

## **A Woman's Story**

**Rev. Diane Rollert**

**4 March 2012**

### **Dumaguete, Unitarian Universalist Church of the Philippines**

I have never really preached about women in general to my congregation. Serving as a female minister to a community of men and women, I have always felt that my presence as a woman was a strong enough statement in its own right. My church, the Unitarian Church of Montreal, was the first Unitarian church in Canada, founded in 1842. In the 170 years of its history, I am the 11<sup>th</sup> settled minister, and the very first woman. I can tell you that it was an adjustment for my congregation. It took them time to get used to having a female minister. The minister before me had been a big, tall man with a booming voice. He could be relaxed in the way he dressed, and in the way he spoke. He was a man, and just being a man gave him immediate authority in the church and in the city. But for me, as a small woman, I had to work hard to claim authority – something I have thankfully gained over the years.

Later today, I will speak during the Women's Ecumenical conference about how our Unitarian Universalist theology tells us that women are equal to men. We believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We honour women just as we honour men. This is central to our faith. But I can tell you that this was a lesson that took me a long time to learn and to fully embody for myself. So, maybe the only story about women that I can tell you is my own story.

I will never forget crossing the border the day I left the United States to immigrate to Canada to become the minister of the church in Montreal. I arrived with all my documents and papers. When I explained that I would be serving as a pastor of a church, the immigration officer, a woman, looked at me in shock. "You are a minister?" she asked. "You, a girl? I mean a woman? You can do that?"

"Yes," I explained. "In my religious tradition, women can be ministers."

To my surprise, the woman smiled, "I wish I could come to your church," she said.

Far away from here, in cold, cold Canada, in the province of Quebec, where I live, the people were once ruled by the Catholic Church for hundreds of years. This is something that the province of Quebec has in common with the Philippines. In our case, it was the French Catholic Church that came to power. At the same time that Spain was colonizing Mexico and the Philippines, France was colonizing the Eastern parts of North America. The French sent their priests and friars to Quebec. They said they were there to "civilize" the people. For hundreds of years, the Catholic Church had complete control over Quebec society. It ran the schools, the hospitals, the social service institutions and, by influence, it ran the government.

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Like here, the majority of the people in Quebec were raised as Catholics. They knew no other religion. But all of that changed in the 1970s, when we had what we call the Quiet Revolution. The French-speaking majority took over the government. They took over all of the institutions that had been run by the church. Basically, they threw the Catholic Church out of power. They did it quietly, without violence, through a democratic vote. Overnight, the Church was gone, and thousands of people abandoned the Church, because they were very angry at the Catholic Church and what it had done during all its years in power.

Today, when you talk to older women who grew up during the days when the Catholic Church controlled Quebec, they tell bitter stories. They remember how the village priests had forced them to have many children. It was common for women to have as many as 20 children, because the priests told them it was their responsibility to give birth to as many French Catholic children as possible. The older women remember the cruelty of the priests in the small villages, and how they abused and shamed women. They remember how the priests took their money and their lands. They remember how they were told that they were less than whole, how they were second class citizens who had no rights, who would not be heard. These women's hearts grow cold when they speak of the past and they have told these stories to their daughters. It is hard for them to imagine that religion can be good. They remember too much of the bad. But when they meet a woman who is a minister, their hearts begin to soften. They begin to remember the parts of their faith that still have meaning for them. In those moments, I am especially grateful for this path I have taken.

When I was a child, I never imagined that I could become a minister. My parents were not religious, but they decided it was important for my older brother and I to have some religious education. You see, my mother was Jewish, and my father was half Jewish. His mother, my beloved Grandma Dora (my lola), was a Ukrainian Catholic, who immigrated from Eastern Europe to the United States when she was 13. Growing up, my family often told me that I looked like my Grandma Dora, and that I was as tough as she was. Sometimes that was a compliment, sometimes not.

My Grandma Dora was a brave woman. As a teenager in a strange new country, she lied about her sewing skills and got a job working in a factory that made women's dresses. When my grandma Dora's father died a few years after she arrived in the US, her mother got remarried to a terrible man. He was a cruel and abusive stepfather. To get away from him, my Grandma Dora married my grandpa Manny (my lolo) – a Jewish salesman who sold buttons and ribbons to the factory. Manny rescued Dora from her unhappy life, but their marriage was very unusual for its time. It was rare for a Catholic to marry a Jew, and in the end it wasn't a very happy marriage. My grandparents fought over my father's religious education, and then my grandfather lost his job and never tried to work again. My grandmother courageously left my grandfather and supported herself and her two sons on her own. That too was a very unusual thing for a woman to do at that time.

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Still, my father chose to introduce us to his father's religion, even though his parents' fighting had soured him on the idea of God. When I was four years old and my brother was nine years old, my father and mother took us to the Temple, a Jewish synagogue, in our city.

I loved the Temple, and I loved everything about being Jewish. I became very faithful, and I discovered a deep love of God. "When I grow up," I told my family, "I'm going to marry a rabbi." My whole family laughed. They thought it was very funny that I would be so religious. There were no women rabbis or women ministers in those days. I had no role models, so I imagined that marriage was the only way I could live a life of faith.

When my brother turned 13, he decided to leave the Temple. On that same day, my father and mother told me that they did not believe in God. I was shattered and heart broken. All my faith and love of God was torn away from me. They told me that I could continue going to the Temple alone, but I said no. I was only 8 years old. I didn't have the strength to be different from the rest of my family. But that change left a big hole in my heart. I carried that emptiness with me for many years.

Over time, it was my mother who became my greatest role model. Of course I loved her as a small child. She was the centre of my world. We were very close, but as I became a teenager, our relationship became strained. We fought a lot. Maybe this is a very North American thing for daughters and sons to try and distance themselves from their parents. Sometimes, the closer we feel to each other, the harder we fight. I look back and regret my terrible behaviour! Thankfully, my mother was very loving and patient. She also understood about children and how they develop. That was her field of expertise. My mother was a college teacher who worked among the poorest students in the city of Chicago. She taught her students how to become preschool teachers. Although I didn't realize it at the time, her values were very Unitarian Universalist.

She taught her students to honour the good that was inside each child. She showed them through science and through love that children grow and flourish when you don't hit or beat them. Many of her students had been raised to believe that you had to literally beat the devil out of the child. "Spare the rod, spoil the child," is what they had been told. But my mother showed her students how to set limits and how to encourage children to think for themselves. One year, when I was 16, I was a student in my mother's class. For three months, I studied alongside her students and I saw how much they admired and respected her. I began to see my mother in a new light, and I began to learn from her how we can touch people's lives. I know that through her work my mother changed the lives of her students and they in turn changed the lives of their own children and the children they taught. So much goodness rippled out from my mother, touching thousands of lives.

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Like my Grandma Dora, it was my mother who really supported our family. My father was a musician and was often out of work. My mother worked hard to make sure there was always a roof over our heads and food on the table. Even with such a strong role model, it took me a long time to find my own voice. I doubted myself for many years, just as my mother often doubted herself, despite all the success she had known. I didn't believe I could be a good student. I didn't think I was smart enough for college, and it was only thanks to some friends who believed in me that I did finally go to university. But then it took me many more years to find my way back to faith and into seminary to study to become a minister.

Thirty-one years ago, I married my husband David. Since David was raised as an Episcopalian and I as a Jew, we needed to find someplace that would be willing to perform a wedding for us. We were so grateful when young Unitarian Universalist minister agreed to marry us. After we were married, my husband longed to find a religious community, but I wasn't sure I could ever feel comfortable as a member of a church. Finally, with my baby son in my arms, we found our way to a Unitarian Universalist Church, close to where we lived at that time. There, in that church's sanctuary, I found myself coming home. Tears came to my eyes as I felt myself reconnecting with God for the first time in so many years. There, among the Unitarian Universalists, I found my faith again and I have never let go. It was the church that gave me the courage to find my voice, and it wasn't long before people were telling me that I would become a minister. "No," I said, "that job is too hard. I could never be a minister."

Yet, something kept calling me – perhaps it was God. It took another 15 years before I felt brave enough, strong enough and ready enough to become a minister. When I finally decided to enter seminary, I called my mother on the phone. I told her my plans and I told her how worried I was. "Mom, maybe I'm too old to do this. I will be almost 50 by the time I finish my schooling and become a minister," I told her. "You'll be fifty anyway," she said. Those words have always reminded me that it is never too late to find your voice or to follow your dreams. Sadly, my mother died just before I graduated from seminary. "Don't worry," she told me during her last days of life, "I'll be there. My body will be gone, but my spirit will be there watching you."

How often we women censor ourselves. Too often we are afraid to speak. Yet how powerful we can be when we do allow ourselves to speak. In seminary I met amazing women who inspired me, who taught me that what I did would matter in the world, that a woman can indeed be a minister. Eight years after my mother's death, and so many years after the death of my Grandma Dora, I am carrying their spirits out into the world. Through all that they taught me, I am touching as many lives as I can, softening the hearts of women in my new found home of Quebec, and coming here to walk among you, as you touch my life. These are such great blessings.

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My path has been a long path, but I am grateful for every step. To the women here this morning (and to the men), this is my prayer for all of you: May you never let go of your dreams. May you claim your voices. May you share your strength and encourage the women around you to grow. And may you pass on your courage to your daughters just as you pass it on to your sons. I pray that the spirit of all the brave women you have known bless you, keep you and be with you always.

Amen. Blessed be. Shalom. Namaste.