Margaret Sanger: 1883-1966
A Sermon by the Rev. James R. Bridges
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As many of you know, I like to give at least one sermon a year on a famous Unitarian Universalist. Often, over the summer I plan for sermons in the coming year, picking various topics of interest, either to me or relevant to the congregation.

This past summer I was engaged in rather heated discussions regarding a woman’s right to choose, Planned Parenthood, etc. on an internet chat board, and some of the more conservative, near fundamentalist posters began citing quotations from Margaret Sanger, basically designed to smear both her and Planned Parenthood.

It bothered me, for Margaret Sanger’s name is on the sites which list famous Unitarian Universalist people. At first I was taken aback and pressed them for more than just excerpts. I wanted a full citation. Further, I wanted to know the context of these quotations, which were fairly radical, even for today’s audience in the greater Monroe County office. It turned out that the conservatives really did not have full citations or contexts. They were merely copying them off of one or two websites that were anti-Planned Parenthood sites.

Then I became curious. What could have prompted Sanger, assuming the quotations were accurate, to have written what she did. I decided I wanted to explore her life and writings more fully, to rebut the allegations of extremism, or to put them in context. The more I thought about doing this, the more I realized I could that as well as create a talk about her life. And so began my project and this sermon.

After reading several books on her life, I became somewhat suspicious about her UU connection. First of all, none of the books mentioned Unitarian Universalism. That in and of itself does not necessarily mean anything, for the same is true of books on Susan B. Anthony. However, when one visits the Unitarian Universalist church in Rochester, one can see Anthony’s signature in the membership book, ending any question of whether or not she was a UU.

The same cannot be said of Margaret Sanger. Indeed, it can be stated that she was not a Unitarian Universalist after all. Her name’s appearance on these lists is apparently still another example of us Unitarian Universalists claiming folks who were not really UU’s, over-extending ourselves, so to speak.

How did this happen? Well, for one thing, she did have as friends other Unitarian Universalists. In part, she modeled herself on Jane Addams, who attended the Unitarian Church in Chicago, although she too never joined a Unitarian congregation. Friends and acquaintances included Roger Baldwin and the Rev. John Haynes Holmes, to name only two. Through the years she spoke at many Unitarian Universalist congregations, and not a few Unitarian Universalist congregations and members embraced her cause. Our own Wendy Mazur was active in the founding of the present Planned Parenthood in Monroe County, just as an example. Indeed, some congregations founded Planned Parenthood chapters, and members were active in the organization. To this day, a few UU congregations in Metro NY District provide safety escorts for Planned Parenthood, accompanying women having an abortion through lines of pickets.
Even though not a Unitarian Universalist, I believe Margaret’s life story can nevertheless be an inspiration for us, and her life does embody several of our UU principles. So let us proceed.

Margaret Higgins was born on September 14, 1883, in Corning, NY, exactly 120 years and one week ago from today. Her father Michael was a Catholic born, Irish immigrant, a non-conformist, socialist, and atheist. He made his living by working in the glass factories of Corning and as a stonemason carving angels and other designs on tombstones. Because of his outspoken political viewpoints, however, his business often suffered. That is a polite way of saying that the family was poor.

Just one example of her father’s outspoken ways, and the community’s reaction to them, can give you a feeling for what it was like for Margaret living in that community. A famous socialist, Col. Ingersoll, was visiting Corning from England. When Michael learned that he would be speaking nearby, he took it upon himself to invite the socialist to speak in Corning too. He secured the local church hall of the Catholic church for the event, giving the priest the customary rental fee. As the day approached, the priest learned that the socialist had made some anti-religious statements at another meeting. Finally, when Michael approached the meeting hall accompanied by the socialist and Margaret, there was a crowd gathered out in front. In front of the hall stood the priest with his arms crossed. They were refused use of the hall.

Michael decided on the spot to invite the speaker to use a grove of trees next to his house as a rallying point, and those who had come to hear the speaker followed Michael, with the remaining crowd booing them. Margaret, who had accompanied her father, walked proudly with them, her head held up high, ignoring the shouts and catcalls from the crowd.

The next day, and for many days thereafter, as she walked her brothers and sisters to school past the local parochial school, her family was taunted by the calls of children exclaiming “Devil’s child. Devil’s child” and “Heathen!” From that time onward, the family became more self-contained and isolated in Corning.

Michael had taught his children to be socially aware thinkers. He believed strongly the words he spoke to them. “You have no right to material comforts without giving back to society the benefit of your honest experience.” Another of his quotes, as each of them left home, was to “leave the world better because you, my child, have dwelt in it.”

Margaret, the sixth child out of 11 children, took these words to heart. Her exhausted mother, Ann Purcell Higgins, a devout Catholic of Irish-American heritage, was worn out from having 11 children. She died when Margaret was 19. Margaret was encouraged to continue her studies in college by her sisters, who helped her attend Claverack College in 1896 and then the nursing program at White Plains Hospital. Nursing at that time was one of the very few professional vocations open to women at the time.

In 1902, Margaret met and then married William Sanger, with whom she had three children. He too was a socialist, like her father. They took an apartment not too far from Local No. 5 of the Socialist Worker Party, located on 135th Street in Manhattan. Both of them attended many meetings at the local, as well as hosted them at their house. She met and befriended several relatively famous radicals and free thinkers through those
meetings, including Eugene V. Debs and Bill Haywood, leader of the Wobblies, and the network supported her thinking independently a few years down the road.

Margaret began her work for the Visiting Nurses Association in 1912, which was sponsored and run by the Henry Street Settlement, a settlement house which still exists on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. It was there, on the Lower East Side, where Margaret began to see the misery of those women living in poverty. She heard the mothers beg her for the “secret” of preventing pregnancy. She also occasionally took private nursing jobs, working for the upper class of New York as a nurse for an infant or sick child. She compared her experiences, and saw the difference on how children were treated. Among the wealthy, the children were sought, and once born, they were well cared for and appreciated. They were also few in number. On the Lower East Side, however, the children were not sought by either parent, who felt overwhelmed already by their poverty. Family size was much larger, and physical abuse of children was not uncommon. Margaret realistically concluded that the child was not wanted.

In one case in particular, she was extremely troubled. On a hot July day in 1912, Margaret paid a home visit to Sadie Sachs, a 28 year old Russian immigrant who had seriously hurt herself trying to self-induce an abortion. She was hemorrhaging badly. It took several hours to end the bleeding, and several weeks for her to fully recover. As Margaret was preparing to leave her patient, Sadie asked her “Another one like this will finish me, won’t it.” Margaret relayed Sadie’s concerns to the doctor, who agreed that it would. Sadie then begged the doctor to tell her how to prevent another pregnancy. The doctor refused, and made some joke about telling her husband to sleep on the floor. After the doctor left, she begged Margaret to tell her the secret. But the truth of the matter was that Margaret didn’t know a good way. Condoms were expensive for poor people, and they were not reliable. Douches didn’t always work, and in the cold water tenements, women were embarrassed to sneak down the hall to the only toilet with a douche bag in hand.

A few months later, Jake frantically called Margaret. Sadie was again pregnant, and now she was bleeding again. This time, the bleeding could not be stopped and she died. Jake was beside himself with grief, shouting “My God, My God, My God!”

That event became a turning point for Margaret. She wrote 20 years later “I knew I could not go on merely nursing, allowing mothers to suffer and die….I went to bed knowing that no matter what it might cost….I was resolved to do something to change the destiny of mothers whose miseries were vast as the sky.” It was her epiphany.

From then on, Margaret informed women about condoms, douches, etc., but in so doing, she was violating the Comstock Act, and law passed in 1873 which forbade “every obscene, lewd, lascivious or filthy book, pamphlet, picture, paper, letter, writing, print or other publication of an indecent character.” Birth control was obscene.

Trying to learn more about contraceptives, Margaret was advised by several physicians to study in Europe. Finally, in 1913, the family traveled to the Continent. In Paris, Bill studied art, whereas Margaret began researching birth control. In Paris birth control was permitted, along with abortions. Consequently, she also discovered most poor families were small, with the children cherished – a much different finding than her experience in the U.S. Upon her return from Paris, she founded an organization of young feminists devoted to contraception….the National Birth Control League.
To advertise the new group, she began publishing *The Rebel Woman*, with the motto “No Gods; No Masters,” mailing it out through feminist and socialist circles. The first issue, published in March of 1914, featured “denunciations of marriage, property laws favoring men, established religion, capitalism, and laws against contraceptive information.” As might be expected, the issue was banned from the mails under the Comstock Act. The April issue was also banned.

Finally, in the May issue Margaret ran an article warning of the dangers of abortion brought about by the failure to use birth control. At the urging of Comstock, the Postmaster General declared the magazine “indecent, lewd, lascivious and obscene.” Postal authorities seized all copies of it, and in August of 1914, Margaret was indicted on nine counts of sending birth control information through the mails. She faced up to forty-five years in prison. Most of the press approved.

To defy the law further, she wrote a pamphlet entitled *Family Limitation* and had it distributed to feminist and socialist groups across the country. Should she be imprisoned, it was to be sold to the public. Her father upon reading it was at first shocked and opposed, but after reading several issues of The Woman Rebel, he realized that his wife would still be alive at the time had they known this material then. He subsequently supported her cause warmly.

Margaret asked for a postponement of her trial to better prepare for it. Her request was denied. She then made her own postponement, skipping bail and going under a false identity to Montreal and then onto Europe. She wrote to the judge and told him that she would notify him upon returning. Her actions caused what the government and Comstock feared the most – widespread publicity about the censorship of birth control information!

While in London, she studied birth control methods again and discovered several scholarly books published on the subject, books banned in America. She also discovered how in 1832 an American physician had written a book on birth control, and as a result, spent several months in jail. Since that time, physicians were fearful of the topic and subject. She returned within a year and opened a birth control clinic in Brownsville, Brooklyn. On the first day of operation, a line stretched around the corner containing over 140 women. Within ten days, she was arrested for giving birth control information. Over the next decade, she was imprisoned nine times for giving men and women information about how their bodies worked and for helping them understand how to limit the size of their families.

One of the later organizations which she founded went on to become our current day Planned Parenthood. For a while, Margaret went into semi-retirement, but in later years, she left retirement to work at the international level, creating the international Planned Parenthood Federation.

So how do we characterize her life. For one thing, she was courageous. She identified a problem and then committed to solving it. She relied upon her experience, which many Unitarian Universalists do. She was not afraid to speak out, to grapple with difficult and controversial ideas. She surely was anti-oppressive, and she fought with the Catholic Church on behalf of poor women. She worked to create a more just, humane world. She strived in her work to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of women. Her work embodied justice, equity, and compassion to poor women.

Her whole life provides an example of our fifth source in our covenant:
“Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit.”

Without her, birth control quite possibly might not exist in America, nor would family planning knowledge be available to all people.

She paid a price for her work and her thinking. During several periods in her life she was ostracized, viewed as too radical. At times she had to tone herself down, for political reasons. As already noted, she was arrested a number of times before committing civil disobedience was viewed positively. She paid a price in terms of family life because of her commitment to family planning. Her first marriage ended in divorce. Her second marriage seemed more driven for financial support of her cause.

Yet I believe we must rejoice in her work and be grateful for her life. May we all, as best as we are able, follow in her footsteps, to help the world improve and advance.

Blessed be and amen.

Comments?

References


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