



A Fierce Unrest
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January 29, 2017

On December 23, in the year 1776, Thomas Paine wrote these immortal words:

“These are the times that try [our] souls.

The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will in this crisis

shrink from the service of their country.

But those that stand by it now deserve the love and the thanks of man and woman.

Legend has it that he wrote those lines on a drumhead, in the flickering light of a camp fire.

At General Washington's request.

To rally the troops.

The demoralized, hungry, bedraggled army which owed its existence in large part to Paine.

For it was Paine's essay *Common Sense*, that incendiary manifesto in praise of freedom, which gave the colonists something to fight for beyond a simple tax revolt.

Why do we study great historical figures? As Unitarian Universalists we honor the prophetic words and deeds of men and women who challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil. Paine dedicated his life to that confrontation. And his life is a challenge to us. So we

need these stories-- especially now, when we need all the sources of hope and strength we can get!

And there's a link between Thomas Paine and this church. Moncure Conway, your former minister from 1856 to 1862, was Paine's foremost biographer.

And on January 29 1860, 157 years ago today, the Rev. Conway preached a sermon honoring Thomas Paine on his birthday. As I do today!

Conway wrote of Paine, "The whole circle of human ideas and principles was recognized by this lone wayfaring man.

The first to urge extension of the principles of independence to the enslaved negro; the first to arraign monarchy, and to point out the danger of its survival in presidency; the first to propose articles of a more thorough nationality to the new-born States; the first to advocate international arbitration; the first to expose the absurdity and criminality of dueling; the first to suggest more rational ideas of marriage and divorce; the first to advocate national and international copyright; the first to plead against cruelty to animals, the first to demand justice for woman..."

Yes, it's true that I considered calling this sermon "Tom Paine said it first!" Or "Tom Paine, my hero." He wrote so well. He was successful in the arena I respect the most: he incited people to work for justice. He gave them something to fight for. The difference, in fact, between Paine and his contemporaries who wrote about political and social theory was that they Rousseau, Jefferson, Locke, and others encouraged their readers to think about justice. Paine's purpose was to stir to both thought and action. He wrote of the hows and whys of change, and created a picture of where we could go and how to get there.

He passed up a fortune from the sales of both *Common Sense* and *The Rights of Man*, both phenomenal best sellers. Passed up a fortune because he believed in the words he spoke, and in the ideals he championed. He didn't write for money. Much, much more was at stake.

The theology of Thomas Paine has been a controversial topic. Theodore Roosevelt once anathematized Paine as "that filthy little atheist."

Even as late as the year 1982, there was a favorable BBC documentary on Thomas Paine. Michael Foot, a former leader of the British Labour party, described Paine as "the greatest exile ever to leave these shores".

The London Daily Telegraph responded, under the headline: "A Radical Rascal" by saying that "Among decent Englishmen in his time his name was a synonym for treachery, blasphemy and (whether justly or not) debauchery. . ."

Paine was 37 years old when he came to America. He'd already had a full life. He'd been trapped by the rigid class distinctions in England and knew first-hand the damage done. He'd lived on "Gin Row", where people lived lives of intense intoxication, sex, and violence. Gin was two cents a shot, and whole city blocks would be roaring drunk by noon. He knew poverty. He had seen how short childhood was for the poor, children working from 5 or 6 years of age, adults working 12 to 14 hour days. He knew the lot of those who must steal for food, when the penalty for stealing a sack of turnips was to be torn apart by two teams of horses; the penalty for killing a rabbit was to have one's ears and nose removed.

Paine believed in change. He worked for change. Even with the class structure as it was he tried his hand at other occupations. Paine worked as a staymaker, a shopkeeper, a cobbler and a carver, plower and planter, teacher and tax collector. He'd survived the death of one wife and the end of a second marriage.

He had attempted to organize the tax collectors, and petitioned Parliament for higher wages, an effort which failed. He had even tried a stint as a Methodist preacher.

He believed in change, but the status quo in England was too powerful. The Colonies, young and willing to experiment, called to him.

Somehow he made the acquaintance of Benjamin Franklin who was in London, and Franklin wrote him a letter of reference. Armed with the letter and with the desire, common to immigrants in all times and places to make a better life in a new world, Paine sailed to Philadelphia.

It was November of 1774. Paine stepped off the boat right into the midst of a people who were unaware that they were about to turn the world upside down. A mere six months later, April 19, 1775 the first shots were fired on Lexington Common.

Some of the colonists were second and third generation already. They took their freedom and opportunity for granted. Paine could see with fresh eyes the treasure in this land and its people. The merchants and farmers here had disagreements with England, and there had been a few scattered tax revolts.

Somehow Paine grasped the tremendous opportunity which presented itself, the chance for an entire people to be truly free. He saw clearly what kind of nation these colonies could become.

His scope was international. He was one of the few to see in this conflict the sweeping implications for the world. He saw the fact of history in the making. How often does one encounter a chance like this? He put his voice and his pen at the service of change.

He talked his way into the job as editor of a recently founded magazine, and made it a success. He had a way with words. Not flowery or abstract words, but short crude to-the-point words which workers, plowmen and shopkeepers understood. "A Pub philosopher", he was called, but people took notice.

He wrote *Common Sense* to put into words his understanding of this conflict and the opportunities it represented. Paine understood and spoke of both the movement for independence, and the social and political revolution which was in the making. He wrote of his hopes for the new world they were creating.

He was wildly successful. Beyond what anyone could have anticipated. *Common Sense* sold an estimated half a million copies. The pamphlet, or "Broadside", as they were called, caught the imagination of the colonies like nothing before or since. It galvanized the populace. Almost everyone read or heard the words read. It gave purpose, shape to the yearning. It put into words what had been felt but not spoken. Within months people who had been ready to negotiate with England were now for "Independency and Nationhood". They fought.

Paine refused an officer's commission in order to stay with the foot soldiers. He marched, fought, sang and drank with the men. "Old Common Sense" they called him.

Paine's impact on history could have ended with the successful conclusion of the war. We could understand and support him if he took the farm offered him by a grateful country and settled down to the life of a gentleman farmer. He deserved some rest, and some happiness. But he continued the struggle. Why?

Benjamin Franklin once said, "Wherever Liberty is, there is my country," to which Paine replied, "Wherever Liberty is *not*, *there* is my country, and there I will go to help them attain it."

Paine was a revolutionary. He understood as few did at the time that he was living at a cusp of history. Humanity had a tremendous opportunity to act for justice. The old tyrannies were

losing their grip. And who knows for how long? It was time to fight. "What we can't achieve? What new worlds, what glories, what promises?"

He had been granted a sense of his powers in America. How could he rest when there was so much more to do? Representative government for all? The abolition of monarchy? Why not? Why not do away with poverty, and provide funds for children, for widows, for retirement? Paine wrote about it all. A United States of Europe! An end to religious divisions, *the church universal*, wherein humanity acted from love of god by providing for each other, that none may want. Anything was possible, and Paine seized the time.

He wrote *The Rights of Man*, attempting to do for the people of England what he had done for what was now the United States. He spoke of freedom, of justice, of what could be done, and how to do it. Seven years, he believed it would take, for a family of humanity, government of the people, justice spreading across the entire world.

The *Rights of Man* sold 200,000 copies within a year in England.

But the English were not ready to revolt, and the power of the military was too great. He barely escaped arrest, certain to be hanged, and, out of the frying pan and into the fire, he went to France, to take part in the revolution breaking there.

In France it went very wrong. The revolution soon became the terror. He wrote an Address to the People of France. "France is fighting for the Republic of the World! France must be bold, and calm!" One of the reasons for the violent turn, Paine believed, was the lack of support from the United States when it was needed.

In France he was out of his element. Without a mastery of the language, watching events and alliances shift faster than they could be understood, this was not revolution the way he had known it. He argued against the death sentence for the King. "Kill the office, not the man", he argued. For this he was arrested and sentenced to the guillotine.

In prison, he wrote his indictment of religion called the *Age of Reason*.

The Age of Reason was an appeal for the goodness of God, and for freedom from the tyranny of the church. In it Paine reflects many Unitarian theological concepts.

He begins with his own statement of faith:

"I believe in one God and no more;
and I hope for happiness beyond this life.
I believe the equality of man,
and I believe that religious duties consist in

doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to help one another. . . .

I do not mean . . . to condemn those who believe otherwise;
they have the same right to their belief as I have to mine.

But it is necessary to the happiness of man,
that he be *mentally faithful* to himself.

Infidelity does not consist in believing, or in disbelieving;
it consists in *professing to believe what one does not believe.*”

How many have come to the UU church for this very reason?

If he had contented himself with writing the positive aspects of his theology, public opinion may not have gone so much against him. He was only daring to speak of beliefs he shared with many - Adams, Franklin and Jefferson among them. But Paine launched an attack on the Bible, and on the church, which was the next tyranny after the Monarchy which must be overthrown.

He wrote, “All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.” He mercilessly exposed its inconsistencies and immoralities, the rapes and murders condoned by God, the lack of believability of miracle stories. These were dangerous words, and Paine was not forgiven.

He was released due to ill health, eleven months after entering death row at the old Palace of Luxembourg.

There was no reception for Thomas Paine when he returned to America in the year 1802. President Jefferson received him, but having himself been criticized for being a crypto-Unitarian, he could offer no position to Paine.

One historian wrote that Paine was attacked by the political right and the religious left. In fact, it was the Unitarians who were the most vociferous in attacking Paine. Fighting attacks for their unorthodox theology, they repudiated Paine as a means of establishing their own respectability.

It got to the point that children chased and taunted the old man when he appeared on the streets. He had come home to die, and he was caricatured with horns, being carried off by the devil. On his death bed he was tormented by a parade of clergymen who hoped Paine would recant. After his death, his remains were dug up to be displayed as a curiosity, and were lost, so no one knows where he rests. Or perhaps he does not rest, because all are not yet free.

Why do we study great historical figures? One of the reasons we honor our forebears and learn their lives is to learn how we might live our own lives.

Paine wrote that he did not believe in the creeds of any church he knew of. "My own mind is my church," he wrote. Well yes, but our beliefs and actions are at their best when they are grounded in conversation, in community.

Paine left his community. Writing in the darkest days of the French revolution, he had forgotten the simple faith of the farmers he had known in America. He forgot how well he himself had used the Bible, its passages which stress liberation and the struggle for justice. In isolation, he had no chance to see that his words had the opposite effect of what he had intended. Rather than being honored for the fierce fighter for human dignity he had been, he died infamous as a heretic. He tried to do it alone! None of us can fight that fight alone. We need each other.

Let us remember this fighter for justice. May we too never be totally at rest until all are free.
AMEN