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REACHING FOR A NEW CONSCIOUSNESS

— Lucile Schuck Longview

An ever increasing number of feminists among Unitarian Universalists are seeking a spiritual identity beyond what patriarchy has said it to be. Women's search for spiritual experiences leads us to a new sense-of-self and to new ways-of-being beyond the male doctrines and laws that decree primacy, empowerment and dominance for males — while naming suffering, obedience and chastity to be the lot of females.

Over the past six years, through the process of the business resolution, the only means available to us, feminists in the pews have been endeavoring to bring into focus within the UUA the sex bias that is so basic to the Judeo-Christian tradition and to world religions generally.

By adopting the Women and Religion Resolution at the General Assembly in 1977, members and leaders of the UUA agreed not only to focus on theological assumptions that are sexist, but to seek new ways of conceptualizing relationships that are free of hierarchy and domination.

Through implementation of that resolution which calls for the denomination "to avoid sexist assumptions and language in the future", we join the phenomenal movement to bring about ideological change and to reach for a new consciousness that feminists are initiating in all religious denominations.

It is women, that half of humanity historically excluded from shaping religious traditions, who are now pushing for new ways of perceiving and for new ways of relating that will expand our sense-of-being in the world. Such a change in understanding and in attitude is revolutionary and will be extremely painful. As old myths are challenged and begin to fall, religious institutions will resist and become more deeply entrenched in Patriarchal ways of thinking and acting. We see the reactionary forces everywhere.

And wherever we look, we also see networks of people exploring the new spiritual age outside and beyond institutionalized religion. Meditation, dream-world analysis, and others all point to a shift away from a religion mediated by authorities, to one of direct personal experience — a shift away from belief to knowing. There is a growing sense that whatever answers there are to our quest for meaning must come from within ourselves.

This new consciousness promises to release a spiritual force transcending religious and cultural boundaries, drawing us into a sense of oneness — oneness not only with the human community globally, but oneness with the totality of life.

Our work in bringing a new awareness to the UUA and feminists' work in other denominations, and the networks of people beyond religious institutions, who are reaching for a new spirituality, are all part of the larger search for a new world consciousness that will maximize the human potential and transform human experience and spiritual understanding.

Once called to our attention, we suddenly see a seemingly endless number of transformative explorations in all areas of life:

In the area of health —

Natural foods, holistic health, self-healing.

In environment and ecology —

Citizen movements pioneered by Ralph Nader.

In economics —

Consumer movements, cooperatives, ecologically harmonious life styles.

In the area of empowerment —

Networking. Accompanying the needy rather than serving their needs.

Participatory democracy rather than representative democracy
[Peace Marches - Anti-Nuclear demonstrations]

In the area of learning —

New systems approach to knowledge (All is related - not isolated streams of thought]

The sum of all of these explorations points to a revolution in consciousness in the whole culture. I'm grateful every day to have lived to see the beginnings of a cultural shift, to be able to push for a new beginning — a new Genesis.

Robin Morgan says in The Anatomy of Freedom: "Feminism is at this moment and on this planet, the DNA/RNA call for survival and for the next step in evolution - and even beyond that, Feminism is, in its metaphysical and Meta Feminist dynamic, the helix of hope that we humans have for communication with whatever lies before us in the vast witty mystery of the universe."

Never before have we had so much responsibility for remaking ourselves and our world. The crisis is at hand. Thought patterns built on the assumption that hierarchy and domination is the only basis for relating lead us toward global destruction.

Never before have we had the sense-of-self that the new feminism is bringing to women. We must own our self empowerment.

And never before have we had the tools — the analysis, the insights and the new perspectives with which to make a significant difference in how reality is perceived.

Many of us have chosen to work for change within our own religious community by pressuring for implementation of the Women and Religion Resolution. We found, however, that the leadership which controls the interpretation and the implementation of resolutions was misinterpreting the resolution by:

- a. Ignoring three previous resolutions that centered on obtaining equal opportunity for women within the denominational hierarchy, and in their place, claiming that the Women and Religion Resolution was about that institutional concern; and by -
- b. Denying that the Women and Religion Resolution was concerned with moving beyond patriarchal perceptions that see man as the model human being, and women as "the other".

To bring the Women and Religion Resolution into a theological focus, feminists turned to the principles of the denomination and looked at the underlying assumptions in those basic statements.

We saw that the principles which supposedly included women — one-half or more of our membership — committed us "to cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, ...".

We knew that it was the universal truths of those male prophets and teachers that elevate men and diminish women. Those cherished prophets and teachers initiated and perpetuated sexism, the very issue so basic to all discrimination.

We saw that by remaining quiet and holding to those principles in the UUA and thereby furthering the sexist assumptions of Patriarchy, we were participating in our own diminishment.

The only means available to feminists who wanted to open a process whereby the bias of the UUA principles would be considered was again through the business resolution.

A draft of revised principles was developed over a period of two years, and districts were asked to submit the revision as prepared by feminists and voted by the 1980 Convocation of Women and Religion as a resolution to update principles. Five districts and fourteen active member societies submitted the recommended version. One district amended it.

Many obstacles are encountered by most resolutions on their way to adoption and implementation, but the effort to change sexism in the principles by the resolution process is special and the obstacles more numerous than usual.

At the General Assembly in Philadelphia in 1981, the resolution for principles review was referred to a board of trustees appointed committee. We now have a Handbook put out by that committee, and one or more should be available in each society. The resolution submitted by feminists is included among resource materials on page 16. We can use that as a starting point for our discussions here and in our societies.

The Handbook can be a very useful tool for consciousness raising if we ask as we read: "Who is being affirmed?" "What is the underlying assumption?"

By page 3 it will be very clear that only males have been insiders in Unitarian and Universalist denominations, and by reading the 1961 statement from the by-laws we can see that it was only the men of the denominations that merged into the UUA, the current denomination.

When we degenderized the principles in 1972 we buried the evidence of that fact but did nothing to change people's attitude and perspective. We covered over the historic fact that the UUA, like other religious denominations, has been an association with a patriarchal orientation.

Read the Handbook for what it contains and for what it doesn't contain. We are not told, for instance, that it was women in the pews who pushed for reconsideration of the principles. That's too revolutionary. The history of the women's movement in the UUA, like all denominational history, is limited to what the leadership perceives it to be and wants us to think it is.

One of the lessons we must all learn is that reality is standpoint determined, and where you stand in a hierarchical relationship affects what you see.

Don't look in the Handbook for information about changing perceptions of reality in the larger culture or for information about feminists' push for change in other religions.

And we are not told that it took many years to come to a merger agreement. If we could get a perspective on that ongoing adjustment to change, then perhaps we could see the folly in assuming that an analysis of patriarchy and an integration of the feminist perspective can come about in a three-year time slot.

We're undertaking a task without end. We need an ongoing process. It is not the final agreement on a statement that is important, but the process of how we arrive at that statement.

The UUA has come of age as a New Age is becoming. Our principles should reflect that fact.

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