

NEVERTHELESS, WE PERSIST

Richard S. Gilbert – First Universalist Church, Rochester, NY – January 21, 2018

The scene: the well of the United States Senate. The issue: the nomination of Senator Jeff Sessions for Attorney General. The characters: Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell and Senator Elizabeth Warren. Speaking against the nomination, Warren tried to quote Coretta Scott King, who wrote in opposition to a previous nomination of Sessions as a federal district court judge because he intimidated black voters. McConnell told Warren to sit down, but she would not. “Nevertheless, she persisted,” McConnell scolded, in words that continue to resonate.

I have pondered those words. I take them, not as an insult, but as a mandate. Persistence, as a religious value, has been eclipsed in our instant gratification culture. Amidst wide-spread discouragement in the public square, persistence ought to be explored as a spiritual necessity – especially by activists who may be impatient to bring in the Beloved Community - tomorrow. As I reflected, three persistent people in American history came to mind, and I wondered what we might learn from this prophetic trinity.

The scene: the 28th Congregational Society in Boston, 1850: The issue: slavery and abolitionism. The characters: Theodore Parker (1810-1850), Charles Sumner and Daniel Webster (*In absentia*).

“Fellow subjects of Virginia,” Parker said mockingly. “Yes, we are the vassals of Virginia. She reaches her arm over the graves of our mothers, and kidnaps men in the city of the Puritans; over the graves of Samuel Adams and John Hancock. Shame!”

Parker spent much of his ministry opposing slavery with his prophetic voice. Keeping a pistol in his pulpit to protest the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, he lit into that giant of New England, Daniel Webster, and his false notion that the "purpose of government is to protect property." He also challenged one of his members, abolitionist Senator Charles Sumner to greater effort.

Parker was a Unitarian preacher who persisted in applying his faith to public issues. In his "Sermon on Merchants" he vigorously attacked the greed about him, naming chapter and verse. A precursor of the women's rights movement, he often began his prayers with "O Thou who art our Father and our Mother...." In an essay he continued: "If woman had been consulted, it seems to me theology would have been in a vastly better state than it is now. I do not think that any woman would ever have preached the damnation of babies newborn; and "hell, paved with the skulls of infants" would be a region yet to be discovered...."

Parker formed a Vigilante Committee to help runaway slaves, harboring many in his home. He denounced slavery unequivocally from the pulpit - the only Boston preacher at that time who would do so. For his theological and social radicalism he was tried as a heretic by his fellow Unitarian ministers of Boston, who would not exchange pulpits with him. He knew and supported John Brown.

A thorough-going “peacenik,” Parker denounced the Mexican War as "an excessive lust for land;" it was quite simply unchristian. But slavery - that was another matter. The preacher of peace became the man militant. The Fugitive Slave Act challenged Parker as both man and moralist. Ellen and William Craft were slaves who had escaped from Georgia and come to Boston, becoming Parker's friends and parishioners. He considered himself minister-at-large to all fugitive slaves. And so who should speak to the community against those who would take the Crafts back to the South? Parker's name was mentioned, but one man said that was no business of the clergy. Ever-ready to do battle, Parker responded: "Gentlemen, you can assign me to no duty I will not perform."

And perform he did from pulpit and platform. The Committee hid the Crafts and then with Parker went directly to the hotel which housed the men from the South and drove them from town. Not content to let the

matter rest, Parker triumphantly performed a legal wedding ceremony for the Crafts on what was called Nigger Hill in Boston.

During a religious revival at Park Street Church in Boston, March 6th, 1858, the following prayer was uttered against Theodore Parker: "Lord, we know that we cannot argue him down, and the more we say against him, the more will the people flock after him, and the more will they love and revere him. O Lord, put a hook in his jaw so that he may not be able to speak. O Lord, what shall be done for Boston if thou dost not take this and some other matters in hand."

Indicted by a grand jury for his radical abolitionism he eagerly went to trial. Alas, before he had his chance to spellbind judge and jury with his defense, the indictments were quashed on insufficient evidence. The Attorney General said to him as they were leaving court: "You have crawled out of a very small hole this time, Mr. Parker." Parker replied: "I will make a larger hole next time, Mr. Hallet." He published his defense anyway.

Theodore Parker was relentless, his sermons and lectures being augmented by his cryptic placards denouncing slavery from a hundred walls. He thundered against it, defying President Franklin Pierce, of whom he said, "With his election any man was in danger of becoming President now."

It was Parker who first used the phrase "bending the moral arc of the universe," which was resurrected by Martin Luther King, Jr., among others. A spinner of phrases, he kept a faithful correspondence with a young lawyer named William Herndon of Illinois on political questions. Parker sent him two sermons on democracy which contained the words: "Democracy is direct self-government, over all the people, for all the people, by all the people." Herndon thought it a good definition; he would pass it along to his senior law partner, who might be interested. Indeed he was. His name was Abraham Lincoln.

Sent by his church on what turned out to be a life-ending therapeutic cruise (he had tuberculosis), he wrote a long letter to his beloved congregation:

"So I have not only preached on the private virtues, which are and ought to be the most constant theme of all pulpits, but likewise on the public virtues that are also indispensable to the general welfare I have preached many political sermons No doubt I have often wounded the feelings of many of you. Pardon me, my friends! If I live long I doubt not that I shall do so again and again. You never made me your minister to flatter, or merely to please, but to instruct and serve." Parker died at 50 and was buried in Florence, Italy. Nevertheless, through his short life, he persisted.

The scene: the federal court house in Canandaigua, New York, June 19, 1873. The issue: a woman's right to vote. The characters: Susan B. Anthony and Judge Ward Hunt. She and several of her friends had voted in the 1872 presidential election. She was arrested, brought to trial – not a jury trial, but a bench trial - presided over by Judge Ward Hunt, who pronounced her guilty.

Judge Hunt: "Has the prisoner anything to say why sentence shall not be pronounced?"

Susan B. Anthony: "Your honor, I have many things to say, for in your ordered verdict of guilty, you have trampled underfoot every vital principal of our government: my natural rights, my civil rights, my political rights, my judicial rights, are all alike ignored.

Hunt: "I protest, Miss....."

Anthony: "May it please Your Honor, I am not arguing the question but simply stating the reasons why sentence cannot in justice be pronounced against me. Your denial of my citizen's right to vote is a denial of my right of

consent as one of the governed, the denial of my right of representation as one of the taxed, the denial of right to trial by a jury of my peers.”

Hunt: “The court cannot allow the prisoner to go on.”

Anthony: “I am not here only for myself, but for all women everywhere.”

Hunt: “The court must insist....”

Anthony: “I have been tried by the forms of law all made by men, interpreted by men, administered by men, in favor of men, against women.”

Hunt: “The court orders the prisoner to sit down...”

Anthony: “Your honor, I shall never pay a dollar of your unjust penalty. All I possess is a debt of ten thousand dollars incurred by my newspaper, *The Revolution*, which is solely to educate women to do precisely as I have done, to rebel against your man-made, unjust, unconstitutional forms of law that tax, fine, imprison, and hang women while they deny them the right of representation in government.”

She never paid the fine. The rest is history.

We are about to celebrate the 198th birthday of Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906). In preparation for writing a book, *No Consorting with Angels: The Religious Life of Susan B. Anthony*, I have read Ida Husted Harper’s monumental three-volume biography of Anthony and marveled at Anthony’s sheer tenacity over decades of time and worlds of space. Born a Quaker, she died a Unitarian, having attended First Unitarian Church in Rochester since 1850, signing the membership book January 1, 1893. What amazed me was her persistence in traveling the length and breadth of the land for woman’s suffrage under the most harrowing of conditions – natural and human – from freezing, foul weather to the jeering of arrogant men and scorn of skeptical women.

While she was a Unitarian, Anthony worked with Universalists as well: with Olympia Brown, first woman minister ordained by a denomination; and Clara Barton, with whom she formed the second Red Cross chapter in the nation at Rochester in 1881. Late in her career she addressed a Universalist convention in Rochester. After her usual plea for woman’s suffrage, she noted that there were no other women speakers on the platform: “I resent this from the bottom of my heart, and I demand of you to practice what you preach - universalism!” Nevertheless she persisted.

The scene: Brown’s Chapel, Selma, Alabama, March 1965. The issue: Voting rights for black citizens. The characters: Martin Luther King, Jr. and Richard S. Gilbert.

I had interrupted my graduate studies at the University of Chicago Divinity School to join hundreds of others to pay tribute to my martyred colleague, the Rev. James Reeb. King gave the eulogy.

That event is etched in my memory. Surrounded by burley Alabama state troopers; embraced by the black people of Selma who wanted nothing more than the right to vote; accompanied by nuns in their habits, priests in their collars, farmers in their overalls and many more, we marched to the courthouse after that service. When I returned home I told Joyce that I wanted to leave my studies and return to the parish ministry *where the action was* – which I did - five years in Ithaca, 32 in Rochester and here I am, still in pursuit of the Beloved Community of which King spoke.

Three years ago I revisited Selma; I stood and sang civil rights songs in the very place where Martin Luther King had brushed by me on his way to the pulpit.

Who can forget his “I Have a Dream” speech at the Lincoln Memorial? I certainly can’t. Joyce and I were there on August 28, 1963, with Howard, a black friend who was uneasy riding in a car across state lines with a white woman. We were there far away along the reflecting pool – King’s words coming to us more over the radio than the loud speakers which carried his immortal words.

A few years ago I preached in the Cortland Universalist Church from the pulpit where King had addressed the 1956 meeting of the New York State Convention of Universalists on non-violence.

King was much more radical than he is now portrayed. Activist Cornell West warned against the “Santa Clausification” of King. Last week I found those formal pronouncements from political leaders, including our president, to be gross hypocrisy. Donald Trump’s reprehensible words and racist actions belie King’s legacy and neutralize his radicalism. King once said: “Call it democracy, or call it democratic socialism, but there must be a better distribution of wealth within this country for all God’s children.” In 1967 I cheered his sermon against the Vietnam War in New York’s Riverside Church despite warnings from critics inside and outside the civil rights movement.

And who can forget his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail?” King admonished the moderate white clergy who thought he had gone too far in his campaign of non-violent resistance. “I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate.... We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.”

And who is not moved to tears at listening to his speech to the Memphis sanitation workers on the eve of his death: “I have been to the mountain top and I have seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but we, as a people will get to the promised land.”

He persisted. Even now his spirit persists despite everything assayed against it.

Three persistent prophets of the human spirit. What did they have in common? They persisted – not over weeks and months, but over years and decades – and lifetimes. Justice was not an extra-curricular activity. They did not quit when they were tired or experienced defeat – and every one of them had been smitten many times by failure.

The takeaway is that their times were as perilous as ours – they resisted the principalities and powers of their day; ultimately their causes prevailed after their lifetimes – slavery was abolished, women gained the right to vote and white supremacy was dealt a staggering, if not yet fatal blow. And each of them was motivated by core religious values. One of my friends has on his email home page a cartoon of a demonstration with the placard reading “Every time we don’t show up, they win.”

The scene: First Universalist Church, Rochester, NY, January 21, 2018: the issue: Making America Just. The characters: I am standing here; you are sitting there.

Our task is not to await a Parker or an Anthony or a King. And Oprah will not save us, either. We must save ourselves. Our democracy is in peril – behold the government of the oldest democracy on earth is shut down. If it dies, it will die, not with a bang, but with a whimper. There is no cosmic guarantee it will survive the current onslaughts.

Last night I viewed *The Post*, a powerful defense of First Amendment rights. While it was compelling theater, it neglected to mention the courageous role of Unitarian Universalist President Robert West as our Beacon Press published a two-volume version of the historic *Pentagon Papers*. At the same time it made me all too mindful of our present predicament. Our president is a clear and present danger to nation and

world. I worry not so much about his physical or mental health as his moral fitness. Nevertheless, my universalism mandates he be included in my compassion – but it is a real test.

And so I suggest that we join together in “the ministry of showing up.” Heaven knows - I know - we cannot show up for everything, every time. In the months after the 2016 election many of us “showed up” at countless rallies and protests – some of us were there yesterday at the women’s march – and there will be more. But there are many ways for people of faith to “show up.” Not all of us are able to participate physically. And so we “show up” by keeping ourselves informed on the issues – local, state, nation, world - and then taking action. This is what democracy looks like: people talking with their neighbors, serving at soup kitchens and homeless shelters, financial supporting activist groups, writing letters, licking envelopes, placing stamps, signing petitions, visiting their representatives- and remember - November 5, we can vote.

We need to find our particular niche; our specific mission; our unique contribution to justice building. Mine is primarily working with Interfaith Impact of New York State. This congregation provides ample opportunity for all of us to find our “sweet spot.”

As I reflect on my 8 decades of life, 6 decades as a religious activist, I well remember the many moments of discouragement and defeat. I have “retired” from active parish ministry, but I have not “retired” from the public square. I am always called back by the “still, small voice” of my religious heritage. There is a perspective here that as Maya Angelou put it: “No one can make it out here alone.” There is a perspective here that reminds us that the Beloved Community will not be realized in our lifetime. There is a perspective here that reminds me that social justice is the work of a lifetime. The road to justice is not a 100-yard-dash, but a marathon. Our ethic requires a long horizon.

We worship in a city with a proud history of social justice activism including two whose birthdays we will soon celebrate: Susan B. Anthony, February 15, 1820; and Frederick Douglas, February 20, 1818. We are both the inheritors and the bearers of that proud tradition.

Back to my original scene: While we are a non-partisan faith, we cannot ignore a prophetic word when we hear it. Recently, Elizabeth Warren spoke at a biennial convention of Reform Judaism in Boston. Her words are our mandate: “Our power is not a battery that is drained with use; it is like a muscle that gets stronger the more we use it.” Nevertheless, we persist. We must persist.

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MEDITATION: FOR ALL THAT IS GOOD IN THE WORLD

For all that is good in the world we make thanksgiving.
For the beauty of the earth, we sing praises.
For the joy of human companionship we say Amen.
For the abundance of creation we give gratitude.
For the blessings of being we are grateful.
In the serenity of this hour and the sanctity of this space,
We gaze upon life, not with rose-colored glasses,
But with a heart-felt appreciation of all that is good.
While the world surrounding us seems in the grip of evil,
We remember the good which graces our every day.
When greed and avarice seem to rule humanity,
We recall the generosity of others.
Where pessimism about our predicament holds sway,
We conjure up an image of possibility.
It is no false confidence that we seek here,

For we know and experience quiet courage everywhere.
It is no naive optimism we would exhibit,
For we experience the devotion of those fired by hope.
In the quietude of this holy hour,
We remind ourselves of all the good in the world,
And are glad.

READING: BEATITUDES FOR JUSTICE BUILDERS (excerpts) - Lindi Ramsden

Blessed are you who can question your own assumptions and listen with an open mind;
you will receive new insights beyond your imagining.
Blessed are you who suffer the attacks of others to stand up for what is right;
you are not alone, for your courage will inspire others to rise.
Blessed are you who build friendships as well as justice;
you will strengthen the foundation of your community.
Blessed are you who do not demonize your opponents;
your eyes will be open.
Blessed are you who work in coalition rather than in principled isolation;
you will be effective.
Blessed are you who will not let the perfect be the enemy of the good;
you will see progress in your lifetime.
Blessed are you who take delight in people;
you will not be bored in meetings.
Blessed are you who play as well as work;
you will generate enthusiasm and draw the powers of the impish to your cause.
Blessed are you with an active spiritual life;
you will find perspective in times of loss
and will rise without cynicism to meet the challenges of a new day.
Blessed are you who live from a place of gratitude;
you will know the meaning of Life.

CLOSING WORDS: WE WITNESS, WE SPEAK, WE ACT -- Robert R. Smith

We witness, we speak, we act. May our witness be faithful to the world of which we are only a part. May our words be honest that our children may hear them without shame. may our acts be loving, remembering that justice transcends legality, that love transcends justice, and that love is the meaning men and women have given to a speck of dust in the vastness of space.

ORDER OF SERVICE

Prelude

Words of Welcome and Welcoming Each Other

Announcements

Call to Worship and Lighting of the Chalice

Opening Hymn *Singing the Living Tradition* # 298 "Wake Now My Senses"

Affirmation of Faith

Doxology and Offertory

Story

Song *Singing the Living Tradition* # 389 "Gathered Here"

Musical Interlude

Sharing of Joys and Sorrows

Pastoral Prayer and Silent Meditation

Hymn of Meditation *Singing the Journey* # 1010 “We Give Thanks”

Reading “Beatitudes For Justice Builders” Lindi Ramsden

Centering Music

Sermon “Nevertheless – We Persist”

Closing Hymn *Singing the Journey* # 1030 “Siyahamba” (In Zulu And in English)

Benediction

Postlude