

## **The Never-ending Wave**

A service in honor of women  
at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock

**Anne Bancroft**  
February 7, 2010

### **Opening Words –**

Once there were a big wave and a little wave in the middle of the ocean. The big wave was crying, and the little wave asked why. "If you could see what I can see," the big wave said, "You'd know that ahead of us are rocks. We're going to crash on the rocks and be in big trouble!"

The little wave offered to teach the big wave something that would remove his fear, and first the big wave asked if it would cost anything, or if he would be required to chant a bunch of mantras and stand on his head, but the little wave said no, and that in fact it was only a short message.

So the big wave said, "Sure, teach me."

And the little wave said: "You're not a wave, you're water."

**Chalice Lighting** – We may think we are separate. We may think we are independent beings, each with our own issues, each moving in our own space. In fact, we are all a part of the same essence. Our fortunes, like the sea, rise and fall together. We are not the wave, we're water.

### **Sermon**

This morning I want to apologize right up front if you feel as though I might be hitting you over the head with the wave metaphor. In a few minutes, I'm going to start talking about first, second and third wave feminism and you might be tempted to roll an eye or two, but don't do it. It will all make sense in the end. I thought about putting in songs like *Swimming to the Other Side*, or *Michael Row the Boat Ashore*. I even thought about *Surfin' USA* – so, you see, it could've been worse!

If you didn't have a chance to see it, the August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2009 issue of the *New York Times Magazine* was titled, "Why Women's Rights are the Cause of Our Times." I mentioned in the *Quest* that the writers argue that "the well-being of women around the world is the key to progress, national security, development and health." I wondered, what does that mean for this congregation? And what does it suggest for the future of our children – both girls *and* boys?

We know, of course, that the health and safety of women in our world is not simply a feminist issue. Christine Grumm, President and CEO of Women's Funding Network,

reminds us "If women have a roof over their heads and a home free of violence, and good and affordable health care, then so do children." But other reminders about the significance of working for women's safety and equality, and equality of opportunity include Larry Summers' statement that "investment in girls' education may well be the highest-return investment available in the developing world." The Hunger Project tells us, "Women are the key to ending hunger in Africa." And the White House Council on Women and Girls suggests that "greater female involvement in society and the economy appears to undermine extremism and terrorism."

One has to ask: what are we waiting for? Why do we continue to find women subject to, at best, unequal pay for equal work; and, at worst, abject brutality and oppression. Do you know that more girls have been killed worldwide in the last 50 years than men in all the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

This is about power, of course, and the value of human life, and who gets to make what decisions, for whom. The point I want to make is that in a very fundamental way - in the way that we are all water - we are all in this living together - and the damage we do to some of us is the damage we do to all of us.

For some reason, women keep getting left with the short end of the stick.

Now there are many things we might point to, but to begin with, I want to suggest that a part of our cultural predispositions may have to do with our religious imaginations. Let's think for a moment about the ways in which female participation and imagery has been written out of our theological constructs for the past - I don't know - 4 or 5 thousand years. There was a practice in Roman times, called *Demnatio memoriae* - "damnation of memory," whereby punishment for someone considered heretical to the Roman Republic would be erasure from history. The name of the individual challenging the authority of the status quo would simply be wiped out, as though the individual had not existed. It was considered the severest punishment for those who challenged power.

Isn't it interesting how monotheism has largely erased female participation in leadership? Can you imagine how much differently girls and women would be valued today - particularly, though not exclusively, in the West - if the primary image of the divine for all these hundreds and thousands of years had been female - mother, instead of father; a sacrificed daughter, instead of son? Rather than having the mere handful of female role-models as reference, imagine scriptural text filled with the feminine divine! Imagine replacing the visual of a grey-haired man in long white robes and a long white beard with the visual of a woman? What if Buddha were a woman? Or Mohammed? Reading sacred text can sometimes feel like the authors exercised their fair share of *Demnatio Memoriae*.

Mythology that preceded monotheistic constructs had much more engaged feminine imagery. I can't help but think our human abilities to value women has something to do with that cultural shift.

I'm going to make a blanket statement here, and ask you to accept it. There is nothing inherently less valuable about the female than the male. "What would men be without women?" Mark Twain asks. "Scarce, sir, mighty scarce."

And yet across the world, women are devalued for their contribution to our collective lives. What's up with that?

Just for fun: if I asked you to assign gender to the story of the waves that Jennifer shared with us this morning, how might that look? Is your big wave a boy or a girl? Is your little wave a boy or a girl? Big wave – big voice. Little wave – little voice. Big wave – big power. Little wave – little power . . . except, remember: we're not the wave. We're water. We're all in this together.

Speaking of waves - let's look at the situation for women in the US for a moment – and particularly at efforts to challenge inequity over the last 150 years or so.

There have long been women fighting the good fight for women's rights (in this country and others), many of them Unitarians, by the way, but the first strongly organized effort – the First Wave of feminism - is considered to have functioned in the US in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, focused primarily on suffrage, on getting the vote for women. They succeeded in 1920 with the passage of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the United States Constitution. The term First Wave was actually coined by the Second Wave feminists of the 60's and 70's, to differentiate their struggle from that of their earlier sisters. Many in this room might consider themselves to have been active Second Wave feminists – male and female alike. The Women's Liberation Movement grew out of the post-WWII efforts to re-establish pre-war patriarchal social trends. During the war, when men were absent, women carried on. When the men came home, there was a problem! Women were expected to move back into pre-war constructs – again, a bit of *Demnatio Memoriae*?

We know, however, it's hard to go back to the farm after you've seen "Parie!"

"One project of second wave feminism was to create 'positive' images of women, to act as a counterweight to the dominant images circulating in popular culture and to raise women's consciousness of their oppressions." (Arrow. Michelle. 2007). After a long series of legislative successes, culminating in the Roe v. Wade, 1973 decision that established the choice for safe and legalized abortion - by the early 1980s, it was largely perceived that women had met their goals and succeeded in changing social attitudes towards gender roles.

I am happy to tell you that today, more women earn bachelor's degrees than men,<sup>[11]</sup> half of the Ivy League presidents are women, the numbers of women in government and traditionally male-dominated fields have dramatically increased, and in 2009 women were expected to pass men in the American workforce.<sup>[12]</sup>

Then why, exactly, according to the National Committee on Pay Equity, are women still making less – even in this country - for the same work than their male colleagues? "Since the Equal Pay Act was signed in 1963, the wage gap has been

closing at a (surprisingly) slow rate. In 1963, women who worked full-time, year-round made 59 cents on average for every dollar earned by men. In 2008, (45 years later) women earned 77 cents to men's dollar. That means that the wage gap has narrowed by less than half a cent per year!"

Clearly, we're not done yet . . . and there's a Third Wave. Like many things in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it's a bit more complicated. Standing on the platforms built by second wave feminists, third-wavers are taking on different issues, and more than ever women are being joined by men who understand these lingering issues of injustice.

Third-wave feminism's central issues are that of race, social class and sexuality. However, they are also concerns of workplace issues: continuing to challenge the glass ceiling, sexual harassment, unfair maternity leave policies\*, motherhood—support for single mothers by means of welfare and child care and respect for working mothers and mothers who decide to leave their careers to raise their children full-time. . . Third wavers also want to put attention to alleged unhealthy standards for women in media; the glamorization of eating disorders; the portrayal of women as sexualized objects catering solely to the man's needs, and anti-intellectualism.

If that weren't enough, third wave feminism is taking on terminology. For example: some third-wavers prefer not to call themselves feminists, as the word *feminist* can be misinterpreted as insensitive to the fluid notion of gender and the potential oppressions inherent in all gender roles. In the story we heard earlier from *Free to Be You and Me* – a product of the 70's – two babies are trying to determine their gender, with the assumption that one is either a boy or a girl. But we are beginning to understand that gender identity is a social construct. We *learn* what it is to be a girl or a boy, quite apart from the biological determinatives of male or female. That two-sided construct - binary gender identity - leaves little room for transgender realities, which are also becoming better understood and addressed.

It won't surprise you that I was delighted to find the following statement by Third-wave writers, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards: "For our generation, feminism is like fluoride. We scarcely notice we have it – it's simply in the water." (Baumgardner, Jennifer; Amy Richards (2000). *ManifestA: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux)

I loved thinking that feminism is in the water – in **all** of our water – not as individual storms or crashing waves, but as fluid and blended strength. After well more than 100 years of women fighting for equity and justice, with some men along the way, no doubt - the idea that the work of feminism is "in the water" for all of us felt good. We get it. We all get it –right? But I re-read their statement and realized it begins with the words, "The presence of feminism in our lives is taken for granted . . . for our generation feminism is like fluoride. We scarcely notice we have it – it's simply in the water."

And therein lies the rub. When something is taken for granted, it's another form of invisibility. It inclines us towards complacency, and feels not so very different from

the unacknowledgement of erasure. This complacency may be why women's issues – particularly in developing countries – **must be** the cause of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, because we have forgotten how critical they are to our common cause.

It is the paradox of so many things – that when the struggle for the particular gets blended into the universal, it becomes invisible. How do we work for the good of the water without losing the value of each wave? First Wave feminism was specific: they wanted the vote. Second Wave feminism expanded, to include broader societal inequities. Third Wave feminism has expanded even more, and now the wave is so big and so broad we scarcely see it – which is a good thing, and yet . . .

It is a wave we must keep attending to, that WE ALL must keep attending to – because we know, now more than ever, that supporting justice and opportunity for women seriously impacts the success or failure of a culture.

Our ushers will be handing out cards at the end of the service, with web-sites you can visit to consider supporting women's economic opportunities in developing countries, or ways to get more involved in Third Wave feminist issues at home and abroad. Let me remind you with words from the United Nations Development Program: "women's empowerment helps raise economic productivity and reduce infant mortality. It contributes to improved health and nutrition. It increases the chances of education for the next generation." If economy were not enough, our safety is also of concern, because we now that "countries that nurture terrorists are disproportionately those where women are marginalized." There is work we can do, and we should be doing it. Our children need to know that we are paying attention to their futures, to ALL of their futures.

But I want to end this service by inviting us to participate a bit right here, right now – in an effort to expand our religious imaginations. No matter what age we are in this room, we have been raised in an environment that force-feeds male dominance in our spiritual constructs. And often, when we have discovered that imagery to be problematic or insufficient, we have thrown the baby out with the bathwater.

I have asked Willow to share a version of the beautiful poetry that is the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, using the text that is in our teal hymnal, which substitutes the masculine pronoun with the feminine. At the risk of offering that polarity, I wonder if we might listen and imagine a more blended construct of grace – that the shepherd we are comforted by in the challenge of our everyday lives might be both male and female and everything in between. It will be each of our individual tasks to create an internal vision that comforts you – but at least we will have held up the feminine as an equal contribution to the equation.

So may it be.

\*second and third wave feminism specifics were Wikipedia references.