Fools rush in where Angels fear to tread. *Alexander Pope*

Last Friday evening Concordia University hosted the Reader's Digest Lecture: Breaking the silence 25 years after École Polytechnique. Accomplished journalist and film maker Francine Pelletier began the event with a short chronology of the progress that has been made in the feminist movement. She spoke with passion and authority. Twenty-five years ago she was on Marc Lepine’s hit list – a list of Quebec feminists who dared to advance the cause of women. Then Sue Montgomery, veteran journalist and brave co-initiator of #beenrapedneverreported moderated a question and answer session.

The audience was predominately female. The fact that men were present was mentioned and applauded. However, during the question and answer time a handful of jabs were taken at middle-aged, white males. In fact, when the moderator – a middle-aged white male - decided it was time to wind the evening down it was playfully pointed out that here it was again, “a middle-aged, white male taking control of an event.” It was only when he pointed out that he was a middle-aged, white, *gay* man that he was let off the hook!

From the audience there was an attack on the #notallmen feed that was launched as an outlet to break down a growing stereotype that generalizes deviant male behavior. The young woman asked, “So you never raped a woman. What do you want? A cookie?” Ouch.

There was some conversation about [Jian Ghomeshi](https://www.google.ca/search?q=jian%20ghomeshi&start=0&spell=1) and Bill Cosby. Both have been accused of abusing multiple women. Rather than being angry with these two suspects, the feeling in the room was more one of relief; relief that finally there will be a well-publicized court case that has the potential of exposing an epidemic of misogyny that has been incubating for years.

There are many strong, positive female role models. Beyonce, Oprah, Elizabeth May, Emma Watson and Hillary Clinton were all mentioned during the presentation. It made me wonder if there were any men who could be called strong feminists.

As one of the middle-aged, white males in the audience I did not feel particularly maligned. However, I did get a sense that I was perceived as part of the problem and not as a potential ally in the quest for a solution. Therefore it is with trepidation that I offer these four reflections that I had after the event:

- Forums and dialogues such as these are critical to the feminist movement. In an auditorium filled to capacity with intelligent people and being addressed by very accomplished, powerful individuals filled me with hope that change is possible. It will be through these kinds of events, where ideas are shared and proposals are tested, that minds will be altered and a kinder and more just society will emerge.

- Feminist must stop alienating men who desperately want to see this next wave of feminism succeed. In the past, men have been marginalized and told that this was a woman’s issue. However, at the root of the problem is men – men who abuse, men who hold onto power, men whose examples have been misogynistic men. Men can have an incredible impact on the lives of other men – for good and for bad. Now it is time for feminists to enlist and empower like-minded men, who have the conviction to be righteous, to assist them.

- We must ban hate-speech in the lyrics of songs that are being sold as truth to our young people. We are permitting a handful of money-rich but morally bankrupt miscreants influence the way our young people think through the pounding repetition of misogynistic rhymes. As a high school teacher, it makes me sad and angry to watch beautiful young girls say cruel things about themselves and each other – calling themselves bitches and hoes as they repeat lyrics from the latest rap-disaster. In doing so they lower the bar on what they expect from themselves and the abuse they willingly accept from others.

- Finally it is critical that we develop academic programs that are designed to teach gender equality and that we weave them into our school curriculum starting at the beginning of elementary school. The Ministry of Education of Quebec is starting to review how sex education is being or is not being taught in our schools. Now is the time to insist on content that is designed to promote communication and cooperation. We must incorporate into the lessons a positive and correct view of the concept of power. Students should learn how to use their power as a constructive force. Also, something must be done to encourage more men to pursue careers in elementary school education. This would have an even greater impact on our children when gender equality and power sharing is being taught.

During the evening’s question and answer segment, the topic of ‘solutions’ was raised. It was quite stunning to hear Francine Pelletier pause for a moment and make one the greatest contributions to the discussion. She said, “Solution? I guess the answer is love!” Imagine the impact on our society and on our children’s lives if we would endeavor to dispel fear and overcome hatred by modeling, teaching and promoting love? It sounds like a dream, but as Reverend Tutu once said, “I'm not optimistic, no. I'm quite different. I'm hopeful. I am a prisoner of hope.”

James Watts