

**Joseph Tuckerman: Message for All Ages
written by Rev. Michelle A. Walsh (copyrighted 2011)**

Today, the first Sunday of February, is “Community Ministry Sunday,” a day when we recognize and celebrate the many ways we bring our values – what we love and care about as Unitarian Universalists – out into the world beyond the walls of our church. This is a true story about the man we regard as the founder of community ministry in our movement.

Once upon a time, a little boy named Joseph Tuckerman was born around the time of the American Revolution in 1778, the sixth child in a noisy, loving family. Little Joseph was kind of a sickly child, rather frail as he grew up, and some may have called him a bit of a “mama’s boy” because he loved his mother a lot and stayed pretty close to her - but being a “mama’s boy” was a good thing because she really did train him in the values that would help to make him so famous later in his life! At his mother’s knee, he studied the bible and learned about the Christian religion as a Unitarian back then. And he grew up to have a very soft, giving, and loving heart.

Back in those days, boys went to college (and it was usually boys in those days rather than girls because girls weren't encouraged to get a higher education, luckily that's changed!) – anyway, boys went to college at much younger ages. So Joseph went off to college at Harvard at the age of 16, the first in his family to go to college rather than into merchant shipping. His roommate and best friend in college was someone else who is famous in our Unitarian history – William Ellery Channing, the man who would claim the name “Unitarian” for our religion (this was before the Universalists and Unitarians came together, that was much later, around 1961).

When Joseph was in college, as I said, he was a very good hearted and generous young man who often gave away his part of his weekly allowance to the poor. However, he was not much of a student – he tended to prefer poets and having fun and was generally thought to be rather unserious. Only when Joseph made up his mind to become a minister did he try to buckle down with his studies and be more disciplined. He still struggled with this, however, and complained that he had a hard time making his

feelings subservient to his reason and that his feelings often overwhelmed his mind despite his best intentions.

Joseph worked very hard as a minister in Chelsea for 25 years – and what was different about him was that he tended to go out and visit people in their homes a lot to give them help of all kinds, even in the worst kinds of weather and when he was feeling poorly himself. Not every minister would do that, but Joseph had a very big heart and he did not like to see anyone suffering. As a Unitarian Christian during that time, he felt very strongly that God had made people to care about one another and that they should follow through on this natural impulse to be loving with each other.

When William Ellery Channing began to call our religion Unitarianism, some of the other ministers in Boston thought it would be a good idea to do some ministry to the poor in Boston as an organized Unitarian effort. Channing remembered his good friend, Joseph, and thought he would be the best minister for this special job – and Joseph eagerly accepted because the demands of his parish ministry had been wearing on his frail health. Little did

Joseph know that his new ministry-at-large would have such a large and enduring impact – including internationally!

And little did his wealthy friends realize that Joseph didn't think the poor were the only ones who needed help! You see, as he learned at his mother's knee, Joseph took his Christian faith and religion very seriously. He really did believe that the poor were not that different from him, that they were, in fact, his brothers and sisters who had fallen on unfortunate times and circumstances.

And Joseph believed that his wealthy friends were part of the problem! Instead of helping their brothers and sisters, they were sitting comfortably with being rich and judging poor people as less perfect and less favored by God than themselves. Joseph, however, thought poor people were more often superior to his rich friends because they had to try to be good when they were struggling with so many things not being fair or equal. It was a lot harder for the poor than for the rich, Joseph argued. And he spent a lot of years bringing his rich friends out into poor communities to meet the poor and see their good character and needs for themselves.

Joseph began to develop a dream that poverty could be cured by scientific study and organized relief – and his ideas actually influenced people in England! He organized all the different religious groups around the Boston area to help the poor, particularly women, people in prison, juvenile delinquents, and he also helped to create Sunday School programs. It was unusual during that time for different religious groups to work together, but Joseph was able to get them to talk to each other – even getting Catholics and Protestants to work together, which was a pretty big deal back then!

While Joseph eventually did die from all of his physical frailties and hard work at the age of 62, his life and work live on today in our Unitarian Universalist Urban Ministry, which became the institutional form of his ministry-at-large. And today, on “Community Ministry Sunday,” we celebrate his life and work as someone who took his faith seriously and brought it out into the world to create more just and beloved communities for everyone.