

**First Unitarian Universalist Church**  
**Unraveling the Gender Knot**  
**Rev. Sandra Fees**  
**May 20, 2007**



Last summer Chris and I spent a week in the Finger Lakes. We spent one day in Seneca Falls, New York, site of the first Women's Rights Convention in 1848. Something about being in a place where history was made is very powerful. It makes it real in a whole new way.

The historic site was not what I expected. It was simply not as grand as I thought it might be. We had trouble finding it because I imagined there would be lots of signs pointing us in the right direction. And there weren't.

I expected there to be a lot of tourists walking around. But it was drizzling that day. There were only a few of us milling around what remains of the chapel where 300 men and women gathered to bring attention to the struggle for equal rights for women.

What was most impressive was the wall monument on which the Declaration of Sentiments appears. Using the U.S. Declaration of Independence as its model, this declaration was drafted by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and a few others and signed by 68 women and 32 men. It outlined goals and defined the new women's rights movement.

Next door to the historic site of the Women's Rights Convention is the National Women's Hall of Fame. There we found the photographs and biographies of countless women of achievement – both historic figures and contemporary women.

We have come a long way. The women's rights movement succeeded in giving women the vote. As a woman today I have many more opportunities than Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, including voting. Having myself just voted this past week, I recognize the vote as an important milestone in women's lives. Women have made tremendous strides overall and are now holding positions of power and being publicly honored for their achievements.

We have come a long way. But have we come far enough? That is what I would like to reflect on for a moment. I think many of us would like to believe that sexism along with racism and homophobia is a thing of the past. Perhaps some of you would argue that we make a bit too much of these isms or that sexism unlike the others is not so much of a problem today.

Allan G. Johnson, author of The Gender Knot: Unraveling our Patriarchal Legacy, would not agree. He says we have not come far enough. He has come to the conclusion that patriarchy and sexism are very much with us. Too much with us.

What Johnson means by patriarchy is a society that is male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered. It involves the oppression of women. One sign of a patriarchal society is that when women find their way into positions of power, people are struck by the exception to the rule. Imagine the possibility of a woman president in our next national election, for example.

## **Unraveling the Gender Knot (cont'd.)**

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In a male-dominated society, men claim a larger share of income and wealth. Studies show that the poorest in our society are women and children.

The most obvious example of a society being male-identified is in the language we use. We still live in a society, where male pronouns and nouns are widely used to represent people in general – and also for God.

A male-centered society offers male experience to represent human experience. The movie *Kramer vs. Kramer* is a good example of experiences that are more often associated with women being attributed to men.

One of the most telling aspects of patriarchy is its insistence on strict gender roles for men and women.

It wasn't long after I arrived in Reading as your minister that I was reminded there are still perceptions and ideas about women's roles. At a meeting of a local group of women's entrepreneurs, a city official was invited. I was introduced to him as the minister of our church. The first words out of his mouth were "I'm not comfortable with women being ministers."

What you might be thinking is that this was some raging political conservative. There they go again. But he wasn't, well presumably he wasn't. He was lucky to have his wife beside him to smooth over the conversation. After all, isn't it the wife's role to assuage her husband's public image when he's had too much to drink?!

I was appalled. I informed the woman chairing the woman's group. She looked surprised, genuinely surprised, and said "I think he's had too much to drink."

The whole incident was a stark reminder to me of how deeply embedded are some of our ideas about men and women. Men are figures of authority. Men are breadwinners. Women are stay-at-home moms and caretakers.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with these roles for men and women. It isn't that women shouldn't be stay at home moms. It's that these roles need not be assumed. Strict gender roles constrain us all and perpetuate sexism and homophobia. They prevent both men and women and boys and girls from being able to be who they are.

The problem occurs when certain roles become the only right and acceptable arrangement. Some have come to be seen as the only moral and decent arrangement in society and within families. These roles get interpreted as God-given and therefore as part of our basic human nature as men and women.

Sadly, we know that traditional religion has often been responsible for advancing this belief. Such thinking insists that there is an essential difference between men and women and that as a result it is not only okay to expect men and women to take different roles but it is normal for them to do so.

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This is perceived as the normal and unproblematic way we do things as a culture. When people begin to break out of the status quo, out of their assigned gender roles, the reaction is swift and unmistakable.

We see the backlash against feminism, for example. Feminism has been under such attack that many young women today want to disassociate themselves from the word. We see the reaction against women in the assaults on reproductive rights and health, including recent rulings that limit a woman and her doctor's choice.

We see it in the continued wage disparity between men and women, which has largely fallen under the radar. The way we respond and don't respond to violence against women and its accompanying spiritual, emotional, and physical damage are further indicators.

And then there is the persecution of gays and lesbians. At first glance, this may seem to be a separate issue. Yet, as Johnson says, the persecution of gays and lesbians is a linchpin of patriarchy. It is no wonder. The very existence of gays and lesbians defies clear-cut gender roles. In a relationship between two women, who will be the breadwinner? In a relationship between two men, who will stay home to raise the children? The gender issues surrounding transgender people are even more complex.

You might be thinking what I often think. That we are different. Our religious tradition is progressive thinking and inclusive. We support women's equality. Over half our ministers are women, and generally speaking more and more women are becoming ministers. As a religious tradition, we have led the movement on reproductive choice and in calling an end to violence against women.

All this is true. We have been leaders in many ways. On a day when we welcome new members to our community, I think about how important this is to people coming to our faith who believe in inclusion, equality, and justice.

But what Johnson would tell you and what I also believe is that all of us still live and work and exist within a larger world whose legacy is patriarchy. He uses the metaphor of a knot to describe it. He writes:

The more we pull at the knot, the tighter it gets. We're trapped inside a legacy, and its core is patriarchal. To understand it and take part in the journey out of it, we have to find ways to unravel the knot, and this begins with getting clear about what it means to be inside a patriarchal legacy.

And so we still carry some of those remnants around with us. What Johnson suggests is that we all need to continue to look at how our thinking, our attitudes, and our behavior are part of the larger system. This may mean we need to acknowledge our own tendency to be defensive about the subject of patriarchy and sexism before we can go any further.

To unravel the knot, we each need to do the rigorous self-reflection and self-examination that can help us see the ways that we embody and enact aspects of patriarchy within ourselves and within

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our families. This can be something as seemingly innocuous as a woman being able to own her need to please and be liked. It can be a man acknowledging his struggle around the cultural messages that “boys don’t cry.” Both men and women need to do this hard work. This is not just a women’s issue. Men need to be allies with women against patriarchy just as straight people need to be allies with the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community against homophobia.

We all need to be concerned about our young people. The consequences for them are serious. The pressure on boys to be boys and girls to be girls hurts all young people and limits their choices and happiness in life.

There are no easy answers when we are dealing with the gender knot. But we can help to unravel it. We can begin by acknowledging that patriarchy still exists and not treat it as something of the past. We can remain in the ongoing struggle for women’s rights by noticing and challenging the ways we perpetuate a pink and blue world.

Amen.