"Illusions and Delusions"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
September 30, 2018

When I planned for today's sermon to address "Illusions and Delusions" and to engage the question of *"how do we know what we see or do not see is the truth?",* I could not have known it would be against the backdrop of this week's events. Like many of you, I have attentively watched the news about the Senate hearing with its powerful testimony by Dr. Christine Blasey Ford and a forceful rebuttal by Judge Brett Kavanaugh. Last Sunday, I questioned whether or not to mention these events in this space—were they just too political, too partisan? While the process has undoubtedly become widely partisan, the underlying issues are moral—about dignity and equity. And so, today, I find that I cannot keep quiet.

It's not easy to find the words to name the pain that I am certain resides just below the surface in many women—and some men—in this room. Statistically, one in six women and one in thirty-three men have experienced rape or attempted rape.[i] For many, the news has triggered flashes of memory and emotion.

By week's end, I realized that my focus and attention had been dialing in and out of the present and the past. While I have never suffered rape, I have lived in fear. I have been threatened and restrained as I used my wits and my body to be free again. I have feigned sleep when I knew a man had tried to get me drunk in order to take advantage of me. I have been groped and shrugged it off as yet another 'stupid guy.' I have been whistled at by strangers. I have walked through parking lots with my keys between my fingers and looking over my shoulder. I have been silenced or talked over in classrooms and meetings. I have learned to live as a woman in a society still deeply shaped by patriarchy.

Most of the time, the fear and the injustices hum quietly as background noise. And then, there are weeks like this when no matter of emails, to-dos, and distractions can din the roar of anger and pain that surges forth. It is not only what I hear from my own experiences. It is not only the testimony of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford. It is the roar of fear and pain in women all around us—on the tv, on social media, and in quiet corners face-to-face. Do you hear it?

And yet, Brett Kavanaugh and his public supporters angrily deny the accusations with their own ferocity. "Where is the proof?" they ask while denouncing the allegations as character assassination. On the one hand, I am chilled by this idea—that Kavanaugh could be innocent and facing a cruel sabotage of his character. Indeed, as a leader, I have faced my own critics who attribute motivations to me that have disparaged my character in painful ways. I can imagine how easily a coordinated attack, especially by powerful people, could inflict horrific damage. If I believed this to be happening to me, I too would be strongly inclined to fiercely defend myself. On the other hand, with the reverberations of Dr.

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Blasey's testimony still in the room, the possibility that Kavanaugh is deliberately lying, or in some way unable to remember, also feels likely. And, the research on memory suggests that what may have been encoded as trauma for her may have been lost in the haze of alcohol and/or everyday "horseplay" for him.[ii]

How do we know what we see or do not see is the truth?

In naming these issues, my intention is not to attack men. I live daily in a household of men with my partner of 15 years, my young adult son (who is 21 tomorrow!), and my young adult stepson. In much of my life, boys and men have been some of my closest friends—beginning with my two beloved brothers. For all of my life, I have loved men and been loved by men. For me, this is not about men.

This is about power and patriarchy. This is about the privilege of race and wealth. This is about a millennial old delusion of the inferiority of women.

My doctorate is in Religion, Gender, and Culture. I serve on the board of *Feminist Studies in Religion* and as co-chair of the Women and Religion Steering Committee for the American Academy of Religion. Which is to say, I'm very well-educated in women's history and feminist theory. In serving as a minister, these credentials usually hover in the background. Today I name them in order to lean into the fullness of who I am and to say that I speak not only from personal experience, but also from a level of expertise.

Which, remarkably, is what Dr. Christine Blasey Ford did in her testimony—weaving together personal memory with academic knowledge. She knew the scientific facts of how traumatic memory is encoded as well as her own painful recollections.

And, I know my own experience of discrimination, harassment, and abuse by men. And, I know that we live in a society deeply shaped by patriarchal assumptions that intersect with privileges of race, class, and sexual orientation. It is no accident that a white man of economic privilege is so easily supported by a network predominated by white men with power.

Patriarchy assumes that 'male' equals human and that women are derivatives, second-tier. Patriarchy is the organization of power to prioritize the choices and perspectives of male-identified persons. It is not the denial of women's presence. It is the refusal of their equality.

In fighting against patriarchal systems, feminists have demanded equal treatment for women in the law, in the workplace, and in relationships. They have demanded protections against injustice and assault as well as for the right of women to self-determine their finances, their health, and their lives.

And yet, for women of color who experienced sexism in movements for racial justice and racism in movements for gender justice, focus on singular issues was never enough. From

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their critiques and analyses, theories that explored the intersections of social status emerged. Coalitions of activists on various issues organized. Such a proliferation of more nuanced and complex understandings of the varied experiences of women was necessary. Being a white, straight woman with some money do not experience the same kind of oppression as that of a black, gay, immigrant woman without documentation or income. This kind of intersectional analysis keeps us from a too simplistic picture. It enables a nuanced understanding of how power and privilege function in a given situation.

In other words, there are multiple ways that we are taught to see who matters more than another person. Men more than women. Able-bodied over the disabled. White more than black or brown or Asian. Straight over gay. Cis-gender more than transgender. The wealthy more than the poor.

When we proclaim, as Unitarian Universalists, the inherent worth and dignity of every person, we resist this unequal way of seeing people. When we promote and affirm justice and equity in human relations, we denounce these hierarchal assessments of who matters most.

And this all sounds great written up in seven neat principles or in a mission statement that states our intention to make a better world by promoting social justice. But, gosh, isn't it so messy and heartbreaking when it means listening to hours of testimony by a woman and a man each claiming to be 100% certain of their story. The flood of perspectives threatens to cloud over any access to the truth.

How do we know what we see or do not see is the truth?

Can we know the facts?

In a recent book, *Factfulness*, public health doctor Hans Rosling makes his case for a fact-based way of seeing the world. In his book and in his public speaking, he begins with a quiz. He asks things like:

> In the last 20 years, the proportion of the world population living in extreme poverty has:
>
> a) almost doubled.
> b) remained more or less the same.
> c) almost halved.

In answering this question, people score lower than chimpanzees. In other words, people do worse than chance guesses and actively choose the wrong answer. For example, in the U.S., only 5% of people choose the correct answer that extreme poverty has almost halved in the last 20 years.

Why do people get it so wrong?!? Rosling gives ten reasons why in his book. From outdated knowledge to fear and blame, he shows how our instincts too often steer us in the wrong

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direction. For example, in discussing what he calls the 'negativity instinct' to perceive more bad than good in the world, he lays out multiple ways that the world is not getting worse but *better*. And yet, he also strongly cautions that seeing how things are getting better does *not* mean that we dismiss the ways in which problems remain. He writes,

> Everything is not fine. . . . People often call me an optimist, because I show them the enormous progress they didn't know about. … I'm not an optimist. … I'm a very serious "possibilitist." … As a possibilitist, I see all this progress, and it fills me with the conviction and hope that further progress is possible. This is not optimistic. It is having a clear and reasonable idea about how things are. It is having a worldview that is constructive and useful.[iii]

Everything is NOT fine. The news cycle will continue to focus on Judge Kavanaugh and the accusations of sexual assault in the coming week. The system of patriarchy will continue to flex its power in an effort to protect the word of men over the word of women. Many women will feel rage now as they did with Anita Hill that speaking out makes them a target of hate rather than a respected source of pertinent information to judge the character of a man.

AND, according to statistics posted by RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network), sexual assault has fallen more than half since 1993. It has fallen from a rate of 4.3 assaults per 1,000 people in 1993, to 1.6 per 1000 in 2015. Let me be clear—this rate should be zero. We continue to have a problem with sexual assault in this country. AND, it has become better. If we take a cue from Dr. Rosling, these facts can help us cultivate a "possibilitist" approach. There ARE things that can be done to make the world safer and more equitable.

We can believe women who say they have been assaulted. Studies show false reports are rare.[iv]

We can teach consent to young women and young men—as we do in our OWL comprehensive sexuality programs.

We can teach bystander programs that challenge people to engage when they see risky or wrong behavior.

We can make it known that is ok to speak out by visibly showing our awareness of the problem of violence against women and our commitment to supporting survivors. As a congregation, we will be doing this on October 9 when we host a Community Vigil and March as well as light our Meetinghouse purple in a coalition of other religious and civic organizations.

And, we can resist the delusions and illusions that try to tell us that some lives are worth more than others. We can commit to better learning how oppressions intersect and how we may harbor our own racial, gender, ableist, or other biases.

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Yes, everything is not all right. In many ways, the sky feels very cloudy with a lot of uncertainty and storms. We can feel blinded by doubt about the possibility of change and by the fear that nothing will ever get better. And maybe it won't this time. Maybe we never all agree on the facts of what did or did not happen that summer night in 1982. Maybe the Senate gets it wrong. Maybe some survivors of sexual assault continue to remain silent or are not believed when they speak up.

AND—maybe the sexual assault rate continues to drop. Maybe more survivors DO speak up and assailants ARE prosecuted. Maybe more men see women as equals and more women believe to their bones that they are just as worthy of respect and dignity as any man. Maybe we can all learn to see injustice more clearly—whether we are oppressed by injustice or participants in ongoing patterns and practices of injustice.

In a moment, the choir will sing, "I can see clearly now." This was also planned weeks ago. I had imagined this to be a joyful way to end our month on the theme of 'vision'. And, I wondered if it would still fit today. Then I looked again at the lyrics—the clear sky does not take away the obstacles in his way; it enables him to see what lies ahead. Or, as Dr. Rosling might say, it gives him "a clear and reasonable idea about how things are." And so, may this song be one of defiant hope that invites us to imagine the possibilities of tomorrow.

May the sun of moral clarity shine upon us.
May the conviction of equality among persons be our blue sky.
And may our vision of justice enable us to move clearly through the obstacles ahead.

So may it be.
Amen.

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[i] https://www.rainn.org/statistics/scope-problem, accessed September 29, 2018. RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network) is the nation's largest anti-sexual violence organization. The primary data source they use for statistics is the **National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)**, which is an annual study conducted by the Justice Department.

[ii] Todd Essig, "The Kavanaugh Hearing Is Not 'He Said, She Said.' It's 'She Remembers What He Did, He Doesn't'," *Forbes*, September 25, 2018. https://www.forbes.com/sites/toddessig/2018/09/25/the-kavanaugh-hearing-is-not-he-said-she-said-its-she-remembers-what-he-did-he-doesnt/#78e066fd5a09. Accessed September 28, 2018.

[iii] Hans Rosling with Ola Rosling and Anna Rosling Rönnlund, *Factfulness: Ten Reasons We're Wrong About the World—and Why Things are Better Than You Think*, (New York: Flat Iron Press, 2018), p.69.

[iv] Studies show false reports are rare—2%-10% of reported rape accusations—and false accusations even more rarely lead to a conviction or even a formal accusation. And while actual rape victims have no typical

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pattern, false accusers are typically teenage girls lying to their parents or adults with a history of bizarre behavior. Sandra Newman, "What Kind of Person Makes False Rape Accusations," *Quartz*, May 11, 2017. https://qz.com/980766/the-truth-about-false-rape-accusations/amp/?__twitter_impression=true. Accessed September 26, 2018.

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