

Unitarian Universalism and Feminism

"Every Unitarian is a feminist so he has to watch his language." Kidding aside, Mary Fairchild states in "Unitarian Universalism: Christian or Not" "The Unitarians and Universalists were religious denominations that accepted the ordination of women earlier than most Protestant denominations did, and many early woman suffrage and women's rights leaders came out of one of these denominations."

According to Reverend Kenneth Collier in his Sept. 23, 2000 Sermon, the history of feminism in the UU movement "goes back to the very beginnings of Universalism and Unitarianism in America. Women like Judith Sargent Murray-a Universalist-and Margaret Fuller -a Unitarian- were feminists before the word was invented. The first woman ordained by a major denomination in America was Olympia Brown, who was ordained by the Universalists in 1863. And most Suffragists were either Unitarians, Universalists, or Quakers. And so it goes, right up until this moment."

The first two of seven Unitarian Universalist principles are firstly, *The inherent worth and dignity of every person* and secondly, *Justice, equity and compassion in human relations*. These two principles establish a base for social action and Unitarians and Universalists (now one denomination, [UU]) have been prominent in fighting for women's rights and freedoms, as well as anti-racism, anti-homophobia, same-sex marriage, and dying with dignity. Unitarian women have been a leading force in these efforts. Jone Johnson Lewis lists over one hundred UU women who were prominent in women's struggle for "personhood", acquiring the vote for women and representing women in leadership roles (*About.com Women's History*). Some of the more familiar include: Abigail Adams (November 22, 1744 – October 28, 1818), Mary Wollstonecraft, (April 27, 1759-September 10, 1797), Louisa May Alcott (November 29, 1832 – March 6, 1888), Susan B. Anthony (February 15, 1820 – March 13, 1906), Olympia Brown (January 5, 1835 – October 23, 1926) and Eleanor Gordon (October 10, 1852-January 6, 1942).

Outlining the contributions of these women would provide sufficient material for, at least, a full university course. Material about UU women contributions to women's rights in Canada is less well known, but a recent, aptly titled book is a beginning. The book, *Invisible influence: Claiming Canadian Unitarian and Universalist Women's History*, 2011, edited by Jean Pfleiderer, Heather Fraser Fawcett and Kathy S. Sage; published by Kingston Unitarian Press describes the lives and contributions of six women. The brief notes which I have taken from that book do not do justice to the contributions of these women, but I include them here so that readers have a starting place for further exploration.:

- ◆ **Mary ann Hayden Church** (1807-1877) -- believed to be the first female preacher to form a congregation in Canada.
- ◆ **Rev. Fidelia Gillette** (1827 - 1906) -- likely the first ordained woman of any denomination to serve as the minister of a congregation in Ontario -- perhaps in all of Canada.
- ◆ **Helen Richmond Young Reid** (1870 - 1941) -- Social welfare champion helped persuade McGill to admit women students, and dedicated to the betterment of social conditions among the poor and underprivileged.
- ◆ **Caroline Dall** (June 22, 1822-December 17, 1912) -- author, journalist, lecturer and champion of women's rights, was a Unitarian community service worker, minister's wife and lay preacher. Originally from Boston, she moved to Toronto in 1851.

- ◆ **Jennie McCaine Peterson** (1838 -1918) -- with her husband, Bjorn Petursson, founded the First Icelandic Unitarian Society of Winnipeg.
- ◆ **Margret J. Benedictsson.** (1866 - 1956) One of Canada's greatest feminist leaders, largely ignored by history, launched *Freyja* a feminist periodical, and built coalitions across the divides of gender, partisanship and religion. (The magazine's name is from "Freyja ", the Old Norse Goddess of love.)

Women UU's in Canada, as of 2011, have an organization the vision of which is to "have a national and international profile with respect to personal, public, professional and political aspects of women's lives and reflect our (UU's) core denominational principles." The Canadian Unitarian Universalist Women's Association is an associate member organization of the Canadian Unitarian Council.

In our Unitarian Congregation of Niagara, women have served in all of the leadership capacities including lay chaplaincy. Women are major contributors to our social action initiatives which include regular contributions to Gillian's Place (a women's shelter) and to Women4Women community store.

In the short time I have been with UCN (two and half years), I don't recall any explicit "feminist" initiatives nor any breaches of women's rights. And yet . . . I don't think we have escaped the influence of the patriarchal culture in which we operate and in which we all were raised. As the opening joke implies, our language is not always free of sexism and our "listening" is not always "gender free." Increased consciousness needs to remain an important priority in our congregation -- as I believe it needs to be throughout society.