

“Rehabilitating History for Present & Future Equality”

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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.

I remember one of my earliest book reports for which we were told to choose a famous Canadian in history and write about him. In my nine year old mind, I was excited at the prospect of finding a “her” to report on. But at the time, I knew nothing about Harriet Tubman and her underground railroad into Canada or Agnes MacPhail the first female member of parliament elected in 1921. What I thought I knew about First Peoples I’d mis-learned from movies and knew nothing about the critical role that Indigenous women had in the fur trade.

So off I went to the community library with a name—Judy LaMarsh. There wasn’t anything about her in my school library, but for some reason, that was the one female famous name I knew in Canada’s history—I have no recollection as to why I knew her name.

But I clearly remember the report.

I remember my grade 5 report on Judy LaMarsh because it was my first experience of not handing anything in. And I didn’t hand anything in because all I could find about the elusive Judy LaMarsh was a quarter-column in an encyclopaedia.

Now, I don’t remember feeling outrage—I didn’t have feminist or much analysis—yet—just vaguely disappointed. But I was certainly imprinted. And further imprinted when my grade 11 physics teacher kindly explained that girls just aren’t any good at science and math. And, except for those rare female exceptions, my ignorance of women’s contributions pretty much continued until university.

In women’s studies, I learned that before God there was (and still is) the Great Goddess. I learned that the rich history of women’s lives have been either disregarded or deliberately erased.

Book burnings by early Christian patriarchs in ancient Alexandria destroyed the work of female philosophers, mathematicians, and historians¹. And in more recent

centuries, the vicious process of colonization undermined the status of Aboriginal women in specifically gendered ways².

Now, in recasting the narrative, First Nations historians tell of women being equally involved in the governance of many communities. They point to the role of women in the fur trade not only as hunters, trappers and preparers of the pelts but as guides, interpreters, and negotiators.

One such woman, Thanadelthur successfully served as key negotiator between the Dene, Cree, and Hudson Bay Company in 1716—a complex process involving over 150 people.³

Early-contact negotiations involving women were recorded by the military, companies, and missionaries but once the fur trade waned and colonialism was entrenched, the toxic fires of sexism and racism in Canada dismantled Indigenous traditions and displaced First Nations women, additionally weakening the social fabric of those communities.

This history of misogyny is extracted in today's violence against women. I was listening to a young Anishanawbe man speak at a town hall on the subject of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. He spoke about the racist legacy of the Indian Act and how the settlers not only imported but imposed sexism onto his people's culture. And he made the links between the entrenched devaluing of First Nations women throughout Canada's history and how they are tragically and disproportionately affected by violence today.

Revisiting truth and acknowledging historical trauma is painful and important work. And we can also revise history and help shape our future by singing our good songs.

Education and awareness and outreach are the midwives to positive social change.

And I'm glad to see our educational curricula finally changing toward more inclusivity at a younger age. Because, when we see ourselves reflected in the past, we can see our abilities today and visualize our contributions for tomorrow.

And it's not like we weren't there, it's not like white men are the sole doers of history and advancements. They're just the ones who've controlled the dominant Western narratives and in doing so, perpetuate lies of omission.

And indeed we all perpetuate the gender lies. As Margot Lee Shetterly, author of *Hidden Figures* says, "We all know what a scientist looks like: lab coat, eyeglasses, pocket protector and holding a test tube. Mostly male. Usually white. Even Google,

our hive mind, confirms the prevailing view. Just do an image search for the word ‘scientist.’”⁴

If you haven’t seen the movie *Hidden Figures*, go and see it. It is a fascinating and inspiring story focused on the achievements of three African American women working at NASA who made critical contributions to the space program in the time of racial segregation.

There’s a scene in which the character based on mathematician Katherine Johnson is saying good night to her daughters. She’s exhausted from the long hours of work and her children miss her terribly, but when saying goodnight, her middle daughter holds up a drawing of her mom smiling out the window of a rocket on its way to the moon.

I loved that scene—I loved the whole movie—but that moment is a deft and subtle nod to the power of visualization for girls and women.

I recently heard Janelle Monae, who plays an engineer in the film-- describe in an interview, her bewilderment when she first read the script and her outrage. Why didn’t she know the story? Why didn’t everyone know about the African American women whose genius and tenacity contributed to space exploration?

Their work defied not only gravity but racism and sexism.

That’s why I am elated whenever I see a Google Doodle focusing on the achievements of a woman. Lives such as Ada Byron Lovelace who proposed an algorithm for the Analytical Engine in 1843 and whose idea that numbers can represent things — making computers do more than calculate — was a theory that would be confirmed a century later.

Ada Byron Lovelace died at the age of 36. Imagine if she hadn’t died so young or encountered all the gender barriers of her time. Imagine if her story, like those of the women of NASA and the hundreds of other early computing geniuses hadn’t been suppressed. Imagine what the technology sector would actually look like today? And imagine what could be accomplished.

Girls and math who-da-think it? Or, as Barbie once said, “Math class is tough.”

And studies continue to show half of the girls in western nations lose their math confidence between elementary and middle school⁵ and most abandon their interest in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math — or STEM subjects — around age 15.⁶

Why wouldn't we encourage girls to contribute to solving the world's problems? And how can we? Again, self-concept is a start. Seeing women in the STEM sector helps girls know they belong there.

Unfortunately, the male-dominated tech industry is so openly hostile to women it's no wonder girls don't aim to work in toxic environments.⁷ "Hidden Figures" should be required viewing for everyone in the STEM fields—especially men.

We need to re-vision women in history. Not only for girls but for boys as well. When raising our son Nigel, I changed "hes" to "shes" and "Mom & Dad" to "Mom and Mom" in many of his storybooks. I wanted him to see girls in lead roles, just like I wanted him to see his family reflected in bedtime stories — and frankly there's only so many times you can read *Heather Has Two Mommies*.

As a same-sex family we chose to come here to Toronto First and join the Unitarian community because this congregation strives to be inclusive and gender balanced. We are willing to say "She" as the pronounced expression of the divine even while some of us don't like to reference a God or Goddess. And we know that it is important for our children to hear imagined characters as female — from frog to farmer.

Unitarian Universalist history includes many rich examples of our work in the world such as Peter's earlier story of Rachel Carson and people like Emily Stowe—a member of this Congregation and Canada's first female physician and early suffragette.

Did you know that just on the west side of Jarvis Street north of Dundas is a historical plaque commemorating the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto and a few of our dynamic forbearers? How great is that? When I see that, I feel pride in our faith community and an affirming love that also generates a sense of belonging.

This is the power of knowing our stories. They tell us truths about our capabilities and our shining moments, our best selves. They help us to visualize and aspire.

As Roberta Jamieson, Mohawk leader and Canada's first Aboriginal lawyer said, "I was told I should be a beautician or a hairdresser by a government official because this is something I could aspire to. Now, nothing against hairstylists, but that's not what I aspired to."⁸

She likely grew up knowing the story of Jigonsaseh of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (referred to by the French as the Iroquois Confederacy). Every student of law and democracy should learn about the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the Great Law of Peace which is dated to somewhere around 1142.⁹

Jigonsaseh's longhouse stood at the crossroads where many warriors would pass. She would allow guests of warring nations to rest and eat in her longhouse but only if they did so in peace. A Seneca woman, she was very knowledgeable about the variety of grievances between nations and became a skilled negotiator. Because of her reputation among nations, she was asked by the Great Peacemaker and Hiawatha to work with them to create a peaceful democracy among the five nations—which would eventually become the Six Nations.

When peace between nations was achieved, they set about building their constitutional government—a horizontal rather than hierarchal structure with a reciprocating and circular process of discussion that aimed for consensus. A matrilineal clan structure was developed for the nations, with men and women having equal voice, and Jigonsaseh became the designated name of the Head Clan Mother passed down for hundreds of years.¹⁰

But forced assimilation meant that women were excluded from governance as the western-style government was imposed.

In the last century, anthropologists gathered and documented in writing, the Great Law of Peace and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. But they did so from a Euro-cultural bias which meant that the role of Jigonsaseh was disregarded.

It is understood now that such documentation reflects only half of the story because—like today—the anthropologists only spoke with the men. And traditionally, women hold the other half of the Haudenosaunee oral history.

In writing this sermon, I've been pondering on that saying that "Those who forget the past are bound to repeat it." This is true. But we also know that what passes for the past hasn't been the whole story.

Sure, human history is a really big story but can we at least start by weaving in the voices and perspectives and accomplishments of women from various cultures and sectors as part of the baseline?

Can we rehabilitate history to better understand all of ourselves then, now, and for a better future?

In researching for this talk, I began with that childhood event and sought out information on Judy LaMarsh. I learned she was responsible for shepherding the Medicare bill through parliament and developing the Canada Pension Plan.¹¹ After her time in government, she returned to law and often took on civil rights cases.

One such case, called the Brunswick Four, was prominent in 1974. It involved four lesbians who were arrested in Toronto's Brunswick Tavern because they refused to leave when the manager tried to evict them for singing about their lesbian lives at an amateur talent night.

Police were called and they were arrested and then physically assaulted by the officers. The incident and trial received a great deal of mainstream media coverage. "Gay historians believe that this event and its consequences was a key incident ushering in a more militant gay and lesbian liberation movement."¹²

Ahh the circle of life.

I wonder what I would have thought and felt if my nine-year old self had encountered this in my search for Judy LaMarsh. Would it have greatly shaped my future? Maybe not. But it would have served as a touchstone during the pain of my coming out years — a hometown story from the recent past, engendering pride in the day, and hope for the future.

Now, that's another story that calls for a historical plaque.

Thank you.

Endnotes

¹ Barbara G. Walker, *The Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*, Harper & Row, 1983

² Penni Mitchell, *About Canada: Women's Rights*, Fernwood Publishing, 2015

³ Jean Barman, "Indigenous Women in the Cusp of Contact," in *Indigenous Women and Feminism: Politics, Activism, Culture*, UBC Press, 2011

⁴ Margot Lee Shetterly: Research. Write. Repeat.
<http://margotleeshetterly.com/margot-lee-shetterly-narrative-non-fiction-writing-research>

⁵ Emma G. Keller, “Why the Gender Gap Exists and how to Fix it,” The Guardian; February 5, 2013 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/us-news-blog/2013/feb/05/girls-science-gender-gap-fix>

^{6,7} CNN Tech Feb 28, 2017 <http://money.cnn.com/2017/02/28/technology/girls-math-science-engineering/>

⁸ Seventh Generation Club Newsletter Spring 2016

^{9,10} Encyclopedia of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois Confederacy); edited by Bruce Elliott Johansen, Barbara Alice Mann Greenwood Press, 2000

¹¹ Harriet Gorham, The Canadian Encyclopedia online, 2008
<http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/julia-verlyn-lamarsh/>

¹² citation Warner, Tom. Never Going Back: A History of Queer Activism in Canada, 2002, University of Toronto Press (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brunswick_Four)

Closing words from Lotta Hitschmanova — a great Canadian humanitarian who founded the Unitarian Service Committee for international aid and whose name and image was shortlisted for the new \$10 bills:

“We are here in this world to help each other and to make this world a better place to live.... We are not here to live empty lives. We are here with a function, with a very important function that has been entrusted to us, and this is to make the world more livable and it lies in our hands and I am absolutely convinced that it can be done.”