

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Peninsula
Sunday October 7th 2018

Homily: “Knowing Our Foremothers”

I first experienced the Water Communion at the Universalist Church of West Hartford, in Connecticut. I had become a member of the Unitarian Society of Hartford that Spring, but then the Summer came and something weird happened: the Meetinghouse (which is what we called the Unitarian Society) held services in July but not August, while Fern Street (which is what we called the Universalist Church) held services in August but not July.

The idea was that Fern Street’s members would come to the Meetinghouse in July, whereas we’d go to Fern Street in August. I don’t know how long this system had been in effect, but I was told it was because “everyone goes to Cape Cod for the Summer”. Aside from the fact that everyone did *not* go to Cape Cod for the Summer, the system didn’t work — and, in fact, both congregations went to year-round services the following year.

But that Summer, I attended services each Sunday in July at the Meetinghouse, where I didn’t see anyone from Fern Street in our Sanctuary, and then in August, I attended services at Fern Street, where I saw hardly anybody from the Meetinghouse in their Sanctuary. What I did see, the last Sunday of that August, was the Water Communion.

I had never seen or heard of anything like it before, but I remember how it happened. The members of the congregation had been asked to bring in some water from some place they’d travelled that Summer. I don’t remember anyone having water from Cape Cod, but there were plenty of people with water from places elsewhere in New England and beyond. And when they poured their water into a big bowl, they each said something about the place from which the water came.

Now this was presented by the service leader as a way to symbolize the community, the congregation formed by the coming together of different people with different personal histories, but nonetheless ending up in this place together. And that’s a nice spiritual meaning to the ritual. But the sharing itself, as people poured their

water into the big bowl, was a series of not very meaningful travelogues, one person after another talking about where they had travelled that Summer. Sure, some of those places were as part of family road trips to see relatives, so there was some personal meaning in water from grandma's kitchen. But a lot of them were trips that required more money than many people could afford to spend and more time off work than many people were able to take. For all that the symbolism of many waters combining together in a single bowl is good, the execution of the ritual was not.

And that's a shame, because the Water Communion was never intended to be the open mic travelogues that it became in most congregations.

It was actually created in 1980, at the UU Women and Religion Continental Convocation in Michigan. Lucile Shuck Longview, Carolyn McDade (whose "Spirit of Life" we sing every Sunday) and others developed a service to celebrate their "connectedness to one another, to the totality of life, and to [their] place on this planet." They chose water, intentionally, as a symbol of women's spirituality, and though the waters poured into a central bowl had come from different places, as brought by the women participating in the conference, the sharing was about what the water meant, what it represented for all of the women gathered there. The ritual was intended not to privilege individual ability and wherewithal to travel, but to celebrate "a spirituality that uplifts, empowers and connects" specifically calling women to strength, to action and to full expression. The Water Communion was created, in other words, as a feminist ritual.

I think it's particularly important that we remember this now, at the end of a week in which a majority in the United States Senate has proved that it has no interest in hearing women's voices, threatening to turn us toward a future that looks more like "The Handmaid's Tale" than democracy. We have seen yet another example of the empowerment of already powerful men, while women lose out once again. Perhaps those men know, on some level, that the tide is turning, and so they're desperate to hold on to power for as long as they can. Certainly the record number of women who are running for public office must be worrying all but the most willfully ignorant leaders of the patriarchy.

But women's voices are not only lacking in the highest levels of government. This is a problem for us as Unitarian Universalists, too. Take our hymn book, *Singing the Living Tradition*, for example. There just aren't that many hymns and readings by

women in it, and there are only so many times in a year that we can sing the same dozen hymns by Alicia Carpenter and Shelley Jackson Denham. Okay, *Singing the Living Tradition* is a product of the 1980s, and at least it addressed the worst of the male-centering language in our hymns, but the newer hymn book, *Singing the Journey*, just doesn't offer much by women, either.

And if representing women in our liturgy is a challenge, it's even more so when it comes to our history. Look at any book or other text on Unitarian Universalism, and you'll quickly see a lot of men's names, because that's how our history has been told. All of the women who were just as much of our faith story, who did just as much to shape our faith, are often left out, unless special effort is made to name them. Sure, maybe that happens during Women's History Month, but once March is over, we get right back to Men's History Year.

So since we're celebrating the Water Communion this morning, and since the Water Communion began as a feminist ritual, I want to take the opportunity to get to know the foremothers of our faith a little better. In your Order of Service, then, there's an insert. On one side it has this week's announcements, which are the same for everyone, and on the other side the insert has a short biography of a Universalist or Unitarian woman from our history, and that's different for everyone. I'm going to give you a couple of minutes now to read that biography, noting in particular any connection with us today, with our location, with our concerns, or anything that jumps out at you as particularly meaningful. Perhaps this is somebody you already knew, but didn't know that she was one of our UU foremothers.

After a couple of minutes, I'll announce our middle hymn. Then, for our Water Communion this morning, I'll invite you to come up, pour into the common bowl the water you brought from home — and if you didn't bring any from home, you can pour some from this pitcher — and then name the woman whose biography you have and, if you are willing, very briefly say something that you learned from reading her biography.

And now, I invite you to take a couple of minutes to read the biography on your Order of Service insert.