

THE CAPACITY TO TAKE IT

By Michael Ventura

December 27, 2013

Persevere. That word has been with us a long time, with little alteration. The Oxford English Dictionary traces it back over 2,000 years, from the Latin *perseverare* (“abide by strictly”), composed of *per* (“thoroughly”) and *severus* (“severe”). It worked its way into Old French, then Middle English, all the way to our English, virtually unchanged. It seems to be a word we really need.

The OED defines “persevere” thusly: “continue in a course of action even in the face of difficulty or with little or no prospect of success.” With little or no prospect. You go on because you go on. Because of what? Faith? Hope? Stubbornness? Not knowing any better? Or just to finally learn how the story, your particular story, turns out? Fill in the blank as to why. You go on. We go on.

My final paper for Mr. Judson’s 12th Grade English class ended like so: “Thank God, we go on, born to be doomed though we are.”

I was a teen without an ounce of angst, but I’d seen bad trouble up close, lots of it, and I wrote that line in a spirit of defiance at what used to be called “the human condition.” Not “a” human condition, but “the,” because everything changes but the basic stakes of what it means to be a frail human being in whatever jungle we make for ourselves.

These contemplations were stirred recently by a magazine I sometimes write for, *The Sun*. The editors put out a call for essays on perseverance. I drafted one and they passed on it (no hard feelings, guys – ask about another topic and I’ll give it another shot). But the concept stuck, because it surprised me – as though I’d been asked to write about water or air, because, like those elements, perseverance is everywhere. The day you’re unable to persevere is your last day.

Just look around. For instance:

Every December, outside the market where I shop, there’s a Salvation Army bell-ringer who looks like Stephen Hawking because he’s in pretty much the same shape. He lives in a motorized chair and speaks with slurred words; his hands and arms are of limited use. Decembers, he’s outside the market’s entrance ringing his bell and saying “Thank you” and “Merry Christmas” when you put money into the Salvation Army kettle. And, no, I don’t feel sorry for him. I admire him. Perseverance? It takes more perseverance to be him for a day than it takes to be me for a year and a day.

Or consider my favorite cashier at the pet store where I buy my cat’s organic eats: That young woman works two full-time jobs and carries a full university course load so that she can earn her masters and be a public school teacher.

When, on a Friday evening, I see a couple in their mid-20s take their three small children to a “Kids Eat Free on Fridays” *taqueria*, I behold them in quiet awe: Those people have signed up to persevere.

So have the mothers and fathers I see in the supermarket, singly and in couples, with one or two or three or four small children in tow. Sometimes the kids sit in the cart or ride the cart’s undercarriage. Economists who say there’s little inflation don’t seem to notice that the price of basic foods has skyrocketed and working-class parents face the choice of

what-to-do-without-today with a grinding, it's-not-likely-to-get-better perseverance that I don't have to imagine because I remember my mother doing the same.

I live in a Title I neighborhood in the second-most conservative city in America: Lubbock, Texas. "Title I" is educational jargon for "poor" and the second-place rating is via the non-partisan Bay Area Center for Voting Research. (The most conservative city is Provo, Utah. Abilene, Texas, down the road from here about 150 miles, comes in third.)

In a place like Lubbock, you've got to be made of perseverance to be two small olive-skinned Muslim women who clearly "ain't from aroun' here." They brave the supermarket veiled in chadors. Not that my fellow Lubbockians are anything but well-mannered, well-meaning, and well-behaved; they very much are; but let's admit a slight air of nervy concern as everybody notices the Muslim women while pretending not to.

Lubbock friends who clearly remember the Fifties remember "white" and "colored" water fountains and bathrooms, and segregated schools and public places. So the other day when I saw a very black, very old woman at the market, I thought of the subject of this essay and said to myself: "Perseverance? I don't have a good enough imagination to picture what this woman and her family and her people had to go through here to persevere."

My partner teaches here in a Title I middle school where the National School Lunch Program serves children free and "reduced-price" meals. But there's a catch. There usually is. "School policy" is that if a child is even pennies short, that child must be denied the meal, *even if the meal has already been prepared*. The food goes in the garbage. That's the policy. But, school by school, teachers devise crafty little ways, out of their own pockets, to slip nickels and pennies to kids who need them, even though to do so is against the rules. Talk about perseverance.

Leave the precincts of the privileged, and most of what you see is perseverance.

It is nothing special, in that it is not unusual. It is how we, as a species, survive. Perseverance is the spine of the human condition. There's a lot we can do without, but we can't do without perseverance.

The great poet of perseverance was an American, Carl Sandburg (1878-1967). He's been out of fashion amongst the literati for some time. That's partly his fault: He didn't bother with the difference between his great and his shaky stuff, and he had the misfortune to become fabulously famous, enabling him to publish whatever he pleased (always dangerous for a writer). That said, Sandburg wrote three great books of poetry: *Chicago Poems* (1916), *Cornhuskers* (1918), and *The People, Yes* (1936).

Read these aloud, I suggest, and see how they sound in your voice:

From *Cornhuskers*: "For this man there is no name thought of – he has broken from jungles... -- circled the earth with ships – belted the earth with steel – swung with wings and a drumming motor in the high blue sky – shot his words on a wireless way through shattering sea storms – out from the night and out from the jungles his head keeps singing – there is no road for him but on and on."

From *The People, Yes*: "The people will live on,/ The learning and blundering people will live on./ They will be tricked and sold and again sold/ ... The people so peculiar in renewal and comeback,/ You can't laugh off their capacity to take it./ ... In the darkness with a great bundle of grief the people march,/ In the night, and overhead a shovel of stars for keeps, the people march:/ 'Where to? what next?'"

Can your voice carry those words? Can your voice take them from where they come from to where they're going?

Sandburg would say: Keep it up – you'll find the voice in you, the voice that connects to why you are here, for you are here because those who came before you, those who are in your blood and bones, persevered.

Where to? What next?

Happy New Year.

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