

FREEDOM IN A FEMALE FORM
A Sermon Preached by Rev. Zenshin Florence Caplow
All Souls, New York City
February 18, 2024

Prayer

May these words, by my colleague Rev. Anacheka Nazeman, bring ease to your heart.

Breathing in our hearts fill with compassion
Breathing out we pray for healing in our world & in our lives.
Breathing in, opening to the transforming power of love
Breathing out we pray for peace in our world & in our lives.
May we know our strength
May we be filled with courage
May our love flow from us into this world.
Breathing in, we are the prayer
Breathing out, we are the healing
Breathing in, we are the love
Breathing out, we are the peace
Breathing in, we are the hope
Breathing out, we are the justice
May we know our strength
May we be filled with courage
May our love flow from us into this world.
Amen, blessed be, may it ever be so.

SERMON

Good morning. My sincere thanks to Pamela Patton, my fellow UU Buddhist Fellowship board member, for inviting me here, and also my thanks to your extraordinary music staff. There is something particularly special about all the music in the service today – see if you can find it - and I want to thank Alejandro for bearing with my unusual request. And most of all my thanks to Rev. Galen for sharing his pulpit with me for these two Sundays. - It is a great honor be here with you.

You might wonder about the robes I'm wearing. These represent the two traditions that are the source and life blood of who I am, a Unitarian Universalist minister and a Soto Zen priest and teacher. Instead of a stole I am wearing a rakusu today, the “traveling robe” of a Zen priest, over my UU preaching robe.

But as I stand before you, I never forget that for most of the history of Judaism and Christianity, and for most of the history of Buddhism, a person with my body would not – could not =- stand before you as a spiritual leader or teacher.

And please know that when I say “my body” as a woman, I am also referring to the bodies of gender fluid and trans women. I can stand here, in this time, in this place, and preach, although there are many other religious spaces even now where I would be most emphatically not welcome in this role. For my trans women sisters, for my non-binary siblings – well, we still have far to go, even within Unitarian Universalism.

I have come to understand that the stories we hear, or don't hear, the people we see in pulpits or on the teaching seat, make us what we are, shape what we believe is possible and what world we can believe in.

I grew up with the stories of my family starting a Unitarian church, called Unity Chapel, in the tiny Iowa farming town of Cherokee in 1890, and those stories are a big part of the reason I stand in this pulpit this morning. But I had always heard that my great-grandfather founded that church.

A few years ago, thanks to the archives of the UUA, I discovered that the family story I'd heard all my life was wrong. It was my great-grandmother, and my great-great-grandmother, and my great-great-great grandmother who were founding members of that church.

In the 19th century women ministers were nearly unheard of even within the progressive Unitarian and Universalist traditions. But out on the frontier the Harvard boys didn't do well, and so there was room for women. And the greatest of all of them was the Rev. Mary Safford, who was not only a Unitarian minister but also an activist for women's suffrage.

She would travel around speaking on the rights of women, and she came to Cherokee and – I'm guessing here = blew three generations of the women of my family out of the

water. Sometime after that they started a women's suffrage society, in their town of 1600 souls, and then a Unitarian church, and they invited Mary Safford to be their first minister, traveling from the big church in Sioux Falls.

If you want to read more the Unitarian and Universalist women ministers of that time, check out the book *Prophetic Sisterhood*.

Just as in my family, some stories get changed, over the years. Some stories get forgotten or even deliberately suppressed. And often, those have been the stories of women, and what women have seen and taught and done. By about 1920, there were no Unitarian Women ministers, and that remained true for most of the next 50 years. They had been systematically silenced.

We see this everywhere. In Christianity the teacher and disciple Mary Magdalen is turned into a grateful prostitute. In Buddhism, the poetry and enlightenment stories of the first women who practiced with the Buddha were forgotten for centuries. The stories of the women Zen masters of China and Japan - hidden, lost, forgotten, buried.

There is a deep yearning and need in all of us, I think, for these other stories. And from my own yearning, and that of my co-editor, Sue Moon, came a book, the *Hidden Lamp: Stories from Twenty Five Centuries of Awakened Women*. We began searching for these hidden stories, and we found more than 100 stories of awakened Buddhist women in the translated literature, some ancient, some modern.

Then we asked 100 contemporary women Buddhist teachers to write on each story. And we called it *The Hidden Lamp*, because that is how it has been – the light of women's wisdom has been hidden – but not entirely, because light has a way of coming through every barrier. And indeed, the book itself has magnified that light, since it was published in 2013.

Today I am going to tell you three stories from the *Hidden Lamp*. If you like these stories, I hope you will consider coming to the retreat I'm leading here next Saturday, where we will have an opportunity to encounter other stories from the book.

The first story is from the time of the Buddha, 2500 years ago. It's about a women disciple of the Buddha, and her encounter with Mara, the Buddhist personification of confusion and delusion. Perhaps you too have heard, sometime, Mara's whisper, telling you that you were not worthy, not capable.

The nun Soma was a disciple of the Buddha. One day she was deep in meditation beneath a tree in a forest grove. Mara, the Lord of Delusion, approached her, cloaked in invisibility. He whispered in her ear, "Because a woman has a naturally limited consciousness, and the realm of wisdom is hard to reach, no woman has the ability to attain it."

Soma recognized Mara and rebuked him, saying, "How could a woman's consciousness be a hindrance when her heart is set on liberation? Am I a woman in these matters, or a man? This question has no power over me. Mara, begone!"

And he was gone.

I love this story. I love it because I've heard my own version of Mara's whisper many times.

The other reason I love this story is Soma's clarity and power. When we began working on the book I wondered, perhaps, that this was too audacious a project. Perhaps we were not sufficiently qualified. Others wondered out loud too. But I knew this book needed to be in the world, these stories and their wisdom needed to be heard. And Soma and her sisters inspired us to not give up—Mara, begone!

Here's another story, from ancient China, more than a thousand years ago.

Once a monk on pilgrimage met an old woman living alone in a hut. The monk asked, "Do you have any relatives?"

She said, "Yes."

The monk asked, "Where are they?"

She answered, "The mountains, rivers, and the whole earth, the plants and trees, are all my relatives."

I spent much of my life as a field biologist and conservationist, walking, sometimes alone, in the deserts and mountains, so I have a certain affinity of this old woman.

The monk doesn't know what to make of her. How could a woman, so weak and defenseless, survive alone, without male relatives to protect her? Isn't she frightened? Isn't she lonely?

But like Soma in the first story, she doesn't buy his story, and she's right.

Everything in the world is made of the same stardust. Modern science tells us that we share DNA with every living thing. Take just a moment to feel the earth under your feet, the sky above, the humans and animals who are all, without exception, your relatives.

My last story comes from the 20th century. Dipa Ma was a Buddhist woman from India who lived an extraordinarily difficult life. She was married at the age of 12, and for many years was not able to conceive a child, a disaster for a traditional Indian woman.

When she finally was able to carry a child to term, in her 30's, two children died soon after birth, and then her husband. She went nearly wild with grief, and turned to Buddhist

practice as she raised her one remaining daughter, Dipa. Dipa Ma, the name she carried, means Dipa's mother.

She became a great teacher, and as an old woman she moved to the slums of Calcutta and taught Buddhism there, where a few young Americans encountered her. Later they brought her to America to teach. She was a tiny person, but strong and fierce and gentle all at the same time. Here is a story about her.

Dipa Ma was on an airplane with a woman student. It was very turbulent, and the woman screamed. Dipa Ma was sitting across the aisle and took her hand and held it. Then she whispered, "The daughters of the Buddha are fearless."

What did she mean? Some people have wondered, was she scolding her student for being afraid? I don't think so. I think she was talking about the kind of fearlessness and courage that arises right in the middle of your fear. It is our willingness to move into our fear and uncertainty, instead of away from it, that makes us fearless. And we need each other for this work.

Dipa Ma took her hand and whispered to her. This is a very different whisper than the one Mara gave to Soma. This is the whisper of love, of standing with another in their fear, of seeing the innate strength in another person and calling it forth. This is what we can do for one another. We can believe in each other's fearlessness and freedom, and call it forth.

Thank you.