

God, Sex, and a Pit-bull with Lipstick

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 Channing Memorial Church  
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As most of you know, I had a baby girl in December. Through out my pregnancy, I had a Maori poem by Roma Potiki on my desk that read:

Breathe  
 help me as the next generation  
 carves a pathway from my body.  
 Breathe  
 in this space between worlds  
 I link my life with yours.  
 Breathe  
 each physical exertion pushes you  
 toward my arms.  
 Breathe  
 in vigor and action.

This poem became a spiritual tool for me during the nine months leading up to Liza's birth. Nothing really prepared me for the path to motherhood. Sure, Sex Education was a part of my biology classes growing up and was offered more explicitly in High School. I remember big laminated posters showing reproductive organs and plastic models of a developing fetus. However, these lessons did not impart anything about the actual experience.

I was always the baby in my family with wonderful parents and doting Aunts and Uncles. My older brother never had children and with no cousins nearby I simply never knew any pregnant women.

So, at the age of thirty-eight, I watched with amazement as my body transformed into a vessel for new life. When I became anxious about potential problems, the poem became my mantra, reminding me to breathe and trust "as the next generation carved a pathway from my body".

At the same time as I was experiencing the wonders and joy of a healthy pregnancy, my beloved father was approaching his final days. As he took his final breaths in September, I could feel movement in my belly at the same time. "Breathe in this space between worlds I link my life with yours." My life is linked to my daughter whose body developed within my own and my life is linked to my father who gave me life and nurtured my development in partnership with my mother. My awareness of the liminal space between conception and birth, life and death has never been so profound.

I have spoken with many of you who have also had similar experiences. The passing of one generation is often marked by the approach of another. Even as a child is greeted with joy, often we grieve the death of an elder. This space between worlds is a

reminder of the cycles of life. Instead of a line stretching back into the past and onward into the future, a spiral better represents the passage of time. Our lives are intimately linked with the changing seasons, an ongoing process of birth, growth, aging, loss, and death. Nothing happens in isolation. As one element changes, the whole is transformed.

The spiral is the ancient symbol of the Goddess. During the third trimester when I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror ancient Goddess figures came to mind—some of them with a spiral engraved on their enlarged womb as a symbol of fertility and continual change. For thousands of years, the Mother Goddess was a symbol not just of female power but of the creative spirit of the Earth. According to archeologist Maria Gimbutas, men and women in many cultures revered the Goddess as Giver of Life, Wielder of Death, and Regeneratrix, all aspects of one Great Goddess analogous to Nature.

Many earth-centered traditions revere the serpent. The image of a serpent biting its tail forms a sacred circle, a mediator between the physical and spiritual worlds. The snake represents rebirth and transformation because of its molting skin.

The association of feminine power with the serpent was well-known when the Book of Genesis was written. Although in the Bible, the serpent represents sin and evil. It is the serpent who convinces Eve to disobey God's command. Then in turn, Eve tempts Adam. As it is written, a woman is at fault for humanity's fall from grace and expulsion from Paradise. From then on, people are cursed to work by the sweat of our brows and women are made to suffer the pain of childbirth as punishment. This is a deliberate reversal of powerful symbols of the life renewing power of Goddess religions.

I will be offering a two-part workshop series on Saturday, March 21 and Saturday, April 11 here at Channing Church. More details can be found in the announcements. The name of the class *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven* comes from the Bible. The book of Jeremiah outlines religious practices that anger Yahweh, the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jeremiah 7:17-18 reads, "Do you not see what they do in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem? The children gather wood and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead dough to make cakes for the Queen of Heaven, and they pour libations to other gods in order to anger me!" This passage highlights the ancient Goddess tradition that predates the Bible and a concerted effort to suppress ancient practices.

As a Unitarian Universalist congregation, we affirm and promote a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. This is a non-creedal faith meaning we are not uniform in our theological beliefs although we hold the same values: justice, equity and compassion in human relations, and respect for the interdependent web of life of which we are a part. Some people here are Jewish; others Christian, there are pagans and Buddhists, Scientists and Mystics. Those members who believe in God have a variety of perspectives about the Divine. Those members who are Agnostic or Atheist find meaning and purpose in their lives through a variety of means from human potential to the wonder of the natural world. No matter what your personal belief system, it is important to consider, how some religious myths and teachings "still create and

perpetuate attitudes that cause women everywhere to be overlooked and undervalued.<sup>13</sup> As these attitudes have led to a society out of balance, both men and women need to be engaged in transforming gender-biased systems and relationships.

In the 1970's when the second wave of feminism was gaining strength, our religious movement underwent a transformation. In 1977, Lucille Schuck Longview a UU laywoman proposed the Women and Religion Resolution which passed unanimously at our General Assembly. This resolution called on all Unitarian Universalists to examine carefully our own religious beliefs and how they influenced sex-role stereotypes. Our faith communities were urged to avoid sexist language and assumptions. Finally, the resolution called for a resource to be developed to examine the relationship between religious and cultural attitudes toward women. That resource was *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven*.

I was raised as a Unitarian Universalist in the 1970's so my upbringing was deeply influenced by the feminist movement within our faith. I am so used to the gender-inclusive language in our hymnal that I am taken aback whenever I encounter the original lyrics. *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven* was very popular in the 1980's. My mother was a part of a group in my home church. I understand that there was a group who called themselves the Goddesses here at Channing. The class not only teaches about the ancient goddess religions but is designed for women to share the stories of their lives. These circles of women often bonded in such powerful ways that they continued to meet for years after finishing the curriculum.

So, why bother exploring these issues today? Some people claim that we are now living in a Post-feminist Era. After all, women have reached the top-level of most professions including Unitarian Universalist ministry where over half of our clergy are female. Women no longer need to choose between a career and family but manage both their professions and motherhood. Governor Sarah Palin received rousing applause on the campaign trail by characterizing herself as a Hockey Mom. She quipped, "Do you know the difference between a hockey mom and a pit-bull? Lipstick!"

All joking aside, women and girls around the world do not have the same access to education, health care, and financial resources as their male counterparts. The food and financial crisis will have a greater impact on women many of whose jobs are less secure. Domestic violence and sexual assault continues to haunt the lives of many women today. In the United States, 4.8 million females suffer physical assaults by an intimate partner every year. Three women are killed by an intimate partner every day.

Religious feminism is about something deeper and more significant than women taking on traditionally male work wearing high heels and lipstick. Instead, we must offer an alternative vision to the ideals of competition, vengeance, and war. As Rebecca Parker writes, it is not just the religious terrorists whose faith causes destruction and pain some teachings of the Judeo-Christian tradition have also fostered the idea of our separateness. The Book of Genesis set up a paradigm where men not only have power over women but taught women to despise our bodies. The paradigm of man's dominion

over the earth has led to our constant striving to rise above Nature instead of recognizing our dependence.

Our call, as women and men today is to boldly proclaim a new era of partnership, balance, and peace. This can only be accomplished by continuing to work for equality, becoming mindful of gender-bias, and actively creating new models of cooperation. Our fate and that of the web of life depends not on dominance but reverence for the natural cycles. As our ancestor Margaret Fuller wrote, “We would have every arbitrary barrier thrown down. Were this done, we believe a divine energy would pervade nature to a degree unknown in the history of former ages.”

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<sup>i</sup> Women and Religion Resolution, UUA