Senator Jo Comerford’s Prepared Remarks

Keep on Moving Forward – AFSC-NH Dinner
September 28, 2019
Concord Unitarian Universalist Church

I was very much looking forward to coming to Concord for this evening’s gathering.

“Keep on moving forward” is a mantra I repeat to myself nearly every day.

And as you might imagine, I love the American Friends Service Committee.

I have also long considered Arnie Alpert to be a teacher. A mentor. So, it was an honor to say yes to his really lovely request.

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But that was before I read you annual highlights newsletter and latest State House Watch.

After that: I couldn’t wait to join you. And say thank you.

Thank you for your painstaking, jaw-dropping work for justice and peace.

Thank you for pushing that arc of the moral universe -- which Dr. King told us would bend toward justice -- thank you for pushing it to bend a little more quickly.

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Like you, I know government only works if people like you make it work. It’s the tried and true reality of our time.

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I’ve been a state senator in Massachusetts for just about nine months.

Truth is, I’ve always loved state politics -- as I’ve thought of the state as a frontline of defense against a volatile and out of touch federal government. A place where people can and should make advances. A place where people on the inside of government (and that now includes me) can more easily reach across to grassroots organizers to make change as partners.

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Lately I’ve thought of my time in the State Senate as akin to taking up residence in the busiest crossroads I can imagine. In moments when the volume of work outpaces my capacity to triage, I return to a strategy that has helped me get results in all of the other jobs I’ve held: organize and collaborate.

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Let me pivot for a moment to tell you that for years and years -- thanks to a former AFSC colleague, I’ve had a 1907 quote from playwright George Bernard Shaw stuck in my brain. I’ll tell you why in just a moment.

It begins: “This is the true joy in life. Being used for a purpose.”

I found purpose in organizing, in peace and justice work which I’ve long thought of as work to equitably level the playing field.

Work to pound on power structures like government to ensure that it grinds away in the best interest of everyone.

Shaw continued, “I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community. And as long as I live it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can.”

Those words — do whatever I can for the whole community to which I belong — have taken on new urgency 112 years later in what can be described as times of great peril and great opportunity.

The opportunity is, of course, in part embodied by the breathtaking surge of activism and first-time candidates seeking elected office in the wake of the 2016 election and Trump.

From Washington, D.C. to state houses and town halls across the U.S., the ground is rumbling as more and more people take to the streets and cram inside of government to forge real and lasting change with innovative, 21st century ideas and analysis.

The peril of today takes many forms.

It’s the full-on assault by Trump and his cronies on most everything I (and I’d wager many of you) care about — from equity for communities of color to reproductive rights to the environment to the fate of immigrants at our borders.
It’s the deadlocked polarization in Washington. The corrosive impact of big money on our politics. And the fact that from gun safety to wages and jobs to the climate crisis to the fate of public education — we’re at seemingly countless and critical crossroads. All at once.

So what do we do? I want to pull out four ways I see you working -- albeit from a distance -- that I think are absolutely critical:

First: You’re resisting issue silos by seeing the intersection of the issues we care about. I have read about the multitude of issues you’re working on all at once under an enormous tent -- and all at once is what’s demanded. We’re simply stronger if we’re together, moving complex, intersecting policies forward. This is the way in which I’ve begun my work as a State Senator in Massachusetts - by collaborating with wonderful advocates on the outside who can help me move important legislation inside the State House.

Next: You’re holding lawmakers accountable.

In large measure, Americans have been divorced from our civic and community infrastructure. Budget cuts and testing have squeezed teaching about civics out of our curriculum. The business of life and the battle to make ends meet have left us with less and less time to engage.

But engage we must--as you well know--using tools like your State House watch and briefings. Helping people track important legislation as it moves through the process, as they juggle a 9-5 jobs and getting their kids to school. You’re making it easier to engage in democracy.

And engage we must - now especially in the lead up to the 2020 election and what must be a referendum on the fate of our nation, the public sector at every level, and our common well being.

I’ve often said that the only thing more powerful than big money in politics, bi-partisan gridlock in Washington, and State House squabbling is you.

An informed, engaged, and passionate electorate on the move for justice.

All of you working in concert with beautiful organizations like the American Friends Service Committee -- and its allies.

And even though — together — we’re more powerful than the vice of big money in our elections, we must fight its impact on every level of government.

This is number three.

There are many national groups battling against the tide of big money let loose after the Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision. We also can and must take action at state and local levels.

For example, in Massachusetts, I’ve introduced bills to limit the maximum political donations to candidates and to super-PACs in the Commonwealth, and to ban political donations by companies owned by entities outside of the U.S. And I’ve co-sponsored a bill to require presidential candidates to submit their tax returns to get on the ballot. Cities and towns in my
district, the Hampshire, Franklin, Worcester district, have also passed ordinances limiting political donations at the municipal level. We can do this. And we must.

And finally number four -- and you’re nailing this one: Be bold. This is not the time for half measures or fear. This is a “leap and the net will appear” moment. We’re facing big problems. Problems festering long before 2016. And big problems need big solutions — the kind that are driven from people in public service.

People will tell you, “It’s not possible. It’s just not done this way.” Hear those words as an invitation to try. And if you fail, terrific. Just fail fast and move on. If you hold on to something that’s not working, you’re blocking what’s next.

I’ll close by sharing a quick litany of some hard-earned wisdom:

I’ve learned that we have to think short-term and long-term in the same moment. Because we need both. We must deal with what’s in front of us and we also have to remember that there are solutions to problems that we can’t even imagine. Yet. This means that we have to be in the weeds of an issue and 30,000 feet above at the same time. We have to be open to the possibility that a square peg just might fit into that round hole. Someday.

Next: Do everything you can to find reciprocity in the work you take up. Peace and justice work, grassroots organizing isn’t a one-way street. We get back way more than we give knowing that we’re part of something bigger than us as individuals. Understanding that from the beginning will help prevent us from getting crispy, which is my word for burnout. Seek and find resilience in ways that work for you.

And: People — advocates, activists, those most affected by injustice, policy analysts in public service — make government work. In Massachusetts, I’d wager that vast majority of staff and officials in the State House go to work each day with the best interest of the Commonwealth at the top of their minds.

But it’s the pressure from the grassroots that makes us move. One of the reasons I wanted to serve in government was that I’d been on the outside of this equation during my career, reaching across to nudge elected officials, and I wanted to be an elected official who reached back — because that connection is at the heart of transformative power and possibility.

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And lastly: Those of us who are privileged enough to work on these critical issues have to pay it forward with an eye toward equity. We have to help build tomorrow’s diverse leaders and then make room for their brilliance by listening deeply and making sure they have a proverbial seat at the table.

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I often tell my state senate team that the squeaky wheel gets the grease.
It’s clear that you here tonight are some of the squeakiest wheels in the region.

You’re on the phones. In the streets. Deep in the budget and policy weeds. And raising your voices at the State House.

And I know New Hampshire is better because of it.

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This is how we win. In western Mass -- like here in New Hampshire -- we and you don’t just vote on election day every couple of years and call it a day. We show up. You all show up. Tirelessly. On the frontlines of issues that matter to the people of your state.

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Here’s the end of Shaw’s famous quote: “I want to be thoroughly used up when I die,” Shaw said. “For the harder I work the more I live. Life is no ‘brief candle’ for me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have got hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.”

The splendid torch burning brightly for our communities belongs to all of you now. Passed to you by great ones.

Now, you’re the ones we’ve been waiting for. I’m in awe of what you’re doing in the world. Lord knows we need you.

I’m tremendously grateful. Proud to fight for our common good alongside you in Massachusetts. And humbled to be your colleague.

Contact Senator Jo Comerford at https://senatorjocomerford.org/

Photos by Kath Allen