

# *Women I Admire Most*

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Last spring, just before the annual meeting, I experimented with a "question box sermon"--an occasion when, instead of a pre-written sermon, I responded to questions which had been written and placed in a box by the members of the congregation. You may recall, I drew the slips of paper from the box and attempted to reply to as many questions as time would permit. Some people, I have been told subsequently, questioned the controls we had established for the process, believing that I may have preselected some of the questions--a level of skepticism which surprised me, despite all my years of working with Unitarian Universalist congregations.

One of the questions I drew from the box asked me to name the three people I admired most, and added the additional condition that one of the three had to be a woman. Without any hesitation, I selected my wife Beverly as the woman I most admired. But as I thought about it subsequently, I found myself wondering what my answer would have been if I had been asked to name three women. In the months which have passed, my mind has returned to that question, turned it over in my mind, sought to understand the influence of women in my life. This morning, in the midst of Women's History Month, I would like to share with you a bit of the thinking which has resulted.

The truth is, I have been surrounded by strong-willed and determined women all my life, women who have confronted great challenges and enormous difficulties, who have exhibited profound courage, and have, in a variety of ways, prevailed. From time to time, I have spoken to you about my surrogate mother, my Aunt Martha; some of you know my wife, Beverly, and more of you will come to know her in the months ahead; and then there is my daughter, Julia--three generations of strong, effective women. But there have been other women who have made a substantial difference in my life, women I have known from a distance, or only by reputation, who, over time, helped me shape my life. It is these women I would remember this morning, in the hope that you may be challenged to enter into your house of memory and find there those who participated in making you the person you are.

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The first woman of whom I have any memory, apart from members of my family and immediate community, was Eleanor Roosevelt, she of the buck-toothed smile, and the voice which could strip wall-paper off the wall. As a child, I knew that she was the wife of Franklin Roosevelt the President of the United States--Franklin Roosevelt, who had always been President--Franklin Roosevelt, who would always be President--Franklin Roosevelt, whose picture hung in the New Deal Cafe and the New Deal Barber Shop, and

in a variety of other public places all over town--or at least that part of town with which I was familiar. With his jaunty smile, and carefully manipulated cigarette holder, he always seemed to be larger than life and somehow unreal. The President, like God, was important in some undefined way, but both were beyond my comprehension. Eleanor Roosevelt was another matter. She didn't look very different from some of the women I knew in my world. Her face and her voice seemed genuine and real--no one would have contrived that smile or that voice. When she appeared in a newsreel or when she spoke on the radio, there was a sense that this was a real person, who had lived life and who knew pain and understood sorrow. But more than this, even as a little child, I sensed in her a moral center defined by a well-used talent for empathy and compassion.

As I have grown older, I have learned to see the imperfections and the failings of Franklin Roosevelt--his willingness to compromise and to shift, to weave and to dodge. Over time, he has become less god-like and more flawed and human. As I have grown older, my initial, intuitive respect for Eleanor Roosevelt has grown and deepened and been bolstered by all I have learned. It was Eleanor Roosevelt who built out of her own insecurities and grief and disappointment and anger a public life which served to nourish the very best in the American character. Mrs. Roosevelt, as we called her, was never satisfied that she had been a very good mother to her own children; nor, except for a few early years, was she ever secure in her relationship with her husband. But she was clear and grew daily more certain about the values she served and the power fate had given her to serve those values.

It was Eleanor Roosevelt who traveled the length and breadth of this country, visiting miners and farmers, laborers and slum-dwellers, the helpless, homeless and unemployed, north, south, east and west, bringing their pain and their suffering and their need back to a White House which might, otherwise, have remained isolated.

It was Eleanor Roosevelt who rose above her early, racist indoctrination, to become the champion of the rights of American Blacks in an administration which might have preferred to ignore the moral issue racism presented. It was Eleanor Roosevelt who resigned from the Daughters of the American Revolution because of the racism of that venerable organization. In a meeting in the south where segregation laws required Blacks to sit on one side of the center aisle and Whites to sit on the other side, it was Eleanor Roosevelt who got up and moved her chair to the middle of that center aisle, physically bridging the wall of separation decreed by law. And it was Eleanor Roosevelt who badgered her husband, relentlessly, to respond to the just grievances of Black Americans.

It was Eleanor Roosevelt who overcame her early anti-semitism to become the champion of those who sought to break down the immigration barriers which prevented the flight of European Jews to safety in this country during the early years of the Nazi triumph in Europe. And it was Eleanor Roosevelt who pleaded for the children of threatened Europe. And it was Eleanor Roosevelt who constantly reminded her harried husband that it would do no good to win the military victory abroad and lose democracy at home, who insisted that housing for the homeless, food for the hungry, medical care for the ill, jobs for the

jobless, fair-play for minority groups were as important as the political and military considerations which dominated the government's agenda.

In the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbor, it was Eleanor Roosevelt who sought to lessen the racist reaction against Japanese-American citizens, and who argued, in vain, against the government's decision to round up those citizens and send them to concentration camps.

Eleanor Roosevelt would go on to assist in the creation of the United Nations, and there, on a global stage, to struggle for a universal declaration of human rights. Truly, she earned her title as "First Lady of the World." Watching her, as I grew up, I saw a shining example of courage, integrity, dedication and determination. In many ways, she set the standard for public morality and ethical service by which I have measured the lesser figures who have paraded across the public stage in succeeding years.

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When I was in Junior High School, the teacher of my Social Studies class was Miss Duesenberry. I never knew her full name--she was always Miss Duesenberry. She was a large, solid woman, not particularly pretty, but an imposing and commanding figure. She was always and unmistakably in control of the class and never tolerated any foolishness. She believed that social studies--the combination of history, political science, and sociology--was the center of any educational program and too important to be taken lightly. No one could be educated without knowing the past out of which we had emerged, without know the social and political structures which shaped our lives, and without some modest understanding of what it means to be human. She took the course work seriously, and demanded that we treat it with the seriousness it deserved.

One morning, Miss Duesenberry came into the class carrying the morning newspaper. She had decided to change the subject for that day's study. Picking up the paper, she held it out for us to read. The headline was about one more charge made by Joseph McCarthy, the junior Senator from Wisconsin, that the government, indeed the entire social structure of the nation was being destroyed by traitors, by communists and communist sympathizers bent upon betraying us to our enemies. Miss Duesenberry read to us the story which accompanied the headlines. Then, she spent the class explaining to us that the Senator from Wisconsin, though he scattered his charges about with reckless abandon, had yet to uncover a single traitor or enemy agent.

What he had done, she told us, with his irresponsible charges that communists dominated the State Department, the motion picture industry, the schools and colleges, the churches, was to create an atmosphere of fear and distrust. In that kind of atmosphere, people who were innocent of any wrong doing, or whose only mistake was in the friends they cultivated or the groups they joined as young people, were being destroyed. They were being fired from their jobs, their careers ruined, their families humiliated. This, she said to us, is the worst kind of betrayal of the values upon which this nation was founded. It is wrong, she said, to attack people in a manner in which they have no opportunity to

defend themselves. "Senator Joseph McCarthy," she said, "is a greater danger to this nation and all it stands for than communism will ever be. Don't be taken in by the newspaper headlines; and don't assume that what an official claims is necessarily true. Think for yourself, be your own judge, that is what constitutes good citizenship in this country."

I did not recognize at the time what a courageous act that was. Miss Duesenberry was speaking out, in a very conservative community, against a powerful and popular senator. And she did so well before any of the nation's political leaders found the courage to denounce Senator McCarthy's irresponsible behavior. She did so in an atmosphere in which teachers were being dismissed and preachers were being fired and actors were being black-listed and government employees were being harried from their jobs at the first suspicion that they were critical of the Senator from Wisconsin and his anti-communist crusade. She could not have known what her pupils might say about that morning's lesson to a parent, or how the parents might react. Nor do I believe she ever calculated the potential cost to her of that act of bravery. She believed that she had an obligation to her students to help them understand the world around them, how it related to their past, how it would shape their future, and what were the values and the virtues which shaped the American system. Nothing would deter her in her determination to teach us what we needed to know.

So far as I know, Miss Duesenberry suffered no negative consequences of her act of courage. There was no public outcry, no demand that she recant or be fired. That class passed without public notice. But I noticed. The events of that morning lodged deep in my soul. And as I grew older and watched the development of Senator McCarthy's career, the way in which even President Eisenhower was reluctant to confront him directly in public, the way in which everyone allowed the witch hunt to continue until McCarthyism collapsed of its own excesses, destroying countless lives and careers in the process, my respect for Miss Duesenberry grew and deepened, and the lesson she taught became one of the formative moments in my own spiritual life. I have never had a chance to tell her how very much I am in her debt. Telling her story this morning is one small way to do justice to a brave, dedicated, woman who taught not only social studies, but nurtured integrity and courage.

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I was a young child, perhaps five or six years old. It was Christmas time, and I was downtown on a Saturday night. With a warning not to touch anything, my Aunt left me to wander through the toy section of the department store, while she shopped for something she did not want me to know about. I examined--without touching--the toy cars and trucks, the electric train accessories, the toy soldiers, the toy guns and the Jr. Doctor kits, and the erector sets and all the marvels displayed for sale. All of a sudden, I was aware of an old woman at the far end of the aisle. She did not see me, but my eyes were drawn to her. Her graying hair was combed back and held away from her face by a series of combs. A few rebellious strands had escaped the combs and dangled limply by the side of her face. Her skin was weathered and wrinkled, looking very much like the farm women I

knew who spent much of their lives in the open air and had little time or resources to lavish on creams and conditioners. Her clothes were patched and ragged, and hung on her frame as if they had been borrowed from someone several times her size. Her hose sagged down her thin legs and into scuffed and broken shoes that threatened to leave her feet with every step. In her hand she held a small, rusty-black purse. She was staring with rapt attention at a doll carefully displayed at the end of the counter.

For a long moment she simply stood and looked at that doll, with its golden hair and blue eyes and wispy white dress. Then her veined hand came out and very gently touched the hair and caressed the dress. For another long moment, she stood there, staring at the doll. Then, she opened her purse, and began counting out the small treasure she carried there. Once she counted. Again she counted. A third time she counted. And then, she heaved a sigh. It was as if all the breath had gone out of her and she became smaller and more bent and more broken. She put the handful of money back into her purse. She straightened her shoulders, wrapped her threadbare coat around her thin shoulders and turned and shuffled off toward the stairs leading up to the street, her loosely fitting shoes flapping against her heels as she walked.

I stood and I watched as she made her way up the stairs and out of sight. I don't know who she was; I never saw her again; but she has remained a part of my life from that day to this. What I saw in her was the image of all those mothers and grandmothers, the world over, who yearn for some small moment of beauty for their children, who scrimp and save and hope and dream, and find that their resources are never adequate, that they are always choosing between a gift of beauty freely given, and paying the rent and buying the food, who are always being told in a thousand different ways that beauty is a luxury and that luxuries are for other people. I remember lying in bed that night, wondering about that old woman, that stranger, and the child who would never receive the doll, and remember as I lay there, a childish anger was lighted in my soul that the world should be so unjust in its treatment of people. I was very young, but it was an iconographic moment, one which powerfully shaped my loyalties and structured my values.

As I grew older, many convictions and concepts grew around that unknown woman. She became the icon, the symbol of all those women who have struggled to raise their children against great odds, and in the face of society's indifference and hostility. She became the icon, the symbol of all those women who, facing disappointment and defeat, draw a deep breath and go on with life, doing what needs to be done, sending their children out into a harsh world equipped with whatever armor, whatever resources love and commitment can provide. She became the icon, the symbol of the stubborn persistence of humanity in the face of overwhelming odds and immeasurable disappointments. The child for whom she coveted the doll, may never have known the depth of her discouragement, for time after time, children have been shielded from pain as much as possible, and given what strength their elders have to give without communicating the cost. This unknown woman, like a visitation from some other realm, taught me something about the high cost of nurturing the human community, taught me gratitude for the quiet courage and determination with which most people live their lives, taught me that the dream of beauty and grace is a human dream experienced by all people

everywhere and that the frustration of that dream is a fundamental violation of our common humanity.

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Eleanor Roosevelt, blessed with all the gifts of family and wealth and social position and political power it was within the scope of modern society to bestow; Miss Duesenberry, an obscure Junior High School social studies teacher; and an unknown woman wrapped in poverty and familiar with frustration and disappointment, taunted by dreams which would never come true, and yet grasped by a love more powerful than disappointment--these are among the women who have elicited my admiration, and who shaped and molded my life. What they share in common, what they evoked in me is a commitment to be a nurturer. Eleanor Roosevelt cared passionately for the forgotten people and for the American dream, and she gave her time and her energy and her life to nurture that dream. Miss Duesenberry cared passionately for the young minds entrusted to her, and was willing to risk everything to nurture them, to help them understand the past out of which they had come, the world in which they lived, and the moral imperative to which they owed fealty. And that unknown woman stands as the symbol of all the voiceless, nameless people who, over time, in the face of immeasurable odds, have nurtured children and nourished them and prepared them, as best they were able, for an unknown and unknowable future. The faithfulness they symbolize is the foundation of the world.

These are three of the people I most admire, women who challenge us all to a life of integrity and passion and courage, who remind us that greatness consists in meeting the tasks which lie at hand, who recall us to the conviction that it is in the nurturing of others that the great challenges and the deep satisfactions of life are to be found.