

Encountering our Ancestors VII

Scripts by Rev. Steven Epperson
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Isabella Jagiellon (1519-1559)

I am Isabella Jagiellon, daughter of King Sigismund I of Poland and Bona Sforza, Princess of Milan; mother of John Sigismund of Transylvania, the first and only Unitarian king. My mother ensured that I was educated in the classics, in languages and in the spirit of Renaissance humanism. Still, to be sure, I was raised for marriage as a tool of political alliance, statecraft and power—that was my fate and duty; and barely twenty, I was married off to John Zapolya, King of Hungary, a man far more than twice my age. He died only a week after our son was born; there were many rivals and enemies who claimed the throne. Hence, my status as Queen and the safety of my son and his right to rule, until he came of age, were in constant peril; we lived in a world of resentment and court intrigue.

Fortunately, my son John and I had a powerful and ever-loyal ally, a man of honour, who pledged himself, his riches and might to the service of our cause—a promise that he kept. You may be surprised to learn that that man was none other than Sulyeman, the great Sultan of the Ottoman Empire; if not for him and the force of his armies that held power in what is now Hungary and Romania, there would have been no Unitarian story in Transylvania—no Unitarian King, no Francis David, no Edict of Torda that established freedom of religion and a sanctuary for Unitarians.

I have learned that in your time, there are some who speak errant and dangerous nonsense about a so-called “clash of civilizations”—between a Christendom and Islam; as though these were clearly contested and rigid borders, as though they were fire and ice. This is theory, not life! Is human life—the mind, heart and soul, are human cultures that simple? In my time, as in yours, inter-marriage was quite common; emissaries, trade and ideas crossed from Christian European territories to Ottoman lands and back again. It was commonplace for Christians to seek out Muslim courts accessible to them, knowing that they would often be treated more justly. Indeed, from Transylvania and elsewhere to Istanbul the ties were deep and mutually beneficial.

Let me give you just one example: in 1548, Catholic authorities in Tolna south of Budapest, demanded that the Sultan's governor drive out or execute Protestant ministers and preachers in their city. Not only did the Pasha refuse this request, he issued *a law of toleration* which stated, in part: "that preachers of the faith of Luther [and others] should be allowed to preach the Gospel everywhere to everybody, whoever wants to hear, freely and without fear, and that all...should be able to listen to and receive the word of God without any danger. Because this is the true way of Christian faith and of religion." Nine years later, in this same spirit, I declared my own "Decree of Religious Tolerance." Here is what I wrote: "Each person may maintain whatever religious faith he wishes, with old and new rituals, while We at the same time leave it to their judgment to do as they please in matters of faith, just so long as they bring no harm to bear on anyone at all."

Do you not know that we, in Hungarian lands indirectly ruled by the Ottomans, held our religious debates freely, that I and my son issued decrees of religious freedom under the protection of presiding Turkish officials, while elsewhere Christians in Europe were persecuting and killing each other over religious differences? During my reign and that of my son, from the 1550s-70s, Ottoman and Hungarian cultures were "greatly [enriched] in...creative engagement, mutual attraction and patterns of influence." Consider this: the fruits of religious toleration and freedom was not the product of liberal European genius alone; they grew from soil cultivated by a shared liberal Christian/Muslim undertaking guaranteed by a promise kept by a Muslim, by Suleyman, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire—my protector and trusted ally.

Joseph Workman (1805-1894)

"One can ask why the Deity, when he made man, chose not to make him whole? ...Why choose against perfection? To make [us] with so fragile a thing as the human mind is, to me, incomprehensible." Or so I found myself thinking privately many, many times during the twenty-two years—from 1853-75—when I served as Superintendent of the Ontario Provincial Asylum at 999 Queen Street.

My name is Joseph Workman; I have been called the "Father of Canadian Psychiatry" – Psychiatry! what a foul, heartless, chaotic realm I discovered when first appointed to the

Asylum. You cannot imagine the incompetence, the petty politics, the mistreatment of patients—most were restraints, and housed in jails in appalling conditions; Dr John Scott had turned “the lunatic asylum into a Dissecting room for medical students!” James Tuke, visiting from England in 1845, described conditions in the temporary asylum thus: “one of the most painful and distressing places I ever visited. There were seventy patients upon whose faces misery, starvation and suffering were indelibly impressed.”

The Hincks administration, under the banner of Reform, called me in to clean up the mess. Literally. My first task was to oversee the removal of the “most foul and enormous cesspool” which, because the builders had failed to connect the drains to the main sewer, had built up to a depth of four feet under the basement. Order and efficiency in administration, healthier living conditions—nutritious food, exercise, wholesome work and housing, and above all, “unvarying kindness, never-tiring forbearance, and undeviating truthfulness” in treatment of our patients—because the “spark of humanity dwells in each of us”—those were *our* guiding principles. I am pleased to say that during my tenure the Toronto asylum, though chronically underfunded and overcrowded, became recognized as a model institution both in Canada and abroad.

And to think before this, at the age of 48 when I was appointed to the asylum, I had shown no special interest in psychiatric matters! I came to Canada in my twenties from County Antrim, Ireland; we were Non-Subscribing Presbyterians—close kin to the British Unitarians. I embraced my new home, studied medicine at McGill and started up a family medicine practice. But the sudden death of my wife’s brother necessitated a change of career. For ten years, I managed the hardware business on King Street opposite St James’ Church with my brother Samuel. My brothers Thomas and William were in the trade down in Montreal; William ended up being the mayor in 1868. Benjamin, another brother, helped found the Montreal Unitarian Church; and we, in Toronto, followed suit and established the First Unitarian Congregation.

The 1830s, 40s and early 50s—those were *full years*! First, there was a medical practice to start up, then I had the business to run, and with Elizabeth, a family to raise. I was elected to the Toronto Board of Trade, served as an alderman for St David’s Ward, and became the first chairman of the City’s Public School Board. This was a passion of mine, and with Egerton Ryerson, we were leaders and principal advocates of free, non-sectarian public schools. Excellence was what was needed, in teaching and subject matter; and I since I believed that the

“exclusion of women from the study of...literature and science savours of barbarism”—our public schools would be co-educational.

On these matters, I could be outspoken and fierce. I *was* frequently in conflict with the elite of Ontario. When George Brown of the *Globe* called me “an irascible, implacable despot,” I sued him for liable, and was pleased to find an ally and friend in John A. MacDonald. I even placed a lock of his hair in my watch chain—in appreciative remembrance? Or perhaps was it to warn myself to be more careful in the future?!

And through and in the midst of all this, still, “the church has ever been among the objects dearest to my heart...I trust never to forsake it in whatsoever trial.” I was the first lay preacher of the Toronto Unitarian church, and was proud to have written its constitution in 1845 which affirmed “the free exercise of private judgment in all matters of belief” and that “females are to exercise the same privileges as males.” I truly believe in the innate worth and dignity of every human being, and in God’s powers of grace and forgiveness.”

My time is up; permit me just to say this in closing—words I spoke to a group of medical students in 1883:

It is too easy to forget that the ends we serve is not our careers...but humanity If we are no better than pedlars seeking profit...then we should leave medicine....The easiest thing to do is lock the insane in cells and feed them and forget them. The hardest is to find that spark of humanity that dwells in each of us. We all are tempted to quit the race at one time or another. But the race is not to the swift. No. It is to he who perseveres. I pass the torch to you. Carry it proudly to the heights of Olympus itself.” Adieu

Vilhjamur Stefansson (1879-1962)

My name’s Vilhjamur Stefansson, born in an Icelandic settlement on the shores of Lake Winnipeg. My parents were definitely of a liberal religious persuasion—in fact among the first English phrases I heard spoken in my home were: “liberal in religion” and “historical criticism of the Bible”—non-conformists, my parents. And I carried that through my life in sticking with the Unitarians—and in my work in the Arctic, my writing on the environment, politics, and nutrition and health. Got expelled from the University of North Dakota for “a spirit of insubordination

and defiance.” But Unitarians backed me up—in 1900 the Winnipeg congregation sent to the International Conference of Liberal Religions in Boston. I even went to Harvard Divinity School—accepted a scholarship there and thought of going into the ministry, but anthropology won out in the end; and soon I was assigned to an Anglo-American Polar Expedition in 1906. That was the beginning of my life-long passion for the North, and of unforgettable experiences in the Arctic—four years living with the Inuit in 1908-12, and then again as a co-leader of the 1913-18 Canadian Arctic Expedition.

If this time living in the Arctic taught me anything, it’s this—*that* land, *those* seas, are not a peripheral frozen waste populated by savages. No, it is the “Polar Mediterranean” where North America, Europe, and Asia come together. And if we will but only seek out the Inuit as our mentors and teachers, we too can live off the land there, as do they. Study their languages! Learn from them cold-weather survival skills! Don’t crush them with “civilization’s juggernaut.” They possess unique qualities of culture and have achieved great things in the ingenious construction of their clothing and housing, and in their ability to live and thrive in the far North. In 1913, I wrote this:

“These natives have, through the evolution of centuries, been ground into such perfect adjustment to their environment that the more you disturb this adjustment, the more disastrous will be the physical welfare of the native.”

Did you failed to heed this warning?

So many things I failed in as well. Men died during the expeditions; some people held me responsible and controversy dogged my heels. A scheme to raise musk oxen for wool came to nothing; raise and herd reindeer on Baffin Island?—that was a disaster (!), as were efforts to colonize Wrangel Island off the coast of Siberia. While engaged to a respectable young woman in Boston, I entered a long-term, intimate relationship in the Arctic with Fannie Pannigabluk, who gave birth to our son Alex. Never did give Fannie the credit she deserved for teaching me Inuit ways and helping me to survive in the Arctic; nor did I publicly recognize Alex as my son, though I provided financially for him. Not proud of that. How could I be?

It wasn’t all a disaster, my life. I traveled more than 20,000 miles over the ice sea; discovered four uncharted islands, and traveling by dogsled over the ice and drilling holes to take soundings, mapped mountains and valleys on the floor of the Beaufort Sea. I wrote books and

articles on Arctic navigation and survival manuals; and helped to create the Northern Studies Centre at Dartmouth College in the States.

I may not have been a regular church-goer, but I remained attached to Unitarianism all my life, and preferred to think “that agnosticism is the only *modest* faith.” In these matters, perhaps my ideal were the Inuit: “They had as much desire to live as any of us but less fear of dying than most of us...These people...were to all appearances so much happier than any group of people I have ever known....The chief factor in their happiness...was they were living according to the Golden Rule....Your importance in the community depended on your judgment, your ability, and your character, but most notably [it depended] on your unselfishness and kindness.” Did we ever learn this lesson from them?

For years, you may have found me with Emma Goldman, Eugene O’Neil, with Brancusi and Buckminster Fuller, and others, holding forth and sharing stories at Romany Marie’s—the best café and salon in Greenwich Village. But, in the end, what do we ever know about each other? I may have been sitting in a New York City bistro—I’d raise a glass to you and offer a chair, but look into my eyes—and there, in Manhattan, you will see Fannie, my son Alex, and the beauty, the haunting splendor of the Arctic, my truth north and pole star.

I am Vilhjamur Stefansson; remember me and farewell.

May Sarton ((1912-1995))

I was in my early twenties when I saw Eva Le Gallienne acting in *The Cradle Song* at the Civic Repertory Theatre in New York; saw her Hedda Gabler as well; fell deeply in love at first sight—with her, with the theatre—and wanted to be an actor, much to father’s dismay. You see, my parents were refugees from Belgium; father taught history of science at Harvard and mother was a fabric designer. They thought that theatre was no kind of life for a young woman—probably only encouraged me to pursue it—*which I did*, first as an actor at the Civic Rep, and then as director of my own Associated Actors Theatre. That went bust during the Great Depression. Maybe it wasn’t college, but it *was* an education; “I believe now that it was immensely valuable for me as a writer, and I don’t regret having done it” for a moment.

I'm May Sarton—and my goodness, was it *fifty books* of poetry, novels, memoirs and journals that I wrote and published during my life? So much writing! So much life! I think that I had my first experience with the Muse when I was an adolescent attending the First Unitarian Church in Cambridge. Rev. Crothers was his name, and one sermon of “quiet wisdom...marked me for life. I can hear him saying, ‘Go into the inner chamber of your soul—and shut the door.’ The slight pause after ‘soul’ did it. [It was] a revelation to a child who heard it and who never forgot it.” From then on, I found a “spirituality” in the creative act of writing and reading my poetry. “Perhaps every true poem is a dialogue with the Divine, and when we are able to write a poem, we become, for a few hours, part of Creation itself.” Take this poem, for instance:

Old Trees

Old trees—
How exquisite the white blossom
On the gnarled branch!
Thickened trunk, erratic shape
Battered by winter winds,
Bent in the long cold.

Young ones may please
The aesthete,
But old trees—
The miracle of their flowering
Against such odds—
Bring healing.

Let us praise them,
And sing hosannahs
As the small buds grow red
Just before they open.

You see, I think that if “one looks long enough at almost anything, looks with absolute attention at a flower, a stone, the bark of a tree, grass, snow, a cloud—something like a revelation takes place. Something is ‘given’ and perhaps that something is always a reality outside the self. We are aware of God only when we cease to be aware of ourselves, not in the negative sense of denying self, but in the sense of losing self in admiration and joy.”

Unitarians were good to me—helped me “get over the hump” from small poetry audiences to larger engagements. I spoke at General Assembly, and lectured at Starr King

School for Ministry. When I received the Ministry to Women Award from the UU Women's Federation, it was an honour to be introduced as "our poet." Still, I did think Unitarians could be a "little sentimental.... Kind, intelligent people, to be sure, but a bit too obsessed with human relations alone.... You did not really want to think about God. His absence...or His presence. Both are too frightening," aren't they? But what am I saying? I'm a guest here, and should stop before you think me rude and ungrateful.

Let me read you one more poem to make amends:

Late Autumn

On random wires the roles of summer swallows
Wait for their lift-off. They will soon be gone
Before All Saints and before All Hallows,
The changing time when we are most alone.

Disarmed, too vulnerable, full of dread,
And once again as naked as the trees
Before the dark, precarious days ahead,
And troubled skies over tumultuous seas.

When we are so transparent to the dead
There is no wall. We hear their voices speak,
And as the small birds wheel off overhead
We bend toward the earth suddenly weak.

How to believe that all will not be lost?
Our flowers, too, not perish in the blight?
Love, leave me your South against the frost.
Say "hush" to my fears, and warm the night.

There. Hush. May your night be warmed, your fears assuaged. You are a gallant group, and gracious. My companions and I, your ancestors—Isabella (Jagiellon), Joseph (Workman), and Vilhjamur (Stefansson)—thank you for your invitation, your welcome here this Samhain, All Hallows season. May peace be with you. Farewell.