

Period Piece

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

Rev. Rodrigo Emilio Solano-Quesnel

29 May, 2022



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Last November, I spoke about one of the lesser-known international observances: World Toilet Day. And we explored how, even though that day of observance may seem to have a somewhat comical undertone, it deals with serious issues of access to sanitation as a matter of public health, a factor in public safety, an exercise in social equity, and a recognition of personal dignity.

I shared at the time how, as a kid, I had been too embarrassed to ask my dad about how toilets worked or how they were invented... even though he had always been willing to explain to me the stories of invention – and the mechanics behind – things like Velcro, dynamite, and the telegraph. And one could argue that sanitation and plumbing technologies have been just as – or even more – impactful advances for society as those other inventions.

Yesterday, May 28 was a similar lesser-known international observance: Menstrual Hygiene Day.

Now, waste sanitation and menstrual hygiene are not quite the same thing, which is why international health organisations feature these matters separately. These two topics do, however, share some important overlaps. Both deal with matters that are often taboo and are therefore not spoken about as often as other important subjects of social concern. And... speaking about them is precisely the kind of life-saving practice that we could do with doing more of.

And matters of menstrual hygiene also impact public health and safety, as well as social equity and personal dignity.

Now, in many ways, I'm not the best person to be talking about this subject. As a person who doesn't menstruate – never have and don't ever expect to – I have very limited capacity to speak about this *experience* with any authority. Many of you will already have a much deeper understanding about that experience than I ever will, so I'll do my best to avoid saying things that might already be painfully obvious to what is likely a majority of you. And to be clear, I'm not looking to give specific health lessons or a how-to guide on hygiene – I'm rather looking to invite deeper exploration on the *meaning* of some of the conversations we'd do well to have more of.

Because, in some other ways, I may be *precisely* the kind of person who needs to speak about this subject *more*, insofar as I can be a collaborator and an ally in raising greater awareness about the importance of this conversation – especially for other folks who do not share in the experience of menstruation, and who might, therefore, not immediately share the same level of investment in that matter, as the people who have more direct experience with it.

Now, you might have noticed that I've been using the phrase “people – or persons – who menstruate”, rather than saying “women”. And that is because we recognize that not all people who menstruate identify as women. There are people with other gender identities who are in this category, so we honour that. Conversely, there are women who do not, have not, or no longer menstruate, including trans women.

That's not to say that there isn't a largely gendered dimension to menstrual hygiene – it's simply worth being mindful of who we are including in this conversation.

Also, my use of the word “menstruation” so often from the pulpit today, might have some of you on edge, and I admit that I feel some

awkwardness about doing so myself. It's OK to notice this discomfort, as that is a step toward confronting that discomfort.

As it happens, it was through interactions with toilets that I was first exposed to some of the realities of menstruation. As a child, I remember visiting a household bathroom and finding that... something hadn't quite fully flushed. Seeing red, I burst out of the bathroom wondering if something was seriously the matter with one of the family members that had previously used the bathroom. And that is how I was first offered some calm explanations of what I had seen, and that it was entirely normal. This happened more than once during my childhood, and I remember that it was useful for me to hear the explanation a few times to truly get the sense that this really was normal. I should note that it was often the adult women in my childhood that took on this educational task.

As an adult, and as a non-menstruating person, I continue to be grateful when I'm invited into this kind of conversation by the people who do. It can sometimes feel awkward – I get a sense that I need to take off my shoes, as I tread on holy ground – I remind myself that I need to use caution in what I say, and more importantly, how I listen to these experiences, and offer support when I can and am asked to do so.

I have found it quite affirming that, where I live, many people who menstruate are indeed comfortable – or at least, comfortable enough – with speaking openly about that experience. I am also mindful, that we are less likely to hear from the people who continue to feel uncomfortable about the matter due to shame or embarrassment, which is why I look be among the people who model bringing this up from time to time – when appropriate – because I see the importance for everyone in the general population to develop some sense of comfort in discussing menstrual hygiene and awareness about its related issues.

Failing to do so can lead to our larger society making uninformed decisions that affect a specific set of people... decisions that may be made by people who might not feel affected by those decisions.

Lately, there has been a resurgence of debate around reproductive choice. And some of this debate sometimes reveals a lack of understanding about the lived experience of menstruation, and about what its related timelines can mean in matters of pregnancy. I won't go too much into that discussion today, as this can be quite an involved conversation in itself – only to say that public policy about sexual and reproductive health requires accurate understandings about biological processes that some of us may be less familiar with, including menstrual hygiene.

Beyond the health and social implications, there are the economic and environmental dimensions. Over the past few days, I've run into a few news articles about the economics of menstruation in Canada, perhaps precisely because Menstrual Hygiene Day is in the calendar.

A major theme that I've seen in this reporting is that a number of government entities have been paying more attention to the issue that has been labeled *period poverty*, stemming from the additional costs of menstrual hygiene products, that some people find difficult to afford. Public measures have been in different stages of implementation, from reducing or removing sales taxes on menstrual hygiene products, to subsidizing their cost, or even offering these for free, in some instances.

Awareness drives change. Awareness demolishes barriers to inclusion.

There is also a growing industry around new menstrual hygiene products that aim to reduce economic and environmental impacts, by being reusable, from menstrual cups, to reusable pads, to washable period underwear, and even period swimsuits. I can't speak directly to the efficacy of these products, but I have heard and read reviews that many of these can be surprisingly effective and often preferable to the more traditional products. The main aim for these has been to expand

comfort and choice, as well as sustainability and affordability in the long run.

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There has also been a movement around expanding paid leave to cover days when the experience of menstruation may make attending work difficult. There is some controversy around this, which I don't feel qualified to comment about responsibly, but the fact that this discussion is happening tells me that a drive to reduce stigma and economic barriers is taking a greater foothold.

Awareness drives change. Awareness demolishes barriers to inclusion.

Indeed, removing systemic barriers to inclusion is a major reason why this conversation, uncomfortable as it may sometimes be, is important for us to be part in, including by those of us who do not menstruate.

One roommate of mine had a practice of laying out a basket of disposable menstrual hygiene products on the tank of the toilet in our shared bathroom. She didn't use these particular products, but wanted to ensure that any guests who might need them would have minimal barriers to access them. And even if our guests ended up not needing them at all, her practice also bore witness to intentional inclusion – effectively telling our guests: “you are welcome here, no matter your experience”.

I must have internalized part of this lesson from that roommate, because every once in a while, when I'm looking through my backpack or satchel, I still run into spare menstrual hygiene products that I packed at some point, just in case someone around me was in need of them. I don't know that I'll ever be asked, but it looks like I might just be prepared to respond if I am.

My friends, awareness drives change, and awareness demolishes barriers to inclusion.

My friends, awkwardness and discomfort in difficult conversations is normal. Identifying and confronting this discomfort, is a step in reducing it.

My friends, in this community, these conversations have a place.

So may it be,
Taking of our shoes, in the spirit of inclusion,
Amen

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Suggested Hymns:

Opening Hymn #360 Here We Have Gathered

~)-| Words: Alicia S. Carpenter, 1930- , © 1979 Alicia S. Carpenter

Music: Genevan psalter, 1543

OLD 124TH 10.10.10.10.10.

Hymn #57 All Beautiful the March of Days

~)-| Words: Frances Whitmarsh Wile, 1878-1939

Music: English melody, arr. by Ralph Vaughan Williams, 1872-1958

used by perm. of Oxford University Press

FOREST GREEN C.M.D.

Closing Hymn #108 My Life Flows On in Endless Song

Words: Traditional, Verse 3 by Doris Plenn

Music: Robert Lowry, 1826-1899

SINGING 8.7.8.7.D Iambic