

Unitarian and Universalist Women, And Another

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Recently I talked about “Stardust,” and gave examples of individuals who have metaphorically “sprinkled” stardust on humanity, helping to propel us forward in some important field. Afterward, someone gently chided me for the fact that all of my examples were men! And she gave me a long list as a “starter,” of women who also belong on that list.

You may have noticed that our world has been slanted a bit in favor of men. Okay, slanted A LOT in favor of men. One word for it is “patriarchal.” There are other words, too: misogynistic. Chauvinistic. Others not repeatable here. But Riane Eisler, in *The Chalice & the Blade*, gives a different possibility. Our culture is based on the *dominator* model: either men dominate women, or (rarely, in today’s world) women dominate men. She proposes the *partnership* model, in which men and women are interdependent, with neither dominating the other.¹ This is a model that has successfully existed in the past, and she believes can exist now.

And women are being recognized for their achievements. Slowly, belatedly, it is surely happening. And that is what this tiny introduction today is about. I thought I’d start with women from our UU tradition, and just give a few examples of contributors to that “Stardust” I had mentioned. And I’ll finish with a woman not in the UU tradition, but who has led the way politically, carving a place as a black woman where there had not been one before.

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The first woman I want to recognize is Maja Oktavec Čapek. True to our society, it’s difficult to find any information about her from one solid source. There’s much more information about Norbert, her husband, of course. She’s mentioned briefly in a website aimed at children; on the UUHHS (Unitarian Universalist History and Heritage Society website (UUHHS.org), and a smattering of UU church websites. Here’s what I know at this point:

She was the third wife of Norbert Čapek. (Norbert’s first wife, Marie, mother of their eight children, died shortly after their arrival in the US in 1914.) I couldn’t find anything about his second wife. Maja had come to the US in 1907 at the age of 19, with her family,

¹ Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*, First edition (New York, NY: HarperOne, 1988).

studying at Columbia University, from 1908-1917. She graduated with a degree in library science. This was highly unusual for women of this time, of course. She married Norbert and eventually both became Unitarians. Norbert was 47, Maja was 29. In 1921 they moved back to Czechoslovakia, and started a Unitarian church in Prague. It quickly became the largest Unitarian church in the world. (They are the originators of the flower communion here, of course.) She was ordained in 1926. In 1939 she travelled back to the US on a fundraising trip. With the start of WWII, she was unable to return to Czechoslovakia. She found out after the war that Norbert had been arrested by the Nazis, sent to Dachau, and died from poison gas in 1942.

Maja continued as a Unitarian minister, with North Unitarian Church in the U.S., from 1940 to 1943. At that point she began working for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency. In 1947 she joined Relief for Czechoslovakia. She retired in 1950, and continued preaching and giving lectures in Europe and North America, supporting the Czech church.

As a serendipitous sidenote, I ran across another Maja Capek. Spiritually she could be a daughter or close relative of the Maja Čapek we've been discussing. Let me read her bio to you:

Maja Capek

Analyst, Education Global Practice, World Bank

Maja Capek is an analyst in the World Bank's Education Global Practice, with a regional focus on the Middle East and North Africa. Prior to joining the World Bank, she gained experience in development and economic policy at the European Commission in Brussels, the German development agency, GIZ, and the German Permanent Representation to the United Nations Organizations in Rome. Maja holds a Master's Degree in International and Development Economics from Yale University and a B.A. in International Relations from Dresden University of Technology.

If she's *not* a Unitarian Universalist, she should be!

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How many of you know about Margaret Fuller (1810-1850)? Forty years is a very short lifetime in today's terms. She was a brilliant woman, considered the most well-read person in New England. But the UUA website describes her as: "an author, editor, critic, teacher, feminist, and revolutionary who played a key role in the Transcendentalist movement."² (This portion of the UUA website is: "Celebrating UU

² "Celebrating UU Women in History | UU Voices | UUA.Org," accessed October 15, 2021, <https://www.uua.org/pressroom/stories/celebrating-uu-women-history>.

Women in History," a really interesting read!) She was also a poet. And in keeping with her intellect, she published, in 1839, a translation of *Eckermann's Conversations with Goethe*. She never got to finish her pet project: a biography of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. She is considered by many to be America's first feminist. She wrote *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, published in 1845. She also wrote *Summer on the Lakes*, published the same year, describing frontier life in Wisconsin and Illinois. With Ralph Waldo Emerson, she started *The Dial*, a Transcendentalist journal. She was also a foreign correspondent for the New York Tribune. It was while in Italy that she met Giovanni Angelo, Marchese Ossoli, who was in the Italian Unification Movement. They married and had a son in 1849. It was on the trip back to the United States that the ship was wrecked in a storm, and all three died. Imagine what she could have done with another 20 or 30 years.

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Many of us are aware of James Reeb, the only white minister (Unitarian Universalist), who was beaten to death in Selma, Alabama, in 1965. Are you familiar with Viola Gregg Liuzzo? She was a UU layperson from Michigan who traveled south, to Alabama, to aid in the civil rights movement. It was 1965. She was 39 years old, mother of five. She had grown up in the south, and knew about the treatment blacks received. In the wake of the Selma to Montgomery march, she was using her car to shuttle protesters to the Montgomery airport for their return to Selma, when a car pulled alongside, shot and killed her. They were Ku Klux Klan, and were acquitted of all state charges by an all white jury. Later three of them were sentenced to 10 years in prison on federal civil rights violations. The fourth was an FBI informant, and was shielded from prosecution, even though he probably participated in her killing. Later J. Edgar Hoover tried to smear her reputation: She was having an affair with the "Negro" volunteer with her. She was an unfit mother. Not true in either case, of course. There is a highly-rated 2004 documentary, "Home of the Brave," about her. There's also a very touching Washington Post article from December 2017, by Donna Britt, about her and her family.³ It has interviews with her daughters. I would read some of it to you, but I can't without breaking down.

National outrage over her death may have speeded the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

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³ "Viola Liuzzo, Killed by the Klan, Was the Only White Woman to Die in the Civil Rights Movement - The Washington Post," accessed October 17, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/12/15/a-white-mother-went-to-alabama-to-fight-for-civil-rights-the-klan-killed-her-for-it/>.

Okay, I have time for one more. She was not a Unitarian Universalist, but I can't resist. My first year of voting in a national election was 1972. The presidential election was between George McGovern and Richard Nixon. My first time in the voting booth, my first adult act on the national scene, was to write in... Shirley Chisholm.

She received a masters in early childhood education from Columbia University in 1951. (There it is: Columbia, again!) Though she started as a nursery school teacher, by 1959 she became a consultant to the New York City Division of Day Care. She was a member of the local chapters of the League of Women Voters, the NAACP, the Urban League, and the Democratic Party.

Mrs. Chisholm was the first black woman elected to Congress: 1968. She had experience in office before that in the New York state assembly, from 1965-1968. In the race for Congress, she was able to speak directly to the Hispanic population of the district with her fluent Spanish. Her Republican opponent a liberal (yes, it was possible then to be a Republican liberal!) was James Farmer, a civil rights leader, a black who claimed that it was time for men to take over from the women in power in the black communities. She won in that Democratic district by 67%. She was a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus and the Congressional Women's Caucus. She was strong, unafraid, one of only 19 in Congress willing to hold hearings on the Vietnam war, for instance. She worked hard for Head Start, food stamps, school lunches.

Her campaign slogan – for Congress and for the presidency – was: “Unbought and Unbossed.” Unfortunately, she was way ahead of her time. She went to the convention fighting against other candidates like: George McGovern, Hubert Humphrey, Edmund Muskie. And won 10% of the delegates. That was 152 delegates. Initially locked out of the debates, she sued and got the right to participate in one debate. And of course another candidate she challenged was George Wallace who was running as an independent. When George Wallace was wounded in an attempted assassination, Shirley enraged supporters by visiting him in the hospital. She felt that if someone was hurting, it was her responsibility to be there for support, in spite of the fact that she was opposed to just about everything he was for. And she didn't want what happened to him to happen to anyone else.

Later, Wallace did serious damage to her campaign by supporting her. This was in Florida. “George Wallace for some strange unknown reason, he liked me,” Chisholm said. “George Wallace came down to Florida and he went all over Florida and he said to the people, ‘if you all can't vote for me, don't vote for those oval-headed lizards. Vote for Shirley Chisholm!’ And that crashed my votes, because they thought that I was in league with him to get votes. That's what killed me in Florida.”⁴ But later Wallace was

⁴ Smithsonian Magazine and Jackson Landers, “‘Unbought And Unbossed’: When a Black Woman Ran for the White House,” Smithsonian Magazine, accessed October 18, 2021,

able to help garner support from Southern congressmen for a minimum wage for domestic workers.

Chisholm felt that it was much harder running as a woman candidate than as a black candidate. And she was both the first woman candidate in history for president, and the first black candidate. Black men were against her, men like Julian Bond, Carl Stokes, LeRoy Johnson, Alcee Hastings, Jesse Jackson, John Conyers Jr. And in the women's movement, Gloria Steinem supported McGovern.

During the presidential campaign, there were three verified threats against her life. Her husband served as her bodyguard until the Secret Service stepped in for protection.

As quoted in the online Smithsonian Magazine, "I want history to remember me... not as the first black woman to have made a bid for the presidency of The United States, but as a black woman who lived in the 20th century and who dared to be herself. I want to be remembered as a catalyst for change in America."⁵

Chisholm continued serving in Congress through 1982, with seven terms in office. She died, after several strokes, in 2005. She was 80 years old. In 2015, President Barack Obama posthumously awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom.⁶

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Maja Čapek. Margaret Fuller. Viola Gregg Liuzzo. Shirley Chisholm. All of them engaged their whole lives in heroic efforts to push our society forward, leading the way for "peace, liberty, and justice for all." Their voices have been recognized belatedly, or have been belittled over the years, because they were women, or black, or married to someone who was "more important." Why?

Isn't it time to open the doors, or rather the floodgates, to contributions from these and the millions of others who over the years have participated as much as our white male centric society allowed? From time to time I hope to continue highlighting the work of these often-ignored, stellar examples. The metaphorical "Stardust," as I mentioned, has come not only from white males, but even more from individuals (women - white and of color, men of color) with vision, who step up, sometimes at great personal risk, sometimes in spite of no recognition, sometimes in spite of derision. Step up to

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/unbought-and-unbossed-when-black-woman-ran-for-the-white-house-180958699/>.

⁵ "Snapshot," accessed October 18, 2021, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/unbought-and-unbossed-when-black-woman-ran-for-the-white-house-180958699/>.

⁶ Biography.com Editors, "Shirley Chisholm," Biography, accessed October 22, 2021, <https://www.biography.com/political-figure/shirley-chisholm>.

implement their understandings and brilliance, to help push our world forward. My answer: yes, *it is* time. Amen.