

History of the Water Ceremony¹
“Revolution by Resolution”
Excerpts delivered at
Monte Vista Unitarian Universalist Congregation
September 12, 2010

Thirty-three years ago at our General Assembly in 1977, an historic action was taken that would set in motion changes throughout our Unitarian Universalist Association. A business resolution called “Women and Religion” was adopted unanimously. This service celebrates the impact of the Women and Religion Resolution and challenges us to recommit ourselves to the unfinished work of ending sexism in Unitarian Universalism and elsewhere in the world.

The story of the original writing of this resolution begins with Lucile Shuck Longview. As a budding feminist in her 60s, she became aware of her life-long submersion in patriarchal consciousness. At the same time, she also began to note the extent to which biblical teachings sanctify women’s inferiority to men. Challenged to improve the image of women, she decided to write a resolution to call the UUA to examine its sexism and set a positive feminist direction for the future of our religious movement.

To have the resolution included on the agenda of the upcoming General Assembly in Ithaca, New York, signatures had to be gathered from at least ten members from each of twenty-five different societies. Lucile and her friends sent letters to everyone they knew asking for support. When the resolution was presented, it had been signed by 548 women and men from fifty-seven congregations from around the continent.

When the resolution came before the representatives at General Assembly, only one amendment was made from the floor, that being to require that the UUA President to give an annual report on the progress of the implementation of the resolution. Then the women and men present gave

¹ This history was taken from the June 23, 2007 worship service at General Assembly in Portland, Oregon which recalled the creation and passage of the Women & Religion Resolution at the 1977 General Assembly and the resulting significant changes within the Unitarian Universalist movement over the years since then. The service was called “Revolution by Resolution: Celebrating Thirty Years of Women & Religion.” The text of the worship service was sent to Rev. Ann Schranz by Rev. Dorothy Emerson.

unanimous approval. The sponsoring women were rather stunned by the ease of passage. “They don’t realize what they’ve agreed to,” was their common thought.

The resolution reads as follows:

Whereas, a principle of the Unitarian Universalist Association is to “affirm, defend, and promote the supreme worth and dignity of every human personality, and the use of the democratic method in human relationships”;

and whereas, great strides have been taken to affirm this principle within our denomination;

and whereas, some models of human relationship arising from religious myths, historical materials, and other teachings still create and perpetuate attitudes that cause women everywhere to be overlooked and undervalued;

and whereas, children, youth and adults internalize and act on these cultural models, there by tending to limit their sense of self-worth and dignity;

therefore, be it resolved: that the 1977 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association calls upon all Unitarian Universalists to examine carefully their own religious beliefs and the extent to which these beliefs influence sex-role stereotypes within their own families;

and be it further resolved: that the General Assembly urges the Board of Trustees of the Unitarian Universalist Association to encourage the Unitarian Universalist Association administrative officers and staff, the religious leaders within societies, the Unitarian Universalist theological schools, the directors of related organizations, and the planners of seminars and conferences to make every effort to: (a) put traditional assumptions and language in perspective, and (b) avoid sexist assumptions and language in the future;

In 1977, when the Resolution passed, there was only one woman minister on staff at the UUA, the Rev. Leslie Westbrook. UUA President Carnes appointed the Rev. Westbrook “minister for women and religion.” Two different committees were established: (1) the Women and Religion Committee, a program committee charged with the development of materials and programs to implement the resolution; (2) the Affirmative Action for Women Ministers Committee, which worked with her office and the Department of Ministry to develop the affirmative action for women ministers program. Less than 10% of the UU ministers were women. The committee trained a cadre of women ministers who were available to meet with congregational search committees to help them begin to consider women candidates.

Over three hundred people came to East Lansing, Michigan, for the first Convocation on Feminist Theology, held in November 1980, and more would have come, if there had been room. One of the most popular elements to come out of the East Lansing gathering was the Water Ceremony, created by Lucile Longview and singer-songwriter Carolyn McDade. At the Convocation, women who came from all around the continent were invited to bring water from their homes to pour in a common vessel to symbolize the overarching sisterhood that was woven across the continent. Carolyn McDade wrote the original Water Ceremony song entitled “Coming Home.”

One of the first institutional expressions to be challenged by Women and Religion advocates was what was then known as the “purposes and objectives” of the Unitarian Universalist Association, a statement hammered out by men, primarily ministers, who had gathered in 1959 for final negotiations between Universalists and Unitarians prior to the joining of the two groups. It took six years for new Principles and Purposes to be developed and approved. This time the Bylaws Revision Committee was composed of four women and three men, with one of the men serving as chair—a significant change from the earlier all male committee.

One of the first projects to emerge from the Women and Religion initiative was the development of a feminist theology curriculum. Leslie Westbrook initially asked Shirley Ranck to develop a study guide—which became the very popular and much loved curriculum *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven*, published in 1986. That was followed in 1994 with *Rise Up and Call Her Name*, by

Elizabeth Fisher. These two programs empowered women to discover the divine in female form and re-imagine religion from a woman-centered perspective.

Early on many women realized that one of the most common and pervasive sources of sexist language was the hymns we sang every Sunday in worship. In the mid-1980s, the Board of Trustees commissioned the creation of a new hymnbook. In reflecting on the experience of serving on the Hymnbook Resources Commission, Marc Belletini comments: “I think those of us who experienced the life-changing privilege of serving on this committee did a pretty good piece of work both expanding and embracing the idea of inclusiveness in a bound, made to be used book. And, gratefully, I think we each learned about the deeper revolutionary meaning of the Women and Religion resolution and the call to inclusion in our own lives too.”

In 1996, nineteen years after the passage of the Women & Religion Resolution, the UUA Board of Trustees determined that the work of ending sexism was complete and declared the “sunsetting” of the resolution. Not everyone agreed. The following fall representatives from district Women & Religion groups met in Massachusetts to deal with the changes that were on the horizon due to being sunsetted, which meant the de-funding of the Women and Religion Committee.

At the end of the gathering, the group went out into the chilly, autumn air on the front porch to silently gaze at the moon. Helen Popenoe reports: “With our arms around one another looking upward in solidarity, Betsy Stevens from Pacific Southwest District quietly said, with firm certainty, something like, “We know the sun will rise tomorrow morning and so will the Women and Religion movement. We’re here to stay. We’re going strong.” Then some of us said in response, “Onward to the Sunrise!”

And thus it is that the Women & Religion movement continues today—in regularly held gatherings in many districts and through the continental Women & Religion network. Even without the full support of the UUA, there have been ongoing efforts through Women & Religion to develop new curricula. *Unraveling the Gender Knot* was published in 2005 and *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven: In Ancient Times* in 2007, thanks to support from the UU

Women's Federation and the Fund for Unitarian Universalism. As Rosemary Matson reminds us, the work of ending sexism is unfinished: "We do not want a piece of the pie. It is still a patriarchal pie. We want to change the recipe!" The Women and Religion Resolution has literally turned the UU movement around. The words that were uttered 30 years ago have indeed set many things in motion—and the Unitarian Universalist movement will never be the same!