

A Piece of the Puzzle: Women's Liberation in the 1970s
The Rev. Cynthia B. Johnson
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Door County
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Two Readings:

- 1) "Transcendental Etude" Adrienne Rich

No one ever told us we had to study our lives,
make of our lives a study, as if learning natural history
or music, that we should begin
with the simple exercises first
and slowly go on trying
the hard ones, practicing till strength
and accuracy became one with the daring
to leap into transcendence...

– And in fact we can't live like that: we take on
everything at once before we've even begun
to read or mark time, we're forced to begin
in the midst of the hardest movement,
the one already sounding as we are born....

- 2) Business section of last Sunday's New York Times.
Paula Kerger, President and CEO of PBS:

...Life is often about those moments – you have to be willing, every once in awhile, to jump, and it's absolutely terrifying. Our nature as humans is not to change. We get comfortable, and we don't want to be pushed out of that comfort zone, whether it's moving from a job that you know is not the right one or because it always feels so much easier to keep on doing the same thing, even if it's painful, rather than taking that leap.

A PIECE OF THE PUZZLE:
WOMEN'S LIBERATION IN THE 1970S
The Rev. Cynthia Barnes Johnson

In late May thirteen members and friends of our Fellowship gathered at my house to discuss how we were affected personally by the Women's Liberation movement of the 1970s. A couple months earlier I'd posted a "Baker's Dozen" sign-up sheet at the Fellowship inviting up to thirteen people to get together to discuss a topic was planning for an upcoming sermon. We were a group of twelve women and one man who said his life had been greatly affected by feminism. When someone said he was the "token male," I said, no, he was not; he, too, like many men in our lives, was affected personally by the cultural shift toward the growing

independence of the woman in their lives. As women claimed their individual potential and forged new paths through life in new ways, there were reverberations within marriages.

I do Baker's Dozen for two reasons: first, to understand a wider range of perspectives beyond my own experience and, second, because I have seen that the people who come really like the opportunity to share their own stories -- and listen to the stories of the other people who signed up.

At the beginning of that evening in May, I was asked what I expected of the gathering, what I expected from them. "I hope you will listen, talk, and tell your stories." At the end of the evening, I was asked if I was satisfied with what they'd said and done. Yes.

We had listened. We had talked. Each of us told some of our stories, but not all of our stories because stories keep wandering off in new directions in our lives. That evening at Baker's Dozen, I jotted down a few notes. I was listening for themes, for patterns, for how our stories were the same or different from one another's. I listened to understand how our stories were grounded in an era of great social change during the 1960s and 1970s. It was known as then as Women's Liberation and/or Feminism when we were young and "things, they were a-changing" around us and, for some of us, powerfully inside us. This morning, it would be inappropriate for me to tell specific stories I heard that evening because they are *their* stories to tell, not mine. Our personal stories are, well, personal, stories for us to tell.

It's always thrilling to plan a sermon over a period of many months -- and then to find it way, way more timely than we expected. Yesterday President Obama published an article about feminism that he has submitted to be printed in Glamour Magazine next month. While tempted to read his article to you for the next twenty minutes, let me just say I've brought in a dozen copies of his treatise for you to read if you missed it. I hope the cockles of your heart will be as warmed as mine are with his closing:

...I want all of our daughters and sons to see that this too is their inheritance. And I want them to help do their part to ensure that America is a place where every single child can make of her life what she will. I want them to know that it's never been just about the Benjamins; it's about the Tubmans too.

"That's what twenty-first-century feminism is about: the idea that when everyone is equal, we are all more free."

I was struck by what different messages I had growing up. I was expected to be a wife and mother and culture bearer for my family and community. I grew up knowing my parents expected me to go to college and graduate, but there wasn't any expectation about a career except that I should be prepared for one: "...if, God forbid, you ever have to go to work."

Oh, how much we are shaped by our first family. How much we are taught, how much we learn. For some of us, it's been pretty easy to move through time and space harmoniously with the imprint of our first family. For others of us, it's been harder -- family tradition, cultural norms, economic reality, and strong parental opinions about the appropriate roles of girls and

women, boys and men. Here's where the image of our lives as a very complex puzzle feels applicable as we live our one precious life forward, recognizing the truth of the words by Jonathan Anthony Burkett: "I look at this life as a puzzle without all the pieces in the box."

Let me pause here to ask you to think about your own life...

Think about your family, your parents. Were they satisfied with their lives?

How many children were there in the family? How did that shape you?

What lessons did your parents teach you about being a good boy or a good girl? What were the tasks and duties you were expected to do? Was there a difference between what was expected of girls and boys?

What did they teach you about the world beyond your front door? What did they hope for? What did they fear? What were you taught to fear? What did they teach you about being a grown up?

Did they expect you to graduate from high school? Did they want you to go to college? Did they want you to live in the same town they did? Worship in the same way they did? How safe was the world out there? Were you encouraged to be adventurous and independent? Were there conflicts between their expectations and what you wanted to do or be?

Our parents. Our neighbors and our neighborhood. Our clan, our language. What are necessities and what are luxuries? Did your family have enough or not enough or more than enough? Where did the money come from? Who earned it? Who managed it?

Oh, how the answers to these questions have shaped us into who we are and what matters to us.

We who gathered for the Bakers Dozen are all in our 60s, 70s, and 80s -- so we were looking backwards through time and memory to revisit ourselves when we were in our 20s, 30s, and 40s. All of us lived within the major cultural shifts in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. In our first families, some of us were expected to go to college as their parents had done, but for others they were the first generation to go to college. Some graduated with debt, some without debt. Some wanted to go college but faced opposition from their parents, sometimes because they were female and the college money in the family was for the boys. Some struggled mightily and shaped their lives over time. Some of us assumed we would get married, work until we had children, and work outside the home after the children were partly grown. Some expected to work within their profession. Some had careers they could not practice by conditions beyond their control. Not everyone did get married. Not everyone wanted children. Some stayed married. Not everyone stayed married. Some married more than once. The man is a strong supporter of feminism but is happier married now to a feminist who is a nice person. There were tragedies and betrayal and bravery -- and stubborn persistence that served them well. Everyone paid attention to the world, including noticing the injustice that abounds. They were strong women who were creative about shaping their own lives in ways that helped them survive and thrive. So much bravery, good judgment, good luck or tragedy, smooth stretches of the journey, and sudden changes that unsettled the way things were for everyone except the one

participant who felt untouched and unaffected by the Women's Liberation movement, a woman with a deep affection for the life she lived, joyously having balanced children, home, many years as a teacher, and a happy marriage. She was a good listener. I don't know what she thought about the rest of us. Three hours isn't enough to tell all the stories, to resolve all the questions...

That data woefully oversimplifies the variety and richness and deepest meaning of the lives we have lived/are living. Our lives are very complicated puzzles that have many pieces. Most of us do not live the same lives as our mothers lived. I have some unresolved sadness that both my mother and mother-in-law thought I fit too much into my life while the children were growing up. At our youngest child's graduation from high school, I have a shadowy memory of Mother saying, "I guess you really could do all of it." I would have liked to know that while I was in the middle of it.

In thinking about our Baker's Dozen, I kept finding myself drawn back to 1968, a milestone year for the world, the United States, for women. A Time Magazine retrospective overwhelmed me with memories: **1968: The year that shaped a generation.** (Time, January 11, 1988) – possibly because 2016 feels unsettlingly like 1968 in some ways:

...Nineteen sixty-eight was a perverse genius of a year: a masterpiece of shatterings. The year had heroic historical size and everything except Tiny Tim's falsetto seemed momentous. Temperaments grew addicted to apocalypse...

Some of the events of the year—the starvation in Biafra, for example, or the seizure of the American intelligence ship Pueblo---might have occurred in some other year. The events were significant but not central to the drama. For the essential 1968 was mythic. It proceeded chaotically and yet finally had the coherence and force of tragedy. And if it was the end of some things (of the civil rights movement, of Lyndon Johnson's generous social vision, of the liberals' hope to keep government in its trajectory), it prepared the way for other beginnings: the women's movement, the environmental movement, the complex reverberant life that the '60s would have in the American mind long after the melodrama was over and those previously on fire went to tend their gardens.

Nineteen sixty-eight was a knife blade that severed past from future, Then from Now: the Then of triumphant post-war American power in the world, the Then of the nation's illusions of innocence and virtue, form the more complicated Now that began when the U. S. saw that it was losing a war it should not have been fighting in the first place, when the huge tribe of the young revolted against the nation's elders and authority, and when the nation finished killing its heroes. The old Then meant an American exceptionalism, the divine dispensation that the nation thought it enjoyed in the world, In 1968 the American exceptionalism perished, but it was reborn in a generational exceptionalism---the divine dispensation thought to be granted to the children of the great baby boom. The young were special, even sacred, in the way that America once was special and sacred. American innocence and virtue found new forms, new skins.

1968. Ah, sweet memories of those high school sweethearts, who married during college, and both graduated. I taught elementary school the first three years of our marriage. Al earned an MBA. In 1968 Al and I were in the fourth year of our marriage. Al entered the work world as I exited it, not intending to work outside the home until all our children were school age. Al was finally beginning his first real job with Kimberly-Clark in New Milford, Connecticut, the location he chose among the three options offered him in the meeting in which we was hired -- without discussing it with me, something neither of us thought peculiar then but we sure do now, in retrospect.

In New Milford we bought our first house, bought a St. Bernard puppy, had our first baby (after being treated for infertility) and we loved being grown ups at last. Two years later a job transfer brought us to Appleton, Wisconsin, the place where our three children grew up -- and I grew up. I remember going to Candidate Forums and whispering my question for the speaker to Al because I had not found my voice. Within months/years I had and I did find my voice -- in large measure because of the League of Women Voters where I learned that if you do small tasks well, you are offered promotions that include a lot of on-the-job training for growing into a public presence who could speak out loud. And I did.

It was about this time in my life, attuned to the larger cultural expansion for women's roles, that I had an epiphany while I was at George Williams College Camp at Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, for the Unitarian Universalist Family Camp probably in 1972. I was there with our sons, aged two and four during the work week and Al came for the weekend. Oh, there were so many classes and workshops and speeches and friendship groups, and child care was available for me to expand my vision of the world and of my place in the world. I have a very clear memory of standing in a telephone booth and calling Al at the office. I was excited and wanted to share major good news with him. I said, "I have discovered that I have an individual destiny to fulfill, an individual destiny that isn't identical with yours." It is a crystal clear life-changing moment in my life. Al doesn't remember the phone call.

Ms. Magazine was an important part of my life from its beginning. I was happy in my own life as Al's wife, mother of our three children, very active in our Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, hyper-active in the League of Women Voters. I was curious about the larger world and remember writing about imagining my life as taking place within a huge beautiful nature preserve. I remember that I felt lucky to live there and explore far and wide within its boundaries and commitment and responsibilities. That is still a useful metaphor for my life, keeping me grounded in a good way.

The League of Women Voters was so respected in Appleton and Outagamie County that boards and committees and task forces often sought out members of the League to work with them on issues we studied. Environmental effect of DDT. Solid Waste Disposal systems. Outagamie County Family Court. Community Guidance Center. Referenda on new library and Valley Transit bus system. Outagamie County Committee on Mental Health/Developmental Disabilities/Alcohol and Other Drug -- for nine years. Outagamie County Selective Service

Committee in the closing years of the Vietnam War. Appleton Police Department Task Force on Shoot to Kill Policy.

Overlapped these things with getting a Masters Degree in Curriculum and Supervision at University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh. Director of Community Daycare Center. Moved to Dallas. The nature preserve grew even larger with intra-state travel and jobs as Al and I made the transition from my having several interesting jobs that were calibrated to the family's needs. My career was different. A four-year Masters of Divinity that involved a wonderful (though complicateing) internship in St. Louis, and, later, periods of time for my internship, a sabbatical ministry, and eventually being minister of the First Unitarian Church of Oklahoma for five years, 200 miles from Dallas where Al, Al's job, and our Dallas home were. After Oklahoma, Door County...

Ms. Magazine – loved my life, interested in other women's lives, what next?

Referenda, Outagamie County Mental Health, Developmental Disabilities, Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse, Board appointments Family Courts, founded Outagamie Council of the Family, Solid Waste and Water Treatment Issues; Environmental issues, Life Cycle of the Peregrine Falcon. Queen Bee. Outagamie County Draft Board. Appleton Police Department Shoot to Kill Policy Development

Watched the world change, new patterns within marriages, something to reflect upon...

To Albert (1977)

The news of the death of two more marriages reached us this week;
four more people have chosen to walk away alone.

When I was young I believed that for every birth a star was lighted
and for every death a star was dimmed.

Something less dramatic happens in a marriage:
a little leaf withers and dies.

There must be a moment that says, "I cannot be who I am, with you."

Is that moment as small as a prickling doubt,
as disquieting as a shudder in the noonday sun,
or does it strike with the drama of a bolt of heat lightning in the summer sky?

Among people we know, there is no observed phenomena, no signal sent to others:
a bruised and swollen eye, a flaunted affair, parched throats screamed closed.
But somehow a gray stranger has spread prying fingers into private places
to plant seeds which thrive in unshared thoughts and deeds.

But that is they -- what of us?

Will effort and a will be enough?

Will we allow each other room enough to grow free in the tended garden?

Will we fashion our marriage with the care of a craftsman shaping a silver chalice?

Let us we wise enough to know that you cannot and I cannot expand
our time and energy in all directions infinitely.

Let us be aware of the moment when we must look the world in the eye and say,

“Excuse us now. We choose to refuse your offer for more baubles and more fame.
We choose to withdraw awhile to stand alone together on the hill
or bend together to find the crocus or run together on the shore.”

I cannot promise you the happy ending, but I pledge to thee my effort.

1985—Dallas Q: what would I do if Al died? Be a Minister... Do you have to die for me to do that? No...

Variation on a Theme by Rilke Denise Levertov
(The Book of Hours, Book 1, Poem 1, Stanza 1)

A certain day became a presence to me:
There it was, confronting me—a sky, air, light:
A being. And before it started to descend
From the height of noon, it leaned over
And struck my shoulder as if with
The flat of a sword, granting me
Honor and task. The day’s blow
Rang out metallic—or was it I, a bell awakened,
And what I heard was my whole self
Saying and singing what it knew: *I can*.

We knew that. We lived that. Life changed. We changed.
The world is changing. Echoes in the election process this year.
Obama’s vision for his daughters...

At Baker’s Dozen: After about three hours of telling our stories and listening attentively to the way it had been for the other people, the discussion was winding down and people were getting ready to leave when one woman said that she thought that our pride and satisfaction with our own journey was good for us as individuals. What about the others who didn’t end up in the place just right?

Justice is conscience, not a personal conscience but the conscience of the whole of humanity. Those who clearly recognize the voice of their own conscience usually recognize also the voice of justice. – Solzhenitsyn

Sounds like a potential Bakers Dozen...