

**United First Parish Church In Quincy
Sermon for 12/30/07 by Rev. Michelle Walsh**

“UU Women Making History, Part I”

Entering the New Year is typically a time of reflection and of resolutions – reflection upon our past and resolutions about our future. In my New Year’s sermon last year, I suggested that Unitarian Universalists need a moment in their liturgical calendar to reflect together *as a people*, both on their history and on their commitments for the future – similar to the Jewish tradition of Yom Kippur, the Islamic tradition of Ramadan, and the Christian tradition of Lent. I have suggested that our annual worship at New Year’s could be just such a moment. So this year, I will be focusing on our history as a Unitarian Universalist people in relationship to women – and this is such a big topic that I have decided to do a Part II of this sermon on March 30th, for women’s history month as well. This sermon has actually become a bit of a prologue to that sermon, and today I will be focusing on what it means to be an ally to a UU woman making history.

I want to start with a confession – I have not spent a lot of time, at least recently, reading about the history of women, including our Unitarian Universalist women. Having been born in 1961 and then growing up amidst the women’s movement and attending a woman’s college, I think I have come to take a lot for granted in my expectations. However, I also now think that there is a danger in being ignorant of the nature and quality of the struggles of women, because this ignorance can then blind us from seeing how women are still struggling today and from understanding what is required to ensure the worth and dignity, the full flourishing humanity, of each woman. Being ignorant of our history can blind us to seeing the potential and the necessity to be allies to women today – whether these are women in our larger society and world or women right here in our own congregation or perhaps even in our own families.

As allies to women, both as male allies and as female allies, what is the essential struggle of women everywhere? Rev. Susan Manker-Seale, a UU minister, writes that it is the struggle for

“visibility, voice, and value.”¹ It is the struggle for the fullness of one’s humanity rather than objectification of just one aspect of that humanity. Manker-Seale writes of an experience she had one day, an experience I suspect will feel familiar to many mothers:

Last summer (1988) I walked into a pizza parlor looking for my husband. My two children, Benjamin at two years and Katie at seven months, were tired and hungry. I needed to ask Curtiss [her husband] something, but now I have forgotten what it was. It was important enough, though, to track him down where he was having lunch next door to the Walgreen Drug store he manages. It was important enough that I didn’t care about the fact that I was dressed in old shorts and a T-shirt, rather than the decent clothes I usually wear when I look him up at work. His employees had told me where I could find him, but I don’t remember their telling me he was having a meeting with someone.

(Manker-Seale then continues) I walked up to the table, feeling somewhat embarrassed. Curtiss and the other man assured me I wasn’t interrupting anything. I was introduced: “This is my wife Susan, and these are my kids, Benjamin and Katie.” By this time, Benjamin was running madly around the restaurant, looking at me and touching everything and totally ignoring my appeals that he stay close to me. Katie, meanwhile, was whimpering with hunger and trying to get out of my arms, throwing her little body towards the floor so that I had to grab her with both hands to keep her from

¹ This quotation and the following story Manker-Seale relates come from her 1989 award-winning sermon “Visibility, Voice, and Value: Conflicts Between Motherhood and Ministry,” in Emerson, D.M. (2004) (ed.). *Glorious Women: Award-Winning Sermons About Women*. Lincoln, NE: Ministerial Sisterhood Unitarian Universalist.

falling. I felt this chaos of motherhood and children hit me full swing. The man laughed slightly in dismissal of it as he stood up, in his establishment suit, to shake my hand. He looked at me, and it was then that I saw myself reflected in His eyes, the eyes of our patriarchal society. Suddenly I realized that, to him (and to me at that moment), I was the image of the mother in our culture: the mother in the commercials (sans make-up); the mother in the comedies of Hollywood. I felt invisible. I felt voiceless. I felt valueless. It was a terrible feeling. (41-42)

As I reflected on Manker-Seale's words and experience that afternoon, I wondered if she might have felt differently if her husband had introduced her not as "my wife," but as "my partner," and the children not as "my kids," but as "our kids," and then if he had also proceeded to take an active role in parenting their children in that moment.

Women, and children, down through time have been seen as possessions – possessions of men. They were not seen as fully human, entitled to the worth, dignity, and rights of men. Instead, they were and are subject to abuse, restraint, and oppression – and worst of all, death, as we saw in the assassination of a prominent political woman, Prime Minister Bhutto, this past week. (There

were many factors involved in her assassination, but we can be sure that one was the fact that she was a prominent vocal and visible woman.) And, as disappointing it may be to hear, this oppression is true across cultures. *Feminist* anthropologists tell us that there are no fully matriarchal societies *anywhere* – *all* societies are patriarchal, men have and continue to hold the major reigns of power.

Now why is this so? There are two classic analytic essays in feminist cultural anthropology that are often referred to today even though they were written in the 1970's. One essay was written by a sociologist, Nancy Chodorow,² who argued that at root is the fact that women are *universally* the *primary* caretakers for children. Responsibility for childcare *structures* family life and the social economy. It can even structure underlying personality traits and dispositions for women and for men when roles are rigidly defined and expressed.

² See Chodorow, N. "Family Structure and Feminine Personality" in Rosaldo, M.Z. & Lamphere, L. (1974) (eds.). *Woman, Culture, and Society*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 43-66.

If girls see their mothers as *only* mothers and as nothing else, then their identities tend to become wrapped around being mothers or caretakers of others – including loss of visibility and voice in the larger society as they take on a caretaking function – that is, unless they find an ally and a mentor to show them alternatives. Boys, on the other hand, experience a need to push away from the immediate visibility and voice of their mothers, and in an effort to identify with a more distant, positional father (who has not been more personally involved with their care and upbringing but who is out, away, and active in the world at large), boys actually tend to devalue their mothers and thus women in general. Again, that is, unless they have an alternative experience or role modeling. This is a simplification of Chodorow's argument, but she does set some explanatory ground for a universal cross-cultural phenomenon that becomes embedded at all levels of a society, including throughout its economic and political structures, unless there is a conscious effort to change the pattern – as I know many families strive to do today, including men and families in this congregation.

The second feminist anthropologist, Sherry Ortner, wrote an essay entitled “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?”³ in which she also tried to explain the universal devaluation of women across cultures. In Ortner’s argument, she examines the human need for control, particularly control of one’s environment and of nature to produce culture, to produce a form of transcendence over that which is perishable, nature and human beings. Ortner questions if women are universally devalued because they are seen as closer to nature through their physiology and even their psychology – through menstrual cycles that are often tied to pollution across cultures; through pregnancies that often physically tie them to children and to a domestic sphere, reproducing not a transcendent culture but only perishable human beings; and through a feminine personality that seems to be more tied to feelings and to perishable human beings rather than to abstract logic, reason, and the rule of law.

³ Also in *Woman, Culture, and Society* cited above, pp. 67-87.

Building on the essays of feminists such as Chodorow and Ortner, Carol Gilligan would challenge this view of women as morally deficient in her seminal 1982 work, *In A Different Voice*,⁴ arguing that male and female development are not a matter of inferiority and superiority but of difference. Maria Mitchell would have had a few choice words to say on this topic as well, I suspect, given that she was both a rigorous scientist *and* a heartfelt poet, as we experienced when we read responsively her description of “the infinitude of creation.”

How has patriarchy seeped into religion? We know well that it has. Beginning with the Hebrew bible, male theologians have argued that since the Garden of Eden the primary sin is that of rebellion against God, of the egoism and pride of defiance, and that a woman’s responsibility is to be obedient to the male as the male should be obedient to God. In turn this has reinforced a self-sacrificial path for many women, including those who believe (and who are even advised by male and female ministers alike!) that as

⁴ See Gilligan, C., Cambridge, Harvard University Press.

good Christians, they should stay with their abusive husbands and suffer as Christ suffered.⁵

Feminist theologians, in contrast, have argued that the sin of pride and egoism does not apply to women, or even to men, when they lack power. Pride and egoism as sin apply to the powerful who gain at the expense of others and break our relational interdependence in the web of existence. Instead, feminist theologians argue, there *is* another sin – the “sin of hiding,”⁶ of not becoming a full and participatory self in creation, a full, participatory strand in the web of existence. “For the oppressed,” Marjorie Suchocki writes, “the problem is not defining limits, but defying limits.” However, to defy limits, to risk becoming and showing one’s fullest self often requires good allies when one is an oppressed female – allies who are males and allies who are females.

⁵ For an excellent treatment on this problem for many Christian women, see Brock, R.N. & Parker, R.A. (2001). *Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and The Search For What Saves Us*. Boston: Beacon Press.

⁶ See Suchocki, M.H. (2003). *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology*. New York: Continuum, 31-32 and generally chapter two for this and following quote.

So how do allies help UU women to make history? We glimpse an answer in Maria Mitchell's ferocity of questions, an infinity of questions, from our "Message for All Ages"⁷ today. Young Maria was lucky because her parents supported her right to ask questions – they supported the development of her full humanity, her full personhood, as an astronomer and a teacher. Maria eventually was also inspired by a male ally, William Ellery Channing, and found a religion, Unitarianism, that supported her right to question religious truths as well.

We glimpse this process of being an ally throughout UU history when men and women support women in defying limits, in expanding the web of our understanding and relationality. We may well know Olympia Brown, the first woman in America to be accepted as an ordained minister by her denomination, the Universalist Church. But have you heard of Olympia's mentee, the

⁷ The "Message for All Ages" was a short children's story on Maria Mitchell entitled "An Infinity of Questions" from Grohsmeyer, J.K. (2004). *A Lamp In Every Corner: Our Unitarian Universalist Storybook*. Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 51-53.

second woman ordained to the Universalist Church, and the first in New England – Phebe Ann Coffin Hanaford?

Phebe deserves her own fame both as a UU woman who made history and who was a good ally to other women as a feminist minister and theologian. Late in Phebe's career she took a great risk upon herself, along with her life-long Unitarian friend, Susan B. Anthony, by supporting Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In 1895, Stanton was engaged in editing a radical and highly controversial project, *The Woman's Bible*, and Phebe agreed to create several biblical commentaries for inclusion. (This was quite a daring and career-risking move on her part when many were running in the opposite direction from this project.) Remember, women did not even have the right to vote until 1920.

Phebe would write to Stanton:⁸

Dear Mrs. Stanton: I believe, as you said in your birthday address, that women ought to demand that the Canon law, the Mosaic code, the Scriptures, prayer-books and liturgies be purged of all invidious distinctions of sex, of all false teaching as to woman's origin, character and destiny. I

⁸ Found in Emerson, D.M. (2000) (ed.). *Standing Before Us: Unitarian Universalist Women and Social Reform, 1776-1936*. Boston: Skinner House Books, p. 451.

believe that the Bible needs explanation and comment on many statements therein which tend to degrade woman. Christ taught the equality of the sexes, and Paul said: There is neither male nor female, ye are all one in Christ Jesus; hence I welcome *The Woman's Bible* as a needed commentary in regard to woman's position.

Phebe would also dare to call God “the infinite Father and Mother,” which famed Unitarian minister, orator, and male ally to women, Theodore Parker, would later repeat in Boston, inspiring other feminists. (We often think of feminism as starting in our times, but this is not true and need to appreciate this.)

As a Unitarian Universalist people, we have a remarkable *history* of women making history and of women and men being allies in that process of making history, only a very few of which I've been able to point to today. In this New Year, I encourage each of us to reflect on the ways in which we, as men *and* as women, could be a better ally to the ongoing cause of seeing, hearing, and valuing women in their fullest humanity, not just in part. I encourage each of us to reflect very *particularly* on the ways in which we as a congregation may only be seeing, hearing,

and valuing very small parts of the women who sit in our pews, who teach our children in Sunday schools, or who are members of our families or our co-workers. Are there ways that we can do better? Like myself, do we take too much for granted? Are there ways, whether we intend this or not, that women in our lives are made to feel invisible, voiceless, and valueless even while they do substantial work for our society? How do we take this challenge as strongly into our lives at all levels as a welcoming congregation as we have taken other issues of justice and equality? It is often harder to turn our attention and work back towards the justice areas we thought we accomplished progress in. Let us each reflect on this and make our personal resolutions for this New Year. Blessed be. Amen.