

Linda Simmons
Waiting With Hope
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On May 26 2011, at a commencement speech I was invited to attend, the first and only female President in all of Africa, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of Liberia, spoke to the class of 2011. She arrived decorated in dancing layers of cloth. I could hear the swooshing of the elegant material as she moved. She stood straight and strong. Right away, I knew I was in the presence of someone who was noble, who was great. I do not say this easily as I am a trained skeptic, even if a tiny bit of a romantic. But regardless of from where you come, when Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is near, you know that you are in the presence of someone unusual. Since she spoke on that refulgent summer's day, she has become one of 3 women who won the Nobel Peace prize.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's story is not one of privilege. She is not Americo-Liberian as the freed African-American slaves are called that began resettling this area in 1820 with the help of the American Colonization Society that was supported. The American Colonization Society was anti-slavery but it was not anti-racist. It was founded on the notion that it was only by removing ex-slaves from this country that there would be any possibility of a life of dignity for them. In response to this, the abolition movement, supported by many more prominent Unitarians, was formed.

In 1847, these resettled former slaves named this colonized land in Africa, Liberia. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf grew up poor, her mother and father members of the indigenous population. She married at 17 and had 4 children. Her marriage became abusive and she later divorced. She received a scholarship and studied business at Madison College, Wisconsin and then went back to Liberia, and was awarded another scholarship to study at the JFK school of Government, getting her Masters of Public

Administration.

Sirleaf worked in the government of Liberia at various times, and fled from the government of Liberia at others. In 1980, there was a military coup and Sirleaf was taken to prison and told she would be buried alive but was eventually released.

Sirleaf ran for vice president in 1985 and lost, was placed under arrest and sentenced to 10 years hard labor for sedition. That sentenced was commuted. The first civil war from 1989-1996 ended with elections in 1997 in which Sirleaf ran and lost and left the country in exile again. In this election, she gained the title, "Iron Lady." In 2005 she ran for and became president.

She took over a nation of 3.5 million people that was still struggling to recover from more than a decade of civil war that claimed more than 200,000 lives and displaced a third of the population. Liberia is one of the poorest nations in the world, with an 85 percent unemployment rate and 60 percent of the population under 25 years old and many of those hardened criminals forced into the lives of combatants at an early age.

As I listened to her tell us all seated in the elegance and protection of an American University setting, far from the pain that her eyes and heart were full of, to be wary of cynicism, to remember that hope can change the world, something in me could scarcely breathe. How is it possible that you can hope after all that you have been through?

One of the many things that most entrances me about Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is her ability to have waited, from a very young age, to make a difference. She waited through two civil wars. She waited through prison time and exile. She waited through abuse and sorrows I can only guess at. Where did

she find her courage? What was the source of her hope?

I knew then and I know now that Sirleaf has something to teach us about waiting and we all wait for something from time to time don't we? We wait for employment. We wait for our children to be employed. We wait for love. We wait for our children to find love and sometimes we wait for our parents to find love again. We wait for returned health. We wait for those we love to have returned health. We wait to learn if we can retire with dignity, with health care, with housing. We wait for the birth of children. We wait for our children and loved ones to find their way in the world.

What do you wait for? I know we are not supposed to wait. We are supposed to be present. But we do wait. We do. And so I wonder, how can we wait with courage when it comes to us to wait? How can we wait with hope when it comes to us to wait?

But before I could hear the answer that Sirleaf's life was speaking, I had to dig deeper into the culture around us, the culture we are steeped in every day. What is it that keeps us in anxiety so often when what we need is hope? We are a highly anxious people, becoming more anxious all the time. We have reason. I am not blaming us. But does this reason mean there is no other way?

Why do we find it so difficult to wait with hope? Why, in the face of so much uncertainty about the future do we turn away from each other, do we turn toward our tvs and our computers and consume things that are not good for us and build walls around our hearts. Where did we learn this? Where did we learn that this is the best way to cope with uncertainty?

The book by Harvard University Professor, Yochai Benkler called, *The Penguin and the Leviathan* helped me answer some of these questions. Benkler writes about the theory in the west that most of us

are familiar with: human beings are self interested and only act in the world to maximize our profits, not just material profits but all that profits us: the theory of the invisible hand.

Problem is says Benkler, it isn't true, or fully true. Turns out, we actually like to cooperate more than previously considered. We're also driven by empathy, solidarity, and concern with what we think is right and what we think is fair and we are capable of trusting and being trustworthy.

Benkler derived this from looking at business models that are working, like Wikipedia and Linux whose symbol is the Tux and, in whose honor he calls the working model, the Penguin. The failing model he calls the Leviathan from the famous book the Leviathan by Thomas Hobbes which takes its title from the biblical Leviathan in Job.

Benkler's thesis comes down to this: What we are is a people that need each other, that need to care, to cooperate, to do good, to contribute, in order to thrive. In which case, all of our behaviors that cut us off from this- isolation, fierce judgments of right and wrong, good and bad that we use to keep each other in and out of each other's lives- breed anxiety which breeds lack of happiness.

Isolation breeds anxiety. Thinking we are only safe when we are taking care of ourselves, breeds anxiety. Thinking we can only control the outcomes when we act in our own self interest, breeds anxiety. And so we end up waiting in fear, waiting in pain, waiting with dread.

Ellen Sirleaf Johnson writes in her book, *This Child Will Be Great*, about when she was in jail in 1980 and they told her they would bury her alive. She would yell at her jailers, her tormentors, scream out at them. Do you know what she would say to them? She would not tell them to remember their decency, though she could have. She did not tell them to remember their souls or their god, though she surely could have done.

She said, "Think about your mother. How would you feel if someone was about to do this to her." She called these men back to their families, back to their connections, back to what made them human.

When a guard came later to her cell to rape her on one of those long nights, and another man of higher rank stopped that rape and asked Ellen Sirleaf if it was true that she was from Gola, a small village that he was also from. She said it was true. He told her to say something in Gola. She knew only a few words of that native tongue of her father's. She said Ma Keye, which means hello and then said thank you in Gola. The soldier said okay and guarded her cell for the rest of the night. He recognized her as part of who he was. It was the words, Ma Keye, hello, in a language they shared. It was the call to the humanity they shared, the call to what made them part of each other's lives.

The book by Yonchai Benkler tells us that we are not creatures who are well when we are serving only our self interests, when we are only maximizing our profits, when we are withdrawing and insulating and isolating ourselves in response to the fear of uncertainty. Benkler tells us that serious people are convinced that individualism is the only truth that offers security.

This ole leviathan will be hard to shake, but shake it we must if we are to walk into the future together and there is no future friends if we do not walk there together.

So, what is this ole leviathan. Do you know it from the Hebrew Bible? It appears in Job as a great and terrible sea monster. This is some of what the bible says from Job 41:

⁸If you lay a hand on him, you will remember the struggle and never do it again!

²⁸ Arrows do not make him flee,

²⁹ A club seems to him but a piece of straw, he laughs at the rattling of the lance.

³³ Nothing on earth is his equal— a creature without fear.

The leviathan is the ultimate creature of isolation. He needs no one or nothing. He seeks to profit only himself. And if we look really deep in ourselves, we admire him don't we? We have been taught somewhere in ourselves to look up to this monster living in the depths. Self sufficient. Beyond harm.

Now take the penguins on the other hand. They have wings but cannot fly. They are blubbery. They live in large flocks and cooperate to stay alive. They have few defenses except their natural beauty and coloring. They live peaceably and in dependent herds.

Not many of us feel a resonance with this description. Mostly, it sounds vulnerable. Still, we are more like penguins than leviathans friends. We need each other. We have few defenses except our coloring and natural beauty. When we cooperate, we feel at peace. Harmony extends our lives. We tend toward being too blubbery too.

What does this mean for us? What if next time we were really afraid of what is to become of the economy or the environment or the system of health care or democracy or our own health or the health of another... what if we called the Meeting House and said, I want to start a group and we meet here and we look in each other's eyes and talk about how scary it can feel to be alive, how lonely it feels sometimes, how we can't sleep sometimes, how we feel numb sometimes and maybe even admit to each other what we do when we feel numb. And say to each other that we will be here for each other, that no matter what happens, we are swimming in this sea together.

In the story, What is heaven, What is hell, hell was becoming too tied to what we believe ourselves to

be, too tied to defending this belief, this position. Heaven was relinquishing this strong hold of individuality and recognizing that peace is only possible in bowing to each other, to the lessons that can only come to us by showing up in all our messiness and risking being seen and trusting that there is a place for us still, right here.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf could wait with hope because she knew that her people waited with her. She could wait with hope because she knew she was not alone. She could wait with hope because in the face of terrible odds, she could dream a dream that she knew her people dreamed with her. And she could do this, I believe, because she had alive in her the understanding that it is only together that hope and peace can be forged. That is it only together that a vision can be made manifest. That it is only by stepping into the storm of life fully that life can be lived, fully.

When we wait together, faith shows up, love shows up, beauty and hope show up, rise up between us like the mist on the sea.

Wait together. Let the waiting be a way of being together, and let being together be a way of life, a way of being here and now.

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, beautiful against the blue sky, said these words to us at the end of her commencement speech:

As you approach your future, there will be ample opportunity to become jaded and cynical, but I urge you to resist cynicism. The world is still a beautiful place, and change is possible. With robust hope and resilience, there is no telling what can be accomplished. Go forth, with the wind behind you and embrace the future.

Amen.

Closing Poem

Waiting, by Linda Simmons

Waiting for the moon
I lost myself in light
And the shadows that chased me
Knew my soul.

Waiting for love
I tripped over my longing
And fell into my arms.
Here I am, I cried, Here I am.

Waiting for peace,
I woke up to this moment
Surrounded by compassion
I let myself fly
And learned the wind
By repeating your
Name.