Proverbs says that "he who troubles his household will inherit the wind". As Unitarian Universalists, we are heirs to a long tradition of people who troubled the household of society by challenging slavery and other social injustices. We will learn about Unitarians and Universalists that include Theodore Parker, William Ellery Channing, Susan B. Anthony and other great social reformers of the nineteenth century.

There was a monkey in the zoo reading the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis and Darwin’s theory of evolution. The monkey's question after these readings was: am I my brother's keeper or my keeper's brother? As we celebrate our UU historical heritage and focus on the 19th century this morning, I mention Darwin in part because his birthday is on Wednesday, February 12th and he is part of our living tradition. Both sides of Darwin's family were Unitarians although his own connection to Unitarianism gradually faded through the years. Like many modern UUs, he preferred to take a walk on Sunday morning rather than go to church. In case you're wondering, Darwin's other connection to this morning is my monkey mind at work. "The Wind We Inherit" comes from the 1960 movie "Inherit the Wind", a fictional version of the 1925 Scopes trial. John Scopes was convicted for teaching Charles Darwin's theory of evolution to a high school science class, contrary to a Tennessee state law. In the movie character Matthew Harrison Brady, a noted statesman, staunch foe of Darwinism and a Biblical scholar quotes the book of Proverbs: "He who troubles his household will inherit the wind".

In the book The Prophetic Imperative, Richard Gilbert says that: Troublemakers tend to get their historical just desserts. Liberal religion has been troubling the household of faith for over four centuries." How we as a liberal religion trouble the waters of culture and even our own house, our association of congregations, continues to be a subject of much discussion, debate and conversation. This week UUA President Peter Morales presented a written report focused on the administration’s ideas about the role the UUA staff can play, our belief in what strategies will move us forward, and a very brief summary of major initiatives. The UUA staff "must lead change" and "cast a vision," the report said. It "must nurture a culture of collaboration, be a powerful public voice for our shared values and do what individual congregations cannot." In response to a question about the vision the UUA staff should cast, Morales replied: "The vision that is emerging, that I’m trying to reflect, has not changed radically at all. It’s a vision around compassion, community, and acting in the world. What is shifting in that vision is a
sense that, given our current context, we must move beyond how we’ve thought about congregations to engage people who are deeply suspicious about church and about congregations as an institution." Unitarians and Universalists in the 19th century wrestled with the same fundamental questions we do: Who are we, what do we stand for, and what implications does that have for the world? What is the role of the church in society?

William Ellery Channing, perhaps the greatest figure of American Unitarianism, believed that religion is not a matter of private piety, but a social principle. In an 1820 sermon he said: "Religion, we are told, is a private, personal thing, a concern between the individual and God. His neighbor or the community must not meddle with it. I would maintain that religion is eminently a social principle, entering into social life, as having most important bearings on the public welfare. The social character of religion is not sufficiently regarded." Channing was born in 1780. He served as minister of the Federal Street Society, Boston, which later became the Arlington Street Church, for 40 years. He was considered the theological leader of Unitarianism, particularly after he articulated what it meant to be a Unitarian Christian in his 1819 sermon "Unitarian Christianity", and he was a prominent social reformer. He defended freedom of the press, established a ministry to the poor, and worked to end slavery.

His greatest impact was the influence he had on other social reformers. Richard Gilbert writes that: "Channing was a leader of great leaders. He inspired Horace Mann, a member of Channing's congregation, to found a public school system in Massachusetts and Antioch College in Ohio. Channing encouraged Dorothea Dix in her work with the imprisoned and the insane; Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe, who developed methods for teaching the blind, deaf and mentally challenged, was a follower of Channing. Channing inspired Julia Ward Howe, an ardent feminist and pacifist, and recommended Joseph Tuckerman as a community minister to serve Boston's poor people. Channing's parishioner Elizabeth Peabody brought the kindergarten to this country. Gilbert goes on to note that in being a social reformer, Channing also had prominent enemies: Daniel Webster, who belonged to Channing's congregation, Henry Clay, and John C. Calhoun, a conservative Unitarian." In his later years, Channing became more and more radical, drawing away from his congregation to serve black people, the poor and the working class. His ministry gradually faded away and he died in 1842, wondering if 40 years of service to his upper class, conservative church had made any difference.

Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, who was born in 1810, is referred to as the "Yankee Crusader". Like Channing, Parker believed that Unitarians should be engaged in the work of transforming society. He wrote that: "The natural function of a great man is to help the little ones" and "A man's greatness consists of the amount of service he renders to the world". He did not exempt himself as a minister from this mandate either: "If the minister is to promote religion, he is to meddle with the state's business, the perishing classes, literature, science, morals, manners, everything that affects the welfare of mankind." Parker understood that true reform meant working for justice, for addressing systemic evils, and not merely doing charitable work. While he worked on a number of social issues, including temperance, prison reform, women's rights and strongly opposed war and capital punishment, he was most known for his work on the issue of slavery. He
sheltered runaway slaves in his home, and kept a loaded pistol on his desk to defend them while he worked on his sermons.

Theodore Parker was also a visionary whose theological thinking foreshadowed the rise of humanism and the eventual embrace by both Unitarians and Universalists of religious pluralism. In 1841, on the occasion of the ordination of Charles Shackford in Boston, Parker wrote his sermon "A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity". In this essay that builds on Emerson's Divinity School Address of 1838 in which Emerson argues against the supernatural elements of Christianity, Parker takes it a step further by stating that Christianity is not unique but another expression of the eternal truth to be found through personal experience of God, not in doctrines or forms of religious practice. Parker went so far to say that even if Jesus had never appeared or his ideas had come from a Greek philosopher in Athens, the truth that Christianity reveals would still be true because it is universal and dwells within the human heart. Over one hundred years before the creation of the UUA, Parker had named our first and most important source of spiritual wisdom, direct experience of God, of the transcending mystery and wonder that has the power to renew our spirits and call us into lives of love. Theodore Parker died in 1860 at the age of 50, exhausted by his years of lonely, intense work and alienated from most of his Unitarian ministerial colleagues, who considered him an atheist and heretic.

For those who know about the long and rich history of American Unitarians and Universalists, Ralph Waldo Emerson, William Ellery Channing, and Theodore Parker are familiar names, but our movement can also claim many women who led the way in the work of transforming our world. Lois told us the story of Universalist Olympia Brown, the first woman to be credentialed and ordained by a major American denomination. Brown also worked tirelessly for women's rights. She formed the New England Women’s Suffrage Association, led the Wisconsin Suffrage Association and served as the president of the Federal Suffrage Association from 1903 to 1920. She was among the first women to vote when the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified. At the church she served in Racine, Wisconsin, now named the Olympia Brown Unitarian Universalist Church, there is a plaque in her honor that says "The flame of her spirit still burns today."

Susan B. Anthony, a Unitarian, led nothing short of a revolution in human rights. Richard Gilbert says that on the Anthony family tombstone, there are four words that sum up Susan B. Anthony's religious convictions: Liberty, Equality, Humanity, Justice. In 1848 she attended the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, New York and signed the Declaration of Women's Rights. Along with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Anthony founded the first women's temperance movement and with Universalist Clara Barton, she founded the second Red Cross chapter in the nation. She also opposed capital punishment, organized women workers, and was a pacifist. In 1856 Anthony became an agent for the American Anti-Slavery Society, arranging meetings, making speeches, putting up posters, and distributing leaflets. She worked closely with Frederick Douglass, William Lloyd Garrison, Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad, helping slaves to get to Canada. She practiced civil disobedience, urging defiance of the Fugitive Slave Act and voting in the presidential election of 1872, an act for which she was tried and convicted. She never paid the $100 fine, which the government was too
embarrassed to try and collect. Through her life she continued to be outspoken about women's rights. After the defeat of a women's suffrage vote in Colorado, Anthony had bitter and biblical words about what had happened: "There are, as you know, a few religious bigots left in the world who really believe that somehow or other if women are allowed to vote, Saint Paul would feel badly about it." Richard Gilbert writes that Anthony's religious faith is best discovered through her deep sense of ethical responsibility. Her personal theological convictions were important to the extent that they informed action on behalf of human liberation.8

We tell these stories of our spiritual ancestors not because we want to be the next Channing or Parker or Anthony or Emerson, but to find renewed inspiration and hope as we discover our own gifts and vision to share with the world. Davidson Loehr said in the first reading: "We may not be motivated enough or courageous enough to follow 19th century leaders and visionaries like Parker, Emerson, Channing, Brown, and Anthony down the demanding path of getting into our best spiritual shape, but we're at least serious enough to listen, and to carry home some fertile seeds in the form of ideas. And who knows – maybe some day some of those seeds will sprout, and make a small but important difference in our lives and our little corner of the world." We each have the capacity to make a difference in the world as Maya Angelou reminds us in the second reading:

When we come to it …
We, this people, on this wayward, floating body
Created on this earth, of this earth
Have the power to fashion for this earth
A climate where every man and every woman
Can live freely without sanctimonious piety
Without crippling fear
When we come to it
We must confess that we are the possible
We are the miraculous, the true wonder of this world.9

We also tell the stories of our spiritual ancestors because their struggles with oppression and injustice and their hopes and dreams for liberal religion are our struggles with oppression and injustice and our hopes and dreams for Unitarian Universalism. The need to nurture and sustain our congregations, as well as discover how to keep them relevant and transformative in our culture hasn't changed. There is a fascinating dialogue happening right now on a blog site called The Lively Tradition", written by Tom Schade. Schade poses some fundamental questions about how UUs can best get involved in transforming the world. He writes: "There are people out there right now at work transforming our culture. They are working for and living toward a culture where liberal values like openness, and solidarity, and self-determination and generosity are normative. The challenge for Unitarian Universalism is how we, as a whole body, make a connection with those emerging forces of cultural transformation. How do we connect with the young people of color, like the Dream Defenders? How do we speak to the educated young people in the families in our own congregations who are burdened with debt and confronted by closing doors? How do we connect to young artists and musicians? We
don't need to start, run, or control a movement for transformation; multiple movements are gathering strength. We just want to be a part of it, because it has been our goal and dream for most of our lives."¹⁰ Schade doesn't ask IF we connect or IF we join a movement for cultural transformation or IF we become part of a movement, but how.

How will we trouble the household, the systems of power that continue to create poverty, injustice, inequality, racism, and other social evils? How will we become a voice for those who have no voices- the undocumented immigrant, the LGBTQ youth who are homeless, the low wage workers in big box stores and fast food joints, the mentally ill, the addicts, the prisoners- all those whom society marginalizes or throws away? How will we equip and support one another to look beyond these four walls, to find the courage, the strength and the curiosity to discover who our neighbors are and how we are called to serve them? How will we live out our strategic plan goal of partnering with other agencies and institutions that share our liberal values and our passion for transforming the world? How will we continue to make Unitarian Universalism a vibrant and relevant life transforming faith in the 21st century?

As we celebrate and remember today Parker, Channing, Anthony, Emerson, Brown and the many other Unitarians and Universalists of the 19th century, may we merit the wind we inherit, the Spirit of human freedom, human dignity and human worth that continues to move through the world and calls us to transform the world with our passion, our vision and our love.

References

⁵ Gilbert, Ibid., pp. 34-37.
⁶ Gilbert, Ibid., pg. 41.
⁷ Gilbert, Ibid., pg. 45.
⁸ Gilbert, Ibid., pg. 46.
⁹ Angelou, Maya, Ibid.