

"In Praise of Women"

Rev. Leland Bond-Upson, given at 1st Unitarian, Honolulu, 27Mar11

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March is women's history and admiration month, the recent news about agitation for freedom from autocrats in the Muslim world reminds us that the march to full participation in society by half the human race is also a story of small steps, led by a few courageous people.

"The day will come," wrote Susan B. Anthony, "when men will recognize woman as his peer, not only at the fireside, but in councils of the nation. Then, and not until then, will there be the perfect comradeship, the ideal union between the sexes that shall result in the highest development of the race."

Well, let's see. Eva Peron, Golda Meir, Indira Gandhi, Margaret Thatcher, Cory Aquino, Benizar Bhutto, Violetta Chamorro, Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Liberia.

We've had some great queens: Cleopatra, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Catherine of Anjou, Isabel of Castile, Elizabeth I, Catherine the Great of Russia.

And behind the throne: Livia, wife of Octavian, later Caesar Augustus, Edward II's Isabel (the she-wolf of France), Condaleeza Rice, Lucrezia Borgia, and many others.

And in business: Carly Fiorina, Martha Stewart, Leona Helmsley, RIP, O 'queen of mean'. Oprah.

These women are exceptional, but are not examples of what I think of as repositories of the greater goodness that I hope and believe women have readier access to than most men. These queens and Presidents and captains of industry behave pretty much like their male counterparts because the job requires it.

So no, it's not in Susan B. Anthony's "councils of the nation" that women have helped bring forth "the highest development of the race", but by writers and artists and intellectuals, and large numbers of ordinary, honest, good-hearted women.

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It's women's appreciation month. Let's honor it in one way by talking about Mary Wollstonecraft, generally regarded as the first modern feminist in the English-speaking world.

Mary Wollstonecraft is remembered principally as the author of "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman", published in 1792. Her ideas about women grew out of her experiences with men, "and her views on the female sex constituted an integral part of a wider moral and political critique of her times which she first fully formulated two years earlier, in her "A Vindication of the Rights of Men."

The "Vindication of the Rights of Men" was written as a reply to Edmund Burke's "Reflections on the Revolution in France" (1790), which was in its turn a critique of a work sympathetic to the Revolution, by Mary's good friend the Rev. Richard Price.

[*A Discourse on the Love of our Country*]

Price was a Unitarian minister in London whose circle included William Blake, and liberal visitors from America, including John and Abigail Adams and Benjamin Franklin.

In 1793 Burke led the attack on the radicals in Britain. He described the London Corresponding Society and the Unitarian Society as "loathsome insects that might, if they were allowed, grow into giant spiders as large as oxen". Mary was derided as "a hyena in petticoats."

In June, 1793 Mary decided to move to France with the American writer, Gilbert Imlay. The following year, Mary gave birth to Fanny. After her relationship with Imlay came to an end she returned to London. Mary married William Godwin in March, 1797 and soon afterwards, a second daughter, Mary, was born. The baby was healthy but the placenta was retained in the womb. The doctor's attempt to remove the placenta resulted in blood poisoning and Mary died on September 10th, 1797, age 38. The daughter Mary went on to marry the poet Percy Bysshe Shelly, and later wrote the greatest of all Gothic novels, *Frankenstein*.

Mary had a feminist contemporary in France, Olympe de Gouges. Few know this name, but we should not forget her story.

Born in 1745 as the daughter of a butcher and a washerwoman, de Gouges married a wealthy older man. After becoming a widow, she had sufficient funds to support herself, so she wrote.

She was ill-educated, as we might expect of a low-class female of the *ancien regime*. Her written French was poor and without an editor, she tended to ramble. Consequently, she was not a commercially successful author.

"Her works were both profoundly feminist and profoundly revolutionary. Author of several feminist works, her best-known work is "The Rights of Women", published in 1791, the same year as Paine's "The Rights of Man". Taking the French Revolution's "The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen" as her guide, de Gouges wrote "A Declaration of the Rights of Women and the Female Citizen", wherein she claimed for women equality with men in all aspects of both public and private life - including the equal right along with men to vote, to hold office, to public employment, to speak in public on political topics (to 'mount the rostrum'), to equal public "honors", to own and control property, to participate in the military, to an education, and to equal power in the family and the church."

Despite her lack of formal schooling, she had logic and style and passion. Here is a sample from "The Rights of Women".

[Genna Coursey speaks:]

Man, are you capable of being just? It is a woman who poses the question; you will not deprive her of that right at least. Tell me, what gives you sovereign empire to oppress my sex? Your strength? Your talents? Observe the Creator in his wisdom; survey in all her grandeur that nature with whom you seem to want to be in harmony, and give me, if you dare, an example of this tyrannical empire. Go back to animals, consult the elements, study plants, finally glance at all the modifications of organic matter, and surrender to the evidence when I offer you the means; search, probe, and distinguish, if you can, the sexes in the administration of nature. Everywhere you will find them mingled; everywhere they cooperate in harmonious togetherness in this immortal masterpiece.

Man alone has raised his exceptional circumstances to a principle. Bizarre, blind, bloated with science and degenerated -- in a century of enlightenment and wisdom -- into the crassest ignorance, he wants to command as a despot a sex which is in full possession of its intellectual faculties; he pretends to enjoy the Revolution and to claim his rights to equality in order to say nothing more about it.

Consequently, the sex that is as superior in beauty as it is in courage during the suffering of maternity recognizes and declares in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following [Declaration of the Rights of Woman and the Female Citizen]

Mothers, daughters, sisters [and] representatives of the nation demand to be constituted into a national assembly. Believing that ignorance, omission, or scorn for the rights of woman are the only causes of public misfortunes and of the corruption of governments, [the women] have resolved to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of woman in

order that this declaration, constantly exposed before all the members of the society, will ceaselessly remind them of their rights and duties; in order that the authoritative acts of women and the authoritative acts of men may be at any moment compared with and respectful of the purpose of all political institutions; and in order that citizens' demands, henceforth based on simple and incontestable principles, will always support the constitution, good morals, and the happiness of all.

[Lee resumes:]

Like Mary, she was ridiculed because of her fervent feminism, her early attempts to organize women, and her ground-breaking feminist manifesto. Despite her allegiance to the ideals of the Revolution (she produced dozens of supporting pamphlets) she spoke out against the execution of the King and his family, and against Robespierre and Marat, and thus became a target of the Terror.

So in the end, Olympe de Gouges, feminist and revolutionary, was condemned as a reactionary royalist, and guillotined, age 48.

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The first feminist I knew was my mother, although we didn't use the word then, in the early 1950s.

Theda, known as "Teddy", was born in subservience, female servitude, so to speak, in 1914. It wouldn't be for another 6 years, in 1920, that a woman (if age at least 30 years old!) got the vote in all elections.

The law in many places made women (and children) the property of their husbands, chattel, an attitude and reality that remains a problem today in the form of financial and credit control of women, by men.

Teddy's mother Bertha had attended college in Hastings, NB for two years, the first of her family, male or female, to attend college.

My mother enrolled at Oregon in her hometown of Eugene, the first of her family to graduate from college (and with honors, including PBK), in 1936.

Bertha had supported her daughters (my aunts) too, but especially my mother, in going to college, because her ability was obvious, and because so many of her teachers were encouraging her to apply. Nonetheless, Bertha fretted that the college experience would cause her daughter to lose her religion.

And indeed, my mother became a skeptic, and a socialist (this was 1932-33-34, at the depth of the Depression). In her first Presidential election, in 1936,

she voted for Norman Thomas, the Socialist, rather than FDR. And indeed, she did lose her religion, at least from Bertha's point of view. Mom ended up migrating from Methodism, to un-churched, to Unitarianism.

As a result of all this free-thinking, she took the fairly unusual step (this being the late 1940s) of going back to work while bearing and raising her three boys. She endured criticism from some of the other mothers, who had a certain idea about the way women were supposed to be. And we still have such people, although much fewer than before.

But mom loved books and the library and the additional meaning to life that work outside the house can provide, and the independence, and the second income, too. She was our town's reference librarian for 31 years.

My dad didn't talk much about feminism, but he was a fighter for equality everywhere. He respected my mother's choices, and we boys grew up presuming this was normal.

When I met Deborah, she came with a whole trainload of feminist relations—starting with her mother Gwen, and Gwen's sisters, and Gwen's mother Emma, and Gwen's daughters, and nieces. They'd been nurtured on the plains of North Dakota, which is right next to Minnesota. You know that Garrison Keillor joke about Lake Wobegon, where the women are strong? Oh yeah—that turned out to be real.

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In the 1950s American society had begun the rapid change that we are even now rocketing along on. Dr. Benjamin Spock's book "Baby and Child Care" was published in 1946, and moms of the baby boom began the revolutionary practice of *treating each child as an individual*. This was a liberal advance of enormous and—I think—underappreciated consequence.

Women had taken men's jobs during WWII, and didn't forget that they had been able to do those jobs. So how can you keep them down on the farm, after they've been Rosie the riveter or an aircraft test pilot?

In the mid-1950s to the late 1960's the Civil Rights movement called for a moral and legal response to the subjugation of a people. Many white women could not help but compare their situation to that of black folk, and black women helped everyone make the comparison.

[Later, in the turmoil of the 60's, young women began questioning why the leaders of the counter-culture were all men.]

In 1960, Jack Kennedy was elected, but perhaps more importantly, The Pill was introduced, setting off the sexual revolution. More freedom.

In 1963, Betty Friedan published "The Feminine Mystique", and 'everyone' read it and talked about it. I'd like to read the first paragraph from Chapter 1, titled "The Problem that Has No Name":

"The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night--she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question--"Is this all?"

"Since the end of WWII there was no word of this yearning in the millions of words written about women, for women, in all the columns, books and articles by experts telling women their role was to seek fulfillment as wives and mothers. Over and over women heard in voices of tradition and of Freudian sophistication that they could desire no greater destiny than to glory in their own femininity. Experts told them how to catch a man and keep him, how to breastfeed children and handle their toilet training, how to cope with sibling rivalry and adolescent rebellion; how to buy a dishwasher, bake bread, cook gourmet snails, and build a swimming pool with their own hands; how to dress, look, and act more feminine and make marriage more exciting; how to keep their husbands from dying young and their sons from growing into delinquents. They were taught to pity the neurotic, unfeminine, unhappy women who wanted to be poets or physicists or presidents. They learned that truly feminine women do not want careers, higher education, political rights--the independence and the opportunities that the old-fashioned feminists fought for. (Women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton in this country, and Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters in Britain.) Some women, then in their forties and fifties and sixties, remembered painfully giving up those dreams, but most of the younger women no longer even thought about them. A thousand expert voices applauded their femininity, their adjustment, and their new maturity. All they had to do was devote their lives from earliest girlhood to finding a husband and bearing children."

(The movie "Mona Lisa Smile" does a good job of recalling that attitude to life, as well as the beginnings of the next round of feminism—the one we're still in.)

We humans have subdued and held dominion over the Earth by means of our superior brains, and men have subdued and held dominion over women and others by means of larger and more muscular bodies. But the time for this brutishness is passing, and the women are helping speed it out the door.

I credit the women's movement with some of the great advances in kindness, freedom, and humanity. Those courageous women, who dared to speak and question and demand change have wrought a great change, which, put in the vernacular, goes something like this: "Hey you! Yeah you! Look buster, what do you think gives you the right to do any damn thing you please. Stop it!"

The dominion of men is now a question, not a given, at least in the West. The whole array of interpersonal abuses are now talked about (not ignored) and remedied, not accepted or ignored. Spousal abuse, child abuse, elder abuse, animal abuse, racism, homophobia, bullying, even littering and wastefulness are viewed now as at best low class, at worst, criminal. When I was growing up people thought nothing of throwing a lighted cigarette out the car window. I hear that still goes on in some places in this country.

In short, the women's movement has made male chauvinism unacceptable in polite company, allowing all the rest of us to breath a little easier.

A good deal of the good brought to us by feminism is simply that of hearing the other voices, speaking up, describing what it feels like to be them. It's betterment for all by demanding attention to the differences. As labor's voice balanced the power of the owners, so black voices give balance and perspective to the white world, and likewise, women's voices give much-needed, long overdue balance and perspective to the male world. We are also hearing the voices of the elderly, of gay people, of the disabled, of Latinos, of American Muslims. Seems like everybody wants to be themselves, proudly.

But there are some unique gifts that women bring to the table, informing and increasing everyone's wisdom.

Women are full capable of combat, but as a race, seem less warlike than men. Women are fully capable to fierce competition, but as a race, seem less driven by it.

To me, this seems like a blessing, in a world that already so terribly subdued by mankind, what we need is not more conquering, but learning how to get along with each other in this crowded space.

Women are not a race of angels – they can be cruel and brutal too, sometimes wielding abusive physical force, as we are beginning to hear about in relation to Lesbian relationships, and even that perhaps-most-hidden abuse of all, women's abuse of men. Who's going to report that?

I think the reason Eve Ensler's "The Vagina Monologues" has been such a

sensational success is that it brought the complementary, but missing, hidden, not-talked-about part out into the open, doing a great service in counter-balancing phallus-worship. It reminds us all—if we need it—that the great work of nurturing and bearing new life begins with a moment's pleasure, but the real deal, the lasting treasure is a long, uncomfortable, risky, sometime fatal undertaking. I think most men still don't really get that, and maybe we just can't.

However (funny story)—at the performance of the Monologues Deborah and I attended in San Francisco, a guy interrupted one of Eve's speeches near the end to say something she told our audience had never been said before. This fellow stood up in the balcony and shouted "OK! OK! I give up! I want one!" Vagina envy. We've come full circle.

I can't end this very dignified religious service on that note, so I'll just say that wherever I go when I return to the mainland, I will preach the gospel of Aloha spirit. Hawaii is a paragon for the whole world in how to get along with everyone.

And yet, compared to aloha spirit, the civilizing power of women is much, much greater. It has a global reach, beyond these pleasant and privileged islands.

You can tell a lot about a civilization by the status of its women and children. I'd like to see Jewish women making common cause with Muslim women. The sexism of the men of both those religions has some significant similarities.

I pray that the women of the world will step out even more forcefully in their opposition to cruelty and stupidity, and teach us your arts of peace and sharing and caring, and escort us all to the next higher consciousness, to better ways to live.

I hope this isn't too much pressure: please--finish liberating yourselves from male domination, and save our world.