“Letters to Hope”
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A Nashville August in 1920: simmering, wishful, ambiguous. An aerial view of the looming state capital would show a peculiar flower garden caught in its shadow: a jumble of yellow and red roses, watered by hope and pride and even hatred. Satin sashes glint in the sunlight with hopeful but exhausted little yellow blossoms tacked above a controversial declaration: Votes For Women. Among them are men with red roses below flushed faces and proud, furrowed brows. The men dabbed their foreheads. The women perspired. It was only half for the heat.

Within the walls of the state capitol building Harry T. Burn, twenty-four years old and the youngest member to serve on the state legislature, felt heat from the inside out. He clutched a soiled envelope in his slick hands. A red rose bloomed from his heart where it was pinned to his lapel, a designation reserved for those opposing women’s enfranchisement. Burn felt the fatigue of the weeks of heated debate within the legislature. The women in the Tennessee legislature bore the weight of history.

The note tucked in the tattered envelope was from his mother, and it read:
“Hurrah, and vote for suffrage! Don’t keep them in doubt. I notice some of the speeches against. They were bitter. I have been watching to see how you stood, but have not noticed anything yet . . . be a good boy and help Mrs. Catt put the ‘rat’ in ratification.”

Signed, the mother who saved suffrage.

I imagine civic virtue like this: Burn clearing his throat, folding his hands in his lap, over the little paper holding the future. His eyes were faraway, posture stiff; his own men milled around in self-assured anticipation, believing that this is a quick box to check off before a sunlit afternoon lunch with their wives and children.

The legislature hall echoed as the speaker called for the ratification vote to break a 48-48 tie. Burn’s “Aye” in response was so hurried and hushed that it took several moments for anyone to realize it even existed. Hardly past boyhood in the Tennessee legislature, Harry Burn swallowed thickly and braced himself in anticipation of the wrath of his colleagues.

There was a beat of silence as the collective body of shocked onlookers and legislators processed the moment. Then came the creaks and groans of a changing world. The crowds erupted.
The brave and bold Harry Burn compelled to defy the orthodoxy of his party, proved himself a Statesman. His defiant action for a just cause enshrined him in history. Resting on the other side of the scales of justice was Phoebe Ensminger Burn. Though she held little more than a yellow flower and less than an ounce of societal power in the palm of her hand, she knew how much more it weighed in capability. She knew that her power was to speak up where she could be detected, where her son could pick her voice out of a crowd of any size. Her responsibility was to not be afraid of her own voice when she heard it out loud.

And this is where leaders are sifted from the crowd: they empathize. Those who are true leaders lead not for the sake of leading, but for the sake of those being led. Too often, those appointed to positions of stature in society eagerly soak up the praise of the majority in order to stuff their hands with votes or flimsy public approval. Popularity is the sunlight in their eyes that prevents them from seeing what is right, and seeing the contents of the hearts of all. Very little do they roll up their sleeves on that playing field and begin sowing until it is level.

“With great power comes great responsibility.” In this famous quote, it is first important to define justice, power, and responsibility. Stripped of all tacky political garnish or opinion, justice is the concept of everyone getting what they deserve. Power lies in being able to extend past yourself: to hear the thud of walking in other shoes, the beat before the crowds erupt suspended. In other words, with the ability to be empathetic, you have the responsibility to act on what you see.

Modern society makes it very easy to prioritize funding for yourselves. With this development has come the muddling of the terms sympathy and empathy together: more and more we sympathize, not take the responsibility to empathize. It is very easy to glance askance at the newsstand at Starbucks and frown at the urgent proclamation bolded on the front page. It takes little fatigue to stand apart from a tornado thundering down on your neighbor’s houses and raise your voice to comment on what a pity it is over the sound of shingles being ripped from the roofs. It is much more difficult, and thus more powerful, to plunge headfirst into the whirl of the storm and lead them to safety.

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Power is not standing before a crowd and winning over the well-rested hearts of the cheering majority. Power is seeing the quiet figures at the back of the crowd, at the bottom of the ocean, in the footnotes of the doctrines of justice.

But power is a lighter crown to wear than responsibility, as Burn likely realized. It is by no means an easy feat to assume another’s burden, nor is the lack of harmony on this planet an easy realization. But to come to understand that you have that capability is power. Discontent with carrying on the charade of perpetual sunny weather has value. This is what Burn was able to do: remove his male lens and assume the female lens, and see the kaleidoscope of a different world. That lens lead him to justice. Justice gives us hope. That is why it is important for those with responsibility to act boldly and bravely. Hope, unfurling yellow petals like rose hearts, veined like a human body, the glint of the sunlight through the writhing surface of the sea as seen from under. Hope is enough of a reason.”

As much of our Constitution was left vague, and as much as humanity had to mark with our own revisions as we forged on through the years, this is the sense I have always had from that: they left us room to grow. To grow is our power, and our responsibility. They found a small patch of level field and fenced in a large garden and planted a small seed, and whether that would grow into yellow or red roses they didn’t know, but it grew. The American life can be chaotic, but it is beautiful because there is hope.

With great power comes great responsibility to remember those who are not you - the single mother whose feet sunk in the marshes of the American dream, the teenage boy who is fingertips away from the surface, the descendants of Carrie Chapman Catt and Burn and his mother. They who struggle. They who persist. They who hope.

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This is how you find leaders: trace the map of our human consciences across the earth. Follow the lattice made up of the lines of inequality and fear and pain. Find the people standing tall at the intersections, in the crossfire. They may not be loud or illustrate the stereotypical image of grandeur that leaders often come attached to, but they will be powerful.
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Many of them won’t echo the rest of the fear-lit world in their actions; a closer look will reveal that their pens are always moving. They are writing letters, and notes, specifically. Letters to us, to me, to you. Letters asking you to bookmark this page in your history textbook. To recognize the cadence of the words when they arise again, because they always do. Writing letters asking for a second chance, not their own, but yours. Writing letters to the world. Writing letters to the citizenship of the future, to the next face in the crowd who dares, the next Phoebe Ensminger Burn writing letters to the next Harry Burn. Writing letters to hope.

“How wonderful it is,” Anne Frank wrote, “that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”

There is no greater author of letters to hope than Anne Frank. She wrote them with love in a loveless time, with emotion when so many societies were absolved of it, when compassion and empathy were rare treasures. But most of all, she wrote with hope. Anne Frank’s diary is the world’s longest letter to hope.

And perhaps it is time that we answered

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On August 19th, 1920, Harry Burn stood silhouetted before the legislature on its first day in a brand new world. The 19th amendment, officially ratified by Tennessee, had emerged on the other side of all its towering obstacles. Burn spoke with no hesitation this time: “I believe we had a moral and legal right to ratify.” Though not physically, his mother stood beside him. “I know that a mother’s advice is always safest for her boy to follow, and my mother wanted me to vote for ratification.”

For the moment I write of, he is hidden away in the attic of the Tennessee state capitol, the youngest man on the legislature and now the most hated in his party. A wilted red rose hangs off his lapel. As the crowds thunder on outside, he comes to realize what he is capable of.
Letters from Hope

A Washington, D.C. January in 2017: crisp, cloudy, purposeful. An aerial view of the country’s capital would show the strangest flower garden ever to throw down roots: a mix of knit hats saturated with pink topping women, men, and children. Their raised fists look a little bit like seeds. Messages of hope, power, and unity sprout from them and strive for the sun. There is no front or back of the crowd: just green, level playing field for miles. And not a single moment it took before the world began to improve.

Somewhere back in history, Phoebe Ensminger Burn smiles.

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At any given time in America, a young person hears the clamor of every voice in the swishing of the flag; not just the pride and the success but the hope, the fear, the untold stories. This is my responsibility as a writer, and yours; to pick out the voices that are trod upon and plant them in the soil to grow.

This is my power: I pick up my pen, and I begin.

Signed, the daughter who will help save justice.