

# **The On-Going Struggle for Gender Equality**

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**In honor of Women's history month, I want to lift up for us four women who changed the course of history in the West, in terms of women's rights and the lessening of the patriarchy's tight grip on women.**

**As Unitarian Universalists our Seven Principles are held as strong values and moral guides within our living tradition of wisdom and spirituality.**

**This morning's sermon leans towards our first two principles, as we reflect on women's history and the struggle for gender equality.**

**With our first UU principle we affirm and promote *the inherent worth and dignity of every person.***

**In our second UU principle we affirm and promote *justice, equity and compassion in human relations.***

**Our faith of Unitarian Universalism names six major sources of our living tradition.**

**This morning's sermon arises out of our second source,**

- *that of Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.*

**Thus, within such a Unitarian Universalist framework, let's look at**

four women in the West who have been courageous  
in confronting the powers of patriarchy.

Each has been instrumental in moving all of us  
in the West towards a more equitable society.

Our first two women are found in the Bible in the *Book of Esther*,  
Dated originally from the fifth century BCE.,  
the book relates the story of a Jewish woman, Esther,  
who as queen of Persia, stopped her husband from destroying the Jews.  
The Jewish festival of Purim,  
which our brothers and sisters at Temple B'nai Israel here in Laconia,  
are celebrating this weekend, is based on the Book of Esther.

So, within the Book of Esther we meet our first woman to celebrate this  
morning.

Vashti was summoned by her husband, King Ahasuerus,  
to appear before him at his Persian court feast,  
which was for men only.

The men had been reveling, drinking and feasting for seven days  
when King Ahasuerus summoned Vashti to appear before the court.

At that time, patriarchy reigned supreme.

The equal dignity of women and the queen as companion of the king was not  
recognized.

We don't know for sure, but perhaps not wanting

to be seen as an object or possession of the king,  
and not wanting to be displayed before a drunken crowd,  
Vashi refused to obey the king's order.

Becoming enraged over her refusal to follow his command,  
the king consulted his lawyers about Vashi's refusal to come to him on  
command...

Here is the lawyers' decision – written in the Book of Esther:

*“Queen Vashti has wronged not only the king, but every official and citizen of  
your empire.*

*For women everywhere will begin to disobey their husbands,  
when they learn what Queen Vashti has done. And before this day is out,  
the wife of every one of us officials throughout your empire will hear  
what the queen did and will start talking to us husbands in the same way,  
and there will be contempt and anger throughout your kingdom<sup>1</sup>.”*

The king banished Vashti, and we don't know what truly happened to her.

Vashti is the first woman sovereign

that we know of in Western history who had the courage to enable her to act  
contrary to the will of her husband, - thus publicly challenging such tyranny.

Vashti's story is regarded by feminists across time as heroic.

Early feminists admired her courage and principles.

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<sup>1</sup> The Book of Esther found in The Living Bible, p. 417. Esther 1: 16-19.

**Harriet Beecher Stowe called Vashti's disobedience "the first stand for women's rights."<sup>2</sup>**

**The other woman in the Book of Esther is Esther,  
who became the next queen of Persia after Vashti was banished.  
Raised as a Jew, she hid her Jewishness from King Ahasuerus.  
until the moment when she was faced with the decision to tell him her truth..  
As the story goes, the king was under the influence of a wicked advisor,  
Haman,  
who had persuaded the king to decree that all the Jews should be killed.  
Haman was angered by the king's advisor, Mordecai, who was Jewish.  
Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman which enraged Haman..  
Haman poisoned the king's mind with an antisemitic formula  
saying "*there is a certain people  
dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of thy kingdom,  
whose laws are different from those of any other people,  
and who do not obey the king's laws* (Esther 3:8).  
Haman persuades the king that the Jews are loyal to their religion  
and not to him, and thus, must be destroyed.  
What amazes me about these lines from the Book of Esther  
is just how far back in human history we find such antisemitic thinking,  
which is currently on the rise even today, especially in New England.  
Such harmful and hateful thinking is of course, terribly wrong.**

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<sup>2</sup> Stowe, Harriet Beecher (1878). [\*Bible heroines: being narrative biographies of prominent Hebrew women in the patriarchal, national, and Christian eras, giving views of women in sacred history, as revealed in the light of the present day.\*](#) Fords, Howard, & Hulbert. Retrieved February 27, 2009.

**Jews, like the rest of humanity, are committed to their religion  
AND the wider community in which they live.**

**Esther learns from Modecai of the decree to kill the Jews.**

**She risks her life to expose Haman, in order to save her people.**

**She goes uninvited to see the King,**

**and this is a risk for which she could be killed.**

**The king grants her entry because he is in love with her.**

**Through further efforts, Esther is able to save the Jews from destruction.**

**The Jewish festival of Purim is a celebration of a victory over hatred,**

**Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote that “hatred of the Jews is the hatred of  
difference which is the hatred of humanity”<sup>3</sup>**

**Esther is able to stay alive and not be banished as, she finds the courage  
to tell her truth in spite of the tyranny of patriarchy surrounding her.**

**So, she, too, is an early example of a woman**

**who had the courage to speak out against injustice.**

**Let’s jump now to the mid to late nineteenth century in our country,**

**where we find our other two women to honor this morning -**

**Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony.**

**Theirs was a fifty-year relationship that became the heart of**

**the story of the women’s rights movement in the nineteenth century.**

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<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Jan Katz. TBI Tablet. March 2023/ Adar-Nisan.

**We owe these two women a huge debt  
as we today continue to struggle for equal gender rights.**

**Susan and Elizabeth were most likely responsible,  
more than any other two people,  
for the break-down of patriarchy's strangle-hold on the West.**

**They both tirelessly worked for women's rights  
in a time when women had few rights.**

**“Woman were prevented from attending college,  
and barred from the pulpit and all professions.**

**Those who spoke out in public in this democracy were thought indecent.**

**No women could serve on a jury, and most were considered ‘incompetent’ to  
testify in court.**

**They could not sign contracts, keep or invest earnings, own or inherit  
property.**

**They had no rights in divorce, including the custody of the children they bore.**

**In fact, women were the property of their husbands,  
who were entitled – by law - to their wives' wages and bodies.**

**And the ballot by which women might have voted to improve their status  
was denied to them by law.**

**No where in America, - no where in the world did women have the right to  
vote.”<sup>4</sup>**

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<sup>4</sup> Ken Burns in Geoffrey C. Ward's *Not For Ourselves Alone*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1999, p. vii.

**By the time Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony died, women had gained many of these rights, except for the right to vote, which came after both of their deaths in 1920.**

**When the Nineteenth Amendment was passed, the words that Stanton and Anthony had spoken over and over again, in their travels and speeches all across America for women's rights – are found within the Nineteenth Amendment -**

**Such word for word writings are found as well in the messages that Stanton and Anthony had been submitting to Congress over and over again for decades<sup>5</sup>**

**Elizabeth Cady Stanton was born to wealth and comfort, and throughout her early relationship with Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth had to stay at home to raise her seven children.**

**She wrote many of the speeches that Susan delivered.**

**A revolutionary in her thinking about women's rights and especially advocating for women's right to vote.**

**Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote much of the Declaration of Sentiments in July 1848 given at the Unitarian Church in Rochester, NY.**

**The Declaration stated in its beginning:**

**“we hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal.” A very radical idea at the time.**

**She would continue for some 50 years to fight for such equality between the sexes.**

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, ix.

**Susan B. Anthony was a Quaker, who was self-supporting all her life. Primarily because she valued her freedom, she made the conscious decision not to marry. Susan was highly discipline as she traveled across the US, armed with speeches that Elizabeth had written for her. By the end of her life Anthony believed that pursuing the right to vote was primary and no other issue should intrude on getting this right to vote. Elizabeth's vision close to the end of her life was broader. She spoke about women's emancipation and social justice issues. She envisioned women coming fully into whomever they each are – She wrote the Women's Bible, changing the actual biblical texts, to make the texts more gender inclusive. (I have a copy of her Bible here – it's fascinating-)**

**In the end the larger movement for women's rights agreed with Susan B. Anthony- and focused solely on women's right to vote. And, as we know, in 1920 women finally were able to vote.**

**Before leaving these four women this morning, I want to mention a just published book by Beacon Press; *The Patriarchs*,. by Angela Saini. As a scientist and anthropologist, Saini believes that patriarchy is not a natural way for humans to relate to one another.**



**She documents that around 7, 400 BCE large Neolithic communities in Southern Anatolia were relatively gender blind.**

**With the invasion around 2500 BCE to 1200 BCE of people from the Eurasian Steppe into Europe and then into Asia, more violent and male dominated cultures overran the peaceful gender-blind communities.**

**In this book, *The Patriarchs*, Saini searches for the origins of patriarchy.**

**As a result of her searching, she asserts that patriarchy is not biological fate but that the source of patriarchy is cultural, -**

**which most often is established over long periods of time**

**through people buying into certain the myths and beliefs:- –**

**(A woman needs a man to protect her; Women are the weaker sex; A woman's place is in the home)/.**

**Saini writes that there have always been a number of matrilineal societies, as well as societies that are not strictly matrilineal,**

**- within the animal kingdom and within human societies which she explores in this book.**

**The goal, of course, is not to have one sex dominate over another.**

**The goal is that of equality between the sexes.**

**Right now, our world is still dominated by patriarchy.**

**Saini believes that if women across the world can attain enough status and have the ability to vote,**

**then the oppressions of gender inequality can be dismantled.**

**Our four stories this morning of Vashti, Esther, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony show their courage in dealing with gender oppressions during their lifetimes. Today we continue to face gender injustices. It seems like we take some steps forward, and then take steps backwards. For example, Malala’s work advocating for education for girls, has faced setbacks, such as the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan, Here in America right now we are in the midst of the rolling back of abortion laws– when many of us thought that after 50 years, Roe Vs Wade was the law of the land. And just this past Friday the New Hampshire Senate passed “a parents’ bill of rights” that will travel onto the House for possible approval, and then, if not vetoed by the Governor, will become law. Critics of this proposed bill say that the bill is designed to target transgender youth. If passed, this bill would require school officials, when asked by parents to disclose that a child is using a different name or being referred to as being a different gender.**

**The stories of our four women this morning remind us of the enormity of the task in the struggle for gender equality, When we hear stories of abuse or harm towards a person**

**because of his, her, their gender,  
may we not throw our hands in the air and give up in such a struggle.,  
May we find inspiration from those who have gone before us,  
such as the four women we honor this morning,  
May we find the courage as they did, to take the next steps needed  
to guarantee justice and gender rights for all.**

**Peace and love to you.**

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<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey C. Ward, based on the documentary film by Ken Burns and Paul Barnes. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999, p. viii.