

Rev. Betsy Mead Tabor
UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes
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Tapping into Power

OPENING WORDS - By Margaret Rieser

When I heard that the theme of today's service was "personal power," I thought, why aren't we talking about personal lack of power? I know a lot more about that feeling. Why don't people act the way I think they should? Why won't my teenager do what I know is good for him?

Then I realized that the only way we can feel that our presence makes a difference in this world is by also having the sense that it doesn't. It's that moment of moving from the feeling of "I'm not enough" to feeling like, "But I am something."

Can you think of a time when you felt this way?

Sometimes for me, the transformation happens in a flash, such as every time I sing with conviction, "This little light of mine. I'm GONNA let it shine." Sometimes it's a slow dawning. I see that my words or gestures, my energy, my presence, make a difference to someone else.

My main spiritual practice these days is to walk on the beach in Narragansett, a half-mile stretch of sand well used by people and dogs. As I walk, I try to simply notice. I fill myself up with what's around me: my breathing, my feet pressing into the sand, the breeze or the warmth of the sun on my face, the funky seaweedy smell, the wild sounds of waves and gulls. As I do this, I find myself transforming. The knots loosen. My body, mind and spirit begin to soften and flow. When I started this practice, I noticed that about 10 minutes into the walk I was smiling, an outward expression, perhaps, of my increasingly soothed inner state.

I am struck, when I smile, at how other walkers respond, so often with open expressions or smiles themselves. Some people feel called to speak, beyond the "G'morning" that is the custom on this beach. We both feel the urge to connect, to comment on the sky, or the temperature, simply to be present to each other.

I see you. We are something.

TIME FOR ALL AGES

Marion Posner spoke to the power of the imagination and took us on a journey of children's book messages from the likes of Harry Potter, The Velveteen Rabbit, The Big Friendly Giant and Where the Wild Things Are.

READING

Our reading is a poem by Dartmouth Medical School neurologist Parker Towle, based on an anecdote told by Donald Sheehan, in Laconia, NH.

Hooking Rugs and Ice-Fishing

He volunteered with a dying patient
 expecting to go through the five stages of grief
 at the first meeting. Instead
 she talked about hooking rugs:

the needle, the thread, the cloth,
 the rhythmic movement of the hands.
 He tried other matters in conversation –
 she talked of hooking rugs.

On the next visit she spoke of the intricacies
 and hardships of ice-fishing that her husband
 had done before his death. Week after week,
 hooking rugs and ice-fishing.

Angered, he said to friends,
 “I can’t go on with this
 interminable hooking rugs
 and ice-fishing.”

One day as they sat
 in the hospital cafeteria,
 she going on, he bored and vexed
 with hooking rugs and ice-fishing

the room
 went silent, air turned
 a luminous shade of green, hooking
 rugs and ice

fishing stopped. She leaned over and said,
 “I could not have done this
 without you,”
 then on again with hooking rugs

and ice fishing. Soon after she died. At the funeral
 relatives said to him, “Thank you,
 all she ever spoke about
 was you.”

SERMON: *Tapping into Power*

“Are you a powerful person? How do you use your power?” These questions were put to the incoming freshman class of a women’s college in the late 1960s. The women’s movement was barely beginning, and my friend who shared this story the other day still thinks about the question. “Me? Powerful?” That would challenge many girls raised in the fifties. It feels challenging even today! What do you think? Are you a powerful person?

I’m not asking how many push-ups you can do or how many people report to you, or maybe once did. What is a powerful person? Someone who has climbed their way up to a position of authority in an organization? Someone who wields power over someone else? Someone everyone in town knows, who has great connections? Does being smart give you power? Or is the dynamo in the room, the one in constant motion getting things done, the most powerful?

Googling “power” suggests that it is highly desirable – an outcome to achieve. Thousands of links tell us how to get and grow and keep power, as if it’s the most important thing of all. Maybe you’ve seen the power poses of social psychologist and Harvard lecturer Amy Cuddy. She says that, to look and to feel powerful, plant your feet wide apart, throw your shoulders back, put your hands on hips. Let’s try it. Everyone stand up and look powerful! How do you feel?

Some people understand their power to be enormous and will happily tell you about it. They’ll tell you of their great successes, maybe tweet them out to the world. (It’s been known to happen.) People with exaggerated feelings of self-importance can spend a lot of time figuring out how to achieve power – think of narcissists and bullies. Beware the person who tells you of their power. Often, they who grasp at power are not the ones who should hold it.

We were all born powerful. Our power finds expression in our passions, our convictions, our fears. And our feelings – we have power surges all the time. Right from the start: there’s nothing as powerful as a baby’s cry to get us moving. Likewise, we can’t bear the truly awesome sound and fury of a two-year-old’s tantrum. Teenagers’ tantrums get even louder. Their power can frighten us.

With luck and good people around us, we learn, as we mature, to manage our reactions to what upsets us, though not always. Rage still rises up through the solar plexus like a volcano. Just yesterday, a power surge hit me when Comcast demanded I re-set my years-long password in order to use email. Hours later, having done all they told me to do, still nothing worked. Feeling *powerless* gave rise to an energetic expression of rage ☺ Life triggers powerful feelings. Are you a powerful person? Not everyone thinks of themselves that way. Just as we remember our missteps and disappointments more readily than our joys and successes, we recall our weak, powerless moments more readily than our glorious powerful ones. You may be thinking, “I’m not a powerful person.” That was certainly my first reaction. In fact, looking back, I see that the times my presence may have made a possible difference are not only few and far between, but they’re subtle. Like happening to be there when maybe some comfort or some clarification was helpful. I love the story of the rug-hooking woman so valuing the chaplain’s presence – for her, powerful – in her last days.

There is power in our presence. You may have a quiet presence in a room. You may feel as if people don't notice you or don't understand who you really are. Maybe you *do* a lot but still feel somehow not seen. You may feel ineffectual, that you don't have much to contribute, or that you're on the outside of things. In a gathering of people, the topic may not engage you, or maybe it does but you haven't yet figured out your point of view. We all operate at different speeds, and speaking up can feel risky. Not that power is about he or she who talks the most – if people who dominate conversations listened a whole lot more, the world would be a better place.

Because every voice counts.

It can take years to believe this. My college, brand new, had an open mike tradition. Every week the entire incoming class would meet in a big lounge and discuss for hours what kind of governance we should have. That is, a small group of vocal young women discussed this. I listened a lot, shy. In all four years I don't remember ever taking the microphone. At first, I admired my articulate classmates. Born talkers, fluent speakers, they had their ideas right at the tip of their tongues – I've always admired that in a person.

But looking back, I wonder. What were the rest of us perfectly interesting young women doing, silent as those few expored their opinions, out loud, night after night? What about our power?

Part of it was timing. We don't have a timeline for self-actualizing or stepping into our personal power and trusting it. Even as well-informed adults, plenty of people take a long time to form their opinions, never mind tell the room. And power, of course, isn't always about talking. We can exercise power by doing or listening; by absorbing, watching, reflecting, writing; by engaging others in what we've observed.

Many of us are moved by the power in the world around us. We feel strength and solidness in the mountains of this place. We feel an abiding softness in the blanket of fog hugging the fields this morning. We feel power in moving water, its precise source and destination beyond knowing: a waterfall, a rolling river, the tide.

The power of men and women through the generations inspires us, too – people who used their gifts for the good, musicians and thinkers who struggled with poverty and ailments of all kinds, not to mention oppression and injustice. We remember some of the world's most luminous leaders for their *quiet power*: the Buddha, Jesus, Gandhi. Or Moses, who said, "No, not me, Lord, I don't have the gifts for this, let my brother lead."

We are more powerful than we think. We must take our power seriously and respect what we are thinking even if we don't say it, even when it's hard to get a word in edgewise. Episcopal priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that, "Every interaction offers you the chance to make things better or to make things worse."

How do you use your power? How do you share the essence of who you are, your best self?

SNL comedian Bowen Yang describes his coming out as a gay person to his parents. “I had this second coming out with them while I was in college and went through this whole flare-up again with them, where they couldn’t accept it,” he says. “And then eventually, I just got to this place of standing firm and being like, ‘This is sort of a fixed point, you guys. I can’t really do anything about this. So either you meet me here or you don’t meet me.’ ” The “place of standing firm” and holding to hard-won conviction is a place of power.

Here at UUFES, we see people “standing firm” all the time, often beautiful and varied. The exercise of power is a valuable tool in feeding the health of our community. I see power rise up amongst you all the time:

- I’ve seen power rise up behind a person when dozens join in supporting an idea for a social justice event on our corner.
- I’ve seen power rise and transform a roomful of people, when one lone voice engages hearts around the room and turns the conversation toward beloved community.
- I’ve seen power grow. I’m thinking of the several individuals who first helped pack weekend food for schoolchildren, who have now become a large and committed group.
- I’ve seen awe-inspiring power when a person’s light holds steady, as life comes to an end.
- I’ve seen so many of you use your true super powers to make things happen: evenings of music and justice, ideas that make the world a better place, worship that makes us cry.
- Every time a member of this community shares at the microphone, we feel the power of community grow warmer and stronger.

We live in a time when power is in the news every day. Our spirits can dip into helplessness, but we must persevere.

Our deepest fear [wrote Marianne Williamson] is not that we are inadequate.
 Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure.
 It is our light, not our darkness
 That most frightens us.

We ask ourselves
 Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?
 Actually, who are you *not* to be?
 You are a child of God.
 Your playing small
 Does not serve the world.

...And as we let our own light shine,
 We unconsciously give other people permission to do the same.
 As we're liberated from our own fear,
 Our presence automatically liberates others.

Our personal power ebbs and flows, doesn't it. Uncertainty and doubt and worry can fill our days, and we feel anything but powerful. And then, when we least expect it – and as often as not, when we need it – something comes. A gift.

I think of power (the good kind) as a sense of knowing, of solid ground. Not the same as certainty – often far from it. A chaplain's power of presence, of staying *with* at a very important time? A young man's getting to a place of standing firm, "a sort of fixed point"? This is power we can trust.

May we trust the power of our own presence and find the wherewithal to offer it to the world, which so needs us.

So may it be.