

THE ROOT OF MY FEMINIST THEOLOGY

It is difficult to believe that as recently as February or March of this year I agreed to speak on "The Root of My Feminist Theology". "FEMINIST THEOLOGY!" Those two terms are practically household companions these days so, while associating them bothered me a bit three months ago, I had no idea that by this time I would find them to be incompatible, -antithetical.

My concept of feminism shouts loudly and clearly, "inclusiveness." It is based not alone in the theory of equality of women and men in the political, economic, social and spiritual sphere but extends beyond the human factors to involve a concern for the totality of life.

But Theology has very different attributes. My American Dictionary says "Theology is the science which treats of God. His relations to the universe." And in my experience God was exclusively male. Moreover, he established a hierarchical order of inequality and dominance in which I and my sisters were less than fully human.

So, in light of the inconsistencies of Feminism and Theology, I ask you to join my search for the root of my feminist ethos--my feminist beliefs. And I want to add, right off, that this experience of seeking roots has brought me face to face with my developing sense of self in a surprising, revelatory and even frightening way. I found that my past opened up in a broader view and my understanding of how I relate to the ULTIMATE has been changing at a startling speed.

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From this vantage point it appears that I came to my feminist beliefs at birth. The root of my feminist concepts lies in my childhood being. I grew up on an Indiana farm where I was a part of the vastness of the earth and sky. I was a child of the soil who often wandered alone in the woodland, amidst the growing grain, comfortable with solitude. A sense of euphoria comes over me as I see her in my mind's eye and relive her yearning to be intertwined in the forces of life. She was, as I believe each small child potentially is, a feminist. She cared for all of life--for the cosmos as she perceived it.

Her spirit is still mine! It is the root, the essence, of my being in spite of the suffocation that that spirit suffered over the years from the swaddling--the wrapping and wrapping--that encased my sense of-self as I accepted more and more of society's prescriptions for being a woman in our culture.

Searching my memory for the root of my current beliefs has brought me closer to her than I have been for more than half a century. A reoccurring childhood dream has come sharply to mind. Night after night in that same dream a wraith, a ghost of myself in form only, ran from me--ran out of and ahead of me as I walked the same spot on the same road. It, my wraith, running lightly, almost drifting, went up the same wooded hill and became more and more nebulous as it approached the crest. Then it dissolved into vapor.

What a portent!! An apparition of myself-my exact likeness-often considered an omen of death. I didn't know what to make of it then but I now believe that I was experiencing a form of death. My childhood spirit was being suffocated-stifled by the dark shroud of acculturation.

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From early on the culture told me what it meant to be me. That is the way we make "humans" of our children. All of our institutions, the family, schools, church and our communities are in collusion to make the basic assumptions of our society become fact as we live out our lives.

I embraced society's definition of reality as if my life depended on it--didn't you? My free-floating child was caught up in midwestern conservatism, both secular and sacred. There was that all seeing and all knowing male deity, white beard and flowing robes wasting, I thought, much valuable time peering over my shoulder.

At night I said, "Now I lay me down to sleep" and later on, in my early teens, I "hit the sawdust trail" as one of those caught up in the Billy Sunday sweep for conversion. What a concept! HE through this rebirth, would make me better. My uterine birth from my mother, a woman, was inadequate.

Well, it didn't take. I was the same Lucile the next morning and when I slipped out of their hands in New Lake as I was being totally immersed at baptism I decided that I was wholly rejected by the GREAT FATHER and church and Theology became a very peripheral part of my life.

But the old dogma is very powerful. I didn't dare risk my children's fate so they were christened (just in case) at the Methodist Church nearby. When they were old enough for Sunday School we went searching for "something better" in Minneapolis where we had recently moved.

The Universalist Church there was a find for us. Here was a loving God. That vindictive God that would consign anyone to hell had been pushed aside. The emotionalism of the revival had disappeared.

We, my husband and I, came into Universalism and ultimately into the merged denominations--the UUA--through the Sunday School door. We stayed in the lower regions--the Sunday School-- as teachers, for a number of years. I believe that when, much later, we added our names to the membership list we, in effect, joined the intellectual community that had built up around the minister and also the concept of social concern, even social action, that Universalism represented in our minds.

My involvement in the denomination increased after we moved, in the late '60's, to the Boston area. By chance I met Mary Lou Thompson and before long I was involved in a peripheral way in editing Voices of the New Feminism. I served for a time on the Board of the Women's Federation where the underlying basis for our current denominational involvement with Women and Religion was being developed.

I attended my first General Assembly in Dallas eight or nine years ago and shyly followed Corrinne Van Alstine around as she portrayed Clara Barton and pronounced some of her feminist statements. The UUWF was also insisting that male centered gender terms be removed from the UUA Principles and By-Laws. What's new? Our activity was then, as it is now, rooted in our past. The story of our foremothers needs to be honored and cherished.

From that time on I have worked to make a place within UUA ideology for emerging feminist perceptions. That is not easy. New understandings originating among individuals, particularly among women in the pews, do not enjoy either the attention or the status of ideas propounded by credentialled professionals in the pulpit.



Three years ago last January when I penned the first tentative version of the resolution later titled "Women and Religion" I was convinced that a place could be established in our UUA understanding for women's emerging spirituality. I honestly believed that we could show Mary Daly that, contrary to her perceptions of UUism, we would ultimately, even very soon, be able to say to disenchanted women of other faiths--"Come unto us, there is room here." At that time I was a believer in the possibility of revisionism!

My current spiritual understanding has been influenced greatly by insights that have come from delving deeply into feminist thought and especially into feminist analysis of patriarchal theology. Our sisters are out there, intellectualizing and sharing. They are critiqueing the patriarchal assumptions that underlie every discipline.

In the early '70's, although I didn't then perceive what I was doing, I began tearing apart the shroud of life-long acculturation, unwrapping the cocoon of patriarchal perceptions in which my whole understanding and my sense-of-self had become so tightly ensnared. I began reaching for, nourishing and now passionately developing the self of my childhood.

I can't say how grateful I am to have lived to participate in the battering at the gates of patriarchal knowledge--the only knowledge that until recently has been available to any of us, whether man or woman. And I honor all of those who work so committedly not only to help us perceive our woman-selves as fully human but to develop patterns of thought that bring hope of a society that moves toward the nourishment of life and not toward global destruction.

Indeed, so meaningful have been the insights of our sisters in helping me recover my childhood spirit that I considered making my entire statement here today by developing a huge montage.

The background of that picture would have been the female symbol- a large circle above with crossed arms attached below. From the crossed arms, the root section, would have been growing a mesh of rootlets, indicating vigorous growth and, filling the circle, even spilling over the edges and stacking one on top of the other, would have been the names of the many women, and hopefully their pictures accompanied by statements, that have brought special insights to me as I have sought to recover my childhood spirit. I view that expression-that montage- as symbolic of the nourishing community that I seek-the shared sustenance of our women's supper.