

“Screening By Gender”

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I noticed in his call for material for this issue that our editor did not ask IF Unitarian Universalist congregations screen people out, but HOW they do so. His note reflects a basic assumption that screening is present in congregations, contrary to our proclamation of openness and acceptance of all.

If this is the editor’s basic assumption, I do not take issue with it. Habits of cool reception or exclusion are often present among us in ways that we are hardly aware of. I have to believe that these habits are unintentional: if not, we really need to go back to the drawing board of liberal religious values. Even we who celebrate a Universalist commitment to inherent goodness and acceptance engage in screening and exclusion from time to time. It seems somehow human nature, to create categories based on human characteristics and then favor some categories over others. One condition for why we modern UUs exclude, in my view, actually comes out of our commitment to justice. We become very committed to a particular category of discrimination, but I suspect that we often assume that once we’ve done work in that area, that any screening has been ‘fixed’ and it’s time to move on to a new justice cause. Certainly we need to remain on the front edge of current justice issues, but let’s not assume that earlier areas of justice work do not require any more attention. History demonstrates our tendency to repeat patterns of the past.

The category of screening I call us to remain sensitive to is gender, and particularly gender in ministry. Without doubt, UUs have much to be proud of in gender reform, which historically means reforms for women. Unitarians and Universalists were among the first to ordain woman and the first to reach a women-majority in ministry; women have occupied most of the lay and clerical leadership roles in the UUA; we have passed many resolutions supporting reproductive rights; we have a gender-neutral hymnal; and much more. However, many today old enough to have participated in second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s wonder (and worry) about the relative passivity around gender advocacy, within Unitarian Universalism and in American culture generally. We don’t want to backslide, as happened in the period between 1920 (the vote) and those rebellious ‘60s, a period when Unitarian and Universalist women lost much of the ground they gained in the late-nineteenth century.

Even with these many earlier gains, it wasn’t always easy for early women reformers: they encountered much screening from both Unitarians and Universalists. Modern Unitarian Universalists are proud that ‘we’ ordained Olympia Brown to ministry, but we tend to overlook her many struggles: for example, in 1876 she left her second settlement, in Bridgeport, CT following an array of criticism, such as that she kept her own name on marrying John Willis or that having children impaired her ministry. Brown experienced much gender discrimination from her own Universalists.

Or consider Rev. Lydia Jenkins’ daring entry into Universalist ministry in 1857. Reports of Jenkins’ preaching parallel that of so many other early women ministers, who were judged primarily on their physical features --- voice, stature, shape of head, and more --- rather than on their professional skills, in ways rarely applied to male ministers. Had Jenkins not received some positive reports about her physical features, one wonders how she would have survived in ministry at all! For example, the *Universalist* of October 30, 1858, wrote: “Mrs. Jenkins has indeed been blessed with fine endowments.... She has a voice full and round, and yet fully female. Her enunciation is faultlessly clear, and her action propriety itself. Her head is a model for the phrenologic sculptor, and her countenance wears a serene earnestness quite unmistakable. Her words are drops in a shower of tenderness while her sentences are perfect torrents of sympathy. Her moral logic is irresistible and she possesses the power of shaming the human soul into a higher appreciation of its duties here and its destinies hereafter.” In contrast, one anxious observer of her preaching in Thomas Sawyer’s pulpit in New York City reported to the *Gospel Banner* of July 17, 1858: “It seems funny that a woman will preach... I feel anxious... Will she sustain herself? I tremble, but whether for myself, the congregation, or the woman minister, I cannot tell.” Luckily, Jenkins came through for that observer: “She preached, and I left the church saying, ‘Woman should preach.’” We might be comforted in knowing that Rev. Jenkins ate well, according to the *Christian Ambassador* of August 21, 1858: “She surprised us with her ... youthful and delicate appearance. She is much more delicate in framework ... some inches above medium height, with slender proportions and a pale face. She is blonde in complexion, with eyes of intellectual grey, brown hair, parted smoothly on a finely formed forehead and confined with the back hair... There is a native goodness in every look, and in her manner truth seems uppermost.... She ate well, preferring vegetarian food, simply cooked...”

We might argue that these reviews are only words: women like Jenkins and Brown still had access to one of the most accepting religious denominations in our country. Certainly, we must also proudly acknowledge the many ways in which Universalist congregations and colleagues did not screen their ministry. But words reflect deeper feelings and attitudes, and several Universalist leaders, ministers among them such as Thomas Whittemore and Ebenezer Fisher, were downright hostile to women ministers. The reality of gender screening back then is illustrated in the types of positions overall that women ministers were able to obtain: many found only itinerant ministry (Jenkins finally complained about the toll on her health, sleeping in so many different beds), many settled positions were part-time or short-lived, and many women who were married to ministers found ministry only on the coattails of their husbands.

Do we moderns screen ministers, in hiring and calling, in working with and developing relationships, in allowing advancement in their professional tracks? My experience is yes, we do. Ministers are screened through many lenses. That we continue to operate under many unstated paradigms for what a minister is reminds us how important it is to hold the workshop 'Beyond Categorical Thinking' when congregations are in ministerial search. Do we moderns screen ministers through gender lenses? Again, I would say yes. Those reviews of Lydia Jenkins might sound archaic by today's standards of equality, but personally I relate to them. How many times after preaching have I had congregants comment on my dress, my hair, my shoes, my voice, with no reference to the theological soundness of my sermon, or my professional service to them as a minister. How many times have I been the last to learn about decisions affecting the entire congregation and my ministry? Modern Unitarian Universalists might have been first to achieve a majority of women ministers by numbers but we have not yet reached parity in power and influence, nor in the vocabulary used to describe our ministries.

Do we moderns screen generally through gendered lenses? My reply is likewise affirmative. We might believe that we 'fixed' gender discrimination a long time ago. However, just as our ancestors probably did not realize that they were unfairly screening women --- based on the cultural convention of 'separate spheres,' women 'belonged' at home, said Thomas Whittemore --- through the perspective of passing time, we realize that screening existed back then even among persons of free religious values. Historically, it was women who were most subject to gendered 'othering.' Today, the gender question is broader: do we in fact also subject men and transgendered persons to gender screening, treating one another with pre-established expectations of how they 'should' be? My nineteenth-century sisters hoped to be welcomed into ministry just as they were. We owe no less to everyone --- no matter of what gender --- in the early twenty-first century --- our ministers, our members, our visitors. Let us be aware of any hoops we ask folks to jump through in the name of welcome and acceptance. Let's get rid of screens.

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