

**IN PRAISE OF PROPHETIC WOMEN**  
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**READING            A WOMAN OF WORTH**

A woman of worth, who can find?  
For her price is far above rubies...  
She looketh well to the ways of her household,  
And eateth not the bread of idleness.  
Her children rise up and call her blessed;  
Her husband also, and he praiseth her;  
Many daughters have done valiantly  
But thou excellest them all.  
Grace is deceitful, and beauty is vain!  
But a woman that feareth the Lord,  
She shall be praised.

*Book of Proverbs, Chapter 31*

It is happenstance that this year the Jewish festival of Purim is the day before International Woman's Day. Purim celebrates the story of a courageous woman in Jewish history. International Woman's Day presents an occasion to look into the Sources of our own U\*U Living Tradition, to lift up a "herstory" of one of our own "*prophetic women*" whose "*words and deeds challenge us to confront the powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love*". It seems appropriate to recount the story of Emily Stowe, first woman doctor in Canada, and to reflect on what her story might have to say to us today.

I have called Emily Stowe a “prophetic” woman. A prophet is one who speaks out, who foretells the future. When we think of prophets we may first think of some of the dramatic characters in the Old Testament, like Daniel or Isaiah, who warned the Hebrew people to change their ways or suffer dire consequences. We may think of contemporary prophets like Martin Luther King or David Suzuki. We may not think as readily of ordinary women who have spoken out for “justice, equity and compassion” as they have gone about the business of their daily lives. Emily Stowe was just such a woman.

She was born Emily Howard Jennings in 1831, into a Quaker family who lived in a small southern Ontario farming community. The eldest of six girls, she was taught to live simply and to work very hard... to “looketh well to the ways of her household.” Hers was not just an ordinary rural girl’s childhood, however. She was a youngster during the Rebellion of 1837 in Upper Canada. She witnessed members of her own “pacifist” family risking their lives helping to support and shelter neighbours who were “reformers”, who were demanding just treatment from the government.

Quakers were enlightened people – ahead of most of the rest of Christendom at that time - in understanding women’s equality, their right to be respected, educated and free to follow their callings. Emily’s mother had

studied at a Quaker college in the U.S. and she home-schooled her daughters. Soon Emily was teaching her little sisters. Emily mused about becoming a doctor, but the only acceptable work for middle class women outside the home in those days was teaching. At age 15 she took a job in a local school. She was annoyed to find her salary was less than half what a male teacher made; nevertheless she saved for six years, planning to go on to university. Universities in 1853, she discovered, didn't accept women. Her only option for further education was the Normal School in Toronto – and even there the women and men were strictly segregated. But off she went.

There was no Quaker community in Toronto then, and so at this time she worshipped with the Methodists. Emily graduated with such high marks that a school in Brantford ON hired her as their principal. This was a first – Emily Jennings, first woman principal in Canada! Of course here too, she was paid much less than a man's wage. Soon she met and married John Stowe, a carriage-maker, and a supportive, liberal-minded man. As a married woman she now had to retire from teaching so she stayed home to raise a family, and again, to “looketh well to the ways of her household”.

Then John Stowe took ill with tuberculosis. He had to leave home, and would spend ten years in a sanatorium. With three small children to raise Emily now needed a job. More than ever she became aware of the unfairness

of laws about women. Married women were not allowed to teach. Fortunately a friend of the family who owned a private school employed her. Her sister, Cornelia, came to live with them and help take care of the children.

In the midst of all this, Emily again heard her call to become a doctor. Imagine her frustration when she applied to the University of Toronto to find her application rejected... women were still not admitted! In her interview with the President, Dr. John McCaul, prophetic woman, Emily Stowe, said:

***“Your Senate may refuse to admit women now, but the day will come when these doors will swing wide open to every female who chooses to apply.”***

To which McCaul replied, ***“Never in my day Madam. The doors of the University are not open to women and I trust they never will be.”***

Prophetic woman, Emily Stowe, had the last word: ***“Then I will make it the business of my life to see that they will be opened, that women may have the same opportunities as men.”***

For Emily to become a doctor there was no other option but to go to the United States where there were then three medical schools accepting women. Even there she was over-stepping the bounds of women in her times. While in the US Emily met other courageous women who were determined to change the patterns of women’s oppression... Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony... suffragists... many of them Unitarians. Emily graduated from medical school with not only a degree but with radical ideas... women should be allowed to vote!

In 1867, Dr. Emily Stowe returned to Canada, opening an office in Toronto. Women, grateful to find a woman doctor, flocked to her flourishing practice. There was a new problem, however. The recently established College of Physicians and Surgeons required all doctors to be licensed, but Emily was still banned from taking the necessary qualifying courses at the University of Toronto School of Medicine. She continued for some years without a licence. Finally, she and one other woman received permission to attend lectures. Even so they were ridiculed and harassed by men students. Under so much stress, Emily failed the exam. Thus her friend, Jenny Trout, became the first woman to be licensed as a doctor, although Emily had been in business much longer. She continued to practice, despite being fined.

Finally, after thirteen years as a doctor, Emily sufficiently impressed her male colleagues with her skill that they agreed to give her a licence. It was 1880. She was 49 years old. Her husband, John, had finally recovered from TB and was home and practising as a dentist. With her family growing and her own practice thriving, she had made it. She could have just left it at that. However, prophetic woman, Emily Stowe, was not finished.

In 1876, Emily formed “The Toronto Women’s Literary Club.” This was a respectable cover for a radical group of feminists who had decided to work together to improve the lives of women. Emily said:

***“We should not just watch what is going on politically. It’s like trying to learn to swim by watching a frog in a basin. If we want to learn to swim, we must get in the water ourselves. We must be a part of the political life of our country.”***

The Literary Club held lectures on important controversial women’s issues.

During this time Emily Stowe became a member of the First Unitarian Church of Toronto, a religious community that affirmed her liberal views and offered her a platform on which to speak out for justice for women.

Emily’s club addressed and brought positive changes to many women’s issues, such as gaining improved working conditions for women in sweatshops. Eventually deciding that what women most needed was the franchise, the courageous members of the club ‘came out’ and renamed it “The Toronto Women’s Suffrage Association”. They redoubled their efforts to educate, network and advocate for women. They even staged a mock parliament to debate whether *men* should be allowed to vote. Gradually they began to change people’s minds. It was slow work. When Emily Stowe died in 1903, Canadian women were still years away from gaining the full federal franchise. Other courageous women would see that work completed in 1917.

But Emily Stowe had seen other victories. Over the years she had continued to press for women’s admittance to the University. With the help of a supportive male colleague she started the Ontario Medical College for Women – which would eventually become what we now know as “Women’s

College Hospital”. In 1883, Emily’s daughter, Augusta Stowe Gullen, was the first woman to graduate from a Canadian medical college. In 1884, after so many years of resistance, the doors of the University of Toronto finally ***“swung wide open to every woman who chose to apply.”*** Emily Stowe had worked hard and lived to realize her own prophecy. I... as a woman who has received a degree from the University of Toronto,... am humbly grateful.

What does the story of Emily Stowe mean to us today? Certainly her words and deeds *“challenge us to confront the powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love;”* Stowe’s life models many ways we can choose to work for justice even in our own times. As different challenges came to her she responded in different ways: at times she provided direct service to people in need; at other times she educated people toward greater understanding. Sometimes she gave public witness to a cause, at other times she networked with like-minded people. Eventually she became a vocal advocate for changing repressive laws. Few of us have the energy or skills to do social justice work in all those many ways, but we can all do some parts of it, sometimes, somewhere, for someone.

Thinking about Stowe’s story, I asked myself the question, “What is it that pushes or inspires a person (woman or man) to stand up and resist injustice? Why are some folks just not content to sit back or “get on with

their own lives and business?” What are the circumstances that would lead a person to “get active”, to choose “*to confront the powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love?*” I came up with three different motives for why I think some people do choose to stand up for what is right – perhaps you can think of more.

The first motive I see is self-defence. Some form of injustice or persecution is directly threatening their very life or well-being. Injustice is “in their face” depriving them of the necessities or dignities of life. Some people who are oppressed simply cave in, but others decide to fight back to protect themselves or their loved ones. Queen Esther, in the Purim story today, chose to face the King, not only because of her dignity, but her life and the lives of her people were at stake. Emily Stowe fought against *the powers and structures of evil* for her right to a job because she needed to feed her family. The first motive I see for fighting injustice is “self defence”, coming out of oppression.

The second motive for confronting injustice that I see is self-advancement, or “self-offence”. Some people, while not in any danger or state of deprivation, find themselves bumping up against *powers and structures of evil* that prevent them from becoming all that they are called to do or be. Many decide just to give up, but others, when they hit such a glass

ceiling, choose to fight back. Emily Stowe wanted a University education, and to be a doctor but she was held back only because she was a woman. She chose to press forward, to confront, over and over again. This incentive to act for justice comes out of passion, the desire for “self-actualization”.

The third motive I see that pushes people into social justice work is “selflessness”. There are people whose own life circumstances are safe and sound, who are not thwarted from living their lives as they wish, but who choose to *confront the powers and structures of evil* for the sake of others. These are people who feel another’s sorrow or hardship to the point of actively reaching out to help the one who is suffering. They may not stand to gain anything personally, in fact they may take personal risks, but they feel in some way connected to the ones who suffer. Like the good Samaritan, they act out of sympathy or mercy, a deeply felt love for fellow human beings. Emily Stowe, long after she had won her own battles, kept up the struggle to win rights for other women: the right to a University education, the right to vote, the right to be treated equitably. This is the incentive of compassion, a choice to act for justice, made out of “selflessness”.

These then, are the three incentives I see: self-defence coming out of oppression; self-actualization coming out of passion; and selflessness coming out of compassion. The first two, although they require courage and

determination, are self-rewarding and are not so difficult to understand. If achieving justice for oneself leads to justice for others too, then all the better.

This last incentive, however, selflessness coming from compassion, is more profound. What is it that makes one person compassionate and another indifferent? Is compassion something we are born with? Or not? Can it be taught? Emily Stowe witnessed compassion early in her childhood when she saw her elders hiding and protecting neighbours who were rebelling against an unjust government. Was this the source of her strength, determination and courage? Was it her Christian faith – the golden rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”? Was it the very fact that she had suffered herself that moved her to address the suffering of others? I don’t know.

I do know Unitarian\*Universalists believe all people are capable of growth and learning in mind and spirit all our lives. Compassion is a quality that we affirm, promote and challenge ourselves to develop. We teach our children, we encourage one another, and we strive individually to learn how to be more loving and caring of others. Do we then go forth and do it?

*“A woman that feareth the Lord, She shall be praised.”* Prophetic woman, Emily Stowe, deserves our praise, for in fearing the Lord she followed the direction of the Hebrew prophet Micah (6:8) who said *“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness and to*

*walk humbly with your God?*” Whatever we name our own God, we can do no less.

I would like to close by asking you to read responsively with me the words printed in the order of service: “IF WE DO NOT, WHO WILL #