

A very long time ago I was a young - very young female seminarian. When I entered seminary it was not always the case that folks would go directly from college to seminary as I did. And so often I was the youngest in the room - both in my classes and in church gatherings. And although seminary was getting close to an equal divide among men and women it was not so with already ordained clergy. When I gathered with my clergy colleagues I was often the only woman. It was daunting at moments this trying to learn the old boys club and its ways.

I trained for the ministry in the United Church of Christ in the Southeast corner of Pennsylvania. That area of the UCC has its historical roots in the German reformed tradition so it was particularly old-boy in its orientation. There were not many female ministers. At clergy gatherings I often ended up sitting next to a minister, Martha. She was actually a pastor of one of our larger congregations. I didn't like her much. She was pretty guarded and very stiff. And she always spoke in that kind, kind pastors voice. She seemed very old school to me and bit boring. I remember her giving me a piece of advice about how the ministry was a life where often times I would call my own hours and make my own schedule and that I should be careful to be self-disciplined. She told me a story about a sermon-writing day where her son was home sick for school and she was trying to juggle the sick child and the focus she needed to write the sermon. She thought she was managing just fine until the president of her congregation

stopped over at the parsonage to ask her a question and she unthinkingly answered the door in her pajamas. She said she had never let her self have another day in pajamas again. I remember mentally rolling my eyes. Like I said I was very young and I lacked a bit of perspective. I gained a big piece of perspective one day while in the presence of Martha. She was talking to someone else about her journey in ministry - how she got there and how she had survived. She mentioned that she was ordained in 1959 and that she knew no other ministers at the time. I realized that she had been ordained the year I was born. In a second I understood - If I was finding it hard to maneuver the old boys club how much harder it would have been for Martha. I at least could find clergy shirts and robes designed for women. I at least knew how to advocate for maternity leave. It may have been uncommon as I graduated from seminary for a minister to be a woman but it was not unheard of. When Martha went to seminary she was the only woman among her 90 male classmates. I realized two things - first I stand on her shoulders - it was because of her courage and her call that a path had already been cleared. Because of her I did not always have to be the first. And I realized that if I had been ordained in 1959 after being the only woman in a graduating class of 91 - I might have been a bit stiff and formal and worn. There is a cost to blazing a path.

We as Unitarian Universalists can be proud of our history in regards to ordaining women. Olympia Brown was the first female ordained to the

Universalist ministry in 1863. Antoinette Brown, not related to Olympia was ordained in the Congregational Church in 1853 ten years earlier and is credited with being the first female in the United States to be ordained by a mainline protestant denomination. The Congregationalist went on to become the United Church of Christ a denomination that does like to recognize their early support of women ministers. What they often forget to say is that Antoinette Brown had a difficult time finding a pastorate as a Congregationalist and eventually became a Unitarian. By the way she married Samuel Blackwell, brother to Elizabeth Blackwell the first female doctor in the US who was educated in upstate NY. But I digress. Celia Burleigh was the first female Unitarian minister ordained in 1871, she was by the way born in Cazenovia, NY

In 1892, according to research of Julia Ward Howe, there were seventy ordained protestant female clergy compared with 101,640 males. 16 of them were Unitarians and 32 were Universalists. In the late 1800s there came to be organized a group of female ministers in the Midwest known as the Iowa Sisterhood. They were Florence Buck, Mary Edith Collson, Caroline Julia Bartlett Crane, Adele Fuchs, Eleanor Gordon, Marie Jenney Howe, Ida Hultin, Mary Leggett, Rowena Mann, Mila Tupper Maynard, Amelia Murdock Wing, Marion Murdock, Anna Norris, Margaret Titus Olmsted, Elizabeth Padgham, Helen Putnam, May Safford, Eliza Wilkes, Helen Wilson, and Celia Woolley.

Mary Safford was "the leading force within the Iowa Sisterhood.

As a child she played at being a preacher by getting up on a tree stump preaching to her family in Illinois where she was raised. Her father was a free thinker who was outspoken in his belief in Biblical fallibility, abolition and evolution. He died when Mary was 9 and she saw her mother raise her six children and manage a farm. Her mother was an excellent role model for what it would take to be a female minister in the Prairies in the late 1800s. She was influenced by Channing, Emerson, and Theodore Parker. "Their affirmation of all people's dignity and capacity for great service offered absolution to [her] who had always been taught to suppress as sinful - especially as she was a female - her nagging sense of self worth and her ambition to make herself heard in public." (Prophetic Sisterhood, p15)

She organized seven societies throughout her ministry, and she encouraged other women into the missionary ministry. She began her organizing with a Unitarian church in Hamilton, Ill. in 1878. She moved on to Humboldt, Iowa, in 1880, ...

1885, she was based in Sioux City, where, assisted by her friend the Reverend Eleanor Gordon, [1889 she moved to Des Moines,] where she served until 1910, revitalizing the church building and congregation. In addition to her pa

rish work, she held leadership positions in regional and national Unitarian associations. She served as chaplain in the Iowa state legislature....

She understood her role as missionary minister, strengthening struggling societies and creating new ones.” [http://www.psduua.org/heritage/bring/part1/1b\\_hepokoski.html](http://www.psduua.org/heritage/bring/part1/1b_hepokoski.html) "In retirement she organized the Unitarian Church in Orlando, Florida and actively served that new congregation, 1910-27.

Safford believed that "true religion must first of all be 'free' religion, free from irrational dogma that discouraged personal growth." She held that the human soul would evolve, not in solitude but through community. People would make their common tasks divine "by doing them in the spirit of love and helpfulness." Throughout her many years of ministry, she worked to help her congregations be the kind of religious communities in which individuals could evolve together "in the spirit of love and helpfulness.”” <http://uudb.org/articles/maryaugustasafford.html> I would hazard to guess that were she alive today she would stand with us on the side of love.

Two of the Iowa Sisterhood members have strong ties to Syracuse NY.

Marie Jenney was actually ordained in 1898 at May Memorial. She was born in 1870 [in Skaneateles, NY], she broke the mold of male conceptions every step of the way. Feeling called to the pastorate, she attended the Unitarian Theological Seminary in

Meadville, Pennsylvania. Her eventual husband later wrote, "There were other women studying at the school, but Miss Jenney was different. She was too beautiful to be a minister. People insisted that she could not be serious. They argued that there was probably a man at the seminary who had brought her there. Only a man could explain such a beautiful girl, with good clothes and evidences of wealth, at a theological seminary. Women did not go in for careers thirty years ago, and saving souls was a man's job."

Mary Safford attended her ordination in Syracuse and gave her the right hand of fellowship. This is the part of the ordination service where the person being ordained is welcomed into the ministry it is in effect the moment when the ordination is complete. Marie Jenney did not ask a male to do this part; Mary Safford the leader of the Iowa Sisterhood welcomed her into ministry. In addition Rev. Florence Buck also of the Sisterhood gave the address. Marie went on to be Mary Safford's Assistant minister in Sioux City Iowa and then went on to pastor her own church in De Moines Iowa. She left the pastorate in 1904 to marry her husband Frederic Howe. "In 1912, in Greenwich Village, she founded a women's club, Heterodoxy, for "women who did things and did them openly." It was a gathering place for suffragettes, feminists, radicals, labor organizers and professional women who met twice a month to debate topics such as women's rights, pacifism, birth control, revolutionary politics, and civil rights. The group included free-

love advocates, lesbian couples, and heterosexuals both [polyamorous] and monogamous.” It was her leadership in the Heterodoxy club that led to the Secret Service arresting her. "According to a letter from Sen. Robert La Follette to his wife (January 12, 1919), Marie Jenney Howe was seized in front of her apartment in New York City by the “Secret Service hounds,” taken into custody and not allowed to communicate with her husband or an attorney while they questioned her about her radical associates and activities – women’s suffrage and aid to the less fortunate being linked directly to socialism and pacifism, and thus tantamount to treason.” (parts quoted are from <https://kihm6.wordpress.com/2013/08/07/the-jenney-family/> ) Rev. Jenney also wrote a scathing piece of parody entitled "Anti-Suffrage Monologue.” <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4963/>

Rev. Elizabeth Padgham was also ordained at May Memorial in 1901 Rev. Marie Jenney gave the sermon and once again Rev. Mary Safford gave the right hand of fellowship. She was raised in Syracuse, 120 Shonnard Street. Marie Jenney, her old friend inspired her to enter ministry. “After graduating from Smith College and Meadville Theological School. She answered a call from Mary Safford’s organization in Iowa to care for the small congregation in Perry... Padgham left the sisterhood’s territory in 1904 when she moved back East to accept a church in Rutherford NJ where she pastored for 22 years until her retirement in 1926.” (Prophetic

Sisterhood, p239). She returned to Syracuse and was a long time and active member of May in her retirement. I found a copy of one of her sermons from 1929 the opening sentence is "Last Sunday after service I was surprised that not one of you challenged my repetition of the statement that the very foundation of the full strong rich life is faith in God. I had fully expected that some of you would question me as to my meaning in the use of the word "God." The sermon was on the theist/humanist split in the Unitarian church. I was amused that in the ensuing 86 years from that sermon we have not yet settled that dispute. Perhaps it is time.

I stand on the shoulders of women like the Iowa sisterhood, Mary Safford, Elizabeth Padgham, Marie Jenney. I would say we all stand on their shoulders. These women were not just prophetic voices in our religious movement they were prophetic voices in the world. Some things about the ministry have not changed it is as true today as it was in 1898 that when I speak as a minister my voice carries a different weight than a non-ordained person. Sometimes that is good and sometimes it makes for some difficult conversations but it is still a reality. When Rev. Safford, Rev. Padgham, Rev. Jenney got in their pulpit and preached people did not just see a minister they saw a female minister, when those women went to town meetings, and they did, when they went to rallies, and they did when they wrote letters to the editor, and they did, people saw and heard a female in



leadership. Our Unitarian and Universalist forbears made a prophetic decision to ordain these women - it was made in large part because of a lack of suitable male ministers in the prairies, it may have been that the right decision was made for the wrong reasons but it was still the right decision. These women, by their very presence and their status as ministers moved the suffragist movement forward. We in Syracuse have a strong history as Abolitionists and we have a strong history of supporting the Women's movement. Ours is a heritage of pioneers, of second, third or fourth born who struck out to find their way in the world. Ours is a history of prophetic voices willing to take the risk in the service of love and life and justice.

And that has changed us to our core. Our congregations are beacons of inclusivity - our hospitality is rooted in our strong history of believing and acting on women's equality because we believe all people have dignity not just the male people. I belong to the local chapter of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers association. About 2/3 of our members are female. We gather for a retreat twice a year in the fall and in the spring. Dick Gilbert has been a long time member of the chapter. He remembers when there were not any woman in the chapter and he describes the retreats as less than fulfilling back then. Dick describes the present chapter as more collegial - more connected - less competitive and all around more pleasant to be with. The meetings have less of a feel of an old boys

club and more of a feel of colleagues interested in supporting and caring for one another. Inclusivity, hospitality, welcoming these change us for the better.

We have a long history of being a religious organization that is open to new ideas and new ways. One of those was the ordination of women and that has shaped us as a people. The suffragist movement was an early civil rights movement and from our civil rights work we have come to learn that we are the people who are open to all who are open to all. Who is it we strive to be - I can think of no better words than those of Rev. Mary Safford:

A Home for all who seek for thee.

The home of faith in all things true,

A faith that seeks the larger view,

The home of love that yearns to bless.

The home of truth and righteousness.

Long may it stand, the outward sign

Of that indwelling Life divine,

Which makes thy children truly free,

In a world without end may it be so.