



UU Women's Federation Sermon Award 2018
Honorable Mention

"#MeToo"

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#MeToo

When I was in high school, I met with a college counselor who was a friend of my stepdad's. We sat alone together in a living room, and he asked me to tell him what I thought my strengths were. It's a pretty typical question during college application time, but it makes most people a little nervous, given that we have a hard time boasting about ourselves. I shyly responded that I worked hard in school and in sports. I was on the Varsity volleyball and basketball teams and made all A's. I was able to be friends with all kinds of people. I was fluent in Spanish and loved languages.

But as I spoke, I became more nervous because he was smiling at me in a coy way, as if he had a secret. When I finished my answer, he kept smiling, paused and then said:

"Well, ____ (name removed) ____, you've forgotten something *very* important....You are also *very* **beautiful**."

This is my tamest story.

You've most likely heard of the #metoo movement. The movement actually began over a decade ago as a way for sexual assault and harassment survivors to find solidarity and healing.

In the last few months, the stories of *so many* women have finally not only been allowed airtime, but even been *believed* – by some at least.

Finally there is space for women to tell their stories.

When the #metoo movement exploded on social media, friends and acquaintances I hadn't talked to in decades started messaging me: "I saw your #metoo...here's mine. Did you know about this?"

The cascade of new revelations reopened wounds for many women. Some stayed away from the news for a time so as not to trigger old pains they could not abide.

The movement has sent most (all?) women (and some men and gender-nonconforming people) into the basements of their memories as we unearthed and catalogued all the times of unwanted touch, of repeated innuendo.

Many women have hesitated to publically say “#metoo.” For survivors of rape and abuse, the hesitation is about the very real fear of retribution. For those with less blatant but still very harmful histories, there is also often hesitation. It is as if we all know viscerally, that yes: “#metoo,” but, because of the way women who speak up on this issue are questioned and threatened...we know that if we say #metoo, even in a tiny Facebook post, we’d need to be ready to respond to the **critique**.

Still, women everywhere started cataloging their experiences, evaluating the harassment and abuse they experienced. Sometimes women even asked each other: “Does *this* count? If it’s not rape, does it count?” And then we said to one another: “What an awful thing to be asking each other if it counts?” We told each other, “Yes, that’s awful. Yes, that **counts**.”

When I ministered as a college chaplain, I **can’t count** the number of times young women came to my office to break open with their story of a recent or long-ago sexual assault. It began to make sense to simply **assume** that the majority of the young women at the college had experienced some kind of sexual abuse in their young lifetime, or – tragically– would soon.

If you move through the world as a woman or gender nonconforming person, chances are that you have experienced some of this. Chances are you have been taught or told to be quiet, to get a sense of humor, or to accept that you were somehow to blame for what happened.

It's not a coincidence that it has taken the stories of celebrities to finally break through to this moment. We value the stories of our movie stars in the U.S., far more than the stories of the farm worker or the hotel maid or the secretary or even the CEO. Celebrities are more likely to be believed, and less likely to face poverty or death after speaking up.

It's also not a coincidence that it's been mostly white women who have been believed.

Our country has a shameful history of believing the stories of white women over the stories of people of color. Decades ago when a white woman said a black boy or man looked at her the wrong way, she was believed, and he was lynched. Just this year, 60 years after she claimed that 14-year-old Emmett Till was sexually crude toward her and he was brutally murdered, the woman who accused him admitted it was not true.

Sexism and racism are inextricably intertwined in our culture. The **reason** white women were believed in the Jim Crow Days is because white women were seen as the **property** of white men. Black men even daring to go near white women was an affront to the power system. Sexism and racism are intertwined.

Many have pointed out that Tarana Burke, the black woman who founded the #metoo movement was **not** included on the cover of *Time* Magazine last week when Time made the #metoo women its Person of the Year.

White actresses and supposed feminists in the show *Girls* came out to defend their writer when he was accused by a woman of color for sexual assault.

And when the wave of claims kept descending on Harvey Weinstein, he didn't break his silence to defend himself until black actress Lupita Nyong'o told her story. Of all the women, he chose her to publicly discredit. And many women of color have pointed out that our president, who was caught on tape bragging in vile terms about sexual assault, was elected by a majority of white women.

And, as was painfully clear in our service a few weeks ago for transgender day of remembrance, transgender women of color receive the worst of it. In a culture where white supremacy and toxic masculinity are the air we breathe – to be a person of color **and** resist gender norms puts you right in the crosshairs of the worst of our culture.

We hear the statistics about the number of women raped each year, and the number of women experiencing domestic abuse. We see the rape whistles on the market, and the articles about how to best protect yourself from an assault. I remember taking a self-defense class for girls at my high school. We spend **so much energy** in our culture telling women how not to get raped.

At what point do we start teaching *men* how *not* to rape?

Where are the statistics about the number of men who rape each year?

Where are the classes for boys about consent?

This #metoo movement has gained steam because we are finally talking about the people – almost always men – on the other side of these stories. Some of them are finally having to face consequences – sometimes after lifetimes of abusing women.

This is hard stuff – stuff our culture doesn't want us to think about. Often, defenses arise within us: “not all men” and “but some women lie about it” and “it's not just women who are assaulted” and “but that man is a good man.” Maybe so, but these defenses distract us from the bigger reality.

The response to all of these defenses is to see sexism and toxic masculinity in the same way we see racism and white supremacy. It's the air we breathe; it's in our conscious and unconscious behaviors. This is on **all** of us. And so the cure is in all of us, too.

The researcher Rachel Yehuda has studied trauma and found that effects of racism and sexism live at the cellular level and get passed down at the cellular level. But **the good**

news is she also found that it is not fixed. Therapy produced cellular changes in trauma survivors.

So we do not have to be defined by what happened to us.

We can define ourselves by the ways we have survived. By our courage in telling our stories. By all we have done despite what happened.

And **we as a culture** do not have to be defined by abusive misogyny.

If we do something about it, we do not have to continue to be a culture of toxic masculinity, where boys learn that girls want to be overpowered, where boys learn that a successful man gets his way whenever and however he wants. We do not have to continue to be a society where “locker room talk” is acceptable, where boys are taught “don’t cry,” where male loneliness is an epidemic, where some men take to assault rifles and mass shootings to feel powerful.

We can shift into a culture where, to paraphrase Judy Chicago, “both men and women [and everyone!] will be gentle. Where both women and men [and everyone!] will be strong.”

As Lindy West writes, for every story told, we must remember there are also “invisible ripples of confidence lost, jobs quit, careers stalled, women’s influence diminished, men’s power entrenched.”

Likewise, the writer Rebecca Solnit asks, “What would women’s lives be like, what would our roles and accomplishments be, what would our world be, without this terrible punishment that looms over our daily lives?”

I often think about the human genius, creativity, and variety that gets crushed before it’s even in the bud –because a girl was groomed and raped and never believed, because a black boy was enslaved, because a boy was told “don’t be a pussy,” because a person who

looked and acted different was disappeared, ...because a high schooler sitting across from a college counselor was told that her beauty was all that mattered.

We talk in Unitarian Universalism and in this church about our vision of the beloved community – and **this** is what that vision is about: about a world where **all** of our inherent worth and dignity, **all** of our marvelous variety and beauty, **all** of our diverse gifts and potential – are given air to breathe, nourishing love, & the gifts of supportive community.

Imagine that world! This is our vision!

So, what do we do?

We listen to the stories at the margins. If we are men: especially the stories of women and gender non-conforming people. If we are white: especially the stories of people of color.

What do we do? We start healing the toxic masculinity around us. We teach our boys it's okay to cry. When we see a girl, we don't always say: what a pretty dress.

We give space to our men to feel. We stop interrupting women when they talk.

We heal our culture's association of sexuality with power. We let vulnerability, courage, and authenticity be sexy. We let consent be sexy. We teach girls and women that sex should feel good. We teach consent to our children.

That's why I tell my family members that they must ask my daughter's permission to tickle her or kiss her. That's why, especially if I don't know you well, I ask before I hug you.

What do we do? We say #metoo. We tell our stories. We trust that they *count*. We listen. We hope and work for a world in which we can stop counting. We gain strength from one another's courage.