The Remarkable Life of

JOHN MURRAY SPEAR

Agitator for the Spirit Land

JOHN BENEDICT BUESCHER

University of Notre Dame Press

Notre Dame, Indiana

© 2006 University of Notre Dame Press
Copyright © 2006 University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, Indiana 46556
All Rights Reserved
www.undpress.nd.edu

Manufactured in the United States of America

The Remarkable Life of John Murray Spear was designed by Wendy McMillen;
composed in 11.3/14.3 Pavane by Four Star Books;
printed on 50# Nature’s Natural (50% PCR) by Thomson-Shore, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Buescher, John B. (John Benedict)
The remarkable life of John Murray Spear : agitator for the spirit land /
John Benedict Buescher.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
BF1283.S69B84 2006
973.5092—dc22
2006017258
∞ The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the
Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

© 2006 University of Notre Dame Press
Introduction

John Murray Spear, the eccentric visionary who is the subject of this book, was one of America’s most extraordinary characters. The world he envisioned was unconstrained by pain, imperfection, and death. It was a magical hybrid of future and past, spirit and matter, heaven and earth, stars and mud, the sublime and the ridiculous. If we use his acquaintance Ralph Waldo Emerson’s criterion of bad taste, his entire life was “incorrect,” because “from the boldest flight,” he would “suddenly alight in very low places.”

He was a clergyman but became the country’s most flamboyant spiritualist and medium of the “spirits” of the noble deceased. He was a tireless social activist and reformer. But he was also far out of touch with ordinary reality. He had a large capacity for compassion, imagination, courage, and energy, but he had almost none for judgment and compromise. As one of his fellow spiritualists said—of John more than anyone else—“In the years that have rolled by, I have learned that Spiritualists are the most active people that ever lived, at least, in the labor of building air castles.”

From early in his career, John associated with many of the moral and social reformers of nineteenth-century America—Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, Bronson Alcott, Theodore Parker, Lydia Child, Dorothea Dix, Henry Longfellow, and others. He was a leader of the pacifist New England Non-Resistance Society, and of the Massachusetts and New England
Anti-Slavery Societies. He was an operator on the Underground Railroad and a leader of the antislavery Boston Vigilance Committee. He created a sensation when he helped free a young slave from her Southern master. On an antislavery lecture tour, he was nearly killed by a mob.

He helped lead the era’s effort to outlaw the death penalty and improve prison conditions. He searched Boston’s streets, courts, and jails for people in need, practically inventing the role of what we have come to call a parole officer. He was an activist for women’s rights, temperance, health reform, labor reform, and the humane treatment of animals.

But then John opened himself up to the spirits. As it seemed to him, he burst open the prison walls of his mortality and emerged into a new world. An association of the souls of the deceased, he believed, began to speak through him. They directed him to heal the sick with psychic power and to consecrate people to wild projects of social reform and technological invention. John and a group of followers dowsed for treasures, dug for imagined ancient civilizations, and founded Free Love communities. Through him the spirits taught that sexual intercourse could make women the instruments through which advanced spirits could gain new lives in a revolutionized world. Convinced of this, his associates became the first public proponents of what is known today as women’s “reproductive rights.”

John and his friends set out to build a perpetual motion machine to collect and distribute the agitating energy of the universe. His guiding spirits dictated through him plans for a series of telepathic transmitters to replace the electric telegraph with a universal network for the free exchange of information. They followed this with ideas for a wireless interplanetary communication device, for a psychic ticker to transmit commodity prices around the country, for a body suit to amplify trances and modulate spirit contact, and for a machine that would think in a universal code.

John’s spirits dictated plans for an electric ship propelled by psychic batteries, for a vehicle that would levitate in the air, for a drilling machine that would slice through rock without effort, and for a sewing machine that would work with no hands. In a secret workshop, John and his spiritized intimates tried to harness the process of invention through dreams, sexual exchanges, and allegorical enactments of elemental processes.

When the spirits retired John as their missionary after twenty years in their service, he continued his social and political radicalism. In the last part
of his life, regarded by fellow Gilded Age progressives as a white-haired visi-
tant from another age, he organized support for anarchist, socialist, peace, and labor causes. He led opposition to government censorship of birth control information and to obscenity statutes. He helped organize a chapter of the International Workingmen’s Association. And he helped lead the Equal Rights Party for Victoria Woodhull’s improbable run for the United States presidency.

The bright clouds of optimistic glory he trailed behind him throughout his life were streaked with dark heartaches, failures, disappointments, and broken human relationships. He spent his life in an argument with death—in preaching universal salvation, in working to abolish the death penalty, and in trying to contact souls in the afterlife. Ironically, he left behind only insubstantial traces of his life. Neither photograph nor engraving of him has surfaced, even though, like a real-life Forrest Gump, he lived among some of the most famous public figures of the time. His letters and personal papers are scarce. During his life, many of his friends, scandalized by the turns his career took, ignored or cut their ties with him. Later writers, after his death, by and large, have been no more generous.

A century ago, not too many years after John died, a curious newspaper photographer visited the site of one of his utopian settlements.3 He found on the rolling wooded farmland only a few tumbled down piles of wood and a small, ramshackle, oddly shaped building. It seemed haunted. A few years later, the place fell entirely into the earth and out of memory, along with its secrets. Then, over half a century ago, the granddaughter of one of Spear’s associates found a trunk in the attic of the old family house, containing a collection of the papers and letters of the settlement. She passed them to a local historian, who described the discovery in the newspaper, and gave the collection to a university library. “As I write this,” he announced, “there lies before me a small metal box, encasing what are evidently the most precious of the inspired documents of the collection. With these was a solemn declaration that the contents were entrusted to the custodian to be jealously guarded until the box received its final resting place where it was to be preserved for posterity.”4 But the library’s collection now has neither metal box nor solemn declaration. Both of them have disappeared.

Oddly, this lack of evidence fits John Spear, who spent the most energetic decades of his career absent, in a sense, from his own life, displaced

© 2006 University of Notre Dame Press
by other spirits. Locating his real voice is difficult now, as it was for his contemporaries, who had to decide who was responsible for the extraordinary revelations coming out of his mouth. He too sometimes wondered what to make of it all, whether to treat his voices as true or not.

By the time John’s spirits began making their revelations, his acquaintance Nathaniel Hawthorne had written about the self-consciously “practical” Yankee dreamers in a “Hall of Fantasy,” of which John Spear would reveal himself as the preeminent example. “Here were men,” wrote Hawthorne, “whose faith had embodied itself in the form of a potatoe; and others whose long beards had a deep spiritual significance.” To the outside observer, the comedy of John’s spirit projects comes from seeing him and his associates acting out their own personal, psychic dramas as if they were details of the objective world writ large, part of a far grander, even cosmic, topography. They projected their impulses, imaginations, feelings, and thoughts into disembodied intelligences, and into plans for utopian societies, for mechanical inventions, even for soap recipes and for improved fruits and vegetables—Hawthorne’s potatoes, we might say—as well as for improved human beings.

The eighteenth-century visionary Emanuel Swedenborg, whose works they all read, believed that all the features of the world, and all his interior states and impulses, had spiritual counterparts in heaven. Everything in the world was charged and resonant, if only its true nature could be seen and made manifest. According to John’s spirits, the foot had a “Foot-ology” that could revolutionize the world. The face had a “Face-ology,” hidden from the view of the unenlightened and unspiritual, but about to be revealed to those who were spiritually prepared. The same with “Womb-ology” and (in the words of one of his associates) with the “Human Crotch Fact” in all its details, and with every other organ and function of the human body. The same was true with animals, plants, and even rocks. Such a world was continually pregnant with meaning, not yet quite born into the outer sight, but quivering with expectation, sparkling with imminent fullness, on the verge of being delivered into a new millennium—or, as Swedenborg himself had called it, a New Age. It linked a past gnosticism with a future postmodernism, where all distinctions dissolved into a whirlwind of mere signs—where the code of limited matter devised by conspiring and obstructive powers had to be broken. Those powers were embodied in the world as it had been. The “Massachusetts Prophets” had appointed the destiny of “The Ameri-
can Man,” as the *Baltimore American* wryly put it. His destiny was to make everything new:

Lean of person, sharp in feature, active in manner, persistent in effort, inquisitive in nature, slightly obtrusive in address, independent in conduct, careless in attire, inventive, acquisitive, locomotive, recuperative, and indomitable, he will “stand upon his hind legs,” the wonder of the sun and the joy of the planetary system. He will no longer be dyspeptic, quit chewing tobacco, and cease drinking whisky, devote more time to healthful recreation, and less to trading, desist from the manufacture of wooden nutmegs, and peddle tin-ware no more forever. But, above all, he will be intensely speculative. He will continue to prosecute his investigations into spiritualism until the entire household and kitchen furniture of the land assumes the aspect of perpetual motion. To remedy any inconvenience resulting from this universal mobility, he will hold a grand auction, sell out the personal effects of the nation, and thenceforth cast the houses of the Republic, furniture, clocks, and all, in a solid piece. In brief, he will be the reconciliation of human characteristics heretofore considered entirely antagonistic. He will be a business man and a philosopher at the same time. He will swap Barlow knives and discuss theology in the same breath; run an engine eighteen hundred miles in a day, and deliver a lecture on phrenology at night; write a poem before going to bed, and open a dry good store in the morning; start a newspaper after breakfast, invent a machine for killing cockroaches at dinner, and get elected to Congress before dark: This appears to be the “coming man,” as depicted in the essays of the New England seers.6

John Spear’s world was, all in all, ripe for comedy. And especially for that sharp, straight-faced sort that Yankees love, a narrative of absurd prodigies recited in a dry monotone, as if there was nothing extraordinary about it. Nevertheless, as Hawthorne put it, some of these “humorists” themselves “would have deemed it an insult to be told that they stood in the Hall of Fantasy.” They could not always “laugh with the laughers.”7 John inhabited this twilight where reality and fantasy, and the hard present and the effervescent future, were thoroughly mixed.
In some sense, Spear’s imagined future has arrived. He would have recog-
nized today’s debates on abortion, euthanasia, and cloning; our attempts to
manufacture humans and to reshape their nature; our transgendered politics
and posed deviances; our deliberate subversions of convention; our mecha-
nical, self-referential performance art; our wireless networks, disembodied
voices, and virtual realities; our taste for magic and enchantment; and our
predilection for the weird in general and for fallen spirits in particular.

John Spear ministered to souls in extremity, either in the flesh or passed
beyond death. His life had an intensity that was unique even for an era in
which bright angels walked the roads with humans, passing in and out of
the gate of heaven. His road was far from the main thoroughfare of human
custom—at some point he lit out for the territory, the borderland between
this world and the next. This book is an effort to bring him back.

In telling John Spear’s story, I am exposing him and his fellow radical
spiritualists to the light, to free them, one might say, from the darkness of
our forgetting. I have been like a curious investigator who has wandered
into their dark séances and turned on the light. I have often caught them in
deshabille, in moments of acting out, in various tableaux vivants that repre-
sented struggles in the culture at large.

Spear’s superlatively odd stor
y was minimized by his embarrassed fellow
radicals. Historians and commentators past and present who have taken no-
tice of him have judged him to be uniquely eccentric, even within the radi-
cal crowd in which he moved. He was a “hard case” whose agitations threat-
ened the less extreme reformers with whom he associated. In the full panoply
of his eccentricities, he was not typical of his colleagues, although he was
by no means alone among his fellow reformers in his enthusiasm for spiri-
tualism. Neverthele
ss, he lived in a time of agitation and volatility—much
like our own time—when extreme cases often come to define political, so-
cial, and religious debate. The result was that his life constituted an odd mix-
ture of comic absurdity and serious foreshadowing of the future—for both
good and ill.

When I first read about John and his associates’ elaborate effort to invent
a living “New Motor,” I thought that the nineteenth century must have been
much more bizarre than what I had suspected. But what impressed me more
about this episode was the lack of evidence that Spear recognized the humor
in it. This raised the hair on the back of my neck and convinced me that, in
John Murray Spear, I was seeing a specimen of humanity that was truly alien to me. As I have looked more deeply into John’s various projects, I think I have been able to see a slight satirical undertone to his seriousness, an intention to undertake these projects as parodies of whatever in the world he was “impressed” to believe needed changing.

If irony is present in the contrast between two things—the real present and the imagined future, for example—then certainly John lived his life immersed in an ocean of irony. But was he aware of the contrast, or was the refulgent glory of the imagined future so bright, shining through the real present, that it blinded him? Or perhaps he saw the contrast but did not see it as comic, for that might have signified to him a lack of faith that what he envisioned could be materialized. To admit comedy might have weakened his vision of the perfect future in favor of the imperfect present. Somehow, he believed, he could magically struggle everything in the imperfect world into perfection.

A hundred and fifty full years of struggle later, this earnestness for utopia seems chilling. His fellow Universalist minister, Orestes Brownson, who eventually disavowed his youthful radicalism, converted to Catholicism. In his novel, The Spirit-Rapper, he put what amounted to John’s belief into the mouth of a fictional radical visionary: “‘If ye had faith as a grain of mustard seed,’ said Jesus, ‘ye could say to this mountain, be removed and planted in yonder sea, and it should obey you.’ I am far from being able to prescribe the limits of full, undoubting, and unwavering faith. Faith is thaumaturgic, always a miracle-worker, and if we could only undertake with a calm and full confidence of success, I have little doubt that the meanest of us might work greater miracles than any recorded in history.”

I share Brownson’s Catholic sensibility, in trying to understand an aspect of Protestantism that now appears to have achieved an apotheosis in American culture. It rejects the sacramental nature of the world, and accepts no limit on shaping it however each of us wills it. Radicals expressed this during their enthusiastic conversations at a reform convention during John’s time: “To acknowledge the right of human government and of human laws [is] treason to humanity. Man is a law to himself. He is his own governor. The Protestant principle of the right of private judgment and liberty of conscience strikes at the root of all the governments on earth. Each one’s nature is his own sole law. The one principle of duty is, for every one to do that which is right in his own eyes.”
This view was proudly held by many outspoken “infidel” (their word) atheists and freethinkers, as well as by many of their fellow-traveling spiritualist radicals. They regarded their own beliefs—radical materialism, atheism, and spiritualism—as the logical result of the Protestant impulse against moral and spiritual authority that transcended the individual. For them, spiritual and moral truth was an entirely private and solitary affair. They believed that those who remained in mainstream denominations were either too timid or dull to realize that each individual constituted his or her own inviolable authority and that the world was, in truth, a congeries of sovereign individual souls, each in its private universe, but utterly without authority beyond its boundaries. Not surprisingly, both radical atheists and radical spiritualists identified the enemy of progress as the Catholic Church.10

Yet they seem also to have yearned for the sacramental vision and the communion of saints they rejected.11 How was it possible, I have wondered, that people could so vastly overestimate the individual’s faculties and virtues, and so vastly underestimate those of the community—that is, the “earthly government”—even while elevating the notion of “Union” to a sacred ideal worth dying for? And how could a belief in the absolute sovereignty of the individual, the negation of “earthly governments,” and the principle of nonviolence have foreshadowed the later worldwide socialist negation of so many lives of actual individual humans and the affirmation of the totalitarian power of the “humanitarian” state? How could those who valued, above all, the rights of individuals, have annihilated their wills so completely in the service of the spirits? And how could people who criticized “Papist superstition” so strongly have believed in the magical idea that the human will, or imagination, or desire could materialize whatever its object was?

In his extraordinary dedication to principles and in his unremitting efforts to relieve the world’s suffering, John Murray Spear is a sympathetic, even heroic, figure. But he also seems like a herald slouching toward the dark excesses that were waiting to be born in the political world of the next century. Some of his visions have materialized and have revolutionized our world, for better and for worse. These visions hover like spirits above his life, floating in the winds that blow from his age into ours.
John Murray Spear entered this world in Boston on Sunday, September 16, 1804. He was a Virgo, so one who was inclined to such speculations might have supposed that he would be a perfectionist. The year before, his parents, John and Sally Spear, had already been blessed with a child, also a boy, whom they named Charles. He was born on the same night that America had doubled its size, when the Louisiana Purchase had taken effect.

On the day of John’s birth, the Boston sky was clear and the wind was still, a rare day in a season in which storms and gales scoured the East Coast. One looking for occult connections with other events might also note that during that time two performers a few blocks away were fueling Bostonians’ sense of wonder while showing them the way that some ancient religious oracles got results. A magician named John Rannie was entertaining crowds with his power of ventriloquism, which was, he advertised, the “same faculty, which, in the scriptures, is called familiar spirit, when the witch at Endor raised the apparition of Samuel, and . . . occasioned a voice to come from the Ghost, which Saul took to be the voice of the prophet himself, but which the artful woman, no doubt, managed as she pleased.”

Not far away, at the Boston Museum on Market Street, William Pinchbeck was demonstrating “an extraordinary aerial phenomenon,” which he called “The Invisible Lady and Acoustic Temple.” With it a woman speaking
in one room could, through hidden tubes, project her voice into the next room out of a hollow ball that seemed to be suspended only by wires from a frame with no other connection to the rest of the device. The purpose of the demonstration, he wrote, was to show that “whenever any uncommon sounds are heard, or any unnatural visions seen, it is indispensably necessary to search into the secret causes of such sounds and visions.” This would have pleased Thomas Jefferson, who, in the White House in Washington, had recently taken up his Bible and was excising passages in it that portrayed Jesus as a miracle worker, rather than as a moral teacher.

The Spears named their younger son for their pastor, John Murray. Ten years before, the boys’ grandparents, a Boston fisherman named John Spear and his wife Abigail, had turned their spiritual gaze from ancient dark images of eternal damnation to bright ones of universal salvation. They had given up their membership in the Brattle Square Congregational Church and had joined Murray’s First Universalist Church. Their son John had grown to manhood as a Universalist, opened a successful blacksmith shop, and married Sally Corbet, an immigrant from Scotland.

John Murray Spear’s parents had him christened by the Reverend Murray, who always rejoiced when conducting this ceremony, but who, this time, also shed a tear when the parents placed his little namesake in his arms. In later years, brothers Charles and John Murray Spear did not remember much of John Murray’s preaching—he retired when they were still quite young—but they remembered his loving manner, which matched his loving theology. From the pulpit, he proclaimed that the love of God was without limit. He denied the doctrine of eternal damnation. Some of his fellow Universalist preachers went further: Hosea Ballou, who occasionally preached in Murray’s church, taught that all misery ended for every person immediately after death. He taught that Jesus restored all humankind to God, a restoration that was “the death of Death.”

Universalists believed that God’s love would end misery, not just in the next world, but, through human action, in this one as well. The Spear boys took that to heart. They were devoted to their parents and grandparents, but their family also told stories about the boys’ gentleness—John, they said, treated animals with love, a nice trait in a blacksmith’s son, but was also unfailingly kind to the aged and to the homeless children he met on the streets.
In May 1809, the family suffered a sudden, terrible blow when the boys’ father, at the age of twenty-nine, died in an accident. It knocked the little family out of the middle class and forced them to struggle for their livelihood. The boys’ mother moved them in with the grandparents.

In 1812, at the start of the war with England, Sally Spear, mindful of the family’s near poverty, took John and Charles out of public grade school and sent them to work in a cotton mill south of Boston. They were eight and nine years old. The mill was the Dorchester Cotton and Iron Works, powered by a dam the owner had built on the Neponset River the year before. The women and children of the neighboring towns found work at the mill throughout the war. When John and Charles labored there, the morning bell rang six days a week at four o’clock in the morning and the bell ending the workday rang at seven-thirty at night. They each made fifty cents a week, plus board. A clerk at the mill set up a Sunday school to occupy whatever of the children’s free time remained, and the Spear boys attended.

After a couple of years in Dorchester, they returned home but continued to work, running errands at a lawyer’s office, then at a cabinetmaker’s shop, then at a bookbinder’s. Their mother kept the family solvent by taking in boarders.

At age thirteen Charles was old enough to apprentice at a trade. But he had acquired what he called an “overpowering thirst for education.” Wishing to be near books, he persuaded his mother to apprentice him to a Boston printing firm. Above all, he was determined to create for himself a career of substance. As he learned the printing trade, he also continued his education among the books and pamphlets he was printing. He taught himself composition with a pen in the moments when he was not composing lines of metal font on the composing stick. He imagined himself, then, not as a printer, but as an expounder of ideas and a molder of opinions.

John was as energetic as his brother. His mother sent him to Abington, where the shoemaking industry had taken hold, to begin apprenticing as a shoemaker. The shoemakers had a reputation for being highly literate, as well as politically radical. The youngest apprentice in any New England shoemaker’s shop was expected to spend some of his time each day thumbing through newspapers and pamphlets and reading them to all the other workers as they bent over their work. It gave him practice in reading and in speaking, even though he was simply giving voice to others’ thoughts. His
elders listened and hammered out their own comments against his voice. While they worked on shoes, they also fashioned a consensus about the events of the day.

After Charles finished his seven-year apprenticeship, he decided not to be a printer, but to enter a different calling, a higher and more public life of service. After John Murray retired, Hosea Ballou had become pastor of the Second Universalist Society of Boston, and the Spears had moved their allegiance to his church. Charles now asked Ballou, “Do you think I can preach?” Ballou’s encouraging reply, Charles thought, was extremely witty, “If you wanted to learn to swim, you would go into the water!”

Charles moved to Roxbury to live with Ballou’s grandnephew, also a Universalist minister, and also named Hosea Ballou. He had set up a Universalist seminary in his home, boarding young men and educating them for the ministry. He believed that establishing a system of training for the Universalist ministry would bring order into what had been a loose network of charismatic itinerant evangels of universal salvation who preached to transient gatherings of enthusiasts and accepted freewill offerings. Charles intended to improve his social standing. He saw in the examples of Murray and the Ballous the possibility of doing that in a new kind of Universalist ministry, in a settled church with an established congregation and a stable salary.

Meanwhile, John, in Abington making shoes, had been attending the nearest church, which was Congregationalist, but he subscribed to the Universalist Magazine, edited by the elder Ballou. Reading it stimulated him to walk eight miles to Hanover on Sundays, where he could attend a Universalist society. He met a girl his own age there, Betsey Briggs, a Mayflower descendent of both John Alden and Miles Standish. Her late father had also been a shoemaker.

John’s interest in her strengthened his determination to attend the church, but he was not distracted from the preaching. Decades later, he said that a sermon he had heard there continued to shape his thoughts and actions ever afterward. A visiting minister had preached on the text, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature.” John realized that a missionary could become the instrument through which love entered the world.

Ever since he had been very young, he had ventured out to solitary places to pray and to let his mind wander heavenward. Now, when he set out alone to the woods, he came to sense that God was calling him to the ministry.
He was near the end of his apprenticeship as a shoemaker, and he scrimped to save money to pay for room and board at Hosea Ballou’s, where he meant to join his brother.

At the end of his apprenticeship, John spent a year earning a wage working for his previous master. He kept his money with his employer. But the country had been in the midst of a depression that had begun when cheap manufactured goods from England flooded into the country after the war. John’s employer went bankrupt, losing his own money to his creditors as well as the money he had been holding for his employees. John was destitute. For a while during the winter of 1825, he wandered the streets of Abington among the closed shoe shops, without home, money, food, or strength. In the depths of his misfortune, he managed to walk to his mother’s house in Boston. When he arrived, he found, to his great joy, that Charles and his teacher had sent him money, and he joined his brother and the other young men who boarded at Ballou’s.

Charles finished his studies and began contributing articles to Universalist newspapers and magazines, finding that his knowledge of the printing trade helped him to get his thoughts published. He traveled through New England, preaching to one group of Universalists after another, looking for a pastorate. At that time, Charles believed that Universalism was both potent and sufficient for revolutionizing the world and he did not preach on particular issues of social or political reform.18

John felt differently. Undertaking the Savior’s work among suffering and neglected people, he believed, would set him against whatever institutions of the world oppressed them. True Christians would have to “come out” from those institutions, in order to manifest God’s love and freedom.19 That freedom might exist in the wilderness—where he had found the silent spirit blowing—or along the margins of society, among people who possessed little of anything else.

The Death of Death
John Spear finished his studies with Hosea Ballou late in 1828, and went to Brewster, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod.1 A new Universalist Society there had called his brother to be its pastor.2 Charles had already moved to Brewster. There he made the acquaintance of a widow in his congregation, Frances King, who had two young daughters, and he married her.3 John went to assist his brother and to look for another nearby society where he could become pastor.4 With that in mind, he acted as minister, at first without payment, to a new Universalist Society in Barnstable. He also preached to other Universalists who were organizing on the Cape, sometimes in the face of opposition from the established Congregational parishes. When the Universalists in Chatham, for example, first gathered the building materials for their meeting house, and were about to begin the construction, “the good Orthodox people of Chatham appointed a prayer meeting on the spot, and earnestly besought the Lord to throw confusion into the Universalist Camp, and hinder their work.”5 The Methodists also resented losing members and “abused and insulted the Universalists and traduced their characters most wickedly.”6

John had matured into a physically imposing figure. Now bigger than his older brother, he stood a few inches taller than six feet, “his face ruddy or even rosy, his eye exceedingly brilliant, his aquiline nose and other features
clear-cut. . . . he was a wonderful apparition.” He was slender, even bony, with pale skin, a cascade of straight black hair, and “a mouthful of large teeth.” He was “a plain, practical, every-day sort of a man, whose look and manner convinces one of his sincerity.” One observer wrote that John “wears a ‘can-I-help-you?’ sort of a look, and speaks so gently and moderately, the listener, if ever so much excited before, becomes calm and feels at home, as in the presence of a friend and a brother.” His pastoral abilities grew out of a rare capacity for intuitive empathy for others—heir spirit seemed to move to his listeners as an impulse. But he was “not afraid to assail any form of evil, however large its bulk or hideous its horns.” Some said he inherited his stubborn singleness of purpose, and his suspicion of worldly authority, from his Scottish mother.

His success in preaching depended on the sheer force of his convictions. He preached in an enthusiastic style that opponents said was unscriptural: He promised joy to all and denied eternal punishment, and so fostered the belief that some thought was a “greater demoralizing influence than any form of error known to the Christian Church.”

At the beginning, the Barnstable Universalist Society met in Hyannis Port’s new red schoolhouse. But after John grew into his duties, the membership of the society increased from fifty to almost two hundred. They began paying him a salary and decided to build their own meetinghouse. In 1830, on the occasion of its dedication, John was formally ordained and installed as pastor.

Some of his strongest supporters in the Barnstable society were members of the extended Cape Cod family of Hinckleys, many of whom ran prosperous businesses. Prominent among them was Eli Hinckley, whose (second) wife Caroline, on April 2, 1829, gave birth to a girl, the sixth of Eli’s many children. One of John’s first pastoral duties with the Universalist society was to christen the girl, who was named Caroline. Now that he had found a secure position in Barnstable with a salary, John went to Abington and proposed to Betsey Briggs, the young woman he had met while he was a shoemaker’s apprentice. She accepted and they were married at the Universalist society in Hanover on June 6, 1831.

Both John and Charles gained some small notoriety through the new local newspaper, the Barnstable Patriot. The editor gave each of the brothers a regular column on the front page for little essays of theological and
moral reflections. John devoted an early column to the subject of death, calling it “a school of wisdom.” He urged his readers to keep the certainty of their own deaths firmly fixed in their minds. He wrote that the hope of eternal life could “warm and bind up every broken heart, enlighten every benighted mind, comfort every mourner, and cause them to rejoice in unlimited and eternal love.”

One of Charles’s early essays was inspired by the recently reported remarks of the Marquis de Lafayette, who had argued for the abolition of the death penalty. During the French Revolution, Lafayette had narrowly avoided being executed. He now argued that capital punishment was unjust because human judgment was fallible and would inevitably condemn innocent people to an irrevocable punishment. Charles agreed and also developed other objections to the death penalty: It was not an effective deterrent to crime, he wrote, and it was unjust because, as a punishment, it was often incongruent with the offense. He thought society could protect its citizens by imprisoning criminals, which made execution unnecessary, cruel, and vindictive.

The members of John’s Barnstable society were young and liberal. Like John, perhaps, many of them were also impetuous—their first constitution contained a careless statement open to comical interpretation: “No person or member,” it had said, “can be excluded on account of having imbibed any religious opinions whatever,” which they had to amend in a more reflective moment to “No member shall be excommunicated from this society on account of his religious opinions.” For their plain worship services, they had built a simple wooden building that had no steeple or ornament. Although their first meetinghouse was architecturally unexceptional, many of them were ambitious and already on their way to becoming wealthy.

John and Betsey’s first child was a daughter, who they named Sophronia. The second was a son, who they named John, Junior. Betsey, who was said to be, above all, “energetic and discriminating,” meticulously applied herself to the role of a minister’s dutiful wife, in “patient toil,” in “watchfulness over and motherly devotion to her husband and children,” perhaps thinking that they would live out the rest of their lives in Barnstable.

But that was not to be. The Barnstable society had members who were radicals on social issues and who were the leaders of Barnstable’s Peace Society, Female Samaritan Society, and Temperance Society. John sympa-
thized with them and let them use the Universalist meetinghouse for their gatherings. But some members of the Universalist society did not condone this. They disagreed with John’s mixing of politics and religion, as they saw it. Others had joined the Universalist society because it offered an alternative to fire-and-brimstone. They had little patience with being exhorted, disciplined, preached to about their moral duties, or having their comfortable feet held to the flames. They confronted John, and then voted to restrict the use of the building to religious services.

John also encountered a problem because his preaching was often spontaneous, and sometimes he did not choose his words with care. Once, for example, he had to defend his beliefs in the Universalist press after he was accused of having said in a sermon that Universalism fostered licentiousness. According to him, he had only described the state of spiritual freedom that flowed from a belief in universal salvation.

John was unwilling to change his preaching or his understanding of what his pastoral responsibilities were. As a result, he began looking for a new society to head, one that would not try to regulate his prophetic witness or his commitment to social or moral reform. In 1835 he left the Barnstable society and moved his family to the prosperous city of New Bedford, where he became pastor of the new First Universalist Society, which he had helped organize. The members provided a house for their new pastor and his family and at first they held their meetings in the parlor. But John’s enthusiasm persuaded them to erect a stone church in the center of the city and to carry a mortgage for more than half its cost. He helped out in the construction however he could, even carrying stones for the masons.

The Spears, in the years after they arrived in New Bedford, had two more children, William and Cornelia. As John’s family and his church grew, so did a base of support within the Universalist society—as well as within the larger community of New Bedford—for his reform enthusiasms. Betsey, however, gave no sign that she too was drawn to the reform causes and missions that John undertook.

He visited the New Bedford Jail on one of these “missions,” to find a candidate to head a local branch of the Washingtonians, a temperance society recently organized by reformed drunkards who had signed the temperance pledge of total abstinence from alcohol and who gave speeches about their reformation. He wrote, “I found a person who had been repeatedly
imprisoned for drunkenness, informed him of the purpose of my visit to the prison, asked him if he would sign the Pledge and go out, if I could get him pardoned, and help in the new movement. He signed the Pledge in the prison. I got him pardoned. He went out and became the head of a large Washingtonian Society.”

John conducted other “missions of love,” as he called them, visiting prisoners to help them contact their relatives, to arrange bail, and to find employment for them once they were released. And he did not limit his prison ministry to New Bedford. In 1839 he visited the Taunton Jail to see Benjamin Cummings, who had been condemned for murder. The man had been intoxicated one night and had resisted arrest by an officer of the law. In the scuffle, the officer had been stabbed. After John visited the jail and talked to the prisoner, he came to believe that Cummings had no memory of the night of the death, that the officer fell on his own knife by accident, and that the jury should not have convicted Cummings of murder. John appealed to the governor to have the death penalty commuted to life imprisonment, but when he had no success, he accompanied Cummings to the gallows.

After the execution, the jailer told John that he heard Cummings declare his innocence even at the last moment, and that he believed he had executed an innocent man. He asked John to do what he could to help abolish the death penalty. John wrote, “Better . . . that ninety and nine guilty persons should escape, than that one innocent person should be hung. It was not the sheriff of Bristol County that executed that innocent being . . . it was the people of Massachusetts, and they are accountable for it.”

John and Charles together persuaded the Universalist General Convention of 1835 to ask Universalists to petition their legislatures to end the death penalty, which their resolution described as “the relic of a barbarous age, and decidedly anti-Christian.” By the following year’s convention, however, the collective view had fragmented, despite the Spears’ renewed efforts. That convention burdened their death penalty resolution with a hedge about the impropriety of “ecclesiastical bodies” interfering in legislative affairs.

John and Charles read The Manual of Peace by Maine clergyman and philosophy professor Thomas Upham. The book convinced them of the “great principles of Peace” and they became devoted advocates of nonviolence. They joined the American Peace Society, but they went further in their convictions toward pacifism than the society was willing to go. They
changed their thoughts on the subject “from the common, popular notion of the lawfulness of war in all cases; then as merely defensive; then that it is never justifiable; then that no nation has a right to take life, nor an individual any right whatever to take his own life or that of another under any circumstances.”

The Spears joined William Lloyd Garrison and a group of other pacifists among the members of the American Peace Society who organized a convention in Boston to articulate stronger principles than the society had been willing to adopt. They formed a new organization, the New England Non-Resistance Society, taking the term “non-resistance” from the Gospel counsel to “Resist not evil.” They renounced all violence, even in self-defense, and called themselves “non-resistants.” The society opposed capital punishment, declaring, “no man or body of men has the right to take another’s life for transgression.” Its constitution also directed each of its members not to vote, not to take an oath, or in any other way to serve the “Government of the World.”

John and Charles became friends with Adin Ballou, an ex-Universalist minister who rose to the top of the organization along with Garrison. Members of the society believed that nonresistance principles were a revival of those of early Christianity. Putting them into practice—implementing a “practical Christianity,” as Ballou called it—would establish the kingdom of God on Earth. “Practical Christianity” did not mean a compromised Christianity, but one in which strong principles of peace were made practical by applying them to every aspect of life.

Charles wrote to Garrison about a series of lectures he had given. “At the close, I gave liberty to the audience,” he wrote. “Several, of course, opposed the views. They could not bear the doctrine that we had no right to kill an enemy to save our own lives. For the thousandth time, I was asked what I would do, if my wife and little ones were attacked. In reply I observed that I would try to do as my Master did, and that was, die for my enemies. I recommended praying for our oppressors.”

The Spears found in nonresistance an expression of the ideal of self-sacrifice that lay at the heart of the Gospel, and that clarified and perfected human character. Charles wrote Garrison another letter suffused with sentiment and self-dramatization, in which he declared his radical convictions and his determination to proclaim them to the world. “We must expect . . .
to be treated with scorn and contempt,” he wrote. “Perhaps even our lives may be required. But let us resolve to be faithful to our great cause. . . . Let us go forth, leaning on the gracious promise of our Heavenly Father, who has said that ‘nations shall beat their swords into plough-shares, and their spears into pruning hooks, and that they shall learn war no more.’”35 As a speaker, Charles could become overexcited and was even prone to hector his audience—this presumably is why, after hearing him speak at a peace convention with Bronson Alcott, Henry Thoreau wrote of Charles to Waldo Emerson, “Ought he not to be beaten into a plowshare?”36

In New Bedford, John added another cause to his reform work—the abolition of slavery. In Boston, a mob had broken up a meeting of antislavery activists and had led Garrison through the streets with a noose around his neck. John read newspaper accounts of the assault. Believing “new truths had ever been unpopular” and “great thoughts were always rejected by the Scribes and Pharisees,” he decided he would hear Garrison speak. When he did, he converted to abolitionism and joined the New Bedford Anti-Slavery Society, believing that truth “was of more worth than all the masked hypocrisy, religious demagoguism, and milk-and-water philanthropy, in all the world.”37

At the time he became an abolitionist, most Universalists were unwilling to work for the cause or even to allow notices of antislavery meetings to be read in their churches. They were opposed to slavery in theory, but they envisioned its end at some vague future date, to be accomplished through gradual means. Garrison and his coadjutors, on the contrary—and John was now one of them—called for an immediate, unconditional end to slavery. They insisted that slavery was an evil with which no compromise was possible.

John now felt that he was under a divine imperative to engage in the moral reform causes of the day. He convinced his brother of the same. Charles, looking for a larger field of action, left his pastorate in Brewster for what turned out to be a short tenure as editor of a Universalist newspaper published in Hartford, Connecticut, the Religious Inquirer. Then, after pastorates in Springfield and Rockport, Massachusetts, he moved back to Boston to try to build up a fragile young Universalist society (the Sixth Universalist Society) that met in a room across the street from a Unitarian church whose pastor, George Ripley, would soon leave to establish the Brook Farm utopian settlement.
Andrew Hutchinson, who owned the building in which the Universalist Society met, had moved to Boston from New Hampshire. His younger brothers followed him there, with the idea of making a name for themselves as a singing group, which they later decided to call the Hutchinson Family Singers. They practiced their songs in the hall in which the Universalists met, and one of the older brothers, Judson, high-strung and impressionable, led the choir for Charles’s society. About the same time, Judson’s brother Jesse, who had moved to Lynn, across the water from Boston, began directing the choir of that city’s First Universalist Society.

Charles’s Sixth Universalist Society was soon overtaken by a vote of its membership to dissolve its formal relations with the Universalists and to affiliate instead with a group of freethinkers and self-styled “infidels” who formed the Boston Free Discussion Society. With that vote, Charles quit in frustration and, while remaining a minister, decided to make his way without a pastorate. He had the idea that it might be possible to make a career, as Garrison was doing, as a professional reformer. But he first had to establish himself with the liberal intellectual and religious elite of Boston and to find a cause that did not already have a leader.

He began at first as a kind of colporteur, publishing and selling his own books door to door, such as his *Essays on Imprisonment for Debt* and a devotional volume he had just finished, *Names and Titles of the Lord Jesus Christ*. He visited and discussed religion and reform with such luminaries as William Ellery Channing, John Quincy Adams, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Cullen Bryant, Lydia Sigourney, and Dorothea Dix. In his diary, which he kept, it would appear, with an eye to future biographers, he seems to have dignified these unannounced visits as pastoral rounds or professional courtesies of a sort. He clearly took offense when a few of those he visited, seeing him holding his book in his hand and asking them for a dollar, treated him as they would an itinerant peddler.