

The Unitarian Universalist Nurse



Clara Barton of Oxford, Massachusetts (1821-1912)

Clara Barton was a bright child, learning to read and spell when she was just three years old and learning to add, subtract, multiply and divide by the time she was four. By the time she was five, she'd also become an expert bareback rider. When she was eleven, something would happen that would change Clara's life forever and would prompt her to do the amazing work of her later life.

Her older brother David fell off of the family's barn and was terribly injured. The doctor said he might even die from his injuries. "Please," begged Clara, "let me be David's nurse! I'll take such very good care of him." The doctor and Clara's parents agreed and Clara stopped school to spend every moment, day and night, with her brother, feeding him, giving him his medicine, and changing his bed. It took almost two years, but David became strong again and Clara could return to school.

Clara spent much of her young adult life teaching and even began a free public school to help poor children who couldn't pay the fees that schools charged in those days. When she was 32, Clara had to give up teaching when she lost her voice and she went to stay with a friend in Washington, D.C. to recuperate.

At about the same time, the Civil War had started and Union soldiers returning from battle were pouring into the city, hungry and in extreme need of bandages and clothing. The government was unable to help them all. So Clara, a lifelong Universalist who believed that God is love and that all lives are precious gifts, took her own savings to buy food and clothes for the soldiers and she began asking others to donate blankets, medicine and other supplies. Within a short time, so many kind people had made donations that Clara had to rent a warehouse to store it all!

Word came back from the battlefields that medicine and food were not reaching the troops and that wounded soldiers were left lying on the ground without food or water until they could (after a long wait) be transported to the overcrowded army hospitals. There were no nurses to help them because people didn't want to see women caring for soldiers so close to the firing line. Yet, that is exactly what Clara decided she must do.

Clara kept asking until she finally got permission to go to the front lines to tend to the injured soldiers. She worked tirelessly taking care of the wounded, cooking for them and cleaning their wounds. She even learned how to remove bullets from soldiers with a penknife! She became known as "The Angel of the Battlefield." Because of her Universalist beliefs, Clara tended to everyone who needed it, black and white, Union or Confederate.

After the war, Clara spent years trying to get people in the United States to join other countries in belonging to the Red Cross, which had been founded in Switzerland. Finally, in 1882, the government agreed to form the American Red Cross and appointed Clara Barton as its first president.

Clara received many awards over the years and brought many great ideas to world about how to help people during natural disasters like earthquakes, floods and fires. She worked for the Red Cross until she was 83 years old!