

## “The MeToo Revelations”

By the Rev. Julia Hamilton

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### OPENING WORDS

Author Arundhati Roy says, “Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, you can hear her breathing.”

We are here this morning to listen to the breathing of possibility among us. The breath of a new world, a new way. Not only possible, but present among us, right here, as we gather ourselves together this morning.

### READING

How many of you have heard of Time’s Up, the anti-harassment movement started by women in the entertainment industry in the wake of the seismic shifts that are happening right now as sexual violence and abuse are being challenged at every turn?

They were inspired by a letter of solidarity from the Alianza Nacional de Campesinas, the National Farmworker Women’s Alliance, a letter sent from over 700,000 farm worker women, welcoming them to the movement for change. They published a letter on January 1st, and here are a few words from that letter:

“To the members of Alianza and farmworker women across the country, we see you, we thank you, and we acknowledge the heavy weight of our common experience of being preyed upon, harassed, and exploited by those who abuse their power and threaten our physical and economic security. We have similarly suppressed the violence and demeaning harassment for fear that we will be attacked and ruined in the process of speaking. We share your feelings of anger and shame. We harbor fear that no one will believe us, that we will look weak or that we will be dismissed; and we are terrified that we will be fired or never hired again in retaliation.

We also recognize our privilege and the fact that we have access to enormous platforms to amplify our voices. Both of which have drawn and driven widespread attention to the existence of this problem in our industry that farmworker women and countless individuals employed in other industries have not been afforded.

To every woman employed in agriculture who has had to fend off unwanted sexual advances from her boss, every housekeeper who has tried to escape an assaultive guest, every janitor trapped nightly in a building with a predatory supervisor, every waitress grabbed by a customer and expected to take it with a smile, every garment and factory worker forced to trade sexual acts for more shifts, every domestic worker or home health aide forcibly touched by a client,

every immigrant woman silenced by the threat of her undocumented status being reported in retaliation for speaking up and to women in every industry who are subjected to indignities and offensive behavior that they are expected to tolerate in order to make a living: We stand with you. We support you...

We want all survivors of sexual harassment, everywhere, to be heard, to be believed, and to know that accountability is possible.”

SERMON

“The MeToo Revelations”

Rev. Julia Hamilton

This sermon this morning covers some difficult subjects. I’m not going to go into any graphic detail of trauma, but the issue of gender-based harassment and abuse is deeply personal, so if at any point you need to get up, get a drink of water, shake it out, or take a breath outside, please feel free to take care of yourself however you need to. And if you need to talk afterward, please seek out a member of our Care Team, or myself or Rev. Caitlin.

Part 1: Revelation

It has been a time of revelation.

Revelation – disclosure, uncovering, bringing to light. The MeToo movement - the unfolding stream of stories of harassment and abuse, shared mostly by women but others have chimed in, too, people from every industry and every walk of life – the metoo movement is not necessarily a revolution – yet - but it is a revelation. Or not just \*a\* revelation, but a series, a wave, a tidal wave of revelations.

I like that the word “revelation” has religious overtones. I like that it implies the sudden and dramatic disclosure of a powerful Truth – something that has been true all along, but hidden, obscured until the veil is lifted and the truth that was hidden now can now longer be denied.

The MeToo revelations have disclosed a truth that can no longer be ignored, set aside, or minimized. The stories of ongoing, persistent, and unavoidable harassment and abuse of women have surfaced and the stories will not be silenced. We will not be quiet, as the choir sang last week.

Revelation. In the Christian context, The Book of Revelation is the name of the final book of the bible, synonymous with the end times. The book is named after the first word that appears in the text, in ancient Greek, apokálypsis. The biblical scholar Bart d. Erhman give a definition of that word that I particularly like; “An apocalypse is a vision of heavenly secrets that can make sense of earthly realities”

Perhaps what the metoo movement really is – a kind of apocalypse – a vision of secret truths that help us make sense of earthly realities. An end times, of sorts.

We can only hope that it is the beginning of the end times for harassment and abuse of women.

It seems like no coincidence, but rather a sort of divine synchronicity, that the massive response created by women in the entertainment industry is an organization called “Time’s Up”, and this is their tagline: “The clock has run out on sexual assault, harassment and inequality in the workplace. It’s time to do something about it.”

Time’s up. End Times for Abuse. The Apocalypse is here. It’s time for some secrets to be revealed that will help us make sense of some earthly realities, and perhaps, if we are brave and motivated and compassionate and honest, perhaps, if we are lucky, this will usher in a new era in our culture, and some old wounds can be healed, and a new generation will grow up and grow old without ever living through what some of us, many of us, in this room have lived through.

The poet Julia Hartwig wrote a poem titled “Demand It Courageously” :

Make some room for yourself, human animal.  
Even a dog jostles about on his master’s lap to  
improve his position. And when he needs space he  
runs forward, without paying attention to commands  
or calls.

If you didn’t manage to receive freedom as a gift,  
demand it as courageously as bread and meat.

Make some room for yourself, human pride and  
dignity.

The Czech writer Hrabal said:

I have as much freedom as I take.

## Part 2: Some Stories

The MeToo movement started long before it was a hashtag on Twitter. In 2007, an African American woman named Tarana Burke created a nonprofit organization to provide resources for survivors of sexual harassment and assault. She wanted to create something to help, to let the women she worked with know they were not alone in their stories. She called the movement “Me Too”. Ten years later, that initial sentiment exploded across the internet when the white actor Alyssa Milano encouraged people to come forward with their stories by simply posting “me too”, so the world would see how prevalent sexual violence was. In 24 hours, there were 12 million responses to the “metoo” hashtag. Revelations began pouring in.

In 2017 Time Magazine declared the Person of the Year to be the Silence Breakers. They profiled a series of women, from different social locations, cultural backgrounds, careers and ages, women who are speaking out about sexual violence. A post from a family friend back in New Orleans scrolled past on my facebook page: “Celeste is one of the Silence Breakers!”

Celeste. I babysat for Celeste when I was a teenager. She was one of the other kids at the Unitarian Universalist congregation where I grew up in New Orleans. But now she is Dr. Celeste Kidd, professor in the Brain and Cognitive Sciences department at Rochester University. And here she was, telling her story in Time magazine. Her story, of how when she was a graduate student and a junior professor, she, along with several other women, were routinely harassed and assaulted by one of the older male professors in the program, and their complaints were routinely dismissed by the school. Their case became one of the most high profile whistleblower cases in academia.

Another one of these MeToo posts came across my facebook page from a friend that I had lived with just after college, when we were all waiting tables together in Los Angeles. Back then, we would come home at night and swap stories from our job that ranged from the hilarious to the horrifying. In the service industry, there are just too many incidents of harassment to choose from. But this post was different – she was linking to an article in the LA Times about James Toback, a prominent filmmaker in Los Angeles. The article detailed the accounts of 38 women who had come forward to the newspaper about this man's abusive behavior. My friend posted this link because she, too, had been singled out by Toback when she was a waitress, and he had used the same abusive tactics with her that were described in the article.

Her own story was not nearly as bad as some of the other women's, and she had escaped the actual physical assault that he inflicted on others. But after publishing that initial article, calls began pouring in. By January 7th, the LA Times reported that 395 women had contacted them about this man. The industry had protected him for years. He denies all allegations against him. All 395 women, he says, are making this up.

Two national news articles. Two stories from two people I know personally who are caught up in the sweep of this moment in history, in the revelations, the secrets that are breaking open, revealing something true about the daily experiences of women all over this earth.

I tell these stories because they are just a glimpse, just a slice of what has come out so far. And no matter what celebrity gets outed next, or whether or not you believe each and every accusation, I don't want the forest to get lost for the trees. In this moment, our job is not to participate in the public trial of every survivor and abuser, not to read the comments section and add our 2 cents – our job is to listen, learn, and take in the magnitude of these stories. This is particular request for the male identified among us. Don't get hung up on a single story. Just take in the sheer number of experiences. Our job is also to uncover our own stories, and cast out the demons of shame and self-doubt that have haunted us for too long. To admit where we have been wrong, or claim space that was never granted to us when we have been silenced.

It's not just about Harvey Weinstein. Or James Toback. Or that professor at Rochester. Or any other individual person who has done wrong. It is about the culture that has allowed sexual violence to persist, to replicate, to become commonplace ... and yet at the same time it is also to be denied, disbelieved, minimized, and ignored. Sexual harassment is at once everywhere and nowhere, the vulgar catcall yelled out on the street in broad daylight and yet the assumption that that same catcall should hold no weight - it should just evaporate

into the space between the abuser and the abused. Shrug it off. Don't take it personally. Move on.

Just a few months ago, I was getting into my car in a parking garage downtown. As I got into my car, a guy was walking briskly past and said, without skipping a beat, "Hey, you should wear a shorter skirt", and didn't break stride as he passed. By the time I registered what he had actually said, that he was actually talking to me, my car door was shut and I was backing out of the parking space, and he was long gone.

In that moment, I was forced into these two contradictory realities – the pervasive nature of harassment, and the invisibility of it, too. What could I do but shrug it off and drive away? Every women and female-identified person I know has hundreds of these little interactions in our histories, and they lay there like soil, the mulch in which the more violent cases of abuse grow and take root.

So I would like to take a moment now and acknowledge all of the stories that are living here in this room. All of the meToo moments, big and small, all of the complexities, the stories that have been told and the ones that still lay like silent stones in our hearts. And yes, this issue of sexual violence is often about the toll it takes on women in particular, but it is not only women who suffer. Men, Transfolk and gender nonconforming people are survivors, too.

So if you are willing, if you are holding a trembling heart or powerful pain or a slight ache in your throat, if you have a metoo story and are angry, or sad, or hopeful, or frightened, if you want to come up here with me in solidarity, if you want to join me up front, please come up. Or you can rise and stand where you are, or you can raise your hands. You don't have to say anything, you don't have to share or anything like that, just be acknowledged and we are going to bless each other in this congregation together.

*(Invitation to come up)*

Please join with me in the spirit of blessing:

If you are here today with nervousness, know that in this moment you are not alone.  
If you are here today with shame, know that in this moment, you are holy and good.  
If you are here today with relief, know that in this moment, you are free  
If you are here today with anger, know that in this moment your rage is recognized  
If you are here today with grief, know that in this moment tears can be healing  
If you are here today with guilt, know that in this moment your heart can be unburdened  
If you are here today with fear, know that in this moment you are held by the courageous love of this community  
If you are here today with compassion, know that in this moment your listening is needed

And If you are here today with a survivor's heart that has persisted against all odds, know that in this moment that all of who you are is welcome here, and know that you are a gift unto the world.

May the spirit of life and love bring us all greater understanding, and the will to change what has been broken for so long. May it be so, Blessed Be, and Amen.

You may return to your seats.

### Part 3: The Religious Imagination

For a long time, religion was part of the problem.

We must be honest here. The patriarchy and religion have been best friends for a long time, in many different traditions, across many different cultures. Even in Unitarian Universalism although as of now there are slightly more women than men in leadership, this is a very recent development. 1974, there were only 40 women clergy in the Unitarian Universalist Association, and only five of those ordained women were pastors of congregations. 5. 1974 was not that long ago.

So we've come a long way very quickly, and although there are now plenty of women in leadership roles, we are not immune from the larger culture. This congregation has had to do a lot of work healing from wounds inflicted by sexual misconduct in its past. And many people who come into Unitarian Universalism from other traditions may be encountering women as religious leaders for the very first time right now in 2018.

But religion, if we can keep it from being stuck as part of the problem, can also be part of the solution.

Because transformation is our business.

Envisioning a better world is our business.

Learning from the past is our business.

Liberation for the future is our business.

Here we can cultivate the kind of imagination it will take to discover what a community without systemic harassment looks like. Here we can engage the kind of empathy that allows us to see shared human stories within any and all gender expressions. Here we can make amends, tell truths, allow apocalyptic revelation not to frighten us back into our corners, but inspire us with a vision of a more beloved world.

So let us get about our business, with good heart and good faith and lots of courageous love. I close with words that were used by one of the speakers at the Women's March yesterday, words from the activist Assata Shakur:

It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains.