



UU Women's Federation Sermon Award 2017

Winner

"From Eve to Hillary"

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From Eve to Hillary

People often recommend a book to me called "Reading the Bible Again for the First Time," and I tell them, take away the word "again" and that's me. As someone raised a Unitarian Universalist humanist, I am reading much the bible *for the first time*, period.

Here is Genesis, chapter three, of the People's Bible. Maybe you've heard it a hundred times, or maybe it's your first time.

God said, You shall not eat the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it or you will die. But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened."

God tells Eve she will die.

Does she? *No*.

What is Eve seeking here? In the words of the author of the Genesis story: good food, a delight to the eyes, to be wise. The serpent tells her she will *not* die but will now be like God, knowing good and evil.

Many of us grew up with the message that Eve *ruined paradise for everyone*. It was her fault we humans had to spend our lives atoning, trying to *make paradise great again*, if you will.

But Unitarian Universalism encourages us to question, to not just accept one story or one way. So I have questions here: Just who is lying in this Genesis story? Whose motives should arouse suspicion? The woman who chooses, knowingly, to seek wisdom and face up to good and evil; the animal who is maligned through ages but -- if you read the actual text -- told Eve *the truth* about her choices; or the entity in power, who made a bold, hollow threat to the people?

Does any of this feel familiar? How different two thousand years of Judeo-Christian history might have been if Eve were respected for her choices, her knowledge, her willingness to seek truth and take risks.

"Genesis 3 has been misunderstood," writes scholar Susan Nitich in the Women's Bible Commentary. "Eve is the protagonist, not her husband. This is an important point, as is the realization that to be the curious one, the seeker of knowledge, the tester of limits - is to be *quintessentially human*."

I read that and I thought, *wow*, Eve could've made a pretty great Unitarian Universalist.

In the congregation I serve, 21 of our 31 founding members were women. And right now, the Unitarian Universalist Association's presidential campaign has three candidates -- all women, *for the first time ever* -- which means that, unless a man joins the race, the UUA will have a female president *for the first time ever*.

It's an important time in our nation and our denomination, and it goes well beyond politics.

This is exciting -- and we know that change can be scary for many people -- for many of *us*. We have to name that. All around, especially online and in the media, we see the poisonous fruit of that fear -- anger, hatred, violence, mistrust, shame -- and we see so much of it directed at women.

Writing last fall in the Huffington Post, Katie Massa Kennedy described how the lore of the "conniving shrew," the "cunning wench," the "lying jezebel" -- this embodiment of "untrustworthiness" in female form -- has been carefully crafted over history. It is genius in its simplicity, she wrote: "gut the credibility, remove the voice."

"And in a country such as ours with stronger Judeo-Christian ties than any other Westernized nation, it is particularly compelling -- Eve giving Adam the apple is a powerful illustration of the cultural casting of a woman caught in her penchant for treachery, complete with a faith-based otherworldliness that makes it irrefutable by design."

Kennedy says we see this in trope in the Salem Witch, the women's suffragist, the second-wave feminist, the modern-day "gold-digger." Since then, we could now add the phrase from the presidential debates, "Nasty woman" to that list. We could add Mitch McConnell's description of Elizabeth Warren trying to read from Coretta Scott King in the Senate: "*She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless she persisted.*"

These tropes and dismissals nullify “a woman’s words before she can even speak them,” Kennedy says.

Gut the credibility, remove the voice.

Yes, Kennedy was relating all this to the treatment of Hillary Clinton, but Clinton was not the only woman in the presidential race - nor the only woman to have run before. In 1972, Shirley Chisholm became the first black candidate for a major party's nomination for [President of the United States](#), and the first woman to run for the [Democratic Party's](#) presidential nomination.

When a reporter noted to Republican Carly Fiorina, then running for the GOP presidential nomination, “Well, ma’am, I never met a presidential candidate with pink nail polish on.”

Fiorina quipped, “Well, there’s always a first.” Then afterward, acknowledged to a reporter, “I’ve been dealing with it all my life.”

Sexism goes far beyond one candidate, beyond party politics. When we talk about how women are treated, we are talking about all of us. I called this sermon “From Eve to Hillary,” which is a good way to drum up excitement and animosity on Facebook, but I could have called it “From Eve to *us*.”

This losing of your voice, *your self*, because of sex or gender expression goes completely against our first UU principle of the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We are called, at this particular moment in history, to be prophetic witnesses -- and workers -- against misogyny, against patriarchy.

None of this is theoretical or merely emotional. It translates into real-life consequences:

- shamefully unequal pay and poor conditions for women in the workplace and for all people who do so-called “women’s work” like teaching and caregiving;
- consequences like paltry jail terms, if any, for rapists, especially athlete-rapists;
- a United States where transgender women, almost all women of them color, are murdered at a record rate; 23 at least in the U.S. in 2016.

This *old stuff*. It crosses lines of race, class, culture, ability, sexuality. And while marginalized group get hit hardest, it is still *everybody's stuff*.

So what are we going to do about it? How are we going to change and heal?

First, let us look inward. Let us ask ourselves, no matter what our gender identity, where we are hurting from misogyny, and where we are part of the system that oppresses.

We are all both. I will start with me. Some small examples: When my 7-year-old daughter asked me earlier this year, "How many girl presidents have we had?" I choked on a lump in my throat to say to her, "None." In 230 years, none.

And yet, when the first woman walked out onto that U.S. presidential debate stage, what I remember thinking first is not "What a historic moment" but rather, "Mmm, I don't know about that eyeliner."

I was no better than the reporter with Carly Fiorina. And I know I internalize that bias with myself as much as with anyone.

As Clinton named in the first debate: "Implicit bias is a problem for everyone. We need all of us to be asking hard questions about why am I feeling this way..."

Like Eve, we need to choose knowledge.

Now, a word about knowledge. Unitarian Universalists have been known to pat ourselves on the back as a group, a bit too self-congratulatory at times about our enlightenment. But when it comes to sexism, we can look at our beloved churches too.

I once sat in a church committee meeting, as a group of good people rushed to get an important job done on a tight deadline. At one point, a woman on the committee spoke up: "I raised this issue months ago because I knew we needed time to get it done. No one responded to my email. The committee only acted when a man brought it up a few months later." I have dealt with this at my job, she said, and I am frustrated to be dealing with it again. It is only getting worse as I get older, she said. "*No one wants to listen to older women.*"

"gut the credibility, remove the voice"

We *love* this woman. No one intended to ignore her. I trust that. But we did.

“Do I have to pound my fists on the table to be heard?” she said, when I called her to ask her permission to tell the story.

I told her she reminded me of Texas Senator Letitia Van De Putte, who spoke up so famously during the Wendy Davis abortion-rights filibuster in 2013. “Did the President hear me or did the President hear me and refuse to recognize me?” Van De Putte asked. “At what point must a female senator raise her hand or her voice to be recognized over her male colleagues?” The Senate chamber, full of emerging women’s rights activists of all genders, erupted in cheers.

At that church committee meeting, there weren’t really any cheers. There was silence, then apologies and vows to do better from now on. *Doing better from now on is the best kind of atonement.*

Day to day opportunities to fight sexism are often small -- as simple as *listening* or replying to an email. The Washington Post recently described how female staff in the Obama administration had developed a simple yet brilliant strategy for being heard. They call it “amplification.”

When a woman makes a key point in a meeting, other women repeat it, giving credit to its author. According to the Post, this forces the men in the room to recognize the contribution — and denies men, or anyone, the chance to intentionally or accidentally claim women or genderqueer people’s ideas as their own. The female staffers set an intention to do this - you might call it a spiritual practice - and it changed the White House culture from the first term to the second. Women on Obama’s team went from $\frac{1}{3}$ of the staff to $\frac{1}{2}$.

That is a strategy designed by women for women, but people of any gender can do it. Call it a spiritual practice. See how it feels to show up with an agenda of amplifying other voices.

Now, speaking of other voices, I want to speak to the men here today. You are so much on my heart. People of all genders, men included, need healing from sexism and misogyny too.

I imagine it must be so uncomfortable, painful, to hear violent, anti-women speech described as “guy talk.” It hurts me -- married to a good man, the mother of a young son -- so, men, I can only imagine how it hurts you. Do you want to holler, “Not me! That is not how I talk! Groping women is not what *I do*.” Please, holler. Please put your feelings in the public square. Tell your partners and your children. Let the world know. Please do not let women and genderqueer people do all this work for and without you.

And I don't want to be naive -- to presume that all of this violence and misogyny is only happening *out there*, not *in here* among Unitarian Universalist men. So, if you *have* talked that way -- if you *do act that way* -- may this spiritual community be a place for you to atone and heal. Facing sexism is not about shaming men. It is about liberating us all.

UU men seeking to grow as feminists, I bring you good news. You have - we all have - outstanding male feminists in our church and movement. For one, I will lift up Chris Crass, a UU father and activist and founder of the Good Men Project. In Chris's book, *Towards Collective Liberation*, he outlines many empowering, practical steps men can take. Here are three that really stood out to me:

- Find other men to support you as a feminist activist. Encourage each other. Include feminism in your UU men's retreats.
- Become more aware of your own participation in social justice efforts. Count how often and how long you are speaking, and how participation breaks down by gender. Crass says, “As a white guy who talks a lot, I've found it helpful to write down my thoughts and wait to hear what others have to say. Others will frequently be thinking something similar or have better ideas. Practice listening. “
- Take on socially defined women's work - at home and beyond - and encourage other men to do the same. This may include cooking, cleaning, providing transportation, replenishing food and supplies, caring for children, tending to people who have special needs (because of illness, age, or ability), taking care of logistics. ... When this work is shared more equally, it frees up other people's time whose leadership and participation is needed.

These suggestions strike me as *very doable*, and thus a source of hope. We cannot change everything but we *can* do something.

I also want to lift up one of the male lay leaders in my church. Young adult activist Kurt Cadena-Mitchell can often be seen wearing a shirt that says, "Women's Rights are Human Rights." Recently I asked him why. He wrote back a message that brought me to tears:

As a Latino growing up in a hometown that was majority Latino, I had ample examples of people who looked like me, in positions of power. That is not to say that racism didn't manifest in ugly ways. It did." But, he says "*being gay was more isolating.*"

Kurt writes, "My biggest anxieties and feelings of being less-than-worthy were rooted in not fitting the standard of masculinity, regardless of whether the messages were sent explicitly, or implicitly...by the media, movies, society were clear about what a man was, and that being masculine was "better". It was never my race that made me consider taking my own life, but it was the messages the world sent that masculinity was better than femininity, being feminine was less valuable, and if you were feminine you were worthless."

worthless.

Does that break your heart? It breaks mine.

To anyone who relates to that pain, please know you are loved just the way you are. This is the saving message of our movement -- that you are loved *in this life*, just the way you are. I share Kurt's story not to bring us down but because anyone who knows Kurt can attest to how he has channeled that childhood pain into powerful, transformative work in the church and his community. Kurt lives out the words of poet Robert Bly: "Wherever the wound appears in our psyche, that is precisely the place for which we will give our major gift to the community."

Sexism, misogyny and patriarchy *are* wounds on our individual and collective psyches. Deep wounds. May we make a gift of the work to eradicate them -- rip out them out by the root, day by day, *like weeds in the Garden*. This is a spiritual calling that transcends politics, goes far beyond one election, all the way toward collective liberation.