

We Persisted

Sermon by Audette Fulbright
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All Souls Church, New York City

On Feb. 7, 2017, during the confirmation hearing for Jefferson Beauregard Sessions on his nomination to become Attorney General, Elizabeth Warren took to the floor of the Senate, as many of her colleagues had before her. There, she attempted to read into the record a letter Coretta Scott King had written in 1986 on the subject of Sessions' suitability for the federal bench. In it, King had noted forcefully that Sessions' legacy as a U.S. Attorney made him unsuitable for federal office - an argument that was persuasive to legislators in '86.

While attempting to read the letter again into the record in 2017, Elizabeth Warren was censured and banned from speaking again on Sessions' nomination. As Mitch McConnell silenced her, he made feminist history when he proclaimed: "She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted," - a turn of phrase which was immediately adopted by women and the movement which has come to be known as The Resistance.

A year to the day later, this past Wednesday, on Feb. 7, House Minority leader Nancy Pelosi, with no prior warning or media fanfare, took to the floor of the House to utilize an obscure legislative "one minute" speaking rule, and then proceeded to make history by holding the floor for more than eight straight hours, reading aloud story after story of the Dreamers - those immigrants brought to the United States as children, who have registered with the government, proved they have committed no crimes, and are working, going to school, or serving in the military. They have jobs and families and lives that have been thrown into turmoil since the current administration decided to end the program that protected them. Pelosi spoke to plead with Speaker Ryan and her Republican colleagues to allow a floor vote on legislation to protect the Dreamers. For over eight hours, she persisted. And she did it in four inch heels.

From time to time, just to make sure I don't lose sight of that great mystery of Spirit, a nudge arrives. Earlier this week, Rachel Rosenthal, our Communications Director, emailed me to ask if the title of my sermon was still "We Persisted." Months ago, I had chosen this title for this particular Sunday, having no awareness it would fall on the Sunday anniversary of Warren's censorship and before Pelosi made her own mark on history through an act of persistence. And yet, here we are.

In social psychology, there is a phenomenon called "the fundamental attributional error." I consider awareness of, and attention to, this phenomenon one of the most essential elements of a mature spiritual life. The fundamental attributional error points out that, in assessing our own errors, mistakes, or poor behavior, we attribute it to external factors, whereas we attribute others' poor behavior to their essential personhood. A classic example is being cut off in traffic. If I cut you off in traffic, I explain it is because I am late for work, or my child was crying and so I was distracted, or because you were in my blind spot - whereas if you cut me off in traffic, it's because you're just a selfish jerk.

Extending the benefit of the doubt, understanding that there might be more to the story than we know, believing that we are fundamentally good people even when we make bad choices - this is the bedrock of both our Unitarian and Universalist faith. In our modern iteration, it is enshrined in our first Principle, whereby we trust in the "inherent worth and dignity of every person." Early Unitarian and Universalist preacher Thomas Starr King put it succinctly in the 1800s

when he said, “Universalists believe that God is too good to damn people, and Unitarians believe people are too good for God to damn.” In 1805, Universalist preacher Hosea Ballou shocked the Christian world and transformed our faith with his “Treatise on Atonement,” in which he argued that Jesus’ life and death was not the story of a God offering an inherently sinful people salvation through a divine sacrifice, rather it was the story of a God who infinitely loved humankind, but that it was we humans who felt unworthy, unable to trust in that fathomless love which so far exceeds our own, and so God was willing to go to any length at all to show that love. Throughout the long history of our faith, we have persisted in believing that we are born into goodness and wholeness and connection to a Love that will never abandon us. And like so many generations of humans before us, it is our spiritual work to remain faithful to that original blessing, to live in such a way as to remain constant to our inherent worth and dignity.

Yet we’re not immune to those other great spiritual dilemmas. For example, we see the evil that humans are capable of. It is morally questionable to blithely assert that a Pol Pot or Assad or Stalin have inherent worth and dignity. The grotesqueries of human malfeasance are clear evidence that while we are born into the original blessing of inherent worth and dignity, we can also cast these aside. We can betray that worth, and abandon that essential dignity. It is our choice, again and again.

Last week, Galen spoke beautifully on the fundamentals of our faith. He said that we can’t avoid the past, we can’t escape the future, and we can’t go it alone. Another formulation of these core spiritual ideas is that we all come from the same Source, we all share a common Destiny, and we can’t get there on our own. Being largely realists who persist in believing that we create heaven or hell right here on earth, we Unitarian Universalists believe it’s that last part that matters most day to day: we can’t get there on our own. We need one another to help us live deeply into our own worthiness, to stay true to our human dignity. When Elizabeth Warren tried to share Coretta Scott King’s words on the floor of the House, both women were doing this work: trying to steer us clear of furthering systems of oppression, naming where a particular individual had fallen short of honoring the worth and dignity of others, and in the process, had done things which may have betrayed his own worth and dignity. Similarly, Nancy Pelosi spoke to try to illuminate the worth and dignity of those who live in this country without permanent legal status.

In any kind of justice work, we are, of course, trying to create a better world and the conditions, which allow all of us our live more fully lives of dignity. Yet too often we pursue that work while falling into the fundamental attributional error - assuming that the people who believe or act differently from ourselves, perhaps even pursuing ends that we perceive as morally wrong - are themselves bad. In our fast-paced world, with our incredible brains that are wired to work using shortcuts and labelling, it is very easy to leap from “I disagree” to “you’re a bad or stupid person.” When we’ve done that, we’ve betrayed our own Unitarian Universalist faith, and forgotten our fundamental understandings. This is why we need church; why we need the spiritual practice of showing up here together to help us persist in slowing down and living our faith more fully, remembering to extend to others the same understanding that we extend to ourselves: the understanding that we are all much more than any single act can express.

And, we need others to call us back to our own goodness when we may have strayed. The core tenant of Universalism is that we all can be saved. In this lifetime, what that means is that none of us is beyond the possibility of change. Ask anyone who works closely in prisons. With enough internal fortitude and external support, even people who have committed the most horrendous harms can change, can reclaim their original blessing and manifest their inherent worth and dignity.

When you add up all of the elements in this faith-filled equation, it looks like this:

Our practice of faith asks us to begin, wherever possible, by assuming the essential goodness of others and ourselves. Our work in this lifetime is to stay true to our birthright, our inherent worth and dignity, and to strive to create a world in which all can do so, freely. This means confronting the powers and principalities of the world when they are unjust, naming them and working to change them without disregarding the fully humanity of the people who both make up and are victimized by systems of oppression. We must persist in remembering, even in the darkest of times, that we come from Love, our destiny is to return to Love, and we can only get there together. I love the way our contemporary UU Christian Fellowship puts it: *we're here to love the hell out of this world - and each other.*

From age to age, through the most difficult times in our corporate and personal histories, we have persisted - with the help of our faith, remembering our own deep goodness, and by holding each others' hands. And so my prayer for you today is that you will go from here, reminded that you are a blessing just by being here, and renewed for the work of loving the hell out of this world.

Amen.