

# Power Dynamic

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

*Rev. Rodrigo Emilio Solano-Quesnel*

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"Three Candles" Photo: Rod E.S.Q.

Towards the end of my last year of seminary, a few years ago now, a group from my cohort was tasked with organizing our closing worship ceremony. The cohort invited folks from all the colleges of the ecumenical school to be part of the closing worship team, representing the United Church, the Presbyterians, and the Anglicans, as well as taking care to invite me, representing the Unitarian Universalist perspective. It was a bit like one of those jokes, though it was really an established practice to work together, in all seriousness.

At our meetings, I remember feeling quite satisfied with a sense of inclusion and representation – we had members from four denominations, with ages ranging from millennial to boomer, embodying racial and ethnic diversity, with folks identifying three sexual orientations, and at least two genders. I thought we had done it – living the dream of collaborative inclusivity.

As we were settling on the details of the Order of Service and the content of worship materials, I made a suggestion for one of the elements of the service. The precise details are a bit fuzzy now, and aren't particularly important, but suffice it to say that it comprised a slightly more... experimental approach to one of the biblical readings.

After some silence, each of my peers in the planning team offered support for it and consented to try out my suggestion. In truth, I could sense that there was some... unspoken trepidation about my idea, and that they weren't fully comfortable with it, but the group nonetheless formed a consensus, giving the go-ahead for it. And, while I had picked up on the hesitance to adopt my recommendation, I did not feel at the

time that it was my responsibility to advocate for others' opinions. If they had voiced their dissent, I told myself, I would listen to it and see about working something out, but since they hadn't spoken against it, I decided to simply take them at their word. The matter was closed.

Or so I thought. A day or so later, I got an e-mail in my inbox. One of my peers wrote that she and the rest of the women had held a follow-up conversation and voiced to each other their discomfort with my suggestion and were wondering if I'd reconsider.

I admit I was initially taken aback. First, the notion that they'd had their own separate discussion – without me – seemed... unpalatable to me. But then, a second shock took over – when I reread the e-mail and noticed that she had written: “me, and the rest of the women...”

It was only then that it dawned on me that all the other members of the team were women – and that I was, in fact, the only man. Only then did I consider that their original hesitancy to object to my suggestion might have something to do with gender dynamics.

Since they had, in fact, now voiced their objection, quite unanimously, I reconsidered my suggestion and withdrew it (and there were other parts of the service where my contributions had been welcome).

But I still felt uneasy about how that *other* conversation had played out, and noticed how inadequate I felt at how I had handled it – feeling that I had missed something important in how I worked with my teammates.

I followed up with one them, to see if she would help me understand. This new conversation was no longer about worship planning, but about the gender factor in our team's dynamic.

She was gracious enough to listen to my questions and offer some of her time to educate me – I imagined she sensed that I was open to listen to her perspective.

She acknowledged that she, along with her female peers, had been socialized to hold back on their opinions – especially when it would mean countering a man’s position. And in holding their own caucus as women, they’d found the confidence among each other, first, to voice, acknowledge, and validate their opinions to each other, and then, to voice them to me.

This is something that I *technically* already knew. At some level, I understood that there was a power dynamic in play among genders. But it somehow felt abstract... a historical footnote in the struggle for gender equality, that now – in the future that was 2012 – somehow did not really matter any more. Except that it did. And only when I saw it play out in real time, did I more fully understand, what that power dynamic meant.

My colleague said something else that has also stayed with me. In addition to how I might consider how women had been socialized, she asked me if I had considered not just the fact that they were women, but that I was, in fact, a man.

I had not.

Since then, I have been learning to understand that – whether I realize it or not – I often wield more power than I might think, simply by virtue of the gender I present with, the moment I walk through the door. I might not *intend* to use that power in any detrimental way, but my words and actions may still pack more weight than those of others.

This includes the understanding that the cultural socialization does not stop with my women peers, but has also shaped my assumptions about how I’m supposed to be and how others are supposed to perceive me, including the expectation that what I say is less likely to be second-guessed. (And certainly, as an ordained and called minister, there are legitimate reasons why people might want to pay attention to what I say – and still, I’m aware that I must always take the gender factor into account.)

This realization has also called me to re-evaluate many of my interactions with women in the past, when I might have thought my words or actions were innocent enough, or at worst, playful joking among friends, when they might in fact have been something worse – disrespectful, hurtful, harmful, perhaps even toxic.

In many cases, it is hard to know for sure, but I know that some of the ways I've behaved in the past are not ways that I would find acceptable now. And of course, the work is never fully done – be it growing in self-awareness, or calling out toxic and harmful behaviours in others.

And that's a call to many of us. Today is the National Day of Action on Violence Against Women. It is a very specific set of words, each one with very direct meanings. The one that I'd particularly like to call attention to is *Action*.

And while women are named – and remembered – in this day of action, it is not a day directed exclusively at women. On the contrary, it is an invitation – an imperative – for men to be part of the solution toward reducing gender-based violence. And we do that acknowledging that women and people with other gender identities are disproportionately harmed when men don't hold themselves, and each other, accountable.

The aim isn't to feel guilty about our genders or debate which one is best or the most virtuous. The goal is to renew a commitment to grow into awareness about who we are and what that can mean, to grow in understanding that the power dynamic among genders is not a mere historical artifact, but a mechanism that continues to affect real people, in real time.

Among the sobering statistics of the pandemic is a surge in reports of people – most often women – at increased danger in abusive households. Even though the *École Polytechnique Massacre* happened in Montreal thirty-one years ago, we continue to see examples of the effects of toxic masculinity in our immediate time (and I'm not talking

about masculinity in general, but specifically *toxic* masculinity). The Toronto Van Attack and the Toronto Danforth Shooting, both in 2018, both seem to draw inspiration from misogynist sources. In our year 2020, the Nova Scotia attacks and the Toronto Machete Attack also have a connection with gender-based violence. And without excusing their behaviour, it is worth noting that many of the male attackers also struggled with a sense of inadequacy in their maleness – exposing a reality that patriarchy hurts everyone (and that might be a conversation for another time).

My friends, these are the most graphic examples, but the difficult and ongoing realities of the imbalance in the power dynamic among genders are manifest in many more, and much more mundane, everyday examples. As I have witnessed to in my experience with my worship teammates in seminary, even the most intentionally inclusive and open-minded settings are not immune to the spectre of patriarchy sneaking up, when one is not actively aware of how the power dynamic among genders can be unexpectedly unbalanced.

My friends, we are called to do that work, as a covenantal community seeking ongoing personal and collaborative growth. To make space when we realize we already take more space than we thought, and invite others to take that space, especially those among us who have been accustomed to give it up.

My friends, may our prophetic imperative to justice, guide us toward a deeper understanding toward harmony, and truer balance among all of us. My friends, we have work to do – may we take it on.

So may it be,  
In Solidarity,  
Amen

*Suggested Hymns:*

## **Opening Hymn #360 Here We Have Gathered**

~)| Words: Alicia S. Carpenter, 1930- , © 1979 Alicia S. Carpenter

Music: Genevan psalter, 1543

OLD 124TH

## **Hymn #130 O Liberating Rose**

~)| Words: Mark L. Belletini, 1949- , © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association

~)| Music: Larry Phillips, 1948- , © 1984 Larry Phillips

INITIALS

## **Closing Hymn #125 From the Crush of Wealth and Power**

~)| Words: Kendyl L. R. Gibbons, 1955- , © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association

Music: Peter Cutts, 1937- , © 1969 Hope Publishing Co.

BRIDEGROOM