



UU Women's Federation Sermon Award 2018

Winner

"Me, Too, Now What?"

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Me, Too. Now What?

Ah, January. What a very dark time of year we once again find ourselves in. Every year, it gets this dark, and every year, we feel surprised at how little daylight we see and how dim the sun looks even as it reaches that early afternoon zenith. As one who has worked with countless survivors of violence, and as a woman myself, I know that there are many among us who are impacted by these changes more viscerally than others. Those of us in the margins – women, LGBTQ folks, people of color of all genders...those of us who fear sexual assault, police brutality, and other crimes based on vulnerability...we don't go outside as much this time of year. Many of us don't feel safe going out for a run, or even taking our dog out before bed. We ask - will my neighbor make a comment about my body today when we're the only two people home? Will indistinguishable shouts come from passing cars while I'm out trying to get some exercise? If that officer in the median of [highway name] pulls me over, how will I be treated?

Stop and think for a minute about the brilliance we lose every day because so many of us are using so much brain space, often subconsciously, just to survive. It's an incredible amount of time and energy we could reclaim if we weren't faced with this need to constantly safety plan. If women and gender non-binary folks didn't have to grip their keys in their hands to be used in self defense or check the back seat of their car for intruders before driving away. If people of color didn't need to teach their children exactly what to do and where to put their hands if a law enforcement officer approaches them. If undocumented folks didn't have to choose between bringing their abusers to justice and being deported from the only country they have ever known. If our incarcerated neighbors were not constantly afraid of being taken advantage of by guards and fellow prisoners alike. If the hashtag "metooK12" didn't have to exist to draw attention to the awful things that happen to our young people at school.

This really is a deeper darkness than we see most winters. But this year, the darkness is mixing with a new source of light, too, as we listen to this recent landslide of brave souls coming forward to say "me too." To say that they, too, have been forced to trade their sexual safety for job security, career advancement, and even literal survival. Over these past few months we have had our pristine images of adored and successful men shattered by these stories, and some of them have lost their jobs because of it. Every day, a new story - many stranger and more violent than those that came before it.

But these stories, we know, are not new. Stories of people in power taking advantage of the silence and fear of those in the margins – these are tales as old as time. We need look no further than the sacred texts of Christianity and Judaism to see Dinah, Bathsheba, and so many others who suffered at the hands of powerful men, some millennia ago.

We should not be surprised now, nor should we have been in 2007...when Tarana Burke, a young activist of color from Harlem, started the "Me Too" movement, primarily to draw attention to sexual assault of young women of color like herself. Our White Supremacy Culture, she said, constructs black women and girls as hypersexualized and easy, making people much more likely to blame victims when they are people of color.

Eleven years ago, Burke was decrying the way we viewed rapper R Kelly's rape of 14 and 15 year-old girls, viewing it as something so-called "goldiggers" (supposedly out for money and fame) somehow deserved. Allegations against R Kelly by black and brown women and girls have been steady since then.

But it's only now, on the precipice of 2018, that Tarana Burke's "Me Too" movement has viral. Over a decade later, we might ask, why now? Why do we seem to have so much more sympathy for the movie star victims of people like Harvey Weinstein than for the sophomores in high school victimized by R Kelly? Did it take scores of wealthy, white, professional, cis-gender women coming forward to get the mainstream media and us to start caring or paying attention?

And why are we disappearing this brave, brilliant black who founded the "Me Too" Movement from this narrative so quickly? When the cover of Time Magazine featuring the Me Too "Truth Tellers" as "People of the Year" came out, Tarana Burke wasn't there. What happened to crediting the source when we use someone else's work? Do we skip that when the author is a young woman of color?

When Reverend _____ asked me a few months ago if I might ever want to preach on these matters, a wave of utter exhaustion overtook me. Many of us have had all kinds of feelings about "Me Too": triumph, anger, relief, pain, sadness, frustration, absolute disbelief. For me, primarily, I just feel incredibly tired.

And if I feel immobilized by exhaustion...it's hard to imagine how others feel. When I think about the relatively easy life I've had, and the relatively merciful ways I myself have been taken advantage of by men who held professional or social power over me...it makes my head spin to wonder what this burgeoning movement brings up for others who haven't been as lucky as me. And, it reminds me that nearly every single person with a marginalized identity almost certainly has their own "Me Too" story. And that's when I get really tired.

Maybe your primary reaction to hearing so many "Me Too"s lately is to feel tired, as well. I see signs of this collective exhaustion all around me. And it, too, is not new.

Last Spring, when _____ traveled to here to speak to us about Black Lives Matter _____, he said that he refuses to become an expert on the names and the locations and the hows and the whys of all the dead black folks killed by people with power. Henson said that it does something to him inside and he just refuses to focus too much of his brain and heart space on these details.

Likewise, maybe this moment in history isn't about memorizing names of the raped and harassed, the celebrity lurkers and attackers, the industries they hail from and the horrific buttons under their desks that they got away with for decades...

For those of us who say, "Me Too," who have been part of this graduating class we never wanted to enroll in, who feel a twisted reunion of sorts has begun in the past few

months, maybe one of our first jobs now is to find a way to rest. None of this is going away. And, just as it's been a long road that got us here today, there is so much more to come in this story.

As James Baldwin said in last year's incredible film, *I Am Not Your Negro*: "He who finds no way to rest cannot long survive the battle." And perhaps even when we have rested, given ourselves permission to put distance between ourselves and the news, we may wonder what Baldwin wondered 50 years ago: "You always tell me it takes time... How much time do you want?"

Reverend Dara Olandt wrote about rest, too, in our most recent issue of UU World: "A heart, once broken," she says, "will sometimes start to close. Sometimes the world is so tough, it's hard to safeguard the heart. Sometimes hearts need protection and rest. This is to be honored."

It's worth repeating, maybe hundreds of times: *Sometimes hearts need protection and rest. This is to be honored.*

But rest is not enough, we know. Especially for those of us who occupy privileged identities, so often coexisting with marginalized identities within the very same person. I've been digging into my thoughts and feelings around "Me Too," underneath this theme of being exhausted. It's easy for us all to feel the exhaustion and stop, but we have to look longer. When I kept looking, I found a second theme: "I am part of the problem."

I am part of the problem. How could they fire him without giving him due process? Was what she went through really that bad? I have asked. No doubt you, too, have had notions like these recently.

People are exhausted, in part, because of questions like this one. The "Me Too" movement just gained momentum a few months ago, and already we start to doubt the intentions of people who have been silent for years. We have erred on the side of assuming stories that of sexual harassment and assault are exaggerated overreactions or just plain lies for so very long. We've been taught to believe that victims who come forward are vindictive people looking for money or fame. And now, for a mere couple of months, we have begun erring on the side of believing these stories, at least when they come from people with "credibility," (in the form of white skin, white-collar jobs, or gender identities that match the biological sex the victim as assigned at birth). After thousands of years, survivors don't even get the benefit of the doubt for a couple months? Really?

Perhaps you are like me, and your takeaway from this latest public discourse has been that you need to learn more, that you need to do better, that you need to examine your own self – both from actions you took years ago and things you said and thought yesterday. On our journeys towards spiritual wholeness, we must shine a light into these dark corners of our lives to better understand them, never forgetting to love ourselves steadfastly at every step along the way. I urge you to lean into this sacred work

wholeheartedly, knowing that your faith community is with you as you embark on this painful self-reflection.

It can be tempting to seek answers from those who have been hurt and marginalized. But I hope we will all check ourselves before giving into this temptation. We cannot keep asking exhausted people to engage in unpaid emotional labor on our behalf – even if they are our partners, sisters, mothers, best friends.

Remember how spiritually draining this moment in history must be for them, and respect that...give them space to find the rest we're all seeking. People in the margins should not have to walk us through how to change. We can, and must, figure it out on our own.

Where do we start? We can listen to the people who are talking and writing about Me Too. We can read the words of Tarana Burke, Roxanne Gay, Bernice Yeung, Alicia Garza, Sarah McBride and blessedly, so many others. We can take time to really hear what is being said, especially when we disagree or feel personally hurt by it. One of my domestic violence prevention colleagues in Maine says it best: "When things get hard, get curious." When we learn something about Me Too that makes us feel defensive, we can ask ourselves why. Are there assumptions we've been making that may no longer be serving us or our world?

Men, talk to other men about what you are learning. Stare the pain of this moment in the eye, fighting the urge to look away and move on with easier or more comfortable tasks. Remember that we are all hurting right now.

Most of all, we can all keep these instructions from Micah as quoted in the Talmud close to our hearts: "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

Blessed Be, and Amen.