

A #MeToo Nation

A sermon offered by Rev. Kathleen C. Rolenz
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Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis

I remember her face. I was twenty years old on a road trip to Washington DC with two of my male friends, Steve and Michael. We were giddy with enthusiasm in the way that youth are, hanging out the car windows, shouting at the cherry blossoms, high on spring and life and our freedom. We were stopped at a light, and Steve saw a young woman standing on the corner. He wolf whistled her, and then said something like “Hey, Pretty Woman – you are Gorgeous!” My other friend, Mike scolded Steve. “Why did you do that? She didn’t want that attention.” Steve was completely astonished by this chastisement. “What are you talking about? He said. “She was beautiful! I was just paying her a compliment!”

We went on with the rest of the trip – and in fact – the rest of our lives. That was over thirty years ago now, and when I asked both of my friends if they remember that moment in time, neither one call recall it. But I did because I remember her face. Until that moment of being catcalled, her face was open, neutral. But after being whistled at by Steve, her face changed and she looked self-conscious and distinctly uncomfortable.

After the New York Times and the New Yorker broke the story about Harvey Weinstein’s pattern of sexual assaults, it’s as if it unleashed a tidal wave of other stories that are now seeing the light of day. Of course we know the history of the sexual harassment and assault didn’t begin with the revelations of last October. Some of us will remember the courage of Anita Hill, testifying about the abusive and bizarre behavior of the now Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas. More recent of course is the infamous recording of the then candidate Trump boasting about assaulting women. Since the Weinstein story broke, however, we’ve been hearing about similar revelations on an almost weekly basis. They all have a familiar thread running through them: stories about powerful men accused of a range of behaviors: from inappropriate touching, texting, suggestive conversations, propositions, to outright

physical assault to rape. Beyond this, what also came to light has been the ways in which these men have sought to cover up their behavior through binding arbitration, confidentiality clauses, hush money, threats of damaging or destroying careers to threats of physical harm to the victims and their loved ones. And even beyond this, a vast network of enablers have been exposed; those who worked with these powerful men to create a culture which allows this behavior to continue.

It wasn’t anyone in Weinstein’s powerful circles that blew the whistle on his behavior. It was a journalist, who after receiving enough credible evidence, went public with the truth that so many people knew about and were too afraid to say – except for the women and some men who finally said “Me Too.”

What the “MeToo” and the later “Time’s Up” movement has revealed, is the prevalence and pernicious nature of sexual misconduct, abuse and violence that occurs just below the surface of our so-called civilized society. What we are experiencing now is what Jesus cautioned against thousands of years ago: “there is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed; or hidden that will not be made known. What was whispered in the ear to silence is now being proclaimed from the rooftops.” MeToo is being proclaimed from our nation’s rooftops – and it’s about time.

Before we begin, I want to acknowledge a couple of things. Sexual violence happens to gay and straight people alike; it happens to women and men; girls and boys. While I will be speaking primarily about the effects this has had on women, I want to recognize that men and boys have been victims of sexual violence as well. While much attention has been paid to heterosexual power dynamics, lesbian and gay women and men can find themselves in predatory and abusive relationships. I also want to recognize the fact that there are individuals who do not fall easily into either one of these gender categories; and there are transgender persons who risk violent assault every day just by being who they are. While I do not go into great depth of this degree of violence; I see you and honor your full personhood.

Finally, I want to name how painful this topic is of course, for women, but for those of you who identify as men – finding yourself caught in a confusing stew of what it means to be a man in this culture, who may find yourself at sea about what’s appropriate and acceptable behavior, and, with the dawning realization that some of what you thought might be okay, never really was.

I believe that the MeToo Movement is an important cultural milestone in the life of this country; and indeed, I hope in the life of the world. As I said earlier, sexual harassment and assault is not new – and neither is the moniker “Me Too. It’s important to note that the phrase “MeToo “was originated by Tarana Burke, a woman of color who had been working on issues of violence against women and girls for over ten years before the phrase was used by the actress Alyssa Milano. The MeToo movement has spread beyond its origins, as it has pointed out the fact that issues of sexual harassment and assault acknowledges that not only is this an issue of relationships between women and men, but about power – who has it; who wields it; and what they do with that power. In addition, the MeToo Movement has shot an arrow into the heart of patriarchy that is shaped by what’s being called Toxic Masculinity; that is, the ways in which men’s experiences and perception of the world as a force to dominate and control wounds all of us.

Let’s go back to that corner in Washington DC for a moment. I’ve wondered why I remember that event so well when my male friends don’t, and it wasn’t until I started thinking about the MeToo movement that I realized why: *because it was so normative.*

As a child I remember watching cartoons that featured the skunk Pepe LePew, chasing after a female skunk who kept trying to avoid what I later realized was stalking. I thought that was the way men who were attracted to women were supposed to behave. As a young woman, I remember a formative commercial from as late as 1980’s – for Enjoli perfume – “I can bring home the bacon, fry it up in a pan, and never let you forget you’re a man – cuz I’m a woman...” That’s what a heterosexual woman is supposed to be like, right? Need I say that most likely it was not a woman who penned that commercial.

What we are facing now, as a nation, as a people, I think goes straight at the core of the first principle of Unitarian Universalism – what it means to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of a person without imposing your own will on that individual? What is so egregious about these stories – so sickening really – is the complete and utter contempt and disregard for both another human beings’ agency AND the innate power in which heterosexual men are given because of living under centuries of patriarchy. What is even more astonishing, inspiring and hopeful to me is the number of women and some men who have been violated who who are naming their experiences out loud and saying “Me Too.”

In this area, I have thus far, escaped the worst excesses of patriarchy. I’ve not been sexually assaulted, but I have been subject to hugs held too long and too close; inappropriate access to touching my body, and the usual challenges to my intellectual capacity because I identify as female. I’ve lived most of my life believing I had to work twice as hard and four times as long as my male colleagues to prove that I could do the job. I’ve had to think about not appearing either too dowdy or too appealing to be taken seriously. In addition to these ordinary realities, there is the fact that most women think about their physical safety *all the time*. Ask any woman in this room and you’ll get a list of things we do in order to feel “safe.” We walk with our keys between our fingers, we park under bright lights, we jog with a friend, we buy security systems for our homes.

That’s why it’s all the more damaging when someone you trust and admire; someone who says they believe in you and wants to support your career betrays that trust because of their own need to gratify their desire for sex, power and/or control. Unitarian Universalism has by no means been immune to this dynamic of sexual abuse. For more than thirty years we have had public conversations and worked on the covenants and disciplinary processes that challenge clergy sexual abuse among us, and we’re not finished yet.

With all of the positive attention given to Metoo, I knew there would be backlash of response – and there was. The posts can be so mean-spirited and ugly, but I did discern a common thread among

some of the men who posted about the metoo movement.

Many of their comments fall under a couple of categories: (1) these women were adults and in some cases, had consensual sex; (2) if the harassment was so bad why didn't they report it to an authority or HR director, etc, (3) this is a new form of gold-diggers, meaning women who were using men to get ahead, only to dump and discard them once they got what they wanted. Another criticism that was lobbied against the MeToo movement was led by the French actress, Catherine Deneuve and 100 other women signed and wrote an open letter to the French publication "Le Monde". In that letter, Deneuve writes:

Rape is a crime. But trying to pick up someone however persistently or clumsily is not – nor is gallantry an attack of machismo...#MeToo has led to a campaign...against individuals who, without being given a chance to respond or defend themselves are put in the exact same category as sex offenders....This summary justice has already had its victims: men who've been disciplined in the workplace, forced to resign, when their only crime was to touch a woman's knee, try to steal a kiss..or send sexually charged messages to women who did not return their interest... Today we are educated enough to understand that sexual impulses are, by nature, offensive and primitive – but we are also able to tell the difference between an awkward attempt to pick someone up and what constitutes a sexual assault."

All of the above arguments have a valid side. I could take on each of these arguments, but for today, I want to look more closely at Deneuve's letter. Indeed, human sexuality is a powerful force; literally having the power to create life. Our human entanglements and attraction are confusing, awkward, and mixed up with fantasy, desire, lust, love and guilt. What Deneuve and the other signers of this manifesto get right is that women do not automatically become victims if they are subjected to men's desire of them. What Deneuve and other critics get wrong – and completely miss – is the dynamic of power that is the core issue of the MeToo movement.

In all of the scenarios we've heard about, from Weinstein forward, these are stories of men in positions of power over a woman. Whether having the ability to influence their career, their reputation or their livelihood, in each scenario there was an imbalance of power. The man then decided to use his power to either force, coerce or make it extremely difficult to escape unscathed – either physically or emotionally.

As more stories poured forth, the nation realized that this didn't just happen to rich white movie stars; it didn't just happen with Weinstein or Lauer or Rose; this degree of coercive power was used on the women who clean your hotel rooms, the nannies who babysit your children, the technicians who do your nails, the waitress who serves your food, the doctor who operates on your body, the lawyers who negotiate your divorce, the teachers who instruct your children, the ministers who preach your sermons.

This happens to women regardless of race or age or shape of body or size; this happens to women by being grabbed, touched, objectified, sized up, dressed down, , and I am here to testify that while you can find exceptions to every rule, the best place to start is...believe the women.

Because for every false accusation – and yes, I admit there have been false accusations – I think of the white woman who accused 14 year old Emmet Till of whistling and groping her – resulting in his death – for every false accusation I can guarantee you there are hundreds, thousands of stories that have not been told because they feared that they wouldn't be believed. Or, those stories would be discounted as hysterical, or, confusing an unwanted flirtation with a sexual assault.

In some ways, the revelation about the imbalance of power is not unlike the ways in which white people have come to understand racism. We discovered that racism is not personal prejudice, but it's that prejudice combined with power to create a system of oppression and white supremacy. Patriarchy – that is the elevation of aggressive and conquering tendencies is the combination of sexism and power.

All of this theory however, doesn't generally trickle down to the average man, who, like my friend in the

car in DC was raised to believe that women would appreciate his admiration of them. It's confusing for men too. Since then, I've had private conversations with men who have said things like: "I don't really know what's okay anymore. Can I compliment a woman if she looks nice? Am I sexist if I hold a door open for her? Am I allowed to flirt with someone I find attractive?"

In answering these questions, I always ask two things: (1) what's the nature of your relationship with this person and (2) what's your intent? Do you have a relationship built on trust from past experience? If so, then you've taken the time to know the person and compliments then could be mutual. But does that compliment or action have an aspect of your own self-interest; that you're hoping to "get" something out of it? Find other ways to express your appreciation for someone other than commenting on her physical appearance.

I want to be clear here. The problem is not with the fact of being born into, or identifying with the male gender. The problem is toxic masculinity, which is defined as traits of dominance, devaluation of women, extreme self-reliance and the suppression of emotions. Bell Hooks, in her book: *The Will to Change* puts it this way:

*The truth we do not tell is that men are longing for love. This is the longing feminist thinkers must dare to examine, explore and talk about. Those rare visionary feminist seers, who are now no longer all female, are no longer afraid to openly discuss issues of men, masculinity and love. Women have been joined by men with open minds and big hearts, men who love, men who know how hard it is for males to practice the art of loving in patriarchal culture."*¹

The problem is a culture that defines success by an overweening desire to crush the "other." The problem is the inability to look at the face of that woman on the street and understand that most women *don't* want your attention, no matter how much you think she *should*. The problem is our ability to bring an awareness of own desires, needs and sexual longings in alignment with a commitment to honoring the dignity of every single

person. It requires compassion, not conquest; vulnerability, not violation; such an awareness demands the human self to risk the truth that lies at the heart of all of us – we need one another. We long for connection, for community, for touch. We need love. We want someone to know us – to be truly known.

This kind of work is hard work – it's heart work – its soul work.

But I believe that thanks to the many women who have spoken in secret,

"yo tambien,"

to the women who whispered behind their keyboards, "me too"

to the women who have shouted into the streets "Me too"

to the women who took to the red carpet, lifting their trophies aloft "Me Too"

to the ones in this very room "me too" I believe this work is actually for all of us; men, women, genderfree, transgender, humans all – for us to do the work of righting centuries of wrong; of changing unearned power into something far more beautiful and lasting - human relationships that reflect our inner holiness; the inner beauty that shines – the spark of the divine which is our birthright – and our original blessing. Amen and may it be so.

¹ Hooks, Bell. *The Will to Change*, ebooks, page 58.