

Opening of New Space for Women's Sexual Assault Centre of Renfrew County

We are here today to celebrate this wonderful new space for the Women's Sexual Assault Centre of Renfrew County. This house has been here since 1889, so it brings more than 100 years of history to this next chapter of its story.

1889 – Women in Canada did not yet have the vote federally, although this was the year the Dominion Women's Enfranchisement Association was established, which led to women getting the vote in 1919. Of course it took until 1929 for women to be declared persons and until 1960 for Aboriginal peoples to be permitted to vote in federal elections, but the year this house was built was an important year in women's suffrage. Maybe one of its first inhabitants was a suffragette!

It was almost 100 years after this house was built that the first rape crisis centres in Canada were beginning to open in 1973. And, now in 2014, more than 30 community based centres and 35 hospital based centres support and advocate for women and girls who have experienced sexual violence and work to raise public awareness about violence against women.

Our services are needed as much as ever. Even as public awareness grows, the rate of sexualized violence experienced by women grows and changes.

The 1889 inhabitants of this house could not possibly have imagined the ways in which the development of technological

communication would have changed the ways in which women could experience violence. Indeed, I could not have imagined it.

I mean, who could have imagined:

- Sexting?
- Online sexual harassment of girls and women?
- Posting nude photos of women celebrities?
- Men thinking it is funny to grab women's bums and post the pictures on You Tube and Facebook?
- Online sexual assault – posting images of women being sexually assaulted on Facebook?

Yes, here we are in 2014, almost 2015, and women are still silenced and disbelieved when we tell our stories of sexual violence.

I recently read an excellent article in Harper's Magazine by Rebecca Solnit, in which she talks about the silencing of women. Here is some of what she has to say:

“Not uncommonly, when a woman says something that impugns a man, particularly a powerful one, . . . or an institution, especially if it has to do with sex, the response will be to question not just the facts of her assertion but her capacity to speak and her right to do so. Generations of women have been told they are delusional, confused, manipulative, malicious, conspiratorial, congenitally dishonest, often all at once.”

She goes on to describe sexual assault as being “an attack on a victim’s right to bodily integrity, to self-determination and – expression. It’s annihilatory, silencing.”

And then she describes silence as having three concentric circles, each of which reinforces the other.

“First come the internal inhibitions, self-doubts, repressions, confusions and shame that make it difficult to impossible to speak, along with the fear of being punished or ostracized for doing so. . . . Surrounding this circle are the forces who attempt to silence someone who speaks up anyway, whether by humiliating or bullying or outright violence, including violence unto death. Finally, in the outermost ring, when the story has been told and the speaker has not been silenced directly, tale and teller are discredited.”

As Judith Hermann (Trauma and Recovery) says: “Secrecy and silence are the perpetrator’s first line of defense. If secrecy fails, the perpetrator attacks the credibility of his victim. If he cannot silence her absolutely, he tries to make sure that no one listens After each atrocity one can expect to hear the same predictable apologies: It never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it on herself; and in any case it is time to forget the past and move on. The more powerful the perpetrator the greater is his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more completely his arguments prevail.”

Let’s just take a minute to think about a story exploding across Canada this week – the allegations of sexual violence being made

against one of the country's most popular radio hosts, Jian Ghomeshi. We can see just what both Rebecca Solnit and Judith Hermann have written playing out, can't we?

As Heather Mallick wrote in the Toronto Star: “[This incident] has revealed the huge spiked meal barriers women still face – even now in times we call modern – when they speak out about the hideous things that have been done to them. . . . When it comes to redress for suffering a sexual assault, Canadian women might as well be in Saudi Arabia. We whisper quietly among friends and quietly trade stories or we shut up for our entire careers. The barriers start with institutional sexism and pile on with the almost impossible burden of proof for acts committed in private, the adulation offered to well-paid and well-connected men When you read the violence, mockery and hate handed out to the unnamed women online who were already too scared to call the police, you might think feminism had never been invented.”

Or, as a fellow musician and friend of Jian Ghomeshi, Owen Palette, put it: “At no point here will I ever give my friend Jian’s version of the truth more credence than the version of the truth offered up by three women. Anonymity does not mean these women do not exist. . . . Let’s be clear. Whether the court decides that predatory men are punished or exonerated does not silence the voices of the victims. It does not make victims liars. Whether our culture continues to celebrate the works of predatory men is another issue. It does not silence the voices of the victims.”

This is one of the reasons we have sexual assault centres – to overcome the silencing of women; to support those women who want to speak out as well as those women who remain silent; to challenge those who try to silence women; to speak out ourselves about sexual violence of women at systemic levels.

You know, at times, the task seems monumental.

When I read about Tshirts at Carleton University, where there has been a hard-fought battle to have sexual assault on campus taken seriously, that say “Fuck Safe Space” with “Or Me” on the back, I wonder if we have made any progress at all.

But then I read that the Chancellor of Ottawa U has cancelled the men’s competitive hockey program because of a culture of sexualized violence and has instituted a task force to look at sexual violence on that campus, and I feel more positive.

When I watch the media try to blame Jayney Palmer for being beaten unconscious by her then fiancé Ray Rice, I despair.

But then when I read Margaret Wente and Leah McLaren, Globe and Mail columnists not prone to feminist opinions, write powerfully about why women remain with abusive men and why they should not be blamed or judged for doing so, I feel hope.

When I see that the Miss America pageant is still alive and well in 2014, with women being awarded prizes and scholarships based largely on their appearance, I rage.

But then when I listen to the new Miss America declare, in the part of the competition where each woman has to talk about the cause they will promote if they win, that she is a survivor of dating violence and wants to make domestic violence her issue, I smile.

When I see the many ways in which the internet continues to objectify and sexualize women, I worry about the future of my 4 grandsons.

But then I see a YouTube video by a young man (17 years old) insisting that YouTubers hold one another accountable for online sexual assault, and I think maybe it will be okay.

When I hear the backlash to Emma Watson's powerful call to boys and men to join with girls and women in working for women's equality – backlash that called her every offensive misogynist name you can think of – I wonder what on earth we have all come to.

But then, I remember the final words of her speech. Emma Watson, hero to so many of my grandsons' generation for her role as Hermione in the Harry Potter films, said, to those who are hesitant to join in the fight for women's equality: "If not me, who? And if not now, when?" and I am inspired.

When I see a federal government that again and again denies the reality of women's inequality in this country, cuts funding to women's equality research and advocacy organizations, refuses to establish an Inquiry into murdered and missing Aboriginal

women – well, maybe I should stop there or I will be up here talking all night – I am angry beyond what words can express.

But then, when I hear the leaders of the other two main parties talk with passion about their commitment to women’s rights; when one of those leaders goes so far as to say members of his caucus will be required to vote pro-choice regardless of their personal beliefs, then I can move beyond that anger.

Let me close by returning once again to the past: In 1941, just over 50 years after this house was built, Wonder Woman debuted. The press release announcing her arrival on the scene of super heroes said, in part: “Wonder Woman was conceived to set up a standard among children and young people of strong, free, courageous womanhood; to combat the idea that women are inferior to men, and to inspire girls to self-confidence and professions monopolized by men because the only hope for civilization is the greater freedom, development and equality of women in all fields of human activity.”

We may not have exactly achieved the goal so ambitiously set out by the creators of Wonder Woman all those years ago, which is why we need sexual assault centres, women’s shelters, women’s advocacy organizations, and a government that is committed to women’s equality.

And we all need to ask ourselves, as Emma Watson encouraged:

“If not me, who? And if not now, when?”