

Women and Resilience (Homily)

April 4, 2020 - Rev. Adam Lawrence Dyer

I was watching CNN the other night when Erin Burnett interviewed Long Island resident Maura Lewinger after her husband died of the coronavirus. I've seen anchors, male and female get emotional...from Walter Cronkite while reporting the Kennedy assassination to Anderson Cooper interviewing Stephen Colbert talking about grief. I also watched Don Lemon and Chris Cuomo struggle with talking about Cuomo's coronavirus diagnosis. Still, I've never seen a news anchor simply breakdown on TV. I have to admit, I've been waiting for it. More and more on the faces of news anchors across the spectrum of political thought, I'm seeing this crisis wear on them all. They look haggard and spent. I was actually relieved when Erin could no longer hold back her tears...it allowed me to join her. The story that Maura Lewinger was sharing was heartbreaking and nothing that anyone should ever live through. It is a story that I'm afraid too many of us may encounter in this changed world. We all should find the opportunities to cry when we can.

Maura told of the medical staff that allowed her to speak to her unconscious husband over facetime and to even play their wedding song. She told of their regular updates to her and their frankness when the situation took a grave turn. She spoke of how they told her when he had no more pulse. Several times, she rereferred to this staff as being female...doctors and nurses and I was reminded as we should all be aware that the medical field has a significant and growing number of women. Recent data points to more women enrolling in medical school than men and Massachusetts boasts the most women physicians in any state

representing 43% of the total number of physicians as of 2018. Certainly, nursing on all levels was dominated by women through the latter half of the 19th century and it continues to be overwhelmingly populated by highly skilled women, particularly women of color.

But I also have to make note of Maura herself who told the story through her own emotion with a level of resolve and commitment that made it clear that she is made of some incredible grit, faith and spirit that will get her through. She has three children who are depending on her. So often we hear these stories of women who are faced with the most bleak of situations, yet they manage to carry on with both grace and courage. And when I speak of grace here, I don't mean a Hollywood affectation or elegance, I'm talking about a connection to spirit and the divine that is not so much about obedience as it is about partnership.

During the 1918 flu pandemic, at a time when doctors were predominantly male in the United States, it was the female nursing staff and midwifery community that brought people into the world and accompanied them out of it. This is what I mean by a spiritual partnership. A link between what it means to be alive and shepherding life. The women nurses and medical assistants were the ones left to face the grim reality that the male doctors had no solutions. They faced the fear of people who woke up healthy one day and were dying by nightfall. They provided not only comfort, but context through their compassion and companionship. They also faced their own mortality every time they tended to a patient. There is no mistaking that much of what we expect from nursing today...a combination of practical skill, fearlessness, reality and intuitive understanding of

suffering and patience comes directly from what women have brought to Western medicine on all levels over many years.

Today, in our current crisis, I believe we are once again being led by women...although, certain men seem determined to try to remain in the spotlight despite their gross ignorance. Leaders on a city level like San Francisco Mayor London Breed who ordered city residents to shelter in place back on March 16, before anyone else was willing to do so nationwide. Governor Gretchen Whitmer has advocated powerfully for her state in the midst of this dire situation while navigating attacks from a Federal Government that should be her ally. Certainly, Speaker Nancy Pelosi continues to lead and speak blunt truth to power, unafraid to wear her personal faith on the outside of her persona without making it a political agenda, unlike a certain secretary of state.

But probably the most visible woman in the midst of this crisis is Colonel Deborah Birx. With 40 years on the front lines with the global AIDS crisis, she has answers and reality and unparalleled perspective. It is cringeworthy to me that even with her rank, her education, her uniquely qualified background and everything she brings to the table, the administration publicly calls her “Debbie”...which may very well be her choice, but even so, I don’t think any of us can afford to forget that if we are truly in a war, we might want to be listening first and foremost to the high ranking military officer who is leading the charge and who actually earned that rank.

As I watch Colonel Birx during the daily briefings, I’m reminded once again that women...accomplished professional women who have had to withstand the disparagement of men, the obstacles to their advancement,

the lower pay, the dismissal of their authority and their ideas...these women who continue to come back time and again, are the leaders we need today in this moment.

And it is not just professional women. It is everyday women who make sense out of a complex daily routine that is obliterated by the entire family suddenly being at home. Women who will face down being quarantined with their abusers or attackers and still rise to live another day. Women on the front lines of efforts to support and protect homeless populations feed the hungry and care for the sick. Women who in the midst of this crisis are determined to remind us that people who are incarcerated or undocumented *still* need our attention and women like Maura Lewinger who even in the midst of her own personal loss is willing to get on national television to instruct people that social distancing is a real solution. And women who are paid to be completely composed and dispassionate as news anchors who will just break down on national television and be real so that the rest of us can too.

Women's resilience brought us through the 1918 Flu. Women's resilience brought us through WWII. Women's resilience brought us through the racist bombing of churches and Jim Crow and the Farm Workers strike. Women's resilience brought us into focus after the 2016 election.

May women's resilience and leadership continue to be a blessing for us all and our guiding light through this crisis.

May it be so.

Chalice Lighting:

I am a stranger
learning to worship the strangers
around me

whoever you are
whoever I may become
- June Jordan

Sending:

May we go forward in purposeful rhythm,
that we may give voice to the melody of our imaginations,
the music of our souls,
and all the possibilities of a just world
as we might together create it.
- Matt Meyer