

# International Women's Day Celebration

Catherine Lake & the Rev. Shawn Newton  
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
6 March 2011

In this morning's service, we celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of International Women's Day, which will take place on Tuesday.

## **Sermon: Where Are We? Reflections on 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of IWD**

### **Shawn Newton – Part I**

The best sermons begin with a question.

Not necessarily as the first line,  
but as the troubling concern, the guiding light,  
the sometimes uncomfortable call to conscience  
that should ground the words uttered from any pulpit.

Such a question must live in the heart of one who would preach  
before she or he can ever hope to have anything meaningful to say.

That gestation period—that time of discernment—  
is one of the great gifts of preaching.

It demands reading and reflection, meditation and prayer.  
To Bob's astonishment, it involves lots of time just staring out the window—  
time, I routinely assure him, when I am actually working—and working hard.

And, perhaps unbeknownst to you, there is a role you play.  
Whether you realise it or not, you frequently figure into my own discernment.

Through your celebrations and your concerns, your wisdom and your  
wisecracks, you—or someone quite like you in the congregation—  
very often informs the questions sitting on my heart,  
the questions that, in time, are turned into sermons.

The question at the centre of this sermon  
took root in a conversation I had with Catherine Lake  
a couple of weeks ago at the Family Retreat while on a cold walk,

and then later sitting by the fire.

We talked of many things as we reflected on the anniversary of International Women's Day, and wrestled with how best to honour a century of striving for genuine equality for women throughout the world.

We spoke of the many things that are worthy of our celebration—the many social, legal and economic achievements of women:

the great strides that have been made over the past century, here in Canada, as women have secured the right to vote, been granted full property rights, been deemed “persons” under the law, and taken their rightful places in Parliament.

the ways that women have found access, if not always equal, in the courts and at the bar, in the halls of higher learning, and in the corridors of power.

A century on, there is much to be grateful for when it comes to the status of women.

But such a milestone moment also begs the question of what work remains to be done.

As Catherine and I have walked with this question, it's become obvious that the conversation between us needed to be shared. So, the sermon this morning is in two voices—a, hopefully, vivid example of the dialogue that's always ongoing between minister and congregation, between pulpit and pew.

## **Catherine Lake – Part II**

Since the United Nations official declaration in March 1911, messages of International Women's Day through the years have resonated with voting rights, workplace rights, education rights and ending discrimination and violence. Essentially, the equal right for self-determination and security of self.

Through the century, women have leveraged IWD to protest the death of their men in war and the hunger of their children. Today, in some countries, women are given roses by men, it's a kind of mother's day holiday. Today, in our country some march in solidarity knowing that there is still work to be done.

And what is that work? What do we protest or demand? What is today's voice of women's liberation?

In recent years, women have disassociated themselves from the "F word" citing politicians, CEOs and Oprah as evidence of mass achievement. And no doubt equal pay and sexual harassment awareness went a good long way to improving the status of women in the west.

There used to be an adage that asked "If we can send a man into space, why can't women have safe and effective birth control?" Those times have changed and now we say "If we can put a woman into space why can't we have safe and effective birth control?"

And while women in our country do have better birth control, our reproductive rights are still and again under attack. Women's shelters must now compete with rape crisis centres for donations since provincial and federal governments defunded them. And since Canada's Conservative government took power in 2006, significant budget cuts have been made to gender equality, political justice, social policy and research programs concerned with the status of women in Canada.

The rise of the "I'm not a feminist" and the "now women are equal" is another form of backlash.

Oddly, we hear such sentiments in tandem with the "reclaim the housewife role" from those same female politicians and media pundits who are out there no doubt working long nights and clutching fast to their bit of orthodox power.

Perhaps they could spend some time working to eradicate the hostile sexism in our society: in politics, in our economy and in the media. And there is plenty.

It is not hard to see but it is difficult to look at. I see so much unrelenting degradation of girls and women that I am shaken with rage and despair on any given day.

We live in such a “free” and “liberal” society that we are privileged to choose from a number of violent crime shows which detail the mutilation of the female body for the viewer—all before 6 p.m. We roll our eyes, maybe change the channel or click to another site. It is as though it has become old school, uptight, hypersensitive and well, just no fun at all to call out sexism.

On the other hand, there are those of us who feel powerless to do anything. We are so tired of fighting ignorant sexism that we can barely take on the task of the serious misogyny that frames our world each and every day. And we just want it to go away on its own. But it won't.

The other day I was walking along the Danforth near my home and passed a dollar store which was had a large framed poster hanging in its window. The poster read “15 Reasons Why Beer is Better than Women.”

With the requisite bikini clad woman, the poster offered classic humour such as, and I quote:

“When you are finished with a beer, the bottle is still worth 5 cents.”

I felt assaulted and degraded. And helpless.

And then I turned around and walked back and into the store and spoke to the young woman wearing a hijab behind the counter while Dad stood nearby. I told her that the poster did not belong in a storefront window. She hadn't read it. I tried to keep my voice calm, assuming her ignorance but I was enraged that such a poster even exists. For the record, you can order it and others like it from amazon.com—the same site whose stated policy is to not post offensive items.

But we all know that such cruelty is there at street level, in our faces every day—don't we? Are we making the connections in our own homes, our neighbourhoods, our communities? Truly, we are now so immersed in it we can hardly see the sexism for the misogyny.

On my return walk, passing the store I notice my little victory: the beer poster was down — replaced with the enduring trinity of womanhood: Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella and Snow White.

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And now, here's the tougher part.

Last month the Super Bowl was broadcast with all the pomp of gladiators and parade of high profile commercials. Although here in Canada we can't watch the commercials on that ritual Sunday, we do hear all about them in our media and a simple click takes us to YouTube where they are vaulted in cyberspace. Of all the commercials, Chrysler's "Imported from Detroit" ranked as number one.

I was dumbfounded to learn that the rapper Eminem was Chrysler's choice to drive through those gritty Detroit streets full of strong men imagery. I listened for some mainstream media thread of controversy around this company choosing a misogynist to support their revitalized image.

And heard — silence.

Eminem is a rap musician with a penchant for "exploring" the rape, degradation, battering and murder of girls and women. Song after song after song exploits such violence with sociopathic disregard for the audience he influences and for those who will bear the brunt of his message.

As an artist with access to a large segment of youth, he has a responsibility that extends beyond his right to say whatever he wants. As an artist profiting from such lyrics, I am astounded that he would be embraced by a major corporation. And I wonder at what depths of degradation our culture will go to, courtesy of the music industry. This angry man is a multi-millionaire rapping about raping girls with umbrellas. Last year's big hit focused on domestic violence and included lyrics that announced:

"If she ever tries to f----- leave again,  
Ima tie her to the bed and set this house on fire"

It was unavoidable as the number one song accompanied by a graphic video played out everywhere including my local gym. That set is one of his lighter lyrics. Such a good father, he also includes loving words for his daughter in another song in which he raps about the pleasure of murdering his ex-spouse while the listener hears her strangulation.

Violence takes many forms in our world but women suffer a unique form of it in addition to the regular means of assault, war, oppression, hunger, aggression. We are nationally appalled at the gender specific and sexualized violence that

women and girls endure in countries like the Congo and yet here in our comfortable homes, we let our children consume vicious misogyny as part of their daily cultural intake. And then we are baffled by men like Williams, Pickton, Bernardo or the rise of female on female violence.

But what's confusing? We know that advertising sells. Words sell. Words promote, pervert, impact, they can hurt. Words soothe and comfort and call us to be better people. It is well-documented that words can help a patient manage pain and heal faster. When we ignore the words of hate, we allow toxicity to seep into ourselves and overtake our culture.

This form of social brutality is coming at us from so many sources that we can't discern who exactly is responsible. But as parents, as consumers and as citizens, we are letting this happen.

And our youth are immersed in it.

That they are beset by this shameful woman-hating violence in all forms of media is bad enough — that we don't collectively speak out against it is even worse.

Our voices count and even the smallest action counts — if only in the eyes of our children. Yet, as a parent, I know that if I point out sexism each and every time, I risk my child simply shutting down and I put my own mental wellness at risk.

But I also know that as parents and as a community working toward justice and equity, we must prepare our youth so that when they themselves are of age, they will have the analysis to discern sexism and misogyny, and have the stamina to act and the words to say: Stop.

### **Shawn Newton – Part III**

I'm sure you've seen the bumper sticker, too.

The one that reads: "If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention."

It came to mind when I read the letter Catherine sent to Chrysler (down below) protesting their decision to engage Eminem for their Super Bowl commercial.

I had long known that Eminem's music was misogynistic and homophobic.

But, I had never really listened to the words of his songs.  
When I actually read the lyrics, I was appalled.  
I was outraged at the brutally violent images.  
And, I was newly and painfully aware of the degree to which I'd been living  
under a rock.

I was also aware that I seem to have a lot of company.

How easy it is, in our busy lives, to remain ignorant—  
sometimes willfully, sometimes simply because  
it's all so much more than we can possibly seem to take in.

My heart goes out to those of you who are actively parenting and  
grandparenting the children in your lives.

I can only imagine how hard it is to help them navigate the larger culture in  
which we live.

I know you have to pick your battles carefully,  
and I also know that the surest way to draw your kids' attention to something  
is to strictly forbid it.

But, what I most hope you'll hear this morning is that this isn't really about, or  
only about, Eminem.

It is about all of us—about the choices we make, the attitudes we hold,  
and the ways we spend our time and our money.

It is about the world we want to live in.

And the question of whether we endeavour  
to live out our values in the day to day decisions of our lives—  
whether we're downloading a song or buying a car.

Our faith repeatedly reminds us that we are a part of the interdependent web with  
all of life—that what touches the life of one of us affects us all.

A web in which we are called to work for justice and equity for everyone.

Here, at the century mark of a movement meant to improve the lives of  
women,

we would do well to take into our hearts the words of Margaret Mead—that “every time we liberate a woman, we liberate a man.”

My fervent hope is that one day even Eminem might be free.

Though it is called International Women’s Day, it is ultimately a day for us all. I especially want men to hear me in saying this.

This is not a day set aside to focus on women’s issues. It is a day to focus on human issues that affect the lives of women—and, therefore, affect us all.

There is, I believe, a vital role for men to play.

Many years ago, when Bob and I first visited the UU congregation in Melrose, Massachusetts, where we would eventually become members, we were a bit overwhelmed by the warmth of the welcome we received.

The congregation had only recently completed their Welcoming Congregation process, the work a congregation undertakes to be open to and inclusive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.

They had gone through workshops on gender and sexual identity, watched films and read books.

They had added a rainbow flag to the sign out front and the words boldly announcing that they were a welcoming congregation.

We were, apparently, the first gay male couple to walk through the doors, and let’s just say that they were incredibly glad to see us.

A few months later, the sign out front was vandalized. The welcoming words painted over and the flag torn down. An angry letter topped it all off.

It was an awful, awkward moment for that congregation.

A moment when their commitment was put to the test—when people who had never felt it before, came to know something of the sting of discrimination.

Bob and I and the lesbians of long-standing in the congregation wondered quietly to ourselves what the response would be—whether the straight people in the congregation would stand up and stand with us, or whether they might just wish the problem—and we—would go away.

I know you know what they did.

They repaired the sign.

And when it was vandalized in the same way a second time, they raised enough money to build a bigger, better sign.

These straight allies were front and centre at rallies for marriage equality at the State House; and for years, these beautiful people have marched proudly in Boston's Pride Parade.

As painful as it was, that congregation's direct encounter with discrimination deepened their commitment.

And, it taught me that there are times when only your allies can stand up and speak out on your behalf.

I believe this to increasingly be the role of men as we enter this second century of International Women's Days.

Now that the legal structures of equality are largely in place in our part of the world, men bear a blessed responsibility to see that the inherent worth and dignity of every woman is upheld in pubs, in locker room conversations, and, ultimately, in our hearts.

At this centennial moment, let us, women and men together, pledge ourselves anew to the promise of a world made just and fair, a world that we bring into being with every moment and every decision of our lives.

Amen.

February 24, 2011

Reid Bigland, Chrysler Chairman, President and Chief Executive Officer  
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Mr. Bigland,

Congratulations on being named the most popular Super Bowl advertisement by YouTube. While the concept, imagery and language are quite arresting and even emotional, the entire message and your image is tarnished by the use of Eminem as the new face of Chrysler. I am very saddened to see that Chrysler has chosen this man to embody the revitalized North American auto industry.

A quick scan of your company history and current diversity initiatives demonstrate an organization committed to the advancement of women and visible minorities. In stark contrast to this image is that of Eminem.

So that we are all clear as to the extent of graphic violence that this performer perpetrates, here is a very small sample of his relentlessly offensive lyrics:

from Eminem's 2002 Superman:

*bitches they come they go,  
I'll slap you off that barstool; there goes another lawsuit.  
Leave handprints all across you.  
Good lordy wody you must be gone off that water bottle you want what you cant have oh  
girl that's too damn bad  
don't touch what you can't grab,  
end up with two back hands.  
Put anthrax on a tampax and slap you till you can't stand.*

from Eminem's 2009 Stay Wide Awake:

*Young girl by the name of Brenda and I pretend to befriend her  
Sit down beside her like a spider, hi there girl you mighta  
Heard of me before, see whore you're the kinda girl that I'da  
Assault and rape and figure why not try to make your pussy wider  
Fuck you with an umbrella then open it up while that shits inside ya*

from Eminem's 2010's Love the Way you Lie:

*If she ever tries to fuckin' leave again,  
Ima tie her to the bed and set this house on fire*

When you choose this man to represent your company, you have chosen to attach your products and image to misogyny and rape. Did NO ONE on your marketing team notice that Eminem considers women whores worthy of rape and violence? Did NO ONE SPEAK OUT and caution you about this?

Just because the music industry is profiting from such disgusting lyrics does not give any of us—Chrysler included—the moral right to ignore the dangerous messages that come from this vile performer. Chrysler has given your approval to Eminem and consequently to the rape of girls, wife battering and brutality against women—not to mention violent homophobia.

I always despair when I have to make the following comparisons but I don't think people really understand unless this is said: Can you imagine the global outrage if he was singing about lynching black men or gassing Jews?

From government websites: “Of the \$3.7 billion committed to Chrysler by Canada and Ontario, \$2.9 billion has been drawn upon to date. Chrysler emerged from bankruptcy protection on June 10, 2009. As additional consideration for providing loans to Chrysler, Canada and Ontario received a 2-per-cent equity stake in the restructured firm.”

For these reasons, I have copied my letter to government officials. My tax dollars are helping to rebuild Chrysler. And this is how you repay us? Shame on you.

The ad holds its own power and does not need any celebrity driving the car. Nevertheless there are plenty of Detroit figures who can represent the company. What would compel you to attach your brand to Eminem? Although all I can really do is ban Eminem from my home, I am speaking out to you and to others who I hope will have influence in this matter (see list below).

I respectfully request that you remove that man's face from your advertisements immediately and apologize to your mothers, sisters and daughters. Let's all take a stand against degradation and violence.

Mr. Bigland, Mr. Marchionne, and Mr Kidder: Please — Do Your Part.

Send a message that Chrysler need not profit from violence against girls and women.

Catherine Lake