

## **In the Minority**

A Sermon by Reverend Lynn Thomas Strauss

I anchor my spirit and my sermon this morning with a lyric, from singer-songwriter Susan Osborn<sup>1</sup>.

*I'm making my shoulders strong  
For the young to stand upon,  
Stepping lightly on the backs of those  
Who hold me up.  
It's a chain of life unending,  
Ever new and ever bending,  
Grateful is the heart for the chance to be alive.*

The image of making our shoulders strong for the young to stand upon resonates strongly for me. When I began my first ministry in Knoxville, Tennessee, 26 years ago, my four children's ages were 7, 12, 15, and 17. We had just moved to Appalachia, and adjustment was difficult for us all. Each time I stood in the pulpit to preach, I had the sense that all four of my children were actually sitting on my shoulders, clinging to my back, needing me to be strong enough to keep them all from falling.

And the lyric goes on...“stepping lightly on the backs of those who hold me up.” That part is always harder to remember, more difficult to trust. Who will hold me up? Who will

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Osborn was the lead singer of the Paul Winter Consort, and is releasing a new recording on February 1, 2017, titled “Hummingbird.”

understand that I still need to know I am carried and protected from falling?

And Susan Osborn takes me into a further knowing... “It’s a chain of life unending.”

As we consider this morning the human experience of being in the minority – the “who are we?” and “where do we fit in?” questions – it is critical to know that each of us has a place in the chain of life. There was a before us, and there will be an after us. It’s not about us...it’s about the chain of life.

*We are not alone.* A phrase that rings true and can have many meanings. This morning I tell you that you are not alone, because you are part of the chain of life. An elder has held you on their strong shoulders, and you have held someone younger on yours...or you will sometime soon.

“In the minority” is my sermon title today. When we hear those words, we usually think of people of color, or those on the margins of society because of physical or mental challenges, or those who live on the streets, or those who are transgender.

We think of minorities as a group because of systemic racism, sexism, and homophobia. I am full of fear that with the new administration in Washington, intentional systems of prejudice and exclusion will rise; it has already begun with bathroom bills in North Carolina and Texas!

How do we deal with issues of minority status and solidarity with one another? Haven't most of us had an experience of "being in the minority"?

Langston Hughes reminds us that America will never be "great again" until it is first America for Everyone. There have always been groups left out of the American dream, left out of the rights and privileges for which we, as a country, aspire to stand.

But even if all the common definitions of who is in the minority were to change, there would still be those who experience exclusion and feel silenced and devalued. The impact of majority or minority status in any circumstance or organization has to do with power, and it seems that those in the majority have more power. And yet, there is more to power than meets the eye.

Prophetic religion is always about speaking truth to power...about reversing the power structures. The ministry of Jesus in Christian theology is nothing if not the story of a power struggle. Inviting everyone to the table, taking the temple back from the money changers, putting first the least among us.

The Hebrew prophets Amos, Jeremiah, Isaiah, all left their families, lived in poverty and risked their lives to condemn the rich and powerful...to advocate for the poor and call the people to repentance. The Prophet is the outsider, the minority voice that will not be silenced.

Have you ever been the minority voice in the room, held the minority opinion? Today, I want to expand our thinking about being in the minority.

As you know, we live in a county that is majority minority. Now, what does that mean exactly? I think it means that in Montgomery County we are, all of us, in the minority. Whatever the color of our skin, or our first language, or our gender or sexual orientation, or our abilities, we are all in the minority in our beautifully diverse county. When the minority is large and diverse, we all can belong.

And isn't it true that we have all held the minority position at times in our lives? I knew of a family that had 6 daughters and 1 son. Imagine how he felt...the only boy. Perhaps you've been in a science or math class where you were the only woman? Perhaps you are the only adopted child among your cousins? I talked with a student at Wesley Seminary here in DC. In large lecture hall classes at this Christian Seminary, she found herself 1 of only 2 UU's in the class of 80.

Consider for a moment times or situations in which you occupied a minority position in your life. I have that experience quite often. As the only person in my family of origin to earn a college degree, become a Unitarian Universalist, or be ordained, I sometimes feel my "difference." I sometimes feel I stand alone.

I included the A. Powell Davies reading “Strange and Foolish Walls” to remind myself that much of what we do to set ourselves apart, to define ourselves as a minority, or as different, become walls of separation – separation that can be strange and foolish. Too often we fail to look for the power opportunities in our position.

At a time in our country when foolish separations and divisions are being emphasized...at a time when some of us seem surprised to find ourselves in a new minority category...it is good to remember that we are more than our differences. We are all a stop on the chain of life, unending, ever new, and ever bending. None of us is alone.

There are two points I want to make this morning. First, I want to ask, isn't it time to focus on how we are alike...on what it means to be human, and all that we share of the human condition? Isn't it time to acknowledge our place in the chain of life, and be grateful for being alive?

My second point: Being in the minority isn't always a negative, or a place of suffering. At times, the minority position can carry an awesome kind of power.

Remember Malala Yousafzai, at 16 she became the youngest recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize. Perhaps you've read her book, *I Am Malala: The Girl Who Stood Up for Education and Was Shot by the Taliban*.

She was a minority voice for girls' education in Pakistan. She spoke out and wrote letters of advocacy for education. A daughter in a culture that valued sons, and a child whose voice was loud enough to be heard by the Taliban. On October 9, 2012, she was shot riding the bus home from school. She was badly injured, but recovered. Now she was another kind of minority, a 16-year-old who had recovered an assassination attempt – and then she wrote a book.

Malala is now a name known to young school girls the world over. Mentored and encouraged by her father, an educator, even at her young age, she seemed to know her place in the chain of life was to advocate for other girls...to carry on her shoulders the next generation of Pakistani school girls.

Her courage and steadfastness demonstrates the power of one person's voice to inspire change in the world. Her minority status gave her a mission and a platform. Because of her minority status, she found her voice.

In 2000, I was lucky enough to travel to Cape Town, South Africa. While there I visited the prison on Robbin Island where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for almost 30 years. Walking on the same cement floor where Mandela had walked. Looking into the cell where he was held all those years. Seeing the cafeteria where he ate. It was a humbling experience. But it was at the rock quarry, where he and all prisoners were made to work, that I felt the most profound respect for Mr. Mandela...it was there tears welled up.

In that prison, though most of the prisoners were black, Nelson Mandela was a minority. He came from a royal family. He was highly educated. He was a political prisoner and still held high status in his political party. He spent a great deal of his time in prison reading and writing.

And as I learned from the tour guide, who had also been a prisoner on the Island, Mr. Mandela was a friend to all. He was caring and compassionate, he was a quiet presence, and leader among the men.

And most astoundingly, as one of the few educated men, during the brutally hot working days at the quarry, he used his minority status to teach others; etching letters on the stones, he taught men how to read. Because of his minority status, he found his calling.

Do not be disheartened at those times you feel yourself in the minority. Remember that most of us have the experience of being in the minority some time in our lives. Continue to challenge systemic racism, but do not strive and struggle to join the majority. Instead, step back and consider this question:

How can you use the power of your minority position? How can you use your minority voice to make a difference in the lives of others?

The Women's March in Washington being planned on January 21 is a continuation of the women's movement actions over the

decades. Women continue to find power in using their voice and their presence. What is there in your uniqueness that is a strength and a knowing that has value? Find a way to share your wisdom. Find your calling.

There is power in being different. There is power in being the unique voice in the room. There is power in knowing who you are and what you have to offer.

Find the courage to take your place in the chain of life, carrying others on your shoulders just as you have been carried.

We are all more the same than different. Isn't it time to celebrate our common bonds? Aren't we, brothers and sisters all, grateful for the chance to be alive?

It's not about any one of us individually – it's about the chain of life itself.

So May It Be. Amen.