

Food for Thought  
Carol Cashion

How common is the experience of sexual harassment? Here is some Food for Thought, the results of a new online survey launched in January by the nonprofit, Stop Street Harassment

81% of women and 43% of men have experienced some form of sexual harassment during their lifetime. This includes verbal harassment, physical harassment, cyber harassment and sexual assault. While the survey results are reported for two categories, women and men, we surely know that sexual harassment is also experienced by persons across other gender identities and sexual orientations.

For women and girls, the survey shows that it starts early. 30% of women had experienced sexual harassment by the age of 13, joined by an additional 27% of their sisters when they are between the ages 14 and 17.

For women, the nearly universal experience of sexual harassment has real impact on our everyday lives. It shapes how we see ourselves and our bodies, it shapes what we do, it determines how we move through the world...

Every day, we shoulder the burden of avoiding sexual harassment and sexual assault, and it is a heavy one.

So, I'm asking, #YouToo?

Indulge me in a quick thought experiment. I will read out a list of TEN statements. To how many of these do you answer, "me, too"? This is not just for women - let's all participate, whatever your gender identity. Keep count on your fingers there in the pews, at the end I will ask you for your "me, too" number. Ready? Here we go:

- I walk with keys grasped between my fingers in case I need to use them as a weapon
- I work or have worked in a place where I knew that keeping my job meant tolerating unwanted comments or touching.

- I have consented to a sexual situation I didn't welcome because I was afraid to say no.
- I check and remember the medallion number when i get in a taxi
- I dress differently when I'm out walking alone or when I am traveling by myself, in the hope that harassers won't bother me
- I avoid social situations if someone who made prior, unwanted advances may be there.
- I wonder if I got a promotion because of how I look.
- I wonder if I didn't get a promotion because of how I look.
- I don't talk back to verbal harassers out of fear that it will escalate to something worse
- I worry about what my daughters or granddaughters will experience as they grow up.

Okay, have you got your number? Quick show of hands:

0?

1-3?

4-6?

7-10?

It is time to lay this burden down. If your number was "0", your task is to listen, and listen hard. If your count was anywhere from 1-10, I encourage you to speak, to be heard, to be seen, because this is where change begins.

Join me, then, in saying the words: "me, too"

Sermon: "#MeToo and the Radical Notion"

March 18, 2018

The Rev. Heather Janules

It is always a challenge and a privilege to preach, to enter into a pulpit and to speak the truth as I understand it. This morning, as we turn towards the current #MeToo movement, I am mindful that I speak to you as a minister but – perhaps first and foremost – I speak to you as a woman in this world.

When Carol invited us to consider how the reality of sexual harassment and assault is woven into everyday life, I said, “me too” as I do “walk with keys grasped between my fingers in case I need to use them as a weapon.” Without giving it much thought in the moment, as a woman I have learned to live vigilantly.

But perhaps the easiest way to see the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault in society, what some simply call “rape culture - a setting in which rape is pervasive and normalized due to societal attitudes about gender and sexuality,”<sup>1</sup> is to recognize how the “#MeToo” movement has inspired reconsideration of what is normal and what is abuse. I know I am not alone in first thinking, “I don’t have a ‘#MeToo’ story” when the movement emerged but, the more I thought about it, the more I realized I do have a story. I have more than one.

One of my “#MeToo” stories comes from when I was a teenager and a new driver. I don’t remember where I was going but I do remember I was alone in the car and primarily focused on the road in front of me. I saw movement in my peripheral vision so I turned to look at the car in the neighboring lane. That driver was also alone; his windows and mine were open on this hot day.

The movement that caught my attention was his mouth as he was staring right at me and moving his tongue in an obscene gesture. He was a middle-aged white man, a complete stranger. It seemed the only thing that inspired him to do this was the fact that we were both alone in our cars and I was a young woman. While we were both in motion and he was many feet away, it suddenly felt like he was there in the car with me. Much younger than he and unsure on the road, I went from simply driving to my destination to feeling afraid and violated.

I had the presence of mind, though, to remember the color and make of his car and, once I pulled into a parking lot, to scribble down his plate number on the side of a receipt. Before I got back on the road, I sat in my car and sobbed.

When I drove home, I passed a police station. As I had the driver’s plate number, I decided to file a complaint. I met with a sympathetic officer who took down my

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<sup>1</sup> “a [sociological](#) concept used to describe a setting in which [rape](#) is pervasive and [normalized](#) due to societal attitudes about [gender](#) and [sexuality](#),” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rape\\_culture#Historical\\_background](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rape_culture#Historical_background)

statement and the information. I gave the officer my phone number so he could keep me updated.

Arriving home, my parents were surprised to find me so upset. I told them what happened and that I had filed a complaint. However, that evening, the officer called with some unexpected questions. “Are you sure you got the plate number correct?” he asked. “Was it a different make or model?” The officer was having trouble locating the car registration. However, to this day, I am convinced I gave the correct information. As he couldn’t locate the driver, my complaint couldn’t go forward. Later, I overheard my father say to my mother that I was “overreacting” to this incident.

With the perspective of age and hindsight, I look back on this moment in my life and conclude a few things.

I conclude that there is no such thing as an “overreaction.” We all react to what we experience in our lives.

I conclude that while this was a clear incident of unsolicited public harassment, this experience is relatively minor as compared to the experience of the one-in-five women who will be raped in their lifetime. One-in-seventy-one men will experience sexual violence.<sup>2</sup>

I conclude that this incident, like other expressions of rape culture, was not about physical pleasure but about power. As there was no tactile contact between me and this driver, his motivation seemed to be to make him the center of my attention, to violate my psychic space, to disgust me, to aggressively insert sexuality into the public sphere.

I conclude that the microcosm of this incident reflects the bigger picture, a picture where those who are targeted for harassment and sexual violence are pathologized and violators are not. I was a “confused overreactor.” Those who speak up, who tell their truth, who make complaints are often received as hysterical, as unbelievable, as not worthy of our time or our trust. At least this was true before the #MeToo movement.

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications\\_nsvrc\\_factsheet\\_media-packet\\_statistics-about-sexual-violence\\_0.pdf](https://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications_nsvrc_factsheet_media-packet_statistics-about-sexual-violence_0.pdf)

The #MeToo movement began with community organizer Tarana Burke, who first coined the phrase in 2006 after she heard a 13-year-old girl tell a story of being sexually assaulted and Burke regretted not responding with “me too.” Burke’s activism fosters support and empowerment for young women-of-color in poor communities who survive sexual violence.

The “#MeToo” hashtag went mainstream last fall when women came forward with accounts of assault and harassment by film producer Harvey Weinstein. Eventually, 84 women would accuse Weinstein of misconduct.<sup>3</sup> The breaking of silence around Weinstein’s behavior went viral, leading to public accusations and, in some cases, firings, of other famous and powerful men, in the United States and beyond. This public conversation inspired millions to tell their own story, posting to social media with the hashtag “#MeToo” as a way to collectively reveal how many have such a story to tell.

I thank one of our Worship Associates, Carol Cashion, for sending me an article about the #MeToo movement. In the *New York Times*, Catharine MacKinnon observes that what makes this movement remarkable is that women have been forever telling these stories and our laws have named assault and harassment as illegal. But, for some reason, in this social moment the stories are now believed and ramifications have become real. MacKinnon writes, “Powerful individuals and entities are taking sexual abuse seriously for once and acting against it as never before. No longer liars, no longer worthless, today’s survivors are initiating consequences none of them could have gotten through any lawsuit...because they are being believed and valued as the law seldom has.”<sup>4</sup>

MacKinnon’s observation invites us to wonder why our culture has arrived at this season of “truth *and* consequences.” I believe this moment has come as part of the broader seismic shifts of our time. When irrefutable evidence emerges, proving that Donald Trump bragged about using his celebrity status to freely grab women by their genitals, and he is elected anyway, the traditional notions of what makes a US President are turned upside down. When Ray Moore, a politician accused by many women of harassment and assault, including women who had

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/people/2017/10/27/weinstein-scandal-complete-list-accusers/804663001/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/04/opinion/metoo-law-legal-system.html?action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=opinion-c-col-right-region&region=opinion-c-col-right-region&WT.nav=opinion-c-col-right-region#story-continues-1>

been teenagers at the time, is almost elected a Senator of Alabama – but for black women going to the polls – this is a sign of basic community standards falling away.

Then, too, other elements of the status quo come into question. Survivors of sexual violence are seen, heard and believed, the crimes against them taken seriously. Women and their allies fill the streets in countless cities to speak up, sometimes protesting or even running for office for the first time. Teenagers who survive the most-recent mass shooting articulate an ethical voice for the nation and challenge the political influence of the National Rifle Association. Following their lead, thousands of students disrupt “education as usual” and walk out of their schools. What we know to be normal is up for grabs and, amid this moral chaos, the marginalized are claiming their power, serving to anchor us as a nation as we threaten to slide into profound exploitation and depravity.

But lest we understand the #MeToo movement as a moratorium on the right-wing, people from all political walks of life have fallen, with accusations ending the careers of folksy entertainer Garrison Keillor and progressive US Senator Al Franken. I was shocked and saddened the most by posthumous allegations against human rights advocate and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel.

And as a minister I have a responsibility to acknowledge that while faith communities are called to stand in moral judgment of the world, they are not immune from human pathologies. It is estimated that at least half of Unitarian Universalist congregations have a history of clergy or leader misconduct, with much of the abuse of power sexual in nature.<sup>5</sup>

The depth and breadth of the violation of the vulnerable is cause for despair. I believe the pervasiveness of this culture stems from centuries of misogyny that assumed without question the inferiority of women and the right of the powerful to exploit the weak for their own pleasure, these narratives woven into the very scriptures that define many of the world’s religions.

Yet, I also believe, as Marie Shear once observed that “feminism is the radical notion that women are people.”<sup>6</sup> I believe that to be human is to cherish agency

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.uuma.org/BlankCustom.asp?page=BSE2016response>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.beverlymcpail.com/feminismradicalnotion.html>

over our own minds and bodies and to seek equal status with others, no matter how powerful or popular they may be. To see women and other vulnerable individuals as people is to navigate through the world with a lens and an ethic of empathy. It is in recognition of our shared humanity that the possibility of change lives.

I recall my mother asking me what justice would look like if the police officer identified the driver who harassed me. All I wanted him to do was to write a letter acknowledging what he did that hot summer day. He didn't even have to apologize. But – and this is the most important part – I wanted him to send a copy of that letter to all the women in his life. His mother. His sisters. His wife and his daughters, if he had them. I wanted those he did not have the freedom to completely dehumanize to know what he did and for the conversation – and hopefully the change - to begin there.

The #MeToo movement gives me hope. I close with a modern parable that hints at this hope, a Facebook post by a woman named Lara Sharp, written on October 20<sup>th</sup> of last year. I have adapted her story as what was said to her cannot be repeated in the pulpit. Sharp writes:

I'm walking up to a train station... and three men are...tree trimming...on ...train station property... The guy in crane turns off his chainsaw and shouts down to me, 'Hey baby! Hey, sexy!...you made my morning!'

I looked up at him, rolled my eyes, and kept walking... I had to walk past them, to get to the ticket office... as I get closer, he starts yelling, '...I'm just letting you know that I'd f...you, baby!'

And then another guy...maybe ten feet from me, starts saying 'Hey, I'd f...you too!'...I look at the third man, and he looks sheepishly at me, but says nothing.

...I pull out my phone... and I take a photo of the company name on their truck, and the license plate... and the sheepish man looks at me, realizing what I'm doing... and he says, 'I didn't do anything!'

So I stuck my phone in his face and I said, 'Exactly! You just stood there, while your coworkers sexually harassed a woman! YOU DIDN'T DO ANYTHING.'

I headed towards the ticket office, with the crane guy shouting 'F...you...' over and over, as I walked away... and I reported the entire incident to the woman behind the counter.

She gets on the phone and she reports it to her supervisor, gives me a number to call for station-related complaints... and she comes out from her ticket counter, and she hugs me.

I get on my train, and call the number, and I'm transferred to a woman, and I tell her what happened. She is extremely compassionate while she takes my report.

A half hour later, I get a call. It's two men, conference calling me about the report. Head of Something and Supervisor Someone...

Both men...apologize profusely, and they assure me that one of them is going to address these men... I mention the photos, and he asks me to send them to him...I thank them, and I hang up my phone...

But, it doesn't hang up... and I can still hear them...They are still talking... my phone is on mute, and I can't remove my ear buds, so I keep trying to press the cord buttons, and it just won't hang up...

One of the men says, 'I can't believe this' and the other man says, 'Me nether' and my heart sinks...

Then, I hear, 'Fire them, or suspend them?'

He responds, 'Are you crazy?'

Other guy says, 'Yeah, you're right. I'm firing them. Women don't make this s[tuff] up...



The other man says, 'I'm angry they treated her that way. Who talks to a woman like that? Who talks to anyone like that? Two of them even have daughters...

Other guy says... I'll file her photos. You go fire all three of them.'

And then... The other guy says, 'When they sign and date the Termination Papers, make sure it says 2017, not 1917.'

They both laugh, somewhat sadly, and my phone goes silent.

And I go silent.

With tears of appreciation in my eyes.

Some of us may be this woman, subject to the abuse of rape culture just for living our everyday lives. Some of us could be the men who say vile things to her. Or we could be the silent bystander who does nothing to intervene. Or we could be the woman who takes the complaint and offers compassion. Or we could be the managers with institutional authority, holding the power of consequences in our hands.

How we live out these roles in this brave new world matters. You want to begin the end of rape culture? Me too.