

## Who Is Pandora?

October 7, 2015 by [Liz Fisher](#) [2 Comments](#)



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We are now engaged in a moral struggle. Whether individuals are able to determine their family size and spacing or remain childless by choice is at the center of one of the most vitriolic political debates we have had to endure. Without access to birth control and safe legal abortion, for many this ability to decide is denied. There is more a stake than a women's right to choose, however.

While this debate is currently about funding of healthcare through Planned Parenthood, a reputable organization that serves millions of men and women by providing a wide range of health services, the real issue is deeper. And it all comes down to the ubiquitous story of Pandora and her box.

In pre-patriarchal societies, she was an aspect of the Great Goddess. She declares: “I am Pandora, Giver of All Gifts.” She lifted the lid from a large jar and sprinkled handfuls of seeds along the hillside, bringing all manner of wonderful plants to the Earth.

In its original form published by the UUA in 1986, *Cakes for the Queen of Heaven* by Rev. Shirley Ranck included the book of authentic versions of the



Ancestral Spirit: Offertory Vessel made by UU Potter Nancy Levin

original myths entitled **Lost Goddesses of Early Greece** by

Charlene Spretnak who tells us: “Then Pandora turned the jar on its side, inundating the hillside with her flowing grace. The mortals were bathed in the changing colors of her aura. She told them: I bring you wonder, curiosity, memory. I bring you wisdom. I bring you justice with mercy. I bring you caring and communal bonds. I bring you courage, strength, endurance. I bring you loving kindness for all beings. I bring you the seeds of peace.”

The most well-known version of the story of Pandora, as we all know, is quite the opposite. This version makes female intellectual curiosity a negative, and punishes women and the world for her inquisitiveness. Like many other Goddess stories, it was invented by the fifth century BC Greek Hesiod. After his retelling, no longer does Pandora bring life giving gifts in her great jar (later turned into a box), but rather disease, misery and death. In this version so often referenced, Pandora is solely

responsible for unleashing destructive forces. Hope is rarely mentioned for, according to the most frequently quoted revisions, Pandora did not let Her out of the box.

To his credit, Nathaniel Hawthorne's account, while still patriarchal in origin, hold Pandora's husband Epimetheus equally guilty. While Hawthorne does affirm that all "the family of early Troubles escaped from the box," he tells us that Hope was in the jar as well. Hope speaks to the pair and assures them she will always be in the world. Hawthorne ends his tale by being glad the box was opened for even though Troubles were released into the world, so was Hope which spiritualizes the earth and make it new again. At least Hawthorne's version is more nuanced and generous to Pandora, and is well worth reading.

Some folklorists believe Pandora's Box has become a metaphor for a woman's womb. Perhaps being forced to have children against her will is a punishment for the woman opening her "box" when she has been forbidden to do so. In other words, by claiming their rights to determine their own sexual behavior and relationship to motherhood, women are visiting all manner of evil on the world.

These associations are triggered by on-going indirect attacks and now direct accusations. Those who control the House of Representatives are threatening to close down the U.S. Government if Planned Parenthood is not defunded because of false claims about Planned Parenthood's practices. The New England Journal of Medicine calls this a *shameful misrepresentation* of a perfectly legitimate and responsible practice on the part of Planned Parenthood. The editorial ends: "We are outraged by those who debase these women, this work, and Planned Parenthood by distorting the facts for political ends."

The full statement: <http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMe1510281>



Pandora's Box image from Nathaniel Hawthorne's retelling of this myth in *A Wonder-Book: Tanglewood Tales, and Grandfather's Chair* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1891 (image in the public domain)

The **UU Women and Religion Movement** focuses on the power of myth. The language of the 1977 General Assembly Business Resolution which passed unanimously “challenges models of human relationships arising from religious myths, historical materials, and other teachings which still create and perpetuate attitudes that cause women everywhere to be overlooked and undervalued.” It affirmed that children, youth and adults internalize and act on these cultural models, thereby tending to limit their sense of self-worth and dignity. The resolution called on UUs to widely publicize this perspective. Still so many years later, we see this premise operating at the very center of the Planned Parenthood debate, illustrating starkly why we must continue to engage this discussion. See [www.LucilesRedNotebook.org](http://www.LucilesRedNotebook.org) for more information about this viewpoint.

The Women and Religion Movement from the beginning has also been concerned with celebrating the Sacredness of Nature. In the 1980s, women and religion activists were primary supporters of the formation of the Covenant of UU Pagans (CUUPS).

Another UU organization, the UU Women's Federation, issued this statement on September 29, 2015 when Cecile Richards, President of Planned Parenthood, testified before a Congressional Committee:

For more than 50 years, the UUWF has been a voice for Unitarian Universalist women and for other women and girls across the country, working to advance justice for women and girls and promoting their spiritual growth. Over our history, the UUWF has spoken out for the right of individual conscience in decisions about family planning, and has worked in concert with many others to secure access to contraception and abortion. We were a founding member of what is now the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, and sit on its coordinating council.

We are also giving a **special \$10,000 gift to PPFA** and will be encouraging our thousands of members and friends to donate generously.

The UUWF published *Rise Up and Call Her Name* and continues to publicize it. This experiential course both celebrates and educates about earth-based spiritualities and religions around the globe, focusing on their woman-honoring aspects. Remembering how various strands within the UUA support one another is an important way of strengthening ourselves and connecting with one another.

What about ecological concerns and implications? The interconnected web demands balancing of varied life forms so natural biodiversity can continue. Instead, the exponential growth of the human population and our careless use of natural resources is causing grave imbalances which are continuing to escalate. When we consider this situation, planning parenthood is one of the most ethical actions anyone can take. Planned Parenthood is helping many low income and otherwise unserved people to do just this. To deny them these services seems to me to be immoral.

As people of conscience, then, we are called to continue to raise our voices in support of every person's right to practice loving sexuality without being forced to parent when they choose not to, because of repressive governmental actions. And, we must reaffirm our pledge to support those who take ecological balance into account when deciding on family size by insisting they have access to the family planning health care this requires.

Art sources:

A pottery urn entitled *Ancestral Spirit: Offertory Vessel* made by UU Potter Nancy Levin, received by Liz Fisher in 1994 from the UUWF in recognition of the course she authored, *Rise Up and Call Her Name: A Woman-honoring Journey into Global Earth-based Spiritualities*. Nancy says: "This ancient mother was made during the full moon. One piece of clay was opened upon a potter's wheel and then thrown into a sacred enclosure that formed her face as reflection of the blessing of the moon. We are joined around the world by the rhythm of the earth and the moon. Listen openly to the rhythm and the ancestors appear."

Pandora's Box image from Nathaniel Hawthorne's retelling of this myth in *A Wonder-Book: Tanglewood Tales, and Grandfather's Chair* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1891 (image in the public domain)

Comments

[Name](#) • [10 months ago](#)

"Without access to birth control and safe legal abortion, for many this ability to decide is denied." For most people, not having sex is an option. They can even have oral sex, which doesn't lead to pregnancy. Or anal sex. or masturbate. No-one needs to give up orgasms to avoid getting pregnant. So I wouldn't say 'many'. Once you create a life you are morally responsible for it. If flushing your goldfish down the drain because you're bored with it is wrong, how much worse is killing your unborn child?

[Mariah Sheehy Name](#) • [10 months ago](#)

Because having sex is always a choice right? And the "pro-life" movement is so sympathetic to rape and abuse victims. <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/po...> Often abusive partners sabotage contraceptives. Once again, the "Christian" right has been so supportive of funding affordable housing, childcare, battered women's shelters. If you claim to care about babies actually walk your talk and care about them after they are born- and care about the mothers before they get pregnant.