

“You have stepped out of your place”: Challenging Patriarchy

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The title of this sermon comes with a story told by the Revd Dr Stephanie Mayⁱ:

“It all began in January of 1637 when Anne Hutchinson went on trial in Boston for her role in creating theological discord within the fledgling Massachusetts colony. Since arriving in the new born Boston a few years earlier, Hutchinson had been holding meetings, leading discussions, and in many other ways expressing her own religious viewpoints—including her opinions about the various clergy in Boston and surrounding towns.

“While her many supporters included the prominent Puritan minister John Cotton, many others opposed her and the controversy split the colony. In 1637 she was convicted by the civil court for being a danger to the state and banished from the colony. She then faced another trial by her church, which led to her excommunication for heresy. One of Hutchinson’s opponents in this trial, Hugh Peters, recorded his critique of her:

“ ‘You have stepped out of your place, you have rather bine a Husband than a Wife and a preacher than a Hearer; and a Magistrate than a Subject.’ ”ⁱⁱ

“In other words, Woman, don’t forget that your place is to be subservient to your husband; to listen and learn about religion—not to speak up with your own ideas or point of view; and to simply follow the laws, don’t try to change them.”

Clearly a patriarchal view of women’s place in society has been around for a while. Scholars debate just how long it has been in place and what might have preceded it, if anything, without reaching consensus. Certainly it was the norm as long as 5000 years ago when the Hebrews excluded women from the God-humanity covenant, blaming sin on Eve.

A prominent Greek general Meno, in the Platonic dialogue of the same name, sums up the prevailing sentiment in Classical Greece about the respective virtues of men and women. He says:

“First of all, if you take the virtue of a man, it is easily stated that a man’s virtue is this—that he be competent to manage the affairs of his city, and to manage them so as to benefit his friends and harm his enemies, and to take care to avoid suffering harm himself. Or take a woman’s virtue: there is no difficulty in describing it as the duty of ordering the house well, looking after the property indoors, and obeying her husband.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The works of Aristotle portrayed women as morally, intellectually, and physically inferior to men; saw women as the property of men; claimed that women’s role in society was to reproduce and serve men in the household; and saw male domination of women as natural and virtuous.

In her book *The Creation of Patriarchy* Gerda Lerner states that Aristotle believed that women had colder blood than men, which kept women from evolving into men, the sex that Aristotle believed to be perfect and superior. Aristotle believed women caused any imperfection in the world because one cannot acquire an imperfection from perfection as embodied by the male. Gerda Lerner claims that through this patriarchal belief system passed down generation-to-generation, people have been conditioned to believe that men

are superior to women. These symbols are benchmarks, which children learn about when they grow up, and so the cycle of patriarchy continues up to the present day.^{iv}

In a previous life I studied for a degree in human development. This is where I encountered Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development. His theory stipulates that in the first two years of a child's life, more learning takes place in general than in any subsequent comparable period of time. This makes the family the most important institution in teaching a child fundamental cultural notions of female and male identities. Children develop understandings of what it means to be female or male in part from observing the actions of adults and from others' expectations concerning how female and male children themselves are to act. A UCLA study by the linguistics department basically concluded we learn about patriarchy around the dinner table. The study found that the narrative around the table between husbands and wives, as late as the 1990s, still creates a "father knows best" mentality.^v

I have to say my family, if in the study, would have skewed the results. My parents did not fit traditional gender roles. That my father did the shopping and cooking, and that my mother managed the family finances are just two of many examples. I've always suspected that the reason they did not embody cultural gender norms is they didn't grow up in traditional families themselves. My father, in spite of having living parents, grew up in an orphanage. My mother, in spite of having living parents, was reared by extended family members. As a result I did not learn that father knows best. Dad, in spite of having two masters degrees and a PhD, frequently maintained that my mom was "the brains" of the outfit. Deferring to her intuitive wisdom was the family norm.

Fortunately for my appropriation of culturally sanctioned gender roles, I had from the age of five a TV. In the US, 1950s television programming relied heavily on shows based on white middle class American family values. I had *Ozzie and Harriet*, *Leave it to Beaver*, *The Donna Reed Show* and, of course, *Father Knows Best* to teach me "proper" gender roles. Since NZ didn't have TV until June 1, 1960, and then for only three hours a night and only in Auckland, men of a certain age may have missed out on this essential formative TV experience leaving Kiwis unprepared for the arrival of the second-wave of feminism at about the same time. Born between first-wave feminism focused on suffrage and overturning legal obstacles to gender equality (*i.e.*, voting rights and property rights) and second-wave feminism, which broadened the debate to a wide range of issues: sexuality, family, the workplace, reproductive rights, and legal inequalities, how were Kiwi males to properly defend patriarchy? It turns out, probably better than me. For these shows, contrary to popular thought undermined the patriarchal values of the day, albeit subversively, preparing me to embrace the second wave of feminism.

While Harriet Nelson, playing herself; June Cleaver, played by Barbara Billingsley; Donna Stone, played by Donna Reed and Margaret Anderson, played by Jane Wyatt are often maligned as having been poor role models for young women at the time, it turns out they nurtured feminism. They may have been "stay at home moms" that fit Meno's ideal of a woman's role, but they began the process of challenging that notion. I would argue that they helped make way for such shows as *Cagney & Lacey*, *Murphy Brown* and *Maude*.

Harriet, throughout the series, is the one with a cool head and understanding demeanour and was often the one to save the day and speak the truth. Consider this exchange about Ricky's decision to go to a dance instead of sports practice:

Ozzie: I would think you'd rather be out playing football than attending some dance with a bunch of girls.

Harriet: Oh, fiddle sticks! I think it's a very nice idea.

Ozzie: Well, maybe you're right.

Harriet: After all, he's not going to be playing football of his life but he will be meeting and associating with people. And girls are people.

Harriet was often the one in marital discourse to have the last word. When Ozzie expounds on what fools men often make of themselves over women, Harriet responds, "yes, but I married him anyway."

June Cleaver was equally misunderstood. Barbara Billingsley said of her character, "people think that June had no brain but in my opinion she was not a dishrag. She wasn't dumb. She never fell for Eddie Haskell's sucking up nor was she a subordinate partner. The marriage of Mr and Mrs Cleaver is portrayed as very equal. Her weekly line, "Ward, I'm worried about the Beaver" is not a woman forfeiting authority but initiating a discussion. In parenting she is the flexible and inventive voice of reason; compassionate, yet practical. She is also the source of wisdom in the show. In one episode she foreshadows what will become more apparent in the next decade telling the Beaver, "Girls today are becoming doctors and lawyers. They are just as ambitious as boys."

Probably no one has been more defamed than Donna Reed. Her name has become an adjective summing up an entire era. But she was not an era, but a real-life woman, a wife, a mother, and an Oscar winning actor, who in her post-Donna Reed life was also a humanitarian who helped found the anti-Vietnam organization Another Mother for Peace. Besides having top billing as an actor in the series she was its producer and sometimes scriptwriter. She was a feminist before there was language to describe her.

As Donna Stone, she and her husband had an equal and respectful marriage. She was far from being a complacent and long-suffering wife. In one episode, Dr Stone comes to breakfast in a grumpy mood. Donna asks him, "Do you want a dog biscuit with your coffee? You are barking at everyone." In another episode she points out to him that he is being both smug and ever so faintly patronising. Reed once said her series "certainly aggravated men. Hollywood producers were infuriated that Mom was equal and capable."

Margaret Anderson, wife to Robert Young's Jim Anderson on the ironically entitled show *Father Knows Best* has also been written off as a poor role model. But as one reviewer described her, she "is at once unbelievable (i.e. perfect) and instantly immediate (i.e. human). She's the most determinedly unflappable Mother Figure in all of television." Jane Wyatt won three Emmy Awards for the role. "Father might make all the decisions," she once said, "but I put them in his head to begin with." Off screen, she was made of steel, being one of the few stars to take a stand against Senator Eugene McCarthy.

Contrary to popular perception, all four of these fictional women and the real women who played them were like Anne Hutchinson, stepping out of their place. One has to ask, if they were such poor role models for young women, why did so many of their young women viewers become feminists? Certainly they undermined any expectation outside my home that I should support patriarchy as the natural order of things. These women were a stabilising force, compassionate, flexible, wise, unbowed, accomplished and assured. Clearly Aristotle missed a lot of the virtues of women. Certainly the Hebrews were wrong in viewing women as responsible for all life's ills. They were the ones

cleaning up the mess, not causing them. The lesson I learned was that men could only hope to be equal to them.

This would account for my wholehearted support for the Equal Rights Amendment in the US, and work for the ordination of women in the Episcopal Church. It would also account for why I chose New Zealand as my adoptive country. At the time I was considering where to move, Aotearoa New Zealand quickly came to the fore. Not only was it the first country to give women the vote, it had a woman prime minister, a woman Governor General, a woman President of Parliament and a woman as the CEO of its largest corporation. I naïvely thought I was coming to a country where patriarchy was waning. After ten years here I can assure you that it is alive and well, if not flourishing.

Feminist economist and technical expert on Gender and Poverty for the United Nations Dr Marilyn Waring recently said, “Forty years of feminist activism and there are issues with no progress at all – violence against women, the recognition of unpaid work; where we are going backwards – numbers of women in parliament, numbers of women appointed to Government Boards and Commissions; and a systemic failure to provide leadership on all human rights issues. It’s an interesting day when I can conclude, from evidence, that there were greater and more female human rights legislative changes and changes in resourcing under Muldoon than there have ever been under Key. Two generations later a parliament still dominated by white middle class middle-aged men needs to hear the truths of the on-going exploitation of and discrimination against the women of New Zealand. So on International Women’s Day in 2015 I have a message for the Prime Minister: Get some guts and join the right side – but this time in your own back yard. I bet you can’t.” She is probably right considering his ponytail-gate fiasco, where to defend his reputation he was willing directly and through his surrogates like Mike Hosking to put the blame on his female victim.

I guess after 5000 years, patriarchy is not going to go away anytime soon, but Unitarians, both men and women, have a long history of stepping out of our place to stand up for equal rights and protections for women. Based on the backsliding Dr Waring describes, we need to step up our game. At the very least we need to be aware and speak out.

- i A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May at the First Parish in Wayland, MA, November 16, 2014
- ii Quoted in *You Have Stept Out of Your Place: A History of Women and Religion in America* by Susan Hill Lindley, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Know Press 1996), p.5.
- iii Carl Roebuck, *The World of Ancient Times*, p. 278.
- iv Lerner, Gerda (1986). *The Creation of Patriarchy*. New York: Oxford University Press. "Symbols," Chapter 10.
- v "In Locating Power: Women and Language." Proceedings of the Berkeley Linguistic Society, 1993.