



## **Skin in the Game I: Moncure Conway and First Church**

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*This is the first of two sermons titled **Skin in the Game**. The second sermon will focus on the life of Peter Humphries Clark and First Church*

The last time Moncure Conway spoke to our congregation he stood behind this very pulpit, just about ten feet back from where it is now positioned. The year was 1902 and it was probably the last time he set foot in Cincinnati from his decades long self-imposed exile in London and Paris. He tried to live in the United States on many occasions but could never quite make the personal, political, and moral compromises necessary to permanently live here. The Spanish American War of 1898 was the last straw. Conway was a peace activist, a feminist, an anti-imperialist, an anti-racist warrior, and a theologian/philosopher of life and love. In this war he saw the United States going irretrievably down the rabbit hole of conquest and empire, losing what little was left of the soul it once had. He grieved for his country and could not abide by its actions. As a US Citizen he was actually more of a citizen of the world and regarded as one of the greatest minds of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. He was an intellectual's intellectual.

If greatness can be measured by the company one keeps Moncure Conway had no equal. His friends came from a broad spectrum of political and literary figures, all of whom held him in high regard. Ralph Waldo Emerson was his spiritual and intellectual father and Conway regularly interacted with Walt Whitman, Henry Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Robert Browning, Louisa Mae Alcott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Mark Twain. He also served as his friends' literary agent, representing them as an act of friendship, not profit. He personally delivered the *Tom Sawyer* manuscript to London and his life was peppered with stories and pranks pulled with Mark Twain. An author himself, he wrote over 24 books and hundreds of major essays. But Conway didn't limit himself to mere literary pursuits, for he was a player in the political and intellectual battles of his day as well. He made friendships and political alliances with Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, John Stuart Mill, Charles Darwin, and Thomas Carlyle. Conway gave this congregation a great gift when he served us as our pastor from

1856 to 1862. Even when we didn't want to learn the lessons, he taught us by his words and deeds. He gave First Church the chance to put Skin in the Game.

Moncure Conway was born into Southern Slave Holding Aristocracy in 1832 in Falmouth, Virginia, halfway between Washington, D.C. and Richmond, Virginia. He was very proud of his American and Virginian heritage, but also deeply troubled by Slavery. For Conway, Slavery was destroying the moral fabric of the society and nation he so deeply loved. At the age of 14 he entered Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania and graduated at the age of 17 in 1849. After starting a career in journalism, he abruptly left Virginia after witnessing a lynching in Richmond. With that image of brutality and inhumanity seared into his memory, he chose the ministry and became a Methodist Circuit Rider in Maryland, where he fortuitously befriended many Quakers and Unitarians. Most importantly, he re-discovered the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and in short order moved to Cambridge and Harvard to study with his new mentor. Emerson quickly recognized Conway's gifts and they developed a father-son relationship for the rest of Emerson's life.

Conway's first Unitarian ministry was in Washington, D.C. at the First Unitarian Church (later called All Souls). He was 22. Armed with his Harvard education and the support of Emerson, Conway proceeded to make a name for himself as a Transcendentalist Abolitionist minister serving a congregation that had little love for either of those sentiments. The D.C. church was split on the issue of slavery from its very founding when future President John Quincy Adams, an abolitionist, and his Vice President John C. Calhoun, South Carolina's most vocal advocate of slavery, joined forces to create a Unitarian church in the nation's capital in 1821. Nineteenth Century Unitarians were hardly of one mind on slavery and there were many Southern Unitarians who came to the faith because of their basic alienation with mainstream Christianity. They either saw no connection between their faith and the institution of slavery or they used their faith to justify the superiority of the White Race. Needless to say, Conway's Washington tenure was short lived and the church terminated his services in 1856 because he could not stay quiet about his opposition to Slavery.

Hearing about his plight from afar, First Church of Cincinnati had no hesitation in offering Conway the pulpit here in Cincinnati. We were proudly abolitionists, at least in theory, and Emerson's Transcendentalism carried some intrigue with it. Besides, he was a Harvard Man and we all know that this church has always loved Harvard graduates in the pulpit! It all happened rather quickly. (Take note Ministerial Search Committee.) Conway preached his first sermon in Cincinnati in the late Fall of 1856 after his Washington termination in the summer. He was 24. And thus began Conway's and First Church's relationship with each other.

The Cincinnati that Conway encountered was a boomtown. In 1840 the population was 46,000. By 1850 the population increased by more than 100% to 115,000 and it was the 6<sup>th</sup> largest city in the country. By 1860 the population increased by another 50% to 161,000. You don't have to be a sociologist to recognize that this kind of population growth carries with it an equal amount of social upheaval. Cincinnati was a center for all kinds of political, social, and economic change. The First Congregational Church (Unitarian) of Cincinnati sat in the middle of it all anchoring the west end of 4<sup>th</sup> Street with a commanding hillside view of the Ohio River. Commerce and industry was king because the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers served as the Interstate highway system linking Cincinnati with every market in the

country and the world. A major driving force in all of this was the Slave Economy. Slavery drove the primitive accumulation of wealth and power nationwide, not just in the south. We were a critical border city—the Northern City with a Southern Exposure. Whether we wanted it or not Slavery dominated every social, political and economic decision people made. That reality polarized and energized Cincinnati.

Adding to this dynamic were the mass migrations of Germans and other Europeans escaping from the failed Revolutions of 1848 and the religious persecutions exquisitely designed to exterminate Jews. By 1855 there were about 10,000 Jews and 15,000 working class Germans living in Cincinnati in the West End and in Over the Rhine. If the Jews brought the Torah in their migration the Germans, also known as the “48ers”, brought a Beer Stein and a copy of the *Communist Manifesto*. One of those German Radicals, August Willich, became a member of our congregation and close friend to Conway and many other church members. Willich was a classically trained philosopher, military officer, and revolutionary Marxist who led military units in opposition to the Monarchs. A close colleague of both Marx and Engels, Willich was to the left of his Communist friends and saw no reason to usher in Capitalism as the next step in overthrowing Feudal Europe. He, instead, insisted that he had seen enough of the destruction that Capitalism brought in its wake and he was ready for a democratic socialist society. Marx and Engels agreed with Willich’s destination, they just disagreed on how to get there. The three of them argued endlessly. In contrast to Willich, a large part of the *Communist Manifesto* was nothing more than a poetic tribute to the power of Capitalism to transform the world paving the way so that Socialism and then Communism could ultimately triumph.

Willich and the 48ers hated slavery as much as they hated Capitalism, and, in fact, they saw them as one and the same. First Church members Alphonso Taft and George Hoadly, as founders of the Republican Party, recognized they had common cause with Willich and the 48ers. Almost every good Republican and Free Soiler had also read Marx and found much that they liked. Even Abraham Lincoln was a proponent of Marx’s Labor Theory of Value, which became part of the critique that Republicans had against Slavery. It violated the sanctity of labor. Stolen Labor was Stolen Wealth. Conway felt right at home with the radical Republican politics of Cincinnati.

Moncure wasted no time in leaving his mark on Cincinnati and our church. Through his well-crafted and pointed sermons he aligned our congregation with the most radical elements of the abolitionist and political movements of the time. He also democratized our church by attracting artists, musicians, working class radicals, and free thinking secularists. Even though he didn’t join our church until 1868 Peter Clark started attending regularly because of Conway. If First Church was anything from the time of its founding it was a congregation of stuffed shirts and upper class matrons. They were East Coast Unitarians through and through and they carried with themselves an air of social superiority at the same time they saw themselves as enlightened liberals. Getting one’s hands dirty in the rough and tumble of American or Cincinnati politics was somehow beneath their dignity. Our beloved church historian, Walter Herz, stumbled upon this very dynamic when he wrote his historical pamphlet about our church: “SUCH A GLARING INCONSISTENCY: The Unitarian Laity and Anti-Slavery in *Antebellum* Cincinnati”. Walter noted that First Church tolerated and even encouraged Anti-Slavery sermonizing from the pulpit but vociferously resisted doing anything about Slavery when it came time for action. Understandably, if one made a

handsome living off of the spoils of Slavery it would be very hard to fight for its elimination. And that was precisely the dilemma facing many of our First Church forbearers. All of our ministers prior to Conway lived with that “Inconsistency” and did not bother to challenge the congregation to put their beliefs into action. You can imagine the “Congregational Heartburn” when August Willich organized a march through the city with banners praising John Brown on the day he was executed.

Conway was different. He was not a Boston Liberal. He was a Socialist-leaning Anti-Slavery activist from Jeffersonian Virginia who refused to put on airs or conciliate his deeply held beliefs. And it was not just Slavery that preoccupied Conway’s ministry. He championed women’s rights and workers’ rights from the pulpit and in the newspapers demanding equal pay for equal work. He saw through the hypocrisy of other religionists in Cincinnati who sought to save the souls of prostitutes, saloon gals and theatre workers. He said if women could actually earn a living wage by teaching, working in factories, shops, or in offices then they would have no reason to prostitute themselves. But until that fact is addressed he would never condemn a prostitute. He even proposed ways to regulate prostitution to make it a safer occupation for women. He scandalized the congregation by hanging out in German Beer Halls deeply engaged in political discussions, going to the theatre and the opera, and dared to write newspaper reviews about the productions he loved. He also broadened the intellectual discourse of the church and the city by popularizing philosophical thought from Kant to Hegel to Emerson to Marx. His widely published sermon on Thomas Paine in 1860 was prompted by the fact that he frequently visited a humanist club that met near the church. They called themselves the *Infidels*. They were Humanists and Atheists who gathered regularly to discuss the world and they were the original champions of Tom Paine in Cincinnati. After his sermon on Paine they started attending First Church. So I would suggest that the Humanists in First Church today should think about changing their name to the *Infidels* or at least, *The Conway Club*, because Moncure Conway made Humanism and Atheism legitimate for our church. His mind and his body were constantly at work building what he believed to be the Beloved Community and the Just Society. More than any other minister before, or likely after, Conway challenged the members of our church to their core. He was controversial and divisive with his words but really hard to dislike in the long run because his Southern manner and conviction were both gentle and sincere. His closest First Church friends like Alphonso Taft, George Hoadly, Judge Stallo, and August Willich remained close friends for the rest of their lives. More than likely, these same attributes that won over others helped him win the heart and hand in marriage of Ellen Davis Dana, the love of Conway’s life. Ellen Dana, born in Cincinnati and member of our church, was a feisty radical in her own right and a champion of women’s rights. Moncure credited her repeatedly with keeping him on course throughout his life. She was his co-conspirator and intellectual equal for 40 years.

Despondent about the chances that the Civil War was going to lead to anything positive, Conway grew less involved with our church and more engaged at a national level in the cause against slavery. His book, *The Rejected Stone*, (written while in Cincinnati) outlined how the founders of our republic rejected the idea of Freedom for all Human Beings when they adopted a Constitution that institutionalized slavery. The book was so wildly popular it was reprinted many thousands of times by some Anti-Slavery philanthropists and issued to every Union Soldier as a part of their battle gear.

In the Spring of 1862 Conway found himself in Washington, D.C. searching for a way to assist the people his father had enslaved. They were also his childhood friends. He had received word that they emancipated themselves from his father's plantation and were roaming through Virginia. He sought assistance from President Lincoln and the Secretary of War Stanton, both of whom helped him with documents of passage into the war zones of Virginia. Before he could cross into Virginia, however, he learned that his friends had already arrived in D.C. Following a tip Conway showed up at a random house in Georgetown to find that all the families his family had enslaved made it to D.C. They were plotting their next move. It was not easy transporting 31 people illegally from Baltimore to Ohio. At one point Conway resorted to using phony transport papers Lincoln's White House staff drew up for him to convince the station-master in Baltimore that they were legitimate. There were many close calls, but they safely reached Ohio and headed straight to Yellow Springs where descendants of the Conway Community still live today. It was a daring act in time of war, but such was the activity of the Underground Railroad—dangerous and still illegal. It was just one more way that Conway, by example, demonstrated to his congregation what it meant to live by faith.

Ironically, the issue that broke open our church was not Conway's persistent social justice work, but that of Supernaturalism. In 1858-59 Conway delivered a series of sermons on superstition and supernaturalism where he proclaimed there was no compatibility in modern Unitarian practice for a belief in the divinity of Jesus or a supernatural God who could violate the laws of science. Conway celebrated the scientific advancements of Charles Darwin (later to become one of Conway's many friends) and stood on firm theological ground paved by the Historical-Critical Theological work of Emerson and David Strauss. Today those positions are mainstream UU, but back then they were a heresy that divided First Church into traditional and progressive religionists. It seems our church has always been a bit resistant to change of any kind. Granted, this was more fundamental than a list serve argument over the propriety of the term "Doxology", but you have to admit our church can easily get into a snit about things. The Traditionalists broke off to form the Church of the Redeemer and they met at an abandoned Universalist Church building at 6<sup>th</sup> and Mound Streets. Like many divorces, the process impoverished both sides and they struggled along in a parallel fashion just a few blocks from each other. The remaining First Church members (the majority) stayed on at 4<sup>th</sup> and Race, but vacated that building when it was sold in 1863. From 1863 to 1870 First Church was homeless and without a consistent minister for part of that time until we built the 8<sup>th</sup> and Plum St. Church. In 1875 the factions reconciled their differences and chose to reunite with Conway's theology triumphant. Conway who came in from his exile in London for a US speaking tour was invited to deliver the sermon for the Re-unification of the church. He titled his sermon *First Love Again*. He was truly a beloved leader for the reunited church—so much so that he was even invited to stay on as the minister—an offer he politely refused.

So let's step back from this for a moment. Why would our church at this moment in time choose to have an internal civil war over whether or not we believe in the divinity of Jesus and a Supernatural God who could violate the laws of nature? This was hardly a new issue. Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, Thomas Paine, John Adams, and virtually every other founder of the United States didn't believe in the divinity of Jesus or a Supernatural God either. Jefferson even took a pair of scissors to the New Testament and literally cut out all of the miracles and God talk so that he could read religious texts that

made sense to him. Why all of this discussion and argument at First Church while the world outside our church was going to Hell in a Hand Basket as our country was sliding into the abyss of a civil war?

I would suggest to you that this was a “Fake Fight” because our church didn’t really want to deal with what was happening in the world and this was a safer argument to have. It was much easier to pick a fight with Conway and his supporters over Supernaturalism than to squarely face the core issues of racism and slavery inside our city and our congregation. Ultimately, Conway responded with action instead of words. Significantly, after the war was over and the Republican Party chose to abandon Reconstruction in the South we reunited as a church with the theologies of Emerson, Parker, and Conway triumphant. I am sure we’ve had other “Fake Fights” many times in our history when we didn’t really want to address the core issues facing the church. In recent times we have waged battles over governance, two services, and the structure of worship maybe because we didn’t want to deal with the “Real Issues” facing our congregation. This is not unique to our church, but it is critical that we recognize what is going on.

Shortly after the daring escape to Yellow Springs, Conway realized he could not stay in Cincinnati, but that he must devote his whole being to fighting slavery. In many ways, he outgrew our church and both parties probably knew that. In the fall of 1862 He took a position editing an Anti-Slavery journal, *The Commonwealth*, and returned to his mentors in Concord and Cambridge, Massachusetts. From there he wrote and forcefully argued with Lincoln, the Republican Party, and some of his friends in the Abolitionist movement. Conway, along with Peter Clark, and Frederick Douglass, took the position that unless the war was about ending slavery instead of preserving the Union there could be no victory worth all of this blood and destruction. Realizing that he was on the losing end of that debate he moved to London to work on keeping the British Empire from entering the war on the side of the South. Disheartened and demoralized by the moral and political corruption of the Republican Party and the willingness of his own Abolitionist colleagues to give into racism, he and Ellen elected to live in exile rather than to return to a compromised life. Moncure Conway lived his life with as much consistency as he could muster. He never lost his humanity. He never lost his gentle and kind nature. And he never lost his sight of what was right and what was wrong. The world and our church were fortunate to have such an example of right living. Moncure Conway never stopped growing, thinking, and writing. Because he was willing to put his own skin in the game he challenged us to do the same.

Moncure Conway died in 1907 in his apartment in Paris. He was in the middle of a biography project on the life of John Calvin. He never let differences break apart his relationships. Because of that trait he is now regarded as a true Virginia patriot even though he bitterly opposed the slavery and racism that made Virginia wealthy. When Elizabeth Cady Stanton died her family only allowed one man, Moncure Conway, among all who gathered and spoke, to eulogize her life. Even in his own death Moncure Conway brought people together. Among the many assembled was Andrew Carnegie, who recounted their common devotion to international peace and how Conway got on so well with all of his servants whenever he visited Carnegie’s Scottish castle. I’m not sure Carnegie knew what was going on there. Here was a man who could bridge the gap between Karl Marx and Andrew Carnegie. Shortly before Conway died Carnegie, along with Mark Twain and few others, funded the building of Conway Hall on the campus of Dickinson College as a lasting tribute

to their friend. In London, Conway Hall still stands as the home of the South Place Ethical Society where Moncure Conway served as minister and guiding light for Free Thinkers, Atheists, Unitarians, and Universalists for 25 years after he exiled himself from the United States. Even though our church has not officially recognized his contributions, Moncure Conway lives on in us whenever we decide to put skin in the game and Stand on the Side of Love and Justice.

However, our congregation's failure to truly grapple with the implications and legacies of slavery and racism in the life of this church may have been one of the deciding factors that pulled Conway away from Cincinnati. We will explore this dynamic a little more closely with the second half of this series, which examines the life and legacy of Conway's friend and America's First Black Socialist, Peter H. Clark, another member of our Church. We never did squarely face the racial and class privilege from which most of our members luxuriated even though Conway worked tirelessly to democratize and socially engage us with the faith that we professed. He brought a vibrancy and an excitement to this church that members talked about for 50 years or more after his departure. He returned to Cincinnati several times in those 50 years always to an enthusiastic welcome from the city and our congregation. The last sermon he ever delivered was in front of our members when he stood right here in this sanctuary in 1902. We would be well served to remember Conway whenever we recognize that living up to our faith may cause us discomfort and difficult times. That, my friends, is the legacy of a life well lived. My only wish is that we find more examples like Moncure Conway in our congregation and in our denomination. Our future as a Faith Community depends upon it.