

“The Culture of Gender”

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The Rev. Heather Janules

It was a powerful image – dozens of Congresswomen attending the 2019 State of the Union dressed in white. These female legislators arrived clad in the trademark color of the suffragettes who worked to ensure women’s right to vote. “Wearing suffragette white is a respectful message of solidarity with women across the country, and a declaration that we will not go back on our hard-earned right,” observed Representative Lois Frankel.

At least one woman who wore white that evening acknowledged more than one movement that preceded her arrival into the halls of Federal power. Ayanna Pressley, the first black woman representative from Massachusetts, arrived wearing both white and traditional African print. She wrote, “Tonight, I honor women like #AlicePaul who led the movement & women like #IdaB [Wells] who were excluded from it. Kente cloth & the color white. Holding space for both #womanists & #feminists, always,”<sup>1</sup>

If we could go back in time and grant Alice Paul and Susan B. Anthony and Sojourner Truth a window into our world, could they even imagine how women have become part of civic and political life?

For me, the meaning of collectively wearing white – what more than one journalist called a “fashion statement”<sup>2</sup> – comes from these leaders’ gratitude, their refusal to take access to institutional power for granted. The advancements of women in national politics have been revolutionary; this is something to celebrate.

Yet, even in the wake of the “year of the woman” in politics,<sup>3</sup> I am wary of calling the goal of gender equity achieved.

The “isms” – racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism – are unique; they leave individual, toxic fingerprints on our humanity. And yet I see parallels between

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<sup>1</sup> <http://time.com/5518859/state-of-the-union-2019-white/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.rollcall.com/news/hoh/democrats-wear-white-state-union>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/28/us/women-2018-biggest-stories-me-too.html>

them, reminding us, as Ayanna Pressley did through her invocation of both Alice Paul and Ida B. Wells, that there are ways that oppressions parallel *and* intersect.

When I participated in a racial justice training, drawing from the work of the organization Crossroads, I learned an important lesson. The training invited us to think about the difference between individuals and systems, about how the very police officer who shoots and kills an unarmed black man could himself be black. About how sometimes those with less privilege can become gatekeepers to power but, in the end, they still don't "own the gate."

As a woman, I rejoice in the increasing number of women and people-of-color in Congress. I rejoice not only for myself but for the young girls in my life, for whom this is now status quo.

And I am mindful that these gatekeepers of national power now join an institution that for so long has been defined by the dominant culture. As the humorous quiz show "Wait, Wait, Don't Tell Me" observed with a partisan jab, at the State of the Union address, "many of the Democrats *wore* white...and all of the Republicans *were* white."<sup>4</sup>

There are procedures and processes in every institution. This is the formal way decisions are made and authority exercised. And there are the functions of culture that are just as – if not more – powerful than any by-laws.

For culture defines who belongs, who deserves respect, whose voices are heard, who is called to account and how things get done. And culture transcends the boundaries of a formal session of the Senate. If relationship is at the heart of what makes the world move, culture helps and hinders how we establish our relationships and with whom. I have never served in Congress so I cannot speak to the culture of its chambers. Yet I wonder how much change a radically-different incoming class of legislators can make in an institution that for so long did not include their foremothers and ancestors, the people who spoke their native cultural tongues.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/09/692983327/whos-bill-this-time>

This month, we as a congregation are exploring the theme “curiosity.” One thing liberating about curiosity is it reminds us we don’t have to have all the answers. Clarity, like grace, is not guaranteed and might be an unexpected gift.

So I have made some peace with how difficult it is to understand and articulate the influence of culture. Preparing for this morning, I have struggled to put words to what mainstream culture says about gender, to how the culture of gender shapes our relationships and how elements of culture are subtle and subjective and, at the same time, powerful in their impact.

As a relatively young woman in ministry, I have some stories that give us a starting place. I have shown up at outdoor wedding locations and many times have been confused for either the caterer or the wedding planner. One guest, curious about the black robe over my arm, asked if I had just come from a graduation.

And there are many positive stories too. A casual observation of the Winchester Unitarian Society reveals that we, as a community, are unafraid of women in authority. I, the settled minister, am a woman as is our Intern Minister. The Executive meetings of the Standing Committee include Kathy the chair, Phyllis the vice chair, co-treasurers Judy and Sue, the clerk Jennifer and Alison the Administrator.

And, yet, as part of the honesty I seek to practice as your minister, my inspiration to explore the culture of gender comes from some observations I’ve made in congregational life. Overall, I experience the way we are with one another as congenial, sensitive and collaborative. And there are times when being together seems difficult and this difficulty feels particularly gendered in its tension.

My curiosity about the culture of gender and how it plays out here comes from having more than one female leader confide in me that being aggressively challenged or having their ideas repeatedly dismissed have become subjects of discussion in their therapy sessions. Drawing from Brittany Packnett’s wise words, my inspiration to consider the culture of gender comes from noticing not just what is said but how it is said. By who is held accountable and who gets a pass. By how things sometimes move forward quickly regardless of whatever other plan or process is in place.

How might gender show up among us? As one male leader observes, sometimes when members of a heterosexual couple assume positions of leadership, the wife serves in religious education or fellowship and the husband joins the Standing Committee.

And it shows up in more subtle ways, through stories like “At a social gathering, the men around the table got into an intense verbal exchange. I couldn’t get a word in edgewise. I felt invisible, silenced, and angry; there seemed to be little awareness that the focus of the conversation was predominantly between two [men] in the group, while the rest of us were...observers to a topic of conversation that we weren’t...invited into.”

Or “He wouldn’t stop making his point until we gave in and went with his suggestion.”

Or “In a raised voice, she demanded to know why something hadn’t happened even though it wasn’t my responsibility and others had a plan to deal with it.”

Or “For two months in a row, a male leader failed to complete something on time. This inspired another leader to respond with ‘That’s okay. We know you’re busy’...as if everyone else who fulfilled their obligations weren’t busy too.”

You may have noticed that I have not named sexist comments or incidents but behaviors and that people of all gender identities can – and sometimes do – exhibit these behaviors.

Some argue that genders themselves are cultures and communication across the false binary of “male” and “female” is actually a cross-cultural experience. In the mainstream, through sports and other activities with followers and leaders, boys are often socialized to be goal-oriented, hierarchical, aggressive and unemotional. Girls are often socialized to express their feelings and to be relational, leading to consensus and collaborative decision-making.<sup>5</sup> Where there is a power imbalance in society, the culture of the dominant group often becomes the culture of organizations and institutions. As your pastor, I sometimes see us struggle across these differences and with these cultural norms.

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/uscg/gender\\_communication.htm](http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/uscg/gender_communication.htm)

I am mindful that some of you brought friends this morning and may be thinking “Why is Heather telling this story...today?”

I share my observations with old friends and new because faith communities are counter-cultural spaces. Here, we can tell our truths and create an alternative to the world we navigate beyond these walls. Creating a true sanctuary for the spirit begins with honest conversation. It is naïve to think that the “isms” we have learned all our lives would not follow us here and it is exciting to know that, beginning with love and candor, change is possible.

I am also mindful that some may hear this sermon as a critique of men or maleness. My curiosity about gender also comes from a place of compassion, my sense that the dominant culture beyond our walls does not serve anyone well. Again, recalling the Crossroads training, I learned that white supremacy denigrates the dignity of people-of-color, inflates the personhood of whites and violates the humanity of all. Similarly, I believe that men and women and everyone inbetween do not thrive in environments defined by competition and domination.

My views are influenced by thoughtful reflections by others. I am grateful to many male colleagues who responded to this question I posed on-line: “How have you been affected - positively and negatively - by cultural values and assumptions about what it means to be male?”

One colleague wrote:

Male and head-of-household went together...Many of the women in our social milieu were the strong, hold-it-all-together centers of their families...I witnessed first-hand the pain my male elders caused, and I promised not to follow their example. Looking back, I can see how the culture crushed the spirits of blue-collar men and I connect their weakness at home to the devaluing they knew in the workplace. Frankly, I experienced growing up male as dangerous.

Another replied that:

The dominant cultural model of masculinity...is that of the "macho jerk." Being raised by a single mother in a UU congregation, that model was clearly not the only way to be a person...

So, how have I been affected by those twin influences of jerkdom and [paternal] neglect? I've felt lost. It feels like I have two choices...either I become an embodied, powerful jerk...or I become an intellectualizing, weak nice guy...

I remember the first time that I was ever in a room full of men and felt totally comfortable in being so (after a weekend men's workshop). It felt incredible...Since that day, I have been working toward building a sense of wholeness around my own manhood...

Finally, another colleague sent me a blog post that, while academic, provides an important insight. Carl Gregg cites Michael Kimmell's book "Manhood in America: A Cultural History." Kimmell argues that "American men define their masculinity, not as much in relation to women, but in relation to each other". The real fear is of "being ashamed or humiliated in front of other men."<sup>6</sup>

What, I wonder, would it be like to not live in fear of shame, humiliation or domination? I ask this question to all of us. I ask this question for all of us.

If faith communities are counter-cultural spaces, what could this look like? I imagine a world – including this community – where the cultures of gender are all valued for the gifts they offer. One leadership article gives an example from the military, a case study where a male officer gives an order to a female subordinate. She had experience from a previous mission that suggested that another approach to the task would be better. When she offered the alternative, the officer was insulted, reading her reaction as insubordination. She was insulted, being reprimanded for trying to reach their shared goal in a more effective way.

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<sup>6</sup> [https://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2016/09/trump-toxic-masculinity/?fbclid=IwAR0WbUBDIBEdGTC8LGvCdWTdy\\_WOHwwwxpthjbNQLixGYtESdKqWFisWfU](https://www.patheos.com/blogs/carlgregg/2016/09/trump-toxic-masculinity/?fbclid=IwAR0WbUBDIBEdGTC8LGvCdWTdy_WOHwwwxpthjbNQLixGYtESdKqWFisWfU)

The article concludes that neither approach was the “right” way; a healthy community is one that affirms the value of each culture of gender and employs those approaches when they would be most effective. An emergency might call for authoritative, hierarchical and efficient decision-making while a situation requiring creative problem-solving might benefit from drawing insight from all members of a team.

I imagine a world where people of all walks of life are intentional about how they engage with one another. Unitarian Universalism is not a creedal faith but a covenantal one. When our covenants – or promises – of how to be with one another are explicit and transparent and living commitments in community we all become co-creators and sustainers of a culture that truly reflects our Principles.

And I imagine a world where feminine and masculine traits are welcome among us all. One thing I cherish about my colleague Fred Muir – an older, white male minister known for his gifts as a religious leader and his integrity – is that he often cries when he leads worship. There is something counter-cultural – nay revolutionary – about a male elder weeping in community in our society. And, while I am not much of a crier, I have internalized the idea that for a woman to cry in the pulpit is vocational suicide. Can’t we all be vulnerable? Can’t we all be strong?

I began today by recalling women who wore white to honor those who fought for women’s suffrage. I conclude by recalling another group of legislators who made a “fashion statement.”

Just this week, members of the gun-control advocacy group Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense testified in the New Hampshire state legislature for a bill that would limit firearms access for individuals who pose a threat to themselves or others. They were met by male legislators wearing pearl necklaces. Lest one think this was a supportive signal to the women recounting how their lives have been impacted by suicide and domestic abuse, one of these officials also wore an AK47 pin on his lapel.

The women felt disrespected. Yet Moms Demand Action founder Shannon Watts turned her attention to the bigger picture. She affirmed, “It’s my hope...that

the...volunteers who sat through the hearing today will consider running against the men who had the audacity to mock the legislative process.”<sup>7</sup>

It is naïve to think that the “isms” we have learned all our lives would disappear through one “year of the woman.” And it is exciting to know that, beginning with love and candor and proceeding with courage, change is possible.

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<sup>7</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/03/06/gop-lawmakers-wore-pearls-while-gun-violence-victims-testified-activists-were-outraged/?fbclid=IwAR3wHEboNYZtNKzSWIF0oAXnJT11QDQkKrG7mEykk-GFZ3OWDP1sSByydY&utm\\_term=.edf89831beb2](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/03/06/gop-lawmakers-wore-pearls-while-gun-violence-victims-testified-activists-were-outraged/?fbclid=IwAR3wHEboNYZtNKzSWIF0oAXnJT11QDQkKrG7mEykk-GFZ3OWDP1sSByydY&utm_term=.edf89831beb2)