

## From Queen Esther to Queen Latifah

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The New York *Times* article read “Women Teachers Demand More Pay: Fight for Equal Salaries with Men Is Now in the Legislature.” It followed a long battle by New York City women teachers to pass an equal pay for equal work bill—a bill opposed by the New York City Board of Education because it would cost some \$6 million to implement.

The article detailed significant discrimination in the pay of women teachers—who earned between 8 and 30% less than did their male counterparts for doing the same job. For elementary school teachers, the difference was about 10%—the biggest difference was among principals and department heads.

The article was buried on page six of the newspaper, though it was more than thorough in its reporting. Page six of the Sunday paper—on Sunday, February 17, 1907.

Fast forward to just last Sunday, March 1, when the *Times* featured a half-page color chart in the Business section, entitled “Why is Her Paycheck Smaller?”

The chart detailed wage discrimination across a wide variety of fields and jobs—from food preparation (where the average wage gap is 8%) and computer support (15%) to insurance sales (32%), corporate chief executives (19%) and physicians (where the average wage gap is a staggering 40%). In all of the occupations employing more than 50,000 people of each sex, there were only four where women earned the same or more than their male counterparts.

Four: Airport ticket agents (where the salaries were equal); data entry clerks (with a 1% difference); special education teachers (3%); and postal clerks, where women, on average, made a whopping 4% more than their male counterparts.

What about those elementary school teachers? The average woman in that field makes 9% less than her male counterpart. The gap is 10% for high school teachers, and 22% in colleges and universities.

In one-hundred-and-two years, the pay gap for teachers has not changed. Though there are no longer separate pay scales for women and men (as there were in 1907), pervasive sexism, decreased opportunity, and discrimination against people who choose simultaneously to nurture careers and families have combined to keep pay equity from being a reality in 21<sup>st</sup> century America.

And decades of government policies have made it increasingly difficult for women to do something about it. It is telling that in 2009, the first piece of legislation signed by our current President was the

Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, which, far from making pay equity a reality, just made it possible for women to sue their employers when they find out they've been paid less than their male counterparts.

Lest we think that Unitarian Universalists would never fall into the trap of sexism and oppression, I will note that women ministers in our very movement face the same inequities as do people in many other professions.

As a religious movement, we claim the heritage of Olympia Brown, the first woman ordained to the ministry with full denominational recognition in the United States, way back in 1863. We claim her as inspiration when we proudly boast that more than half of Unitarian Universalist ministers today are women.

We are honored to have been a progressive voice in the fight for women's suffrage, a constant voice in the struggle for gender equality, and a loud voice opposing sexism in its many forms.

We look to our past and see groundbreaking examinations of women and religion, conferences and task forces and curricula like *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven* that helped women claim a feminine face of religion.

Today, with thanks to serious fundraising from the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation, our congregations support a full-time internship in our Association's Washington Office to lobby our government on issues of concern to women—issues like pay equity, access to childcare and freedom for women to control their own bodies.

And yet, of the fifty largest congregations in our Association—the congregations who, thanks to fair compensation guidelines, generally pay their ministers the most—only five are led by women Senior Ministers, a number that has not changed dramatically in a long time. Women in the Unitarian Universalist ministry are over-represented in part-time ministries, assistant minister positions, and any number of jobs that don't pay very well.

This is not the only problem women in our ministry face, but it is the starkest example—and perhaps the easiest for people in any profession to relate to. This in 21<sup>st</sup> century America, in a liberal faith that proclaims the radical equality of all people.

We all—no matter who or where we are—have a lot of work to do to truly honor the struggles of women throughout the centuries.

And it was precisely to honor those struggles—the countless examples of bold, courageous women who stood up to inequality, sexism, and oppression—that I agreed to center our worship today on the celebration of International Women's Day.

These examples stretch far into antiquity.

Today, our children are celebrating the Jewish holiday of Purim, celebrated by Jewish people all over the world tonight and tomorrow. Purim is a holiday in honor of an event that took place almost three thousand years ago in the ancient Persian Empire.

The Queen of the empire, Esther, was herself of Jewish ancestry. When she found out about a plot by a prominent prince of Persia to kill all of the Jewish people in the empire, she knew she had to do something. As a woman, though, she could not go before her husband, the King, to talk to him directly—she faced the death penalty for doing so.

Even with that punishment as her potential fate, Queen Esther approached the King and asked for an audience. When it was granted to her, she told him of this plot, and confessed to him her own Jewish identity—another dangerous and courageous act in those days.

The King stopped the genocide, and declared that Jews in his Empire would be free from persecution and have the right to defend themselves. Because of the courage of Queen Esther, an entire people was saved. And so our children celebrate that story.

Examples of courageous women, of course, are numerous in our history. In Unitarian Universalist history alone, we look to Olympia Brown and Margaret Fuller, Louisa May Alcott and Judith Sargent Murray, Elizabeth Peabody and Susan B. Anthony, Abigail Adams and Elizabeth Cady Stanton.

And yet, we find these examples not merely in our ancient history, not merely in tales of bygone eras and outdated social norms. Every day, women find the strength and the courage to stand up against sexism and misogyny, to demand their equality, to demand being taken seriously in a world that still over-values the contribution of men, to prove their equal worth in every walk of life in our society.

In planning this service, I will admit that the Queen Esther part of the sermon's title came first. It was only in thinking about modern examples of courageous women that Queen Latifah came to mind. It didn't hurt that it made for a nice parallel structure, but the more I thought about it, the more I thought that she was an excellent choice for a modern-day heroine in our celebration of International Women's Day.

For those of you who don't know who Queen Latifah is, let me be brief. She is not the reigning monarch of a far-away nation. Rather, she is Dana Owens of East Orange, New Jersey, a woman bold enough to break into the intensely male-dominated world of hip-hop music in 1989.

While the life of a woman rap artist might not captivate your imagination, Queen Latifah also went on to become a highly-praised television and movie actress, and later even a singer of soul and jazz works. All of this without abandoning her hip-hop career. She has won Grammy and Golden Globe awards and has been nominated for an Emmy and an Oscar, among other honors.

To top it all off, she has fiercely defended her private life as her own. This has not been without controversy—fans from all over have clamored for most of the last 20 years to know more about her. Her sexuality, her dating life, her habits, her hobbies. And yet, they have learned precious little. Queen Latifah is a public personality, entertainer and star—Dana Owens is a private person who has stayed such.

In a world where the odds are distinctly stacked against a black woman from Newark, in a niche of the entertainment industry where women were not welcome, in an industry where trying to do too much is often seen as a weakness, and in a society where the private lives of entertainers are routinely made public, Queen Latifah has stared down all of her detractors and emerged on top.

Now, I know—there are better examples of the courage and accomplishment of women in our sexist world. Women who have made major scientific breakthroughs, women who have been elected to lead their nations, women who have founded non-profit organizations, saved countless lives, won Nobel prizes, served as CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, exposed injustice through investigative journalism, orbited our planet in space and so, so much more.

And here, I picked an entertainer. A good one, mind you—perhaps even a great one—but an entertainer nonetheless.

So maybe you have stories to tell me. Stories of women you know or know of. Stories to celebrate women on this day when women around the world are being honored.

I look forward to hearing them.

And I hope that once we hear them, we can all do something to make sure that newspapers in 2100 are not printing stories about wage gaps between men and women, the failure of our government to ensure the equality of all people, women being denied basic human rights around our globe, underfunding of women's health initiatives, repressive governments shutting down schools for girls, violence against women and girls, or the many things which women around our globe are forced to stand up against every day.

Let us stand in the long line of people that includes Queen Esther and Queen Latifah as well as countless others, that long line of people who have resisted sexism and misogyny wherever they are found.

And to all of you, no matter your gender: Happy International Women's Day.

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