

“Joel Metcalf: Minister Astronomer”

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It was the early 1900's. At 2:30 one morning a young girl named Rachel and her father had an astronomical emergency. For her father had just discovered a new comet; the Harvard University Observatory needed to be notified immediately.

The problem was that their camp in rural Vermont did not have a telephone. There was a phone about a half-mile away but they shared the line with other households. To make a call now would wake everyone up. And they didn't have a car so they couldn't drive into town. And neither she nor her father could endure the suspense of walking those three miles with such important news to share. So they decided to go by boat. Rachel Metcalf Stoneham recalls:

We had a row boat with an engine of sorts in it and luckily I knew how to run it. Father was in no condition to be mechanical...We started bravely out. The boat was rickety, the batteries weak, the gasoline low, and the oil lantern our only light, with the stars for our guide. Not a single light twinkled on shore. We gave the first reef a wide berth and took the deepest water down the bay. Finally...we closed in on shore and found the dock by bumping into it...

Once they docked, they ran the half-mile into town and roused the Postmaster. She continues:

We banged and called until a terrified postmaster let us in, much relieved to know that the whole village was not afire and that we only wanted to use his telephone. I heard him mutter something under his breath about these dang city-folks. Then, while I sat on a counter surrounded by candy...fish hooks, seeds, kitchen...implements, as well as the politely interested but scantily-dressed postmaster and his wife, Father put in a long-distance call to Cambridge. His calm controlled voice belied his smoldering excitement and one would have thought he discovered a comet at least once every night.¹

Yet, if we step back and review the life of Rachel's father, Joel Metcalf, in the arc of time between his birth and death, he did discover and co-discover heavenly bodies at an astonishing rate – altogether five comets and forty-one asteroids. Two asteroids – Joella and Metcalfia - bear his name ² and a small minor planet orbiting the sun was named “Winchester” after the community where Metcalf, its discoverer, resided in 1913.

I feel an affinity for Rachel Metcalf Stoneham as I, too, grew up in the presence of a father's all-consuming hobby. While my father collected rocks and minerals and looked at them under a microscope – some kids went to Disney but my family visited abandoned mines – Joel Metcalf

¹ “Joel H. Metcalf, Clergyman – Astronomer,” Popular Astronomy, Vol. 47, p.22:

<http://adsabs.harvard.edu/full/1939PA....47...22S>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joel_Hastings_Metcalf

turned his lenses skyward, sometimes with telescopes he made by hand, setting aside the minute intricacies of earth for the grand and distant elements of space.

But Joel Metcalf's enthusiasm for astronomy was only one element of his ambitious and remarkable life. Here at the Winchester Unitarian Society, he is remembered as the seventh senior minister – serving from 1910 to 1920 - a ministry that followed service in Burlington, Vermont and Taunton, Massachusetts and preceded his final ministry in Portland, Maine, the community where he died in office. While Joel Metcalf was clearly called to examine the heavens, he was also called to consider other ethereal matters – the spiritual lives of us earth dwellers as understood through the lens of Unitarian Christianity.

And Joel Metcalf is also remembered as a humanitarian, practicing his service to others through volunteering on the front lines of World War I. Who else can say they made significant commitments to not only their family, but to science, to their faith and to their country in wartime? As we explore “curiosity” this month, I can't imagine a better role model in how to pursue the human sense of wonder.

Joel Hastings Metcalf was born in Meadville, Pennsylvania, on January 4th, 1866. That same year, his uncle, Richard Metcalf, would become the first minister of the Winchester Unitarian Society. So, whenever we gather downstairs in Metcalf Hall, I do not know if that space is named for our first or seventh minister – or both.

When Joel Metcalf was in his early teen years, a book by Richard Proctor titled “Other Worlds Than Ours” from his Sunday school library first ignited his interest in astronomy. With Mars and Jupiter coming into alignment around the same time he read Proctor's book, there was much to inspire him.³ Rachel Metcalf Stoneham recounts the stories her father told her:

A schoolmate of his...found a three-inch telescope objective in an abandoned house, and the boys swapped marbles and jack knife for telescope. Grandmother never had any money for luxuries, and young Joel had to plead long and to carry many an extra armful of wood before she could be persuaded to give him the six dollars necessary to have the lens mounted. Soap boxes and old wood from the barn made an excellent stand – his first observatory. Father never admitted it, but grandmother said...she always suspected that her son climbed out the window many a clear night after he had been sent to bed.⁴

I could not find an account of Joel Metcalf's decision to enter the ministry so I don't know why he chose this vocation over the life of a scientist. Perhaps his uncle Richard was an influence? But we do know that Joel Metcalf graduated from Meadville Theological Seminary – the precursor to my alma mater – in 1890, continued his education at Harvard Divinity School and earned his Ph.D. at Allegheny College in 1892. Along the way, he married Elizabeth Lockman and together they welcomed two children, Herbert and our faithful memoirist, Rachel. After his

³ <https://www.ast.cam.ac.uk/~jds/tail17.pdf>

⁴ <http://adsabs.harvard.edu/full/1939PA.....47...22S>

service in Burlington, in 1902, Metcalf also studied at Oxford University for a year, attending twenty-five lectures a week in philosophy and religion and, at night, using borrowed keys to access the observatory.⁵

Joel Metcalf clearly was a person with two competing passions, ministry and astronomy. Yet, in at least one instance, Metcalf drew from his love of astronomy in service to his ministry. The March 18th, 1920 edition of *The Christian Register* reports that:

Reverend...Metcalf of Winchester spoke upon "The Religion of the Stars." It was a new thought to many that we are reading history when we look at the starry heavens. It was a novel idea to consider our Earth as a star of the Milky Way whence one may contemplate a journey to one of those distant stars seen in that wonderful span of the heavens, establish a telescope there, and look back upon the Earth and behold historic events of different ages in the making...The thought of the immensity of space was quieting and reassuring...

Overall, though, Metcalf is remembered as a minister who advocated an active humanism, grounded in theistic devotion. This morning's reading speaks to that gospel with Metcalf's reminder that, "we do not sufficiently realize that our Republic is only you and I, and all of us working for the common good, and when one citizen fails of his duty the whole body politic suffers...Deep down in our hearts we all believe in the Church of the Living God." Thus, Richard Didick, creator of the "Joel H. Metcalf Memorial Homepage" summarizes Metcalf's ministry as one of social engagement. Didick observes that Metcalf's "commitment to the community is expressed through his powerful sermons criticizing child labor, poor wages and social injustice and is backed by his devotion to civic duty." During Metcalf's ministry here, his sermons were often published in the local paper, *The Winchester Star*.⁶

It was another Unitarian Minister, William Ellery Channing, who advised "may your life preach more loudly than your lips." Perhaps the season of Metcalf's life that best preached his message was his time volunteering in World War I. According to Winchester historian Ellen Knight, Metcalf was one of three middle-aged men from Winchester who were too old to serve in the military but willing to care for those in active duty through the YMCA. They left for France in 1913, in the middle of Metcalf's ministry here.

Knight affirms that the "volunteers often endured the same hardships as the troops, caught in skirmishes, surrounded by enemy fire, bombed from the air" even though their duties focused on organizing and maintaining support centers such as theatres, clubs, chapels and places to write letters home. These older men were often affectionately called "Pop" although Metcalf is reported to prefer the nickname "Doc."⁷

⁵ <https://www.ast.cam.ac.uk/~jds/tail17.pdf>

⁶ <https://web.archive.org/web/20040409103805/http://personal.tmlp.com/richard/metcalf.htm>

⁷ <https://www.winchester.us/DocumentCenter/View/3535/Y-Men?bidId=>

Metcalf's service included marching with the troops and leading them in song, with some marches as long as 25 miles. In more harrowing moments, Metcalf carried the wounded. As published in a Unitarian newsletter, *The Calendar*, these abridged excerpts from Metcalf's letters, dated July 25th and 28th, grant a window into his experience:

When we broke the rush of Germans over the Metz to Paris road and French were in full retreat and when our boys came along they shouted, "La guerre est finis. Paris est perdu. Allez vite..." Instead of retreating, we advanced and fought the battle which centered around Belleau Woods...This place got several hundred 8-inch shells every day...It got so every time I walked out, I made up my mind just what hole or depression in the ground I would drop into when I heard a shell...

The second battle of the Marne, that is, the German offensive beginning on the night of July 14, was a tremendous effort on their part...At 12:15 Monday night without an instant's warning they opened with a crash on a 50 mile front...Like a thunderstorm and a sudden fall of rain, the heavens seemed to drop steel everywhere for 10 miles back of our lines. I was in bed (that is on the floor) with my shoes off when the first shells fell...The air reeked with gas, high explosive and mustard. Imagine me, the tears running out of my eyes from gas, crouching in a corner sitting on a nail (two nails in fact) gasping for breath, the mask cutting my ears and forehead till they ached. We sat thus for 9 mortal hours, like Paul praying for the day and the end of the bombardment, while the wild roar of the shrieking death continued outside. At twelve o'clock the worst was over and we came out of our holes in the ground, to find the chateau...in ruins and many of our company dead and wounded.⁸

The Army eventually offered Metcalf an officer role, a role he refused as he wanted to continue caring for the troops.

Within a year of Metcalf's return from his service with the Y, he concluded his Winchester ministry to fulfill another European mission, serving as one of three ambassadors from the American Unitarian Association to Unitarian churches in Transylvania, sent to offer post-war resources and morale. One account recalls that he toured many remote areas and, although details are not given, he "[made] one remarkable journey between Cluj and Bucharest, returning not without peril." The account concludes with the observation that "he was so loved by the people there that when two other commissions were sent back...in 1922 and 1924, they were continually asked when Dr. Metcalf would ever return."⁹ With our long-standing Partner Church connection to the Unitarian Church in Marosvásárhely in Transylvania, it is meaningful to me that one of my predecessors was a pioneer in these cross-border alliances.

After Metcalf's mission to what was then Hungary, he began a new parish ministry in Portland, Maine and, in Ellen Knight's words, "continued his dual career as minister and astronomical

⁸⁸ <https://www.ast.cam.ac.uk/~jds/tail17.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.ast.cam.ac.uk/~jds/tail17.pdf>

discoverer.” He died on February 23rd, 1925 at the age of 59, prophetically the night before preaching a sermon titled “The End of the World.”¹⁰

“May your life preach more loudly than your lips.” Through my casual exploration of Joel Hasting Metcalf’s life and the events that shaped its course, I am curious about the greater meaning, the deeper story, of his time on earth. As it is at any memorial service, we are invited to wonder how the sacred spark, ignited with every human birth, glows through this biography.

For me, I keep coming back to Metcalf’s dual passions of ministry and astronomy, of theology and science. I keep returning to how they seem so disconnected from one another and yet connected in the lived experience of us human beings. For when we are in the literal or figurative foxholes on earth, we are often moved to believe that there must be something greater than this. When we bear witness to the pain of life on this planet, we are often inspired to turn to a distant, more ethereal realm beyond such self-inflicted suffering. We sing of such a place every December with the words of another Unitarian minister, Edmund Sears:

Beneath the angel-strain have rolled
Two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love-song which they bring;
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing.¹¹

Joel Hastings Metcalf did not dwell on angels but he searched for stars, perhaps because he knew too well the nature of life on earth. I hear the distance between the life before us and the mysteries of the skies in Metcalf’s vision of a community with “an open door and an open heaven,” as named in today’s reading. There he speaks of the Beloved Community that welcomes truth in all its forms. And yet, with the poetry of his words, I see a vision of a liberated earth, free to behold the mysteries of a boundless sky.

As my father’s daughter, I also know that sometimes a person’s weird hobby is just that. Yet, while our own times are painful and difficult in their way, I am grateful to Joel Metcalf for his example, his reminder to look heavenward for inspiration, whether our lens be that of spirituality or of science. I am thankful for his influence, as reflected in his daughter’s concluding words to her memoir: “every black velvet night I still think ‘what a wonderful night for comets.’”¹²

¹⁰ <https://www.winchester.us/DocumentCenter/View/3080/Named-for-Winchester?bidId=>

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/It_Came_Upon_the_Midnight_Clear#Lyrics

¹² <http://adsabs.harvard.edu/full/1939PA.....47...22S>