



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

#MeToo: a Will-o'-the-wisp or revolution?

Clay Nelson © 4 March 2018

Do not think this sermon title asking if the #MeToo movement is a will-o'-the-wisp or a revolution will result in an answer today. Let me say up front that I hope #MeToo will be a transformational event in our culture that could be considered revolutionary, but I have no idea if it will succeed. My past experience with such moments does not encourage me. Patriarchy will not forsake its privilege and power voluntarily or with grace.

I have reluctantly decided to engage the issue now. I have not made my views known here or in social media. But indefinite silence does not seem an option. My reasons for not speaking on an issue that has gone viral around the world before now are several.

First, I think my gender requires that I first keep my mouth shut and listen carefully to those who have suffered sexual violence, abuse and harassment by men supported and protected by their privilege in a patriarchal society. I have been doing that, especially with the women closest to me.

Second, I believe the issues raised by the #MeToo movement are complicated and nuanced. Understanding them all and any unintended consequences created will require greater wisdom and insight than I or any one person might possess. I have been applying the rule that says, "It is better to be silent and thought a fool, than to speak and remove all doubt."

Third, I have taken this time to examine my conscience and past behaviour. As someone who has been in a position of power most of his adult life in an institution heavily steeped in patriarchy, in spite of some very strong women who have tried to hold it accountable, it is all too likely that I have perpetuated, knowingly or unknowingly, the cultural norms that permit the sexual abuse of women, if only by my silence or blind eye. I have known too many clergy who have abused their power and the Gospel. Some of my sins may have been propitiated when I was, for a time, responsible for setting the guidelines in my diocese for appropriate relationships between clergy and their parishioners and enforcing them.

I wanted to take time to inventory my own possible culpability before I spoke. With my aging, faulty memory, I can't be sure that my behaviour has always reflected my values. I pray it has, as I was fortunate to be brought up to respect women. That has held me in good stead as I only have one sibling, a sister, two daughters, a step-daughter, five granddaughters, one niece and one great-niece. My fervent hope is the next generation of women in my family will have no occasion to post #MeToo on social media.

Lastly, I didn't want the sermon to creep into "mansplaining" as if I knew what it was like for women to survive in a society where all the rules are against them by design, blocking their careers, silencing them, and making them targets for sexual violence, abuse and harassment in their homes, workplace and on the street. I know I don't. What I do know is some of the feelings and consequences of sexual harassment. I could have posted #MeToo as well. The most serious of several occasions has remained buried within me for nearly fifty years. I

spoke of it for the first time only recently to Rachel, thanks to the movement. That has given me the strength to acknowledge it to you. The event required me to choose between changing my academic goals and career path or sit in class listening to my abuser lecture. The shame, anger, and loss of self-worth I experienced would not allow me to choose the second option. I did bring the event to the attention of people in authority I trusted, but they chose a course of inaction. I left feeling both unheard and of no account, while the perpetrator suffered no consequences.

I do not equate my experience with that of women. While there are similarities they are not the same, thanks to my white male privilege. I have shared it only to acknowledge that it affects my understanding and support of the movement and its importance.

That said, I now choose to break my silence. While listening remains essential to furthering the movement, being silenced plays into the hands of those who would like to see #MeToo be a will-o'-the-wisp that disappears quickly.

To more fully appreciate the immensity of the problem #MeToo is exposing, consider that “Me Too” was tweeted for the first time by actress Alyssa Murano around noon on 17 October, 2017 and had been used more than 200,000 times by the end of the day, and tweeted more than 500,000 times by the next day. On Facebook, the hashtag was used by more than 4.7 million people in 12 million posts during the first 24 hours. This response is less surprising when you consider that 17,700,000 sexual assaults have been reported worldwide since 1998. The actual numbers for this seriously under-reported crime are likely to be astronomical.

The phrase was first used eleven years earlier on MySpace by social activist and community organiser Tarana Burke in 2006. She says she was inspired to use the phrase after being unable to respond to a 13-year-old girl who confided to her that she had been sexually assaulted. Burke later wished she had simply told the girl, “me too”. Those were in the early days of social media so it did not ignite a movement. Ignition took Murano’s tweet in the wake of the sexual misconduct allegations against Harvey Weinstein. She asked women to tweet #MeToo to show the magnitude of the problem. It broke the dam of silence about the prevalence of sexual violence, harassment and abuse worldwide, reaching more than 85 countries. Only this week, broadcaster Alison Mau launched #MeToonz to end radio silence about the extent of the problem in Aotearoa New Zealand and to hold abusers to account for their sexual misconduct.

In the five months since it began, the movement has evolved. Burke wanted #MeToo to be a means of simply expressing empathy. Murano saw the movement as a way to give voice to the survivors and to seek justice for them in the court of public opinion by naming powerful people like Weinstein and detailing their actions. The list of high profile individuals who have been named thus far is staggering. Except for Trump, who is the worst of the worst and makes Weinstein look like a choirboy, many have already paid the price of seeing their careers implode and personal lives in shambles. Patriarchy is beginning to panic. Within three months of the first tweet the expected backlash began.

I have been reading all week a multitude of attacks against the movement. There is no surprise that there has been a lot of victim blaming, suggesting that the claims are exaggerated or insufficiently abusive or primarily their own fault. What is surprising is some of these attacks have come from feminists who boldly declare that women have gone too far,

exaggerating the harm they experienced from men who ignored their boundaries in pursuit of personal pleasure. They suggest that women simply need to be more resilient and call a cab.

A coterie of French women, including Catherine Deneuve, declared that #MeToo was a serious threat to “sexual freedom.” At *The New York Times*, Daphne Merkin criticised “the victimology paradigm” of young women who she thinks perceive themselves “as frail as Victorian housewives.”

Even feminist icon and *The Handmaid’s Tale* author Margaret Atwood asked if she is a “bad feminist” for comparing the #MeToo movement to the Salem witch trials, or to Joseph Stalin’s purges.

Atwood was throwing the question of due process at the movement, which involves having a set of rules to protect the accused. Writing in *The American Interest*, Claire Berlinski is more derogatory than Atwood, calling the #MeToo movement “a frenzied extrajudicial warlock hunt that does not pause to parse the difference between rape and stupidity” and “a classic moral panic, one that is ultimately as dangerous to women as to men.” The problem lies in a system that is strongly biased against women, suggesting they can’t be trusted. The assumption being that their report is false. Yet worldwide studies have determined that only 8% of reported assaults have been shown to be false and only a small percentage of convictions have been overturned later. The fact that only seven of every 1000 reports of rape result in a felony conviction attests to how broken the justice system is everywhere. It is, however, quite effective in intimidating victims of assault to remain silent, having no hope of justice.

Other critics, often from media with a conservative bias, warn that the movement is creating hostile opposing camps of women and men. Journalists in their effort to be “fair” seek balance in their reporting, but that only benefits the powerful. For instance, giving equal time to one scientist who is a climate change denier as is given to the 99 scientists who offer scientific evidence for climate change only gives support to the rich and powerful who seek to exploit the earth’s resources for their benefit and to our detriment. Efforts to moderate the #MeToo movement by “fair and balanced” reporting simply moderate the degree of injustice women suffer, leaving institutions of power fundamentally unchanged.

It is too soon to know if these efforts will moderate or even extinguish the flame of hope #MeToo has given millions of women and men. I hope not for the sake of us all. We need #MeToo. We need to end the silence if we are to find freedom from patriarchy’s domination.

What might we do to further the transformation of our society this hashtag offers? For us, as Unitarians, our principles support it. But those are only words on a banner if we do not act.

Many women have already shown their courage by breaking their silence, but I think men have an important role to play. Listening, examining our past behaviour, becoming aware of our sexist language and acknowledging our male privilege, confronting locker room talk that disparages women, and raising our sons to be respectful of all genders by example are all important and a good start. But there is one more thing we can do that may be the most helpful in supporting the movement. When a person of any gender shares a #MeToo moment with you, tell them, “I believe you”.