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Building a New Mythology

A Sermon for Women's History Month

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In the early twentieth century, a tradition began of celebrating March 8th as International Women's Day—an annual invitation to celebrate women's contributions to events in history and contemporary society. In the early 1980s, this tradition expanded within the U.S. to Women's History Week, and a few years later, to all of March as [Women's History Month](#).

If you have been around UUCF for a while, you'll know that one of my core convictions is that ***the stories we tell matter***. Too often, our collective cultural history and stories have been told much more frequently by *men* than by women—and in a way that was biased toward *male* perspectives and experiences. And as you may also have heard me quote before, “If you're not at the table, you might be on the menu.”

So what might a different way forward look like that includes greater gender equity? Elizabeth Lesser, co-founder of the Omega Institute, a holistic retreat center in New York, has said it this way:

The basic belief of feminism is not that women are right and men are wrong. It is merely that women are people and therefore their voices matter, their values matter, and their stories matter. It's time for women to tell their versions of what it means to be fully human; it is time for men to respect those insights; and it is time for all of us to integrate them into a new story of power. (190)

So on this Sunday in Women's History Month, in conversation with two recent books, I would like to invite us to explore some of what a new story, a story more inclusive of all women's experience, might look like. The first book, by Elizabeth Lesser herself, is titled *Cassandra Speaks: When Women Are the Storytellers, the Human Story Changes*. The second book is *The Heroine with 1001 Faces*, by Maria Tatar, a professor of literature, folklore, and mythology at Harvard University. If this sermon leaves you curious to learn more, I would recommend starting with Lesser's book *Cassandra Speaks*, which of the two books is much shorter and more accessible.

But before proceeding on our journey of rewriting and reimagining from women's perspectives, I should clarify that a UU approach to **Women's History Month embraces the word "women" in the broadest possible sense, very much including transwomen.**

There is a lot to say here, and we have gone into more depth introducing gender vocabulary in previous sermons that are available in our [online archive](#). But given the rise in political attacks on transgender folk, it feels important in this Women's History Month sermon to give a very brief overview of four important terms related to what I mean by including women in the broadest possible sense: gender identity, gender expression, orientation, and biological sex. And **"where one is" regarding each of these terms is not necessarily correlated with where one is on the spectrum of the other three terms.** For a visual representation, see the [Genderbread Person](#).

- **Gender Identity** is *internal*: in your mind, do you think of yourself as more of a "woman," a "man," or somewhere in between? Importantly, notions of what words like "women" and "men" mean have differed significantly across cultures and time.
- **Gender Expression** is *external*: in your clothes and behavior, do you present yourself as "masculine," "feminine," androgynous, or gender fluid? Again, keep in mind that our perceptions of categories like "masculine" and "feminine" are socially constructed and change across cultures and time.
- **Orientation** is in your *heart*: are you sexually and/or romantically attracted to men/males/masculinity, women/females/femininity, to both, or to neither?

- **Biological Sex** is more complicated than whether your chromosomes are XY-male or XX-female. For instance, in “1-in-1500 to 1-in-2000 births...a child is born so noticeably atypical in terms of genitalia that a specialist in sex differentiation is called in...” But a lot more people than that are born with subtler forms of sex anatomy variations, some of which won’t show up until later in life” (Heath Davis, *Beyond Trans: Does Gender Matter?*, 33).

The point is that there are a number of angles to consider if we are to celebrate Women’s History Month in the broadest possible sense. And notice that in so doing we are already engaging in the act of re-storying and re-mythologizing. **Gender is a social construction, and it has too often been defined in ways that make the gendered perspectives of straight, white men the norm (or alternatively, of straight, cis-gendered white women)—and everything else a lesser deviation.** Women’s History Month is one among many invitations to widen our circles of compassion and inclusion.

So let’s get further into it. When Dr. Maria Tatar titled her book *The Heroine with 1001 Faces*, she was alluding to two other books. First, she was alluding to the highly influential book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* published in 1949 by Joseph Campbell (1904 - 1987). As Campbell compared all the different mythologies around the world, he came up with a theory about an underlying archetypal structure that he called the “hero’s journey” or the “monomyth.” This model has been widely impactful in many popular Hollywood films and television shows, many books, and other forms of popular culture. Campbell’s monomyth makes the case that our most influential stories boil down to a singular template of a hero who leaves home, encounters one or more crises, and returns transformed by the experience. These three movements often show up as “Act I,” “Act II,” and “Act III” in many plays and films.

But here’s the rub: Campbell came up with his theories about the monomyth of the “Hero’s journey” when he was a professor at Sarah Lawrence College in New York, where he taught for almost four decades from 1934 to 1972. For almost all of that time (until 1968), Sarah Lawrence was an *all-women’s* school. Now on the one hand, at this all-women’s school, Campbell’s classes were so popular that he had to limit enrollment

to students in their senior year. On the other hand, it might be considered, shall we say, *problematic* to teach a male-biased monomyth at an all-women's school.

In 1972, during Campbell's final year of teaching at Sarah Lawrence, in the midst of second-wave feminism, one of those seniors asked Campbell: "You've been talking about the *hero*. But what about the *women*?" Campbell replied, "The woman's the *mother* of the hero; she's the *goal* of the hero's achieving; she's the *protectress* of the hero; she is this, she is that. What more do you want?" The student retorted: "***I want to be the hero.***"

Dr. Tatar's book *The Heroine with 1001 Faces* takes up that challenge on behalf of all the women who have ever experienced the countless parts of popular culture influenced by Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Tatar realized that **many women want to be the hero of their own stories, instead of the helpmate**. Tatar's title also one-ups Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces* with an allusion to Scheherazade's *One Thousand and One (Arabian) Nights*, meaning that there are not just a huge number, but always one more beyond that—essentially an *infinite* possibility beyond the male-biased monomyth (Tatar 1).

As for Joseph Campbell, he died in 1987 without ever publishing a book that centers women's experiences. However, that student's comment in 1972 arguably did change him. During the next and final decade and a half of his life, from 1972 (when he retired from Sarah Lawrence) to 1987 (when he died), he delivered more than twenty lectures and workshops "exploring the figures, functions, symbols, and themes of the *feminine* divine." And in 2013, those lectures and workshops were collected together for the first time in a book titled *Goddesses: Mysteries of the Feminine Divine*, which is now an official part of the 18-volume Collected Works of Joseph Campbell.

I'll share with you just one quote from that volume, where Campbell confesses:

All I can tell you about mythology is what *men* have said and have experienced and now *women* have to tell us from *their* point of view what the possibilities of the feminine future are. And it is a future—it's as though the lift-off has taken place, it really has, there's no doubt about it.
(Tatar 275)

I appreciate Campbell's willingness to be honest, later in his life, that his work was incomplete. And it has become clear that we need not a *monomyth*—not one single *singular* archetype for all people at all times and all places—but rather, a plurality of perspectives and stories that more fully capture the breadth and depth of our diverse human experiences.

On the importance of what we might imagine together if we give ourselves the chance, Toni Morrison used to say, **“Dream a little before you think”** (Lesser 9-10). I love that: “Dream a little before you think.” Don't just think within the received categories—such as Campbell's *monomyth*. Take some time to dream a little about the 1,001 faces—the infinite possibilities—of what *might* be.

At the same time, let us also be honest that such a wide-open canvas can also sometimes be intimidating and scary. It can feel safer to stick with what you know. As the classicist and poet Anne Carson said in her book *Red Doc*, **“To live past the end of your myth is a perilous thing.”** But if we do accept the task, what might we discover if we boldly begin to co-create, re-story, and to re-mythologize? What new as-yet-unforeseen possibilities might open?

Sometimes such re-mythologizing happens by switching the narrative from the traditional male point of view to a retelling of the story from a *women's* perspective. That single change alone can be powerful. But one major problem is that many of the classical myths portray women in pretty dire straits. So, if you only switch to a women's perspective without changing the overall patriarchal myth, you can end up going into the details of some fairly horrific “tales of assault and abduction, injury and trauma” (Tatar 52).

A more contemporary example of re-mythologizing that centers women's experience is the important and impactful #MeToo movement, a name coined by the African American activist Tarana Burke for publicly shared stories of abuse and harassment that for too long have been kept silent out of fear of retaliation (35).

Another approach to re-mythologizing is to replace all the leading men with leading women, by switching all the traditionally heroic roles to heroines, as with the recent all-female remake of *Ghostbusters* (31). There are some advantages to this strategy, but it is also still operating within the dominant patriarchal paradigm.

So how might we expand our playbook to re-mythologize even further? One starting point might be by simply giving ourselves permission to do so. Elizabeth Lesser shares that for her, such perspectives came with time. In her words:

The best thing about being older is that I finally trust my own point of view, so much so that I no longer suppress it when it deserves to be expressed, nor do I argue it with a person who is uninterested in listening, learning, or growing (or helping me listen, learn, or grow). I know my own heart, and I value my experience. I am not afraid of being exposed when I'm wrong. I'm not looking for accolades when I do the right thing. I am at home in my own skin, and my own mind, and in the joy and mess of being human. (Lesser 17)

Can any of you relate to parts of that? Does it feel to any of you like a sigh of relief: yeah, I do finally trust my own point of view more. I am more at home in my own skin, my own mind, and in the joy and mess of being human?

Part of what I take Lesser to mean is that she has come to understand herself as no less worthy to co-create new mythologies than those ancient myth-makers who came before. We are not limited to the stories of the past, although we may (or may not) continue to find value in them. Either way, we have the freedom to create new myths that serve us more fully and that are based in a more inclusive set of perspectives.

And there is very good news that this practice is not idle speculation. For many decades now, there have been a growing number of examples of what such re-storying and re-mythologizing can look like.

I wonder how many of you were influenced by Clarissa Pinkola Estés's book *Women Who Run with the Wolves*, which was a bestseller for a number of years in the early 1990s. At least for some of the women I was hanging out with in college, that was a life-changing book.

Or how many of you participated in a *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven* class at a UU congregation? *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven* was a widely influential UU Religious Education curriculum published in the mid-1980s that centered women's experience and the feminine divine?

And there are so many more examples. We can turn back the clock a little to celebrate older examples—from Little Women to Anne of Green Gables to Nancy Drew—that each in their own way helped set the stage for more contemporary examples like Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Sex and the City, Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, Arya and Sansa Stark from *Game of Thrones*, Disney’s Moana and Elsa, the chess champion Beth from *The Queen’s Gambit* on Netflix, or Ava DuVernay’s *Naomi*, about a Black girl with superpowers. This short list contains only a few of the burgeoning examples of re-mythologizing.

Another of my recent favorite examples is someone who asked on social media: “What if (Wonder) Woman, instead of being a super-strong woman in skimpy clothes, was simply a woman philosopher who sat around *wondering* about things? What if the words *Wonder Woman* came to mean being super smart?”

There is so much more to say about all this. But as I move toward my conclusion, I want to end with two important examples of one more method of re-mythologizing: reinterpreting classic myths from the perspective of women’s liberation.

First, let’s take on one of the most influential myths that has been frequently interpreted in misogynistic ways: the story of Eve, the apple, and the serpent in the Garden of Eden. This tale has often been understood in a way that scapegoats Eve and all women thereafter for the alleged original sin of this single archetypal woman. One option is to dismiss this story as an obsolete fable that is too tied up in patriarchal religion to be relevant today. Another option is to use our 1,001 tools of imaginative re-mythologizing to highlight neglected parts of this text.

Notice, for instance, that God (who we might call here “Father God”) tells Adam and Eve, “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.” But the serpent tells Eve that “Father God” is not telling her the whole truth. The serpent says, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” And the biblical text says explicitly that the woman ate of the fruit because she “saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise.”

So, what if we reclaim this text not as a cautionary tale about what happens when women disobey their father figures, but an *inspirational* tale of trusting what can happen when women trust what they are seeing with their own eyes, when they learn to take risks, and begin to live life on their own terms. From this perspective, **we can celebrate Eve—not as the original sinner, but as “humankind’s first grown up”—someone who shows us we don’t have to remain naive children in our parents’ garden forever.** We can grow up, create our own families of choice, and discover what life has to offer. In this sense, Eve becomes, not someone to denigrate, but a wisdom figure to *emulate* (Lesser 30).

Or, to take on one final classical myth that is deeply resonant for our predicament today, Cassandra is known as the woman cursed to know the truth about the future, but to never be believed. If you go back and read this story closely, you’ll find that she received that curse for being unwilling to go along with the inappropriate sexual advances of a powerful male god (4). Cassandra’s story is an archetypal #MeToo tale.

But here is where we get to choose how we respond to these ancient myths. Do we accept on face value that women are doomed to tell the truth and never be believed (5)? Some of you may be thinking about the recent Netflix film *Don’t Look Up*, which explores themes of the world’s population not believing what scientific data is clearly showing. Do we resign ourselves that such willful disregard in the face of evidence will always be the case?, Or do we **take on the challenge of reclaiming the Cassandra myth by learning to leverage power, turn our dreams into deeds, and build the world we dream about (6)?** Women like Tarana Burke, Greta Thunberg with climate justice, and so many others are showing us that *another world is possible*. As Amanda Gorman said, “If only we’re brave enough to see it. / If only we’re brave enough to be it.”

On this Sunday in Women’s History Month, let us celebrate that we are not limited to the hero’s journey or the male monomyth. **There are a thousand and one creative ways—really an infinite number of ways—to imagine and live into a more**

inclusive future that is deeply shaped by “care, empathy, compassion, and new forms of justice” (Tatar 290).