

The Feminization of the Unitarian Universalist Clergy: Impacts, Speculations, and Longings

Dawn Sangrey

In the Majjhima Nikaya there is a very short passage about how the world has come to be. It is very simple, very easy to understand, and yet very deep: "This is, because that is. This is not, because that is not. This is like this, because that is like that." This is the Buddhist teaching of Genesis.

- Thich Nhat Hanh

feminine - characteristic of or appropriate or peculiar to women feminism - theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes feminize - to give a feminine quality to....to cause (a male or a castrate) to take on feminine characteristics

- Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary

The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.

-Muriel Rukeyser

Introduction

Each year delegates of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations (UUA) meet to discuss resolutions, vote on study issues and proposed by-law changes, and participate in worship, workshops, and trainings at the annual meeting of the Association, called the General Assembly (GA). In June, 1999, some 3,500 Unitarian Universalist (UU) clergy and laity came together in Salt Lake City, Utah, for this gathering, which affords some delegates their only opportunity to meet and work with Unitarian Universalists from churches other than their own.

Because it is the largest annual UU gathering, significant changes of importance to the Association are often celebrated at GA. In 1999, the UUA had achieved a watershed in institutional development, a change so profound it was featured on the front page of the *New York Times* (April 25, 1999). The Department of Ministry had released statistics indicating that fifty-one percent of active ordained ministers in the UUA were women. Thus, the UUA became the first Protestant denomination in history in which congregations employ more female than male clergy in their leadership. News conferences, press releases, parties, and dancing in the aisles accompanied the celebration of this achievement in Salt Lake City.

As a woman who is seeking UUA ordination, I am interested in the impact of this feminization of our clergy. This paper will trace the rise in the number of UU women clergy and consider its effects on the institutional life of the Association and on the lives of individual congregations. I am interested in what people

believe and say about this change, that is, about perceptions and assumptions, as well as in what is empirically known about the impact of the change. And I am interested in its impact on me personally, on my professional career in ministry and on the future of the church which I am preparing to serve.

Beginning in the late 1970's, a steadily increasing number of women have sought ordination in the Unitarian Universalist tradition. This development coincides roughly with the Second Wave of the feminist movement. In recalling that period of my own development, I have revisited several books in the classic literature which were important to my own feminist awakening (Dinnerstein, Friedan, Gilligan, Janeway, Morgan), along with analysis written in the 1980's (Belenky et al., Buchanan, Douglas) to refresh my own memory about the development of feminist thought during the three decades when women clergy became more and more predominant among Unitarian Universalists. The more recent feminist debate between what Anne Carolyn Klein calls the "essentialists" and the "postmodern feminists," has also informed my understanding of the feminization of the UU clergy (5).

This reading in feminist theory has provided one of the theoretical frameworks within which to consider a series of practical questions: What impact on ministry do the differences (whether essential or socialized) between women and men imply? How have these differences manifested themselves in the work of UU women ministers? What are the implications for the future of ministry in the UUA? A critical question for me is the fundamental one which divides the essentialists from the postmodernists: Are women clergy different from men clergy in some ways because they are women? Put another way: To what degree and in what ways are the differences in our churches and in the UUA over the last thirty years related to the fact that our clergy has gone from being overwhelmingly male to being half female during that time?

I have tried to answer these questions by consulting several recent books about the feminization of the American clergy in general which include information about Unitarian Universalists (Nesbitt, Zickmund et al.). In addition I have studied a 1998 survey of over five hundred UU ministers and its analysis completed for the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association by two of our women ministers (Cohen and Emerson; Cohen, 1998).

I have also conducted hour-long interviews with five UU women clergy who were ordained and began serving during the early years of the sudden increase in women among UU clergy, colleagues who have lived through this change. All of these women now occupy senior ministerial positions within the UUA. Each had unique adjustments to make in the early years of her ministry, and each reflected with me both about her personal experiences and about her views of the implications of the feminization of our clergy.

It has been striking for me to listen to these women ministers, who were ordained

between 1977 and 1985, and to remember what I was doing and thinking during the period when each of them was becoming a minister. In those eight years, I got married, gave birth, and was researching and writing a book about the impact of feminism on marriage (*Wifetypes: Women Talk About Marriage*, New York: Delacorte Press, 1983). I had steeped myself in the classic feminist writings of the day, including those titles mentioned earlier, and was working as a writer and a teacher. My own call to ministry was twenty years in the future, but the ground was being prepared for women like me to come into the profession by these pioneers, who contributed to a leap from 6 percent UU women clergy in 1978 to 25 percent women in 1988 (Cohen and Emerson 1).

I have also had a sense of being mentored by the early Second Wave feminists, of following in their wake. Betty Friedan graduated from Smith College in 1942, the year I was born. She published *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963, the year I graduated from Mount Holyoke College, one of Smith's sister colleges. We are very different women and very different feminists, and Friedan is no longer one of my heroes. But this congruence still creates a feeling of connection and succession between us, which is now tied also to the feminization of the UU clergy, and to my third career in professional ministry.

As I have worked my way through the material in this paper, I have found the hermeneutical model proposed by Majella Franzmann in *Women and Religion* helpful:

The process has four key steps:

1. describing the phenomenon in its context;
2. describing your own standpoint;
3. understanding the phenomenon;
4. taking a position: academic and personal accountability

You should not see these steps as linear, going from 1 to 4 and finishing there, but rather as a continuum on which you will constantly move backward and forward among steps 2, 3, and 4 (21).

Her emphasis on the emotional and psychological aspects of a phenomenon and a writer's reactions to that phenomenon have been especially useful as I have grappled with the questions in this paper because they are of central importance to me personally, academically, professionally, and spiritually. I can't write about the impact of women in the UU ministry without writing about myself, my own concerns and longings. These hermeneutics give me the room to approach the question from many different perspectives.

Franzmann's encouragement to remain fluid and open throughout the work is also useful to this project. She explains, "the whole process is really like a very lively, open-ended dialogue in which the positions of the dialogue partners

constantly change and new and interesting ideas come to light" (19). The questions raised in this paper have seemed more and more cosmic to me as I have worked with them. It is reassuring to know that I do not have to come to the end of my process feeling as if I have discovered the Truth, but rather that I have encountered the material and myself in ways that have been fruitful and carry the promise of further dialogue.

Orientation: The Phenomenon

To orient ourselves to the present and the future, we need to consider the past. In this section, I will briefly trace the history of women ministers in the Unitarian and Universalist movements both before the merger of these two faith traditions in 1961 and since. Although the first woman ordained nationally in the United States was a Universalist (Olympia Brown, 1863), women ministers have been a small minority in the UUA until recent times (Hitchings 30).

During the First Wave of feminism in the United States, Universalists and Unitarians ordained a handful of women, many of whom were active in social reform movements, including temperance and woman's suffrage (Hitchings 4-5). The Iowa Sisterhood, a group of liberal religious women ministers who emerged in the 1880's and 1890's, helped expand Unitarianism into the frontier after the Civil War (Tucker, *Prophetic Sisterhood*, 3). Altogether there were about seventy women ordained in Universalist and Unitarian churches by 1890, but their presence was controversial and their professional status ambiguous since they were "called to only the smaller or shakier congregations that men would not take...and regarded by the denominational leadership as a blotch on their image and best kept on the organizational sidelines" (ibid.).

In 1910, only 684 women were working as ordained ministers of all denominations in the entire United States (Cohen and Emerson). Among Unitarians and Universalists, 130 women had been ordained by 1920, when the Nineteenth Amendment passed, but ironically the achievement of suffrage marked the beginning of a decline in those seeking ordination and able to find employment as ministers. The General Superintendent of the Universalist Church wrote in 1935 of "a tremendous prejudice against women ministers....[A]t the present time I find it is practically impossible to get any women minister a hearing at any salary whatever" (Hitchings 6). This decline was mirrored in other Protestant denominations in the United States and has been attributed to the Great Depression, the active resistance of male clergy to women ministers, and what historian Cynthia Tucker calls "the advancing virility culture" of male denominational leaders, dating back to the post Civil War period (*Prophetic Sisterhood* 153). By the late 1950's, there were no women settled as parish ministers among the Unitarians and, in 1959-60, only three women clergy served Universalist parishes (Cohen and Emerson). Ten years later, in 1968, only two percent of UU ministers were female, a total of twenty-one women (ibid.).

Then, in a period of three decades beginning in the mid 1970's, the ordination of women to UUA ministry exploded. In 1978, of a total of 916 UU ministers, 57 (6%) were women; ten years later, in a total field of 1108, 276 were women, fully 25%. In 1998, 49% of all the clergy active in UU ministry were women (504 women among 1035 ministers) (Cohen and Emerson). As we have seen, the next year women became the majority.

The UU women ministers whom I interviewed for this paper were ordained in the eight year period between 1977 and 1985, during the first phase of the feminization of the UU clergy. I asked each of them to tell me the story of how she decided to become a minister. "What made you think you could do that?" I asked. Their responses provide an introduction to these interview subjects and help to explain what made this tremendous demographic shift possible. (With the exception of a few of the Rev. Helen Cohen's stories taken from her paper, "Leaping From Their Sphere," all of the stories and direct quotations attributed to these women were recorded in the interviews cited in the bibliography of this paper under each woman's name.)

The Rev. Diane Miller, who was ordained in 1977, said that she felt "strongly called" to ministry in the early 1970's. Although she had never heard of a woman minister, she felt sure that Unitarian Universalists wouldn't have any rules against women being ordained. "There was obviously a culture that stood against it," she noted. "But I didn't know what that would mean." Miller began her theological studies at Harvard Divinity School in 1972. She chose Harvard partly because there were a number of other women students there, mostly in academic studies but also a few preparing for ministry.

During her second or third year as a theological student, when she was 23 or 24 years old, Miller attended her first weekend UUA ministers' meeting, a "very alienating" experience. She was one of two women present. Some of the men teased her about who her roommate would be and persisted in this joking after she asked them to stop. She was dismayed by their heavy drinking and remembers thinking "maybe I had made a mistake" about going into the ministry.

Rev. Miller also found positive aspects to being among the first women candidates for UU ministry in her generation. "At the same time, I was young, and it was kind of fun because you got to tweak people's expectations and challenge assumptions without having to be assertive even--just by being there, you created a bit of a stir. And that part was rather amusing." She experienced a "tremendous bonding" with the other women at Harvard, especially in the Women's Caucus, which was "very positive."

When she began to work in her first settled ministry in a church which had not called a woman minister before, Rev. Miller found "a lot of reaction around [her being] the first woman." She was later to distinguish herself further by becoming the first ordained UU woman in modern times to become pregnant and give birth

while continuing to serve a church, which led her to form a support group called the Reverend Mothers made up of UU women ministers who were raising children. Some years later, Rev. Miller became the first woman Director of Ministry at the UUA, a position she has held since 1993. She is also a candidate for the presidency of the UUA, an elected position which has never been held by a woman.

Thinking back on her first years of ministry, she noted that the novelty of being the first woman minister was short-lived. In her second church, she followed a woman minister and "people saw me not as a woman minister, but as their next minister, different from my predecessor, who had also been a woman." Then "the whole thing about woman minister disappeared and dropped away, and that was it. And suddenly there were other women around, and it wasn't so unusual."

The Rev. Deborah Pope-Lance, who was ordained in 1978, said she had been raised to believe women could do whatever they chose. "I was always interested in religion...and I liked the church. It was a place where I could discover myself and what mattered." The UU church and the Liberal Religious Youth group had been "a different, freer place than school or home, less directive." She was influenced by the Rev. Joyce Smith, who was the minister in Sherborn, MA, in 1967. Rev. Pope-Lance majored in religion in college, and "it was a short walk to choosing the ministry and the forwarding of the church" for her life work.

In addition, the "provocative aspect" of becoming a woman minister at a time when few women were entering this profession appealed to Rev. Pope-Lance. "How compelling it was to be a twenty-five-year-old woman who was choosing to do this. I couldn't have done it without the support that derived from the provocative nature of what I had chosen. Women would come up to me, obviously moved by a woman in the pulpit, by a person with "their body and their experience" fulfilling priestly and pastoral responsibilities. They would tell me, often with tears welling up in their eyes, what a spiritual and personal difference my femaleness made to them. I couldn't have endured the adverse reactions, the awkward moments, the discrimination and occasional harassment, without knowing that my presence as a woman minister truly mattered to these folks."

In 1973, when she first began to request information from seminaries, Rev. Pope-Lance experienced a pattern of discouragement. She requested catalogues which did not arrive and had to be ordered again. One school was so slow in responding to her indication of interest that they called the day after she had left for Drew University, where she received her theological education. Here she found actual hostility on the part of professors who were not ready for women students. She recalled one who began his classes, "Good morning, gentlemen."

This discouragement continued in her early years of looking for work, beginning in 1977. She had difficulty getting job interviews; her dossier packet would be

returned unopened. One joke among the women seminarians at Drew was that they should borrow the wives and babies of their male counterparts to help the women get more job interviews since young men with families were seen by many churches as attractive candidates. They laughed to keep from crying: the discrimination was painfully real.

When Rev. Pope-Lance was called to her first church, in Trenton, NJ, she was the only woman minister in the district. "I felt every Sunday that I got up and wasn't an idiot, I was a success. I just had to stand there in this [woman's] body." A second woman came to work in Metro New York the following year. By 1982, five years later, the situation had already changed, in her estimation. In the late 1970's "it actually was daring to call a woman--but by the early 80's it wasn't so daring. It became less radical and more provocative."

Like Rev. Miller, Rev. Pope-Lance attributes part of her resilience in the face of this early discouragement to her youth and also to the fact that she was not married at that time. Unlike older women who came into ministry as a second career and had husbands and children, "I never had to accommodate or assuage any man...I never had to ask anybody." She speculated that the older, married mother "may well be a different person, a more accommodating person" and noted "women are acculturated to worry about what other people think."

Rev. Pope-Lance described her younger self as a person whose opinions had been formed by the culture of the mid 70's, "bright, ambitious, optimistic, innocent." She was "shocked" to discover "that I was offending people so deeply and irrationally" by her vocation, and she became "radicalized" through her pursuit of study and employment as a minister. After twenty-three years in the ministry, fifteen of which she served in parish ministries, Rev. Pope-Lance serves in a community ministry as a marriage and family therapist, providing programs and resources for clergy and laity on the ethics of congregational life and ministerial practice.

The Rev. Helen Lutton Cohen, who was ordained in 1980, is a lifelong Unitarian Universalist who had never seen a woman minister when she was growing up. She went into teaching after receiving a Ph.D. in English Literature, "hired as an assistant professor in the English Department at Yale in 1968, the year before they went coed, and they needed role models" (Cohen 1998). At Yale she experienced the outrage of sexist discrimination: "At a department party early in the year, I was introduced to an elegant white-haired emeritus professor as one of the new faculty members. He said, 'At Yale we have always approved of women, but lately we have been using them for more and more purposes'" (ibid.).

By the time Rev. Cohen entered the UU ministry, she found her colleagues, "male and female alike...actively and warmly supportive" (ibid.). She had come to ministry as a second career after teaching and staying home with her children while they were young. The family became involved in a small UU Fellowship,

where Rev. Cohen was encouraged by the members of her congregation to consider becoming a minister. After an experience with a fellow congregant in which she had taken a pastoral role, she determined to enter seminary and enrolled at the Harvard Divinity School.

Rev. Cohen entered seminary with some trepidation. "I thought I was probably crazy. I had not seen a woman minister. Can it be done?" Soon after she arrived in Cambridge, she met two UU women ministers who were working in the Boston area, The Rev. Polly Laughland Guild and the Rev. Marjorie Sams Montgomery, both excellent ministers and very different from each other. "Then I knew it could be done." During her training, she felt "very welcomed" and "supported" by fellow students, supervisors, and mentors. Although UU women seminarians were still uncommon, she doesn't feel like "one of the pioneers." She identifies Rev. Miller and Rev. Pope-Lance as pioneering, but by the time she began to prepare, it wasn't lonely. The UU students were involved with each other.

Rev. Cohen was called to First Parish in Lexington, MA in 1980. It was her first job out of school, she was their first senior woman minister, and she has served in that church ever since. It was, she said, "a good match from the start." She gives the search committee who chose her as their candidate a lot of credit. "They took a big risk because they had had an assistant woman minister but no other woman minister experience. They were brave."

The Rev. Ellen Brandenburg, who was ordained in 1982, came into the UU ministry through her work in religious education. She was working toward accreditation as a Director of Religious Education (DRE) when the program she was taking changed to allow students to extend themselves and qualify for an MRE, a Minister of Religious Education. Rev. Brandenburg decided to opt for the MRE. "It wasn't a big calling," she said. "I wasn't aspiring. It was coming after me."

She didn't particularly identify herself as a feminist although "I certainly had feminist understandings. But I wasn't an activist....I read all the books, but I was definitely not out there on the front line trying to prove something on behalf of women. I was more interested in doing a job and being well prepared for it and fulfilling my own sense of call." Because she was involved in academic preparation, she read the new psychologies of women that were coming out in the 1970's and 1980's as well as Betty Friedan and the self-help books. She also read Carol Gilligan's *A Different Voice*, and was a subject for some of Gilligan's research.

Rev. Brandenburg's career path has followed "where my kids were. I had little kids and was very much in the domestic role" in the beginning. When her children were in Sunday school, she worked in children's religious education; when her kids grew up into youth group, she worked with youth; when they left home, she went into her present job as Director of Ministerial Education for the UUA. "I have

never really considered myself terribly ambitious, but I have always felt very called to contribute what I can, the sort of 'Go where I send you' thing."

After she was ordained as an MRE, Rev. Brandenburg left her job as a DRE and served as an interim parish minister at a church where they had never had a woman minister. "I think they intentionally chose me because they wanted to try that out--see what that would be like. They also needed some help with RE, and they needed someone with those skills. But they asked me to be their parish minister. Now when I went up there, I really hadn't been trained at all for parish ministry. They trained me. They were great." Her transition to parish work was made easy by the supportive atmosphere in the church which called her.

She was the only woman minister in the local ministers association, and this presented some discomfort. "It was easy in the church....but I did have some difficulty being on an equal footing with people in the community. I was a weird duck. You know, I was new to the ministry. I was a woman. I was a UU....But no one was ever disrespectful or no one ever closed me out. It was just that feeling of being a little girl in a bunch of Big Daddies."

Reflecting on those early years, Rev. Brandenburg noted, "I think that's been an issue for a lot of women like myself who are not real staunch feminists in some respects. It's an internalized oppression. And being in RE [which is often less respected among both congregants and parish ministers than 'real ministry'], that's another piece of it. So I had a lot of things going for me in terms of helping me feel marginalized and oppressed. But I can't say anybody did that to me."

She went on to talk about the situation of women in her age cohort who have come into the ministry since that time, and she noted that "it's still harder for older women to feel they belong....What the culture has said to these women, to us, has become internalized and even though the culture may have changed, it's a little hard to keep up sometimes."

The Rev. Sarah Barber-Braun, who was ordained in 1985, became a UU minister after leaving her marriage of thirty years. "I was looking for a profession which provided me a context in which I could both work and become self-sufficient.... unconsciously strategizing a way out of a marriage so that I could find work that fit my political, intellectual, and spiritual preferences." Unlike the other women interviewed for this paper, Rev. Barber-Braun was directly and powerfully inspired by the example of women ministers in earlier times. She took a course in the history of women in America, learned about Anne Hutchinson, which she said was "spiritual recognition of the most basic kind," and realized that she had been "uncomfortably located in the wrong religious tradition." She eventually left her marriage, the town where she had lived for two decades, and her trinitarian UCC church.

Rev. Barber-Braun found Unitarian Universalism in a small Fellowship in the

town where she was working as a community educator. "The first time I walked in, what I discovered was the place where I should have always been, and it was all the people I already knew in town." Soon the part-time minister was urging her to become the lay coordinator when he left, and then the district executive came to town and told her about his background. He had been a disc jockey and started UU seminary at Starr King School for the Ministry at age 55. "That was the magic number," according to Rev. Barber-Braun, since she was 55 when she heard the story. Soon she was enrolled at Starr King herself.

At Starr King she continued her intensive work in "academic women's studies," which had begun with that course in the history of women in America some years before. Inbetween, while she was attending UU Leadership School, she had discovered the history of UU women ministers, including Olympia Brown, "a contemporary of my grandmother Julia, the doctor" who had graduated from medical school in 1873. Anne Hutchinson continues to be her "main spirit guide," and in addition Rev. Barber-Braun has done extensive research on other women ministers, including Phebe Hanaford, a contemporary of Olympia Brown who was ordained in 1868. A founding member of the Board of Directors of the UU Women's Heritage Society, she writes a column, "Clio's Calendar," for the UUWH's newsletter, *The Flame*.

Commenting on the centrality of feminist history to her work, Rev. Barber-Braun said, "All this history, much of it still to be discovered, is the source of my energy whether it's energy for ministry or energy for social change. If the next generation can know this history which stands visibly and invisibly before us, that for me is one of the great satisfactions."

Rev. Barber-Braun, who is in her seventh decade of life, has served in the parish ministry since 1986 in eight churches, including her present full-time consulting ministry in Southold, NY. She said she has personally discovered what ministry is through the loss of an infant son in 1962. The people in the town where she lived who had lost children themselves came to her and supported her, spending time and folding the laundry. "And I recognized the essential part of life was just being with people--often unspoken recognition of you as a person of worth and dignity." After she had told that story, she said, "I am content with my profession."

Had she ever felt she was in the minority as a woman in the ministry? "I was personally beyond that." What about the future? "Who cares," she said.

Impacts I: Standpoint

Listening to these extraordinary stories, I am struck by a sense that none of it could have happened twenty years earlier. Although only one of the women I interviewed herself identified the feminist awakening of the 1970's as critical to her own calling and development as a minister, each woman benefited from the assumptions of the time, the new horizons which Second Wave feminism had

opened.

Both Rev. Miller and Rev. Pope-Lance, who came into the profession straight from their undergraduate careers, were energized by the challenge of moving into vocations where women had not served in many years. Rev. Cohen and Rev. Brandenburg were able to change careers in a climate in which women of their class were expected to work.

Rev. Miller acknowledged this debt when I asked her what advice she would give the women ministers coming up now. "Don't forget what went into making it possible for you not to have to worry," she said. "A lot went into that. And don't lose ground. And don't undercut what's there. Because some of the [sexist] attitudes are still there, and you could get bit by them." She continued, "Don't forget the lessons of feminism of the 1970's and the lessons of feminism from today--address major issues still coming up: sexism, racism, classism."

We will return to these five voices later in this paper when we turn to their answers to the main question: What has been the impact of women on the UU ministry?

First, following Franzmann's hermeneutical model, I want to reflect on my own standpoint in relation to the phenomena presented here: the statistics, the historical perspective, and the interviews.

I am in roughly the same age cohort as most of the women I interviewed. When Rev. Miller and Rev. Pope-Lance were getting out of school and getting into their first ministry jobs, I was leaving my first marriage. Like Rev. Barber-Braun, I became a feminist as a result. I had married the year I completed my first master's degree, in 1964, at the age of 22, and moved with my husband to the suburbs of New York where I worked as a high-school English teacher. I expected to work until we had our first child, stay home until our children were in school, and then return to teaching.

When the marriage dissolved, I was so disoriented I didn't do anything for a couple of years, and then I realized I had to get out of the suburbs so I left my tenured teaching job and moved to Manhattan. There's nothing like being single and thirty and female and alone in the city when you expected to be married and pregnant and setting up housekeeping in some nice little ranch house with a grassy front lawn and a picket fence to turn a person to feminist ways.

It was 1972. I was reading Elizabeth Janeway:

the idea of innate sexual separation still echoes....men are active; women intuitive; men are interested in things and ideas; women in people and feelings. Stand in the sun and experience the bright, hot, active positive male yang. Move under cover and feel the dark, moist, cold, passive force

of female yin...Man's world, woman's place, yang and yin, make an all-inclusive pattern...they suggest control over life because they promise to explain how the astonishing and menacing events we experience fit together. And indeed behind the pattern there does lie a system....ancient, mysterious, monstrous...and all man-made (8).

I was reading Robin Morgan, Dorothy Dinnerstein, and--yes--Betty Friedan.

All I wanted to do for a long time was get married again. But I stayed single for six years, long enough to become independent, to learn to make friends with women, and to develop some more opinions about how I wanted to live my life. Then I did get married again and the real work started. Six years into the second marriage, I had written *Wifetypes*, a book of interviews with married women seeking to learn what the impact on marriage of Second Wave feminism had been. I said in the book that things had changed some between women and men in marriage, but not very much.

Things are still not that different in some places, including the place where I am doing ministry right now. In the UU church where I have been working as a ministerial intern, in a pretty little rural suburb north of Boston, men in suits take up the collection most Sundays, and they also take up most of the air time in the Parish Committee meetings. (The Parish Committee, its male chair explained to me last year, "runs the church.") I think of the advice of the Rev. Alison Cheek, one of the first women ordained to the Episcopal priesthood and the director of the feminist liberation theology program at Episcopal Divinity School. She says only women who want to change the church should seek ordination (Nesbitt 4). I do want to change the church, but more than that, I want to change the world in which it is embedded.

I am a candidate for the Unitarian Universalist ministry because I think our faith tradition offers hope to the world for transformation. I am an institutionalist; I love the church, and I believe it carries the potential to change the hearts of people one heart at a time, which is the only way I think this change can happen. As a woman coming into ministry now, I am grateful, as Rev. Miller admonishes us to be, for those who have gone before. I am inspired by the women in our UU history who struggled to be part of the clergy when they were not welcomed. I am inspired by the women who talked with me as I prepared this paper, for their dedication and their clarity and their vulnerability.

This is not an easy time for women's liberation movements or any kind of liberation movement. The Million Moms March for common sense gun control, which mounted a major demonstration in Washington, DC, in the spring of 2000, had an extraordinary statement on their website: "This [march] is personal, not political. We are in this for one reason alone: to keep our kids safe" (*New York Times*, May 7, 200, Week in Review, 1). How can gun control not be a political issue? When I became a feminist, our slogan said the personal was the political.

I still believe that this is so, but such language meets resistance among many good hearted people, including the women from my church who went and marched and would say that they were not feminists. For me, gun control is a feminist issue.

Women's acceptance in the ministry, and what we say about the impact of women's growing numbers in our ministry, are also feminist issues. We have made some progress towards equality of opportunity for women in our clergy, some progress toward full acceptance of women in ministerial roles. But we have some work to do.

Impact II: So What?

In their 1998 survey of 565 UU ministers, Cohen and Emerson asked about many aspects of ministerial life and practice. Their final question: Do you believe women ministers have had a significant impact on the nature of ministry and on congregational life in recent decades? Almost every respondent answered yes (482 to 12). When they compiled the reasons and explanations their respondents had offered, Cohen and Emerson came up with 32 positive changes and 18 negative changes. The top five positive changes were "sharing ministry/collaborating, broadening spirituality, personal openness/humanizing, relationships/connecting, and less competitive. Among the top five negative changes (all cited by many fewer respondents than the positive list above) were "lowers compensation, political correctness/rigidity, less intellectual rigor, lowers status, and less social/political activity."

When Rev. Helen Cohen presented the survey results at the ministers' CENTER meeting at the 1998 GA, she fleshed out some of the findings, offering her interpretations and reactions. First, Rev. Cohen's overall reading of the survey "is that there is an amazing overlap between the ministry of men and women" (1998, 6). As we have seen, almost all the ministers polled agree that the influx of women ministers has had an impact on the UUA and its congregations.

In addition, Rev. Cohen talked about three key areas--theology, style of ministry, and focus of ministry--in which the survey showed no appreciable difference between women and men ministers. Asked to self-identify their theology from a list of terms, the ministers selected categories that demonstrated very little distinction between women and men (ibid.). Asked to choose among a list of descriptive terms for their ministries, the respondents again showed little difference by gender. "Men and women were almost equal in pastoral, facilitating, priestly, inspirational. Men had a little more in prophetic, teaching, leading, and organizing. Women far outweigh men, 131 to 83, in empowering, but that was the only category that was significantly imbalanced" (7).

Among terms chosen to describe the focus of their ministries, again most of the responses were "'dead even' proportionally. Women chose pastoral counseling a

little more often, men social justice a little more often" (ibid.).

A few interesting imbalances did appear in the Cohen and Emerson survey results. Twice as many women as men said that they believed their ethics was affected by their gender. Rev. Cohen speculates about this finding: "I wonder whether the Kohlberg/Gilligan studies on values have raised more women's consciousness of the relationship between gender and value than men's. Do men still see their values as 'the norm' and therefore not gender related" (7).

In addition, in a group of questions about the kinds of groups the respondents joined, men and women report attending almost the same number of study groups and mixed-gender support groups, but the women ministers in the survey reported having four times as many single-gender support groups as men (8). Finally, "many more women than men receive comments on their clothing from parishioners" (ibid.).

Some of these same themes appeared in the interviews I conducted for this paper. Those conversations began, as we have seen, with some exploration of the ways in which the women had come to ministry. After we had discussed their person histories, I turned the interview to the impact of the feminization of our clergy with this question: "Over fifty percent of our clergy are women. So what? What difference does it make?"

All my respondents agreed that things are different since women have become more numerous among UU clergy, and many of them identified similar issues, both positive and negative. Among the positive, the women I interviewed all mentioned that chapter meetings, which are gathering of ministers from the same region, had improved. You may recall Rev. Miller's horror story about a chapter meeting she attended as a young student minister. The presence of more women has apparently resulted in much improvement in the ministers' behavior. Rev. Brandenburg, for example, said "I think [the increase in the number of women ministers] has made a huge impact on collegial relations in the UUA. I think colleagues have changed the way they do business with each other. There's a much deeper appreciation for personal sharing, for support....The tenor has changed. There's less bragging. The dinosaurs are becoming extinct; they're losing their power."

Rev. Cohen agrees. "It certainly has changed chapter meetings, ministerial gatherings. Everybody agrees who's been around about that. And mostly for the better, we think. It's more collegial, more open, more mutual, supportive....it's possible to talk about vulnerability and weakness and ask for help." But she adds an interesting caveat: "A male minister whom I like very much said, 'It's too earnest some of the time.' We've lost some of the humor that was part of the Old Boy stuff. And I think that's...you know, we [women] can be PC [politically correct]. So it's not all good."

This strong consensus among my small sample, which seems to parallel the Cohen and Emerson finding of "personal openness/humanizing," is striking because it's so stereotypical of old-fashioned gender relations for the men to behave themselves better when women are present. It harks back to some of Dorothy Dinnerstein's speculations about the psychoanalytic roots of male misbehavior and just reminds me of a hundred things in my youth: dancing school, Sunday school, school--places where women were in charge and the boys had to behave.

Rev. Pope-Lance, who conducts training for ministers and congregations in the area of ministerial sexual misconduct, made the related point about misconduct among (mostly male) ministers that our tolerance for such behavior is less since the numbers of women ministers has increased. But, she adds, "our ability to deal effectively with misconduct is not proportionally greater." Rev. Barber-Braun mentioned this difference as well: "Things have really changed from the patriarchs. All this business about sexual ethics and sexual harassment. Honesty is taking over. I think it's time. It's overdue."

Rev. Brandenburg offered a vivid description of the way things used to be in contrast to current awareness of sexual abuse and sexual harassment: "Men used to take it for granted that they could use their positions to do just about anything they wanted....The whole culture has changed around this. Women used to think that, too, that what men were doing was okay. Or it was going on and nobody thought it was [a problem]." Here and at other points in their analysis of the impact of the feminization of the clergy, each of the interviewed ministers noted this difficulty in teasing out which changes were part of a change in the overall culture and which could be attributed specifically to having more women in the profession.

Changes having to do specifically with the practice of ministry were also, surprisingly, subject to this analysis: were they due to the influx of women or just to changes in religious practice in the wider culture? However you come down on this question, another positive difference mentioned in my interviews has to do with innovations in UU worship and liturgy. Rev. Cohen described a "general return to more appreciation of the visual, the symbolic, repeated ritual, in the culture [at large]--the search for spirituality which I think of as a search for depth. People live at a frantic surface level....They don't get a chance for depth so the church needs to provide that. And depth doesn't come from verbal discussion, verbal presentation. It comes from sitting quietly and having symbols that create certain reactions; it comes from music; it comes from art....I think that probably women on the whole are more into these things. I don't know."

Asked about specific worship practices that have been introduced in her church in her twenty-year tenure, Rev. Cohen quickly mentioned half a dozen: "chalice lighting, unison affirmation, candles of joy and concern [in which members of the congregation come forward, light a candle, and speak briefly about important

personal matters such as death, illness, anniversaries, accomplishments], silence after meditation, more different kinds of music." She also said she thought women liked more color, an antidote to the traditional Protestant tradition, especially in New England, which is "very austere."

Rev. Pope-Lance talked about the changes from a sermon-centered liturgy to one in which sermons were shorter and the rituals were "more real, less contrived in other times." In addition to candles of joy and concern, an innovation which became common in the 1980's and is now a weekly feature of many UU worship services, she mentioned innovative forms of "communion," including flower communion and water communion. Rev. Pope-Lance noted that the traditional liturgies were often changed first by adding new rituals without changing the old ones, but at some point, many congregations began to ask, "What are we doing here on Sunday morning?" a question which opens the way to more thoroughgoing change.

Rev. Miller was reluctant to make any generalization about the impact of women on UU ministry, and she specifically questioned the belief that women ministers are more "spiritual" than men ministers. But she did say, "Women have been more imaginative around worship, that's a generalization I would make." She told a story about a group of women ministers who met for a convocation and struggled through the conflicts created when one of them brought a small, noisy infant to the meeting. At the close of their work together, the women created and shared a breast milk communion, using the expressed milk of the mother who had brought her baby, as an expression of their solidarity and "bond." Thus, according to Rev. Miller, these women ministers "tried to express our experience of female bodies, culture, identity and our roles and responsibilities in society" through a newly created ritual.

Another aspect of ministerial practice which may be influenced by the influx of women into the profession involves what Rev. Pope-Lance called the "realworldness" of women. In her view, "women have a greater capacity for relevance" which enhances the quality of both their preaching and their pastoral care. Rev. Barber-Braun stated this difference in the strongest terms. For her, having women in the ministry, "makes all the difference in the world. There's this huge difference between men and women's lives." Women exemplify that "essential part of life...just being with people."

Rev. Brandenburg seemed to agree: "Women may be a little more sensitive to the need for broad-based kinds of caring communities. I think that women tend to be more collaborative so that would indicate that this shared ministry concept [in which ministry and laity work together in less hierarchical ways to accomplish the work of the church] would be highly supported by women." Not satisfied with this generalization about women, she added: "But a lot of the men coming into our ministry now are very comfortable with [shared ministry], so I think part of it has to do with the change in the whole culture. And I know a lot of women who get

into ministry whose behavior looks to me just like some of the Old Boys. So I'm not sure I would lay it all at the feet of women."

In another example, Rev. Miller first agreed that women had influenced the shared ministry movement, but then she noted that "our most visible leaders of this aren't women." Speaking of the idea that women are more nurturing, she attributed this pastoral aspect to role as well as gender, reporting that she had been seen as the more accessible minister when she served as an associate with a male senior minister, but later when she promoted and assumed the senior minister's role, the minister who assumed her previous role as associate was seen as the nurturing one. "I found myself being typecast a lot as being nurtural and spiritual...but I think a lot of that is a kind of self-fulfilling expectation."

In fact, for Rev. Miller at least, this expectation can cut both ways. "People, when they're not seeing me as a nurturing female type tend to think I'm an overly executive Ice Queen, so what we have is different stereotypes around different styles for women and then different names often for the same kind of thing for men, and the ones for women are generally less flattering or supportive."

This ambivalence about attributing changes to the influence of women reflects the current feminist debate, noted earlier, between "essentialists" and "postmodern feminists" (Klein 5). How much of what's changing is due to some quality inherent in women, and how much should be attributed to cultural influences? My respondents remarked that it was difficult to discern which was which, and when they were discussing the positive changes that women ministers may have brought to the UUA, often qualified their attributions, as we have seen. I noticed less such discernment among them when they were discussing the possible negative impacts of having more women in the UU ministry.

Of all the possible impacts attributed by my respondents to the feminization of the UU clergy, the most problematic had to do with the authority of women as ministers. Rev. Cohen expressed this struggle in personal terms: "I think of ministry as an androgynous profession--the best ministry will combine the ability to really listen and in feminist terms hear people into speech and obviously also hear people into action as well. But it's also a leadership position and you've got to be willing to be out there, to be a catalyst and give people ideas and expose them to different kinds of thinking and challenge them. And I suppose these two different things are stereotypically female and male....Just speaking for myself, and I don't know how you find this, but in our generation [we are both in our 50's] I've learned a lot about modulating my leadership and being uncomfortable with it. I have not been able to use all of myself as fully as I would have had I been raised more recently because I'm uncomfortable enough with it that either I don't exercise it as much or I can exercise it with a tone of voice that isn't as effective. The mother tone. The teacher tone....It's a little harder for women to accept the

leadership dimension from women than from men, or at least it was."

This exchange was especially poignant and meaningful because Rev. Cohen is the mother of a young woman who has just recently been ordained into the UU ministry, and she believes that the women in her daughter's generation do not have the same problems expressing their authority. "They [the younger women] are exercising themselves more across the spectrum of their strengths." So in her view it's a generational thing rather than simply a gender difference.

Rev. Miller spoke of her own struggle with authority issues. "I experience a lot in myself...[the need] to address my being more tentative in what I say, being collaborative to a fault...being willing to speak up, being willing to take certain kinds of political risks...naming and claiming my own leadership." Was it inherent or cultural? "I have observed some differences between women and men....I think that this is cultural. Women have learned behaviors around [leadership]."

For Rev. Pope-Lance the issue of women and their authority has to do as much with other's perceptions as with the way a woman minister behaves. "If you ask a minister for an opinion, you expect, especially him [that is, a male minister] to answer. Culturally women are expected to [waffle and say], 'Well, golly, it's just me...!' Being in the job with some authority is a challenge for women. What matters is how the person in front of you sees that, and it has to do with mothers and fathers, with cultural expectations of women and men, with all our experiences with authority (God, your boss, your third grade teacher, your minister)...Our understanding of women in positions of influence and authority is different from our understanding of men. It plays out in terms of how people in the pews understand authority. It plays out in the women ministers as they attempt to establish authority and lead."

Rev. Brandenburg, who sees all of the candidates for UU ministry as part of her work, agrees with the perception that older women have more difficulty claiming their authority. "We still see difficulty finding their authority in women in our age cohort, people who are now 45 or older, because of the way you were raised. That's not to say that there aren't plenty of women who do it very well. It's just more prevalent [among the older women]." She too noted that this contrast between the older and the younger women candidates. "It's the exception to find younger women [who struggle with expressing their own authority] but for women our age it's the other way around." In Rev. Brandenburg's perspective, the difference between the two groups has lessened in recent years. "Women are just growing up, regardless of what their age is."

Rev. Brandenburg also talked at length in her interview about a related aspect of change in the UUA ministry, what she called a loss of "an entrepreneurial spirit among some of our ministers, where there seems there may have been [in the past] more emphasis on institution building, on public ministry, on ministry beyond the walls of the congregation, on prophetic ministry." She attributed this

change specifically to the increased number of women in the profession: "The women [candidates] who come in here tend to be primarily excited about community building [inside the church]. There seems to be less of a drive, less of a passion for bringing Unitarian Universalism into the public domain. Less interest in serving larger churches. Most women who come in here want to serve small churches. The horizons aren't quite as large....Men tend to be bigger risk takers in terms of public ministry. Women tend to be bigger risk takers in terms of their pastoral style, their willingness to risk interpersonally." And then, hearing herself make these gender-based distinctions, she remarked, "This all sounds so categorical." But, she continued, "What we need now is more of an entrepreneurial, risk-taking kind of person which in my experience [as Director of Ministerial Education] the men tend to fall into more than the women, still with very notable exceptions."

Questions about the ability of women and men to assume authority are related to another issue raised by my respondents: what they perceive to be the dangers of having too many women in the UU clergy. Rev. Brandenburg spoke of this early on in her interview. "When you say the 'feminization' [of the UU clergy], to me that implies...that carries some kind of...it's a loaded term, and I'm wondering if you want it to sound that way....maybe we should turn the tape [recorder] off [laughter]. It's used by some people as a warning sign, You know, like there's something wrong. That it is somehow scaring away men. Or that men because of the feminization of the ministry are no longer seeing it as an attractive career choice."

Later in the interview, she returned to this point. "People who worry about the feminization of the clergy have a point. I've always hoped we could keep a balance. And I did get worried for a while that men just simply weren't going into the ministry--that a man in our ministry would be as rare as a male nurse. So it's not seen as a normal career option. That has been a concern in the past [when there was such a sharp rise in the number of women coming into the UU ministry]." Asked what she thought the ideal proportion of women to men would be, she said, "Well, for want of a better percentage, half and half. I think the way it is now is good. I would hate to see it become lopsided in any direction."

Rev. Cohen also talked about the need for balance. "It's my hope that we remain fifty-fifty, partly because it's richer than becoming more one or the other. I mean it certainly was enriching to have women move in and change the model to some extent, but I think it would be a serious loss to have it shift a whole lot more both for the sake of the denomination, which I think wants to be as rich as possible in its leadership, and for individual churches, which probably want to experience [both] women and men." For Rev. Cohen, having our ministry balanced in terms of gender is part of a larger goal of balanced leadership along many dimensions. "It's just my view of things to really like to have it as totally inclusive and balanced as possible so I think the concern now should be more around ethnic, racial diversity, that kind of thing. It's very hard to do that."

She went on to put this issue into the larger social context. "Also in terms of our effect on society. I think a lot of society just isn't going to listen to mainly women's voices." In her view, the church has lost authority in the culture at large.

"Business is the place where the leaders go. A UU minister in a typical UU church may have a lot of responsibility but doesn't carry a lot of authority, not as much as they used to....Ministers do need to have authority in order to provide the nurturing leadership that is going to make the church mean more than a community support system for people, that it's going to be really a place which challenges them to grow, reach out to others. You don't want to have everybody second-guessing everything you do and say."

At another point, Rev. Cohen clarified her vision of ideal leadership this way: "When I talk about leadership, I'm not talking about telling people what to do or being in front of the line all the time....[G]ood leadership is nurturing. It's being a catalyst; it's being an audience; it's being a cheerleader. And a reminder that there are more important things than what kind of a car you buy....We ministers have to be very countercultural now, to get people to look at how we're living."

Providing this kind of leadership from the ministry will be difficult in our culture, where, according to Rev. Pope-Lance, the church is widely seen as an anachronism, less compelling, less prophetic, less relevant to people's lives.

Speculations and Longings

As I complete my training for ministry, I want to foster in myself and in my work qualities that I identify as particularly female: nurturance, empathy, the ability to listen, the ability to share power and to let go of traditional authority, nonhierarchical problem solving, shared ministry. I do not know--I think we cannot know--whether these qualities are inherent or enculturated. But they are qualities that I believe women possess in greater measure than men, overall, and qualities that I identify in myself with being a woman, being a mother, being a caregiver.

I want to combine these qualities with the kind of nurturing leadership that Rev. Cohen described in her conversation with me and to use my authority as a minister and as a human on this planet to change the world. One place I know this work has to be done is in the racism, classism, and sexism that still pervades our culture and our church. Rev. Miller suggested that women ministers have a useful perspective from which to work on these kinds of problems because we have ourselves been marginalized because of our gender: "My real answer about what I think might be different [since women have come to predominate in the UU ministry] is [women have] a little bit more of an understanding of privilege. This is different than the stereotype. Because women recognize, no matter when they came in, that in the past they wouldn't be [in ministry]. I would think women have brought by and large a deeper sense of privilege of ministry and maybe

more of a sense of selfless call to ministry....Excluded groups carry with them, whether it's people of color or people going into ministry, gender, gay, lesbian, whatever, those groups carry an awareness of the privilege of being a minister."

Later in the interview, she added, "Be glad that it is the point in time in the universe that you can be a minister and serve in this way. It's the most incredible thing to be doing with your life."

Rev. Pope-Lance had a more cautionary view. "Ministry is a harder job than ministers often realize, certainly than we were all trained to think it was." She said that the difference "lives on in how people see the impact of women on the church, the denomination, and the ministry. The difference is not simply how much harder the job of being a minister may be for a woman because women are expected to do everything well and without the support that the traditional male minister's wife provided, that balance. Is the job of minister easier for a woman because she may be more nurturing, empathic, accommodating to shared leadership? Or is it harder for these same reasons?" Can we be "more nurturant, more relational, more pastoral, less arrogant, less authoritative" and also be effective?

Rev. Brandenburg asked about the relationship between the "conversation over the last ten or fifteen years about the decline in the quality of ministry and the so-called feminization of the ministry....What is the nature of that perception? What is the role of the ingrained, archetypal figure we work with in our head? That's really deep stuff. So you have to ask yourself, is the ministry really becoming feminized, or what? What is going on? Just because there are a lot of female bodies doing this, does that really mean that our images of what ministry is and ought to be have changed?

Neither the militant feminists of the 1970's nor the worshippers of the Goddess nor the secular spiritualities of the New Age will satisfy my longing for a religious tradition that is grounded in history and yet open to evolution and change. I have cast my lot with the free liberal Unitarian Universalist tradition as the best expression of that hope for a faith that is grounded and open, that has roots and wings. As a woman, as a minister, as a human, I want to work within this tradition to carry us forward together.

This project of interviewing UU women ministers began as a term paper for a course in Women, Feminism, and Religion with Professor Leila Ahmed at Harvard Divinity School in the spring of 2000. The interviews were almost an afterthought in a paper that had been conceived as heavily academic. But as soon as I began talking to the women ministers, what they said seemed more real and vital to me than anything I was reading in books. I have become convinced that our understanding of the impact of the feminization of the UU clergy needs this kind of personal testimony and witness.

I hope to continue this work myself and also to encourage others to conduct interviews with women ministers, to help create occasions for more conversations about their experiences and how they have influenced the women's views of their ministries and of the church. One of the women I interviewed told me that these conversations have the potential to "give us back to ourselves." Another suggested that encouraging women ministers to reflect on their experiences could help to provide the "true balance" we need.

I look forward to continuing the conversation.

So may it be.

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