

## **Stamp Collecting for UUs**

**[Edited Transcript]**

**A Sermon by Beth Collins**

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**Back when my children were 9 and 10, maybe, (middle-aged, as I call it), my daughter Jessie Allison took an interest in stamp collecting. She mailed off for some of the packets of stamps you see advertised in magazines, and soon began acquiring quite a pile of used postage stamps from around the world.**

**I was excited to learn that there was a stamp club for all ages which met in Warner Robins. In order to promote this wholesome hobby, I suggested that we go. Not only was my daughter interested in going, my son Josh was willing to go to. We had a real family activity. It was a miracle.**

**Other than the postal workers and a few kids, most of the members were retirees. They loved having children come to the meetings. They did their best to teach them about collecting and taking care of their collections. They sold them stamps and other materials at a minimal cost, even gave them stamps.**

**We learned a lot about different kinds of collections. Some people try to collect all the standard US postage stamps. Some collect plate blocks, which is the corner, usually 4 stamps, with the number indicating the ink batches used for the printing. Some are more interested in First Day Covers, which are envelopes stamped and postmarked on the first day of issue. These require some research and preparation, as only one post office in the country is authorized to sell a stamp on the first day of issue. The collector mails a request along with a self-addressed envelop to the post office, which affixes the stamps, postmarks and mails the envelop on the appropriate day. Of course there is quite a resale market for these and for other items as well.**

**The kids loved it. I enjoyed the company of new friends and sharing with my children, but I really wanted the collections to be for them. I insisted that I was not collecting, just bringing the kids. I did pretty well ... for about 3 months. Then, one fateful night, the club offered at auction a full pane of 22-cent wildlife stamps. I snapped those babies up, and the rest, as they say, is history. It took about 3 more months for the children to lose interest, but by then I was on my way to full-blown addiction.**

**After they dropped out, I kept going for another six or eight months, adding to my collection, visiting with my new friends. I focused on topicals, which means collecting by topic. Flowers, fish, wildlife, women. Trees. Black Heritage. Hands on stamps. Maps on stamps. Nudes on stamps. The possibilities are endless.**

**During this active stage of my addiction, while I was still attending meetings, an article appeared in the UU World magazine about Famous UUs on stamps. I was fascinated. The fact that I was attending meetings was critical, because it meant that I had access to the resale market and was able to pick up stamps pretty easily that had not been sold at the post office for many years. I also had access to stamps from other countries, and so was able to put together a pretty good set in a relatively short time.**

Putting together this collection of UUs on stamps also gave me a different perspective on Unitarian Universalist history. One of my first observations was how many of my Women on Stamps were also Unitarian Universalists.

Very few women were pictured on US stamps before 1970. Of those who were, if we eliminate president's wives and the Virgin Mary, fully half are Unitarian Universalists. If we include Martha Washington and Eleanor Roosevelt in the count of stamps, the UU women still account for over a third. That's counting 3 stamps for Martha.

What that says to me, loud and clear, is that throughout history UUs have been an egalitarian bunch, respecting the inherent worth and dignity of all people. UUs are doers, workers for justice, for what they believe. Among those early UU women to be honored were Susan B Anthony, Jane Addams, and Lucy Stone, social activists every one.

Susan B Anthony, of course, was most well known for her ceaseless work for women's rights, including the right to vote and more liberal divorce laws. She was also an abolitionist and a co-founder of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, an organization that promoted legislation with the goal of limiting the sale of liquor.

Lucy Stone also pushed for the abolition of slavery and more famously for women's rights. Married to Henry Blackwell, she became known for keeping her own name to protest the restrictive marriage laws of the time. Here is an interesting quote from Ms. Stone:

"In education, in marriage, in religion, in everything disappointment is the lot of women. It shall be the business of my life to deepen that disappointment in every woman's heart until she bows down to it no longer."

And another: "We want rights. The flour-merchant, the house-builder, and the postman charge us no less on account of our sex; but when we endeavor to earn money to pay all these, then indeed, we find the difference."

Her dying words to her daughter were, "Make the world a better place."

Jane Addams is known as the "Mother of Social Work". She pushed for legislation to protect women and children, including child labor laws. She helped to establish the Hull House in Chicago, providing services to immigrants including kindergarten and daycare facilities, an employment bureau, an art gallery, and libraries. She was said at one time to be the country's "most prominent woman", and a list of the organizations that she led or supported certainly indicates that: The Consumers League; the National Conference of Social Work; Campfire Girls; National Child Labor Committee; National Association for the Advancement of Colored People; the American Civil Liberties Union, to name a few. She became involved in the international peace movement in the early 1900s and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931 for her work.

It was through stamp collecting that I discovered that we have had 5 US Presidents who were UUs. Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, John Quincy Adams, William Howard Taft, and Millard Fillmore. I wish I could say that they were our greatest presidents, but I guess that depends on how you define greatness. They were all great thinkers and philosophers, but all of them, including TJ, were controversial and unpopular as presidents.

Thomas Jefferson had served as governor of Virginia, as U.S. minister to France, as secretary of state under George Washington, as vice-president in the administration of John Adams, and as president of the United States from 1801 to 1809. However, he asked that his tombstone cite him as "author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom, and Father of the University of Virginia" and, as he requested, "not a word more." Although historians might add his

accomplishments in disciplines such as architecture, most would agree with his own assessment of his most important accomplishments. His presidency was not one of them.

Likewise, John Adams and his son John Quincy Adams were noted philosophers, but unpopular presidents, particularly the son.

The last UU president, William Howard Taft served from 1908 until 1912. Taft considered his appointment as Chief Justice of the United States to be his greatest accomplishment. He wrote, "I don't remember that I ever was president."

Millard Fillmore, known as "The Great Compromiser", was president during the 1850's. He was strongly against slavery, having had a taste of what it might have been like after being sold by his father into indentured servitude. But as president he was aware of the volatility of the political atmosphere surrounding the issue. He crafted a compromise which may have postponed the Civil War, but which ultimately inflamed both sides to the point that it spelled the end of his political party, the Whigs. In trying to please everyone, he pleased no one.

There is some deeper meaning about leadership here. Being one of those philosophers myself who tries to see all sides and bring everyone together, I am not ready to step forth and make a grand proclamation, but it does seem apparent that the American public does not and never has appreciated a thoughtful president. (Jimmy Carter is of this same ilk: a great human being, but regarded as a poor president.) Is there something about putting too much thought into politics that dooms us to failure? High-minded considerations of fairness and justice?

Where these same men really succeeded, and maybe what we ourselves can succeed, is not in quoting our ethics and philosophy to the agencies of government, but in rolling up our sleeves and doing the work that needs to be done. Putting our philosophies into action, leading by example. It doesn't really matter in the great scheme of things what our reason tells us, what we hold in our hearts. It is our actions that will be judged, that will make a difference. Like Jane Addams and Susan B Anthony, when we put enough pressure on the system by the rightness of our actions, our beliefs will be made manifest. When we convince by our works, our words carry more weight.

Another story which supports this line of thinking is that of Luther Burbank, a UU scientist. He was a lover of truth, and a believer that religion need not be incompatible with science and reason. While he devoted most of his life to the pursuit of science, events of the day caused him to speak out regarding his religious beliefs. One was the Scopes "Monkey Trial" which thrust the doctrine of evolution into the national spotlight. The fact that a high school teacher had been put on trial for teaching the "heresy" of Darwinism (which Burbank had been teaching, and practicing as a genetic researcher for many years) "aroused him to a conviction that he ought to speak out, without mincing words, and declare for truth." His declaration brought upon him "a whirlwind of hatred", according to biographer Wilbur Hall. It was this whirlwind which, according to some, killed Burbank.

Hall, who was with him during those weeks, (and I quote extensively here) saw Burbank "growing tired and harassed, not by the dispute or the vilification heaped on him, but by the physical task that entailed. He tried to reply to all the letters, using mild but fearless good sense with those who attacked him, and amplifying his original statement for those who supported him."

". . . he was misled into believing that logic, kindness, and reason could convince and help the bigoted. He fell sick. The sickness was fated to be his last.

"What killed Luther Burbank, at just that time and in just that abrupt and tragic fashion, was his baffled, yearning, desperate effort to make people understand. His desire to help them, to clarify their

minds, and to induce them to substitute fact for hysteria drove him beyond his strength. He grew suddenly old attempting to make reasonable a people which had been unreasonable through twenty stiff-necked generations. . .”

Which is not to say that there is no room for words and philosophy in the world. Many of the UUs who were honored on stamps were writers and wordsmiths. British author Beatrix Potter. Scottish poet Robert Burns. Louisa May Alcott, who wrote a lot more than “Little Women”, some of it not the kind of thing I want to discuss from the pulpit. (She was a very liberal woman.) There are the transcendentalists: Thoreau and Emerson. Rabindranath Tagore, the national poet of India and quite a mystic, honored on a dozen or more stamps from around the world.

Writer Bret Harte was of great interest to me as a stamp collector, simply because his stamp is a biggie: Five dollars. That is the kind of stamp that is likely to increase in value, because not so many of them will be bought and stashed away. Interestingly, Harte’s success was due in large part to the fact that he was a UU. No less a person than Thomas Starr King, the Unitarian minister in San Francisco for whom one of our two seminaries is named, recommended Harte to editors and publishers “back East”, who made Harte one of the most popular regional writers of his day. When he fell into disfavor after a particularly “colorful” story, “The Luck of Roaring Camp”, he began publishing anonymously. Mark Twain was said to have been quite steamed after receiving a letter from his editor suggesting that he write a story or poem in the style of some of these anonymous submissions. It is said that Twain burned the letter.

Not all of the UUs honored on postage stamps were in the distant past. (Okay, maybe mid-20th century does some like ancient history to some of you. At any rate...) Adlai Stevenson was a UU, another of those too-philosophical politicians. Paul Dudley White was an American cardiologist, known among other things for treating his patients with optimism and respect, explaining their treatment to them. What a concept!

Whitney Young is the only African-American UU to be honored by the Postal Service thus far. Young was the Executive Director of the National Urban League from 1961 until his untimely death in 1971. He drowned while swimming in rough surf in Lagos, Nigeria, which he was visiting as part of a delegation on American and African relations. Like many of the others we have talked about, he was a social activist, working tirelessly to end racism and injustice. He was instrumental in organizing black leadership and supporting the 1963 March on Washington, and helped craft Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty. Young considered himself a worker, albeit a white-collar professional. He felt most effective at his desk, strategizing and planning how his programs would be carried out. One of the best descriptions of his life was given by a black high school student in Michigan, at the time of Young’s funeral: “Whitney Young started out a brother and died a brother. He was one cat that could run with rich white people and still look out for us.”

Of all the UUs I have learned about through my philatelic pursuits, the one closest to my heart is Samantha Smith. While she was not the last to be honored, she is at this time the last in the chronological line of UUs who have been honored. Born in 1972, Samantha was 10 years old when she decided to make her contribution toward world peace by writing to Soviet leader Yuri Andropov. Some of you may remember her story from the news. Here is her letter:

"Dear Mr. Andropov,

My name is Samantha Smith. I am ten years old.

Congratulations on your new job. I have been worrying about Russia and the United States getting into a nuclear war. Are you going to vote to have a war or not? If you aren't please tell me how you are going to help to not have a war. This question you

**do not have to answer, but I would like to know why you want to conquer the world or at least our country. God made the world for us to live together in peace and not to fight.**

**Sincerely,  
Samantha Smith"**

**Surprisingly, Andropov responded. He told her that he and the Soviet Union were "trying to do everything so that there will not be war between our countries." He invited her to visit his country, which she did. She became know internationally as an ambassador of peace. Tragically, she and her father were killed in a plane crash in 1985. She was honored, not on an American stamp, but on a Soviet stamp.**

**Samantha's story says to me that even the least of us has something to offer to the world. Young or old, rich or poor, male or female, well educated or not, we can each roll up our sleeves and do something to make the world a better place.**

**So may it be.**