

First Unitarian Church

April 8, 2018

A few years ago I preached a sermon called Good Sex. The sermon signboard caused a bit of a stir that week. Many of you will remember the phone call we received from a passer by who thought we had been the victims of a prank. But that really was the title- it was a sermon about religiously liberal sexual ethics. Good sex, as in ethical sex.

Today's message about the MeToo movement ties in with that one. In fact, I could have called this sermon "Bad Sex" but I wasn't sure anyone would show up. And anyway, I'm not sure I'd want to sign my name under that one on the sermon signboard.

But the MeToo movement is about bad—as in unethical—behavior having to do with sexuality. It is about sexual harassment, abuse, and assault. That is something that I know many of us in this room have experienced. And for many, the unfolding of the MeToo movement has been painful. Therapists have reported that between the election of a president who bragged about sexual assault and the unfolding of the story after story about sexual abuse in the media, they saw an increase in patients with PTSD symptoms.

Today, the goal is not to relive those things. I'm not going to be giving any graphic descriptions of assault. But I am going to be talking in general terms, and especially about the concept of consent. So if anybody needs to step out for a while, you go right ahead. Take care.

Let us also recognize that while MeToo has made plain a big trend described almost entirely in male and female terms, there are many people of non-binary gender identities whose lives have also been impacted.

Finally, although it has just come to most of our attention, the MeToo movement dates back quite a bit further than last year. It was started in 2007 by Tarana Burke, the founder of Just Be Inc., a nonprofit that helps victims of sexual harassment and assault.ⁱ Ms. Burke remembered an encounter she'd had with a thirteen-year-old girl in the nineties, in which the girl told her about sexual abuse she'd experienced, and Burke found herself speechless.

"I didn't have a response or a way to help her in that moment," Burke says, "and I couldn't even say 'me too.'" Later, she started a movement with the name Me Too in order to marshal the resources and support she wishes she'd had back then.

Last year, after assault and harassment accusations against Harvey Weinstein were made public, the actress Alyssa Milano also wanted to give voice to sexual abuse victims. She posted on Twitter: "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet." It ignited on social media. Within twenty-four hours, the hashtag had been posted 12 million times on Facebook.

Before we move on, let it be acknowledged that Tarana Burke is black, and Alyssa Milano is white. Tarana Burke is not famous, and Alyssa Milano is—but of course, white women are more likely to be made television stars than black women.

After Alyssa's tweet set off a cultural torrent, many black women activists noted that it is typical that white women are heard while black women are brushed off.

Within a couple of days, when she learned of Tarana Burke, Alyssa Milano gave Burke credit, and also reached out directly to her. But later, when Time magazine named the women of the MeToo movement as the "person of the year," they did not include Tarana Burke on the cover—a glaring omission.

Tarana Burke says she is glad the MeToo movement has grown. She knew what we all can now see: that a *lot* of women have MeToo stories.

And you know what? *Me, too*. During my middle school and high school years, I experienced groping, harassment, and so called "slut-shaming" in school. My name was scrawled on the boys bathroom stall. I was stalked by a fellow student and on numerous occasions was followed by strange men. When I took a temporary job doing data entry at my mother's workplace, her boss—a man my grandfather's age that she privately referred to as Attila the Hun—groped me. I was fifteen.

These are my tamer stories.

It went on and on, easing up only when I transformed my image from "teenage girl" to "mother" at nineteen, a role I dove 110% into, wearing turtlenecks and ankle length skirts under the baby-sling, partly because I wanted to be safe.

I wasn't safe.

I share this knowing that I may receive criticism for it. That what has been happening when women share their MeToo stories. They are criticized. But I also share it knowing that it really doesn't stand out much.

Of all the women I've ever described this stuff to, none has been particularly surprised. A majority have similar stories. When I've shared it with men, some have been shocked. Some responded with empathy. But others—and a few women, too—have responded with questions along the lines of what I could have done better to prevent it.

Here's the thing about that. Women think about sexual harassment and assault prevention every day. We avoid being alone outside in the dark. We look over our shoulders when we walk alone in unpopulated places, keep our keys in our hands and look under our cars in parking lots, and lock the doors as soon as we get in.

We play out self-defense and escape scenarios in our minds, think about whether we can run in our shoes, and only meet new male acquaintances in public spaces.

We walk side routes to avoid being harassed on the main drag, avoid eye contact, avoid initiating conversations, take the stairs instead of the elevator, and cross the street to avoid a man who looks potentially aggressive. We answer fake phone calls to avoid interacting, or pretend we are walking with the nearest other person or group.

When (not if) a strange man is overly familiar with us, we may pretend we are about to meet someone, or we try to politely extricate ourselves, because we or someone we know has experienced a man who went quickly from flirting to rage, and became dangerous.

Some men feel encouraged by that politeness, and refuse to let the conversation end. Some men would never dream of becoming dangerous, but a woman cannot not know that. She only knows she feels trapped in the conversation.

The younger a woman is, the more of these things she does.

Ladies, do you know what I'm talking about? Do you do some of these things? Let me hear you say, "Me, too."

If you've ever arrived home alone at night and checked your closets for an intruder, can I get a "Me Too?"

The odds of someone being in our closets is vanishingly small. But that's the mindset a person develops when they are repeatedly exposed to a threat. It's a traumatic mindset.

In our workplaces, it gets more challenging. Somehow we have to be pleasant enough in the face of inappropriate behavior not to get fired or ostracized, but we also have to be careful not to seem to like it, which could invite more of it or worse. That's a tough needle to thread. Impossible, a lot of the time.

And in 1:1 relationships, where some trust has already been established, it may be trickiest of all. In one common pattern, a man elicits a woman's sympathy. Maybe he is sad or lonely. Maybe he has been rejected in the past. Maybe his behavior is not the worst of the worst. Maybe it's just a little "off." In the gray area.

He may be such a pitiful case, she finds herself unable to assign any value to her own discomfort as he ignores her boundaries. At the end of the day she feels violated and angry and strangely guilty at the same time. Her, too.

It's a subtle but common storyline that has been told and retold in the last year.

So when we ask what a particular woman might have done to prevent a MeToo kind of situation, not only are we ignoring the likelihood that she already has been practicing prevention every day of her post-pubescent life, we are also implicitly normalizing sexual harassment, assault, and abuse.

What do I mean by “implicitly normalizing?” I mean we are acting as though the woman’s behavior, and not the abuse itself, were the most remarkable thing. What an odd response. Instead of focusing on the outrageous behavior of the men involved, we focus on a woman’s responsibility to deal with it.

As though it were unstoppable. But that’s just not true.

It’s so hard talking about these things. Women don’t all agree on how to do it, or on what constitutes abuse. There’s a significant generational divide. Many men instantly feel attacked or hurt when the issue comes up. They are afraid of being lumped together with the worst-behaving men.

Others worry about due process, and some of the loudest voices are sounding the alarms about potentially false accusations. What if a nice man is taken down by a false accusation? It’s true that that would really be awful. It’s also true that statistically speaking, today a man is more likely to be the victim of sexual abuse himself than to be the victim of a false accusation. And so a conversation about ending abuse and harassment serves everyone.

If we spend too much time down in those weeds of which cases were abusive, and which men are responsible, and to what degree—well, then we are missing the larger picture here. MeToo is about seeing the big picture, and changing the undeniable dynamics that created it.

The power of the Me Too movement is that it keeps us from losing the forest for the trees. When so many women speak out at the same time, it is impossible to ignore the larger pattern.

It is so hard, so fraught, to talk about. But as the writer Jessica Valenti says: “The truth is that this is what optimism looks like. Naming what is happening to us, telling the truth about it as ugly and uncomfortable as it can be, means that we want it to change. That we know that it’s not inevitable.”

I believe in boys and men. I love them as a minister, as a fellow human, and as the mother of one, a young adult that I brought into this world and have adored since he weighed seven and a half pounds. I love men, and I know so many—especially here—who strive to be kind and egalitarian.

Another thing I know for sure is that what’s happening now is bad for women *and* for men. We’ve been hearing the phrase “toxic masculinity” in the news and on social media. It’s not a perfect phrase. It kind of makes it sound like masculinity itself is toxic. Masculinity reflects a deep and valuable part of our humanness, and it is to be cherished, along with femininity.

“Toxic masculinity” refers to something else, which is an ideal of masculinity active in our culture today that is harmful and incomplete. It is toxic for the person who tries to embody it, and for the people around them.

It's a masculinity obsessed with power and conquest, with dominance and the suppression of emotions.

In order to have a conquest mindset, a man has to dehumanize the "other" that he would conquer. He has to think of that person as deserving of conquering and since conquering implies that the other person will resist in some way, he has to not care how the person feels. He has to shut down empathy; he has to believe that person is not like him.

Because those others are typically women, in this process, men also cut themselves off from that part of themselves associated with femininity, like tenderness, vulnerability, and caring. Otherwise, the women would be like them and that would mess the whole conquering mindset up.

This costs men dearly.

The psychologist Niobi Way conducted a study on men and friendship, and discovered that American men are disproportionately, chronically lonely.ⁱⁱ Many American men have no close friends with whom they can share their authentic selves.

This is due to many factors, but a significant one is that the toxic ideal of masculinity does not allow for it. How does a man develop close ties with another man if he has to suppress his feelings of love and affection? How does he be authentic if he hates and hides any part of himself that might be construed as feminine?

A lack of meaningful friendships is correlated with mental and physical illness, and premature death. An analysis of nearly 150 studies suggests that "spending time building and nurturing your friendships may be just as important to your health as eating right and exercising."ⁱⁱⁱ

Toxic masculinity touches the lives of gentler men. It makes them the targets of bullies, and it also seeps into our subconscious when we speak of boys trying to "get some" and girls "giving it up." That's conquest language.

It shows up when men objectify women in inappropriate contexts—commenting on bodies on the street, school, or workplace. I know some men are genuinely perplexed that women aren't flattered by this when the comments are positive (which they are often not). There are definitely times and places when any one of us (male or female or non-binary) wants to know another person finds us physically attractive.

But focusing on women's bodies in the wrong context can feel threatening or undermining of other kinds of relationships, like professional ones.^{iv}

Does this mean we are putting an end to flirting? God, I hope not! Flirting can be affirming, energizing, and fun—when it is mutual and in an appropriate context. When it doesn't come out of nowhere and land like a grenade.

The toxic kind of masculinity, because it is so pervasive, touches all of us. And so it's also true that kind men (and, really, people of all genders) also have some learning to do. That's okay. Having some learning to do does not make anyone a bad person. We all have learning to do in one way or another.

The spiritually grounded approach to that is openness and curiosity. The humility to say, "There may still be things that I don't know."

What is being asked of kind men? The same thing that is being asked of all men.

To let women speak, without interrupting to defend yourself or others—not right now. Let women speak. And believe women when they describe their experiences. They are taking a chance if they're telling you. They know that telling these stories can lead to being silenced, blamed, or criticized.

Refuse to participate in normalizing bad behavior. Call your brothers out when it is reasonably safe to do so. Safe, not comfortable. It will be uncomfortable.

Men are being asked to understand and practice meaningful consent. Everyone needs to practice meaningful consent, but in the context of MeToo, right now we are especially addressing our beloved men who partner with women.

There are many situations in which, although mutual consent may be apparent, clear, meaningful consent is not possible. For example, between a boss and an employee, or a successful professional with lots of connections, and a person who is desperate to launch their career.

Meaningful consent is also not possible between someone who is alert, and a very intoxicated person. Or in a relationship in which one person threatens to withhold their love, or leave, or become sullen and angry, if the other won't agree to their sexual requests.

Meaningful consent means being mindful of whether another person is vulnerable, physically, psychologically or emotionally, in their life or in a particular moment.

An ethic of meaningful consent means we have to pay attention not only to the person, but to the context. We have to pay attention to unequal power. And we have to pay attention to the power of roles, and what others need from us.

For example, priests, ministers, counselors, and doctors cannot have sexual relationships with any person they serve in those roles, because those roles come with power and a set of expectations, and to cross that boundary is to violate a relationship.

Meaningful consent also means getting affirmative consent. A woman's body is not a silent yes until she explicitly says no. It's a silent no until she explicitly says yes.

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Meaningful consent means sometimes taking no for an answer. It is not okay to repeatedly put a woman in the position of saying no, whether it is about going on a date or having sex. It is not okay for a man to try to wear a woman down to change her mind. That's the conquest mentality.

I've got one more thing to say, and then I'm going to wrap up. Sexual harassment, abuse, and assault happen in churches, too. It happens on church staffs, and between ministers and members, and from member to member. Here at First Unitarian, we speak openly about those things. We have policies for preventing, and if necessary, responding to that kind of behavior, including behavior that seems to fall in the gray area.

If you observe or experience something here, please tell one of us ministers, or a member of the Healthy Community Committee, or the Board. We take that very seriously.

The questions and the stories of the MeToo moment are tough, but this is the worthy work. We are having a learning moment as a country. A change moment—and that causes some anxiety.

It intersects with other issues, like racism and privilege. It shines a light on unfinished work in our country, on who gets to speak and who gets to be heard. And that can feel overwhelming.

But as we learn, as our perception expands and we see more clearly, it opens a door to healing, to wholeness, to friendships, and health, and restoring right relationship. A time for loving and for being loved.

This is the deep work of being human together in community.

ⁱ The story about Burke and Milano can be found here:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/20/us/me-too-movement-tarana-burke.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=594719471>

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^{iv} For a comedic take on appropriate workplace conversations between men and women, see <https://medium.com/@annevictoriaclark/the-rock-test-a-hack-for-men-who-dont-want-to-be-accused-of-sexual-harassment-73c45e0b49af>