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*Rising Waters*

A young girl becomes aware of problems with our earth. She hears warnings about dwindling natural resources, melting glaciers, flooding and drought, holes in the ozone layer – problems that recycling and turning off the lights won't fix. She becomes consumed with thoughts of what will happen if...and she begins to withdraw from life. Only eight years old, she sinks into a deep, depressive state. She stops talking except to family members and one teacher, and she stops eating, too. She hovers in this state for many months. Inert. Passive. Non-communicative. Hopeless. In a dark place.

An extreme response to feeling overwhelmed, to be sure, but you and I know what it's like when the world feels like too much to bear and we need to step back from it. When we're grieving a loss, we might go through the motions of getting through the day for months on end, but our ability to be truly present is missing. Our heart is not in it. When we've been dealt a great setback – a disappointment, an illness, an injustice – we might manage to look like our usual selves out in the world, even though we don't feel that way. When overwhelmed by the demands of caring for others, we might keep putting one foot in front of the other while our heart aches.

Meanwhile, what is happening within us at these times? I like to think that we may be resting, absorbing, integrating the impact of what life has given us. I like to think that, with luck or grace, and surely with effort, we are gathering strength, taking the time we need before re-entering the world. Perhaps, when we feel unable to face the day, we're like a butterfly in its cocoon and in the fullness of time we'll come back into the light.

I wonder about the girl, Greta Thunberg of Sweden. Within her, something eventually shifted, and it happened for a reason: at last, someone heard her. Her own parents. After repeatedly asking them to stop eating beef, to become vegan, they finally agreed. But the biggest moment came when her mother, an opera singer who traveled by plane to performances, agreed to stop flying. She began to travel by train, and Greta began to re-emerge. "It felt very good," she later said, "to be listened to."<sup>1</sup>

You may know her story. This past August, Greta, now sixteen, started skipping school one day a week. She would sit in front of the Parliament in Stockholm with a sign that read, "School Strike for the Climate." Others have joined her, huge crowds day after day.

Today, the world listens when this child – diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome, OCD and Selective Mutism – speaks. In December, she addressed the UN Climate Change Conference in Poland. You can listen to her powerful TED talk. Hundreds of thousands of students at schools around the world have held strikes to urge leaders to act. Last week, Greta was nominated for a Nobel Prize.

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<sup>1</sup> Somini Sengupta, "Becoming Greta: 'Invisible Girl' to Global Climate Activist, With Bumps Along the Way," *NYTimes*, 18 February 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/18/climate/greta-thunberg.html>

Greta is not a natural extrovert. Talking and interacting with people exhausts her. She can't wait to go home and cuddle on the couch with her dog. "All my life," she says, "I've been invisible, the invisible girl in the back who doesn't say anything. From one day to another, people listen to me. That's a weird contrast. It's hard."<sup>2</sup> And yet, expressing herself may be what healed her, what helped her re-enter the world. Today, speaking is what makes her work in the world powerful.

Greta's story is a testament to the human spirit and the power of passion, which in her case might not have had a chance were it not that she finally felt heard. We can't underestimate the power of being seen and actively valued by another person. By your mother. By someone at coffee hour. By a stranger.

How close to your life is the climate story? We've become accustomed to seeing parts of the world under water. Mozambique. India. America's mid-west. But what about your story?

In my hometown, the Bratskellar restaurant on Rte 1 floods regularly. We used to drive by at super high tides and see water spilling out off the marsh into the edges of the parking lot. Now it routinely covers the whole parking lot. Out our own front door, the water table has risen, creating run-off from the hillside onto the road and black ice slicks we've never had before.

When Hurricane Sandy swept through New York coastal areas, destroying beach homes, my brother, an architect, designed a new home for one of those property owners, big and beautiful, high up on stanchions to withstand future storms. Tough for the owners, but they had insurance and savings – no comparison to the hundreds of thousands whose *everything* has disappeared.

When we were kids, Aunt Betty from Texas wrote in her Christmas cards about the latest hurricane that had flooded their Galveston home. Today, stories like this are not unusual. We watched Hurricanes Katrina and Harvey tear through New Orleans and Houston – and in fact we have a friend whose sick mother died during Katrina, apparently deserted in a nursing home. And I'll always remember Jesmyn Ward's book *Salvage the Bones* and the horror of the kids looking out the window to see water rushing through the neighborhood and then filling their home. Memorable images, if at a distance.

At a distance until recently, that is, when my daughter, always about saving the earth, brought me a bit closer. As a little girl, Laura trick-or-treated as a recycling bin. In grade school, she sobbed on our annual pilgrimage to a Christmas tree farm. She begged us to not kill another tree. Did we listen? Did we hear her? I wish I could say "yes," that we'd bought a potted pine that year – and every year – but instead we thought her tears were cute and that day became a funny family story.

Resilient, Laura stayed in the game. Last fall, before starting grad school, she heard a radical climate justice activist speak at a conference, a lawyer seeking reparations for people in the Mississippi delta devastated by climate change. Wowed, Laura approached the speaker and asked if she might be open to coming to Cambridge if it could be arranged. Just two weeks ago,

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

Colette Pichon Battle, Founder of the Gulf Coast Center for Law and Policy, did come to Cambridge and presented to packed rooms at the JFK School and the law school.

She was the opening speaker last summer for Netroots Nation, an annual conference that draws several thousand progressive organizers and grassroots activists. Pichon Battle began by welcoming the chief of the largest native tribe in Louisiana, 17,000 people, asking his permission to hold this conference there.

“We know one thing for sure, [she said,] we will not win until the original sins of this land are dealt with....It’s not always the easiest thing to do but it’s always the proper thing to do. ... We have to at least pay honor to those who were here before us.”<sup>3</sup>

Pichon Battle grew up in the Louisiana bayou. African American, a good student, she won a scholarship to Kenyon College and tells the story of people all over town donating money for her to get to Ohio. Years later, when Katrina hit, she took off time from working as a lawyer in DC to come home. She began helping friends and family “read their papers” – those confusing, legalese documents people who lost everything began to receive. The need was huge, and a few years later when the BP oil spill devastated those very same communities, she realized she was where she needed to be to make a difference in the world.

Pichon Battle praises “movement [that] has come from the front lines.” She weaves a picture of environmental justice, racial justice, voting rights justice, queer liberation justice – all interconnected. She gives a shout-out to organizing on the ground, to heroism in gulf cities leading the way in innovation and renewable energy, and to the resistance of leaders in places with limited resources. She notes, too, the not uncommon phenomenon of the criminal justice system in these gulf states targeting these very leaders.

“What I didn’t understand, as a movement leader,” she said in an interview about her work, “was how much injustice was located in the middle of a disaster....It dawned on me that we’re going to keep having storms. The climate is changing, and they’re still extracting oil and gas, and they’re doing it from deeper and more dangerous places....I feel an obligation –a love obligation – ...to be here and to be helpful.”<sup>4</sup>

She calls on people to connect one-on-one. To see each other.

I come from a strong line of South Louisiana women who love their family, love their community. They love the land. They love the water. They love the crawly-creepy things. And they love the beautiful sky and the trees. We understand that our entire existence requires there to be a balance on this earth. I’d like to make sure that legacy is left when I’m gone.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Colette Pichon Battle, Netroots Nation, 2 August 2018, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4743858/c-battle-netroots-nation-2018>

<sup>4</sup> Colette Pichon Battle, “After the Storm,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8pfypJ7IgE>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Which brings us back to today, UUSC Justice Sunday, and the legacy of our UU faith tradition. In the UUSC's partnering with indigenous peoples on Pacific islands and in Alaska native villages, we see more than climate work. More than science. More than an awareness of the interdependent web of existence. In its insistence on starting with the first people affected, we also see our 1<sup>st</sup> principle held high – that UUism affirms and promotes the worth and dignity of every person.

Make no mistake. While the science of rising seas and extreme weather are part of the storyline, hearing and valuing every person is the main character.

- For Greta, it is finally being heard by her own parents that nudges her back into life.
- Behind the energy of Colette Pichon Battle, is her “love obligation” – being-with and working-for-justice with *her people* on the frontlines.
- In the UUSC's work, the people of the place come first: *their* perceived needs, *their* priorities and *their* dignity set the course.

Yes, measures must be taken to eliminate the carbon footprint and wipe out emissions, but climate *justice*? That's about people.

Listen, white friends [says Colette Pichon Battle]. Now is not the time for you to cry and stand still. Now is not the time for you to point at your one black friend and say, “What shall we do?” This is not that time. But...let me say, “You are welcome to come to our meeting. You are welcome to follow our leadership, and you are welcome to ask us what we oughta do.”

We gotta do this together and we gotta get over all that stuff that we have on our shoulders....I'm sorry, but the time is now. We don't have any more time to figure it out or to go journal about it....And let's also say that this is not the time to fall into the delusion that organizing is done simply on the computer....

Listen, take it from your southern friend. Sit down at the table and have something to eat with people. Have a conversation. Share a meal. Make a dish. I'll even eat the vegan food....We have to look at each other in the face, y'all. It's time we gotta get together. We gotta be a little uncomfortable, and we have to eat together....Climate solutions have to be rooted in justice. This is not a policy win. This is the fate of our planet. Let's save it together.<sup>6</sup>

And so, as we re-think what we eat, re-consider where we vacation, and re-evaluate how we travel, we must remember that we cannot go it alone. Everyone has something to say, and everyone longs to be heard. So let us listen. Let us really hear each other. This is justice. This is our most sacred work. Together let us create the future we envision.

So may it be.

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<sup>6</sup> CPB, Netroots Nation.