

“Change 7: Women Working for Change”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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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.

Around the world, International Women’s Day calls our attention to the rights of women and girls.

It is celebrated each year on March 8th—as it has been since 1910.

But its origins go even further back, to 1909, when the Socialist Party of America organized the first “Women’s Day” which was on February 28th.

Today of course is February 24th—several days ahead of March 8th—but, of course, the rights of women must be addressed and upheld on every day of the year, and we’re pleased to be doing that today.

This year, as we conclude our worship series on “change,” Margaret and I will be profiling a number of women who are working for change in the world today.

Some may be women you’ve heard of...but many names will be unfamiliar.

Some are involved in activism close to home...while others are active in the United States and other countries around the world.

We hope you find them all inspiring.

Needless to say, it would be impossible to offer the “perfect cross-section” of women working for change.

We hope that after hearing these short profiles, you think of many others who could have been included... and honour them by reflecting on *their* stories as well!

Finally, it should be said that although we will share the stories of several “high achievers”...positive change in the world is taking place every day, thanks to the ongoing and often quiet efforts of people who are unnoticed in the media.

In addition to the women whose stories we share with you now, we honour and affirm the ongoing efforts of all women working for change...

...as well as the essential justice work of people of every gender.

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In August of last year, following a heat wave in her native Sweden, Greta Thunberg decided not to go to school, to demand that the Swedish government meet the emissions targets of the Paris Agreement.

She inspired other students around the world to hold strikes in support of the climate, and by the end of last year, strikes had taken place in more than 270 cities.

After then going on to deliver a TED talk and attract worldwide attention, she addressed the United Nations in December, 2018, saying:

“We can no longer save the world by playing by the rules, because the rules have to be changed.

We have not come here to beg the world leaders to care for our future.

We've come to tell them know that change is coming, whether they like it or not.

The people will rise to the challenge and since our leaders are behaving like children, we will have to take the responsibility they should have taken long ago.”

Greta Thunberg is now 16 years old. Thank you to Judy Velland for bringing her to our attention.

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Recognized as one of Canada's Top 25 environmentalists under 25 by the Starfish organization, activist Tina Yeonju Oh grew up on Treaty 6, near Edmonton, Alberta.

Encouraged in the work of direct activism by her parents, Tina's work highlights the interconnections between human rights, feminism and environmentalism.

In particular, she notes how climate change affects marginalized communities more than any others.

Today the 20 year-old leads the fossil fuel divestment campaign at Mount Allison University.

She helped organize the Ottawa Climate 101 action against the Kinder Morgan Trans-Mountain pipeline expansion, where she was arrested along with 98 other young people.

She also has served as a delegate at the two most recent UN Climate Change conferences...and continues to inspire activists of all ages.

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When you see Second Harvest trucks driving around the city, you may not realize that two Toronto women, Joan Clayton and Ina Andre, started that important community service in 1985.

In the beginning, they simply drove around in their own cars, picking up leftover food from restaurants and stores and delivering it to social service agencies.

Now with a fleet of 10 trucks and a van, Second Harvest delivers food to more than 373 social service agencies across Ontario...enough for 34,000 meals each day.

In 34 years, Second Harvest has rescued more than 140 million pounds of healthy food, preventing 128 million pounds of greenhouse gases from entering the atmosphere as a result of food waste.

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Also providing food and other essentials to people in need in Toronto are Sue-Lynn Manone and Sigrid Kneve.

Several people in our congregation met Sue-Lynn when she organized the vigil at the offices of Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada at 25 St. Clair Avenue West in 2017. She was present there for many weeks

What I didn't know, until Kate Chung told me, is that every Sunday from noon to 3:00 at Allen Gardens, Sue-Lynn and Sigrid organize the sharing of clothing and food for people who are homeless and near-homeless.

Kate lets us know that donations are welcome for this ongoing work for change in our city....

and I'd like to thank Kate for making several very helpful suggestions as we found stories to share for today's service.

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Our next few profiles come from the most recent UN Women Annual Report, which is dedicated to economic empowerment, peace, security and humanitarian action, and ending violence against women,

It notes that in 2017-18, 27 laws were amended or reformed in 17 countries...

and "more than 7,000 women leaders, aspiring candidates and elected public officials were trained in 32 countries."

Here are just a few of the women profiled in the report this year:

After trying unsuccessfully three times, Alice Wahome won a seat in Kenya's Parliament, in the county of Murang'a, which had never before elected a woman.

Despite immediately improving access to water, electricity and education for farmers in her region, she was the victim of vocal attacks because she was a woman...

Yet, she was re-elected in 2017 and continues to work courageously for change in her region, inspiring many other women and girls.

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In Senegal, Coumba Diaw is the only female Mayor of the Sagatta Djoloff community in the region of Louga, where men govern the 54 other municipalities.

She was raised in a conservative family where she was told women should not be in leadership positions.

Married when she was 14, she spent thirty years working in the home as she says she was expected to do...

But inspired by other women working for change, she then successfully ran for mayor.

One of the first thing she did was install drinking taps in 33 of 43 local villages, freeing up women's time that had previously been spent fetching and carrying water.

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In India, in the region of Uttarakhand, Sunita Kashiyap is the secretary and founder of Umang Producers Company.

It's an organization of more than 3,000 women in India who are farming, producing and selling their own goods.

All of them are shareholders in the company, providing micro-loans for each other to create more opportunity.

As a young woman, Sunita worked as a homemaker, farming beside her husband but not receiving the same status.

After joining with other women to form this organization, she has earned both a bachelor's and master's degree...and focuses all her efforts on creating more economic opportunity for rural women in India.

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(Addition by Margaret Kohr)

Similarly, in Nepal, Shobha Prahan Shrestha, a social worker who trained in Nepal but who obtained her MA on a scholarship at University of San Diego, was frustrated at the inability for most “help” agencies to effectively deliver direct support to communities.

She set up her own non profit organization Women for Peace and Democracy Nepal, focused on giving women in rural and marginalized communities the support they needed to empower them to step out of the strongly patriarchal, and sometimes abusive culture.

Shobha and her staff travel across Nepal, to meet with women in remote communities, providing women’s groups with training, technical support and resources in community development, sustainable farming, micro-enterprises, and credit.

As a result of her dedicated work, village women have formed community support groups to manage the micro credit loans, and earned enough through their training to move from subsistence living to being able to keep their children (significantly their daughters) in school and generally improve the lives of their families and communities.

Some of the women have developed plays against spousal abuse, which they perform in neighbouring villages; some have become leaders in their community circles; some have actually run for and been elected to local government office.

These women, thanks to WPD, now have pride of place and status in their communities and are taking that out into the world. They are changing the face of Nepalese society and expectations of women in marginalized communities... and this will spread into future generations.

WPD is supported in its programs by World Accord, our partner in the Central America Construction Expeditions. There's so much more about Shobha and WPD at <http://www.wpdnepal.org.np/>

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In Skopje, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Ana Vasileva's activism against sexual harassment began before the MeToo movement.

After writing a blog that attracted anti-feminist criticism, Ana joined with other young women in an activist collective.

Among other actions, they mapped the streets with feminist history and placed feminist books in the hands of statues in the city centre.

After the emergence of the #Me Too movement, Ana started a similar campaign against sexual harassment in Macedonia, translated as "I Speak Up Now."

Within 24 hours, the campaign received official support from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the Ministry of Education and Science and the Ministry of Interior, and the Prime Minister.

As a footnote to this inspiring story of one woman working for change, it's important to note that over the past few years, the Me Too movement has strengthened women's voices and created long-overdue awareness of sexual assault and harassment.

All of the women of #Me Too—which very likely include many people in this room—deserve credit for changing the world in crucial ways right now.

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As we come to the end of February, which is Black History Month, we also celebrate the woman who ensured that Canadians recognize it each year.

Jean Augustine immigrated to Canada in 1960 after being born in Grenada, and she became the first black female member of Parliament...elected in 1993 in Etobicoke-Lakeshore and serving until 2006.

In 1995, August made a motion to recognize February as Black History Month, which passed unanimously.

As a result of her hard work and dedication to education and politics, she received the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Medal in 2012, and was appointed to Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 2014.

Augustine retired from politics in 2006 but continues to work as an advocate for positive social change at the Jean Augustine Centre for Young Women's Empowerment, based in Etobicoke.

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Many names stand out among women working for change in North American politics. Here are just a few.

Currently, Canada is watching as Jody Wilson-Raybould, the first female and indigenous (now former) Justice Minister is “speaking her truth” to power.

No matter what the eventual outcome of Canada’s current political crisis, one cannot help but be impressed by Wilson-Raybould’s commitment to ethics and integrity.

In the United States, 29-year old Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (or “AOC”) is the youngest woman ever to serve in the United States Congress...standing for progressive values including environmental protection, universal health care and much higher taxes for the super-rich.

Another inspiring woman who goes by her initials is, of course RBG—85 year-old Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

This beloved, and “notorious,” associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court has devoted a significant part of her career to women’s rights and gender equality.

A name in U.S. politics you may not know is Andrea Jenkins.

She is the first African-American openly transgender woman elected to public office in the United States...and is also a performance artist and poet.

She has served on the Minneapolis City Council since January 2018.

And in Canada, in 2017, Julie Lemieux became the first transgender person to be elected mayor in any Canadian municipality.

She serves in Très-Saint-Rédempteur, Quebec.

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As today's service was being put together,
many memories surfaced of women who worked for change in the
past, but are no longer living.

And needless to say, you will have your own personal list
of women who worked for change,
who inspire you now in the positive changes you can make...in your
life, and the lives of others.

The poem we read together by Joy Atkinson,
earlier in the service,
spoke the "womb of stars" that embraces us—
the cosmic feminine that gives birth to
our power and strength.

As we look ahead to International Women's Day this year, may we
continue to be guided by the courageous stories of women who have
gone before us...

and who walk beside us...

in the ongoing journey toward a changed world...

Of equality, justice,
and well-being for all.

Blessed be.

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