

Patriarchy Is Alive and Well in Unitarian Universalism

Sermon for Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Central Michigan

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Introduction / Defining Patriarchy

Good morning.

Today I want to talk about patriarchy, and especially about patriarchy in the Unitarian Universalist movement. Patriarchy is not something that existed long ago in the time of our parents and grandparents. It is with us today. It exists here in this otherwise enlightened religion.

I'll begin with how I define patriarchy: it is a system of oppression that falsely elevates men and boys to a status of greater importance or value; and assigns girls and women lesser importance and value. Like other systems of oppression that are part of our American society, such as racism, patriarchy is so woven into the cultural fabric of our lives--through language and advertising and stories--that at times we don't even notice it. It is the water that we are swimming in.

For me, because I identify as a man, I am part of the privileged group in the system of patriarchy—which makes it harder to see and makes me more resistant to acknowledging it even when I do see it. It's like a blind spot that's right here [behind my head]—so I need a mirror or a trusted companion to help me see it. I've been trying, and today I'm sharing with you what I see.

I will talk about how I see patriarchy at work in American society at large, and in our religious movement of Unitarian Universalism. I will give three examples, and I will also talk about how we can work to end patriarchy.

Power: U.S. Politics and Large UU Congregations

My first example is political power. Consider the United States senate, the supreme court, and the presidency. Women have risen to other levels of government more readily, but seldom to the senate or supreme court and never (so far) to the presidency. Clearly, then, American society remains patriarchal.

At the national level of Unitarian Universalism, we do currently have our first female president, so there is progress there. However, there's a strong parallel in UU ministry to the American government example I gave a moment ago. In the United States, there are about 1,000 UU congregations: some small like this one, some mid-sized, some large, and a few very large. Female ministers are well represented in UU congregations at the small and mid-size and even large congregation level—but not at the top level. There are six UU congregations with 1,000 members or more: five of those are led by male ministers. The sixth one is led by a team of co-ministers (one male, one female). Female ministers, mind you, are a majority in our religion: overall about 60% of UU ministers are female. But none at the highest level. Patriarchy, male power, is alive and well in this way.

For that one, my first example, I'm not sure that we here can do anything to change that manifestation of patriarchy since we don't live in one of those six cities. But for the other two examples I'm sharing, I think we can change them.

Power: Men Dominating Conversations

My second example of patriarchy is much more subtle: the tendency of men to speak more, and with a greater sense of authority, than women do. Men have a tendency to speak up; women have a tendency to be quiet and let others speak. I think this is more true for those of us from an older generation, and less true for those of us from a younger generation, but still true. Men have a tendency to explain things even when they don't need to. This is called "mansplaining." Have you heard of "mansplaining?"

Maybe I should explain it to you...?

I want to illustrate that this tendency of men to take more than their equal share of the conversation is present in Unitarian Universalism as well. To do so, I'm going to use my friend Scot as an example. Scot gave me permission to use this story in the sermon today.

Like me, Scot is a new minister, he just finished his seminary training last year, and like me, he was an intern minister last year. In his internship, one day Scot was part of a workshop discussion circle. He wasn't leading it, he was participating in it. And the facilitator of the workshop asked a personally challenging question about a difficult topic, and there was a silence in the circle. The workshop participants were waiting, digesting the question, maybe seeing if the circle felt safe enough to talk about this difficult topic.

And Scot is hearing the silence, and he thinks, "Well, someone's got to break the ice here, so I guess I'll speak up." And as he begins to speak, the facilitator had the wisdom to say, "Hold on, Scot, let's let someone else speak first."

Like me, Scot has many privileged identities. He has white privilege like I do; we both are heterosexual; we both are cisgender; we both identify as male; we both have the privilege of wealth and education. But among those many privileged identities, I think it's our socialization as males in this patriarchal society that gives us the impulse to think that we should speak up first, that our voice is important, that others will listen to what we have to say.

Power: Sexual Harassment

I've talked about political power, I've talked about "mansplaining;" now the third and final example I want to talk about, the third manifestation of patriarchy, is sexual harassment. Here I'm talking about men as perpetrators, which is the vast majority of sexual harassment (although women can do it too). It is patriarchal because men doing sexual harassment are wielding power and falsely elevating their sexual desires over the wishes of the person being harassed. For this discussion, I'm including everything from unwanted comments to unwanted touching to sexual assault and rape as "sexual harassment."

About two years ago, the #MeToo movement began when a Hollywood film executive was exposed for his pattern of sexual harassment, and thousands of women spoke up on social media to say – "Me Too." Women said, this has happened to me, in some form...in the workplace, in public, somewhere. Then more and more public figures have been exposed for their sexual harassment, and more women have come out to say, "Me Too." Unfortunately, a majority of women report that they have experienced some form of sexual harassment.

So clearly it is a problem in American society. But what about in the UU religion?

In 2014 Rev. Deborah Pope-Lance researched sexual harassment in UU congregations and came to this conclusion: "As many as two-thirds of our congregations have been served in living memory by a minister known to have engaged in sexual misconduct there or elsewhere," she said. "At first I said that timidly because we can't imagine our ministers would do that, but now we know they can and have."¹

This is recent, and this is ongoing. Currently this is a focus of the work of my professional association, the UU Ministers Association. We are especially working to end the pattern in the past where ministers guilty of sexual misconduct in one place were shielded by secrecy and allowed to move on to a new congregation.

For myself and other members of the UU Ministers Association, our code of conduct states:

*I will not engage in sexual contact, sexualized behavior, or a sexual relationship with any person I serve as a minister.*²

This policy is very clear, but it has still been violated.

I have been focusing on sexual misconduct by a minister. Of course, sexual harassment of other forms within a congregation--from one congregant to another, for instance--is also very harmful to the safe community we are trying to build.

Solutions – Sexual Harassment

For the last part of my message this morning, I want to turn from problems to solutions. What can we do to stop these manifestations of patriarchy in our congregation? The first example of patriarchy that I talked about, the absence of female ministers leading our largest congregations, I'm not sure we can directly do anything about that. My second example was "mansplaining," and I'm going to come back to that in a minute. My third example of patriarchy was sexual harassment, and we can do something about that.

The Unitarian Universalist Association has a Sexually Safer Congregations program, and on their website this is what they recommend:

A sexually healthy and responsible congregation is free from sexual abuse, sexual harassment, and sexual misconduct. Congregations need explicit policies and procedures to keep children, youth, and vulnerable adults safe from abuse and harassment; strong codes of conduct for religious professionals, and safeguards for congregants who have been accused or convicted of sexual offenses.³

There is a lot there, and this is work that I believe we need to do in this Fellowship. I'm talking with the board of trustees about our policies as a congregation. All of us having awareness of the potential for sexual harassment is an important step; having a clear channel for reporting it is another step; and keeping the safety of the victim at the core of the process is critical. This is the beginning of the conversation.

Solutions – "Mansplaining"

Finally, when it comes to "mansplaining," I believe that we can address this here by calling each other into accountability and into community. I want to talk about *calling in* versus *calling out*, and first I want to talk about male fragility. Guy Newland recently gave a sermon here that was about white fragility, and the same idea applies here. When a person from a privileged group is confronted with the system of oppression and how it is harming people, they may become defensive. White people being defensive about racism is white fragility; men being defensive about patriarchy is male fragility. Because when someone is used to privilege, and then they are asked to give up their privilege for the sake of equality, that can feel like oppression. If I, as a man, have to give up the privilege of people listening to me just because of my gender, so that women have their equal voice, that may make me feel like I'm being persecuted—but really it is only fairness.

If you are a man who has enjoyed privilege from this system of patriarchy, and now we're asking for equality, and that feels like oppression to you, that's your work that you need to do.

And I love you. And I want you to be part of this community. And I invite you to do that work with other men, who understand what that feels like. I'm not asking anyone to silence or squelch themselves. I'm asking for awareness. I believe in healthy masculinity and I want every man here to be empowered in their full masculinity—but that should never include dominating others or having more than our fair share of anything.

Finally, I'm going back to the idea I mentioned before about *calling in* versus *calling out*. The difference is a subtle difference, often one of tone. In the example I gave before about my friend Scot, the facilitator in the circle called him back in to accountability, reminded him to give space to others. It was not blaming or shaming. And Scot had the self-awareness and humility to see what was going on, and even to learn from that moment about his own privilege. He was called in to community, not called out for bad behavior.

So men: be ready to be called in. And here's what that might look like. If there's a committee meeting or a discussion group or a social gathering of the Fellowship, and I notice that men are talking a lot more than the women, I might approach the man later and say, *Can I talk to you about something? Are you open to hearing some feedback about something I noticed? In that meeting there were six women and two men, and I noticed that you and the other man did most of the talking. Is that something you're willing to look at with me?*

And if I'm asking men here to be ready to be called in, I need to be ready to be called in myself. Because I identify as a man, I am part of the privileged group in the system of patriarchy—which makes it harder to see and makes me more resistant to acknowledging it even when I do see it. It's like a blind spot that's right here [behind my head]—so I need a mirror or a trusted companion to help me see it. Therefore I invite any of you to call me in to community and into right relation if you are bothered by something I say or do. Here's what that might look like, you could say, *Drew can I talk to you about something? ... Drew, that thing you said in your sermon last Sunday...or...that thing you said at coffee hour last week, it's been bothering me. I felt like it was insensitive, and it bothered me, can we talk about this?*

I want to have a community where we can say that to each other. A community that is loving enough and safe enough that we can say these things to one another. And I want to be safe enough and self-aware enough that I can hear that from you.

I will end with these words of prayer:

Conclusion / Prayer

May all of us dare to confront patriarchy.

May we have the courage and the wisdom to see patriarchy at work in ourselves—may we see our own blind spots; may we see how we have been complicit in this patriarchal system.

May this community be a safe place for us to call each other into accountability with love and respect, knowing that we all make mistakes, and knowing that everyone deserves to be safe from oppression and harassment here.

May our awareness and our anti-patriarchy work be strengthened here so that it may flow outward from this place to create a more safe, just, and loving community for the whole world, with no exceptions.

¹ Deborah Pope-Lance, quoted by Kimberly French in article "Reforms take aim at clergy misconduct," published in UU World, Winter 2014. Retrieved online at <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/reforms-aim-clergy-misconduct>

² "The UUMA Guidelines for the Conduct of Ministry" retrieved at <https://www.uuma.org/page/guidelines>

³ <https://www.uua.org/safe/healthy>