation from all forms of cultural oppressions.

It is, when it comes right down to it, our seventh principle: respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. Or as Dr. King said much more eloquently,

*All [people] are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.*

The deeds of Reverend Joshua Young, and their consequences, still speak to us, both to inspire, but also to act as warning. That Young's ministry in Burlington was brought to a close, likely because of his perceived improper – extreme – stance directly related to racial justice in his time, speaks to us now in how our congregations across the nation support or censor ministers and other religious leaders for speaking out in support of #BlackLivesMatter, or for naming the patterns of white supremacy in our midst.

Of course, the struggle for racial justice dwells not in history alone, but is alive right now. For those of us of a certain age who wonder what we might have done during the civil rights era, we need not wonder about the past, but reflect upon our own actions now, in this time.

It is about our nation now. How white supremacy continues to break hearts metaphorically and bodies, literally, with police brutality visited disproportionately on people of color.

It is how white supremacy does not look like what it looked like in the middle of the 19th century, but it is still very much alive and thriving and requires our urgent and persistent attention, not just showing up for the big public events or the hanging of banners, but for the long-haul that involves relationship building and behind-the-scenes engagement.

Reverend Joshua Young shared his prophetic vision, calling his white congregation to see their own freedom bound up with the yet-to-be freedom of African American slaves.

*To plead the cause of the slave is to plead our own cause.*

He spoke using the idioms and the social reality of his time. So, with humility in my heart, let me update his prophetic words to our modern circumstance.

*We affirm that all lives matter through our declaration that Black Lives Matter; we choose to face white supremacy to diminish its power over all of us, knowing as we do, all liberation is bound up together.*

May we ever work to get free together.

***Amen.***