



Barbara Jordan: Speaking the Truth with Eloquent Thunder

Edited by Max Sherman

My Personal Introduction of Barbara Jordan

I take my cue from Henry Steele Commager, one of the nation's most distinguished historians and teachers, who died in March 1998. This consummate teacher said, "What every college must do is hold up before the young the spectacle of greatness" in history, literature, and life. I would go a step further and say that all of us in public service must hold up before the young—and the public—the spectacle of greatness.

How will we do this? If I have a theme, it centers on the life of Barbara Jordan, who was my friend and colleague for twenty-five years. For most people in public life, she symbolized what ethics and values are.

In 1988 Barbara almost drowned. I was at my mother's home in the Texas Panhandle when the call came informing me of the accident. I immediately boarded a plane and came to Austin. I went from the airport to the hospital. The intensive care area was closed, but being a politician, and in my youth a door-to-door Bible salesman, I found an open door and a friendly custodian who took me through the maze of hallways to her room. Her attending physician was still there. I identified myself and he let me stay. They were not sure she would live through the night. I held her hand, but because she was unconscious, she did not know I was there.

Later, while still in the hospital and unsure of her future, Barbara invited a few people to come and spend some time with her. We did not talk about politics or policy matters, but fundamental, basic values. We even worked in a little religion.

Barbara lived for eight additional years. That near miss with death shaped the rest of her life. I am convinced that she approached her teaching, her life, and her commentary on important public events with a new intensity. She had renewed her commitment to higher moral values.

In the administration of Governor Ann Richards of Texas, Barbara Jordan served as the "Ethics Czar." She addressed and charged every new group of gubernatorial appointees on matters of ethics. One of those appointees remembers that Barbara also scared them to death by telling them that they were now "public servants" and that there is a vast difference between "public" and "private." Barbara's message was this: you will make more money in the private sector; you can conduct most of your business in secret; you do not have to tell others how you spend your money. Private activity is more efficient; there are not as many rules and regulations. In public life you will not get rich; your business will be conducted in the open; your budgets will be open to the public; it is terribly inefficient because of the many rules and regulations to ensure public accountability.

She told those public servants and all of her students that public service is the price we pay for the space we occupy on this earth. It is the highest calling. One does not enter it lightly.

I was fortunate to have a choice seat at Barbara's funeral at the Good Hope Missionary Baptist Church in Houston. Luminaries and dignitaries from throughout the nation were there, as well as lines upon lines of average, ordinary people who had come to pay their respects. A nation was holding up "the spectacle of greatness" for the young and for the whole world to see.

Even now, some of the following events strike me as uncanny, even eerie.

At Christmastime in 1995, Barbara was hospitalized again. I went unannounced to her room, as I always did (because if you called ahead, the answer from hospitals, doctors, or attendants was always "no"). She was in intensive care, this time at another Austin hospital. The nurse told her I was there, and I was invited in. She was not well. While I was there, her doctor came to report some test results. I offered to leave, but she asked me to stay and asked the doctor to go ahead. It was not good news. Medically, Barbara was not given long to live. By her choice, she went home and had excellent care.

On a Tuesday morning, January 16, 1996, I went to my office, but an instinct told me to drive down to Manchaca, a few miles south of Austin, to see Barbara. Unannounced, I knocked on the door. I was invited in. The breathing machine was not working, and two nurses were trying to make it work. Two of Barbara's close friends asked me to come into another room to talk. They confided that Barbara "never thought she would die" and, consequently, had not

in the Texas State Cemetery.

By noon the first two tasks were completed and the third was on track. I had an appointment to meet the superintendent of the State Cemetery the next afternoon. All of us were going to meet at the lawyer's office the next morning at ten. Before we met for those appointments, just before 9:30 the next morning, Barbara's close friend called to tell me, "It's over." Barbara had just died, January 17, 1996.

We did meet later that morning. Stan, a longtime friend of Barbara's, and I were dispatched to pick a plot in the State Cemetery. The cemetery's superintendent had worked in the State Senate when Barbara and I served there. He called me "Senator Sherman" and called Barbara "Senator Jordan." He told us that because of recent renovations the old, original hill had three possible places. He picked out what he thought was the "choice" plot. The geography was perfect, but knowing Barbara's politics, we felt that the company of very conservative Texas politicians was problematic. Stan and I agreed we should look at the "second best" spot.

I should add that earlier I had asked Barbara's closest friend what we were looking for. She jokingly said, "Well, you know Barbara. It needs to be on the highest hill, and next to Stephen F. Austin [known as the 'Father of Texas']." I laughed with her, knowing that is what Barbara would have wanted, but now it appeared impossible.

Stan and I went to the spot on the back side of the hill, measured it, and looked over the adjoining graves. Stan said, "I think this is it." It was on the old hill. But I had the nagging feeling that we should see the last spot, which was considered unworkable. It had been reserved for Col. James W. Fannin, one of the early Texas heroes who was buried at Goliad. Fannin's daughter was already buried close by. But the proposed renovation plans of the State Cemetery included a separate area for "Texas Heroes." So, for the first time in more than one hundred years, this spot was available. The superintendent said, "It may not have enough space, since it was designed for little people of another era, and Senator Jordan was a big woman." I asked him to measure it anyway. "Lo and behold, Senator, it will work," he said. And that is where she was buried. Barbara's grave is at the top of the highest hill in the Texas State Cemetery, and it corners on the grave of Stephen F. Austin!

What does all of this have to do with ethics for those of us living and meeting tough challenges today?

Barbara Jordan distilled ethics down to its essence. But how? Where did this innate sense of right and wrong, of "oughtness," come from? I think it came out of her upbringing in a Baptist minister's manse, out of her education, out of her dogged determination against gender and racial barriers, out of her overcoming the frailties of the human body, out of her success as an elected public servant and her preeminence as a teacher.

This is what Barbara said in an interview given shortly before her death. It is a surprisingly simple definition:

Ethical behavior means being honest, telling the truth, and doing what you said you would do.

At an earlier, happier time, there was an all-day picnic at Barbara's riverside home to celebrate her first ten years of teaching and preparing graduate students for public service. Her students came back from Washington, D.C., and many other places across this country and abroad. One of those students, who returned to Texas for the first time in ten years in order to attend the event, said this about Professor Jordan: "Above all else, she has taught me that greatness, more than power or fame, is something you do every day."

By holding up Barbara Jordan as a "spectacle of greatness," those of us who call ourselves "public servants" take on the mantle of telling the truth, whether we be president, special counsel, judge, elected or appointed official, public employee; we are honest; we tell the truth; we protect and care for the public and public resources; and we do what we said we would do when we accepted our respective public service positions.

If we call ourselves "public servants," we should live our lives in such a way that whenever we retire, or are honored or recognized by our agency or college or public institution, or just whenever we are remembered by our colleagues, we are remembered for living and conducting our public business in the most honorable, ethical way.

Few of us will have the opportunity to be on the nation's center stage as Barbara Jordan was, but each of us should aspire to be remembered as a "spectacle of greatness" in our own small corner of this planet. Even if we cannot change the world, the state, or even our agency, we can, to borrow from Mahatma Gandhi, influence our own "zone of peace." This should be our goal.

Max Sherman, 2007