

#metoo
January 21, 2018
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The story I am about to share is not a story about sexual assault.

I'm small person. About 5'2" on days when I stand really tall. And I've always been small. I was a small kid, and I stopped growing when I was about 12 years old. I watched as my best friend, who had been the same height as me throughout elementary school, shot up to over 6 feet tall. But not me, I was still little, still short, still small.

And throughout my elementary and middle school years I was also always someone who loved hugging people, and so I'd always encourage people to hug me. I would feel the warmth and connection that it brought me. To this day, I still consider myself a hugger, though, if you've interacted with me much here you might not know that.

One thing that would sometimes happen, however, as I was a teen and a young adult, is that people who were taller, bigger, and stronger than me would sometimes go in to hug me and then they would lift me up off the ground. They would put their arms around my back and pull me up into the air, sometimes spin me around.

Now, I didn't particularly like this. It made me chest feel crushed, like I couldn't breathe. It was uncomfortable. It made me feel like I had no control over my own body. I didn't know how long it would last. Luckily, it usually didn't last more than a few seconds.

But still, I would smile and laugh whenever someone did this. What else was I supposed to do? I felt uncomfortable, so I laughed. Smiling seemed like the polite thing to do. I *had* offered to hug this person after all. The other person was often expressing excitement at seeing me. Much the way you see people pick other's up in movies and spin them around because they are so excited to see them.

One day, about four years ago when I was 28 years old, a friend of mine hugged me and as he was hugging me he said to me "can I pick you up?"

And I paused for a moment and I said "no."

And that "no" even surprised me. It had literally never occurred to me in all this time that I could say "no" to someone when they were doing this.

And, frankly, I'm sure it never occurred to a single one of the people who picked me up when they hugged me. I'm sure it didn't occur to these people who were mostly men and boys - but did include people of all genders - I'm sure it never occurred to them that I didn't *like* getting picked up when I was hugged. Because I was laughing and I had asked them to hug me in the first place, so wasn't this part of it? And some people *like* getting picked up when they are hugged. What would have taught them that this *wasn't* ok with me? Even though it really wasn't.

Now, people don't really lift me up when they hug me anymore.

I don't know if it's that I'm not hugging people as much anymore or if it's because I'm older or if it's because I have a Reverend in front of my name and it doesn't seem very ministerial to pick up somebody who's a *Reverend*.

Or maybe it's because four years ago was around the time that I, a transgender man, started being seen in the world as a man, instead of a woman.

Our worship service this morning is about the #metoo movement.

The #metoo movement is a movement that gained attention this past October when it became widespread on social media, on Facebook and Twitter. What you need to know is that people, mostly women, were encouraged to post a status saying "me, too" if they had been subject to sexual assault or harassment. The idea was that if people posted this on social media we would see how much of a problem it was, what a large magnitude of a problem sexual assault and harassment was.

The phrase in this context was originally coined by a Black woman named Tarana Burke who wanted to use it as something called "empowerment through empathy" over ten years ago. The idea was to give women the feeling that they were not alone in experiencing sexual abuse, because there is so much stigma and shame around it.

The #metoo movement has spread and is ultimately what's led to many, especially in the people in the entertainment industry, it's what has led to these men finally being held accountable for abusing their power and sexually harassing and assaulting women, and other, that they held power over. It is what has led to American film producer Harvey Weinstein getting dismissed from his position at his company, and he was the first of a list of many.

The idea of the #metoo movement is that there are so many women - and people of all genders, but we'll get more to that in a moment - that there were so many who had experienced sexual harassment, assault, and abuse, that it was a problem that could not be ignored.

This revelation shocked many men, when they saw their social media accounts filled with the words #metoo, and left many wondering how this could be so widespread and how they never knew about it.

The #metoo movement also angered many people, feeling that they shouldn't have to share their story, their often traumatic stories, in order to have the issue of sexual assault taken seriously.

And it was complicated by the fact that men who were survivors of sexual assault and harassment were at times encouraged to share their stories and at others shamed for

sharing them and “taking up space”. And those who are transgender or non-binary were sometimes pushed out of the conversation completely as the movement sometimes encouraged narrative of men and women that left little room for those who don’t fit neatly into those categories, but who often *because* of their gender identities, were subject to sexual assault and harassment in their lives.

Furthermore the complexities of how race, class, and disability play a role have been sometimes included and sometimes ignored.

But one thing is for certain, the #metoo campaign is altering the way we talk about sexual assault, sexual harassment, consent, and, frankly, it’s altering the way we talk about sex. And that’s a good thing.

At this church, every month around the beginning of the month, I meet with a group of people in the congregation to talk about our upcoming worship services, they are called our Worship Committee. This month, during that meeting where I laid out the different services I was planning, when we got to January 21st and I had written “#metoo” someone looked at me from the group and said “So. Otto. #metoo, huh? Are you SURE you want to talk about *that*?”

“No, I’m really not” I said.

And I have to say that standing at the pulpit today is probably the most scared I’ve been since I became your Minister. Sexual assault, sexual abuse, sexual harassment - and let’s face it - sex are not easy things to talk about. We don’t talk about them in polite company. And church is polite company, right?

This is scary. It’s scary because we’ve all been impacted by sexual assault and harassment, and most of us have been impacted by it directly. It’s scary because of the ways we had it done to us and the ways that we’ve allowed it to happen to others.

Unitarian Universalism is a religion that not only affirms that sexuality is a part of who we are, but makes it a point to educate ourselves and each other about how to be sexually healthy. One of the ways that we do this is through our Our Whole Lives curriculum which teaches about sexuality to people of all ages.

It’s a curriculum that was developed by the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ and is a reflection of our values as Unitarian Universalists - that we have a right to make our own decisions about our bodies, that sexuality is a healthy part of being human, and that it’s best expressed in consensual relationships among adults. This is actually a sexuality education program we have offered here and in conjunction with other churches for middle schoolers, and there are curriculums for all ages, from preschool through adults. Yes, adults need to learn about these things as well!

One of the state assumptions of the program, along with “sexuality is a good part of the human experience,” is “sexuality in our society is damaged by violence, exploitation, alienation, dishonesty, abuse of power, and the treatment of persons as objects.”

Unitarian Universalists believe that sexual education is a part of the justice work of our faith and that is an important part of the spiritual work of our faith. We believe that in order to honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we must also honor the inherent worth and dignity of every *body*.

When you called me as your Minister I told you that if I didn't talk about things that were uncomfortable, I wasn't doing my job. And at this time we have to think about what our response will be and what our responsibility is, as a church, and as people here in this moment, to this social movement of our time. Because we don't always come to church to be comforted. We come to make sense of the world around us. And to go out into it sustained to do the difficult work and have the hard conversations.

I shared that story about getting lifted up when I was hugged at the beginning of this sermon because I wanted to get you thinking about the fact that this issue, the one the #metoo movement is bringing up, is in part of the clear and not-so-clear ways we each have control or not over our own bodies.

And I wanted to tell you a story that wasn't about sex because this issue isn't simply about sex, though that's a place where often bodies are violated and power is used in subtle and overt ways.

The lines are being drawn in the sand - the victim here on one side and the perpetrators on the other- the sexual assaults and rape on one side, the “normal sex” on the other - the men on one side and the women on the other. But it's not a black and white issue. And it all comes down to this - what is consent?

In the scenario I described where I was lifted up during a hug, I didn't say no. I never told anyone not to do that. I didn't even realize that I could. I feared what would happen if I said no. I'd been socialized not to hurt someone's feelings, not to reject them.

But I didn't consent.

And there were dynamics that impact that ability for me to consent. These people were bigger than me. They were stronger than me. They had power over me in those ways. They were literally holding me, sometimes so hard I could feel in in my ribs.

This conversation - the one about sexuality and sexual assault and consent - in a lot of ways is about our own abilities to decide what is right or not for our bodies. And there are countless subtle ways our interactions impact us every day.

You don't consent when you don't say no to a sexual situation because the person who is initiating it is your boss who has power over you to fire you.

And you don't necessarily consent when your coworker, a man who has more power to get promoted over you, initiates sex and you don't explicitly say no.

Or even your date. Maybe he's in your group of friends or maybe he's a powerful celebrity. But you know that people won't believe you if you tell them you said no. Maybe you're afraid of the fact that he knows where you live or that he has more physical power over you.

Just because someone didn't say "no" doesn't mean that they consented.

Now, as a society, we talk a lot to women and people who were assigned female at birth about how to prevent being raped. I experienced it in my teens and twenties - don't walk home alone at night, don't go out with a man you don't know, don't wear short skirts.

And the conversation has changed a little. There is talk of "instead of telling women not to get raped, let's treat men not to rape."

But it needs to be more than that.

Those people that picked me up even though I didn't want it - they had no reason to believe that what they were doing was wrong. Because, so often, we see bodies as objects. We are sometimes taught to take into account others feelings, but often not their bodies.

I don't know where the conversation is going from here. I can say that I have immense respect for those who have come forward and shared their stories. I have immense gratitude for the many who have shared their stories, publicly and on social media, including the many people in this very room who have shared their stories and shone a light where it was needed.

I know that simply firing and taking away the power of those who abuse it, though a good first step, is not enough.

We have to change the way we talk and teach each other and our children about bodies and respectful relationships with them.

We have to teach ourselves to ask before we touch people, and to consider the reasons why someone might not be able to say no.

We have to examine systems of power - the power we hold over each other, and not take no for an answer.

It's going to be a long, hard road. But as Unitarian Universalists who believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we must be committed to changing the conversation and changing ourselves.

There are a few things I want you to take away from this.

First is to listen to the stories that are being told, especially if you have not experienced sexual assault or harassment yourself. Listen to them and believe them. I believe you.

And if you are someone who has experienced it, don't feel like you do have to read another story, another account of sexual assault. Taking care of yourself is important. And don't feel like you have to share your story for it to be legitimate.

Another is to get educated about consent.

When my friend asked me if he could pick me up, he didn't assume that I was ok with something, he asked. He checked in about boundaries before he did something to my body. We could all use a little more checking in with each other about that.

You might think that because you are in a committed relationship, or married, that you don't need to think about consent. But we all do. We can only change it the conversation's we are having with each other and with our children is changing.

So with that, let us enter in the work of changing and transforming our world through conversation about consent.

Let us say together amen.