

A PIECE OF THE STORM

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
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The Babylonian story of creation known as the *Enuma Elish* came into being about 4,000 years ago. In the beginning, according to the story, there existed a highly sexualized primordial chaos, which was understood as female and was given the name Tiamat, the dragon goddess of the ocean. Tiamat existed alongside her male counterpart Apsu, who embodied the principle of order. Chaos, the story makes clear, existed as the presence of female sexuality. Creation eventually proceeded and order appeared when the Tiamat was slain, thus conquering female sexuality. The two halves of Tiamat's severed body were then used to form the heavens and the earth. This beginning didn't bode well for women.

Rebecca Solnit, author of *Hope in the Dark* and *Men Explain Things to Me*, among other books, began her column ten days ago in the Guardian by observing that the previous week had not been a good week for women. In the US, a man who raped a 12-year-old girl was granted joint custody of the resulting child, who is now eight years old. In Copenhagen, the severed head and legs of Swedish journalist Kim Wall, who disappeared after entering the submarine of inventor Peter Matson, were discovered. Matson's computer was loaded with videos showing women being decapitated — alive.

I'm so sorry to say these things in a sermon. I'm so sorry that we live in such a profoundly broken world. I know this is an especially difficult time for those of you who have experienced sexual harassment or sexual violence, which probably includes most if not all of the women here and some of the men. *I'm so sorry.*

Solnit continues her chronicle of a very bad week. A Swedish model received rape threats for appearing in an ad with unshaven legs. The week also saw the anniversary of the release of the tape in which the president of the United States boasted about assaulting women, along with the largest mass shooting in modern US history, carried out by a man reported to have been abusive toward his girlfriend.

Then there's Harvey Weinstein. To date, more than 40 women have accused Weinstein of sexual harassment or sexual assault. In response to an invitation by the actress Alyssa Milano to share stories of sexual harassment or sexual assault, the hashtag #MeToo, established 10 years ago by the black activist Tarana Burke, has exploded across social media — over 500,000 times on Twitter and 12 million times on Facebook in the first 24 hours alone. The deluge prompted one woman commentator to ask whether a woman exists who has not been sexually harassed or abused. No one stepped forward in response.

In her column in Thursday's *New York Times* titled "The Raw Power of #MeToo," the humanities scholar Margaret Renkl describes a conversation over dinner with her husband and their three teenage children. Renkl was waxing eloquent about a novel she was reading by an Irish-born writer, when one of her sons expressed surprise that she had never visited Ireland.

She replied, "First I had no money, and then I had a bunch of kids."

"Dad biked around Europe all by himself for nine months before he even went to college," her son replied. "You could have done that, too, if you had wanted it bad enough."

Renkl writes: "I taught my sons to stand when an adult enters the room. I taught them to look people in the eye and extend a hand when introduced. I taught them to put their napkins in their laps, not to speak with their mouths full, to stand up for children being bullied. What I had not taught them, it suddenly dawned on me, was how it feels to go through the world as a woman, the mental calculations involved in parking a car downtown or riding an elevator at night or taking a walk in the woods."

My mother didn't teach me this either. Most people of color can describe in vivid and often painful terms the moment when they became self-conscious about what it means to go through the world as a person of color. Most women can describe when they became self-conscious about what it means to go through the world as a woman. Most gay people can describe when they became self-conscious about going through the world as a gay person. In this sense, #MeToo is a crash course for men about what it feels like for women to go through life as women. Maybe, just maybe, Harvey Weinstein is a turning of the tide.

In her article, Rebecca Solnit says, "It's time to talk about the fact that many men seem erotically excited by their ability to punish, humiliate, inflict pain on women — the subject of a lot of porn." Whether the case in question is Harvey Weinstein, or Las Vegas shooter Steven Paddock, or the white supremacists who marched again this week in Charlottesville, she says, "underlying all these attacks is a lack of empathy, a will to dominate, and an entitlement to control, harm and even take the lives of others."

She continues, "At this point in history, it seems to be not just a defect from birth, but a characteristic many men are instilled with by the culture around them... Or perhaps it's an extreme version of masculinity that has always been with us in a culture that gives men more power and privilege than women; perhaps these acts are the result of taking that to its logical conclusion."

About a thousand years after the *Enuma Elish*, the well-known story appeared that opens the book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible. It blames the temptress Eve for seducing Adam, which led to the couple being cast out of the Garden of Eden and into our present world of sin and suffering. Ever since Genesis, especially in the West, men have blamed women for male sexual desire and tried to make them responsible for its consequences. If men can't control their desire for women, then women must

themselves be controlled by men – how they dress, how they act, and especially when and with whom they have sex and reproduce.

Male dominance plays a central role in the traditional religions of the West, all of which have featured a male God. As the feminist theologian Mary Daly memorably put it, “If God is male, then male is God.” Given this backdrop, I can certainly understand why traditional religionists refer to God as male, but I can’t for the life of me understand why the secular media continues to do so. In both religious and secular contexts, references to God as male advance the power of patriarchy over women. It helps perpetuate an environment in which men are free to do whatever they want to women.

Boys will be boys, as the saying goes, and girls and women will suffer, as the hashtag shows.

One of the men who shared his own story of abuse in response to #MeToo is an actor named Jim Beaver, who was sexually molested decades ago as a young Marine by a high-ranking Marine doctor. In explaining his decision not to join the #MeToo campaign, Beaver says: “What seems to have taken the world, at long last, by storm in the past few days is most prominently an issue for women, because while many men have been victimized in such manner, the painful truth is that we live in a world where women are *expected* to put up with such things, where it is so commonplace that we managed to elect a president who brags about such behavior.”

He adds, parenthetically: “The clear likelihood is that had the current occupant of the White House been caught bragging to a TV reporter about molesting men, he would never have become president. But since it was just women, well, boys will be boys.”

He concludes, “Well, this boy says the men and boys I know and trust and look up to are better than that, and we will join in calling out the curs among us who think ‘boys will be boys’ is acceptable behavior.”

This will require a sea change in culture unlike any we have ever seen. In an interview with the *New York Times*, director Quentin Tarantino, whose close association with Harvey Weinstein produced a string of Hollywood hits spanning several decades, admits that he knew about Weinstein’s behavior. He says that in its treatment of women, Hollywood has been “operating under an almost Jim Crow-like system that us males have always tolerated. We allowed it to exist because that’s the way it was.”

Tarantino expressed profound regret for not responding to the many reports he had heard over the years — many of them first-hand — about Weinstein’s harassment and abuse of women. He said, “I’m calling on the other guys who knew more to not be scared. Don’t just give out statements. Acknowledge that there was something rotten in Denmark. Vow to do better by our sisters.” He added, “What was previously accepted is now untenable to anyone of a certain consciousness.”

When Tarantino refers to “a certain consciousness,” I take him to be pointing toward some awareness of what it feels like to go through the world as a woman.

In a *Guardian* article titled, “Liberal men think they know feminism. They really don’t,” Jessica Crispin calls this ‘awareness feminism.’ She says, “What feminism should

mean to men is not think this thing or vote this way. It's not about using the right language to describe women, or learning a respectful behavior toward women on the street. It's a project that needs to illuminate the dark, unconscious urges that power the violent behavior. The power imbalance between the genders is built-in from birth, and our cultural values (strength and power over empathy and softness) are transmitted through everything from entertainment to the news to our political structure. It's one thing to perform respect out in public. It's another to fully understand, both consciously and unconsciously, that when you're alone with a woman, she is a human with her own valid needs and desires."

She continues, "Feminism should be a spiritual awakening for men; it should be a revelation of the ways they have participated in the oppression of women in both public and private spheres. It should show them the parts of themselves, their own feminine nature and their capacity for compassion and vulnerability, that they have dismissed as mere weakness, that need to be reclaimed. It is a psychological — even a spiritual — project, not merely a political one."

Perhaps because of my vocation as a theologian and minister, the process of developing my own feminism has been a decidedly spiritual journey. As many of you know, in the early 1980's I quit the Conservative Mennonite Church, the faith of my upbringing, because of its refusal to endorse the full equality of women. I've been working on developing my feminism ever since.

One of my very first sermons at All Souls, preached 24 years ago this month, was titled "On Being a Man in a Woman's World." In the sermon, I said:

I am convinced that the values which unite our [faith] community lie along what Audre Lorde calls a "deeply female and spiritual plane." The life force of women bears a world stamped by deep sharing and intimate connection. This life force is the same spirit of life which we gather to celebrate as Unitarian Universalists. Lorde describes this spirit as "the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person."

In years since that early sermon, I've been fortunate to be surrounded by strong women who have helped me on my feminist spiritual journey: my wife Holly, whose struggle with her own #MeToo's and whose ferocious commitment to the dignity of women has opened my eyes; my daughter Zoe, whose vulnerability to male violence, especially in her early years, has opened my heart; and numerous female colleagues and close friends, whose faith in my integrity and confidence in my feminism has contributed to my growth and bolstered my courage. I'm deeply grateful to you all.

From my perspective, the hashtag #MeToo has expanded this conversation exponentially. This is an opportunity for women to share the brutal aspects of their journey through life as women, and for men to extend our capacity for compassion,

vulnerability, and accountability. This is an opportunity for us to do the deep spiritual work that feminism requires. This is our opportunity to show that the tide is turning.

Writing in the *Guardian* last Monday, the columnist Suzanne Moore distills this hope. She says, “Male power is not laid low by the bringing down of one man. As long as we have Donald Trump in the White House ranks will close. But just for a moment there is a gap where we see things could be different. Many have waited long time for this. Don’t let it go now.”

Our commitments as a faith community are based on our bedrock belief that things can be different. Culture can change. People can change. We can change. It won’t happen quickly, and it won’t happen easily, but it can happen. The God we serve is a God of possibility.

I leave you with an image from poet Mark Strand's poem titled, “*A Piece of the Storm*,” taken from his book of poems that won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000. The poem describes a single snowflake wafting through the window and landing in someone’s room, a snowflake Strand describes as “a blizzard of one.” While only the tiniest piece of the storm, the snowflake is a harbinger of things to come. The last line of the poem reads, “It’s time. The air is ready. The sky has an opening.”

There is a piece of this storm for everyone. So much can be done. Whatever you can do — especially if you’re a man — to ensure that girls and women are treated with dignity and equality, and that they can go through the world feeling safe and loved, do that. It’s time. The air is ready. The sky has an opening.