

Maria Cook: Universalism's First Woman Preacher (1779-1835)

By: amanda uluhan

Maria Cook was the first woman to be recognized as a Universalist preacher. This is a story about her.

In 1779, Maria was born in New York State. She was born during the American and British war for independence. When Maria was four, the Americans won the war. Then when she was eight, the Constitution was delivered: a document that says we are a nation of freedom of speech and freedom of belief, where everyone gets a vote.

Maria Cook wanted to find a religion that was independent and free thinking, where people could work to do what was right for themselves and their communities. Maria chose to be a Universalist. You see, Universalism, that's one of our two UU grandparent religions, says that God loves all people, each and every one of us. No matter who you are, or what you do, no one is more or less important. Not all religions talk about people in this way. And that is why Universalism was so special for Maria. Maria knew that even though the Constitution and Universalism both said that everyone had certain freedoms, most people couldn't participate in society or religion.

Maria Cook felt she had to share her vision of this world. She left her family home when she was 30 and started to share her message. She wanted everyone to hear about Universalism from a woman. All over New York and Pennsylvania, even up into Canada, she traveled. She went to people's houses, to stores, and to congregations talking about Universalism. Maria wanted to help make space for woman in religion like no one had done before.

In 1811, she spoke at the Universalist Western Association, addressing her colleagues. A Universalist church gave Maria Cook a letter of fellowship, which is why today we remember her as the first woman to be a Universalist preacher. Many communities welcomed the vision and wisdom of Maria, but mostly just for a short while: Universalism was not ready for a woman leader.

One time, she was put in jail. It was 1813, several years after she had become a well-recognized woman in Universalism. When the police came to arrest her, Maria didn't argue but instead practiced passive resistance. She knew they could arrest her even without good reason. The police had to carry her all the way to jail because she refused to walk! In jail, she shared her opinions and beliefs about Universalism and about womanhood. After a few weeks, the judge let her go. Maria continued traveling to different towns and preaching about Universalism. Even in the face of authority, she found peaceful ways to express her views. All her life, Maria Cook spoke out for what she believed in and did what she thought was right. She spoke out.

Even though Maria is recognized as the first woman to be a Universalist preacher, she was never ordained and never had her own congregation. In fact, she didn't think that the religion, full of men at that time, was really ready for a female minister. There was

much more work to be done before Universalism would really accept the leadership of women. A woman preaching was a radical idea, and not everyone liked it. It was until over 50 years later, Olympia Brown became the first woman to be ordained as a Universalist preacher. Universalists were finally ready for change and fearless leadership and Maria Cook helped to shape that path toward a more caring community.

Unitarian Universalism is a faith that works hard to encourage everyone to have a voice and a vote in decisions. Unitarian Universalism, thanks to the legacies of Maria Cook, and Olympia Brown, and many others, welcomes people of any gender in the pulpit and in the congregation. UUs believe that everyone should have a voice and a vote, to make an impact on society, to help lift each other up and be heard.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What can you do to be ahead of your time in the way that Maria Cook was ahead of her time?
2. How can you help to lift up voices that aren't heard?
3. Can you think of a time when you felt nervous about saying something because not every might agree?
4. Imagine yourself saying or doing something that is difficult. Do you have an idea of what that would be? Remember: your community has your back!
5. Why is the fifth principle important?
6. What are the risks and benefits of giving everyone a voice and a vote?

Resources:

Keith Kron "The Next Steps: Unitarian Universalism in the 21st Century"
Bridgehampton, NY, July 21, 2014

<https://uucsf.org/the-next-steps-unitarian-universalism-in-the-21st-century/>

Dictionary of Unitarian & Universalist Biography: Maria Cook

<https://uudb.org/articles/mariacook.html>

Janeen K Grohsmeyer "Speaking Out: Maria Cook, A Universalist Preacher" from
Tapestry of Faith "Faithful Journeys Curriculum: Grades 2-3"

<https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/journeys/session10/speaking-out>