

Rev. Dr. Lydia Ann Jenkins: Perfectionist Social and Religious Reformer

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Through my current research, I want to reclaim for Lydia Ann Jenkins (1824-1874) her rightful place in Unitarian Universalist history. The single fact about Lydia which will probably become her claim to fame in future religious and women's histories is that she was the first woman ordained to Universalist ministry, in 1860, three years before Olympia Brown, traditionally hailed as the first ordained woman. Lydia's ordination was of equal denominational authority as Olympia's: both credentialed at yearly meetings of Universalist Associations in up-state New York. However, more compelling for our history of Universalist women is Lydia's total life as a social and religious reformer in central New York's Burned-over District, the epicenter of the ministry of perfectionist evangelist Charles Finney (1792-1874). Many historians recognize Finney's religious call to a life of usefulness as an equal influence on the emerging women's rights movement as were principles of Enlightenment democracy usually identified as the primary source of the women's rights movement. The Finneyite zeal for a more perfect world grounded many radicals, including Lydia and her husband Edmund Jenkins, in a network of interconnected reform agendas.¹

Some basic information about Lydia Jenkins: She was born Lydia Ann Moulton, probably in Butler, Wayne County, New York, the oldest daughter in a family of eight children. Her own accounts describe the Calvinist orientation of her family's Baptist faith. However, there is also evidence that at least one of her elders, paternal grandfather William Moulton, had ties to a fledgling Universalist society in Butler at the time of his death in 1831. Lydia was bright and well-educated (perhaps largely self-taught), and even as a child, it seems, constantly asking questions about the nature of existence. She married Edmund Jenkins (1817-1909) sometime between 1843 and 1846. One of ten children, Edmund's extended family merged Universalist and Quaker affiliations and practices. Edmund followed several Jenkins relatives into Universalist ministry when he began preaching in 1853.

Lydia and Edmund enjoyed an egalitarian marriage. They held many mutual interests in social reform --- hers grounded in women's health and hygiene, closely associated with temperance, and women's rights; his grounded in abolition. In the early 1850s Lydia gained the attention of the reform community through fourteen essays --- on female education, temperance, alternative women's dress, parenting, women's rights, and more --- published in the reform journal *The Lily*. She also delivered major addresses at several national Women's Rights and Temperance Conventions. Additionally, both Jenkins were active in the Congregational Friends during the five years they lived in Waterloo, New York, 1850 to 1854. Congregational Friends were a radical group who split from more conservative Hicksites Quakers in 1848. Nearly a dozen Congregational Friends groups arose in the northeast and Midwest. Their meetings were open to persons of any religious affiliation and they addressed virtually all current reform causes.

¹ Nancy Hardesty, *Your Daughters Shall Prophecy* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1991) presents Finney as a significant influence on women's rights. Lydia was Universalist in theology at the start of her preaching, but I see a Finneyite influence in her reform spirit. Finney's evangelism appealed especially to Baptist and Methodist congregations, creating a network of 'multiple reformers:' activists living the principle that reform involved meant commitment to many different reform subjects.

Indicative of their utopian mindset, the movement changed its name to ‘Friends of Human Progress’ in 1854.

Inspired by her call to bring to others the life-transforming awakening that Universalism had given her, Lydia followed Edmund into ministry, preaching for the first time in March 1857. It is clear that her extensive experience as a social reformer, gained through working with powerful activists such as Ernestine Rose, Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Antoinette Brown (whose 1853 ordination by a local Butler congregation may have inspired Lydia’s ministry), bolstered Lydia’s resolve to break Universalism’s gender glass ceiling as its first credentialed woman preacher. Lydia realized she faced challenges stepping into the pulpit, especially (unfortunately) from other Universalist ministers, but she did it anyway, not because Universalists necessarily welcomed women ministers with open arms but because she believed in the capacity of women to speak religious truths as effectively as men could. Unlike some denominations, Unitarians and Universalists were the logical entry point for women preachers because there were no rules officially barring women from the pulpit. For Lydia, preaching became yet another means of making the world a better place.

The Jenkins might be considered our first co-ministers, serving Universalism together in itinerant preaching, in ministry at the Clinton Universalist Church and Clinton Liberal Institute, and in other assignments. While they supported one another well, the Jenkins found Universalist ministry physically taxing. By the mid-1860s, they turned their focus to the medical practice of watercure. After obtaining medical degrees at Russell Trall’s Hygeio-Therapeutic College in New York City, 1863-64, they opened their own watercure clinic in Binghamton, New York. Watercure became their ministry, a means of helping others realize a more perfect lifestyle, especially as the practice was especially attended by members of the reform community. Before returning to upstate New York in 1865, they lived briefly in Hammonton, New Jersey (not that far from Murray Grove) for a year. The nature of their ministry there is open to speculation, but they may have been associated with the (unsuccessful) formation of a utopian community. Their only child, Grace, was born in 1869 in Binghamton.

In the mid-nineteenth century, there wasn’t only one mindset for women (and men) who worked for a more perfect world, just as today what constitutes modern feminism takes on many different guises. In her study of the mid-nineteenth-century reform community of Rochester, New York, historian Nancy Hewitt offers one of the clearest delineations of public activism: 1) benevolence (largely charity by wealthier reformers); 2) perfectionism (a middle-class drive to correct current conditions); and 3) ultraism (radicals’ visioning beyond perfectionism to instigate substantial change).² Lydia’s activities and writings alike demonstrate that she saw herself in the most radical category: as an ultraist. She was intentional about her drive to change the world, for herself and those around her, through activism in female education, dress reform, vegetarianism, temperance, Universalist exegesis of the Bible, women’s rights, and more. In her essay “Ultraism” in *The Lily*, November 1, 1849, she defines an ultraist as anyone who engages in radical reform and stays in advance of public opinion and even public awareness. She likes ultraists: they are pioneers in religion, morality, science and literature. Her own life of radical

² Nancy A. Hewitt, *Women’s Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), especially Ch. 2, p. 38-68. Hewitt’s delineation of these degrees of activism can inform modern social justice reformers.

reform, especially her step into the pulpit, illustrated the basic principle that ultraists never look back. That Lydia cites only one woman --- Elizabeth Fry, an English Quaker --- among her examples of ultraists may be surprising: among others, her list includes Columbus, Benjamin Franklin, Robert Fulton, and Patrick Henry. To seal her own identification as an ultraist, in this article she also revealed her full identity for the first time, having published her four previous *Lily* articles with the neutral signature 'Ann.' Lydia was even ahead of Elizabeth Cady Stanton, also a frequent contributor to *The Lily*, who to that point had only signed her submissions by the pseudonym 'Sunflower.'

Lydia the ultraist changed the course of Universalism when she stepped into the pulpit to make the denomination a more perfect religion through the inclusion of women. Lydia accomplished many of her goals for ministry: she served full-time for five years, by her own account pastoring five different societies where she built ties of 'heartfelt affection and connection.' In those five years, she delivered 638 discourses, averaging 130 a year (some of these may have been lectures rather than sermons), in all of the New England and Middle Atlantic states but two. By 1862 she admitted to fatigue from being on the road so much. She also endured much public review, scrutinized by the press as much for her appearance as her theological positions. Lydia's activism to transform Universalism into a more perfect faith made life much easier for ordained women Universalists who came after her: the next to follow in the 1860s --- Olympia Brown, Augusta Chapin, Phebe Hanaford --- had a much easier time of it. Regrettably, by the first half of the twentieth century, Universalism and Unitarianism all but forgot these daring women and the importance of a gender-balanced ministry, as women were all but banned from ordination. Here in the early twentieth-first century, we can reclaim the inspiring life stories of Lydia Jenkins and many other daring and caring women ministers, to grant them their rightful places in UU History.

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