

# Masculine Voices and Values in the #MeToo Moment

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Roger D. Jones

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Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento



## Hymns:

#1000, Morning Has Come; #131, Love Will Guide Us; #126, Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing

## Reading

This reading is an excerpt from a sermon entitled, "Making the Sacred Profane (or Worse)." It was given in 2014 by the Rev. Mike Morran at 1<sup>st</sup> Unitarian Society of Denver.

...[E]vil becomes possible when our inner selves, our inner lives, get divided into compartments that don't talk to each other. I mentioned how we know for a fact that most torturers, and the guards at Nazi concentration camps, and the guys who dropped the napalm onto Vietnamese villages had families at home, and they love their children, and they think of themselves as good parents and providers.

I believe we are a whole culture separated from our spiritual center, and that gap, between the illusion of separateness, and the deeper truth of the inherent sacredness and worth of every single soul..., that gap is where evil arises.

That gap is where sexual violence originates. And sexual violence is one of the ways that gap is made still wider in a self-reinforcing cycle of power and pain, because pain that is not transformed, is transmitted.

Which is why we talk about this stuff in church. Because talking about it raises the odds of transforming the pain, so that we might lower the odds of transmitting the pain.

...

Here is what I teach my own sons; and I will close with this thought.

Violence is not sexy, and neither is having power over people. Having power over people is ultimately hollow and unfulfilling.

Want to know what's sexy? Really sexy? Unbelievably, inarguably, bubbling, slippery, cauldron-hot sexy? Consent!

Loving, happy, enthusiastic, participatory, and joyful consent. It doesn't get any sexier than that. And we need to know this because something so ravenous, sweaty, sweet, passionate, loud, and sexy... without consent.... is rape.

## Silence

## Prayer

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be useful and helpful and honest.

## Sermon

Back in 1984 in a graduate course in business, we were assigned a journal article written by a man who was an expert in production management. Among other ideas for improving efficiencies in service industries, he suggested that airlines install mirrors in the galleys of planes. No stewardess could resist a mirror, he said. Every time she passed by it, she'd be compelled to check her makeup and hair. This would save her the trouble of going into the restroom and would add value to her presence on board. This was the early 80s. In the

classroom conversation about the readings for the day, I shot my hand up first. I pointed out the sexist assumptions of the article. Disgusting, I said. I talked at *length*--mansplaining, I guess. I wanted people to understand. But I must admit I wanted to score my class participation credit early. If the professor didn't call on me later, he wouldn't find out I hadn't read anything else for the day.

Most of the adults around whom I grew up would not have questioned the sexist assumption of that article--women as well as men in my family would have nodded their heads. As a teenager in the 1970s, I thought my mom's ideas about gender were outdated; her attitudes made me cringe. "Muh-ther!," I'd shriek, "don't say that!" So I got her a gift subscription to *Ms. Magazine*. With its feminist perspective and critiques of popular culture and social roles, it would enlighten her and liberate her. She didn't read it. But I did. It began my feminist education. This education continued in the 1980s when I volunteered at a domestic violence shelter--a big old house in a small midwestern city. I answered the phone, did filing, and spent time with children of the women staying there. I learned how long it had taken to get laws on the books to make domestic abuse a crime. I learned how hard it was to train police departments to protect women and arrest their abusive partners. And in the decades after that, I've tried to learn more and expand my awareness and my empathy.

Nevertheless, I was not prepared for the magnitude and number of accounts of sexualized violence that are called MeToo. Like a lot of male-identified people, I'm not alone in my surprise.

The phrase MeToo was coined over a decade ago by Tarana Burke, an African American woman. In 2006 Burke started an organization to support women and children who had suffered sexual harassment, abuse, or assault. The phrase gained widespread use recently thanks to social media. In October of 2017, multiple women accused Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein of sexual assault, including his demand for sex in return for support of their acting careers. He got away with it for 30 years! Alyssa Milano, a white woman, posted on Twitter: "If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted, write #MeToo as a reply to this Tweet." Within a day there were a half-million

MeToo postings on Twitter, and 12 million postings on Facebook, among other social media.<sup>i</sup>

*Time* magazine's person of the year for 2017 was not one person but those it named "The Silence Breakers." They now are a growing fellowship of survivors--many of them famous names in Hollywood. Noting the fear that had kept hundreds of women actors and several men from coming forward about the abuse by powerful Hollywood men, the magazine writers ask:

What hope is there for the janitor who's being harassed by a co-worker but remains silent out of fear she'll lose the job she needs to support her children? For the administrative assistant who repeatedly fends off a superior who won't take no for an answer? For the hotel housekeeper who never knows, as she goes about replacing towels and cleaning toilets, if a guest is going to corner her in a room she can't escape?<sup>ii</sup>

Both survivors and perpetrators of sexual abuse are closer to us than we may realize. A study published in 2009 indicated that 1 in every 5 girls and 1 in every 12 boys will be sexually abused before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Nearly all of them are abused by a person they know, sometimes other children or youth.<sup>iii</sup> In a nationwide survey of 18 to 25-year-old Americans, the Harvard Graduate School of Education found that "87% percent of [young] women reported having experienced at least one of the following during their lifetime: being catcalled, insulted with sexualized words by men or by women, having strangers say something sexual to them or touching them without permission."

To say that sexualized violence is an epidemic or a social crisis would be inaccurate. Words like epidemic and social crisis imply something new and maybe temporary. Instead, what we are learning is how deeply rooted, widespread, and persistent is the abuse of power. All the sins and crimes unmasked in this MeToo moment have been committed by individuals. Yet each one is part of a system of power, control, secrecy, and selfishness. They are part of a larger

culture of hatred against women and against others who are in vulnerable identities. The culture is called patriarchy.

To be sure, I know men of all ages who have suffered from sexual abuse or assault—whether as children, young men, or adults. Every survivor deserves attention and care. Everyone at risk needs protection. Every act of abuse causes pain, fear, and lasting harm to the one who goes through it, regardless of the gender of the victim or of the perpetrator. Yet all the abuses emerge from this culture which is based on the domination of women by men. In his own MeToo testimony, Jim Beaver said that as a young Marine he had been abused by a male doctor of high rank. Yet even having that experience, he said that MeToo is “predominantly an issue for women, because while many men have been victimized in such manner, the painful truth is that we live in a world where women are *expected* to put up with such things,” and males are not.<sup>iv</sup>

The suppression of women is engrained in our culture, and it goes way back. For example, the Holy Bible has many accounts of men regarding women as objects, not as full human beings. Here are two stories from the same royal family in ancient Israel. When King David laid his eyes on the married woman Bathsheba bathing in a nearby courtyard, he decided he wanted to have sex with her. He was king, so he did. She became pregnant. Her husband, Uriah, was a soldier in the King’s army, so David gave orders for the man to serve on the front line of battle. The man’s death, as a result of this, enabled the King to take one more wife as his own. Bathsheba’s perspective on all this? Well, she has no speaking role in the Bible.

Later on, we learn that David’s son Amnon has his eye on Tamar, his half-sister, who is a virgin. Amnon’s good buddy suggests a trick: say that you have taken sick, and go to your room. Request that all you need to get better is for your half-sister come to your room and make your favorite food, there in your presence. Amnon does just that, and when Tamar comes to help him, he pounces. Tamar tries to resist: “No, my brother, do not force me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile!” Pleading for mercy, she asks: “As for me, where could I carry my shame?” In an essay about this, the Reverend

Ruth Everhart asks: “What has Tamar done that’s shameful? She has simply cooked dumplings for her supposedly sick half-brother. It’s those around her who act badly, yet she will bear the shame.”<sup>v</sup> Blaming and shaming victims—this is patriarchy.

So, the depth of gender-based violence is not new. What’s new is the unmasking of it. As revelations rise of abuse by predatory politicians, clergymen, celebrities, coaches, mentors, family members, executives, line supervisors and other bosses, many survivors and those who care for them are saying: *finally*, it’s being exposed.

Recently I’ve spoken with guys from this congregation about living responsibly as men in this MeToo moment, and in the future. These men represent various ages, family situations, sexual orientations and occupations.

This MeToo moment has made us reflective. It has caused some to question ourselves. One man wondered: “Did I make others uncomfortable or afraid? Was I disrespectful? Did I cross the line?” He said: “I don’t think I was abusive, but of course that’s the privileged perspective of a male.”

MeToo has humbled us. How many times did we not stick up for a person in a vulnerable situation, we wonder? How many times did we fail to pay attention or ask questions, when we should have? When did we fail to interrupt speech that was improper? When did our fear of losing the approval of another man keep us from confronting a buddy or a boss or a brother about his intentions or his behavior? I pray these kinds of questions are on the minds of men all over the land. I pray that all men can find other males with whom to examine their behaviors, their attitudes, and our culture within a circle of trust and courage.

Given the statistics of abuse in this country, it likely that many guys among us at least *knew about* abuse or discrimination. It’s likely that we failed to act. Perhaps it was out of cluelessness, ignorance or fear that we didn’t act—or a sense of powerlessness. I can admit to all of these. One retired man recalled having had a supervisor who gave promotions to women employees in exchange for sex with him. A younger man recalled being at business meetings at a construction firm where

women would come up with ideas and be ignored by the males in charge. A guy who is a father said, “We encourage our girls to be scientists and engineers,” but those male-dominated fields often include harassment or worse. For example, he said, in meetings with the male investors who dominate venture capital firms, female-identified engineers and entrepreneurs have to endure private invitations to dinner, and sex propositions.

The culture of patriarchy is the culture of conquest. It is deadly for women. For men it is a spiritual burden that we are now able to recognize. One man said: “The test of your manhood has been [what kind of woman] you can get,” rather than the gifts you might have to offer. Looking back, another man said: “The ‘litmus test’ of manhood [was] being sexually active—the chase.” A man in his mid-60s recalled the male culture of his early years in a small town: “You’d do what you could get away with...and tell your buddies about it.” He said, “maybe that was how men got bonded with each other.” Certainly, he said, the sexual pursuit “was not about bonding emotionally with women.”

One man was pained to see disrespect of women modeled by the current U.S. President, who has been accused of harassment by 20 women, or more. Patriarchy is alive and well when a presidential candidate is able to get elected after bragging on television about how easy it is for him to commit sexual abuse. In a debate, when he was challenged, he apologized for what he called merely banter, “just locker room talk.” I wish a male journalist had followed up: “Mr. Trump, for years I have been going to gyms and health clubs, and I’ve never heard banter like that in a men’s locker room. Would you tell us what club allows that sort of language?” Except maybe when I was 14, I’ve never heard that language in the locker room either. But whenever we hear women being objectified or demeaned, we who identify as men should not let those words rest without challenging them. [For example:] “What you said is wrong. It’s disgusting. It makes you look stupid, so stop it!”

The Bible returns to the story of King David’s rape of Bathsheba and sending of Uriah her husband to die. A few chapters later, the Prophet Nathan visits the King. Nathan tells him a story, an allegory, about a thieving, selfish, cruel man. David

hates the man in the story—he’s unjust and evil. “You are that man!” says Nathan. Then this prophet brings down the condemnation of God on the King, scolding and warning him of the doom to come to his family. Seeing his wrongs, King David repents. Nathan is speaking truth to power. As ordinary men, we can strive to do more of that, speaking truth to power. Moreover, if we hear another person daring to confront abusive attitudes or behaviors, we can back them up. Nathan was alone, but we don’t need to be. We can look for support from other people when we confront misogyny, abuse and sexism.

The guys who’ve spoken to me here said they don’t want to be part of the problem, don’t want to make things worse. Yet how can we be a responsible supporter? It’s confusing. Well, we’ve got to get used to feeling confused. More honest confusion may be safer for people than decades of certainty have been—certainty about sex roles, or the certainty that men don’t have to examine our attitudes or check our behavior. We can be open to our confusion.

Our men fear saying the wrong thing. One said: “What do I do? Where do I step in if I want to be part of the solution.” He thought for a bit, and then he spoke about the practice of empathy and humility. He said: “We probably don’t know what’s best, so we men should stand aside, observe, listen and learn.” Whenever a vulnerable person is brave enough to tell their experience of being disrespected or abused by a person with more power, we can listen to them. Rather than questioning their story, we can accept it. Rather than trying to minimize what the offending person did or intended to do to them, we can just receive this person’s testimony. We can then thank them for their courage to speak and thank them for their trust in us. We can listen and learn.

We can work to educate ourselves. If we have children in our lives, we can teach them about respect and consent, empathy and humility—and what mature sexual relationships look like. Families have a crucial role to play. In the same Harvard study that found most women aged 18-25 had had experienced harassment in their lives,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the respondents of all genders reported that they “had never had a conversation with their parents

about how to avoid sexually harassing others. [Likewise,] majorities of respondents had never had conversations with their parents about various forms of misogyny.”

Yet the positive thing is that most of the young people said they *do* want that kind of guidance. There are resources for families to teach and learn what emotionally healthy relationships look like. Parents can help one another do this. I know many parents who are grateful that this congregation invests money and our volunteers invest their time in providing sexuality information to their children through the program known as Our Whole Lives, produced by our denomination, the Unitarian Universalist Association. I’m grateful too.

This MeToo moment is a time for bringing predators and perpetrators to face justice. It’s a time for all of us to bear witness to how much harm has been done. It’s a time for protecting the vulnerable with better laws, better oversight, and education about how to avoid being hurt or causing hurt. As confront a system that thrives on silence and control, it’s a time for speaking up and speaking out. It’s a time of unmasking the violence of patriarchy so that we lessen its grip on the body and soul of everyone we know.

Also, this moment in history is a time to practice humility and cultivate empathy. So may

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<sup>i</sup> Brian J. Mason, “Me Too,” sermon given January 21, 2018, Universalist Unitarian Church of Wausau, Wisc.

<http://uuwausau.org/sermon/me-too-brian-j-mason/>

<sup>ii</sup> Stephanie Zacharek, Eliana Dockterman, and Haley Sweetland Edwards, “The Silence Breakers: TIME Person of the Year 2017,” *Time*, December 18, 2017; accessed August 18, 2018. <http://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-2017-silence-breakers/>

<sup>iii</sup> Jayneen Sanders, “12 Confronting Sexual Abuse Statistics All Parents Need to Know,” *Huffington Post*, January 25, 2017. [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/12-confronting-statistics-on-child-sexual-abuse\\_us\\_587dab01e4b0740488c3de49](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/12-confronting-statistics-on-child-sexual-abuse_us_587dab01e4b0740488c3de49)

every moment be. So may we strive to live—so that all may live in peace. Amen.

### Silence

### Prayer

Please join me in the spirit of intention or prayer as I offer these words.

Spirit of Human Courage, be with us. Open our awareness to situations where peace, compassion and respect are lacking in our lives, our institutions, our communities. Bring us together to confront systems, attitudes, actions and words that threaten the safety of others or diminish their wellbeing. Help those now making the long journey of healing, and bless them in their courage. Save all those people now suffering, and let them know peace. Stop those who wage violence. Lead them to see the harm they cause. Lead them to learn contrition and accountability.

O Spirit of Human Dignity, be with us. Invite us all to regard ourselves with compassion. Invite us all to treat everyone with respect. Help everyone to learn greater empathy and humility.

Help us to find more love; help us bring more peace into the world. So may it be.

<sup>iv</sup> Quoted by Galen Guengrich, “A Piece of the Storm,” sermon given October 22, 2017, All Souls Unitarian Church, New York. [http://www.allsoulsnyc.org/atf/cf/%7B641c68f5-a0a1-4017-851b-](http://www.allsoulsnyc.org/atf/cf/%7B641c68f5-a0a1-4017-851b-66985a3b0df3%7D/A%20PIECE%20OF%20THE%20STORM%2010-22-2017.PDF)

[66985a3b0df3%7D/A%20PIECE%20OF%20THE%20STORM%2010-22-2017.PDF](http://www.allsoulsnyc.org/atf/cf/%7B641c68f5-a0a1-4017-851b-66985a3b0df3%7D/A%20PIECE%20OF%20THE%20STORM%2010-22-2017.PDF)

<sup>v</sup> Ruth Everhart, “Women in the Bible Say #MeToo,” *Christian Century*, July 17, 2018. Her book *Ruined* is about her struggle with her faith after the experience of being raped.

<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/women-bible-say-metoo>