

Bystanders or Upstanders

Presented by the Worship Committee on December 8, 2019

Chalice Lighting

by R. T. Bennett

Learn to light a candle in the darkest moments of someone's life. Be the light that helps other see; it is what gives life its deepest significant.

Will You Be Bystanders or Upstanders?

by Erica L. Bartlett

On March 19, I got the surprise of being inspired by something related to my job.

It was at an annual conference that my company puts on for our customers, and I had spent the day before explaining to those customers why we hadn't done the things we had promised them the year before. Plus, I was annoyed that I'd needed to travel for work on a Sunday, I was still grieving the loss of my 20-year-old cat two weeks earlier, and I didn't like having to be "on" all the time for our customers for three days in a row.

In short, I wasn't in a particularly good mood when I walked into the keynote presentation by a photographer named Platon. But he blew me away.

He talked about his work photographing people in power, and seeing how that power shaped them and the world around them. This included many American presidents, as you can see [here](#), a few others in American politics, and some outside, including Vladimir Putin.*

Platon also talked about his social justice work, trying to bring awareness to the power imbalances in many places, including the Congo and our own country. He showed us pictures he's taken of those who are poor and marginalized.

And at the end of the presentation, he asked us a question. "Will you be bystanders or upstanders?"

It was a rhetorical question, but inwardly I said, “Upstander!” I’m not sure who there would have answered differently.

Right then, I wanted to do something with that feeling. I would have loved to talk to a close friend about it or to be able to go back to my room and write in my journal, or gone out and done something related to social justice.

Instead, we had just a ten-minute break before the next session, barely long enough for me to make a few notes to myself so I could go back to those thoughts.

Then life happened, and I didn’t have much chance to think about it again until a couple of months later when another work event brought the question to mind. This time it came up while I went through our sexual harassment prevention training, which had a section called “Bystanders to Upstanders.”

What I found interesting about the work training is that it addressed the elephant in the room.

Most of us want to do the right thing and say we’ll be upstanders, but it doesn’t always happen. Why not? Why is it that when you see something you think is wrong, you don’t necessarily act?

Certainly, this is true for me. I try to act or call attention to things I feel are wrong, but I don’t always.

The training at work offered a few explanations. You might not know how to act when a difficult situation comes up, such as witnessing sexual harassment. Maybe you worry that you’ll do more harm than good. Maybe it feels safer to stay out of things that don’t seem to involve you.

I also thought of other possibilities. Maybe you don’t fully register what you’re seeing at the moment or recognize it for what it is. Maybe you don’t have the emotional or mental bandwidth to take on yet something else.

Or maybe you don’t act because you feel like it won’t do any good, that the problems are too systemic and widespread, and even if you say something, it won’t matter.

Suddenly I realized how very easy it is to talk myself into being a bystander. I'm grateful that I've never had to confront the sexual harassment issue at work, but I wondered how I might respond in such a situation. Would I feel too afraid or overwhelmed to act after all?

Then I remembered one of the other photos Platon showed us. It's of the Maison Dorcas Women's Singing Group in the Congo, a music therapy group designed to provide psychological support and community to vulnerable women. Despite abuses they know of and have suffered, they find strength and solidarity in their singing.

That's when I realized the flaw in my thinking. Sometimes it may be necessary to stand by, but I was forgetting what can happen when you stand up. How being brave can make a difference not only in someone else's life but also in your life.

And being an upstander doesn't have mean taking on everything all by yourself, trying to save everyone, or making yourself a target.

It simply means doing something, anything, that will help, whether it's taking photographs or singing or acting more directly. Even better, I know for myself that when I start with something small and see how that helps another person, I'm inspired to take the next, bigger step.

When I remember to think of it that way, my heart lifts, and my courage rises. And I can say with greater confidence that I **will** be an upstander.

*Platon's photos can be viewed here: <http://www.platonphoto.com> and here <https://www.thepeoplesportfolio.org>.

All Rise

by Mike Luce

When the phrase "bystanders and upstanders" came up I first thought of the words in a binary kind of way. One very good, praiseworthy even, the other with a hint of laziness, maybe selfishness. As I thought about this a little more though I started to see the nuances of the phrase.

Some upstanders write letters to the editor, go to demonstrations, often with a cool sign and arrange significant parts of their life around their cause or causes. Most of us can't do that, either by nature or by circumstance. We can still stand up from a mostly sitting position though, springing to our feet and showing ourselves only occasionally. Most of the time, we're going to be looking like bystanders.

When should I be one of those early risers, starting at the dawn of a new cause, calling attention to a subject everyone around me is blissfully unaware of? Will I just annoy people? But what if nobody dares to be an annoyance? I don't want the rep of being the man of a thousand causes, but I'm not the proverbial potted plant either. In either case, people tend to stop paying attention at all.

I really don't like going to demonstrations, but on occasion I'll go if motivated enough. The thing which will get me out there is likely to be fear or anger based. I'd rather do a lot of what I do quietly. Honestly, I'd rather be a supportive but quiet bystander most of the time. Don't write off being a bystander. It's emotionally energy efficient, at least until it isn't.

There's a quiet, sort of insidious toll to being just a bystander. It saps your spirit over time. Whatever you ignore is still there, seeping into you one way or another. Lots of things can mitigate to keep someone on the sidelines while toxicity rises. If you're the one who's right now enjoying all the privileges some others are not, and you could put your own privileges at risk by poking your head up, some consideration is in order. Will you be effective? How? If you don't stand up, how long will you be able to stand that? If you do put yourself out there, what's it going to cost you? What do you say and to whom? There are a myriad of questions, particular to each situation. Just as there's a toll to being a bystander, there are for sure costs to being an upstander.

As with lots of things, it's nice to have company. Numbers matter. Any change movement needs support. Think of the proverbial bed of nails. That's fine as long as there are thousands of nails sticking up, but if that board has just one or two, then getting a hammer is going to be part of going to bed. To really grapple with all that faces us today, we need those thousands of nails sticking up to get us to a higher level, and it'll still be pretty uncomfortable.

And maybe it should remain a little uncomfortable. We don't want to get too smug in our newfound groupthink, or we might just start looking like we perceive some of those other people standing up across the way to be. I guess the moral I take from it is to keep looking around when you stand up.

Will You, Won't You?

by Rick Kimball

I woke up early one recent morning, and directed my sleepy thoughts toward upstanders and bystanders. Poetry began to emerge.

*A pacifist UU named Will
Found burglars attacking his till
Should he put up a fight?
Oh what will be right?
For pacifist burglarized Will?*

Poor Will has a problem. His instincts and inclinations are bumping into each other. Does he act as pacifist bystander, or as upstanding and possibly pugnacious justice seeker?

The choice of bystander or upstander, of activist or observer, is not always easy. Let's take a case study from the news. Not long ago, I was at my computer with a few moments to kill before Tirrell and I went out. I decided to click on CNN and look for any news story I could find not connected with Trump. I found this headline:

"Man hit by lightning has shoes blown off, clothes charred."

What should you do if you look out the window and see lightning strike somebody? Run out to assist in a dangerous electrical storm and so test the theory that lightning never strikes the same place twice – and risk adding your body to the one lying prone on the sidewalk?

Or would you follow my instinct and ask the man to do it again so you could get a picture? Or grab the shoes and take them to Goodwill if they don't fit you? Or chase the dogs that the man was walking and that ran off when lightning struck? Or stand quavering, or . . . or . . . or?

Surely the upstanding thing to do is what I first suggested, to run out, despite the storm, to try and help the victim. In this case, which actually happened in Texas recently, you would have discovered that the man was not breathing. What then? Try CPR, even if you are not sure you remember how and you fear doing more harm than good? Another conundrum. But instead of trying to solve it, let 's revisit the Texas story. What actually happened? Well, workers in a nearby veterinary clinic rushed into the storm, applied CPR, and saved the man's life. He was sore, at last report, but expected to make a full recovery. I don't know if his shoes still fit.

So what do we learn from this? First, that CNN missed the story. Here were good Samaritans saving a life, and CNN focused on the victim's blown-off shoes. Fake news? No, but foolish news.

We also learn that the act or don't act decision is situational and tricky. You might have to think hard, and you have no time to do it. If a man is lying on the sidewalk apparently dead, you can't run home to write Dear Abby and ask her advice on how to respond. Your assessment of whether you can and should help must be made in seconds, with instinct, perhaps, replacing thought. That was the case with the dogs. Their internal nature responded to external danger and they ran away.

Well, it's easy and even fun to analyze and critique situations in which we are not involved. But we all face upstanding/bystanding challenges every day, some of them sudden emergencies like accidents, and some of them ongoing, like environmental choices, and some of them extremely discomfiting, like threats from our own government. How can we, how should we prepare ourselves to meet such challenges?

The same way we prepare for the rest of life. By knowing ourselves, by developing and adhering to our own personal principles, by understanding and honoring our own strengths and weaknesses. By preparing to overcome the instinct to flee. And by hoping, even praying, to be and do our best, whatever challenges we may face.

Oh give us the strength and the will

To know if to act or sit still

Should we stand and be brave?

Should we rush to a cave?

Oh give us the strength and the will.

And do it fast, please, because with all that's happening in the world, we may need very soon to stand up and act in uncomfortable, even scary ways.

Blessed be.

Three Choices

by Susan Selbe

The other day I was listening to the NPR program On Point. The guest this day was an author named Alan Furst, whose genre is historical spy novels.

It so happens that Tom Hanks is a huge fan, and the show opened with an excerpt from an interview with Mr Hanks, who begins by describing an interview he had heard with Mr Furst. He begins by describing the world during Nazi domination, and the European resistance against it.

“Everybody who was in that arena at that time had a choice of being one of 3 things, that was determined by their character and their circumstances. They could either be a hero or they could be a villain, or they could be a coward. Those were the three choices they had. And I thought ‘that is exactly what life prescribes for all of us. What are you going to choose to be? What do we have the wherewithall to be. What do we have the stomach for, the training, the desire. What’s our initial instinct? To run, to flee, or to lean in, get involved, or just stand back and watch? That pretty much wraps up every circumstance a human being can find themselves in.”

Then Mr. Furst’s comment, “I think there’s always a period as there was in France up until 1942, there was no French resistance, and I think people have a preliminary instinct that ‘I can live with this, it will go away.’ And then one day you realize it isn’t going to go away unless people do something, and that, in fact, you are one of the people.”

We all know the story of the frog--put it in boiling water and it will jump right out. Put it in comfortable water and slowly bring it to a boil and it will boil away.

I've lived in the most comfortable times in all of human history. I've tried to do it with a conscience, tried to do my part to make the world a better place, attempted to have a relatively small energy and consumption footprint, did my part not increasing the population bomb, protested wars, protested guns and sexism and the military industrial complex.

But all that time, I've had a roof over my head, clean running water, warmth in the winter, garden space in the summer, a sense of safety and physical security.

I wonder how much I have in common with the frog. I'm getting tired now, of living in dangerous times. I thought the Viet Nam War era was so very dangerous, and then the Reagan lies about trickle down, and worse yet, the Iraq War based on warmongering pols latching on to invented information to justify it.

But we are now in the most dangerous of times, with centralized mass media controlled by our own corporatocracy, and wealthy despots gaining power around the world, including in our own country.

Am I a hero, a villain, a coward?

Can I live with this? Have I realized it won't go away unless people do something, and in fact, I am one of the people?

Closing Words

by Jarod K. Anderson

Kindness. Gentleness. Empathy.

These things are fires shining in the forest night. They must be tended, but in tending them we are illuminated. We become a target for things that thrive in darkness.

So, as ever, love is tied to risk.

And, as ever, it's worth the danger.