

**ABOLITIONIST MINISTER:
SAMUEL J. MAY OPPOSES THE FUGITIVE SLAVE LAW**

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INTRODUCTION

In Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved* (1987), the title character never appears alive. The narrator of the story is a younger sister who gradually uncovers the circumstances surrounding Beloved's death. Their mother was an escaped slave who, hearing that slave-hunters were coming, gathered up her children, took them to a woodshed, and slit their throats. Beloved died. Two brothers survived and seemed not to remember the incident in the woodshed. All the same, they never

rested easy when their mother was in the house. Neither did *Beloved* rest easy; she returned to haunt her mother.

The story seems fantastic, excessive, grotesque, and overdrawn, like an account in a lurid martyrology. Surely, this story concerns legend as did Morrison's previous novel, *The Song of Solomon* (1977), which explored the myth that Black people, in extenuating circumstances, could fly. *Beloved* is a beautiful and disturbing tale, a tragedy in the classic sense, evoking both pity and terror. The mother seems as implacable and incomprehensible as Abraham on Mount Moriah, as fervent as Patrick Henry when he chose death over servitude.

Most historical accounts of The Underground Railroad talk about a variety of important fugitive slave cases. Among these are such instances as the rendition of Thomas Sims in Boston and the rescue of Jerry McHenry in Syracuse. One of them, incredibly, is that of Margaret Garner, who killed one of her children to prevent its return to bondage. In essence, the story of *Beloved* not only could happen, it did happen in January, 1856.

Arendt (1990) has argued that in the United States our founding documents, the Declaration of Independence and the constitution, provide the sacred base on which all rights are predicated and all procedures depend. Yet the Declaration of Independence was expurgated of all reference to slavery, and the freedoms guaranteed by the United States Constitution were compromised at the outset. In order to form a union at all, much less a "more perfect union," the founders of the nation felt themselves forced to grant concessions to the slave-holding states.

Over the years, additional legislative and judicial advantages were added to those granted to slave-owners by the Constitution. By the time Margaret Garner attempted to save her children from a fate worse than death, she possessed no civil rights, no status as a human being, and no recourse to the law or courts. If she and her children were apprehended by slave-hunters, even if she had been a free woman, she would not have been allowed to testify on her own behalf, or to have anyone else speak for her. Rendition was a foregone conclusion.

From the inception of the Republic until the Emancipation Proclamation, the coercion of civil and military force was used to suppress the rights of Black people. The principles of liberty and equal justice, guaranteed by the Constitution to the white population, were not extended to people of other races. The American Revolution was an incomplete one. In the struggle for freedom for African-American slaves, the Revolution was continued and continues down to the present

time. Black Americans still experience a disproportionate share of society's sorrow in the forms of inadequate housing, unemployment, poor health, and blighted lives. No one rests easy; Beloved is with us all.

The various denominations of Christian churches struggled with the problem of slavery. Even in its formative years, "Christianity did not seem capable of transcending certain social patterns of the day, and slavery was accepted in the legal sense. Implied criticism of this bondage came through indirect efforts of Christians to change the hearts of slaveholders and in urgings which prompted the release of slaves on a voluntary basis" (Marty, 1959, p. 66). The churches were divided in their opinions about slavery, and there was a real threat of internal schism, so that: whatever moral persuasions the churches might have brought to bear upon the subject, they were hampered both by a reluctance to alienate their southern membership and by wrangling over the scriptural warrants for social action. Slavery was considered necessary to Southern commerce, and if it was an institution to be transcended in time, the time was not now. Gradualism was the popular remedy, and as in the early centuries of the faith, voluntary emancipation was the ideal. Some churches issued manifestos declaring the duty of Christians to emancipate their slaves, only to rescind these orders when schism threatened. The Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian denominations had all split over the issue of slavery (Stang, 1977).

The Margaret Garner case illustrates one of the painful and persistent ironies of American political and religious history. In the middle of the nineteenth century in a country founded upon guaranteed rights and principles of equality and justice, a child was murdered to protect her from officers lawfully empowered to remand both mother and child to slavery. In those days, it was the exceptional person who was able to see through the blandishments, threats, and inducements of the slaveholding majority in national government. Samuel Joseph May was one of those gifted with sight. He was able to feel and articulate the intense shame and sorrow caused by the nation's involvement in slavery. He was a devout Abolitionist, and throughout his long and eventful life, he endeavored to free the slaves, alleviate their suffering, and apprise citizens of their guilty complicity in that major "sin." I am proud to observe that he was a Unitarian minister who performed all the offices of that post with grace and integrity. He was preacher, counselor, teacher, activist, prophet. His life stands as example and aspiration to those of us who follow into times as dark as his with lesser gifts and courage.

Samuel Joseph May's life and example cannot compensate the child who was Beloved, but at least he provided what the era sorely needed, a reasoned, whole-

hearted, unequivocal cry of anguish and outrage.

PRUDENCE FORBIDS: SLAVERY IN AMERICA

On the whole, my respect for my fellow-men, except as one may outweigh a million, is not being increased these days.

Henry David Thoreau
(1859)

At the time of the formation of the New England colonies in the seventeenth century, the ethic which governed everyday life within the religious communities was the stringent application of God's law as the colonists interpreted that law. Anglicans, Calvinists, and Quakers agreed that God himself was the source of all legitimate social power and order (Lippy & Williams, 1988, p. 1429). The enforcement of rules of conduct was a matter of local church discipline. Generally, people settled in groups in which opinions tended toward conformity if not agreement. Each community established rules of conduct which seemed to them best suited to ensure their safety and to maintain their souls in spotless condition. Radical divergence of opinion could be handled by the expedient of banishment. If recalcitrants quarreled with the established interpretation of "God's law," there was always unsettled territory to which to remove, there to establish communities based on different principles

With successive waves of immigration, the former homogeneity of opinion could not be maintained. No longer could it be assumed that settlements had primarily a religious base. Often there were economic considerations: farmers in search of land, merchants and agents of manufacturers in search of raw materials, etc. The authority and effectiveness of the churches were severely tested by the increasing diversity of people's opinions, morals, and ways of life.

From the point of view of the British and European merchants and manufacturers who invested in the colonization of North America, the colonies were merely raw-material provinces. Mercantile economy slanted the trade balance to favor the mother countries, to the detriment of the colonies. At that time, these policies were considered sound and patriotic (Hart, 1907). Many colonies established methods of producing goods which returned the most profit with the least investment in capital and labor. In many cases, this involved exploiting the cheapest labor to be had – slaves, although the institution of slavery had its critics from the first.

Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration of Independence contained a clause pertaining to slavery.

He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur a miserable death in their transportation thither. This practical warfare, the opprobrium of infidel powers, is the warfare of the Christian King of Great Britain. Determined to keep a market where men should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce. (Phillips, 1856, p. 11)

Even though it was England's King George III who was castigated, the clause was not acceptable to South Carolina and Georgia, and it was stricken from the document.

The colonies which banded together as adversaries of Great Britain found it difficult to set aside the attitude of resistance once the American Revolution attained its goal. The political ties to England were severed, but the economic arrangements continued, and the states were divided into special interest sections. They had an enemy in common and little else.

The post-war business of establishing the rules by which the states would regulate themselves as a unified nation immediately bogged down as each section argued for special interest and consideration. Agreement seemed impossible. The best that the country's statesmen could counsel was compromise. South Carolina and Georgia would not join the union without some guarantees and protections for their "peculiar institution" of slavery. Their economy, based as it was on cotton, rice, and indigo, could be profitable only by utilizing unpaid labor. Some Northern States were concerned to protect their shipping agreements with the Southern States.

The North also feared that if the South did not join the new nation, it would seek aid from foreign powers. The Revolution had just been fought to expel foreign governors and troops. To have the South resort to European aid, trade, and transport was insupportable. The North was in a mood to concede much to prevent the reintroduction of foreign interference. In this atmosphere of mutual distrust and bickering, the constitution was drafted, debated, dissected and adopted.

Article I Section 2 of the Constitution apportions representatives and assesses taxes according to the number of "free" persons, excluding Indians, and three-fifths of all others. The "other" persons were slaves, thus granting to the slave-holding states a disproportionately large representation in Congress. During the debates on the Constitution, some favored prohibiting the importation of slaves, but some Northern shipping interests objected, as did the South. A compromise was struck. Section nine stipulates that Congress could not prohibit the importation of slaves for twenty years.

In the conventions held in the thirteen states to debate the Constitution, the advantages which the document awarded to the slaveholders were noticed and mentioned. In the New York convention, a Mr. Smith objected to the three-fifths rule of apportionment, because he thought that it was founded on unjust principles, allotting privileges to those people who were so wicked as to keep slaves. But, he supposed that accommodation was in order if a union was to be established, though it was "utterly repugnant to his feelings" (Phillips, 1856, p. 74). Alexander Hamilton defended the passage, citing commercial reasons. The North, he said, derived advantages too, specifically a treaty-making advantage when dealing with foreign nations regarding commerce in tobacco, rice, indigo, etc.

In the Virginia convention, Governor Randolph worried, as the Pharaoh of Egypt had before him, about the growing numbers of slaves. "Are we not weakened by the population of those whom we hold in slavery? The day may come when they may make impression upon us. The number of those people, compared to that of whites, is in an immense proportion; their number amounts to 236,000 – that of the whites, only to 352,000" (Phillips, 1856, p. 78). The fear of inciting slave rebellions continued to be used as an argument to stifle antislavery agitation in the years to come.

George Mason of Virginia complained that there was no provision in the Constitution to prevent the Northern and Eastern states from interfering "with our whole property of that kind." Nor, he thought, was there any protection for securing to the southern states those slaves they possessed, which ". . . will involve us in great difficulties and infelicity to be now deprived of them. . . . and the loss of which would bring ruin on a great many people" (Phillips, 1856, p. 81). James Madison reassured Mason that there was a clause that secured that property. "This clause was expressly inserted to enable owners of slaves to reclaim them. This is a better security than any that now exists" (Phillips, 1856, p. 81). He was referring to Article 4, Section 2, which stands as the original Fugitive Slave Law. It states that

slaves who escape to a free state are not thereby emancipated by the laws of that state, but they should be returned to their owners.

Mr. Henry summed up the dilemma, "As much as I deplore slavery, I see that prudence forbids its abolition" (Phillips, 1856, p. 82). Madison agreed that a dismemberment of the Union would be worse than allowing the importation of slaves for another twenty years. So the concessions to slave-holders were accepted and written into the Constitution. John Quincy Adams reflected some years later that "the delegation from the free states, in their extreme anxiety to conciliate the ascendancy of the Southern slaveholder, did listen to a compromise between right and wrong – between freedom and slavery" (Phillips, 1856, pp. 158-159).

The consequences of the Congressional imbalance, as Theodore Parker observed (1848), were important and long lasting. Parker provided a statistical analysis of the state of the Union. Three million men, or one sixth of the nation, were slaves. One half of the States were slaveholders. Seven out of ten presidents had been slaveholders. In 1790 there were 697,897 slaves valued at \$10,000,000. In 1840 there were 2,487,355 slaves valued at \$1,200,000,000. John Quincy Adams had come to a similar realization about the leadership of the government during his time. The president, President of the Senate, Speaker of the House of Representatives, and five out of nine Judges of the Supreme Court were citizens of slaveholding states and slaveholders themselves (Phillips, 1856, p. 158).

Over the years, the Southern Congressmen managed to protect Southern rights and privileges. They saw to it that when frontier States petitioned for admission to the Union, that the South did not lose its advantage. It became policy to admit states in pairs, one free and one slave, to maintain the balance between North and South (Boorstin, 1985). Additional laws were proposed and adopted to deal with the continuing problem of runaway slaves. The Northwest Ordinance of July, 1787, established the Northwest Territory as free, but it contained a Fugitive Slave Clause which provided for the lawful reclamation of any slaves who escaped to the Territory.

The First Fugitive Slave Act (1793) is subtitled, "An act respecting fugitives from justice and persons escaping from the service of their masters." It sets forth a process for the extradition of fugitives among the states and territories of the United States. Two classes of fugitive are described: Those who had committed treason, felony or other crime, and those held to labor, or slaves. Those in the first category were to be held and delivered to an agent of the state from which they fled. If no agent appeared within six months, the criminal was released. Expenses

accrued during a fugitive's incarceration were to be paid by the state that requested extradition.

In the case of fugitive slaves, however, the stipulations were more severe. An agent or attorney of the owner was allowed to arrest the fugitive and take him or her before a circuit or district judge or magistrate of the county, city, or town where the arrest was made. If the owner's agent could "prove," either by oral testimony or affidavit, that the captured person was indeed a fugitive slave, he received a certificate allowing rendition of the fugitive. In both cases, anyone who interfered with the capture or transport of fugitives was subject to fines up to five hundred dollars and, in the case of helping an escaped felon, the possibility of one year imprisonment (*The public statutes, the underground railroad, 1845-1925*, pp. 302-305).

The Missouri compromise of 1820 contained a fugitive slave clause similar to that of the Northwest Ordinance which provided, again, that any persons escaping into the Missouri Territory could be lawfully reclaimed and returned to the owners. Southern congressmen were aware that once a state or Territory was admitted to the Union, the time to press their position on the issue of fugitives was past, so these fugitive clauses were added to the legislation by which the states were originally recognized.

The Second Fugitive Slave Act of September, 1850, amended the First Act of 1793. It established the office of Commissioner, who was empowered to carry out the duties allotted to judges and magistrates in the First Act. The appointed commissioners could hear testimony and receive affidavits from agents or attorneys of claimants and pass judgment upon the truth and merit of the claims. As an inducement to render agreeable judgments, a fee of ten dollars was to be paid to the commissioner if he decided for the claimant and a fee of five dollars if he did not. The Commissioners were authorized to form a posse to execute the provisions of the Act, and "all good citizens are hereby commanded to aid and assist in the . . . execution of this law, whenever their services may be required. . . ." Moreover, it stipulated that the circuit Courts "shall from time to time enlarge the number of commissioners, with a view to afford reasonable facilities to reclaim fugitives from labor, and to the prompt discharge of the duties imposed by this act" (*The public statutes, the underground railroad, Volume 1, Appendix A, 1845-1925*, p. 362).

Marshals and deputy marshals were enjoined to obey and execute all claims presented to them or be subject to a fine of one thousand dollars. If a marshal or

deputy should loose track of a fugitive slave, he was liable to prosecution and a fine equal to the value of the labor of the fugitive. These fines would be remanded to the owner of the slave. Any persons convicted of hindering or obstructing the apprehension and removal of a fugitive were subject to fines and penalties not exceeding one thousand dollars and six months imprisonment, in addition to civil damages payable to the slave's owner in the amount of one thousand dollars per each fugitive lost.

Section six of the Act allows the owner's agent or attorney, with only a written and certified power of attorney from the owner, to "pursue and reclaim such fugitive person, either by procuring a warrant from some one of the courts, judges, or commissioners aforesaid, . . . or by *seizing and arresting such fugitive, where the same can be done without process.* . . . [emphasis added.] Then the owner or agent, with the fugitive, went to a judge or commissioner to present depositions, affidavits or "other satisfactory testimony," from the claimant only! "In no trial or hearing under this act shall the testimony of such alleged fugitive be admitted in evidence; and the certificates . . . shall be conclusive" of the right of the owners to remove the fugitive to the State or Territory from which he or she escaped. Section ten allowed any claimant, agent or attorney to apply to any court or judge, and with "satisfactory proof," have the escape recorded by the court. A transcript of this record was then considered "full and conclusive evidence" of the escape and that labor is due to the claimant. However, the law adds this section was not to be construed to mean that such a transcript was required as evidence but "the claim shall be heard and determined upon other satisfactory proofs, competent in law" (*The public statutes, the Statutes at Large, Volume IX, pp. 462-465*).

The commissioners, and the members of the posse which the commissioner could summon, were to be paid by the claimant, as well as all expenses for the apprehension and incarceration of the fugitive. However, should a rescue be suspected, the officer who made the arrest was to retain the fugitive in custody and transport him or her back to the claimant's state, all expenses to be paid out of the treasury of the United States. How the possibility of having expenses paid by the people of the United States influenced the number of suspected rescues would be interesting to explore.

ONE MAY OUTWEIGHS A MILLION

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the United States found itself facing grave political and religious problems, not the least of which was the intransigence of the problem of slavery. Had the First Fugitive Slave Act been effective, there would

have been no need to amend and fortify it. The severity of the penalties for helping slaves to escape testifies to the magnitude of the problem: How do you keep them down on the plantations? The presence of millions of slaves in a country founded upon principles of equality and justice was mortifying to people of conscience. Some well-intentioned but passive reformers assumed that freedom was a self-evident right, and that the south would free her slaves gradually, as a humanitarian act. Others believed that slavery would be phased out as paid labor became more available and cost effective. Still others held out hope that the Africans could be exported again to a colony in Liberia, on the West coast of Africa.

There was cause for hope that emancipation could occur in the ordinary course of events. Britain, after all, had emancipated the slaves in the British West Indies in the 1830's, so there was some evidence that civilization was progressing. But, as the years wore on, these hopes were not realized, and the number of slaves increased radically after Whitney's invention made cotton a more profitable crop. Some people began to suspect that some sort of coercion might have to be exerted in order to gain freedom for the slaves. Coercion might take several forms: Moral suasion, petitions to congress, defiance of the Law, or even armed forays into slave territory. All these strategies were tried as the North framed responses to the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.

Abolitionists disagreed among themselves about which arena – private, public, or ecclesiastical – was the most appropriate, righteous, and effective in which to work. There was also disagreement about how much force could rightfully be used in waging the good fight for justice. Many Unitarians espoused and worked for the antislavery cause, but Samuel Joseph May stands out among them because he worked effectively in all arenas.

Samuel Joseph May was born in Boston on September 12, 1797. He was the third child of Joseph and Dorothy Sewall May to be named Samuel Joseph, the previous two having died before his birth (Mumford, 1873). He graduated from Harvard in 1817, read theology under Norton and Ware, briefly assisted William Ellery Channing, and was ordained in 1822. He served parishes in Brooklyn, Connecticut, from 1822 to 1836, South Scituate, Massachusetts, from 1836 to 1842, and Syracuse, New York, from 1845 to 1867. At the invitation of Horace Mann, he served as principal of the Normal School in Lexington, Massachusetts, between the South Scituate and Syracuse pastorates (Malone, 1961). When he died in Syracuse, New York, in 1871, the Black people in the community put on mourning badges and lowered their flags to half-mast, the same honors they had accorded President Lincoln. At his funeral, Blacks, whites, and Native Americans sat side by side, a

microcosm of integration that had yet to be achieved on a national scale.

A list of the charitable causes which he served during his long ministry reads like an encyclopedia of nineteenth and twentieth century social action: Child labor reform, educational reform, Indian rights, interfaith dialogue, peace, poverty relief, temperance, women's rights, etc. But the cause that commanded his time and concern for more than three decades, the one that occasioned the mourning badges at his funeral, was the abolition of slavery.

Beginning in 1830, Mr. May worked faithfully and energetically for the abolition of slavery. It was he who in 1834 chastised and encouraged William Ellery Channing to write on the subject. He championed the work of arch-Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. He was a founding member and agent of the American Antislavery Society and served on the Committee that drafted the Society's statement of sentiments. He urged the American Unitarian Association (AUA) to adopt an antislavery platform. He preached and published an antislavery message. His home was a stop on the Underground Railroad, and he personally helped many fugitives along the road to freedom. These were not popular endeavors when he undertook them. Indeed, May was shunned, threatened with bodily harm, hung and burned in effigy, and on several occasions, mobbed.

Samuel May's liberalism and piety were rooted in the New England liberal religious tradition associated with Old South Church and King's Chapel. May's great-great grandfather (1652-1730) was Chief Justice Samuel Sewall, one of the judges at the infamous witch trials. He came to regret his part in those proceedings and for many years he submitted himself to a public ritual of repentance. At Old South Church, Boston, he stood before the congregation while the minister read his letter of confession. Sewall then asked the congregation to pray for him, his family, and his country. His son, the Rev. Dr. Joseph Sewall (1688-1769), later served as minister at Old South (Mumford, 1873).

May's grandparents on his father's side were originally members of the Hollis Street Church. Discontent with the minister, Dr. Mather Byles, caused them to remove to the Old South congregation where May's father, Joseph, sang in the choir as a child. When British troops evicted the Old South congregation, the people of King's Chapel allowed them to meet in their space. This arrangement continued for five years, and when Old South was reclaimed in 1783, Joseph remained at King's. Later, he was one of the contingents that favored the altered Unitarian Liturgy, and he also voted for the congregational, ordination of James Freeman. But for the good offices of Dr. Byles and the British troops, Samuel

Joseph might have been born into an orthodox family!

At the invitation of Harriet Beecher Stowe, May reflected upon the events in his life that had influenced him to espouse the cause of the slaves. He credits at least two: First, his friendship with a bright, creative, popular Black boy during his early school years; second, the anonymous Black woman who carried him home after he had fallen and struck his head (Mumford, 1873). Thus May learned early to respect Black people's capacities for academic, social, and moral achievement.

There were many other childhood events and conditions that had important bearings on May's direction in life. The most tragic and remarkable was the death of his brother, Edward. This happened when Edward was six and Samuel but four years of age. May witnessed the terrible accident that claimed his brother's life. In fact, Edward was entertaining the younger brother, clowning and cavorting about the yard, when the fatal fall occurred. The entire family was very solicitous of young Samuel during the grieving process. His father, uncle, and brother assured him that Edward was still alive, an angel in heaven with God and Jesus. His uncle also took him into the family crypt so he could see what happened to the body after death. Two days after Edward's burial, Samuel dreamed of him – vividly. The ceiling above his bed opened, and Edward, with other angels, came down and spoke comforting words to him, reassuring him that the family had told him was true, and entrusting loving messages to other members of the family. This dream recurred several times again, so that May was even eager to go to bed so the dream could commence and he could be with Edward. May himself realized that this powerful dream had deeply influenced his spiritual life. “I believe it had the greatest influence in awakening and fixing in my soul the full faith I have in the continuance of life after death” (Mumford, 1873, p. 10).

In his memoirs, May mentions with gratitude the pioneers in the anti-slavery movement who inspired him to take up the work. He was first attracted to this cause in 1819 when he heard Daniel Webster speak in opposition to the Missouri Compromise. His mission to the captives was sealed the following year upon hearing Mr. Webster deliver a charge to the clergy in regard to slavery and the slave trade. He said, "I invoke the ministers of our religion, that they proclaim its denunciation of these crimes. If the pulpit be silent wherever or whenever there may be a sin (sic) bloody with this guilt within the hearing of its voice, the pulpit is false to its trust" (May, 1869, p. 358). Webster was later to renege on his own rhetoric and speak in favor of Clay's Omnibus Bill, which contained the Second Fugitive Slave Law. May reflected upon this irony, that the man who had introduced him to the cause of the slaves had become their enemy (May, 1869, p.

359).

Two Presbyterian ministers inspired May by their example and witness: John Rankin and John D. Paxton, who published letters which later proved useful to the Abolitionists. Paxton lost his Cumberland, Virginia, pastorate because he preached an antislavery doctrine (May, 1869, pp. 10-11). It was Noah Worcester who had convinced May of the necessity of holding to peaceful means of settlement, and May carried this idea into his antislavery work. Benjamin Lundy, a Quaker, had been organizing anti-slavery societies since 1815. He also published an anti-slavery newspaper, *The Genius of Universal Emancipation*. When he came to Brooklyn, Connecticut, while May was minister there, May was very impressed with the man and his mission.

The most powerful influence on May was exerted by William Lloyd Garrison, whom May met in Boston in October, 1830. Accompanied by Bronson Alcott, his brother-in-law, and his cousin Samuel Sewall, May attended Garrison's lectures on Abolition.

The hearing of Mr. Garrison's lectures was a great epoch in my own life. The impression which they made upon my soul has never been effaced; indeed, they molded it anew. They gave a new direction to my thoughts, a new purpose to my ministry. I had become a convert to the doctrine of 'immediate, unconditional emancipation, liberation from slavery without expatriation. (May, 1869, p. 20)

May also was converted to Garrison himself, whom he perceived was to become the great prophet of the Abolition movement, and the two men became friends and co-workers for the cause.

Garrison's lectures were held in Julien Hall, the meeting place of Abner Kneeland's congregation, and the only place in Boston which would deign to accommodate the lectures on Abolition. Garrison had applied to many of the prominent churches, and May surmised that the reason for the refusals was that Garrison was opposed to the Colonization society, which was then a popular cause among the churches and among people who favored a more gradual emancipation than the Garrisonian immediatists.

Earlier in his anti-slavery work, May, too, had favored the colonization idea, which was to secure a colony in Liberia on the West coast of Africa, where emancipated slaves from the United States could settle. Garrison's lectures had convinced him of

the impracticality and injustice of Colonization and that immediate emancipation was the course to follow.

The Sunday after meeting Garrison, May was scheduled to preach at the Sumner Street Church. He immediately began to act on the "new direction" his ministry was going to take. He reworked his sermon, "prejudice," interlining here and there in order to relate his new convictions. He exhorted the congregation heartily and encouraged them to go and hear Garrison for themselves. The address caused some stir, and Sumner's minister was annoyed and vowed that May would never again have the occasion to "violate the propriety" of his pulpit. Many people in the congregation expressed their gratitude for his remarks, but Boston clergymen were not moved. When he worked in Boston as an agent of the Antislavery Society, only Channing and Ware, Jr. invited him to their pulpits, and Ware's congregation pointedly asked him not to return.

May's father was alarmed at the "new direction" his preaching was about to take, having heard about the Sumner street sermon – that it was fanatical, incendiary, or treasonable. He remonstrated earnestly that his son cease and desist. The elder May held gradualism to be a superior and safer course to follow, and cited the guarantee granted by the Constitution, his faith that civilization would eventually prevail, and that paid labor would yet prove more economical than slavery. He also warned Samuel that he could lose his position or his usefulness in the church (May, 1869).

"Prejudice" was already scheduled to be published as a tract by the AUA. May submitted the manuscript to Henry Ware, Jr. with all the interlineations he had used at Sumner Street Church. Ware would accept it only as originally written. May later lamented that the interlineations were not printed, since that would have indicated an early antislavery commitment on the part of the Association. "But", he said, "we were all in bondage then. Unconsciously to ourselves, the hand of the slaveholding power lay *heavily* upon the mind and heart of the people in our Northern as well as Southern States" (May, 1869, p. 24).

NOT IN CONNECTICUT: PRUDENCE CRANDALL'S SCHOOL AND THE BLACK LAW

I felt ashamed of Canterbury, ashamed of Connecticut, ashamed of my country, ashamed of my color. (May, 1869, p. 71)

In Boston, Lydia Child, a popular author of children's literature, published the first book-length abolitionist document, *An appeal in favor of that class of Americans*

called Africans (Child, 1833) She dedicated the volume to Samuel J. May "for his earnest and disinterested efforts in an unpopular but most righteous cause" (p. iii). This righteous cause was Prudence Crandall's school for Negro girls, located in Canterbury, Connecticut, a few miles from May's home in Brooklyn.

Crandall was a Quaker teacher who opened her school to Negro girls, almost by default. She had allowed Sarah Harris, a bright Negro girl who had worked at the school, to attend classes. Parents of her white students threatened to withdraw their daughters if Crandall did not expel Sarah. Crandall refused, and the parents made good their threat. Far from intimidated, Crandall took out advertising in several periodicals advising Negro families that she would accept their daughters at her school. Subsequently, over a dozen children came to Canterbury, Connecticut, to Crandall's school. Then the trouble began in earnest. Crandall and her students were snubbed on the street. Local businesses refused to provide them even the necessities of life. The well was polluted. A student was arrested on a vagrancy charge and threatened with public whipping. When none of these measures succeeded in destroying the school, some of Crandall's enemies managed to get a Black Law through the Connecticut legislature. One of the more able and powerful of her adversaries was Andrew T. Judson, who told May, "That nigger school . . . shall never be allowed in Canterbury, nor in any town of this state" (May, 1869, p. 49).

The Black Law was enacted in May, 1833. It prohibited anyone from establishing a school specifically for non-resident Black people, and in order to teach Black people at all, permission must be obtained, in advance, from the civil authority and the Selectmen of the town where the school is situated (May, 1869, p. 52). Prudence Crandall was arrested and tried on the basis of this law. In this event, May revealed his knowledge of public relations and his recognition that public sentiment could be a powerful weapon. Although he was warned and could have prevented it, he allowed Crandall to be jailed for one day in order to rally public opinion to her side. In addition, he conferred with Arthur Tappan, a wealthy merchant and abolitionist, who agreed to pay the costs of Crandall's defense. He instructed May to engage the best lawyers available (May, 1869, p. 58). He found the best in William Wolcott Ellsworth, Calvin Goddard, and Henry Strong, all of whom opposed the Black Law. Ellsworth, the most prominent of the team, was a Yale graduate, and U. S. Congressman, the son of Oliver Ellsworth, second Chief Justice of the U. S. Supreme Court. Five years later, he would become governor of Connecticut (Strane, 1990).

May and Crandall's friends hoped to have the Court rule on the constitutionality of

the Black Law, but this drastic step was avoided when defects were discovered in the state's Attorney's case, and the trial was terminated (May, 1869, p. 70). However, Judson and the enemies of Negro education gained their objective of banning Crandall's school. The house in which the school met was vandalized and set on fire, the students terrorized, and Crandall was unwilling to subject them to further danger. She closed the school. She subsequently married and moved West, where she once more opened a school, raised two stepchildren, and continued to be independent and troublesome (Strane, 1990).

The Crandall School affair had far-reaching consequences that could not be foreseen at the time. In the Dred Scott Decision of 1857, which allowed Southerners to take slaves as property into the West, Chief Justice Roger Taney cited Crandall vs. the State of Connecticut to show that Black people were not citizens. According to the Taney opinion, Black people were inferior and unfit to associate with the white race, socially or politically, possessing no rights which whites were bound to respect (Strane, 1990).

Andrew Judson, Crandall's old enemy, was the judge in the Amistad case in 1839. A cargo of slaves was en route to Puerto Principe from Cuba. During the voyage, the Africans mutinied and brought the ship north. A United States Brig escorted the Amistad to the New Haven harbor, and then ensued a controversy about what was to be done with the "cargo." The State Department and the Spanish Minister wanted to ship the Africans back to Cuba to stand trial for mutiny and for the murder of the ship's captain. New York abolitionists argued that the mutineers were not Spanish subjects and should be returned to Africa. Judson, who was a Colonizationist – not because he respected Blacks, but because he wanted them out of his country – heard the case and ruled that the men must be returned to Africa. This was one time when the interests of the Colonizationists and the abolitionists happened to coincide.

In 1953, when Thurgood Marshall was chief counsel for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored people in the historic Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka case, he reiterated the arguments which William Ellsworth and Henry Goddard had advanced during the trial of Prudence Crandall (Strane, 1990). Thus, one hundred twenty years later, Arthur Tappan's six hundred dollar investment at last paid interest.

Eventually, Windham County, where Brooklyn and Canterbury are situated, was admired for championing equal human rights ahead of the rest of Connecticut. In the 1866 elections, the county cast its vote in favor of Negro suffrage. This was a

large remove from the vilification and violence the Canterbury citizens wreaked upon Prudence Crandall. May credits the "distinct presentation and thorough discussion, throughout that region," occasioned by the Crandall School event several decades earlier (May, 1869, p. 39). The citizens of Canterbury eventually repented their behavior in regard to Prudence Crandall and her school. Some twenty years after the Civil War, they petitioned the Connecticut legislature:

We, the undersigned citizens of this state and of the town of Canterbury, mindful of the dark blot that rests upon our fair fame and name for the cruel outrages inflicted upon a former citizen of our Commonwealth, a noble Christian woman . . . respectfully pray your Honorable Body to make such late reparation for the wrong done her as your united wisdom, your love of justice and an honorable pride in the good name of our noble state, shall dictate. (Strane, 1990, p. 217)

The legislature was slow to act, and friends and former students lobbied on her behalf. The Canterbury section from May's book (May, 1869) was reproduced and distributed to every state congressman. A petition was circulated which collected one hundred twelve signatures from the residents of Canterbury. Eventually, Crandall was granted a small monthly stipend from the state of Connecticut. In this strange way, Canterbury finally granted that she had a right to run a school for Black children in Connecticut, and May's prediction proved to be true that "God and good men would be our helpers in the contest to which we were committed" (May, 1869, p. 57).

BROTHERS AND OTHERS: THE ECCLESIASTICAL MILIEU

People in general are equally horrified at hearing the Christian religion doubted, and at seeing it practiced. (Samuel Butler in Fulbright, 1968, p. 420)

Political institutions seemed incapable of addressing the issue of slavery in the United States, compromised as they were in favor of supporting the economic status quo. The churches also failed to rally to the cause of the captives. During the national agitation for abolition, the churches could not come up with an unequivocal institutional response. The Presbyterian Church split in 1838 into the Old School in the south, which became proslavery, and the antislavery New School of the North. At the same time the Methodist Church was struggling with the issue, and in 1844 the Southern Methodist Episcopalian Conferences separated from the main body and maintained a proslavery stance. This split was completed in 1846.

The Baptists had come to a parting of the ways the previous year (Macy, 1919).

The earliest recorded instance of social reform issued from the Quaker meetings. Half the members of the New York Manumission society, founded in 1785, were Quakers. But even the Quakers, who as individuals seemed always to stand in the first ranks of those who struggled for human rights, were reluctant to deliver an antislavery statement from the platform of their yearly Meetings (May, 1869, pp. 147-150). May, as an agent of the American Abolition Society, attempted to appeal to the New England Yearly meeting in 1835, but he was rebuffed.

The American Unitarian Association managed to stay intact during the years of Abolitionist agitation, and considering the wide diversity of opinion among Unitarian individuals and churches, this was an accomplishment. But some critics contend that Unitarians bought the peace at the price of its prophetic voice. May felt that, "The Unitarians as a body dealt with the question of slavery in any but an impartial, courageous, and Christian way" (May, 1869, p. 336). Although May credits individuals, ". . . we Unitarians have given to the antislavery cause more preachers, writers, lecturers, agents, poets, than any other denomination in proportion to our numbers, if not more without that comparison," (May, 1869, p. 335). He expected much more from the faith on the institutional level. Nor was he the only recorded critic of the AUA. Dr. Henry I. Bowditch, who had been converted to abolitionism when he saw Garrison being mobbed in Boston, told fellow-abolitionist Maria Chapman that the Unitarians as a body were "as rotten as ever" upon the topic of slavery (Stang, 1977, p. 137).

A number of Unitarian ministers lost their positions due to their antislavery preaching or activities. The Rev. George F. Simmons' life was threatened when he preached two rather mild antislavery sermons in the deep South (Denton, 1969, pp. 80-83). John Pierpont was let go by the Medford parish. No Unitarian Church, he said, wanted to hear anything about "rum and niggers," meaning temperance and slavery (Stang, 1977, p. 146). Samuel May, Jr., May's nephew and later an agent for the American Antislavery Society, had lost two churches because of his involvement with abolition. Collison writes that there was a taboo against preaching on slavery in the Boston pulpits. "It was not that Unitarians loved slavery; most abhorred it. But many loved order and stability more, a not-so-surprising position for a denomination in which the best pews were filled with political leaders and merchant princes" (1989, p. 215).

However remiss and belated the American Unitarian Association might have been in expressing an official antislavery doctrine, expressions nevertheless did appear

from time to time, causing C. R. Denton to suggest that perhaps the Unitarians were not as apathetic on slavery as their critics would have it (Denton, 1969, p. 77). Sometimes their involvement was quite direct. The AUA sent thirteen thousand dollars, from 1855 to 1859, to support a mission in Kansas for the express purpose of stopping the expansion of slavery to Kansas (Denton, 1969, p. 109).

The Unitarian periodicals, *The Christian Examiner*, and *The Christian Register*, carried articles, book reviews, announcements, and letters to the editor that presented antislavery sentiments. *The Christian Register*, in some quarters, was at one time considered an Abolitionist organ (Denton, 1969, p. 77). The paper's editorial policy on slavery from 1826 to 1835 included the propositions that slavery was brutalizing, that it was on the road to extinction, contrary to the Christian religion, and condemned by all intelligent people, North and South. A gradual emancipation was advocated, one under the initiative of individual slave-owners and the state governments rather than the federal government. Portions of Channing's work on slavery, advancing similar principles, were printed in *The Christian Register*. When Edward Everett, a former Unitarian minister, reported the happiness of the slaves to Congress, *The Christian Register* rebuked him saying that his opinion was contrary to the spirit of the age and the mind of the country (Denton, 1969, p. 50). Early on, *The Christian Register* was cordial to *The Liberator*, Garrison's Abolitionist newspaper, and Garrison's views generally. *The Register* censured the actions of a Boston mob that attacked Garrison in October, 1835, but about the same time, the paper's editors grew weary of Garrison's extremist rhetoric.

Both the *Examiner* and the *Register* carried articles both for and against the American Colonization Society. As early as 1827, *The Christian Examiner* carried an article by May's cousin, Samuel E. Sewall, titled "On Slavery in the United States," in which he called colonization a noble but impossible cause. He did not favor immediate emancipation but advocated education for slave children to prepare them for freedom, and he urged individual slave owners to undertake this enterprise (Denton, 1969, p. 51). In 1832, the paper published "The American Colonization Society" by William Joseph Snelling, who denounced the society because it was impractical, encouraged the domestic slave trade, fostered racial prejudice, and depleted the labor supply. He also chastised the hypocrisy of the appeals of the ACS, saying that it used antislavery arguments in the North and proslavery arguments in the South to promote its ends (Denton, 1969, p. 52).

In response to Britain's abolition of slavery in the British West Indies and just

before the Turner uprising, the paper advised Southern State governments to begin manumission without delay to prevent slave revolts. Even after the Turner revolt, *The Christian Register* blamed only slavery as the cause of the trouble. Further, it was said, granting freedom to the slaves was all that could prevent more "outrages" (Denton, 1969, p. 55).

Denton writes that in 1834 the editor of the *Christian Examiner* accepted an antislavery article written by Samuel May, but the acceptance was overruled by "the periodical's owner" (Denton, 1969, p. 66). Is the alleged "owner" the Executive Committee of the AUA, the editors, or some anonymous benefactor, as the term "owner" implies?

Samuel May, Jr. attempted to introduce resolutions on the subject of slavery at the Annual Meetings of the AUA at least as early as 1842, but no action was taken on the resolutions. In 1843 when May, Jr. was in England, an antislavery resolution was presented by Rev. John Parkman, Jr., but it was not discussed because, it was felt, slavery was too controversial an issue. Before the next year's meeting, the AUA received a message from the British Unitarians urging the Americans to be more forth coming on the issue of slavery. Out of frustration over his failure to elicit antislavery statements from the AUA, May Jr. had put the British up to it. To no avail, since the British gesture was largely considered an impertinence.

At the May meeting in 1844 May, Jr. brought up the subject of slavery again, urging the AUA to state that slaveholding was inhuman, anti-republican, and unchristian. After hearing objections that the North had nothing to do with slavery, that it was approved by the framers of the Constitution, May, Jr. offered a different resolution, stating that lest the aid received by churches in the south not be construed as an approval of slavery, the AUA should affirm that slavery was contrary to Christianity, human rights, and principles of justice and humanity. The resolution entreated all to bear faithful testimony against slavery. Then the Executive Committee was enjoined to send a copy of the resolution to any society receiving aid from the AUA.

Objections were immediately voiced, fears that the AUA would be turned into an Abolitionist Society, influence in the South would be lost, and that the resolution would be considered an impertinence to Southern churches. More telling arguments came from Ezra Stiles Gannett, who said that the AUA had never contemplated any action on slavery, because such an action would be contrary to the objects of the Association's formation. Moreover, the resolution constituted an invasion of the rights of conscience and was tantamount to the establishment of a

creed, and finally, it would be injurious to the slaves. He also intimated that it ill-behooved them to rebuke the south when there was a "hellish spirit" in their own midst.

In the end, the group decided to pass censure on the Unitarian Church of Savannah, Georgia, because it had refused to accept a reputedly Abolitionist minister. Stephen C. Phillips offered a resolution commending the action of the Executive Committee in refusing to send another minister to the Savannah Church. In other sections, the resolution was similar to May, Jr. stating that slavery was inconsistent with natural human rights and brotherhood, and that it undermined morality and religion. An appeal was made to all Christians "to do what they can by their prayers, by the indulgence and expression of their sympathy, and by the unremitting and undisguised exertion of whatever moral and religious influence they may possess" (May, 1869, p. 343). The Phillips resolution became the first of the Association's continuing list of social action resolutions (Denton, 1969, p. 86).

Yet the issues raised by Gannett during the debate are interesting ones. Was Gannett at that time resisting the threat to the individual member's autonomy that Channing had mentioned as a danger of voluntary associations? James Luther Adams said that the differences between conceptions of the love of God become clear when we determine the social-institutional implications of those conceptions (Adams, 1976, p. 92). Supposing the love of God requires us, as May believed, to relieve suffering, spread the benefits of freedom and justice, and reprove the sinners. Does that leave enough room for the freedom of others to disagree, or to agree but decide not to help? And when Gannett sues for the maintenance of non-creedalism, does that leave room for a whole hearted exhortation on important issues? Stackhouse answers that what is needed is "a vitalizing tension between the attitude of distance and the attitude of decision" (Stackhouse, 1976, p. 52). The vitalizing tension was apparent during the debates when the AUA at last took up the antislavery resolutions. Then, the genuine difficulties of taking strong social action while maintaining freedom for others to disagree became plain.

Prophets seldom question either their sources or their authority to speak. They call others to action, repentance, life, and they do so in ringing tones. They wax impatient with delays or dissemblings; they can be imperious, as the members of the AUA discovered at their meeting in 1850 when the keepers of the associational peace came up against a true believer.

Meanwhile, in 1845, "A Protest against American Slavery" was adopted by a meeting of Unitarian ministers in Boston and sent to the brethren for signatures.

Two-thirds signed.

We on our part do hereby pledge ourselves, before God and our brethren, never to be weary in laboring in the cause of human rights and freedom, until slavery shall be abolished and every slave set free. (May, 1869, p. 344)

In 1847, that indefatigable instigator of resolutions, Samuel May, Jr., again presented some antislavery ideas at the Annual Meeting. They were placed on the table to give place for action on other subjects. At the conclusion of the business on the other subjects, the first of May's resolutions was approved:

Resolved, That we believe slaveholding to be in direct opposition to the law and will of God, and entirely incompatible with the precepts and spirit of Christianity (The 22nd report, 1847).

In these statements, the ministers pledged to serve in the antislavery vineyards, based upon their theological understanding of the will of God.

When the Second Fugitive Slave Law was adopted, the AUA, at its Autumnal Convention in October, 1850, was forced to consider a response to it. John Pierpont moved that the Association present its views on the Law. A counter-motion proposed tabling Pierpont's motion, and narrowly passed when the Chair of the Convention broke a tie vote. The next day Samuel Willard prevailed upon the Convention to reconsider Pierpont's resolution. The Chair explained that he had voted to table the resolution so as not to disturb "the harmony of the Convention," but he agreed to a reconsideration. Adversaries tried to table Willard's motion as well, but missed, fifty votes to fifty-three. The Convention preceded to record, over strenuous objection, its disapproval of the Law and a commitment to work for its repeal.

At the meeting the following year, Samuel J. May, appalled that "prominent ministers of the denomination" had supported the Fugitive Slave Law, offered a resolution that was surprisingly pungent in view of his usually Irenic or conciliatory temperament (see Appendix A). Stange calls it "one of the most highly charged personal indictments against a church's leading ministers and laymen in American denominational history (Stang, 1977, pp. 211-213). May proposed that the AUA condemn both the Fugitive Slave Law and the prominent Unitarians who had supported the measure. He named names and instances, calling persons "unsound," and obedience to the law "practical infidelity." He went on to endorse the aid and comfort of escaped slaves as required by the Golden Rule. When the

vote was called, the resolution failed to carry by only three votes. May read the same resolution at the Ministerial Conference the next day, and the resolution was accepted, although there was objection to certain personal denunciations. Dr. Gannett defended his parishioner, George T. Curtis, who had turned in a slave, Thomas Sims, because, Gannett said, of his civic obligations.

The AUA had been organized in 1825 as missionary organization with a mandate to promote and extend the Unitarian faith. It is not surprising that there was reluctance on the part of the members of this body to jeopardize its first mandate by taking on another that was not explicitly outlined in its charter. Samuel J. May and others intuited a duty incumbent upon any Christian organization to uphold Christian ethics. However, some members of the AUA, and some fledgling churches which the parent organization wanted to retain within the fold, held differing opinions on what constituted Christian duty. The specter of schism, which had afflicted other denominations, certainly rendered timid many sincere minds. It was largely through the strenuous efforts of the Abolitionists that the AUA was forced to struggle to define its relationship to the body politic. The Abolitionists urged a prophetic stance upon an Association that did not as yet conceive of itself as anything but an outreach organization. Samuel May expected more, since he held a very high estimation of the power and duty of the pulpit to effect change. "The pulpit has no higher function than to expound, assert, and maintain the rights of man" (May, 1869, p. 358). When the pulpit is "false to its charge," the consequences are horrible:

Alas, our land is filled with testimonies written in blood, that if the ministers of religion had only been fearless and faithful in declaring the impartial love of the Heavenly Father for the children of men of all complexions, and their equal, inalienable rights, which would assuredly be vindicated by Divine Justice, our late Civil way would have been averted! (May, 1869, p. 344)

Prophets foretell doom, and May has described the consequences which accompany infidelity to Christian 'principles. Whether "fearless and faithful" antislavery preaching could have averted the Civil War or not, we cannot know for certain. Like most wars, the Civil War was driven by economic factors, and in the struggle between religious and economic motivations, "the will of God" is generally harnessed to mammon and fights on both sides.

May utilized techniques he had learned from the Awakening revivals in the meetings of the Antislavery Societies and in the 1850 Meeting of the AUA. He put sinners on the "anxious bench" and let them squirm. Why? Not because he was

vindictive, but because he believed, absolutely, that he had correctly interpreted "God's will," and that some of his brother ministers were in error. He trusted in the salvific power of repentance, as had old Samuel Sewall. And, in the tradition of the liberal Mays, he believed in the nobility of human beings. He saw, I think, in the collective, an image of his own soul writ large, and the collective did not suffer in the comparison. But perhaps, on this account, he credited human nature with more virtue than it possessed, and he erred on the side of expecting too much from an association that had already stated and done more than any other.

NOT ENTIRELY STIFLED: STUDENT UPRISINGS

"Some men . . . are so afraid of doing wrong that they never do right." (Charles Follen in May, 1869, p. 254)

Daniel Webster went on a lecture tour to support obedience to the Fugitive Slave Law. He was immediately brought to task by some Unitarian ministers for the turnabout in his views. As an example, Theodore Parker engaged a hall and roundly denounced the Law and Mr. Webster to the Bostonians in attendance. But Webster had a loyal following in Massachusetts. A supportive letter was drafted and sent to him over the signatures of eight hundred citizens, among them Charles P. Curtis, a Unitarian (who had participated in the rendition of Thomas Sims,) Samuel A. Eliot, who had voted for the Law in Congress, the president of Harvard College, Jared Sparks, and three men from the Andover Theological School (May, 1869, pp. 407-408).

President Sparks' views on the matter of slavery were not universally shared by students at the Harvard Divinity School, many of whom were preparing for careers as Unitarian ministers. Students were concerned about slavery and other social ills, and they used the meetings of the Philanthropic Society to explore and discuss current affairs.

The Philanthropic Society was composed of students and faculty from the Harvard Divinity School. Charles Follen from the Harvard staff and Samuel J. May were honorary members (Collision, 1989). The group met monthly for twenty-one years, from 1831 to 1851. The topic of slavery was broached and actively debated in this forum. In 1835, the students, after three nights of discussion, passed resolutions condemning Northern Black laws and declaring slavery an outrage and a sin against God. At that time they were still sympathetic to the idea of African colonization (Collision, 1989).

In the spring of 1838, the Philanthropic Society again considered the problem of slavery, and the report under scrutiny ended with an appeal to all members to "come forward and help in the good work" (Collision, 1989, p. 224). The faculty requested students to postpone voting on the resolutions, but since they only requested, students decided to maintain their right of free discussion. President Quincy himself intervened on behalf of the school, which had suffered serious decline during the 1830's. The student body, numbering forty in the early 1830's, was nearly halved, and faculty was down from five to two by the next year (Collision, 1989). Quincy did not want Harvard involved in the controversies over slavery, thereby risking further attrition, even though he was, personally, sympathetic with antislavery causes.

Not singling out the Philanthropic Society as the specific object of the ban, he sought to prohibit outsiders from speaking at meetings of any society in the University. This move caused the students to cling tenaciously and their rights of free speech to more association, and the Philanthropic Society condemned Quincy's suggestion. They also continued their meetings and passed a number of strongly abolitionist resolutions. This was the same year in which the senior Class at Harvard Divinity School invited Emerson to deliver his famous, or infamous, address. President Quincy's concern for the survival of the school amid the divisive controversies presented by Abolitionism and Transcendentalism was well founded, and the methods he used to protect Harvard from the dual stigmas were in common use in institutions of higher learning. If, as Lader suggests, Harvard was "equally a pillar of conservative Unitarianism and State Street commerce," which "did to it's best to stifle antislavery agitation," its best was not enough to stifle the agitation completely (Lader, 1961, p. 74).

Modern students of Unitarian history hear much about the Transcendentalist controversy and perhaps not enough about the trouble caused by the disagreements regarding slavery and how to alleviate its abuses. The first issue brought Unitarian theology into question; the second brought into the open the question of whether, and by what methods, the Unitarian hierarchy should engage in social action. Both issues have alienated people of the liberal faith from our more conservative colleagues, and both issues remain unsettled.

It was Professor Follen's abolitionism, not his radical theology which occasioned his release from Harvard. Professor Charles Follen had been forced to leave teaching positions at prestigious universities in Europe to immigrate to America in 1824. His political opinions and social agitation had necessitated the move. Once established in a chair at Harvard through the agency of friends, Follen continued

his enlightened criticism of principalities and powers. He quickly found the arena in American politics in which to make himself troublesome. He became a staunch and active Abolitionist.

He sought out Garrison in the Liberator office on Merchants Street. He joined the New England Antislavery Society, in spite of warnings from his friends that this alliance might cost him his livelihood. The dire predictions proved to be all too true; he was dismissed from Harvard. Or, as May more subtly phrased it, "The funds for the support of his professorship at Cambridge were withheld; and he was obliged to retire from a position which had been most agreeable to himself, for which he was admirably qualified, and in which he had been exceedingly useful" (May, 1869, p. 254).

Henry Ware, Jr., who had been present at the first convention of the New England Antislavery Society in 1834, was head of the Divinity School during these proceedings. He organized his own Cambridge Antislavery Society, one which, he hoped, could express its objectives in less clamorous language than that employed by the Garrisonian Abolitionists, but in due course it attracted opposition, and he abandoned it.

Ware came to his views on slavery some time after Samuel May. It was Ware, who had been an editor of tracts for the American Unitarian Association, who refused to print the abolitionist additions to May's sermon on prejudice in 1830. May thought that Ware at a later time would not have refused the additions, "But we were all in bondage then. Unconsciously to ourselves, the hand of the slaveholding power lay *heavily* upon the mind and heart of the people in our Northern as well as Southern states" (May, 1869, p. 24). May later lamented the fact that his "new direction" had not been disseminated at once, it "might have helped a little to commit our Unitarian denomination much earlier to the cause of impartial liberty, in earnest protest against the great oppression, the unparalleled iniquity of our land" (p. 24).

Abolition continued to occupy discussion and resolution time during the meetings of the Philanthropic Society. Professor Convers Francis encouraged students to continue their Abolitionist work in their ministries. Abolitionist resolutions were repeatedly issued, and members agreed to invite English Abolitionist George Thompson to visit their meeting. The faculty refused to allow the invitation, fearing a backlash against the school. The students did not insist but passed a resolution commending the labors of George Thompson, saying these were entitled to respect and gratitude (Collision, 1989).

In 1847 the senior class invited Samuel J. May to deliver the graduation address. The choice devolved upon May after eleven ballots had been taken, and it was far from unanimous. The invitation stated that the students' opinions reflected their theological differences rather than any objection to May himself or, presumably, his abolitionist views. The Transcendentalists had their way, seven to six, and in spite of the qualified nature of the invitation, May delivered the address (Collision, 1989).

The Philanthropic Society met only once during the 1848-1849 school year; enrollment at the Divinity School was dangerously low that year as well. The society was nearing its demise, and although interest revived the next year, in the spring of 1851, the last meeting was held. During its tenure the members of the Society had been able to discuss a very wide range of social and issues. Collision, in his survey of toleration at the Divinity School, credits the faculty with tolerant, progressive atmosphere. He also credits students with using this atmosphere to enlarge the boundaries of Unitarian faith (Collision, 1989).

In his *Recollections of our antislavery conflict*, May describes the ordeal of abolitionist students at a less progressive, or perhaps more organized school, Lane Seminary (May, 1869). The students had formed a Colonization Society at the inception of the seminary itself. When Garrison's rebuke to the colonization scheme came to their attention, they investigated his charges. At Lane, as at Harvard, the faculty sensed some danger to the school if students persisted in these inquiries, and they advised postponement of the discussions. Again as at Harvard, the students went ahead with the discussions, and they decided that immediate emancipation was the duty of every slaveholder, and the colonization scheme was deemed unworthy of the approbation and aid of Christians. These results were met with warnings and threats from "certain quarters," and the faculty formally outlawed the Lane students' Antislavery Society. As an added measure, they disbanded and abolished the Colonization Society as well.

The drastic prohibitory actions of the faculty were approved at the next meeting of the Overseers of the Seminary. The students sued for reconsideration and were refused. Subsequently, seventy or eighty of the hundred then in residence withdrew from the seminary altogether. Theodore Weld, who did not withdraw immediately, had been held responsible for the uprising, and he was expelled. He decided to remain until he was cleared of all charges, which happened at the next meeting of the Board. Then he withdrew and became an agent of the American Antislavery Society. May reflected that it would have been a loss for the Abolitionist cause if the faculty and overseers of Lane had been wiser men.

College and University campuses are frequently the places where social unrest is first noticed. It was true in the first half of the nineteenth century as it proved to be in the mid-twentieth. Somehow, Harvard Divinity School managed, barely, to hold itself together, and thereby to keep some socially active ministers within the ranks of the liberal church. Lane seminary lost a great many. How that fact has played itself out in the relative social activism of liberal and conservative churches would be an interesting study.

Professor Charles Follen, after he was dismissed from Harvard, became a Unitarian minister. He helped to build the East Lexington, Massachusetts, church, and was to be installed as its minister in January, 1840. But a month before that time, he was killed in a fire aboard the steamer, Lexington. Since he had been an agent and officer of the New England Antislavery society, the Abolitionists planned a memorial service which would laud his good work on behalf of freedom and justice. Samuel May was chosen to compose the eulogy, but no place could be found to hold the services. East Lexington Church refused; Channing's church first consented, and then reneged after he had announced the service would be held in his church. After several months, the Marlborough Chapel was volunteered, and the service was held there with, some say, two thousand persons present. May, of course, spoke as did Henry Ware, Jr., John Pierpont, and William Ellery Channing (May, 1869). Dr. Channing died shortly after this excruciating embarrassment.

GENTLE RAIDERS: THE KIDNAP AND RESCUE OF JERRY MCHENRY

Cherished prejudice is apt to become unrelenting and violent. . . . It seems to be blind and deaf. It refuses to be convinced by any exposition of facts, or array of arguments, and often every effort to arrest it serves only to increase its fury. (May, 1831, p. 87)

The Fugitive Slave Act was signed into law by (Unitarian) President Millard Fillmore on September 18, 1850. Many people residing in the free states were indignant, and some vowed to violate the edicts of that law. The *Christian Register* said that it would be unenforceable in the North, and the paper also criticized Daniel Webster for his support of the Law (Denton, 1969).

This prediction proved true, at least in Samuel May's home town. The concerned people of Syracuse met in their City Hall early in October to confer upon what to do. The Mayor of the city himself presided, and a series of resolutions were read

and passed which denounced the law and promised citizens protection against it. A Vigilance Committee of thirteen citizens was appointed which was mandated to ". . . see that no person is deprived of his liberty without due process of law" (May, 1869, p. 354). May organized a group that pledged financial help to anyone who might be arrested while opposing the law.

The vigilance committee agreed upon a place of rendezvous and a signal that would alert the members that a citizen had been apprehended by slave-hunters. After several false alarms, just one year later the bell sounded, on October 1, 1851. By the time William (Jerry) McHenry, a cooper in Syracuse, was detained by slave-hunters and federal marshals, May was a seasoned resistant. At the beginning of his anti-slavery work, he had braved the disapproval of family and friends, the disapprobation of colleagues, and the outright hatred of Abolition's adversaries. He had befriended and defended Prudence Crandall. He had preached and lectured for two decades on the evils of slavery. He had served as organizer, agent, and secretary of Antislavery societies. He had faced angry mobs; he had faced the AUA. In regard to the Fugitive Slave Law which had occasioned McHenry's arrest, May was already counseling resistance. In a sermon preached in Oswego, Rochester, and Syracuse, May cautioned the following:

A law of the land requiring you, as this Fugitive Slave Law does, to disobey the Golden Rule is, indeed, a far more grievous encroachment upon your liberty of conscience than a law prescribing to your faith any creed, or any rites and ceremonies by which you must worship God. . . . I declare that you are, everyone of you, under the highest obligation to disobey this lay, – nay, oppose to the utmost the execution of it. (May, 1869, pp. 361-362)

As it happened, there was an antislavery convention in Syracuse, as well as a meeting of the county Agricultural Society. The streets were full of people. On the way to the meeting place, he was told that Jerry McHenry, who had lived in Syracuse for several years, had been arrested. May turned now toward the Commissioner's Office where McHenry was being held. According to the stipulations of the Law, during the so-called trial, or hearing, the accused slave was not allowed to speak or present witnesses, but only the testimony of the alleged owner and his agents was considered legal evidence. May was observing these proceedings when McHenry slipped out and began to run. The crowd which had gathered favored his escape, but there had been no organized arrangements to make the escape good. McHenry was recaptured after a furious struggle and lodged in the back room of the Police station. At this point, May was approached by two contingents. Several townspeople said, "Mr. May, speak the word, and we'll have

Jerry out." The Chief of police also invited him to come into the station to speak to McHenry, who was in a terrible rage. May counseled the first group to bide their time and remain available until proper preparations could be made. Then he went to see the accused.

After listening for some time, May tried to calm the prisoner, but McHenry was outraged, "Would you be calm, with these irons on you? What have I done to be treated so? Take off these handcuffs, and then if I do not fight my way through these fellows that have got me here, – then you may make me a slave" (May, 1869, p. 376). Finally, May was able to convince him that he was to be rescued.

May hurried to a nearby office where plans for the rescue were being charted. The plans included a "bold driver in a strong buggy, with the fleetest horse to be got in the city." These would be stationed near the police station ready to take the prisoner on a circuitous journey through the city to elude pursuit. It was thought prudent not to attempt to leave the city, since the roads would be watched.

It was urgently stressed that the rescue should be executed without the use of violence, insofar as it lay with the rescuers. May had vowed earlier that, should just this occasion arise, he would not resort to violence.

I declared I had no confidence in the use of deadly weapons; that I would not carry even my cane to the rescue of one who should be seized under the law. I would hold a man who was attempting to execute it if I could; overpower him if I had the strength so to do; but not intentionally harm a hair of his head. (Mumford, 1873, p. 221)

At the appointed hour, a large group of men assembled at the police station and quickly subdued the guards. The "bloodless coup" was transacted as the vigilantes had planned. One of McHenry's guards was injured when he jumped from a window to escape the intruders, and one of the raiders received a superficial bullet wound, but no rescuer intentionally harmed a hair.

McHenry was carried away, eluding all pursuers, and secreted in a private home for several days until he could be put aboard the Underground Railroad. Subsequently, May, Gerrit Smith, and others involved in the rescue, were arrested and indicted for violating the Fugitive Slave Law. On the other hand, the slave owner's agent and the Deputy Marshal were also arrested and charged with attempting to kidnap a citizen of Syracuse. Their defense was that they were acting under a federal law. The people of Syracuse were fairly well exercised over the

issue, and meetings were held both justifying and opposing the rescue of Jerry McHenry.

May and others published acknowledgements as to their parts in the rescue, and advertised that their defense would rest upon the unconstitutionality of the Fugitive Slave Law. Gerrit Smith, who was then a member of Congress and under indictment for the rescue, campaigned so heartily against the Law that the United States Attorney found that a jury could not be impaneled because so many people had formed strong opinions about the case. All the Jerry Rescue cases were eventually dropped, and May's confidence that "a correct public sentiment is our surest safeguard" proved to be well-placed (May, 1869, p. 361).

Samuel May came reluctantly and sadly to realize that the non-violent but active method, which had worked so well to free McHenry, was not going to suffice to accomplish emancipation on a national scale. The nation needed to repent and cease its participation in slavery. The Abolitionist prophets preached doom at their meeting in Syracuse following the McHenry rescue on the 29th of January, 1861. May reported in his *Recollections* the resolution that was adopted, stating that repentance and reform were necessary, and that Abolitionists would continue to speak even more earnestly for the oppressed to prevent the "few vestiges of freedom yet remaining" from being blotted out, "and this entire land over swept with tyranny, violence, and blood" (May, 1869, p. 394)

BLESSED ASSURANCE: WHAT MAY MAY ATTAIN

If I die, I may have a clearer vision, but I cannot have a surer faith. Samuel J. May (Mumford, 1873, p. 292)

After the President of the Syracuse and Utica Railroad heard one of May's antislavery sermons, he gave orders to his employees that if any fugitive slave was discovered on his railroad cars, they were to "stop the train, take off the irons, and set him at liberty" (Mabee, 1970, p. 300). May was persuasive. This was not the first or last time he was singularly effective in his endeavors, even though, as in the cases cited above, he did not get all of his heart's desire. Prudence Crandall was not allowed to carry on her work to educate Black children in Connecticut, but the turmoil regarding her persecution managed to advance consciousness in her home State. The AUA (now the UUA) still struggles with its identity and the tension between decision and will, as well it should. Jerry McHenry reached Canada, but the case of the rescuers was not allowed to test the constitutionality of the Fugitive

Slave Law.

And for every slave so rescued, there were countless others who were caught or murdered. Yet the Jerry Rescue case helped to mobilize the people of New York on behalf of fugitives. Sadly, society is still dangerously segregated, and the judgment that May predicted would befall those who practice injustice still looms over American cities, such as the 1991 Rockford, Illinois, school segregation case where a group of citizens sued the School Board, charging discrimination (*Rockford Register Star*, January 8, 1991, Section B, p. 1).

Despite his partial success, Samuel May was a presence in Prudence Crandall's life and the lives of her students. He represented the liberal faith in action, doing as Unitarians espoused. He demonstrated what it meant to fall into the hands of a loving God. He took the principles of his Christian faith seriously. He sustained the struggle against slavery for many years. He did so in the face of criticism from close relatives and friends; he did so despite danger to his reputation and his person; he did so while performing all the usual duties incumbent upon a clergyman of the time; he did so while suffering grievous losses. How was he able to persevere? From whence came his strength?

Upon cursory study, May appears to have been one of that type of person called healthy minded, or once-born – rational, serene, disinterested, with a generally optimistic outlook. But May was far from simply well-and-once-born and untroubled of soul. On the contrary, he was early introduced into the sorrows of this world. The names Samuel and Joseph had had long currency in his family, and they lay upon May the responsibility of living up to all the Samuels and Josephs – those who had lived long, and those who had not. Of the baby Samuel Josephs in his immediate family, he was the only one spared. Worse yet, his own son, Joseph, died in infancy.

Then there is the fact of May's childhood dream of angels, who came to comfort his anguish. This was a very profound experience, ". . . the scenes that I witnessed, and the heavenly vision that I had, are vivid in my memory, although most of my life for several years afterwards is very indistinct" (Mumford, 1873, p. 9). The dream, or vision, was particularly vivid, sustained, indescribable, and it effected long-lasting change in the dreamer – all the qualifications of religious experience.

May's own account of his visionary experience certainly echoes other reports in the literature of comparative religion which describe the "call" of the wounded healers. In the classic case of Black Elk, the Sioux shaman, the visionary dream occurred

when he was nine years old. Some years after his vision, he became very ill, and his parents consulted a shaman, who advised the young man that the visionary gift would harm him if he did not find a way to share with his people the wisdom he had received.

May's vision did not portray wise grandfathers, rainbow warriors, and cloud teepees as had Black Elk's vision. The imagery of Samuel's vision was Judeo-Christian, and he was not himself taken up into the clouds, but the angel – Edward – brought the words of assurance down to him. There is small wonder that May trusted implicitly the power of words to effect change. May had been converted to Garrisonian Abolitionism through the power of Garrison's rhetoric and logic. His own ability to persuade had in turn affected numerous others.

It was May's vocation that provided the means for him to share such wisdom as he possessed, to impart his convictions about life after death, the requirements of Christian life, and the providence of a benevolent God. More than words, important though they were, was the work that May undertook to do, sensing that it was God's work as well as his own. Others noticed his devotion; Bronson Alcott called him "the Lord's chore boy" (Mumford, 1873, p. 232).

Granted that his early experiences with Black people and people of other faiths had immunized him against the prejudices that were common to the times, I think that it was the dream that determined the course his life was to take. The dream was May's initiation into a life that was to be set-apart, in the way that prophets and shamans have been set-apart, or dedicated to the gods. May's initiation was into Christian faith and the life of service to that faith. The principles and requirements of Christian living became for him ultimate issues. The Christian gospel provided him the model for suffering for a cause that transcended his own life, so that when he was threatened, or mobbed, or exhausted, he was sustained by the reassurance that he was suffering for high purposes. When the Fugitive Slave Law required him to violate what he conceived to be Christian principles, there was no contest and, seemingly, no doubt. Moreover, he was as scrupulous as any Puritan in insisting that other people must also forswear slavery, or incur the guilt of sin.

In addition to May's unshakable conviction of the rightness of his antislavery work, he possessed a knack for organizing, networking, and working with others. He early associated with other Abolitionists and helped to organize antislavery societies. These voluntary associations were sufficiently large, organized, self-sustaining, and effective so that its members could maintain hope in the face of opposition and setbacks. He maintained ties with antislavery individuals and

groups, so that he never had to feel that he was totally alone in the fray, and he was continually encouraged by all the work that other antislavery agitators accomplished on behalf of the cause. Of course, he also wanted there to be more people involved in the work, especially his fellow ministers, who, he felt had no warrant to exclude themselves from so Christian an enterprise.

Throughout his long career, May remained in touch with the alternate views and intelligence of women and children. He was pleased to welcome Angelina Grimke to his own pulpit, and he entertained vast admiration for the women with whom he worked in the Abolition movement (May, 1869). He could foresee that the enfranchisement of women was the next social reform on the horizon, and he was in favor of it. He possessed insight into the psychology of children that was decades ahead of his time, and which informed his labors on behalf of educational reform. When many men of his time and social standing held paternalistic views about everyone except white men, he was able to grant respect to everyone he met, with the possible exception of his anti-antislavery colleagues. I suspect that his attitudes about Blacks, women, children, Native Americans, and other minorities were due to his having maintained contact with the unconscious psychological aspects of himself that were dark, feminine, and childlike. May possessed extraordinary mental health on this account, which helped him to trust his own counsel when he was most alone in his antislavery work.

May did not let the antislavery cause become abstract. To him, the slaves were real people suffering real hardships, because he had met them, talked with them, and heard their stories. On two occasions, he journeyed to Canada to observe for himself how the Underground Railroad passengers were faring as free citizens in the Northland. In this way, he could see the practical, direct benefit of the work he performed, and that this work was right.

The greatest part of Samuel May's strength came from his Christian faith, which he was born into, and to which he was consecrated in a dream. In addition, he received ample aid from his upbringing in a progressive household, his emotional health, his ability to relate to a wide spectrum of persons, and his love and hope for humanity. Samuel May felt, knew, that he had been redeemed from death and anguish. The considerable gifts he bestowed on the world during his life were the gifts of grace that he himself had amply received.

EPILOGUE: SOME PERSONAL THOUGHTS

Society's "sin," or wound, is also its growing edge. The areas of social life in

which citizens have identified a contradiction between their actions and their social principles are the very areas which are ripe for transformation. For Samuel May and the Abolitionists of the last century, that area was slavery. Although Blacks were specifically exempted from the protections guaranteed to other citizen by the constitution, this exemption itself violated other parts of the same document. Abolitionists labored to bring this contradiction into general awareness, so that reform could be achieved. On this point, May was correct: the *word* must be preached, announced, written, and shouted from the rooftops. The *word* must be heard, or there would have been no chance for either a peaceful or violent overthrow of injustice.

Now I have been considering my own time, my own society and its ills, which are legion. Which areas of our corporate life are coming to consciousness and present themselves as ready for transformation. I have also been considering, these past two years, my experience in abusive, addictive families. Both my family of origin and the family I established were based on alcohol abuse, emotional and occasionally physical battering, and severe co-dependence. The addictive maladies, as research shows, are progressive in their prognoses; left to their own devices, they worsen. Thus, in each succeeding generation, the addiction becomes more severe, and it claims more victims.

Samuel May had observed the toll paid to alcohol in lost jobs, as well as the breakdown of family life. He concluded that he would abstain from alcohol and encourage others to abstain so as not to tempt weaker persons. He even prevailed, successfully, upon shopkeepers to refrain from selling this profitable substance.

Having experienced the ravages of alcoholism and abuse from the inside, I appreciate all that May was able to see and do in his time. I wonder what is to be done now. I see the need for many more "safe" houses where victims of violence can harbor. In more drastic circumstances, where lives are in danger, perhaps we need to resurrect the Underground Railroad. Today's passengers would be women (mostly) and children who need to "be disappeared" to escape violence in their home. The churches again have a duty to proclaim the "word," to alert people to the prevalence of the problem, offer aid to the victims, and exhort the "sinners" to "repent," or rather to get into a treatment program.

I am thinking that once I have a position in a liberal church, I will have access to a nationwide network of people who are (I hope) aware of the problem of domestic violence, concerned for the victims, and willing to help. Perhaps May would be surprised at this latter-day interpretation of his antislavery work; perhaps he would

approve.

APPENDIX A

Resolution, by Samuel J. May

Presented at the Annual Meeting of the AUA, May, 1850

Whereas, his Excellency, Millard Fillmore, whose official signature made the Fugitive Slave Bill a law, is a *Unitarian*; and the Hon. Daniel Webster, who exerted all his official and personal influence to procure the passage of that bill, has been until recently, if he is not now, a member of a Unitarian church; and whereas, one of the only three Representatives from New England, who voted for that bill, is the Hon. S. A. Eliot, a distinguished Unitarian of Boston, known to have been educated for the Unitarian ministry; and whereas, the present representative of the United States Government at the Court of the British Empire is a Unitarian, and his two immediate predecessors were once preachers of this Gospel, and one of them, Hon. Edward Everett, has publically declared his approval of Mr. Webster's course touching this most wicked law; and whereas, the Hon. Jared Sparks, president of Harvard College, and president of the Divinity School at Cambridge, formerly a distinguished minister, and a very elaborate and able expounder of our distinctive doctrines, is one of the number who addressed a letter to Mr. Webster, commending him for what he had said and done in behalf of the Fugitive Slave Law; and still more, because the late President of this American Unitarian Association (Dr. Dewey), one of the most popular preachers, expounders, and champions of the Unitarian faith, has been more earnest and emphatic than any man in his asseveration that this law, infernal as it is, ought nevertheless to be obeyed; and because the gentleman who this day retires from the highest position in our ecclesiastical body, the Rev. Dr. Gannett, is understood to have given his adhesion to this lowest of all laws, and several of the distinguished, titled ministers of our denomination in and near Boston, the headquarters of Unitarians, have preached obedience to *this law*, –

We therefore, feel especially called upon by the highest considerations, at this, the first general gathering of our body, since the above-named exposures of the unsoundness of our members, to declare in the most public and emphatic manner that we consider the Fugitive Slave Law a most fearful violation of the law of God, as taught by Jesus Christ and his apostles, and, therefore, all obedience to it is practical infidelity to the Author and Finisher of the Christian faith, and to the impartial Father of the whole human family.

Resolved, Therefore, that we, the American Unitarian Association, earnestly exhort all who would honor the Christian name, but especially all who have embraced with us views of human nature similar to those held up by our revered Channing, – to remember those in bonds as bound with them; ever to attempt to do for them, as we would that the new enslaved or fugitive should do for us in an exchange of circumstances, – to comfort and aid them in all their attempts to escape from the oppressors, and by means to betray the fugitives, or in any way assist or give the least countenance to the cruel men who would return them to slavery. (May, 1869, pp. 368-369)

Seconded by Theodore Parker.

The motion failed, 27-22.

Presented at the Ministerial Conference, the motion carried.

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