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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Kamloops
The Long Road Back: healing from sexualized violence
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Today I want to talk about healing from sexualized violence. Not your typical Sunday sermon fare. Yet, I think, as Unitarian Universalists we must talk openly and make room for thinking about the kinds of behaviours that cause physical, emotional, or spiritual distress or harm by one human being to another...lest we be hypocrites to those principles and values we espouse, calling us to affirm and promote inherent worth and dignity, to practice compassion, and to stand up for justice.

There are many words that refer to all the varying forms of sexualized violence: Rape, sexual assault, sexual coercion, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, sexual touching, sexual misconduct, sexual harassment, sexual offence, fondling, grabbing, stalking, flashing, cyber bullying, and so on. How each term is understood often depends on who's speaking them...the justice system, women's groups, the media, pop culture, or you and I in conversation over a latte.

But I think we can all appreciate how it feels when someone behaves in a way toward us with sexual overtones, whether blatant or subtle, when we are left feeling uncomfortable, or fearful, or hurt.

We may not even fully understand in the moment why the situation is uncomfortable.

I remember one day when I was seven or eight years old. As I was walking home from school, a car pulled up. The driver rolled his window down, asked me for directions to a street many blocks away. Earnestly, I tried to explain...go that way, until you see the park...turn left...then suddenly I noticed that the smiling man with the kind voice was busy playing with his penis as I spoke. I didn't know a lot about masturbation yet, but I knew that playing with your personal body parts in front of a stranger simply isn't right. Yet, I kept on giving directions, avoided looking at the man, I raced to finish giving the directions he'd asked for. Why? The power of adults over children. Years of being raised to defer to adults and to be polite always. My inability to believe that my world and town were anything but safe for me.

Perhaps the most complex and paradoxical aspect of being human is figuring out how to express our sexuality and sexual desires in vital and exciting ways, that are also respectful, safe, healthy, nurturing of others. No means no. Seems simple, right? Not always.

Not when there is power differential, for example between an adult and a child, or when alcohol or drugs or mental capacity limit judgment and ability to say "no".

The Canadian Women's Foundation website provides clear information about sexual violence in Canada...¹

- Women self-reported 553,000 sexual assaults in 2014, that's over ½ million women according to Statistics Canada's General Social Survey on Victimization.
- Women were 10 times more likely than men to be the victim of a police-reported sexual assault that year.
- Sexual assault is the only violent crime in Canada that is not declining.

Who is doing what to whom?

- half of all sexual offenders are married or in long term relationships
- 57% of aboriginal women have been sexually abused
- 1/5th of all sexual assaults involve a weapon of some sort
- 80% of assailants are friends and family of the victim
- Young Canadians are more likely to experience sexual assault. The rate of sexual assault for Canadians age 15 to 24 is 18 times higher than that of Canadians age 55 and older
- Girls are four times more likely than boys to be sexually abused by a family member
- Women with disabilities and those who are institutionalized, Aboriginal women, single women, and women who are unemployed or have low-incomes are at heightened risk of sexual assault.
- Disabled women experience sexual violence at about three times the rate of non-disabled women.
- Out of the total number of seniors who are sexually assaulted by a family member, 96% are women.

There are three levels of sexual assault in Canada:

Level one sexual assaults cause little or no physical injury

Level two sexual assaults involve a weapon, threat, or bodily harm

Level three sexual assaults involve physical wounds, disfigurement, or threaten the life of the survivor

While most sexual assaults fall into the level one category, any type of sexual assault can have long-term impacts on a survivor's psychological well-being. Many women who are sexually assaulted experience high rates of depression, anxiety disorders, sleep disorders, suicidal behaviours, self-harm, eating disorders, and substance abuse issues.

Women who have experienced sexual assault are more likely to attempt suicide.

¹
http://www.canadianwomen.org/sites/canadianwomen.org/files//Fact%20sheet_SexualAssaultHarassmentFormatted_18_08_2016.pdf

Sexual violence also has financial consequences for survivors. It's estimated that each year in Canada, the collective financial impact for women who experience sexual assault is \$3.4 billion in medical costs, lost productivity, and intangible costs like pain and suffering.

Only one party is responsible for sexually assaulting or harassing another person: the perpetrator. Holding a survivor accountable for the violence she experiences is called victim-blaming and it is not only unfair, it's also dangerous.

Victim-blaming leads many women to believe abuse is their fault and makes them less likely to come forward and report sexual offenses.

There is a myth that sexual assault is usually committed by strangers, but in about 80% of cases, the sexual assault survivor knows the offender.

There is research linking alcohol to sexual assault, but "the fact that alcohol consumption and sexual assault frequently co-occur does not demonstrate that alcohol causes sexual assault."

There is also a double standard: while alcohol consumption is sometimes used to excuse the abuser's behaviour, it is also often used as a reason to blame the victim for the abuse

Like other forms of violence against women, sexual assault is rooted in gender inequality. It's driven by the idea that the needs, feelings, or beliefs of one person/group are more correct or important than those of another person/group. Those who commit sexual assault perceive the victim as unequal. This creates a rationale for control, humiliation, intimidation and abuse.

The real trauma of assault and sexual violence are the scars we cannot see:

The woman afraid to go out in public...afraid to be in her own home in the dark.

The man who fears that his assailant will come back for more.

The teen who not only suffers rape, but who is then bullied with pictures and vicious comments on the internet.

The abused child who grows up unable to ever love fully or find sexual pleasure without re-triggering their trauma.

The real victim of sexual violence isn't the body, it is the spirit.

The body usually heals just fine. It is the spirit that carries the scars that are hardest to heal. Some survivors move on and simply ignore those scars as best they can. A few even turn them into strengths.

Many more simply cope as best they can, never really free of the fear. Some never recover.

Is there any one here who has never been hurt by another person? That's obviously a rhetorical question. All of us have been hurt sometime, by someone – and I think it's fair to guess that all of us have also caused other people pain.

We are who we are partly because of the negative experiences we have survived. I also know that many of us carry wounds from our childhood and adolescence that continue to play out in our lives today; some of us have walked a long road, and continue to struggle with events or situations from our past even though they happened many years ago.

At a dinner theatre event a couple of nights ago I played a saucy, flirtatious character called Chastity Darling...it's fun to play someone we are not...or perhaps someone we could be, but resist being, someone we once were, but left behind.

Here's the part of this homily I struggled to write.

For several years as a youth and young adult, I was highly promiscuous... accepting to have sex with individuals I didn't really know or even liked. While difficult to fathom now, in the moment, it seemed just the way things were. That part of my life became a source of embarrassment, shame and regret. It took many years of reflection and healing to see where this had come from. Raised to be kind, honest, and thoughtful, how on earth did a good little Catholic girl end up behaving so uncharacteristically?

A therapist helped me understand about trauma from childhood sexual abusive experiences. My, "complicated" early childhood relationship with a favourite uncle had been one of sexual abuse.

Uncle Pete was a relative who I trusted, who was kind and generous. I loved to spend time with him because he was so interesting and took me to neat places...but he was often sexually suggestive, made lewd comments in my presence, and touched me when and where I did not want to be touched. He did not "rape" me, or physically hurt me, or even threaten me. It still felt wrong, though I never talked to my mother about it. I wasn't even sure why I was uncomfortable... Having an attentive adult in my life, receiving small gifts, and going on fun outings helped to allay my loneliness and filled a void in parenting – my absent seafaring father, and mother who was bereft since the illness and death of my eldest sister years earlier, created a gap in my nurturing. It was filled by extended family and neighbours.

... even though my uncle's behaviour sometimes made me uncomfortable, my little girl self desperately needed a surrogate parent. So I remained silent and took the bad with the good.

For a long time, I thought that with enough introspection and enough therapy, I could reach a place where I no longer would feel that little girl's confusion and pain. – as the Dixie Chicks sang, time doesn't always heal everything.

The catalyst for changing my pattern of promiscuous behaviour was...an incident of sexual assault.

I was living and going to university in Montreal. One day, walking down the sidewalk, a heavy briefcase full of books in hand, I noticed a man coming in my direction. A small, weasely kind of guy...just walking in the opposite direction...except when he got close to me, suddenly he leaned in, and quickly grabbed my breast, squeezed, and took off like a shot. In that instant, everything changed. I snapped. I snapped into action, determined not to take any more abusive from men. I pivoted, turned and began to chase him! I ran five blocks, trailing him only because I was still lugging the damn briefcase full of books! Finally, I got close enough to swing my bag at him. It clipped him on the head. "ohhh" he cried in surprise. The action sent me off balance as he took off running again...and I knew I could not catch him...probably a good thing, given my anger. It no longer mattered. I had taken a stand...maybe 20 years too late...but I was never going to give my body to another without feeling deep affection for, and trust in another human.

Some of you may have stories of bullying and harassment in your past; you may carry histories that are much worse.

If we are representative of the nation as a whole, one in four of the women here today and one in six of the men were sexually abused as children. The effects of childhood and adolescent abuse and incest is lifelong –adults with these often histories suffer from high levels of depression and anxiety, post traumatic stress syndrome, reduced sexual desire, and problems with intimate relationships throughout adulthood.

In the book, *The Boy who Was Raised as a Dog and other stories from a child psychiatrist's notebook* (2006 Basic Books/Perseus Press), Dr. Bruce Perry describes case stories about traumatized children. Those fascinating accounts help readers to better understand the complex nature of trauma and how traumatized children inevitably struggle to function as adults in society, and in all their relationships. These cases also teach us about loss, love, and healing.

Sexual violence is one of many legacies of having our souls violated that some of us carry into adulthood. Many of us are survivors of families paralyzed by alcoholism and other addictions, by mental illness, by physical violence and abuse, by belittlement and criticism.

Most of us carry scars from not receiving the type of unconditional love and regard we needed and deserved as children. *Forgive sounds good*, as the Dixie Chicks said, but sometimes it is neither realistic nor possible. Sometimes we have to act. These histories – our stories – can paralyze us if we don't find ways to heal ourselves and our planet and move forward.

I read this quote online in a women's magazine blog. It said, "*What doesn't kill me, doesn't not make me stronger. It makes me anxious, bitchy, and vulnerable...but nobody wants to see that embroidered on a pillow.*"

There's an old Cherokee truth story: One evening a wise old grandmother was teaching her young grandchildren about the struggle that each person faces. "There are two wolves struggling inside each of us," the old woman said. "One wolf is vengefulness, anger, resentment, self pity and fear. The other wolf is compassion, faithfulness, hope, truth and love." The granddaughter sat thinking, and then asked, "Which wolf wins, grandmother?" Her grandmother replied, "The one you feed."

The one you feed. It's the choice we all have to make. It's at the root of whether we can heal from the certainty that you have been hurt by others, that you will be hurt again. It goes to the root of what kind of person you will be, how you will feel in the life you lead.

Naming the hurt and speaking it aloud is often the first step towards healing.

Speaking your truth out loud to others makes a difference – whether that's with a therapist or a minister or in a small peer group. Being a good listener, without judgment – reaching out and saying "I'm here to listen" -- is one of the most important gifts you can give your spouse, your partner, your children, your friends, each other.

As communities of liberal faith, Unitarian Universalists can take collective action. We can advocate to improve the social conditions that fuel sexual violence... poverty, inequities impacting women in the workplace... We can promote education about sexuality in our communities and share our stellar lifespan education curricula Our Whole Lives, bring OWL to as many church and secular groups as we can; we need to teach our children and grandchildren that sexual expression is a sacred and beautiful and special part of life that should be celebrated...while also raising children, males in particular, to be aware of their social power and status in relation to females. Our social justice work can focus on global initiatives to stop the practice of female genital mutilation, stem the tide of children and women trapped in the sexual slavery trade, or internet porn trade which exploits children and adults; there is much to change.

In Rwanda, between 100,000 and 250,000 women were raped during the three months of genocide in 1994. This is not an isolated reality: women and girls in other countries, such as Darfur and The Congo have been intentionally brutalized as a tactic of war.

For centuries, the subjugation of women has found traction in the misinterpretation of scripture and patriarchal church culture.

Former Starr King President, Rev. Rebecca Ann Parker writes in her book *Proverbs of Ashes* says "*theology that defines virtue as obedience to God suppresses the virtue of revolt...but obedience is not a virtue. It is an evasion of our responsibility. Religious must engage us in the exercise of our responsibilities, not teach us to deny the power that is ours...we need a God who delights in revolutionary disobedience and spirited protest.*"

We need courage to face those hurts and to move forward. I understand that the things I have been talking about are difficult to listen to – that your own memories of how you have been hurt may be very hard to sit with.

Anais Nin said, "*Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage.*"

And Retired Episcopal Bishop John Spong wrote, *“to have the courage to be ones self, to claim the ability to define one’s self, to live one’s life in freedom and with power is the essence of human experience.”*

It is indeed an act of courage to make the conscious decision to choose the wolf of compassion, faithfulness, forgiveness, hope, truth and love – instead of fear, anger, depression, and retaliation.

Some times it may seem impossible. And, that’s partly why we are here. We can’t do it alone. That’s why we need each other: to listen to our stories, to cry with and to laugh with each other, to celebrate each others joys and sorrows, to reach out a hand and offer to listen, to work on social justice projects together, whether here in Kamloops, or Darfur and the Congo, to know that there is a place we can go where we will be loved for just who we are. We need to know that there are people who will walk with us, walk with the little hurt children inside us, and be there with us as we explore our own journeys

The book of Ezekiel, the book of Isaiah, the book of Luke all talk about the need to “bind up the broken.” We are all the broken –and we all can be healers. Let us be gentle with the child within us. Let us be compassionate towards one another. Let us feel the strength we have within us and in this community to help us heal and bless our days. Let us sing to the power of love.