



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

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From #MeToo to #WeToo

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You should preach a “metoo” sermon, my partner Sam started telling me in October when the Harvey Weinstein allegations came to light. I was so disgusted and triggered by the details of the story, I resisted the idea of preaching a whole sermon that might drag these sordid and violent details into our sacred space. I also felt nervous to share my own history of being harassed in the ministry, my own “industry.”

So, I participated in the social media campaign, simply posting #metoo with millions of other women, many of whom were brave enough to post the details of their own stories. 5 weeks ago as the media storm raged on and more names were named, I couldn’t keep quiet about it, and I led a prayer in church, powerfully bringing forward voices from our congregation, a defiant chorus of #metoos from women of every age, identity and life experience.

And then, the allegations kept coming, from every corner of so many different industries.

And then allegations emerged within our own church, as employees came forward to report incidents of sexual and identity based harassment here on our campus. These claims were swiftly investigated and found to have merit. The employee in question was found to have violated our employee handbook code of conduct and our Unitarian Universalist principles, prompting his termination. The #metoo problem of harassment became a problem that #wetoo had right here in the workplace that is our own church.

Unfortunately, as the church, #wetoo have had the problem of sexual harassment and assault within in our own denomination for years, mainly within our ministry. We have kept secrets, we have protected offenders, and we have shunned and cast out women who have come forward. Keeping quiet about this pattern does nothing but allow patterns of abuse to continue. Ironically, it is often women ministers who follow ministers who have committed sexual misconduct in churches, left to deal with emotional damage done by an offending former leader. As I watch the news every night, I’m surprised not to see more religious leaders publically caught up in these allegations. Perhaps we will, perhaps we won’t. But we can open a dialogue about the reality that as the church #wetoo are implicated in this massive cultural problem.

As Pastor Amy Butler of the Riverside Church has written in a piece for the Washington Post:

“If the church is not talking about these issues from the pulpit, in small groups, with our children, in staff situations, then we join the list of predatory forces in the world. Our silence makes us complicit.”

If our silence makes us complicit, the more the church can give voice to the massive problem of sexual harassment and sexual assault, the more possibility exists for real change. One of the places to start is offering women of all ages and identities the space to tell their stories and be heard and believed. This is what the founder of the #metoo movement Tarana Burke names being “empowered through empathy.” To foster this support for women in her congregation, Pastor Amy Butler recently hosted a dinner at her home with congregants where women were invited to share their stories of sexual assault and harassment. Many of them shared that the sexualized comments and behavior started at frighteningly young ages.

“The first time a man exposed himself to me, I was at a neighborhood pool. I was 7.”

"In my all-girl's elementary school, I had to stay after school some days when my mom was working late. I hated it because the janitor would push me up against the counter and touch my body. When I reported it, I was told just to stay away from him."

These are stories of young girls being harassed by full grown men. But these men were once boys who learned this behavior. Personally, I can remember a harassing comment from a boy in the 4th grade like it was yesterday.

I was in a phase of dressing like a tomboy, one I wouldn't really grow out of. I was wearing a plaid flannel shirt and a bandana on my head. When we were partnered up for an assignment, and in the middle of class, the boy said to me "I like your bandana." Blushing, as I still do with compliments, I took off the bandana to reposition it in my hair and laughed nervously as I said "Thank you." Then the boy said "If I told you I liked your shirt would you take that off too?"

I remember feeling totally caught off guard, confused, and ashamed. These feelings are the same ones that still come up whenever I receive a harassing comment. We were both 9 or 10.

You might think of this as simple flirtation between kids, but looking back it's important to look at the loaded nature such a comment. How did he learn to be so forward, how did he learn about his power to make girls uncomfortable at such a young age? If he had learned to treat girls like that somewhere, isn't there also a way that he could learn not to?

Debra S. Borys is a California-based clinical and forensic psychologist specializing in sexual harassment. She has studied the spectrum of behavior, from verbal harassment to physical assault. She has found that adult men who harass find gratification in making women uncomfortable, using sexuality to disarm and disempower. In a recent article she is quoted as saying: "Some men have a distorted sense of arousal and get pleasure from seeing a victim's anxiety, fear or shock. Some actually interpret that shock or discomfort as approval." Another psychologist, James Campbell Quick, notes that this behavior begins early, as "a manifestation of a life history of development," a pattern that endures over time.

Another place the church can take leadership is helping families to raise boys to be men who do not harass, abuse or assault. This starts with working with children from a young age to shape their understandings of appropriate and healthy sexuality. Out of all our programs for children and youth we are perhaps most proud of our comprehensive Sexuality Education programs, called "Our Whole Lives," or OWL, created jointly with the United Church of Christ. The program is firmly rooted in our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person. As the program puts it: "Every person is entitled to dignity and self-worth, and to his or her own attitudes and beliefs about sexuality." The OWL Program assumptions include:

Sexuality is a good part of the human experience.

and

Sexuality in our society is damaged by violence, exploitation, alienation, dishonesty, abuse of power, and the treatment of persons as objects.

There is also a faith component to these programs that affirms that sexuality is a sacred part of our lives, and essential own wholeness as human beings. We begin our Our Whole Lives program with children who are as young as Kindergarten and 1st grade, and also offer this program to our 8th graders. The 8th grade program which comes before high school to help our young people prepare for the challenges of navigating

relationships and heavy peer pressure that the years ahead inevitably bring. We seek to give them crucial tools for college and the working world, when they don't have the support and care of their families and church community. For her book *Conflict is Not Abuse*, author Sarah Schulman began exploring the problem of sexual assault on college campuses. One of these conversations was particularly illuminating. She writes:

At one point I (had) a casual, off-the-record conversation with a friend who was hired to set reasonable response systems in place for another private, elite institution around male assault. She was finding, as a result of talking to a wide range of students, that there were a small number of men who were pathological assaulters, and that it was the violation of consent, itself, that was the motivator. But at the same time, she discovered a large percentage of young men who were confused by women.

They didn't understand women's messaging. They were confused by women's conflicts about sexuality. They couldn't figure out how people got from one place to another in the trajectory of a sexual relationship. How sexuality and romance depicted in film, television, or online influences how people think they are supposed to behave, and also influences how other people read and interpret those behaviors. And for some, authentic communication is something that they grow into, or it is learned or acquired through therapy or life experience.

The church can be a force for good alongside parents, children's first sexuality educators, to create opportunities for our young people to develop authentic communication and understand how to have a healthy sexuality and positive relationships. Our young people need to learn how to develop boundaries, understand consent, and articulate their own needs in the reality of our culture. Of course, not every teen is so lucky as to receive this kind of sexuality education or this kind of support. I know that many of us in this congregation are still struggling with the questions that Sarah Schulman articulates. Many of us are still figuring out how to have and keep healthy relationships, how to express our sexuality appropriately, within and outside of the workplace. The support we extend to our children and youth should also extend to our community of adults of all genders. We are all affected, and all have healing to do. Our Universalism calls us not to cast anyone aside, but to call into a circle of love and trust so that harm will not repeat.

This Sunday, the Christian season of Advent begins. Along with our Christian neighbors, we loosely follow the Advent story with the texts and music that foretells the story of the birth of Jesus not because it brings a sense of meaning to the Christmas holiday deeper than the yearly visit from Santa Claus, bringing presents and holiday goodies. In the darkest days of the year, before the winter solstice turns our hemisphere towards lengthening days, many of us can find ourselves feeling pretty lost in the despair of the world. In Advent, we allow ourselves to yearn and ache for the good, daring ourselves to believe that a hopeful turn is possible in our world.

This year especially, I find myself getting particularly emotional about the Christmas story. Sure, it could be because I am 8 months pregnant and I am emotional about a lot of things. But it could be because I'm not sure there is anything more hopeful than birth, particularly the celebration of the birth of a male child who was foretold to have the gift of helping the world rid itself of oppressive power dynamics: between warring tribal peoples, rich and poor, and even, perhaps especially, between men and women.

The advent texts for this Sunday, from Isaiah 10 in the Hebrew Bible, use images to create a vision of a coming age where the powerful use their power more wisely, not to dominate, intimidate or coerce, but to create equity and right relationship.

*Justice shall be the band around his waist, and faithfulness a belt upon his hips.
Then the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat;
The calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them.
The cow and the bear shall graze, together their young shall lie down; the lion shall eat hay like the ox.
The baby shall play by the viper's den, and the child lay his hand on the adder's lair.
They shall not harm or destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the LORD, as water covers the sea.*

I end with this quote about Advent, from author John A. Taylor.

We human creatures, in spite of all that has happened to us and been done by us, are still hopeful. Something new, something vital, something promising is always coming, and we are always expecting. Along as we expect, as long as we hope, someone will light a candle against the prevailing darkness- and neither the winds of hate nor that gales of evil will extinguish it.

May we be those hopeful people who time and time kindle that chalice flame against the darkness, ever believing that human goodness, kindness, justice and mercy will prevail.

May it be so, blessed be, and Amen.