

How Not to Be a Boy

Twenty years ago at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York – long before I heard my call to ministry – a woman named Elizabeth Schell read a difficult story in the Old Testament. As Elizabeth describes it, this story from the Book of Judges is “the horrific tale of the unnamed woman who is raped and dismembered into twelve pieces, and whose violation then leads to the violation of countless other women and children as the tribes take revenge upon one another. A text not included in lectionaries; a text to be avoided in worship.”

She was consumed by the story, but more, was compelled to make something of it. And so, she created this twelve-foot-long doll, in twelve pieces. When first presented at Union in



1999, her parts were strewn around the chapel, and during the service, people gathered her and put her back together.

Over the ensuing years, Elizabeth has occasionally used her in workshops, retreats, and worship services along the eastern seaboard, leaning into messages of healing. She is covered not only in her original art, but with the names of those seeking their own healing, written as prayers and affirmations.

Big Woman, as she came to be called, became famous at Union for the depth of creativity and healing she represented. A year ago, I met her in person at the Southeast UU Summer Institute, and Elizabeth loaned her to me, so I might continue her journey.

Here she is – today – sitting among us, her pieces together, wearing names like scars, representing the hundreds of battles fought against harassment, abuse, and violence.

Her story, though, isn't just the story of women. It's the story of all of us, battle worn, scarred, broken, exhausted. And today, she is here – to hold our brokenness, and call us to healing.

Now I want to clarify some terminology that I'll be using. It would be easy to rely on “men” and “women” as my terms, as we are in a culture that's comfortable with the gender binary. But the truth is, many of the things experienced by cisgender women in this culture of misogyny are also experienced by non-binary folx and transfolk. Thus, I am leaning into the delineation as used by the site AreMenTalkingTooMuch.com – “dude” – meaning cismen,

and “not-a-dude” – meaning everyone else. I won’t alter quotations that use the terms men and women, but if it’s me – it’s “dude,” and “not-a-dude.”

Now it would be easy to get and stay angry – and entirely reasonable, too – given the sheer volume of explicit misogyny and sexual violence we see, and the overwhelming statistics about reported and unreported rapes, harassment in the workplace and online, and the almost belligerent show of ‘manhood’ from celebrities and heads of state. And I doubt there’s a dude here who isn’t as angry about these things as the not-a-dudes are. We should be angry. But what happens when we turn our attention from the statistics and look at the systems that feed those statistics?

You know from the good, hard work you’ve been doing around anti-racism and Black Lives Matter that an important step for allies is to acknowledge that we swim in a culture of white supremacy, a culture that says if you’re white, the color of your skin is not complicating your life or causing you problems.

The same is true of this millenias-old culture of misogyny, which I could offer a few thousand words on – much as others have offered thousands of words about the history of the culture of white supremacy – which are related, by the way, because attitudes toward race and gender are inexorably intertwined. It would take us to the Code of Hammurabi, include an examination of Old and New Testament texts. It would examine the early Church and the shift to a male-dominated hierarchy that would permeate even the most egalitarian Celtic cultures. It would explore the gendered domination in cultures that commit female genital mutilation and footbinding. It would trace the history of bridal dowries and arranged marriages. It would include the commodification of black bodies – particularly black women’s bodies. It would lift up the struggle over the first English queen, and the rights of women to own property, get the vote, get a credit card, get equal pay.

This ancient way of understanding not-a-dude as a “suspect class” means that we all swim in this culture that says if you’re a dude, your gender is not complicating your life or causing you problems. Yes, other things may be – of course. Class, sexual identity, age, ability, health – all of those things can complicate your life, dudes. Of course. But for those who are not dudes, gender is a problem.

Just this past week, economist and feminist activist Caroline Criado Perez, OBE, released her new book *Invisible Women: Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*. In this book, she examines the ways in which everything in our culture is designed for men – from life jackets and military armor, to chemical testing, to pharmaceuticals, to workplace environments, to snow removal, to bathrooms, to public transportation, to academics, to Hollywood scripts, to iPhones.

Perez argues that by setting standards for the average human based on a model called Reference Man – Caucasian, aged 25-30, weighing 154.3 pounds – we ignore crucial

differences in endocrine and immune systems, pain, physical stature, breasts and genitals, body strength, pelvis size – and thus, body armor doesn't protect everyone, not-dudes' bodies are more easily injured, medications don't work, and the unpaid labor of child care and household chores take their toll.

Sometimes the exclusions are purposeful – as Perez notes over and over, data on women is often tossed out as “complicating factors.” But often, designers of systems and product safety and medicines and equipment just don't think about anyone who isn't Reference Man; “they just don't think to consider if women's needs might be different.”

This breaks us.

There are hundreds of examples – backed up by research – in her book, but the thing that struck me most, and made me realize how deeply imbedded this culture of male-unless-otherwise-indicated is, were the studies Perez highlighted showing that while the word “man” is used to include all people – what is called the generic masculine – is in fact NOT read generically. It is read overwhelmingly as male.

We live in a culture that assumes ‘dude’ is normal, and not-a-dude is a notable exception. This is hard, because for millennia – maybe since Esther – not-dudes have doing everything they can to measure up. As Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez noted recently, “when you're only seeing white dudes just like, running the world, you think you need to act like a white dude to run the world. The problem is that mold wasn't made for you. And so even if you try the hardest at being that, you will not be as good as someone who is just that already.”

And yet we try to fit the mold. We try to put ourselves together in the ways our culture says we should. We who are not dudes even learn to judge other not dudes the way dudes are supposed to. It so permeates our culture, it's almost comic – as we see in parodies from Amy Schumer, Key and Peele, That Mitchell and Webb Look, and Saturday Night Live.

But it is deadly serious, especially when you factor in sexual harassment, abuse, and assault. Those who are not dudes are taught from the time they are kindergartners how to protect themselves, how to avoid the male gaze, how to dress, how to behave not too assertively but not too coyly, how to temper their behavior and speech so as not to break the system.

We put ourselves together in ways that, well, just don't work. And dudes wonder what's wrong with those who are not dudes – why are they sick, why are they complaining, why are they not seeing the world as it really is, why does everything have to be about feminism, why do they take up so much space now, why did they have to try to invade our superheroes and our computer games and our military and our legislatures and our White House?

As those who are not dudes begin to see how they are broken and begin to do something about it, the truth becomes even clearer: This isn't just about those who are not dudes. This breaks all of us.

Actor Robert Webb talks about this in his book, *How Not to Be a Boy*. While the book is on one hand a celebrity memoir, it goes deeper than that, as Webb explores how the rules for how to be a boy were taught by his father and older brothers, as well as in school and university – rules that teach boys to play sports, be rough, dominate, become king of the hill, and for gods sake, don't be emotional. As Webb describes, “We tell them to man up, get up, don't cry, be tough, don't acknowledge your own emotions; and if you keep being told to not express these emotions, it eventually starts sounding like ‘don't have these feelings – don't feel these feelings.’”

Without emotional validation, dudes wind up turning only to their romantic partners for emotional support. Dudes aren't taught to bond emotionally, they're taught to bond over sports or games or work, free of emotional support – and romantic partners are the only ones where feelings can happen. Thus, when a not-dude says to a dude, I just want to be friends, that can be interpreted as “there goes my one emotional support person” – and the not-dudes are upset because someone they thought of as a friend really just wanted to have sex with them. At its worst, it causes deep emotional trauma for dudes, who sometimes turn to substance abuse and depression, and rage – which leads to the kind of toxic masculinity that looks like mass shootings and rape.

Now this isn't to say masculinity itself is toxic – no, dudes. It's perfectly okay, and in fact appropriate, for dudes to be strong, as long as they're using that strength in a positive, non-abusive manner. We want you to be strong, as portrayed in a recent commercial from Gillette. The ad used research from surveys asking about qualities of good masculinity – and yet it received a backlash – from dudes – saying it was just feminist propaganda.

That healthy masculinity is attacked is a sign that we are all being tricked into us into thinking that it is the way it is supposed to be. Webb calls it The Trick with his family, to name “the incoming tide of gender BS that [his] daughters and their friends (including the boys) will spend their lives wading through.” He points it out to his children, and to his readers, “because it is difficult to resist, because it hides in plain sight. It's everywhere: a system of thought and a set of invented and discriminatory practices in our laws, culture and economy that feminists call the patriarchy. Feminists aren't out to get men,” he writes, “they're out to get the patriarchy. They don't hate men, the hate The Man.... This thing, The Trick, is dangerous for girls. And it's dangerous for boys, too. Feminism is not about men versus women,’ he concludes, “it's about men and women versus the Trick.”

The Trick gaslights us. It fools us. It not only hurts those who aren't dudes, it hurts dudes too.

As Webb notes, “there are probably lots of men who haven’t had their lives marred or pointlessly complicated by the expectations of gender, but I’ve yet to meet one. You had to bury your pain; you had to conform to the tribe; you had to grow up faster than you wanted; you had to have sex as early as possible and with as many people as possible, even if that made you a liar; you weren’t romantic enough and you felt bad you failed to do manly tasks with competence and you felt bad; you made promises you couldn’t keep.”

Human history never told you the system is the problem. This system broke us long before we ever had a chance.

We are broken. All of us, broken by this. #MeToo, and before that, #TimesUp and #NotAllWomen, are pulling back the curtain and revealing our brokenness, revealing how hard it is to be a human being in a culture that tricks us all.

And there’s nothing we can do about what has been done. But there is healing.

Some of you are familiar with the Japanese practice of Kintsugi, the art of repairing broken pottery with veins of gold, copper, and silver. In this art form, the bowl is never not broken, and is even more beautiful in its brokenness.

There’s a Hindu goddess – named Akhilandashvari – her name means the Always Broken goddess. She is a goddess of destruction, but of carefully curated destruction; as writer Julie Peters notes, “Akhilanda derives her power from being broken: in flux, pulling herself apart, living in different, constant selves at the same time, from never becoming a whole that has limitations.”

In some ways, Big Woman is Akhilanda – never not broken. She invites us to make a choice in how to go forward. We always have the incredible opportunity to decide how we want to put the pieces back together. Despite the messages our culture sends, no matter how hard it can be to be our whole selves in a culture that isn’t made for us to be whole, we are whole anyway, and we can put ourselves aright, wearing the scars and the cracks as evidence of our broken wholeness.

And this is our theology: Universalism teaches us that our very humanness means we have inherent worth and dignity, and that there is always a place for us, even in our brokenness. In other words, we’re always whole, always loved, always fully human. Like a cracked pot, lovingly repaired. Like a goddess, daring to put herself together in new ways. Like a young child, noticing the trick. Like a congresswoman, daring to lead authentically. Like all of us, full of holes, yet whole, and holy.

So what now?

Now that we’ve seen The Trick, we can’t unsee it. And we cannot keep quiet – to ourselves, our family, our friends, our communities.

(congregation is invited to respond in this litany while the accompanist underscores with "Quiet" by Milck)

We hear the stories old and new, and we acknowledge the pain of generations.

We can't keep quiet.

We hear our own stories of brokenness, deep pain, and we acknowledge the complexity of these wounds.

We can't keep quiet.

We seek wholeness and healing, being willing to unbecome what we have been told to be and become anew that which we are.

We can't keep quiet.

We commit to reaching out in compassion and kindness, to be a haven of welcome and acceptance, to believe the survivors and work for their protection.

We can't keep quiet.

We commit to speaking out when we notice harm is being done, whether through words, or assumptions, or attitudes, or erasure, or actual physical harm.

We can't keep quiet.

We commit to celebrating healthy and inclusive ways of being and model these for our children.

We can't keep quiet.

We affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, of every gender, and welcome each other on this journey to wholeness.

We can't keep quiet.