

The International Day of the Girl; A Zoom gathering sponsored by Senator Kim Pate

October 8, 2021-10-09

Greetings to all of you out there in Zoom space who are joining with Senator Pate and some of her fellow senators and former senators like me to celebrate the 2021 International Day of the Girl. Sen. Pate has asked me to say a few words about this year's theme which is, as I understand it, Gender Equality in the Digital Universe. This is not a topic about which I have any real expertise. I recognise that this digital universe is all around me but like many of my friends, who are also past ninety, I am floundering in it, needing the help of my granddaughters and others much younger than myself to navigate it. Unlike most of you young people who are natives I am an immigrant with all that that implies of awkwardness and discomfort. The men of my age are even clumsier so perhaps there is already some redressing of inequality there!

Of course I am all for gender equality among girls and boys or better still gender equity which implies that girls should have the same opportunity to thrive in this new universe as boys. I am also aware that currently they don't, at least not in those parts of the world that are suffering most from armed conflict, climate change and Covid. Here in Canada digital access is almost universal for people of all ages and even I have a computer and a hand held device. I can send and receive messages, I can seek and find information and I can keep in touch with family and friends. But I am very careful with what I share on the Internet. When I was a young girl the technology for social contact was more or less limited to the telephone. No sooner did my girlfriends and I part at school than we rushed home to pick up the phone to continue our gossip. The only person put out was my father because sometimes he couldn't get through to say that he was going to be late for supper! But this technology was limited to hearing one another's voices. No images could be exchanged via those old dial phones nor was there a "reply all" button to push! Now we live in a completely different world of communication facilitated by tools that broadcast everything about you including your location, your likes and dislikes and even what you look like. It seems that in the digital universe there is nowhere to hide and yet very few of us today, even among the elderly, would choose to live outside of it.

That being said the challenge for all you young girls at home in this universe is how to make sure that the digital environment is a positive rather than a dangerous space to be in, how to take advantage of all that it has to offer rather than be victimized by it, how to swim in a sea of new possibilities rather than be eaten by the sharks that are there and all the while becoming, just possibly, a little more adept at manoeuvring than your brothers! For there can be no doubt that the dangers there are real for anyone who is vulnerable and, after all, who isn't? I have been watching with dismay the rise of on-line bullying, sex-trafficking and the proliferation on various platforms of false information about everything from body image to vaccines. The isolation imposed by the pandemic has only amplified the

disembodiment of human contact by transforming it into pixels. We can't actually smell, taste or touch our friends and our opportunities to learn how to read the nuances of body language have been curtailed. I am happy to see your faces on Zoom but I would really like to see the rest of you, too, when we talk. I know that in-person connections will be re-established once the pandemic is over and that we will be hugging one another with abandon but the digital universe will continue to draw us in. So, in line with the theme of this year's International Day of the Girl, your task as young women is to determine that the instruments you use to access the digital universe are your servants and not your masters. And I use the term "masters" advisedly because it seems that the vast number of manipulators associated with social media are male. This was made clear by the Facebook whistleblower when she testified last week to the US Congress that the male owners of the platforms it sponsors were more interested in profit than they were in the mental well-being of the girls who were being lured into problematic chat rooms. I'm not sure I actually understand this but it seems that certain kinds of racy discussions attract more advertisers and so have been promoted by Facebook!

But enough about the dangers of the Internet! What I am learning from my own granddaughters and from other girls and young women I know is that the social media is enabling them to form and nurture friendships in ways that would have been impossible when I was sixteen. So let me end with a positive story about the digital universe, one that I hope will inspire you because it is about how a young girl has been able to take hold of social media not only to her own benefit but to the benefit of us all. A recent interview with Greta Thunberg in the Guardian Weekly reminds us that it was the social media that turned the image of a lonely, unhappy, frightened fifteen year old girl sitting on the steps of the Swedish Parliament protesting the failures of the powers-that-be to confront the climate crisis into a world-wide movement able to hold world leaders to account. And along the way, Greta says in this interview, she, who had never had friends before, has been able to make friends and that now, at 18 and in spite of fires and floods and hurricanes she is actually much happier and more hopeful about the future because she has genuine friends who are prepared to travel with her into it and help her to make things happen. This is very empowering and a really important message. However far ahead of girls boys may be in mastering the mechanics of the digital universe there is one thing that girls have shown themselves to be better at than boys, making and maintaining friendships. As I look back over my long life I recognize that nothing I have ever accomplished of real significance has been done without a little help from my friends and that most of those friends have been female. So I would like to reframe the theme of this International Day of the Girl. Rather than focusing on gender equality in the digital universe, let's talk, optimistically, about gender inclusion as all of us are in this together!

Hon. Landon Pearson O.C.

