

## DECEMBER 6, 2017: WOMEN'S MONUMENT

This is a difficult day, and it comes after several difficult weeks. The trial of Basil Borutski, the verdicts and now the sentencing, have forced back into the front of our minds and souls the murders of three women whose names are etched into the monument: Anastasia Kuzyk, Nathalia Warmerdam and Carol Culletin. Not that their names have ever been far from our minds since September 22, 2015, but these past few weeks have not been easy for those who knew and loved them and for those of us who came to know them after their deaths.

December 6<sup>th</sup> is a National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women in Canada. It has been 28 years since Marc Lepine gunned down 14 women at L'Ecole Polytechnique, an event that catapulted the hidden reality of violence against women into news headlines across the country and around the world.

As each year passes, I struggle with the best way to commemorate this day without it becoming a rote activity. How do we keep meaning in a commemoration based on a date that has such personal meaning for so many of us but that is just another day in history for so many others? (Most of the students now attending the universities and colleges that led much of the initial December 6<sup>th</sup> activism were not born in 1989.)

How can we keep December 6<sup>th</sup> and everything it stands for real and important?

Have we actually accomplished anything of substance in the struggle to end the misogyny and racism that create the framework within which violence against women thrives?

Ending misogyny often feels like a Sisyphusian task: no sooner do we get that rock close to the top of the hill than it starts to roll back down again, knocking us out of its way as it goes. It can seem as though every positive achievement is followed by a backlash of equal or greater significance. And, sometimes it is hard to know whether what first appears to be positive is a step forward or a step backwards.

Do we see the women's equality provisions in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* as a step forward when those provisions have yet to transform women's daily lives?

What are we to make of the recent media frenzy about the behaviour of high-profile men in the entertainment industry ranging from sexual harassment to sexual predation when so many women are still not safe to speak out about the sexual violence they have been subjected to because the men who have sexually molested, abused and assaulted them are their uncles, their bosses in small workplaces, their patients in hospitals where they work, guests in hotel rooms they are cleaning, coaches of their school sports team, leaders in their religious communities and will never make a headline news story?

Do the provisions in Ontario's Sexual Violence and Harassment Action Plan (SVHAP) intended to address sexual violence on university and college campuses matter if there is no accountability to see that they are properly implemented?

Does the legal requirement that courts consider family violence in custody and access cases mean anything if lawyers and judges are not educated to understand what family violence really means?

Do apologies by the Prime Minister for past wrongs against Indigenous peoples and the LGBTQ2 communities have meaning if government policy changes and hard cold cash don't follow?

Will the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (NIMMWG) really make a difference?

There are reasons to doubt the effectiveness of any of these actions. However, that doubt should not become an excuse not to act. Without action, there is no possibility of change.

While the *Charter* may not yet have transformed women's daily lives, it has created a structural framework that makes that transformation possible.

The Harvey Weinstein phenomenon opens the door to discussions about male power that need to happen; discussions that were started in this country as a result of Jian Ghomeshi's abuse of women and that have led to some positive outcomes.

While the SVHAP has not ended sexual violence on university and college campuses, it has empowered students to become engaged in forging solutions.

Changes to family law alone will not keep women and children who flee abuse safer, but they can lead to the education that is needed for those who implement and interpret those laws.

The NIMMWG has forced all of us to pay attention to both historic and ongoing racism that frame much of the violence to which Indigenous women and girls have been subjected.

I heard a really interesting phrase the other day when an Indigenous woman was speaking about the history of colonization and the ways in which it shaped the violence and abuse that she, like so many Indigenous woman, has been subjected to both within and beyond her community. She talked about having anticipatory grief – just knowing something bad or the news about something bad was coming her way.

Anticipatory grief. Yes, exactly the right word to describe how I feel every year as December 6<sup>th</sup> approaches. But also anticipatory rage. Grief at the ongoing violence to

which women everywhere in the world are subjected. Rage at how little we have been able to change that reality.

Both matter and both can be positive. So, as we stand here today, in this beautiful and peaceful spot, let us first take the time to grieve, as we remember the women we know and the women we don't know whose lives have been affected by male violence.

Then, let us hold onto our rage as we leave here, because that rage can empower us to take action to end the violence that surrounds us.