



A Selection from  
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**Augusta Chapin:  
Universalist Pioneer, Missionary, Prophet**

by the Rev. David A. Johnson

In the spring, summer, and fall of 1893 the Columbian Exposition, countless congresses and the World Parliament of Religions gathered in Chicago. There was a congeries of congresses of every sort through the long, hot, muggy summer - the Doctors Congress, Temperance Congress, Folklore Congress, Education Congress, Electrical Congress, Evolution Congress, even the Central Conference of American Rabbis and a Roman Catholic Congress. There were as well a host of smaller religious and secular groupings and gatherings, everything accompanied by the constant drumbeat of a full dress Dwight L. Moody tent revival nearby to counter the presumed sinful temptations and opportunities of such a terrible moral sinkhole as the World's Fair.

Women were determined not to have a repeat of the debacle and almost total freeze out of women at the 1876 Philadelphia World's Fair, at which women, led by Susan B. Anthony, given no place on the program, created one, and presented their Women's Declaration of Independence to a stunned chairman after the traditional Declaration was read at the Fourth of July ceremonies. They were equally concerned not

to have a miniscule place, as at the New Orleans Exposition of 1885, for which one woman, Julia Ward Howe, had put in long months of drudgery. They wanted full participation, place, position and power.

The women, shunted to what was thought would be the least felicitous time slot, were given the opening weeks of the Fair for their showcase events. They made the most of it and captured headlines in the nation's press. They dedicated their building on opening day, May first, with elaborate publicity and ceremony - despite the last minute "tearing the building to pieces and putting it together again" continuing until moments before the dedication Augusta Chapin, Chair of the Women's Committee of the Department of Religion, shared the platform with the Board of Lady Managers and a host of special guests. The WCTU's paper, the *Union Signal* of May 4th, proudly reported:

The noble women of all lands must have felt an electric thrill of sympathy with these representative women of the world who assisted to register an event in history as new as the creation--the consecration of a building, planned and decorated by women, to the arts, industries and literature of women; and greater still to chronicle the first meeting of its women by a government, in a great national enterprise, in a position independent of and coordinate with the men of the nation.

There was undeniably a feeling that this was, in some sense, a new creation, the beginning of a new world of opportunity and recognition for women.

There were fifty organizational booths in the Woman's Building, including several of special interest to Universalist women, among them the National American Woman's Suffrage Association booth, the WCTU booth and the Women's Ministerial Conference booth, which was decorated with pictures of its members. There were thirty-seven women Universalist ministers in the country and several were members, including Olympia Brown Willis, Florence Kollock, Phebe Hanaford, Mary Livermore (not a denominationally recognized preacher, but then neither was Julia Ward Howe, the President and founder) and Augusta Chapin, Vice President from its founding in 1873 (at the Church of the Disciples in Boston) until her death in 1905. All these were present in Chicago for the Women's Congress just ahead.

The opening of the Woman's Building was but a prelude to the major women's event of May, the World's Congress of Representative Women, which convened two weeks later in the still unfinished Art Palace. The officers of the Association for the Advancement of Women, celebrating their 21st anniversary at the Fair, President May Wright Sewell and Secretary Rachel Foster Avery, Unitarians, had put in a year of grinding labor to invite and urge the attendance of women from dozens of countries, and to assemble a weeklong program - thirty-nine separate sessions on subjects of concern to women. It was in some respects like a mini version of the entire gathering of other congresses, so encyclopedic were the topics raised.

Through the long days of the Womens Congress several Universalist women (as well as Unitarians) spoke. Also during the Womens Congress the Women's Ministerial Conference held its annual meeting, involving several Universalists including Augusta Chapin. The Conference, "presided over by that sweet woman, Mrs. Julia Ward Howe," said Rev. Emma Bailey, "heard fifteen women preachers give their experience."

The National American Womans Suffrage Association arranged to have Mrs. Upton read a strong address written by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, too weak to attend, on the "Ethics of Suffrage." The Womens Unitarian Congress met, Hultin and Dix presiding. With what intent they invited Jane Patterson to address them it is hard to guess. A more passionate and partisan Universalist would have been hard to find. Speaking on Universalism and the emancipation of women she reminded the Unitarians that four Universalist colleges opened their doors to women from the beginning, and Tufts had just opened all departments, including the theological, to women. She noted that Lombard College had just conferred the first Doctor of Divinity on a woman there in Chicago, Augusta Chapin, a Universalist naturally. Unitarian Marion Murdock was given the cleanup position on this debacle.

Sunday was not on the original Congress schedule. Neither were several major programs that creative women like Carrie Chapman Catt created as it were, *ex nihilo*, as they went along. To many it was important that the hour of the week most closed to women's leadership, the worship hour, be celebrated by women. Just that year, the outspoken renegade Matilda Joslyn Gage published right here in Chicago *Woman, Church and State*, savagely attacking "the most stupendous system of organized highway robbery known - the church's use and misuse of the talent and energy of women, crushing her personal, intellectual and spiritual freedom." Others might blanch at her words but the sentiment was shared. Elizabeth Cady Stanton put the matter pointedly in her autobiography: "Having men pray or preside for us at our meetings has always seemed to me a tacit admission that we haven't the brains to do these things ourselves." Her *Womans Bible* was, as the women met in Chicago, swiftly moving toward publication - in the hands of the revising committee which included Universalists Willis, Hanaford and Chapin.

A woman's service was in order. Two were scheduled, according to Celia Parker Wooley, one in Washington Hall with Anna Howard Shaw preaching, one in Columbus Hall with Augusta Chapin preaching, both at 10:00 a.m. Sunday morning, May 21st. It appears only the first service was held, but Augusta surely needed no additional opportunities to speak. She was omnipresent all summer, even serving on the Board of Jurors in the Liberal Arts.

There were also religious displays, including individual denominational displays at the Exposition. The Unitarians had a corner among the other church exhibits, where they had constructed a pale pink and blue Greek temple, which some observers felt was in perfect form for the "pate negations of the Unitarians." The Universalists decided to forego the

opportunity for such a physical display and put their energy into the Universalist Congress.

The Rev. Miss Augusta J. Chapin, as Chair of the Woman's Committee of the Department of Religion, appointed the Woman's Committee of the Universalist Congress, including the Mesdames Harris, Sawyer, Sears, Ellis, Wallace, Swan, and Balch (widow of the beloved late minister in Elgin) in 1892. They had held several planning sessions with the General Committee, headed by Rev. A.J. Canfield, in that year, setting out the final program for the Universalist Congress insuring women's participation on the platform as well as in the audience.

The World's Parliament of Religions, the "monster gathering" as the Universalists called it, ran from September 11th to the 27th in the Hall of Columbus at the Art Palace. There were three sessions each day over the seventeen days in the Hall of Columbus, which seated 3000. It often overflowed. There was a spirit, an excitement, an intense interest palpable in the audience, a sense that something new, never before accomplished, was occurring around them, and so there was. Never before had representatives of so many diverse faiths met in a public congress on equal terms.

We stand today in awe and amazement at events in Eastern Europe at the rebirth of freedom, at winds of change, a sense of openness and opportunity overtaking old oppressions and restrictions. We are stunned by the striking figure of Nelson Mandela, free at last, fighting for South Africa's freedom. It was such a sense that religious liberals and especially women experienced in Chicago that summer and fall at the Womens Congress and the World Parliament. It seemed a talisman, an opening fanfare to a new world being born. Augusta Chapin in her opening address to the Parliament poured her heart and soul into her opening words as she had poured her energies into Congresses and Parliament:

Welcome. I am strangely moved as I stand upon this platform and attempt to realize what it means that you are all here from so many lands representing so many and widely differing phases of religious thought and life and what it means that I am here in the midst of this unique assemblage to represent womanhood and woman's part of it all. The parliament which assembles in Chicago this morning is the grandest and most significant convocation ever gathered in the name of religion on the face of the earth.

The old world, which has rolled on through countless stages and phases of physical progress, until it is an ideal home for the human family, has through a process of evolution or growth, reached an era of intellectual and spiritual attainment where there is malice towards none and charity of all; where, without prejudice, without fear and with perfect fidelity to personal convictions, we may clasp hands across the chasm of our indifference and cheer each other in all that is good and true.

The World's first Parliament of Religions could not have been called sooner and have gathered the religionists of all these lands together. We had to wait for the hour to strike, until the steamship, the railway, and the telegraph had brought men together, leveled their walls of separation and made them acquainted with each other; until scholars had broken the way through the pathless wilderness of ignorance, superstition and falsehood and compelled them to respect each other's honesty, devotion and intelligence. A hundred years ago the world was not ready for this parliament. Fifty years ago it could not have been convened, and had it been called but a single generation ago, one-half of the religious world could not have been directly represented.

Woman could not have had part in it in her own right for two reasons: One, that her presence would not have been thought of nor tolerated; and the other was that she, herself, was too weak, too timid and too unschooled to avail herself of such an opportunity had it been offered. Few indeed, were they a quarter of a century ago who talked about the Divine Fatherhood and Human Brotherhood, and fewer still were they who realized the practical religious power of these conceptions. Now few are found to question them.

I am not an old woman, yet my memory runs easily back to the time when, in all the modern world, there was not one well-equipped college or university open to women students, and when, in all the modern world, no woman had been ordained, or even acknowledged, as a preacher outside the denomination of Friends. Now the doors are thrown open in our own and many other lands. Women are becoming masters of the languages in which the great sacred literatures of the world are written. They are winning the highest honors that the great universities have to bestow, and already in the field of religion hundreds have been ordained and thousands are freely speaking and teaching this new Gospel of freedom and gentleness that has come to bless mankind.

We are still at the dawn of this new era. It's grand possibilities are all before us, and its heights are ours to reach. We are assembled in this great parliament to look for the first time in each other's faces and to speak to each other our best and truest words. I can only add my heartfelt word of greeting to those you already heard. I welcome you my brothers, of every name and land, who have wrought so long and so well in accordance with the wisdom high heaven has given to you; and I welcome you, sisters, who have come with beating hearts and earnest purpose to this great feast, to participate not only in this parliament but in the great congresses associated with it. Isabella, the Catholic, had not only the perception of a new world but of an enlightened and emancipated womanhood, which should strengthen religion and bless mankind. I welcome you to the fulfillment of her prophetic vision.

Jenkin Lloyd Jones recalled that this session was punctuated with "tumultuous applause," handkerchiefs waving, "the mingling of tears and smiles." Overlapping the Parliament meeting were not only the Unitarian and Universalist Congresses but also many others.

There were few Universalist speakers at the Parliament itself since their own Congress was so extensive-fifty-five speakers. Augusta Chapin spoke at the beginning and at the

conclusion, also reading a paper by the absent Antoinette Brown Blackwell on "Women in the Pulpit," and subsequently presiding over a session. The next month she was to speak in her own words on the ministry of women to the Universalist General Convention in Washington, D.C. The closing session of the Parliament saw six thousand in attendance. Augusta Chapin summed up the Parliament in reflecting that it was the "fulfillment of a dream, the fulfillment of a long cherished prophecy." Speaking to all of every faith and persuasion she declared, "We are glad to have seen you face to face, and we shall count you henceforth more than ever friends and co-workers in the great things in religion." She was followed by Julia Ward Howe who reminded all that deeds not words alone were called for, "Let some valorous, new, strong, and courageous influence go forth," she urged. Religion is not the supremacy of one individual, idea or sex, but the province of every living soul. Olympia Brown Willis put in the Biblical punctuation: "If ye love not your brother [or sister] whom ye have seen, how can ye love God whom ye have not seen?"

Augusta Chapin continued lecturing, teaching, traveling and serving Universalism and the movement for women's freedom and religious freedom for years to come, helping to reshape the Woman's Ministerial Conference into a vigorous, supportive community of women professionals in her last years. It would be difficult to find in the two hundred years of organized Universalism in this nation a more devoted, successful, effective evangelist of the faith.

### **Closing Remarks at the World's Parliament of Religions, Chicago, 1893** **Augusta Jane Chapin**

The last seventeen days have seemed to many of us the fulfillment of a dream; nay, the fulfillment of a long cherished prophecy. The seers of ancient time foretold a day when there should be concord, something like what we have seen, among elements before-time discordant.

We have heard of the Fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the solidarity of the human race until these great words and truths have penetrated our minds and sunken into our hearts as never before. They will henceforth have larger meaning. No one of us all but has been intellectually strengthened and spiritually uplifted.

The last moments of the great parliament are passing. We who welcomed now speed the parting guests. We are glad you came, Oh wise men of the East, with your wise words, your large, tolerant spirit, and your gentle ways. We have been glad to sit at your feet and learn of you in these things. We are glad to have seen you face to face, and we shall count you henceforth more than ever our friends and co-workers in the great things of religion.