



UU Women's Federation Sermon Award 2021

Honorable Mention

"If We Don't Get It: Imagining Womxn's Liberation"

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Right now, we have a great opportunity to radically change our world and set standards that will live with us for generations. Today, knowing there is much work to be done, I wonder how we harness the power we built through the 2020 election and leverage that towards our liberation.

I think our women's and feminist movements have a lot to teach us, here. From their successes and their pitfalls.

There is one thing from my movement, that I continue to chew one. In the 1960s, second wave feminists explained that the **personal is political**. I've been thinking about this idea as an organizing principle.

In the spring of 2020, I participated in a great training at UUANI (UU Action Network of Illinois) about telling your story. It was about how we can use the power of storytelling to shift dominant narratives, to inspire people to action, and to imagine new possibilities for ourselves. In this training we were asked to tell the story of why we started doing social justice work? **We asked ourselves "when was the movement where we decided that comfort or inaction was not an option?"**

Some folks told stories of encountering injustice in their school or workplace place. Others spoke of an awakening after the 2016 presidential election. In a small breakout room on Zoom, we took turns telling our stories.

I told my story.

It's a story about how unions saved my father's life. I told them about how when my father was going through chemo, a nurse noted that people don't often make it this far--not because of the severity of the cancer, but because of insurance companies that wouldn't cover the treatments. That is when I understood that unions save lives. Union negotiated healthcare saved my father's life.

Then, the last person in our 6-person Zoom breakout group, a woman with concern and confusion clear in her face, said that she didn't have a story and that her life had been pretty "rosy."

This moment made me think, "*surely*, in a group of folks doing social justice work, we all could locate our own skin in the game."

I don't bring this up to suggest that there is something wrong or bad about this woman's reaction to this storytelling exercise. I bring it up because it is so instructive to our own lives, and, I think, particularly instructive for women's activism in these moments where it is said that women have such great political power.

What must we understand about our own lives AND the context of the current political moment in which we live, that can make us better at this work of justice?

What about this learning can help us imagine womxn's liberation-all womxn (BIPOC, trans, disabled, poor, undocumented) as possible, and therefore for the liberation of us all more possible?

Today, especially in the middle of a pandemic, the status quo is killing us. It is not just the negligence of an administration, it's that so much was broken, absent, or inherently inequitable that we lacked basic systems to resist the devastation.

And I don't think it's because we're not fighting hard enough. I think it's because we're not locating ourselves and others in the political story of our personal lives.

We must ask ourselves, "what are we not getting that allows people to think their lives are not political? What narratives get airtime that work to obscure the political as narrowly about trauma or oppression and not about privilege?"

Maybe then, we can find out how we got here.

All of our stories make up the conditions under which we live and under which many of us die.

So I want to tell you another story. This one is also about my family, unions and labor in the country.

My Grandmother was born in Alabama in the 1930s, 10 years after the ratification of the 19th Amendment that granted *some* women the right to vote.

For a number of years, she was a domestic worker. She worked in the homes of her white neighbors, taking care of their children. There are moments that are still spoken of in hushed tones and euphemism to blunt the reality of the traumas in this type of labor. But, displayed in her home, is a photo of the children she took care of, among the other photographs of her 12 grandchildren.

Our lives are complex. We all relate to each other and oppressive power in different ways. We have to understand our political lives and that of others in order to work through those difficult complexities and develop strategies for our liberation.

As Toni Morrison said when she addressed the 1979 graduating class of Barnard College "the function of freedom is to free someone else."

I still wonder if there is a photo of my grandmother in the home of her employer or in the dormitory of the university their children attend. Do they know the names of my grandmother's children, as my mom knows the names of their children? **Or, for them, is my grandmother and her labor invisible? And subsequently, how does that shape their narrative and understanding of themselves?**

In addition to my grandmother's birth, something else happened around the 1930s. The United States Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act during the Great Depression. This set regulations for minimum wage, overtime, and working conditions. But this bill left out farmers and domestic workers.

Then in 1964, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act, which left domestic workers out, again. The law didn't include protections for employees in workplaces with fewer than 15 employees. So essentially, it's legal for employers to sexually harass and discriminate against care workers and housekeepers based on race, religion, gender, or national origin.

I think about how the protections gained in the labor movement, which my father and my family benefited from, were/are not enjoyed by all. I think about how the story of labor law excluding black women and labor benefit saving my father's life, is my story and that they come together to shape my social and economic location.

I think about how championing collective bargaining as my core politicization story is incomplete. I think about how the stability of not being in devastating economic conditions growing up, also made some elements of my life--as the women in the storytelling training said--"rosy" compared to others.

The conditions that keep us safe, or comfortable, MUST be our political stories as well. Not only the trauma stories. We have to understand that these stories and how we imagine ourselves are always-already political and that this shapes how we imagine ourselves out of this mess.

Whether it's:

- policy that failed to protect the lives and recognizing the dignity of farmers and domestic workers;
- the 13th Amendment declaring slavery illegal except in the case of incarceration;
- stimulus checks leaving out the undocumented;
- climate policy that does not address a history of stealing and poisoning land and water of BIPOC folk;
- criminal justice reform that doesn't meet the demands of the people in the streets grieving the killing of their neighbors and loved ones;

- fighting for \$15 minimum wage without addressing the sub-minimum tip wage that disproportionately impacts poor womxn/womxn of color;
- wanting to address voter suppression without addressing the ways in which democracy is obstructed by the filibuster or the electoral college, or the BIPOC folx in DC and PR who are not represented in Congress;
- women's movements that don't center the lives of trans women;

These are the lessons I hope we bring into how we imagine womxn's liberation.

What happens when we don't get that leaving people out is both unjust and a threat to all of us?

In 2020, suddenly, voter suppression became an issue that spurred millions of people to become active in the election, though it has been an issue since Black folx won the right to vote. What happens if we don't reflect on the fullness of our own personal and political lives in order to uncover where we participate in, or benefit from, or just don't have an awareness of injustice?

I believe our movements and activism demand interrogation and the politicization of all of our lives in service to justice.

In a time where we witness the first woman African American and Asian American Vice President of the U.S. getting sworn in by a first Latina Supreme Court Justice, we have 3 million women who have left or have been pushed out of the workforce since the emergence of Covid-19.

We had an election season that brought out an historic 155+ million voters, where we saw organizations--many of them BIPOC womxn-- flip GA during a crisis that devastating BIPOC, working class womxn.

It forces me to ask "how do we keep winning *and* losing at the same time?"

Yes, we must talk about and celebrate womxn in politics. Not just the ones in the seats of elected office, but the ones who cast the ballots in the election, and the ones who cannot. And not just the people, but the politics of womxn's lives and the movements we lead.

2020 showed us that leaving people out is morally wrong and collectively dangerous.

If we don't get inclusive moral policy, what are we getting?

If we don't get our own relationship to justice *and* oppression, then how do we get out of this mess and move towards womxn's liberation, our collective liberation?

If we don't understand our own lives, how can we begin imagining the liberation we say we're struggling towards.

May we learn more about ourselves and one another. May we begin to imagine better towards our collective liberation.