

1

Theological Opportunities Program  
November 3, 1988  
Lucile Schuck Longview

HONORING EXPERIENCE  
RECLAIMING OUR WISDOM

THE IMPACT OF WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE ON FEMINIST THEOLOGY.

Daphne Hampson and I had lunch together three weeks ago today to share thoughts for this morning's presentation. That meeting, in itself, was a revealing experience for me. As I remember it, I talked all of the time.

I tossed out all sorts of ideas. I could set the tone with a ritual symbolizing my own spirituality and draw us all into a relationship to, empathy for and identification with the totality of life on this planet.

And I must emphasize the meaningful experience Theological Opportunities Program provides for all of us who are seeking liberation from Patriarchal Theology and are envisioning a more empowering spirituality.

And I must point out, I added, what an important experience reminiscing is for me and how helpful, even essential, life story telling is for older people. In the process our lives come full circle and we arrive at an increased understanding of the self over time. Then I would brag about my age and my life as a survivor and convey the tremendous satisfaction of becoming a feminist after 60.

I must have gone on and on for at one juncture the young woman whose table we had asked to share ventured a comment. "You know," she said, "It would be enough if you simply got up and stood there"

THAT MADE ME PAUSE!

At this opportunity, Daphne, who had now eaten her lunch, remarked that she had to leave for an appointment and could I tell her how the two hours that we had would be divided between us.

We discussed that a bit before Daphne departed. I ate my salad, went directly home and wrote my portion of today's presentation. It was a single sentence and here it is. "When it comes to Feminist Theology women's experience is all."

After sleeping on it, however, I realized that the single sentence of yesterday was not only inadequate but it belonged in someone else's statement. I'm here to give experience--tell a portion of my life story that impacts Feminist Theology.

Don't be surprised if I appear to wander occasionally. It is much easier for me to stand the topic on its head and relate the impact of Feminist Theology on my daily experience.

The impact of women's experience! Which women? We white women need to be particularly sensitive to our own dominating role in the women's movement, subsuming minority women within our purview as we now see we were subsumed by men within theirs.

I emphasize that I speak from a limited perspective; a white woman, aging "with knowledge and power", an emerging post-Christian feminist lay woman on the boundary of the Unitarian Universalist Association but still engaged, endeavoring to help make room within the denomination for women's evolving spirituality and altered consciousness.

Reviewing life for this occasion has been a pleasant and revealing experience. I love meandering among memories, don't you? Recently I have found that I am thinking about my life in terms of multiple identities. This sense of sequential selves is new for me.

By 1973, the place where I begin examining the threads of my involvement with Feminist Theology, the body I inhabit had been around for 62 years, occupied, one after the other it now seems, by two former sister-selves.

The first self, an only child in a rural, mid-USA setting, lived close to the land, was a lover of nature and had a sense of oneness with it. As a student she gulped-down and later as a teacher passed on the prevailing patriarchal knowledge of the time.

The second inhabitant of this body was, it now seems, a self wholly identified by who she saw herself to be through her relationship to others--a caregiver in the broadest sense of that term, a super wife to both husband and house, super mom to three progeny and a saver-of-the-world through community volunteering.

That identity was lost when her mother and husband whose care had absorbed her existence during the previous seven years, died within six weeks of one another. The three adult children were now on their own, scattered about this hemisphere and she was in a community still comparatively strange to her, Lexington, Massachusetts.

This current self, this take-over-residency-self emerged from grief for the previous relationships but with a subliminal sense of hope and even excitement at the possibilities available to this now third inner being. For the first time in my life I could become a person in my own right.

Looking back nearly 16 years later I realize that developing a different sense-of-self and even acting differently was easier as a newcomer to a community for there were no deeply entrenched impressions among my new associates of the person I had formerly been.

Moreover, the dominant mood of the times makes a tremendous difference in what a self can become. Emerging, birthing myself

again in the early 70's when the current wave of feminism was gathering force, provided opportunities to move toward a new consciousness not available to the selves of an earlier time.

Feminist Theology and the strand of feminism that I now embrace would have boggled their minds and timidity, a concern for what other's would think, had kept them lock-stepping throughout their reign in this, a then younger body.

In my head I am light years removed from either of them and still moving. In no way do I reject my sister selves of yesteryear. Indeed I am much indebted to both of them, socially, economically and intellectually and they have every right to keep pushing to get into my story. Without them there would be no story, but they do divert me.

My current self did not arrive full blown as a feminist. There was what then seemed a lengthy gestation period during which I avidly read books by feminists, sometimes going over and over portions. Patriarchy as a designation for our on-going reality paradigm was a concept that really stopped me in my tracks for a long time. I worked and worked to grasp it and to envision another concept of reality.

And unlearning became an obsession. Using the tools I had developed in my earlier schooling I debriefed myself of much that I had formerly taken-in as infallible. I reread sections of the Bible. It was a revelatory experience. I could now see that I, like many women, have embraced Eve's guilt, Mary's selflessness, Ruth's self-sacrifice as an expression of love. Many of us identify with the male defined woman. We are battered--beaten down by the divinely ordained cultural assumptions about the nature and destiny of women.

Reading Mary Daly's "Beyond God the Father" was the real capstone. It blew my mind but even then I did not know what I was doing. Rather, I didn't then know that what I was doing would later be called Feminist Theology.

It has been within this past year, as I have tried to put on paper my views of Feminist Theology that I have realized more fully what Feminist Theologians have been saying about Feminist Theology. I quote Rosemary Reuther: "Feminist Theology is, first of all, a systematic critique of the androcentric and misogynist bias of Theology, both throughout the whole doctrinal structure and its various historical periods of development by particular theologians and theological schools of thought. It extends to all branches of Christian Theology."

Other Feminist Theologians echo the same ideas but usually in simpler language: She, Reuther, also has put it more simply: "Feminist Theology arises as a critique of the patriarchal bias of traditional theology."

"Critiquing the patriarchal bias in traditional theology"! That is what I was doing when I was rereading the Bible and that is what we have been doing many days at T.O.P.s. We may not have been doing it systematically but we have been examining traditional and dominant theologies of the west--Judaism and Christianity.

Feminist Theologians, to whom we now often turn for information, also appear to agree that feminist theology draws, above all, on women's experience. The women's experience referred to is any and every woman's experience of patriarchy itself and the ways we have been erased, subsumed and denied our full sense of empowerment.

More precisely our topic for today might have been stated, "the impact of women's experience of Patriarchal reality on Feminist Theology."

Becoming conscious of what our experience in Patriarchy has been is a spiritual occasion that calls for ritualization.

Celie in Alice Walker's "The Color Purple" says, "When I found out I thought God was white and a man I lost interest."

That's it! Not just thinking but knowing what we think and why. That is what consciousness is all about. Once we know what we think in Patriarchal consciousness we lose interest--reject it and become open to a new consciousness--open to envisioning a new world view.

"Beyond coming to awareness through the critique of patriarchy and patriarchal theology how can we then impact Feminist Theology?" I muddled around with this question in my mind for some time and finally took it to my Catholic Sister friend, Chris Laughlin the co-director along with Carolyn McDade of Womancenter near Plainville. In our conversation Chris said, (and I had her write it down) "Moving beyond critique of patriarchy--for any woman to share her experience, tell where she has been, what she has been doing after the critique of patriarchy and patriarchal religion is to be a subject of a creator of feminist theology".

Good news. By that standard we are all creators of Feminist Theology when we share our life experiences within the framework of an understanding of how patriarchal thought diminishes women. No need to be academics, feminist theologians, have access to a pulpit. You and I who have traditionally listened quietly from the pews can do feminist theology.

In no way can I measure the impact of this lay woman's activities since becoming aware of the injustice of Patriarchal Theology. I simply knew that I had to spread the word whenever and wherever I could.

Conferences--local, national, global--seminars, workshops, panels, position papers and rituals--lots of rituals, alone, with a caring sister--in groups, large groups, church and conference rituals And amidst it all I was taken by a new name. In giving attention to the name "Longview" I was acknowledging the new self and listening to my inner voice.

At the same time that I was trying to help raise the consciousness of my sisters: I also became involved in what I've now concluded is an endless task; that is raising the consciousness within our whole denomination, men and women alike, of the androcentric misogynist bias in the tenets of patriarchal religion.

The laity supposedly share power in the Unitarian Universalist Association. We can initiate and promote the adoption of resolutions, generally assumed to be of a social action nature. Those in attendance at the annual meeting called the General Assembly vote those resolutions up or down.

There was a period in the late 70's and early 80's when I had an urge to change sexist and ageist attitudes through resolutions. Nothing was too big to tackle with a resolution. Gray Panther's position on Ageism, the State and Federal White House Conference on Aging and the Global Conference on Habitat's inclusiveness of housing concerns of the Elderly. On and on. Resolutions language and format took over my thought pattern:

Whereas it is 7 A.M., and  
Whereas I am awake, and  
Whereas there is much to be done today  
Therefor, let it be resolved that Lucile  
get up and get on with it.

During that time I was deeply involved with the initiation and promotion within the UUA of four resolutions that called attention to and sought to change sexist attitudes carried along in the religious ideology of the UUA.

- Women and Religion-----1977
- Battered Women-----1979
- Implementation of the W&R Resolution--1980
- UUA Principles----opened in Grailville--- May, 1979

The most memorable of the workshops took place in Copenhagen at the 1980 Tribune that ran parallel to the mid-Decade Global Conference for Women. It was titled Women as influenced by Religion and the cover page of the distributed materials carried symbols of the world's great religions. Either the subject, or the symbols intrigued people for many came and countries on every continent were represented as were various sects of some of the faiths.

After a presentation and discussion (in English) we broke into smaller discussion groups. In my group were two women from Denmark--one Bahai and one Mormon, one from Pakistan who listed herself as Islam, a Chinese Methodist from Kowloon, a United Methodist(Christian)from the republic of Zaire. There were women from Sweden and from Norway who did not state any religious affiliation or preference.

In closing we held hands in a circle of global sisterhood. It was truly a moving experience.

And finally I'll speak of one ritual--the Water Ritual which Carolyn McDade and I developed as part of a Worship Service, "Coming Home Like Rivers to the Sea". I quote from our shared comment about it.

"We were beginning to reach for new and inclusive symbols and rituals that speak to our connectedness to one another, to the totality of life and to our place on this planet. We moved in an intuitive response to the potential of water as a symbol of woman's spirituality. Its universality emerged with our increased awareness of its presence and deep meaning in our lives."

"The vital parts of the ritual are the bringing of the waters by a representative group of those present, the sharing of the meaning of the water that each individual has brought, the mingling of the waters in a common bowl and the taking of the waters for one's continued connection with the other participants."

Creating the service had a special value in what it gave to Carolyn and me. It brought us together for many hours of sharing and conversation, planning, creating, critiquing, clarifying-- it called us to articulation, to pulling our scarcely formed thoughts into words. We each spoke them back with added meaning. It was a bonding and empowering experience for both of us.

There is no way to measure the impact that these and other of my experiences have had on Feminist Theology. I do know that I am grateful to have lived to see the day when we are critiquing patriarchal theology in the Braun Room at Harvard Divinity School, trying to move our own denominations toward a new consciousness, and developing rituals that speak to women's spirituality.

Feminist Theology has been my salvation in this, the third season of my life, and I have hopes that it will be the salvation of the environment and of a world too long caught up in man's struggles for domination.

Thank you for permitting me to meander in my memories and talk a bit about the self I am becoming. May the spirit of Gaia be with you and a sense of wonder be your companion forever.