

Owning What We Create
A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson
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UCV

I'd like to begin by saying that I shamelessly borrowed the illustration on the cover of today's order of service from my daughter Hannah's twitter account. I am truly blessed by the lives of my adult children and their mother, and our on-going dialogue and lives as a family.

On this 31st of March, which brings the commemoration of Women's History Month to its close, I want to take us back in time to two women, mother and daughter, and to some of their significant and lasting contributions. That each was deeply linked to the creative world of ideas, politics, community and publishing of late 18th and early 19th century British Unitarianism adds resonance to our setting here today—the tolling out of this year's Women's History Month and to our congregation that, in October 2010, hosted one these women—Mary Wollstonecraft—as one of our memorable ancestors, as well as Wollstonecraft's dear Unitarian friend and publisher, Joseph Johnson, who visited us in 2013.

So first, to Mary Wollstonecraft who was born in 1759. I think it's important to note that Wollstonecraft grew to adulthood in a not-so-merrie-England. She lived in an age of the rise of the Industrial Revolution, infernal factories, and near incessant wars and rumors of war. Members of non-Church of England religions were barred from Oxford and Cambridge and from serving in government and numerous professions. Dissent at home over Britain's wars and criticism of the government was ruthlessly suppressed. Informers and spies attended dissenting church services, and the mail of suspect dissidents was opened and censored. A host of British Unitarians were at the top of the list.

The House of Lords consisted of aristocrats who inherited their positions regardless of merit. Members to the House of Commons were chosen by just 15,000 voting men, which was about one-half of one percent (!) of the adult male population. The notion of female enfranchisement was beyond the pale of thought. No city—like the burgeoning urban populations of Liverpool, Birmingham and Manchester—had gained the right to representation in the House of Commons since 1678, which meant that cities crucial to Great Britain’s economy and standing were excluded from effective representation in government.

As well, single women had little protection under the law, and married women lost their legal identity on the occasion of nuptials. Women couldn’t retain a lawyer, sign a contract, inherit property, vote, or have rights over their children. Go figure.

Then along came Mary Wollstonecraft, and believe me, she must have appeared on the scene like a freak of nature. She dared to do what no other woman had done, namely, pursue a career as a full-time professional writer on serious subjects without an aristocratic sponsor. “I am going to be the first of a new genus,” she said. *{like Mozart! who did the same thing}*

Wollstonecraft’s life began conventionally and bitterly enough. The second of seven children, haphazardly educated on the fly, what was left of the family’s estate, frittered away by a drunken, brutal father was given exclusively to her elder brother according to the laws of primogeniture. Mary, and rest of the family, was left penniless. To make ends meet, she jobbed out as a lady’s companion and then as a governess to a dissolute aristocratic family.

All the while, she read and wrote on education, female conduct and the duties of life in a civil society; she was in her late 20s. Her work came to the attention of the London-based radical publisher and Unitarian, Joseph Johnson, who became Wollstonecraft’s friend and who engaged her as a professional as an editorial assistant and writer for his new journal *The*

Analytical Review. During the 1780s and into the 90s, for this journal, she contributed over 200 articles, reviews and translations of fiction, sermons, travelogues, children's books, natural history, music, architecture, philosophy, education, and the awfulness of solitary confinement.

Then, in 1790, in response to Edmund Burke's attack on the Unitarian minister Richard Price for daring to preach a sermon that true patriotism is the result of reason and knows no national boundaries, Wollstonecraft penned a ground-breaking, tart reply *The Vindication of the Rights of Men*. In this work, she endorsed the view that liberty of conscience is a sacred right, denounced the lack of representation of men *and* women in Britain's governance, praised revolutions in North America and France, and accused Burke of being blind to man-made poverty and injustice which she attributed to his infatuation with rank and privilege. People! She was taking on the most influential thinker and politician of Britain. Something like this had never before been seen from the pen of a woman and publicly published.

But that's hardly all. Encouraged by her publisher Joseph Johnson, Wollstonecraft followed *The Vindication of the Rights of Men* with the even more radical and influential work *The Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792. In this work, she asked a simple question: if rights and reason are given to all by Nature's God, how is it that half of humanity are excluded from exercising them? In answer, she contended that laws and civilization are the product of historical contingency—they're neither divine nor eternal—and insisted that only those institutions legal, political, cultural and religious that can withstand the scrutiny of reason, natural rights and justice deserve respect and obedience.

What makes this work really stand out is her analysis of the way social expectations, duties and manners imprisoned women in a web of false expectations, where a woman's worth was weighed by surface appearance, delicacy, and deference. Drawing from a remarkable range

of examples and her own subjective introspection, Wollstonecraft contended that nearly every aspect of the prevailing culture dictated the production of girls and women to be nothing but empty headed play-things, ornaments to men enthralled by devotion to the acquisition of property and wealth and its conspicuous display, and incapable of exercising civic virtue and responsibility.

A couple of quotes here to give us an idea of her writing:

Women are told from their infancy...that a little knowledge of cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety will obtain for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, every thing else is needless....How grossly they do insult us who advise us only to render ourselves gentle, pretty, domestic brutes!

Women are everywhere in this deplorable state....It is time to effect a revolution in female manners—time to restore to them their lost dignity—and make them part of the human species...by education in such a manner as to be able to think and act for themselves.... Strengthen the female mind by enlarging it, and there will be an end to blind obedience....I do not wish women to have power over men; but over themselves!

To carry out that revolution, Wollstonecraft advocated, among other things, for the publicly funded co-education of girls and boys based on the same enlightened curriculum and physical activities; that women be granted full civil and political rights, including the right to vote and stand for office, and be worthy of it by developing reason and civic virtues. She also argued that women should be taught skills in trades and professions so as to be able to support themselves whether single, married or widowed. She believed a woman should never have to marry or remarry out of financial necessity, and that the best of marriages was one based on friendship and an equal meeting of minds.

No wonder Wollstonecraft is considered today as one of Britain's most important radical, Enlightenment figures, the first person to call for full and equal rights of women and "the founder of feminism."

That she was also opinionated and outspoken, passionate in debate and love, mothered a child out of wedlock in Revolutionary France to an American merchant and spy who then brutally spurned her leading to two suicide attempts; and then, pregnant again and belatedly entering into a marriage with William Godwin one of England's most noted anarchists, atheists and public intellectuals, and then dying a miserable, unnecessary death only ten days after having given birth to a daughter who would become Mary Shelley...you'd think there would be statues and movies all over the place about this most singular woman. There aren't. Sometimes, I just don't get it.

Which brings me to that daughter—Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelly, and her most famous novel, *Frankenstein, Or the Modern Prometheus* first published in 1818, by Lackington and Co, of London, well-known for, among other things, publishing a *Life of Servetus*, the first *Unitarian Common Prayer Book*, and theological and scientific works by the infamous Unitarian radical Joseph Priestley.

For those of us who think we know *Frankenstein*: man makes monster; monster runs amok; monster kills man; monster gets lynched; monster is a grunting, shambling green-faced lunk—prepare to be surprised. In the summer of 1816, an 18 year-old Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin has fled England with the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. They hole up with Lord Byron in a villa on the shores of Lake Geneva, Switzerland, planning to escape scandal back home, and spend the summer in the sun. But the eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia the previous year had changed the climate of Europe. The weather was so bad they spend most of the time indoors, discussing the latest popular writings on science and the supernatural, and decide, one evening, that each will write a ghost story. Mary Shelley is the only one who actually followed through.

And what came out of the press three years later? Phillip Ball, the editor of the esteemed science journal *Nature*, calls *Frankenstein* “one of the most extraordinary achievements in English literature...a profound and unsettling vision, deeply informed by the science and philosophy of its day. That it was written... by a teenager at a very difficult period in her life feels almost miraculous.”

The novel itself has a complex structure. It consists of three overlapping autobiographies—one by the arctic explorer Robert Walton, the others by Victor Frankenstein, and the Creature himself—each nested cunningly one inside the other, each with a different voice, a different timeframe and a different view of the fateful experiment that brings the Creature to life, along with its terrifying consequences. It’s also a creative mix of genres—gothic melodrama, science fiction, moral fable, and vivid Romantic adventure travelogue—and *Frankenstein* also contains a series of philosophical debates about friendship, love and betrayal, scientific blindness and promise, love and solitude, education theory, justice and civic virtue. It’s quite a book, and I was delighted to read my daughter’s copy of it that included her insightful comments written in the margins.

For a novel, written by a troubled teenaged young woman, that’s seen three hundred editions, 650 comic books and cartoon strips, 150 fictional spinoffs—including Ahmed Saadawi’s 2017 *Frankenstein in Baghdad*—a terrific book by the way—and at least ninety films; that Frankenstein has gained a near universal mythic status and whose tropes, which most notably include a standard shorthand for science gone wrong, and a journalistic cliché for technologies we must distrust have combined over time to create an industry of popular and scholarly interpretation. I’ve waded through some of it, as many of us have in one way or another, consciously or not; but there’s nothing like actually going back to the source, and

reading its first edition from cover to cover, which many did last year in commemoration of the 200th anniversary of its publication.

From the host of surprises I experienced reading the book, aside from its literary complexity, the following stand out: first, “Frankenstein” refers only to Victor Frankenstein, the creator of the Creature, the latter, tellingly, is never endowed with a name. Second, instead of a lumbering, grunting thing with a flat-topped head and bolts at the neck, the Creature is fantastically tall, has long raven black hair, is experienced by others as hideously ugly, and is a highly intelligent, articulate being endowed with deep, moral passions which are revealed over and over again in strikingly moving speeches and scenes.

Here’s a quote to illustrate what I mean. The scene is a wild mountain glacier where Victor Frankenstein and Creature confront each other:

All men hate the wretched [spoke the Creature]; how then must I be hated, who am most miserable beyond all living things...I was benevolent; my soul glowed with love and humanity; but am I not alone, most miserably alone? What hope can I gather from your fellow creatures...[who] spurn and hate me? Oh Frankenstein...be not equitable to every other, and trample on me alone, to whom thy justice, and even thy clemency and affection, is most due. Remember, that I am thy creature: I ought to be thy Adam: but I am rather the fallen angel, whom thou drivest from joy for no misdeed. Every where I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend. Make me happy, and I shall again be virtuous.”

Which leads me to the last surprising thing I want to say about this book. It’s not, as many have written, that the principal theme of the novel is “the penalty of violating Nature.” Rather, it’s that Victor Frankenstein, with all the conventional privilege he enjoyed of gender, beauty, education, wealth, and social esteem *abandoned that which he had created*. What would have happened, I wonder, if Victor Frankenstein had, instead, lived up to his responsibilities by choosing to nurture, rather than spurn, his creature? A dull, short novel, we might say; but

imagine if the story had been about Victor struggling to have the Creature accepted and honoured by a society that shunned it as vile and unnatural.

It's here, I think, that Mary Shelley is the daughter to her mother Mary Wollstonecraft, the latter who, in her time, was grossly condemned and depicted as a "*hyena in skirts*"—an unnatural monster, due to her outspoken, intelligent advocacy of co-education to the professions and civic responsibilities, the rights of men and women, and her piercing, telling attacks on the glittering superficiality of so-called polite, aristocratic manners and society.

As to the penalty of violating nature, which is most often emphasized in readings of *Frankenstein*, what is more unnatural, for both Marys, is not the sin of scientific inquiry and technological innovation, but the thwarting of a child's, a creature's, education to intelligence, virtue and action, which they both knew by bitter experience. What's unnatural is the denial of rights to self-determination of women and men due merely to an accident of birth into something other than aristocratic or genteel classes, conventional notions of beauty, and unearned wealth. What's unnatural is the presumption that our technologies, like our children, won't go awry. Both will ever create new problems, new challenges, new opportunities. Frankenstein's sin, and that of conventional society roundly condemned in the pages of the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, is that we fail to own up to what we have created; the sin is our failure to the responsibility of love and our duty to care.

For a congregation which claims as its vision "a more compassionate world" and that advocates for "love and justice," may we, as this Women's History Month draws to a close, better esteem the work of these two women and their profound, ever-relevant legacy.