

FROM MENNONITE TO MANHATTAN

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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One Tuesday evening last spring, I glanced at my calendar of appointments for the following day, and a name jumped out at me: Torah Bontrager. I knew immediately that I would be talking with someone who had been born Amish.

Bontrager is a common family name in both Amish and Mennonite communities. I lived with an aunt and uncle by that name in Lancaster County for a number of years during my late teens. But the Mennonites are a decidedly New Testament crowd, preferring to follow the simple example of Jesus rather than the complex rules and regulations of, say, the Old Testament books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The Amish, on the other hand, are defined by the rules they keep, and Torah, which means law in Hebrew, is a decidedly Old Testament name. Nine chances out of eight, I said to myself, Torah Bontrager grew up Amish.

What I learned the following day was that Torah had indeed grown up Amish. But it wasn't the bucolic upbringing portrayed by the mainstream view that the Amish live simply and peacefully, work hard on their picture-perfect farms, and bake pies for the family of the man who shot their children at the Nickel Mines School. As a child, Torah was beaten by her parents almost daily for many years, with implements ranging from horse whips to fire wood. She was so traumatized that she nearly committed suicide at age 11 using her father's gun, but she realized just in time that she'd rather live. So she began plotting her escape.

In her book *An Amish Girl in Manhattan: Escaping at Age 15, Breaking All the Rules, and Feeling Safe Again*, she says, "At age 15, I escaped in the middle of the night without telling anyone goodbye. I left with only what I could carry: the clothes on my back and \$170 in my pocket. My departure was permanent."

Her sense of liberation was short-lived. She had escaped with the help of an uncle who had also been raised Amish but had left the church. Shortly after she arrived at his home, he began sexually assaulting her, a pattern that repeated itself for more than a year. Trapped once again, she reached out to yet another uncle for help. The same thing happened all over again.

I know this has been an excruciatingly difficult week for those of you who have suffered in similar ways. We're here for you. Given my own experiences over the past two days, there are some things I'd like to talk about with you. I also like to share with you why I think we have reason to be hopeful.

I returned last evening from Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, PA, where I gave a keynote address at a conference titled, "Disrupting History: Reclaiming

Our Amish Story.” The conference was convened by the Amish Heritage Society, which Torah founded along with Elam Zook, who was also raised Amish and left the church in his teens. I was there to speak about my own journey from Mennonite to Manhattan — what I left behind and what I didn’t. I also spoke about the desire for freedom and the desire for belonging — and the questions of how these two desires relate and which comes first.

In her own address to the conference, Torah lamented the fact that there are no role models for Amish girls. Amish women are expected to be strictly subservient to their husbands, she said, both outside the home and within, especially in bed.

As a young girl, Torah went on to say, she had read a book about Harriett Tubman, an enslaved woman who escaped and then used the Underground Railroad to help other slaves escape to freedom. “I decided I wanted to be like Harriett,” Torah said, “and find a way to help Amish children escape if they are being abused by their parents, as I was.” Torah wants The Amish Heritage Foundation to serve as an Underground Railroad for Amish children and adults who need to escape.

Set against the backdrop of the Cosby sentencing and the Kavanaugh hearings earlier in the week, the conference highlighted the way patriarchy gives cover to men who behave badly. It has become increasingly clear that many men still believe they are entitled to use and abuse women as sexual playthings. When a nominee for the Supreme Court of the United States acts like a petulant schoolboy when asked about his drunken escapades as a high school and college student, and when he’s outraged that anyone would pay attention to the ample evidence that he behaved badly, even if not criminally, it’s a sign that men at the highest levels still believe that boys are entitled to be boys — no matter how old they are.

The conference also highlighted how patriarchy and religion have been doubly devastating to women over the course of human history. Sometimes men use patriarchy — the view that men are superior to women and thus their opinions and supposed needs matter most — to justify their bad behavior, while at other times men use religion as a justification. In the case of the three major Western religions, patriarchy and religion overlap. But “boys will be boys” is a different excuse for bad behavior than “God is male and thus male is God,” as Mary Daly memorably put it. Besides, when it comes to the use of religion to justify sexism, bigotry, and other forms of discrimination, it turns out that we’re headed in the wrong direction.

The other keynote speaker at the conference in Lancaster was Marci Hamilton, who is a lawyer (she clerked for Sandra Day O’Connor) and a professor of religion at the University of Pennsylvania. She’s also author of the book *God vs. the Gavel: Religion and the Rule of Law* and our nation’s preeminent authority on the free exercise of religion clause in the First Amendment. She said that the Supreme Court has been remarkably consistent over the course of our nation’s history in interpreting the free exercise clause, which reads, together with the establishment clause, as follows:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”

The Court has consistently interpreted the free exercise clause to mean that people can't be prohibited from exercising their religion or persecuted for practicing it, but neither can they use religion as a reason to avoid obeying laws that apply to everyone else. No one can be a law unto him- or herself. You can't use religion to justify polygamy, or illegal drug use, or depriving your children of medical care. If a law applies to everyone else, you have to obey it too – no matter if it conflicts with your religious beliefs.

The one exception to the Court's remarkable consistency came in 1971, Hamilton said, when the Court ruled in *Wisconsin v. Jonas Yoder* that the state could not compel Amish parents to educate their children past the eighth grade. The Court decided that Amish parents' fundamental right to freedom of religion outweighed the state's interest in educating its children – and also outweighed the children's right to be educated. In Hamilton's view, this case was wrongly decided. It was a terrible decision, she says, because it says that parents can use religion to justify depriving their children of the education that all other parents are required by law to give their children. This decision set a precedent that religious actors have special privileges after all.

In 1990, in a decision that included an historical summary of the Supreme Court's rulings on the free exercise clause, Judge Scalia, writing for the majority, attempted to explain why *Wisconsin v. Yoder* should be viewed as a harmless anomaly and not as a precedent that overturns all other free exercise rulings. In a footnote, Hamilton explained, Scalia said that Amish people had never violated the law or hurt anyone, so no one needed to worry about what would happen if the Amish took their children out of school after the eighth grade. The Amish would never harm anyone – especially their children.

Working through her organization Child USA, Hamilton's long-term goal – she says it will take 20 years – is eventually to nullify the impact of *Wisconsin v. Yoder* by building legal precedents that view the educational neglect of children as seriously as other forms of neglect. No eighth-grader, she says, can make an informed decision about the impact on their lives of not going to high school. Their brains aren't mature enough, and they don't have experience enough. Their parents, Amish or not, shouldn't be able to make this particular decision for them.

In the meantime, the precedent set by *Wisconsin v. Yoder* has been no end of trouble. It says, in effect, that religious people can indeed be a law unto themselves. It's buttressed by the blatantly-false platitude in the 1990 decision saying that devoutly religious people cannot possibly do harm. These two decisions gave rise to the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, or RFRA, a statute that says that religious freedom trumps the duty to obey laws that conflict with religious belief. RFRA led more or less directly to the Hobby Lobby decision, which says a business owner can deprive employees of coverage for reproductive health care if such care conflicts with the owner's religious

beliefs. Also, according to Hamilton, *Wisconsin v. Yoder* is routinely cited in clergy sex abuse cases, as a way of arguing that religion gives a certain degree of autonomy to actions taken under the rubric of religion.

The truth is that men behaving badly, whether crudely or criminally, cannot be justified – not by the patriarchal justification that boys will be boys, or by the religious justification that believers can set themselves apart from the law of the land. The good news is that these issues have been dragged out of their hiding places. They now dominate the headlines. More and more people are engaged with these issues, and angry about them, and committed to making our nation a place where everyone feels safe and everyone gets treated with dignity. Our nation is not yet that place, but at least we've begun the journey.

As I rode Amtrak's Pennsylvanian train from Lancaster County back to Manhattan last evening, I realized in a new way my good fortune at finding a spiritual home here at All Souls. This is a place where we strive to value the dignity of every person. This is a place where we open ourselves to all that is present in our lives and in our world, as well as all that is past, in order to embrace all that is possible. After spending two days listening to stories of religion at its worst – not just Amish stories, but Orthodox Jewish stories, and Muslim stories, and Catholic stories, and Christian Science stories – I'm profoundly grateful to come home. I'm grateful to have you as my spiritual family. Being here with you gives me a sense of hope.

Besides, look at what's happening around us. Listen to the conversations we are having as a nation. Over the past 10 or 12 years, the Me Too movement and Black Lives Matter have profoundly changed our conversations about race and gender in America. Senators are grappling with issues they've traditionally been able to ignore. Nominees are responding to questions they've traditionally been able not to answer. Legitimate journalists are digging into issues that were once off-limits. These sea changes in our nation's consciousness and culture give me reason to hope.

What's more, especially over the past couple of years, and perhaps most especially over this past week, many women who have experienced sexual trauma, and some men as well, are talking openly about their pain for the very first time – a few in the national media, but countless more in their living rooms, kitchens, and bedrooms. People who love them are increasingly listening, even though it can be hard to bear witness to such pain. These conversations give me hope that the structural enablers of trauma can eventually be dismantled, and those who have been traumatized can eventually find healing.

I leave you today with an insight from Maya Angelou's magnificently-hopeful poem titled, "Still I Rise." Her insight is that hardship itself creates the possibility for hope. She writes, "Out of the huts of history's shame / I rise / Up from a past that's rooted in pain / I rise / Leaving behind nights of terror and fear / I rise / Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear / I rise / I rise / I rise."