

# THE *CAKES* STORY:

## *A Brief Herstory of Cakes for the Queen of Heaven*

by the Rev. Elinor Artman

*“Women have no past, no history, no religion.”*

—Simone de Beauvoir, 1949

These words of Simone de Beauvoir were the opening lines of “A Statement of Feminist Theology” in *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven* in 1986, and remain so for this second edition in 2007. Of course, women DO have a past, a history, a religion—forgotten, hidden, repressed, ignored, rewritten. *Cakes* is part of the reclamation of that past.

And, to again belie de Beauvoir’s words, we now have over twenty more years of “illustrious herstory”—thanks to Unitarian Universalism’s experience with *Cakes*.

In 1977, the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly passed—unanimously!—the Women & Religion Resolution, urging Unitarian Universalists to “examine carefully their own religious beliefs and the extent to which these beliefs influence sex-role stereotypes.” It went on to urge all UUs to “make every effort to (a) put traditional assumptions and language in perspective, and (b) avoid sexist assumptions and language in the future.”

This Resolution seemed to have appeared suddenly—written and sponsored by laywoman Lucile Schuck Longview and friends, inspired by Lucile’s attendance at the United Nations Decade of Women conference in Mexico City in 1975. Although the times were right—with the national debate on the Equal Rights Amendment, the Second Wave of Feminism gathering strength, the push for women to enter all professions including the ministry—still this Resolution addressed another issue: religious feminism.

The sponsors wisely politicked for it, gathering support from both women and men, and quickly shepherding it through the usually lengthy denominational adoption process. Still, the sponsoring women were rather stunned by the ease of passage.

“They don’t realize what they’ve agreed to,” was their common thought.

In 1980, three years after that spectacular adoption of the Women & Religion Resolution, the first Women & Religion conference was held. Keynoters Naomi Goldenberg and Carol Christ opened our eyes to the potentials of feminist theology. Lucile Longview and Caroline McDade gifted us with the Water Ceremony. The first loud rumblings about the need to revise the Purposes and Principles surfaced. And Shirley Ranck was asked by the Unitarian Universalist Association to write a study guide which would help to implement the Resolution.

Twenty years later, we can trace to this sweeping Resolution, directly or indirectly:

- The reframing of the Unitarian Universalist Purposes and Principles
- The improvement of the gender balance on boards and administering bodies
- The adoption of inclusive language in all our written and spoken communications
- The virtual institutionalization of the Water Ceremony as our congregations’ re-gathering services each year in September
- The astonishing increase of the number of women ministers from a mere handful to over half of all our clergy

And, as I traveled the country in the years following the first publication of *Cakes*, I observed, and therefore attribute the following to *Cakes*, directly or indirectly:

- An ongoing interest in the religious history of women, and of feminist theologies around the world
- The practice of sitting in circles, face to face—rather than auditorium style, looking at the backs of others’ heads
- The lighting of the chalice to begin our gatherings
- The introduction of Joys and Sorrows in so many of our congregational worship services

- The rich creativity of so many UU women's rituals today: decorated altars, Goddess figures, chants and songs, robe and stoles, crowns and candles

Of course we occasionally sat in circles, lighted candles, shared our lives before *Cakes*, but seldom in a congregational worship service. *Cakes* itself includes no great rituals—only a few suggestions to help build community. But the women in those *Cakes* circles discovered their deep longing for such expressions of spirit; they creatively, tenderly, enlarged and embellished them, and then asked that their congregations do so also. It took years—but now we tend to believe we always had candles and chalice lightings and Joys and Sorrows in our Sunday morning worship. 'Twas not so. Such simple beginnings are oft forgotten.

Guided by the editorial hand of UUA staffer Leslie Westbrook, Shirley Ranck began the writing of *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven*, and it was completed within a year. But it was five years before it was in the hands of the women in our congregations. Some of the field-test groups wrote letters urging more speed. They personally knew what astounding effect the curriculum could have on women. Shirley Ranck turned to other tasks, losing hope of ever seeing *Cakes* published. But finally, finally, it appeared, beautifully boxed with a picture of a Minoan Priestess on the cover, a ten-session curriculum, including film strips, several relevant books, and other resources.

Why so long an incubation? For one thing, it took an inordinate amount of time to obtain the permissions to use the slides so necessary and enriching to the written word. The editor had changed. Leslie Westbrook moved on and Elizabeth Anastos took up the challenge.

And, well, it turned out to be controversial!

Finally people were beginning to understand what they had really voted for in 1977—the tremendous changes they had so readily agreed to when they passed the Women & Religion

Resolution.

What was controversial?

- It was written for women only
- It was focused on feminist theology
- It discussed Paganism and Witchcraft
- It explored women's body images
- It spoke of mother/daughter connections
- It was not grounded in reason or rationality but in emotions
- It addressed the patriarchal roots of Judaism and Christianity
- It was too psychological
- It was too personal
- It was too angry

Well, yes! Those things were all true. But take out the “too's.” And UU women loved it. It swept the country. It is estimated that 800 of our 1000 or so congregations have used it. When it finally went out of print some years ago, precious copies were copied and passed from group to group. Many of them still exist, annotated in the margins by women who had led the sessions ten, twenty times. Circles of women begun in 1986 still meet. Daughters are now experiencing it as their mothers had. Mothers and daughters are in *Cakes* Circles together. Ways have been found to include men—either with their own men-only groups, or with women who were open to that kind of discussion.

*Cakes* became a code word for sisters to connect all over the country.

Shirley Ranck was honored, in 2006, with the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation Ministry to Women Award. As part of that celebration, women throughout the denomination were asked to reflect on how *Cakes* had affected them.

The most common response was simply: “It changed my life!” They added others things:

- It connected me to my spiritual life.
- It made me aware of the Goddess aspect of history.

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- I am wishing for something to bring back the enthusiasm and energy we had in *Cakes* circles.
- It has changed the world.
- Men, too, appreciate this great contribution to religious enlightenment.
- To Shirley herself: your spirit sings and we rejoice that we are part of the chorus.

It changed my life!

And it changed Unitarian Universalism!

Early in its history, *Cakes* was the subject of a General Assembly workshop, sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation. The workshop title: "*Cakes*: Pillsbury's Best or Half-baked?"

The room was full to overflowing. Some of the panelists tried to talk about archeology and religious history—that perhaps there never was a golden day of Goddesses and feminism. Although only top scholars were used in *Cakes*, not all scholars agreed with their interpretations, and some panelists tried to make the workshop about these scholarly differences. But the women attending mostly had but one thing to say: It changed my life!

The serious scholars present bowed to such personal affirmations. Time for that later—right

then the joy of empowerment prevailed.

And we still ponder the main question that brought *Cakes* to such a point. The question was, and remains simply this: How would your life have been different if, when you were growing up, the divine had been imaged as female?

Naomi Goldenberg, in her 1979 book *Changing of the Gods*, said that as the images of divinity and of leadership broaden and become more diverse, we will begin to understand in a new way that "what binds us together as human beings is not, in fact, the contents of our religious and psychic imagery but rather the continual process of producing and reflecting upon that imagery."<sup>6</sup>

May it continue to be so.

Twenty years of *Cakes* history—and now a new edition, updated, renewed, revised and re-appreciated. What will the next twenty years bring?

Who will in the future declare:  
IT CHANGED MY LIFE!



*...inclusive language in all our written and spoken communications.*

# THE *CAKES* STORY:

## *Women and Religion Resolution*

Passed unanimously by the 1977 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association

### **WHEREAS,**

a principle of the Unitarian Universalist Association is to “affirm, defend, and promote the supreme worth and dignity of every human personality, and the use of the democratic method in human relationships;” and

### **WHEREAS,**

great strides have been taken to affirm this principle within our denomination; and

### **WHEREAS,**

some models of human relationships arising from religious myths, historical materials, and other teachings still create and perpetuate attitudes that cause women everywhere to be overlooked and undervalued; and

### **WHEREAS,**

children, youth and adults internalize and act on these cultural models, thereby tending to limit their sense of self-worth and dignity;

*...avoid sexist assumptions  
and language in the future.*

### **THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED:**

That the 1977 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association calls upon all Unitarian Universalists to examine carefully their own religious beliefs and the extent to which these beliefs influence sex-role stereotypes within their own families; and

### **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED:**

That the General Assembly urges the Board of Trustees of the Unitarian Universalist Association to encourage the Unitarian Universalist Association administrative officers and staff, the religious leaders within societies, the Unitarian Universalist theological schools, the directors of related organizations, and the planners of seminars and conferences, to make every effort to: (a) put traditional assumptions and language in perspective, and (b) avoid sexist assumptions and language in the future.

### **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED:**

That the General Assembly urges the President of the Unitarian Universalist Association to send copies of this resolution to other denominations examining sexism inherent in religious literature and institutions and to the International Association of Liberal Religious Women and the IARF;\* and

### **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED:**

That the General Assembly requests the Unitarian Universalist Association to: (a) join with those who are encouraging others in the society to examine the relationship between religious and cultural attitudes toward women, and (b) to send a representative and resource materials to associations appropriate to furthering the above goals; and

### **BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED:**

That the General Assembly requests the President of the UUA to report annually on progress in implementing this resolution.

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\*International Association for Religious Freedom

# THE *CAKES* STORY:

## *Baking Cakes for the Queen of Heaven*

by Nancy Vedder-Shults

Nancy Vedder-Shults is a UU singer, storyteller, educator, workshop facilitator and ritualist, from Madison, Wisconsin. She was the musical consultant for *Rise Up and Call Her Name* and her CD *Chants for the Queen of Heaven* is listed in “*Cakes Highly Recommended Materials*.” She wrote this song and sang it for Shirley Ranck at the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration for *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven* in 2006.



1. Jeremiah came to me,  
Cursing and a-shouting, wanting me to agree.  
He said Yahweh was mad,  
And we must change our ways,  
Or else his god would end our days.

2. Then Jeremiah said beware,  
Lest Yahweh's fury cause us despair,  
For he's a jealous god.  
We must serve him alone,  
Or he will grind us down to the bone.

*Chorus:*

We are gath'ring wood for the Queen of Heaven,  
Kindling fire for the Queen of Heaven,  
Kneading dough for the Queen of Heaven,  
Because we're baking cakes for the Queen of Heaven.

3. After years of this, some folks got scared.  
Hearing Jeremiah's words, they believed they  
had erred.  
And they ceased to pour drink offerings  
Or bake cakes for the Heavenly Queen.

4. Bitter lamentation was then our lot,  
And the Queen of Heaven was nearly forgot'.  
Captors carried us to Babylon  
And burned Jerusalem to the ground.

*Chorus:*

No more gath'ring wood for the Queen of Heaven,  
No more kindling fire for the Queen of Heaven,  
No more kneading dough for the Queen of Heaven,  
No more baking cakes for the Queen of Heaven.

5. Jeremiah said he'd prophesied  
Our captivity and all who had died.  
But we replied we had to disagree,  
We knew the grounds for our misery.

6. When we baked cakes for the Heavenly Queen,  
We had food to spare and our land was green.  
Now war and famine are all we see  
Since we called a halt to our piety.

*Chorus:*

We will gather wood for the Queen of Heaven,  
We will kindle fire for the Queen of Heaven,  
We will knead our dough for the Queen of Heaven,  
And we'll bake our cakes for the Queen of Heaven.

7. Our old ways we will revive  
And our lives again will thrive.  
We will pour for Her drink offerings  
And bake cakes for the Heavenly Queen.

*Chorus:*

We are baking cakes for the Queen of Heaven,  
Baking cakes for the Queen of Heaven,  
Baking cakes for the Queen of Heaven,  
Yes, we are baking cakes for the Queen of Heaven.

