

Happy International Women's Day!

I appreciate the opportunity again to talk with my people on IWD. There's a lot to cover so let's get going.

So there's this habit I've embraced whenever I'm talking about animals—for example at this year's mid-winter retreat I saw trees felled by a beaver — her long teeth marks evident on the stumps and I also saw her dam spanning across a stream. Or I'll mention an eagle and her nest or a snake in her resting coil.

and Invariably my conversational partner will seem surprised and ask "How did you know it was female?" Even now, in the age of multi-pronouns, I still get asked this—so I simply reply, "Well, she had a pink bow on her head."

Like that one cartoon character out of 5 who also wears heels—we assume male unless otherwise wearing a pink bow. And it's like news articles that still add "woman or female" to the terms artist and astronaut.

Images and ideas are instantly formed in our minds — and they matter.

Before the Christian invasions in the British Isles, he and man were not neutral pronouns. Wer meant woman as did wif—not wife; and femelle not fe-male. Locbore meant free woman; and guocwena a battle woman.¹

Feminist historians and linguistics have demonstrated that from the 16th century on, English grammarians made the masculine generic on the grounds that the male was a worthier gender.²

I revisited these etymologies recently when reading *The Riddles of the Sphinx* in which author Anna Shechtman guides us into the realm of crossword puzzles. It is a fascinating book that explores her own crossword creations alongside years of struggle with anorexia, and with a critique of the boxed roles assigned to women in our culture.

She notes that back in their early days, crossword puzzles were mostly authored by women. Now and especially since the transfer to digital tools, "the creation of a crossword puzzle is a job largely performed by men. But like botany, film editing, library science, and computing before it, it was once a form of women's work."

Last month, I was at a 40th birthday party with a lot of engineers (now-what are you visualizing?) actually it was majority women, a few trans folk, and most of the men present were actually from my friend's swim club. Anyway, I was talking with a chemical engineer about her research in Parkinson's and as the time went on I learned that she came to Canada from Iran.

As a girl she grew up in terror of the morality police — constantly on watch for vans, or any man who would tell her she was not being proper — in whatever way they chose to define. A close friend of hers was beaten at age 12 by the morality police for some gender-based transgression.

She still viscerally reacts with fear and trauma whenever she sees police in our city.

I had recently signed the End Gender Apartheid letter so we spoke about the uprisings — **Women, Life, Freedom** in Iran and **Bread, Work, Education** in Afghanistan.

The global campaign to **End Gender Apartheid** is trying to change “the definition of apartheid under international law to be interpreted to include gender hierarchies, not just racial hierarchies.”

The campaign states:

“Discrimination against women globally is a reality. This campaign is a focused, shared effort led by Afghan and Iranian women, who are looking to challenge the apartheid systems that they live or were born under. We believe the states of Afghanistan and Iran are outliers on women's rights globally, because of gender apartheid; although we acknowledge acts of violence against women are widely perpetrated in some countries more than in others. We hope that this effort charts a path forward for all women to demand the equality they rightly deserve and for global leaders to take notice and set new standards.”³

Here at home, we might call out the constraints of women and girls in other countries, but in these pockets of the world, we are still very busy teaching girls that their worth is measured by the softness of their skin, the length of their eyelashes, the size of their breasts. And with it comes the mass profits in skin regimes and cosmetics now marketed as birthday party themes for 8-year-olds, and the instagramming of girls as young as 3 by their mothers for compensation.

Patriarchy and the capitalist framework *now with Social Media* just keeps spinning us backwards.

It's hard to look. And we don't have to look far or long to see the array of gender-specific violence and conditions girls and women experience worldwide —from female genital mutilation in rural villages to technology-facilitated violence against women and girls in the wealthiest cities.

The 1993 UN World Conference on Human Rights marked the first time women's rights were explicitly recognized as human rights.

Thirty years ago, at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, leaders from 189 countries and over 30,000 activists came together to create the **Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action**, which became the most widely endorsed global agenda for girls' and women's rights.

UN Women point to achievements such as those in legal protection. [Before 1995, only 12 countries had legal sanctions against domestic violence.](#) Today, there are laws in place across 193 countries.⁴

Twenty years ago, Michaëlle Jean, was the third woman and first person of Afro-descent invested as our Governor General, Commander-in-Chief of Canada. In her bio, she writes that, "The struggle for women's rights was for me an incredible school, an opportunity to scrutinize intently our mindsets, the ways we are conditioned, our values, our policies, the failings of our institutions and society, and the civil society forces we must unite to sensitize, educate and bring about social change."⁵

Her subsequent work through the UN focused on the promise of youth and the power of women. Today, Jean is working through her Foundation with youth to bring about racial justice in Canada and beyond. She is one of the author's of the *Halifax Declaration — Manifesto for the Eradication of Racial Discrimination*, which was launched last year.⁶

Through the National Film Board site I recently streamed *Michaëlle Jean: A Woman of Purpose*. (I highly recommend it.) In it, she says, "We can't be sure of achieving victory in all the struggles of our lives. But what matters is that we try. The important thing is that we believe."⁷

This idea—that it is important to believe we can change the world for good — is why I keep coming back to our Unitarian Universalist faith. That we believe in justice, that together we will work for change; that these elements are woven into the fabric of our lives and our UU community.

Like racism and all the other toxins — we are raised and steeped in sexism. In our culture, saying colloquially thank Goddess instead of God or as I demonstrated, using "she" in place of the ubiquitous "he" is often denigrated as petty, or language policing. We must ensure gender equality in our stories, in our services, and to call out sexism in our institutions and in ourselves. And to do so is to work to fulfill our Eighth Principle which calls us to affirm and promote:

- Individual and communal action that accountably dismantles racism and systemic barriers to full inclusion in ourselves and our institutions.

I appreciate the non-theistic approach to our services and spiritual paths, here, in this place of worship with you all, and I equally cherish the times when we share songs and prayers invoking our Great Mother or when we say, unabashedly, Goddess. These words and actions reinforce our living tradition which is drawn from many sources including:

- Spiritual teachings of Earth-centred traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

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

I want to share with you now some astounding examples of gender equality actions:

This billboard is in Nairobi Kenya.⁸

IMAGE 1: End Period Shaming



Imagine if we wore this T-shirt into work during our period time. *Cramps or not, I'm going to work!*

IMAGE 2: Save A Clit T-shirt



Another great T-shirt--compliments of our friend Tanya Cothran.

Organizations like Pastoralist Child Foundation (PCF) are dedicated to ending Female Genital Mutilation in Kenya. They provide 4-day workshops for girls during school holidays in the months that are commonly called the "cutting season."⁹

And just as importantly—they are educating boys:

IMAGE 3: Gender Equality



And if you want to see bravery beyond brave, take a look at the documentary *Bread & Roses*¹⁰ that follows activists in protest against the Taliban. In August 2021 the Taliban returned to power and 20 million women lost their rights — they are banned from working, education, even speaking in public. Protesters are being forcibly disappeared, arrested and detained, and subjected to torture.

IMAGE 4: Bread & Roses



What can we do?

Sign the letter to End Gender Apartheid; Support grassroots and feminist organizations; use your voice for good to speak out, and from Mitzie Hunter — President & CEO of the Canadian Women's Foundation — **do not despair**. She says:

"We're in the midst of major national and global shifts that can make us feel powerless.

Do not despair. This isn't the first time we've navigated unprecedented, unthinkable, and unpredictable change."¹¹

The reading I shared earlier echoes this heartbeat.

Anna Akhmatova survived the Stalinist purges, choosing to stay and fight and write as witness to the events that directly impacted her and those around her.

from the last stanza of her poem, she wrote:

And the miraculous comes so close
to the ruined, dirty houses --
something not known to anyone at all,
but wild in our breast for centuries.

wild in our breast

the She in all of us wildly free and creative

wild in our breast forever connected to another connected with the Mother connected to the spirit in All.

May it be so. Blessed be.

Endnotes

1. *The Riddles of the Sphinx* Anna Shechtman p. 167
2. Challenging the Masculine Generic, Susan Knutson, York University
3. End Gender Apartheid <https://endgenderapartheid.today/>
4. [The Beijing Declaration at 30](#)
5. <https://www.michaellejean.ca/mj-fil-de-ma-vie-1>
6. <https://fmjf.ca/en/initiatives/halifax-declaration/>
7. https://www.nfb.ca/film/michaelle_jean_a_woman_of_purpose/
8. Photo by Catherine Lake, Nairobi, Kenya
9. <https://pastoralistchildfoundation.org/>
10. [Bread and Roses Official Trailer](#)
11. [Canadian Women Foundation Mitzie Hunter](#)