

“Spiritual Transformation and The Vagina Monologues”
First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
A Homily given by Stephanie Gannon
on 6 March 2016

***Plus Reflections by Alezandria Coldevin, Jewels Krauss,
Yvonne Raaflaub and Kimberley Watson***

N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Homily by Stephanie Gannon

This morning I want to take a few minutes to give you some context on why we produced *The Vagina Monologues* here at First last month on the 20th anniversary of the play. Shawn saw the show at Harvard Divinity School 10 years ago while he was in seminary and ever since had the dream of bringing it here to be performed in Sunderland Hall. He was determined to bring these women’s voices and stories into the sacred space of our sanctuary. And we’ve all been transformed in the process...

It’s interesting to note that Eve Ensler was raised Unitarian. Her father was Jewish and her mother was not. In an interview last year with Krista Tippett for her podcast “On Being,” in which she discussed her book on living with cancer, *In the Body of the World*, Ensler told Tippett that while she wouldn’t describe her Unitarian upbringing as what constituted her spiritual life, it’s where she got the idea that religion and social activism go together. Pretty cool, right, that the seeds of Ensler’s activism were planted in a Unitarian setting!

The Vagina Monologues has been produced in dozens of Unitarian congregations across North America, including at my home congregation First Unitarian in Brooklyn and the congregation I worked in last year, All Souls New York City. Some of the things that make it consistent with our Unitarian Universalist values are the play’s open exploration of women’s bodies and sexuality, its telling of women’s stories from diverse cultures and backgrounds and lifting up some of the most marginalized voices, and its ruthless speaking out against oppression and violence against women. Ensler’s commitment to social justice is revealed not only in the constantly changing content of her play, which she updates regularly, but also in her requirement that all proceeds from productions of *The Vagina Monologues* go to women’s organizations like Sistering.

Through Mona and Shawn’s courageous guidance and vision, our production at First allowed a great cross-section of women to embody the voices in Ensler’s play, many of them bravely acting for the very first time. My hope is that we can continue building relationships with Sistering and the women served by their wonderful organization. My hope too is that we as a congregation will honour and respect all people who identify as

women here. Are there instances of violence against women in this space? Ensler invites us to reflect on subtler forms of violence too that we may not have awareness of. May we create safe space for all women here to be free to express their fullest, strongest, wildest, most beautiful selves.

Now let me get out of the way so that you can hear reflections from some of the cast members and learn a little about how they were transformed by their experiences of being in the play. I'd like to first invite up Alezandria Coldevin.

Reflection #1 by Alezandria Coldevin

Vagina. This word has been seen as sacred, as dirty, as fun and everything in between. I personally had never really talked about or considered Vaginas before joining our production of *The Vagina Monologues*. This is just one of the many gifts I received in being a part of that performance. Each one of us got to work one on one with Mona – our amazing director – for weeks before we ever got together as a cast. My experience with Mona was one of nurturing and exploration of the text and of myself, it was powerful, but the week rehearsing with the cast takes the cake! I felt privileged to be able to hang out with such a diverse group of incredible, smart, talented, gorgeous women! The respect and generosity felt among the cast members was tangible from the start, and grew as the week progressed.

Throughout the week I got to consider the monologues, their meaning, and their varied truths, while marvelling at the compelling and diverse performances, and enjoying the company of so many awesome women. By the end of the week of rehearsals – we were confident that we had a great show – and that is when the final piece of the puzzle clicked into place. You. The audience. Both nights were sold out. Standing room only. And both nights we could feel that you were with us, cheering us and supporting us, and for two magical nights, we collectively went on a journey, and that journey lead to vaginas. When I tell friends outside of this community about my experience with this production, they are always surprised that the monologues were performed in a church. A sacred space. A place for families and contemplation and spiritual growth. Having lived that amazing week, with the cast and ultimately with you, I can't imagine it being produced anywhere else.

Reflection #2 by Jewels Krauss

Hi everyone. My name is Jewels Krauss. Actually, before I go into sharing my reflections on my experience with *The Vagina Monologues*, I was hoping you could help me cross something off my bucket list. I was raised in a very conservative Christian church where there was no conversation between who was standing behind the pulpit and the congregation members. I love how interactive it is here, however, so I was wondering if, when I say “Good Morning”, you would all respond with “Good morning, Jewels”? That would be great.

Good Morning!

This is actually a very nice segue into my reflections. Being raised in a conservative Christian church, I would have never imaged something like *The Vagina Monologues* being performed there. I mean I don't know, I haven't been there for a while. But definitely not when I was still going. Which is weird and one of the reason I veered away from that church. I remember thinking as a 16 year old how curious it is that we body shame in church/society. That our bodies and their needs/wants are condemned as evil. When, if you believe in God (which I don't), God himself created us and our flesh. So to me, body shaming ultimately means insulting God's work. Which would be a sin. And therefore not something we should do, right? So, when Shawn told me in January he wanted to put on the VM here at UU, I thought "I don't think I could have any more respect for this man!" How incredible to perform this piece of theatre in a sacred space.

I am an actor and director, and I am very interested in theatre as a sacred space. Story telling, if you go back to the bible ("first there was the word"), is how we understand ourselves, each other, and the world. I saw the VM years ago at a university and it was very powerful. Young women claiming the space. And yet, having it at a university, with young men in the audience, I didn't feel safe sometimes for the performers. It didn't feel like a sacred space. Particularly, during the monologue where a woman reclaims all the various different moans women can make during sex. The reactions coming from some of the young men bothered me. So yes, when Shawn said it would be performed here, I could have not asked for a safer place to do so!

To me the experience was sacred because I shared space with women of all ages. How incredible for me, a young woman, to share a stage with women older than me who are standing powerfully in their sensuality and sexuality. I loved how Mona picked women who were so different from each other in age, cultural background, mother tongue, etc. And we all came together and listened. Truly a sacred thing.

I wanted to end with one thought. I think it is incredible that women are coming together to talk about their sexuality, sensuality, vulnerability, and hurt. But I also think that we've been doing that for a while. Women, I mean. And I wonder with all the recent talk about rape culture and violence against women, I think it is time for the Penis Monologues. I think it is equally important for men to explore their sexuality in a safe space and I wonder if that would move this whole conversation in a different direction. I mentioned this to Shawn before he left on his sabbatical, so we'll see. Maybe he'll come back with a fully written script. I would definitely attend and offer my full ears and heart the way the men here did for us!

Thank you.

Reflection #3 by Yvonne Raaflaub – "Altered"

How does this wordsmith, who expands small topics, reduce an extraordinarily layered experience to 451 words, the length of Eve Ensler's monologue finale I was

privileged to perform – “My Revolution begins in the body” – and that I continue to recite once each day? I can but try or I may just cry, speechless.

Inseparable, “My Revolution” and I. The most powerful piece I’ve taken inside me.

How could I not love this poem that honours females, reveres earth, and respects all human beings, especially those who “feel too much”?

To “feel too much” is to “feel just right”. Mona, you feel just right.

Mona offered me something Unitarian ears might cringe at. Two words. Any guesses?

“Holy Trinity.”

Validation and visibility and voice. Validation as an artist – first-time actor that I was. Visibility – me alone at this podium in my little black tube dress (which I’ve nicknamed my fallopian tube dress), sharing the spotlight with nobody. Voice – “You have a big vocal range.” That’s something I hadn’t known.

What I do know is the power of monologue combined with Mona’s contagious mindfulness. Here’s looking at you, Mona!

And here’s looking at my VagSisters and our respectful rehearsal week together where I was awed by their hard work and buoyed by all the laughter...

But I had come to resent my monologue and struggled with it. Imagine hating a poem about love!

I’d ignored my soul, my reading, my writing and done what I most abhor in others: I’d abandoned the tried-and-true when something new and exciting came along.

I cried, wrote, asked my books for forgiveness (I hope I used all 5 apology languages), made a nest out of my favourite books and slept inside.

“We missed you,” they said, “but you looked busy. Please come back and write in our margins. We’ve missed your touch.”

“I’ve missed yours, too.”

Books are my personal refuge, my sanctuary. I love them. And this sanctuary at First Unitarian, I also love.

When I performed “My Revolution” here, the two things I most cherish in the world came together for the first time in my life. One – the arts, not part of my childhood, fully embodied here. Theatre, with music, poetry, stories...

And I was a performer. Validated, visible, vocal.

Two – my village, population 300, contained within these walls both evenings. Familiar and friendly faces. Just like back home.

Because of you, I am made whole!

Because you live community.

“A great community,” writes Lois Smidt, “creates conditions where people can fall in love.”

“It is a place where we can make a fuss about one another.”

“A place where we can ask, ‘How did I ever live without you?’”¹

Reflection #4 by Kimberley Watson

Good morning. My name is Kim Watson, and I’ve been attending First for about a year.

Women stood in a sacred space, a place of reverence and respect, and told women’s stories.

As someone who currently falls in the agnostic-atheist range, I sometimes feel perplexed at attending a congregation that comes out of the Judeo-Christian tradition – a tradition I left at the age of 13. Looking back, in the version to which I was exposed, I experienced it as didactic, prescriptive, emphasizing shame and sin instead of life and celebration. There seemed to be no space for my questions or for direct experience! Later I tried neo-paganism, where there was an embrace of the feminine principle along with the masculine, and where as a woman I had a place in the sacred circle. But, ultimately, at the time I didn’t know how to compromise that approach with my science training.

And now, here I am, back to a place that comes out of the tradition I left, albeit with some welcome variations – talking about what it was like to tell women’s stories in a sacred space.

In retrospect, I didn’t carefully consider being in *The Vagina Monologues*. Sistering is a good cause, it was a way to get to know people here, it’s a classic play. Never mind I hadn’t auditioned for anything in 30 years! This seemed like a safe place to take chances. Our director Mona el Baroudi asked how brave did I feel – would I consider a monologue

¹ Lois Smidt in John McKnight and Peter Block, *The abundant community: awakening the power of families and neighborhoods*. San Francisco: 2010, p. 148.

reclaiming a fallen word now considered the most profane, AND do it with orgiastic ecstasy to boot? Why not? – This seemed like a safe place to take risks.

The realization of the absolute profundity of this project only slowly unfolded for me. Women stood in a sacred space and told women's stories! The play speaks to the feminine across a range of issues including: sexual desire, body shame, genital mutilation, rape, love, birth, lesbian and transgender experiences, embodiment. My monologue was about the celebratory, healing power of sensuality and sexuality, and the joy and freedom in claiming the right to define oneself.

We named all these things, in the pulpit, which historically has been a seat of power from which women were excluded, women were persecuted, and women's bodies were controlled.

Remnants of neopagan ritual come back to me. I hope that together as a cast we lifted up a sort of incantation that aids a transformation of those difficult truths we declared, and a transformation of the relationship between women and institutions of worship. May there be transmutation in naming these things from a powerful and loving centre.

Our Minister Shawn Newton affirmed this project was his long-time dream. I don't recall him saying – but surely it was intentional? – that *The Vagina Monologues* was performed the very month we focused on the theme of Reconciliation.

WE women spoke of women's realities, in THIS sacred space. We held this place of reverence and respect, and we TOLD the stories.

Our minister, and many of you, attended the show. You listened and bore witness, sometimes despite discomfort. You did not turn away from, interrupt, dismiss or silence us.

You. Bore. Witness.

And that, also, is Truth and Reconciliation.

I stood in this place of reverence and respect and I spoke women's stories, together with other women.

This process healed an old wound that I didn't even know was still there. For that I am ever grateful to all of you.

And yes, I feel renewal. Did you know related words are restoration and restitution?

And yes, this is a safe place.