

Persist in Writing the Future Rev. Tracey Robinson-Harris March 19, 2017

Reading A Valley Like This by William Stafford

Sometimes you look at an empty valley like this,
and suddenly the air is filled with snow.
That is the way the whole world happened—
there was nothing, and then...

But maybe some time you will look out and even
the mountains are gone, the world become nothing
again. What can a person do to help
bring back the world?

We have to watch it and then look at each other.
Together we hold it close and carefully
save it, like a bubble that can disappear
if we don't watch out.

Please think about this as you go on. Breathe on the world.
Hold out your hands to it. When mornings and evenings
roll along, watch how they open and close, how they
invite you to the long party that your life is.

Reading from "Old Friends" by Katy June-Friesen

This is an excerpt of a letter written by Susan B. Anthony to her friend Elizabeth Cady Stanton in 1902 on the occasion of Elizabeth's 87th birthday.

It is fifty-one years since we first met, and we have been busy through every one of them, stirring up the world to recognize the rights of women. We little dreamed when we began this contest, optimistic with the hope and buoyancy of youth, that half a century later we would be compelled to leave the finish of the battle to another generation of women. But our hearts are filled with joy to know that they enter upon this task equipped with a college education, with business experience, with the fully admitted right to speak in public—all of which were denied to women fifty years ago. They have practically one point to gain—the suffrage; we had all. And we, dear old friend, shall move on the next sphere of existence—higher and larger, we cannot fail to believe, and one where women will not be placed in an inferior position, but will be welcomed on a plane of perfect intellectual and spiritual equality.

Prayer by Lisa Friedman

Spirit of Live and Love,
We live in a fragmented world that would tempt us to despair.

We would put it back together, piece by piece, if it were ours to choose.
 But sometimes the fragments are enough.
 In a world of cruelty, there is still power in every act of kindness.
 In a time of doubt, there is still power in every act of hope.
 In an age of division, there is still power in every act of unity.
 May we remember that sometimes the fragments of meaning we make
 are just the right size to hold in our hands.

Sermon Persist in Writing the Future

I begin with a worry and a word.

Here's the worry. One of the stated purposes of the current U.S. Administration is, as its Chief Strategist puts it, to deconstruct the administrative state. The strategies for accomplishing this are many, including the dismantling of agencies, departments and programs that – for all their shortcomings – can help us move toward becoming that more perfect union. The budget proposal overview released by the Administration this past week proposes significant increases in military spending and significant cuts to “domestic programs” including meals on wheels for elders and school meal programs for children. On the way to deconstruction harm is being done, and will continue to be done to human beings, to the planet. This harm is collateral damage. Collateral damage. Every week. Sometimes every day. Every time. Harm.

Some who resist have the gift of focus – on a particular community, on an issue, on a strategy. Others who resist – and I am one – try to focus on keeping everything and everyone from harm. It often feels like a game of “whack a mole.” Do you know that arcade game? A cabinet with holes out of which mechanical moles emerge. The goal is to hit the mole with a mallet forcing it back into the hole. The faster moles are forced back into their holes the higher the player's score. Whack the pipeline permit. Whack the defunding of Planned Parenthood. Whack the immigration ban, refugee ban, Muslim ban. Whack the denial of health care. Whack the loss of Meals on Wheels. Whack the gutting of the school nutrition programs. It is exhausting. I worry about the harm and the exhaustion.

Enough for now. Here's the word. I love this word. Persisterhood.

“It is 51 years since we first met and we have been through every one of them stirring up the world to recognize the rights of women.” For 51 years Susan B. Anthony (a member of the Unitarian Church in Rochester NY) and Elizabeth Cady Stanton were a persisterhood of two in a persisterhood focused on women's rights. In 1848 the Seneca Falls Women's Rights Convention. In 1854 an address to the New York State Legislature on voting rights. In 1860 another address to the New York State Legislature on married women's property rights. Then on to the American Anti-Slavery Society to address suffrage for black and for white women. And then on the defense of divorce before the National Women's Rights Convention. There was the 1867 tour of Kansas supporting women's suffrage. In 1874 it was Michigan. And from 1869-1890 Stanton served as President and Anthony as chief strategist for the National Women Suffrage Association. Despite disagreements – at times over strategy and especially over the

priority to be given to the role of religion in the oppression of women - they persisted. With each other and with justice for women. When Elizabeth died in October 1902, Susan was asked, "What period of your lives gave you the greatest pleasure?" She answered, "When we were digging together. When she forged the thunderbolts and I fired them."

They persisted through ups and downs. Over the years. Even especially trying years. Like 1898. The American Federation of Labor heard a resolution calling on Congress to remove women from government jobs. (It was voted down.) The Chicago and Northwestern Railroad adopted a policy of promoting from within. To avoid having women in management many female employees were fired. The University of Chicago commission studying Chicago's public school claimed pay raises won by the teacher's union were unearned; that men should be paid more than women because they showed "superior physical endurance." 1898. The Spanish American War. United States annexation of Hawaii. Jim Crow. Two years earlier the Supreme Court had declared separate was equal. Pardon the repetition of the metaphor – but talk about whack a mole for justice!

That same year, 1898, Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote, "The suffrage question is practically conceded. With full suffrage in four states, municipal suffrage in another, and school suffrage (right to vote in school board elections) in half the states in the union. . . the opposition with their flimsy protests and platitudes are wandering in fields where long ago harvests were gathered. . ." It would be another 22 years before the 19th amendment to the US Constitution passed giving women the right to vote. August 1920. The suffrage question is conceded. Neither Elizabeth nor Susan lived long enough to cast a ballot. Neither their deaths nor that victory ended the struggle for the vote.

The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo ended the Spanish American War and guaranteed citizenship to Mexicans living in the newly acquired US territories. Mexican Americans did not win the right to vote until 1975. The 1922 Supreme Court case of *Takao v. United States* upheld the 1790 Naturalization Act barring Asian-Americans from becoming citizens. Finally, in 1952 the McCarran-Walter Act gave them that right. Native Americans gained citizenship and the right to vote with the 1924 Indian Citizenship Act. 32 years later, Utah became the last state to grant them that right. Every struggle for full humanity matters for all such struggles.

What can a person do to help bring back the world? We have to watch it and then look at each other. Together we hold it close and carefully save it. . . .

This past week, Guardian journalist Rebecca Solnit wrote about hope and results in the work of justice. "Hope," she said, "navigates a way forward between the false certainties of optimism and pessimism and the complacency or passivity that goes with both. . . Hope (reminds us) the future is unpredictable, that we don't actually know what will happen but we know we may be able to write it ourselves." And about results: it is dangerous to believe the results of our efforts will take only one of two paths: either immediacy or non-existence.

If Susan and Elizabeth had only those two options, non-existence would have won. Their hope convinced them otherwise, that results have more than two paths. There is a third

way, a third way because resisters “know what they do. . . know why they do what they do, but. . . don’t (always) know what what they do does.” (Michel Foucault) What we do is build momentum. What we do is create collateral benefit. Not collateral damage. Collateral benefit. Again the words of Rebecca Solnit: “For many groups, movements, uprisings there are spinoffs, domino effects, chain reactions, new models and examples and templates and toolboxes that emerge from experiments, and every round of activism is an experiment whose results can be applied to other situations. To be hopeful, we need to not only to embrace uncertainty but to be willing to know that consequences may be immeasurable, may still be unfolding, maybe indirect.” Think of Suffragists, of Gandhi and King, of Moral Mondays and William Barber. Think of the 1970’s anti-nuclear movement, the Abalone Alliance, Joanna Macy. Think of ACT UP, of Occupy, of John Lewis, of Standing Rock. Momentum. Collateral benefit.

Resistance is a long game in which “myriad small incremental actions matter. Even when the consequences aren’t immediate or obvious.” In the persisterhood we make it possible for those around us and those who come after us to resist. As an elder woman of Occupy Wall Street said early on in that movement, “we’re fighting for a society in which everyone is important.” Everyone.

One last thing. Some thirty years ago I preached a very different sermon about Susan and Elizabeth. . . when there were few women in our ministry. After that service, a member of the church named Dave told me he had a gift for me. After a few minutes he reappeared and gave me this book: a copy of Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s autobiography *Eighty Years and More* signed by Elizabeth and given to his grandmother at the Woman Suffrage Bazaar held at Madison Square Garden December 3, 1900. Some persisterhood tools remind us how long resistance must last. By the Stanton/Anthony calendar. . . I’ve got at least two more decades to go! “To know history is. . . to see beyond the present, to remember the past gives you capacity to look forward as well.”

Sources:

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5. In Her Own Right The Life of Elizabeth Cady Stanton by Elisabeth Griffith, Oxford University Press, 1984