

“John Murray’s Big Decisions”  
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I love doing genealogy work. I research my own family, and I do it for friends, too. I have a subscription to Ancestry.com, which has millions of records available online, and that usually makes it easy to find information on ancestors, like where they were born, where they lived, what kind of work they did, how many children they had, and when and sometimes how they died.

These facts don’t mean much by themselves. But looking closer, I can’t even imagine how difficult life must have been for some of those ancestors. For instance, I’ve seen people who re-married two or even three times, after their previous spouses died. Sometimes I can see by the mother’s death date and her child’s birthdate that she died in childbirth. One couple lost their first four children in infancy. And I wonder: How did people survive these tragedies?

I think of John Murray, who is the founder of American Universalism. As a preacher and promoter of Universalist ideas, he, along with his wife, Judith Sargent Murray, successfully established Universalism throughout the northeast. But not many of us realize that his earlier life was so difficult that at one point he considered suicide.

John was raised in England and Ireland by strict Calvinist parents. The Bible was the only book he was permitted to read. His father beat and isolated him, out of fear for John’s soul. Not surprisingly, John saw religion as a gloomy means for controlling people’s behavior. In his autobiography, he wrote, “I believed that I had nothing to hope, but everything to fear, both from my Creator, and my father...”

The family moved to Cork, Ireland, when John was 11. There, John encountered a group of Methodists, and he found their more social, musical gatherings to be much more appealing than the services in the Anglican church. John Wesley, the inspiring leader of the Methodists, was despised by the Anglican priests for

seducing parishioners away from the established church. He was threatened and sometimes physically attacked.

He also became a role model for John Murray. Wesley got to know the teen-aged John and saw that he had potential, so he took John under his wing and began preparing him for the ministry. Many Methodists predicted that he would become “a burning and shining light.”

A Methodist family, the Littles, invited John to visit and read the books in their extensive library. He had turned 18 and was finally free to begin his own education. John also started preaching to large audiences in Cork. He soon attracted enemies and was harassed and threatened just as his mentor, John Wesley, had been.

He had fallen in love with a young Methodist woman, and when she broke off the relationship, he was devastated. Not long afterward, his closest friend, one of the Littles' sons, died. Then his father died, after a long illness. John was 19 and expected to manage the Murray family. He had 8 younger siblings, and he felt unable to discipline them or support them financially. On top of everything, John was having serious doubts about John Wesley's theology.

John felt desperate and considered suicide. But as he prayed to God for guidance, he came to feel that he was called to a higher purpose in life. He decided to leave Ireland and return to England. In saying his goodbyes, his grandmother told him, “You are, my dear child, under the guidance of an Omnipotent Power; ...you are a chosen instrument to give light unto your fellow men.”

On his way to England, John stopped to hear an itinerant Methodist preacher in Limerick named George Whitefield. He admired the minister's welcoming, non-denominational preaching style, which he preferred over Wesley's more rigid ministry. He spoke with Whitefield afterward, and when Whitefield was called out of town, John filled the pulpits where Whitefield had been invited to preach – a high honor for a such a young man, but John had already developed his evangelical talents.

John Murray wasn't yet 20 when he arrived in London. He began attending services at George Whitefield's Tabernacle, and after a short time, Whitefield asked him to preach there. His talent quickly became the talk of London. John fell in love with a young woman who had come to hear him preach, Eliza Neale.

After they married, John and Eliza often went to hear popular preachers at various churches throughout London. Like most of their Methodist friends, they knew that a Welsh preacher named James Rely was lecturing in London on universal salvation. John was a good Methodist and so he despised Rely and refused to hear him speak. He even attempted to win back a young Methodist woman whom Rely had lured away. However, John found that the woman's arguments in favor of universal salvation were so persuasive that there was nothing he could say.

John and Eliza began reading literature both for and against Rely's ideas. Eliza convinced John that they should go together to hear James Rely preach. They did, they were both profoundly affected. It's no small thing to become convinced that God is benevolent and welcomes all people to heaven after death, when you've been taught all your life that only certain people are destined to enter heaven, and God has already chosen who will be saved and who will be damned.

The Methodists soon expelled John and Eliza from the Tabernacle. But, the couple was ecstatic that they now knew the truth about God. Not long after, they were thrilled when Eliza gave birth to a son. Their contented family life ended abruptly, though, when the infant boy died. Then John's beloved Eliza became sick, and even though John moved her to the country and hired nurses to care for her, she died.

John was devastated. Soon after his wife's death, he got word that four of his siblings had died. He also had some serious debt. He was arrested and sent to debtor's prison. He was overcome by a sense of failure and was on the brink of despair. Eliza's brother got him out of prison and John eventually repaid his debts. James Rely tried to convince John to join him as a preacher of universal salvation, but he was too depressed to preach.

In the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, we read about spending time in the wilderness. After the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, they spent 40 years wandering in the wilderness. Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness. “Forty” means “a long time.” Being in the wilderness is a time of intense discomfort, and a time of deep reflection about the meaning and purpose of one’s life. John was having his own wilderness experience. He prayed, but felt far from God.

How do we get out of a place like this, out of the wilderness? What if we ask for guidance and hear nothing? What then? What is it that keeps us going? John had once contemplated suicide and he knew he could never do that. What to do now? This was John Murray’s first Big Decision, one that had implications far larger than he ever could have imagined. He decided to get away from England, far away. He thought, “I will close my life in solitude, in America.”

I think John Murray had courage. He had courage to try something completely different. To go to an unknown place with no plans and no connections. Sometimes courage means jumping in to save someone’s life. Sometimes it’s doing something even though you’re scared to death. Sometimes courage is moving ahead blindly, because we feel we have nothing more to lose.

John boarded the brig “Hand-in-Hand” bound for New York. Before reaching New York, however, the ship ran aground on a sandbar off the New Jersey coast. Provisions were running low, so John went ashore in search of food. The first person he encountered was an elderly man named Thomas Potter. Mr. Potter was a farmer, and he had recently finished building a small chapel for itinerant preachers.

Potter told Murray he was waiting for a preacher to come and preach the message of universal salvation. When Murray told him that he was a believer of universal salvation and that he used to be a preacher, Potter was convinced that God had sent Murray to him for this purpose. He urged John to preach, but John refused. He told Potter that he wanted to leave his past behind. Besides, he was heading to New York.

Potter said to Murray with utter conviction, “The wind will never change, sir, until you have delivered to us, in that meeting-house, a message from God.” Now what? John Murray was faced with his second Big Decision. Finally, he told Potter, “if the wind hasn’t changed by Sunday, I will preach.” That was Tuesday. Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday passed with no change in the wind. Sunday dawned: Still the same.

John Murray preached a sermon in Thomas Potter’s chapel on Sunday, September 30, 1770, to the friends Potter had gathered. He felt once again, that God had a plan for him. He was meant to preach the truth of universal salvation in America. Even though Thomas Potter begged him to stay, Murray felt that he was called elsewhere.

Murray began speaking in towns in New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Hampshire and Massachusetts. He attracted opposition from clergy wherever he went, but the public resonated with his powerful preaching style and his message. In 1774, while he was in Boston, a wealthy gentleman from Gloucester, Massachusetts named Winthrop Sargent invited him to preach there. Murray did so, and over the next five years, he continued to preach Universalism, despite the hostility, finally creating the first Universalist church in America in Gloucester. They built their own church on land owned by Winthrop Sargent and called John as their pastor.

Conflict continued, though, because the Universalists refused to pay parish taxes to First Parish, the established church in Gloucester. Instead of backing down, Murray brought the case before the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court, arguing for the right to create a religious organization independent from the established church. In 1786, the court ruled in favor of the Universalists, setting a monumental precedent for the separation of church and state in America.

I have to skip ahead a few years. John married Judith Sargent Stevens, the daughter of George Sargent, in the fall of 1789. As he had with his first wife, Eliza, John found an intellectual and spiritual equal in Judith. The Gloucester congregation officially ordained him on Christmas Day. Judith gave birth to a son. Sadly, he was stillborn. Judith was ill for many weeks. But she eventually

recovered, and together, they traveled to Philadelphia where they organized the first Universalist convention.

Back home, Judith gave birth to a healthy daughter they named Julia Maria. In 1793, John became the minister of the First Universalist Church in Boston. In between his regular duties, John traveled around to help organize other Universalist churches. Although he usually returned home exhausted, he was steadfast in his work.

Because John Murray had the courage to move forward even when he was lost in the wilderness of grief and despair, the message of Universalism reached thousands of people in America who were seeking a kinder God, one who loved them for who they were. It takes courage to speak one's convictions out loud. He spread the "good news" of Universalism in spite of opposition and hatred, and his own physical limitations.

I close with these words from Rebecca Ann Parker:

Even when our hearts are broken by our own failure or the failure of others  
cutting into our lives,  
Even when we have done all we can and life is still broken,  
There is a Universal Love that has never broken faith in us and never will.