

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York  
“Celebrating the Life of Clara Barton”  
Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore May 8, 2016

## Reading

From *Clara Barton: Professional Angel* by Elizabeth Brown Pryor

In Geneva Switzerland, at the Third International Conference of the Red Cross, in September of 1884:

...The American delegation was more than welcomed at their first international Red Cross conference: they were feted and honored wherever they went... Above all, the convention became a personal triumph for Barton. Everywhere she went she was in demand; at every reception and committee meeting her opinion was sought. The New York Daily Graphic gloated:

Scarcely had the American representative, Miss Clara Barton, arrived, in Geneva before she became a center of attraction, and I might almost say homage Her perfect unobtrusiveness yet dignified appearance, her manifest good will, and deep interest, yet also the evident ease with which she deported herself in so distinguished a deliberative assembly constituted her at once as if by common consent the peer of the foremost members of the conference.

With the greatest of esteem the company singled her out for public honor. As the conference came to a close, the Italian delegate sprang to the platform and proposed that Clara Barton was deserving of the highest praise and thanks of mankind for bringing the United States into the Geneva Convention. At another point in the midst of a speech, the assembly broke out in a cheer at the mention of Barton's name. "For her especially it was a triumphant success"...

Barton turned these personal accolades into a larger triumph for women. Four other women were representatives at Geneva, but she was the only one to participate in all of the proceedings as a complete equal of the male delegates. It was in many ways a difficult role. In a society in which women were still discouraged from participating in public affairs, in which they were booted from speaker's platforms and denied access to government leaders, the simple fact of her presence aroused curiosity and comment. "To see on the platform a woman

who represented the government of the United States was to this audience. .a novelty," admitted the New York Tribune.

But as she had broken the barriers at the Patent Office and had persistently changed the opinions of senators and cabinet officers, so did she pass this test with courage and poise. Her simple attire and unassuming manners charmed the delegates, and her well-known achievements in the United States and numerous foreign decorations filled them with admiration ...

All of her life Barton had broken traditions, not by verbal protest but by determined action; she expected fair treatment and allowed no person to deny it. Now, in 1884, she made it plain that she saw herself the equal of the other national representatives. At the same time, by her own excellent example, she smoothed the path for other women, who could now point with pride to the dignity she had brought to the United States as its official representative. Antoinette Margot, who watched the proceedings from the gallery, was overwhelmed with the thought of what Barton's actions meant for the social emancipation of women:

I have in the last weeks looked on to see her sitting in one of the grandest assemblages of men that could be gathered, acknowledged as possessing every right and privilege belonging to any delegate in that assemblage, no less a national Representative than any. . This had been an instance of acknowledged women's rights, never before seen in these countries, and as I believe, never known in the world.

## Sermon

If Clara Barton had been born a man, how different would her life have been! The accolades she achieved at the third international Red Cross meeting you just heard about, might have been *even more* significant. Perhaps she would have been Senator or even President Barton. Barton's persistence and tenacity in the face of adversity, overcame so much patriarchal discrimination ... and yet, being a woman was integral to her success. We can only wonder what kind of life she might have lived in the twenty-first century with the gender barriers that hindered her work greatly reduced.

Surprisingly, her childhood showed few early signs of the greatness she would achieve. Chubby and short, her attractiveness didn't set her up for greatness. The youngest of five children, in a sense a youngest only as her siblings were all much older than her,

Clara suffered because she was frequently teased for being immature. This instilled in her a desire to be taken seriously and be appreciated for her capabilities. Those capabilities became apparent early in her development in her sharp mind and intense curiosity.

Growing up on a farm in the little town of North Oxford, south of Worcester, Massachusetts, she was a Yankee through in through. She made her own clothes, cooked, cleaned, cared for the animals, rode horses skillfully, and did everything on the farm along with her brothers and sister. Thrift and hard work were second nature to her. She grew up attending the town's Universalist church, one to which her father, Captain Barton, had enthusiastically converted. She dearly loved her father and loved to listen to his war and wilderness stories that fired her imagination.

At school she excelled. Clara couldn't remember a time she couldn't read. Practically the first day of school she amazed her teacher by spelling the word "artichoke." She got the attention she didn't get at home from her teachers. They enjoyed and stimulated her eager mind yearning to know the world. Her intelligence also connected her with her older siblings who could share literature and poetry with her.

So it was natural that she would become a school teacher, one of the few jobs open to women in those days. Clara was a gifted teacher. Her love of learning infected her students – even the unruly boys. The way she brought them in line wasn't by corporal punishment but by playing with them on the playground (as Leah mentioned earlier). She had learned their games trying to keep up with her older brothers and her father enjoying their activities and learning to throw like a boy. Letting the boys win when they knew she could beat them impressed them more than anything else.

But ten years of teaching school very successfully didn't leave Clara feeling satisfied with her life. Most women would have been married by now and starting a family. Not Clara. Her intelligence and talent overwhelmed the young men who were attracted to her. She didn't consider them marriage material. Restlessness with small town life and a sense that there was more possible for her beyond North Oxford, got her to leave home for Clinton, New York and the co-ed Universalist school, the Clinton Liberal Institute.

This was a big move for a very shy and introverted young woman. What built up her self-confidence was the appreciation she got as a teacher by her students, their parents and the town for her excellent work. She greatly enjoyed her classes in Clinton but felt

socially isolated. She was twelve years older than many of the students. So she buckled down in the library, frugally spent her savings and completed her degree.

Returning home, she was once again restless. The restlessness was partly an effect of chronic depression that plagued her much of her life. What liberated her from her hometown was the invitation by Charles and Mary Norton, a couple of classmates from Clinton, to come stay with them in New Jersey. It was there she began to start shaping her own life.

She took up school teaching there too, but it didn't satisfy her and she moved another ten miles to Bordentown. This time she saw the need to start a public school. At the time, there were no public schools there different from the pattern in Massachusetts. Clara managed to persuade the town to set one up in an old building. Barton's talent with boys got several of them in the door when the school opened and nobody showed up. By the end of the week the classroom was overflowing with children. So impressed was the town that they built a new school to house all the children. But because Barton was a woman, they hired a man to be principal of the now six classes of children taught by women. Barton was insulted, and things didn't go well. Not long afterward she was on her way to Washington DC where she took up residence ready to start a new life.

Connections through a Massachusetts Senator got her a job in the Patent Office. For the first time, she was paid well and had a job that challenged her mentally. But being a woman soon became a problem as there were only four women working in the entire office. And this was a patronage job that she gained and lost depending on the administration. Still it began to establish her in the Capital and she started building social connections.

What catapulted her into prominence was the outbreak of the Civil War. From the first skirmish in Baltimore as Union troops started moving to Washington DC to defend it against the Confederacy, Barton saw the need to support the troops with food, clothing and medicine. Some of her students from Massachusetts and New Jersey were part of the first Union soldiers to arrive. Their presence in the Union Army made the war far more personal for her and stimulated her desire to support them.

The Union forces were not prepared for the ferocity of Confederate resistance and the huge number of casualties from the first battles. Early reports told of thousands of wounded lying on battlefields for days. Barton fought and fought the army bureaucracy to get permission to bring her wagons of supplies she had collected to the front. Eventually she got close enough to the battlefields to tend to the overwhelming

numbers of wounded. And when she got to them, she didn't stop to eat or sleep for days. Her service was greatly appreciated by the men and the medical teams she supplied. This kind of aid wasn't complicated either. The men were literally dying for a cup of water or a dish of gruel or protection from the sun. She was able to be at the battle of Antietam caring for the wounded. She was close enough to the fighting to have a bullet whiz through her sleeve and into the chest of a man she was tending.

The stress of this work took a toll on Clara's health, which wasn't great to begin with. She had had malaria while working in Washington and now typhoid. But the need was so great she pushed on practically till she collapsed. When she recovered enough to continue, she was back fundraising, and exhorting the North to supply their troops with necessities.

Eventually the Army started supplying those battlefields much better and blocked Barton's relief efforts. Rather than channeling her relief work, they stopped her, much to her frustration. The best she could do was head south on an expedition to lay siege to Fort Sumner, which was never taken till the end of the war.

At the end of the war she lost her job at the Patent Office that had kept her going while doing all her relief work. What catapulted her into the public eye, beyond her network of donors for her work supporting the troops, was joining the lecture circuit. Not a natural public speaker and still introverted, her Yankee determination and natural charisma that had served her well as a teacher got her on the stage. She was an immediate sensation. Barton vividly described her war experiences to a public hungry for war stories. She had touched many, many lives on those battlefields. Her boys she had helped showed up and showered her with praise.

Eventually, the grueling travel schedule of the lecture circuit, disease and her latent psychological weaknesses caught up with her. She got very sick. To recover her health, she traveled to Europe. Visiting friends in Geneva, she made her first contact with leaders of the International Red Cross, an organization inspired by Henry Dunant. Dunant witnessed the carnage of a major battle in Solferino, Italy in 1859 between Huge French and German armies. A book he wrote about it in 1862 including his ideas about how to make war less brutal inspired the first Geneva Treaty signed in 1864 and the formation of the International Red Cross. (Dunant was the first recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1901)

America had not signed the treaty and these representatives who knew of Barton's wartime service wondered if she might help their cause. At the time she wasn't in the

state of health to do such, but after participating in offering aid during the Franco-Prussian War that broke out during her visit and seeing the Red Cross in action the seed was firmly planted.

Going to Europe and getting involved in relief efforts during that war didn't do much for restoring Clara's health. Returning to America she continued to suffer debilitating illness until she found some doctors who could really help her at the Jackson Sanitarium in Danville, New York. Once her health was restored, that urge to be of service to humanity grabbed her and off to Washington she went to seek the ratification of the Geneva Treaty.

For five years Barton worked and worked and worked to get it passed. At first there was little interest. The US was still operating under the Monroe Doctrine that resisted European entanglements. It took several changes in administration before her steady moral pressure eventually carried the day. This was an amazing accomplishment for a woman who didn't have the right to vote.

The Red Cross was an integral component of the Geneva accord. This neutral organization was empowered to care for the wounded, both military and civilians, whatever side they were on. Extending that relief work to non-war time emergencies empowered the American Red Cross to get going doing disaster aid. At first, in a wildfire in Michigan and flooding of the Mississippi, they had difficulty getting recognized and being effective. They made their first mark in the next flooding of the Mississippi by renting a ship, filling it with supplies and traveling up the river finding people to help who were out of reach of other aid organizations. Barton had made good friends with the Associated Press and other news networks while trying to get recognition for the Geneva Treaty. They adored her work and gave her generous coverage ... coverage that she nurtured by generating her own copy for them.

One of their early relief efforts I'd like to mention was a yearlong relief effort to assist the survivors on Sea Islands off the South Carolina coast after a devastating hurricane that destroyed their harvest. They would have no food for a year.

As the population was predominately black, and it was not a well-known location, not a lot of aid was given, about a dollar per person for 30,000 survivors. But Barton and her workers used their Yankee philosophy of disaster aid to help. They gave out food and clothing for immediate relief. But to get more support, they insisted that everyone be involved in their recovery by planting gardens and building new homes. They wanted to support self-sufficiency not dependency on aid. After a year, the island residents

were growing their own food and harvesting a crop of premium cotton for which the island was known.

What is all the more amazing to me, as I read about her accomplishments from disaster to disaster, is she was in her seventies, much of the time in precarious health. For example, during relief work during the Spanish American War, she worked sixteen hour days for weeks at a time!

Talented as Barton was, she wasn't a skilled bureaucrat. In the field commanding the day, she was amazingly effective. Back in the home office, she didn't manage relations well with her affiliates left to their own devices while she was in the place she loved being: with those in need. Her autocratic style alienated key people who turned against her. And she didn't keep the best financial records, though few who saw her in the field criticized her economy and efficiency.

Still she couldn't let go of the Presidency of the Red Cross and eventually was forced out in an ugly battle. Yet that wasn't the end for her. For all her terrible health, she managed to live till she was ninety!

There is so much more to share about Barton's accomplishments, I have only skimmed the surface of a remarkable life of a world figure. She could have gone in many directions at different points in her life after she established her fame and renown. The Women's Suffrage and Temperance movements would have welcomed her leadership. She was very sympathetic to their cause.

But her war time and natural disaster experiences deeply shaped her to work for the relief of dire suffering. Yes, she enjoyed the adulation that followed such work, but that wasn't enough to keep her going. She found her greatest meaning and satisfaction when she was where the action was and she could lose herself in life saving service. In those moments she had no doubt that her life mattered.

May we honor her life as an example of the power of moral leadership married to direct compassionate service. May we take from her life inspiration for our own commitment to service to humanity and moral principle.