

## **Disparate Housewives: How Feminism Has Changed Religion**

by the Reverend Kit Ketcham, March 19, 2006

When Bill Graves suggested “how feminism has changed religion” as his choice for the topic of the auction sermon I offer every year, I was delighted – and not just because it gave me a chance to use the punny title “Disparate Housewives” for my sermon.

Feminism has had a profound effect on religious thinking and practice over the past century and I am the recipient of encouragement fostered by this sea change in religious life. So I am very pleased to be able to bring you my thinking on this important topic.

I was slow to become a feminist. It took me a long time to realize that I too was affected by the prevailing social climate of sexism and lack of opportunity for women. I think I was slow because I was lucky. I grew up encouraged by my parents – AND profoundly and positively affected by the work of a noted 19th century woman author. I suspect that some of you here today were also similarly affected!

When I was a girl, I was such a tomboy that my mother despaired of teaching me anything but the barest social graces. I wanted a horse so badly that I entered every contest that appeared on the radio – Roy Rogers was giving away Trigger’s foal as a prize for the best answer in 25 words or less? I sent in several entries just to be sure.

When no horse was forthcoming from that competition, I entered another and another. There was no discouraging me, and eventually, when we moved to Athena, a rancher in my father’s congregation loaned me horses to ride every summer, first, “Dan”, an elderly Thoroughbred, and then “Prince”, an immense, phlegmatic bay gelding.

Dan and Prince were my ticket to independence, and my life of solitary rambles across Umatilla County stubble fields resembled, in my preteen mind, those of Josephine March, the dauntless heroine of the novels of Louisa May Alcott. As Jo March roamed the Massachusetts countryside, so I roamed those eastern Oregon roads and plains.

I read whatever I could find by Louisa May Alcott during those preteen years, every book of the *Little Women* series, anyhow, reassured that if Jo March could be a tomboy and get into scrapes and adventures and turn out all right, then I, Betsy Ketcham, could too.

Marriage and family didn’t sound like a lot of fun to me at age 11, but if Jo March could do it – especially if she got to play with the boys – then it’d probably turn out okay for me too. Jo March was one of my guiding lights as a preteen; her behavior, though not exactly feminine by my mother’s standards, was kind and loving and productive.

Louisa May Alcott’s heroines were courageous and bold, strong of character and able to withstand terrible loss, at the same time uttering sound advice to fragile hothouse flowers who swooned at the sight of blood and batted their eyelashes at the heroes. My prepubescent soul swelled at the ideas I was offered by this more than one-hundred-year-old woman, who seemed to know just what I, a young 1950’s era girl, needed to hear.

Whether it was Louisa May or my parents' encouragement or my own rebellious spirit, I grew up knowing it was okay to be a tomboy, okay to do well in school, okay not to have a boyfriend (well, sort of okay – hormones hit me pretty hard at age 13), okay to go to college, okay to aspire to all the things that most of my friends did not – a college degree, a career, an independent life.

It didn't occur to me then that there was anything I could not be. Jo March, thanks to Louisa May Alcott, our Unitarian foremother, had demonstrated that there wasn't "women's" or "men's" work, per se. It was all just work and needed to be done.

After college graduation, however, my feminist awareness began to develop, when I decided not to go to theological school like many of my college friends, because all that women were trained to do in seminary was to become religious educators, and that looked like glorified Sunday School teacher to me. I couldn't yet envision myself in a pulpit, doing what my dad did, and anyhow, it wasn't proper for women to become ministers – was it?

Since then, of course, women, particularly in liberal denominations like ours, have become strong ministers and skilled professional religious educators. But it hasn't always been that way.

The Bible, probably the best known of religious texts today, is notable in its lack of strong female figures. Except for wives and concubines and widows and harlots, there are almost no women described in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.

A few female characters lurk in between the lines or in the Apocrypha or noncanonical books of the Bible and careful scholarship has amplified their presence:

Some of them are Deborah, a Hebrew judge and military leader; Judith, who killed an enemy intruder; Zipporah, who used magic to save her husband and son; Mary of Magdala, whose devotion to Jesus earned her respect as a disciple; Mary the mother of Jesus, whose legend has superseded her actual life on earth.

But most of the women in the Bible have gained their place in history because of their husbands or their owners or their sons – or their immorality. Sarah, the wife of Abraham, and Hagar, Abraham's concubine, were the mothers of the two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, from whose lines the ancient religions of Judaism and Islam may be traced; Jezebel, pagan princess and wife of King Ahab, whose sexual and murderous exploits enliven the pages of the books of First and Second Kings in the Old Testament; Delilah, who stole the strength of Samson, legendary strong man of Israel.

The list goes on, naming women as temptresses, as manipulators, seductresses, whores, and worse. Even in the well known stories of Esther and Ruth, Israelite women who survived by their wits and their female charms, it's hard to tell whether the authors of the

Hebrew books of Ruth and Esther are championing their survival skills or pitying them their tenuous positions.

And, of course, it all started with Eve, upon whose ancient shoulders rests the assumption that women are not trustworthy, that they seduce and then betray men, that they are the reason why the human race struggles with evil.

The sexual attraction of males to females in the biological process of reproduction has been used to overpower and control women and to justify rape, slavery, and other oppressive behaviors toward females. This seems clear in the early centuries of monotheistic religious belief.

Of course, not all of religious history is found in the Bible. In the ancient prepatriarchal world, the Divine was found in the image and work of the Great Goddess, who gave birth to all of creation.

For thousands of years, humans paid homage to a divine mother, but over the centuries, for a variety of reasons, the male consort of the Great Goddess became more powerful and eventually took her place as chief deity. And, of course, polytheism, which was standard practice in those ancient times, has since been portrayed as less worthy than monotheism.

Let me skip ahead now to women's place in modern religious history, particularly in the United States, where women from the earliest years of American colonial life began to question the cultural order.

Particularly notable was Anne Hutchinson, who felt a religious calling and held Bible study classes for both men and women in colonial Massachusetts in the mid-17th century. Her teaching put her afoul of Puritan rules against women teaching men and she was condemned by her Puritan church and forced to move to Rhode Island, where a haven for dissenters began to grow.

Many women in 17th century America were accused and convicted of witchcraft, for their insights and rebellion against accepted religious practice, which did not allow for women's ways of knowing.

Any woman who challenged male authority and traditional roles was in danger of being accused of witchcraft, tried, and even executed by the authorities. The portrait of a Good Woman in those days displayed her as necessarily pious but confined in her practice to her home and family.

But this wasn't enough for many women, and though the threat of false accusations persisted into the 19th century and beyond, women became active in many social causes and in rebellion against the strictures of Good Womanhood.

Such heroines of early American history, in addition to Louisa May Alcott, include Margaret Fuller, one of our Transcendentalist foremothers; Susan B. Anthony, suffragist; Elizabeth Cady Stanton, author of *The Women's Bible*; Jane Addams, early social worker; Dorothea Dix, mental health advocate; and many, many others.

Slowly the tide of American life began to turn, and with the turning of the tide, came new ways of thinking about religion and about ministry. Women's presence in religious and sociopolitical life has radically changed approaches to both theology and social service, as well as ministry.

The wisdom of women was for centuries isolated in the home and in a narrow band of service activities, while men's wisdom and knowledge became dominant. But human living belongs to both women and men. Human life is not fully effective unless both male and female wisdom are present throughout the entire range of human activity. Each brings distinctive contributions to human life.

But what is women's wisdom, and how does it play out in human living? What does it mean when women are excluded?

The wisdom of women brings together the experience of the body to the experience of the mind, to combine intuition and reason, feeling and intellect, intimacy and detachment, subjective knowledge to objective knowledge.

When these functions are separated, when only the right brain or the left brain is operative at a time, the human world is incomplete, powered by inadequate systems, lopsided in its morality and generativity.

Human existence is a mutual dependence on a diversity of components. When men centered on themselves and their own ways of knowing, leaving out what women know, the home, the family, in fact, the entire human enterprise on earth was degraded. We did not know this, as a culture, until feminism first began to flower.

We did not realize the damage done to the earth and to the human community when women were considered to exist only for the purposes of men. But by claiming their place in every aspect of the social and cultural life of the human community, women have changed the way the world works, changed attitudes and approaches to social problems, offered a perspective of empathy and nurture which contrasts sharply with the authoritarian perspective of more patriarchal systems.

And women of color have added their own womanist and liberationist outlook to modern systems of social and religious thought, for their experience has been even more circumscribed by patriarchy than that of white women.

In our own religious tradition, Unitarian Universalism – and before that, the separate Unitarian and Universalist strands of our history – women have carved out their place as laywomen and, gradually, as clergywomen.

On June 25, 1863, the Rev. Olympia Brown was ordained as the first Universalist female minister. Slowly, slowly, with many setbacks and disappointments, women's place in the UU ministry became more accepted, until today over half of the UU ministry students in seminaries all over the continent are female.

With a growing cadre of female colleagues, male UU ministers found their old collegiality changing to accommodate women who would not tolerate the authoritarian, good-ole-boy ways of relating to each other.

With more women studying for the ministry, more laywomen hungry to find a spirituality more suited to women's experience, and more female professors in theological schools, theology – both for UUs and in mainline Christianity and Judaism – began to shift from a hierarchical view of the Universe (with God on top and humans on the bottom, struggling to dominate the earth) to an understanding of the interdependence of all life.

Women's ways of thinking and knowing have focused UU theology, at least, more on Life than on death and its consequences. Shared ritual has taken on greater significance in our congregations. Our newer hymnals reflect gender-neutral wording; our congregations are rarely the domain of a solitary male minister. More often, congregants and ministers share the pulpit, share the ritual, share the experience of offering worship.

My colleague, the Rev. Ken Collier, has written: "In 1977, General Assembly passed a resolution entitled "Women and Religion" that has served as the basis for an enormous amount of action and change with UUism. This resolution called for two things: (1st) For all UUs to examine their own religious beliefs and the extent to which these beliefs influence sex-role stereotypes within their own families, and, (2nd) it urged religious leaders at every level of our movement to...put traditional assumptions and language into perspective and to avoid sexist assumptions and language in the future."

Rev. Collier notes that before women ministers began to serve in greater numbers, the minister in a congregation was often seen as a father figure, the Daddy who took care of the congregation, though, of course, this was not overtly acknowledged.

He states that "we were evolving a different model of ministry and collegiality, a model that valued mutual relationship above power...We insisted on a different model of power which held that genuine power was not the power to determine but the power to embrace, not power over others but power shared with others.

He goes on, "And the model of power as a shared commodity has allowed us to bring to the movement the idea of ministry as a work shared among the entire membership of the church... no longer seen as something that is done to (or for) people, who receive it as passive consumers, rather as something that people engage in together."

When I look at what has happened in the past twenty years, as women have claimed their place in American culture, in religious life, and in the calling of ministry, I believe that

profound changes in attitude and understandings have evolved because of feminist attitudes and approaches to human life.

I believe that, though there have always been men who were uncomfortable with authoritarian and patriarchal attitudes and approaches and have offered a more empathetic perspective, it has been the emergence of feminism, empowering women, that has resulted in a fusion of spirituality and social justice that reminds me of the successes of the civil rights movement and its nonviolent philosophical core.

Women are bringing to human life a new feminine paradigm based on tolerance, mutuality, and reverence for nature, values seen as crucial to ending poverty and violence.

Author Pythia Peay calls it Feminism's Fourth Wave, pointing out that first-wave feminists fought for women's suffrage; a second wave, led by Gloria Steinem and others, pushed for economic and legal gains. A third wave advocated spirited individualism – girlie culture and women's rights.

But today's conservative political environment has united women across the feminist spectrum, espousing a new social activism based in joy, not anger, and drawing on feminism's inherent spirituality. According to author Carol Lee Flinders, "When you get Jewish, Catholic, Buddhist, Hindu, and Sufi women all practicing their faith in the same room, another religion emerges, which is feminine spirituality."

I have often described Unitarian Universalism in much that same way, that we are doing religion in a new way, bringing together people of like mind under the umbrella of caring for one another and the earth, rather than shared doctrine.

Unitarian Universalism, recognizing the preciousness of each life, the value of freedom and reason and tolerance, understanding that both males and females bring essential experience to the human community, and the interdependence of all life, is a new kind of religion.

I believe that feminism, in all its aspects including womanist and liberationist philosophies, has changed not only the face of religious faith but its practice as well, and that Unitarian Universalism has been in the forefront of this movement for over a century.

I believe that, had not feminism begun to rise across the globe, we would not be having the kinds of social struggles we are having now. We would not yet have realized how important it is to give all human beings, even sexual minorities, equal rights; we would not have fully understood the terrible consequences of war; we would not have had the courage to say no to a thousand oppressions which degrade human life; and we would not have made the kind of progress in cultural understanding and civil freedom that we have today.

Yet with progress comes conflict, and conflict makes us question the value of our work. Some days it takes all we have to say “yes, it is worth it. It is worth the struggle, worth the setbacks, worth the agonizing, for we are birthing a new way of living, a way which ultimately will save humankind. This new way calls upon both men and women to offer their wisdom and their knowledge and their strength, honoring each other, supporting and caring for the world’s peoples, and uniting in love and justice to cherish and sustain the earth, our common home.

Let’s pause for a time of silent reflection and prayer.

Closing Hymn: #123 SPirit of Life

**BENEDICTION:** Our worship service, our time of shaping worth together, is ended, but our service to the world begins again as we leave this place. Let us go in peace, remembering that whether we are male or female, we have a great deal to offer---to ourselves, to each other, and to the Universe. May we listen to each other, learn from each other, and offer to each other the joy and justice that feminism has taught us to value.

Amen, Shalom, Salaam, and Blessed Be.