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Political Living

Today is *Florence Luscomb Day*. No one else calls it that though some of her old friends would recognize the truth of my designation. Today I am again standing in a long winding line of people--women and men, old and young (though not enough of the young), those dressed in suits and those in plainer clothes. We're all waiting our turn to vote. With little to do, some read their morning paper while others look around for people to chat with. A neighbor from three streets away notices me behind her in line and turns to give me a slow sigh and a roll of her eyes. She wishes the line were short. After all, she has work to do. But I--I revel in this line, proof positive of peoples' desire to vote. My work is here; my work is to wait in this long line. I pass the time greeting other neighbors, catching up on their family news and the local political fight over a chain store's effort to bully their way into our neighborhood. I look around some more and realize that, though I'm a former elected town official, I don't know most of the people in line with me. At first I worry that I'm losing my touch, but then remember the old political adage that what distinguishes a successful political event from a failed one is the number of people unknown to me, an organizer. I love being here, bored, with all these strangers. It will be at least a half hour before I get to perform the rituals: state my address first for the poll taker, then my name, walk into the booth, pull the lever that closes the curtain, then pull the levers for my candidates and my ballot questions. When I close myself into the warmth of the booth, I don't hurry to pull the lever back to open the curtain. Instead I linger to prolong the great moment of voting itself.

Florence Luscomb died over ten years ago, but her soul goes marching on. I met her when she moved into our cooperative house at the age of 87. She was still phoning and marching for people's rights. As her mind faded in her mid 90's, I proudly became her legal "conservator." At that time, our daughter Anna was small. I always took her with me to vote and while waiting in line told her stories of great human rights activists like Florence. One good story for children was of the time in 1918 when Florence persuaded the owner of the circus to put a drape over his lead elephant as they paraded through Boston: *Votes for Women!* the elephant proclaimed.. Florence would do almost anything and go anywhere to get women the vote. She learned to drive a car just for the suffrage campaign. She took the boat to England to learn strategies from suffragists there. Once women won the vote, Florence wrote in her journal, "Now that we have the vote, I must decide what the next outrageous thing is to do."

Years after first taking Anna to vote--too many years after--Nelson Mandela came to Harvard to speak, a free man who had finally won the vote in his own country. Anna and I both shouted (and I ululated a bit, having learned that joyous sound in southern Africa) and we cried. We stretched our hands up and out to catch the spirit of this man, another human who wanted to vote. As we rode the "T" home after, Anna told me, "I don't want to hurt your feelings, but Nelson Mandela meant more to me than to you. After all, I grew up with him.)

Indeed she did. When it was my turn to tuck her into bed, I sometimes sang simple freedom songs, including about people tearing down the walls of Mandela's prison cell. The first music that got Anna (and me) dancing was in 1986 when she was four and the rock single "*Free Nelson Mandela!*" hit the charts. The 80's were easy years for anti-apartheid organizing in the U.S.

Everyone had heard of Mandela. No more would people look at the ribbon on my lapel and ask "Who is MAN-del-LAH?" The 70's were a different story.

Oh, I could recount many victories, including the bit part I played in the US movement against apartheid. I could bring to my account all the drama of those days in the 80's, and I could amaze you the reader with the awe and power of our victories, culminating with the long lines of voters waiting for their turn on that fine warm day in April 1994 in South Africa. I could also forget to mention that trying fact I have learned from hard experience: change does not come easily, if at all. Change is exhausting. It requires all your resources. To start with, it demands your time. Then it demands your expertise on the issue. It demands your ability to think strategically and to write and speak persuasively. It demands your ability to endure long meetings without getting testy, tired or personal. Perhaps most challenging of all, it demands conviction which flies in the face of all the pundits and political commentators--that you *can* win against all odds.

How do I know this? I am an expert. Not at these tasks, though I do many of them passably well. No, my expertise is merely in trying. My greatest achievements did not occur in those glorious 80's when we made or changed laws and created a path-breaking sanctions movement that others now use as a model for their cause. It was in those years that I flatly told a friend "I feel powerful."

I did not feel powerful in the 70's. Yet those are the years I look back to with awe at my confidence and earnestness. During one period I remember our small committee for "southern African solidarity" agonizing for two months to get a slide show "*Rhodesia Shall Be Free*" just right. Then we offered to show it free to

church and community groups. One time I was sent to the Lena Park Community Center, a well respected settlement house in Boston. I discovered my audience was an enthusiastic but somewhat baffled group of mentally retarded African-American adults in a day program. Yet, still we kept at it, making slide shows, teaching people, holding demonstrations, organizing picket lines, introducing legislation through friendly representatives. We met little external success. In 1975 we held a small celebration in someone's home for Mozambique's independence from Portuguese colonialism. Though there were only some forty of us there, the man who gave the toast "Rhodesia will be free next!!" five years later became the first minister of constitutional development in the newly independent Zimbabwe, once Rhodesia. Fourteen years later, South Africans went to vote, some of them voting from exile, here in Boston at our majestic State House. I was there, watching women in big beautiful sun hats, men in suits, girls in party dresses and boys in jackets and ties. They came as families to vote and to celebrate their freedom. They met friends, took as others' pictures, laughed. And they waited in long lines to do it.

Right now I am trying again to find a place in public affairs. To join again with Florence, with Nelson, with all the others who work for the common good and not just the good of their own hearth and home. The political struggle is only easy in retrospect. It is easy to tell the story of Florence and the suffrage movement, of Nelson Mandela and the anti-apartheid movement, and to tell it all to my son or daughter while merely waiting in line to vote. Political change is not easy. But it's worth doing. Some day my children will stand in line to vote with their children and will pass the time with a story or two. What stories will they call up on that day? What truth will go marching on? Will I have managed to overcome my

exhaustion and cynicism to participate with new commitment and hopefulness in the struggle?