

Passion. Grit. Persistence.

Rilla Askew

In 1949 historian Angie Debo wrote: "Any state of the American Union deserves to be known and understood. But Oklahoma is more than just another state. It is a lens in which the long rays of time are focused into the brightest of light. In its magnifying clarity, dim facets of the American character stand more clearly revealed. For in Oklahoma all the experiences that went into the making of the nation have been speeded up. Here all the American traits have been intensified. The one who can interpret Oklahoma can grasp the meaning of America in the modern world."

Some fifty years later I wrote an essay called "Most American" that said very much the same thing: "Oklahoma *is* America. We are its microcosm, our story is America's story, intensified, distilled...a compressed, ironically inverted miniature of the national narrative, unfolding in a matter of days and weeks and months—sometimes hours—rather than decades."

Well, I thought I invented that. I thought I'd discovered that entirely on my own. I hadn't read Angie Debo's wonderful quotation then—but I had read her histories: *The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Nation*. *The Road to Disappearance*. *And Still the Waters Run*. I kept her books open beside me as I wrote. She was a white woman writing from outside Native experience, trying to gather all the facts, glean all the truths she could muster, and understand. To be honest. To be thorough. Meticulous. Relentless.

In so many ways, Angie Debo was a pioneer, from her pioneer childhood in a small town on the Oklahoma prairie, where she'd moved with her family in a covered wagon when she was nine years old, to her pioneering work as teacher, writer, historian. She attended OU and later the University of Chicago, where, in 1924, she earned a master's degree in international relations. She had to major in that field because women were not allowed to major in history at that time. I'll repeat that: women were not allowed to major in history.

In her book *And Still the Waters Run: The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes*, Angie Debo named names. She gave facts and figures detailing how the Choctaws, Chickasaws,

Creeks, Cherokees and Seminoles were systematically deprived of the lands and resources granted to them by treaties that were supposed to protect tribal lands "as long as the waters run, as long as the grass grows." But the 1887 Dawes Act forced private ownership on a people who did not subscribe to the notion of "owning" the Creator's earth, and very soon most of the land was gone out of Indian hands. The historian Ellen Fitzpatrick said Debo's book "advanced a crushing analysis of the corruption, moral depravity, and criminal activity that underlay white administration and execution of the allotment policy." I think that bears repeating too: the corruption, moral depravity, and criminal activity that underlay white administration of the policy.

Many of the men responsible for this "administration" were still alive in 1936, when she finished writing the book; they were still in positions of power in Oklahoma, and Debo's work, as you may imagine, encountered considerable resistance. The University of Oklahoma Press withdrew as publisher. Debo's academic career was sidetracked. She was barred from teaching in Oklahoma. This is the sort of thing that can happen to women who shake things up, who tell truths that some don't care to have told—and not just to women, of course, and not just in Oklahoma. But, make no mistake: the forces that would silence truth-tellers are doubly strong against women. Misogyny runs deep in our culture—it's an underlying force as embedded and intractable and inextricable from American culture as racism is. It's important for us to know that. To see it for what it is and name it.

It's true what they say, you know: well behaved women seldom make history. And Angie Debo did make history, as well as write it. In her later years, I'm happy to say, she garnered the kind of acclaim and recognition she deserved. She received many national awards, was inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame. In 1985, the state commissioned an official portrait by artist Charles Banks Wilson, which hangs today in the rotunda of the State Capitol building. By the time of her death in 1988 at the age of 98, Angie Debo was considered one of our state's great treasures—our "first lady of history," she is called. So maybe that's a good lesson for all of us: Tell the truth, persist, and live a long time; eventually the world will come around.

I begin my remarks today with this homage to Angie Debo for a couple of reasons: one, the simplest: she's my hero. She's one of my heroes. There are actually a number of Oklahoma women I count as heroes—Clara Luper, Anita Hill, Ada Lois Sipuel Fisher, Wilma Mankiller, my state representative Emily Virgin, my grandmother Jewell Askew. I expect you know some

of these names and their stories, or if you don't yet, I hope you'll seek them out. Because we all need heroes; we need role models. We need to recognize that there are others who have done what we aim to do, and we need to take a look at *how* they did it.

So that's the other reason I begin with Angie Debo. She was a scholar, a student of history as well as a teacher of it, an indefatigable researcher, an astute and insightful writer. All these things I aspire to be. And she was relentless. When she was told no, she found another way. When the truths of history proved hard to uncover, she dug deeper. When the powers-that-be wanted her to hush up, be silent, go away, she would not. "Nevertheless, she persisted." She followed her passion, and she would not be swayed.

I'm a different type of writer than Angie Debo. Primarily I'm a novelist, though the novels I write are grounded in Oklahoma's history. I also write essays, where I seek to interpret not only Oklahoma's past but its present, and above all its people. I'm always looking to understand and describe the Oklahoma character—whether I'm writing fiction or nonfiction. Because I believe what Angie Debo said: "The one who can interpret Oklahoma can grasp the meaning of America in the modern world." I believed that, actually, before I even knew she'd said it.

But it took me a while to get there. I didn't grow up knowing I wanted to be a writer. I didn't grow up knowing I *could* be a writer. I knew someone could be, mostly dead white guys and dead English ladies, but I didn't think I could be. No one ever suggested to me that a young girl from Oklahoma could become a writer. This harks back to what I was saying earlier, that we have to know the forces arrayed against us, know them and name them, so we can fight them.

Years ago, in the very early days of the Women's Liberation Movement, we used to have what were called consciousness-raising sessions. I went to my first ones in Tahlequah, where I was going to college. We would sit around someone's living room drinking wine or coffee and just talk. Openly. Honestly. Woman to woman. I was astonished to discover how much I subscribed to male-dominance and patriarchy in our culture. I'd always thought of myself as strong and sassy—I had strong role-models in my mother and grandmothers; I thought I could do just about anything I was big enough to do. But as I talked with these other women, many of whom were way ahead of me in their thinking, I came to see how much I *didn't* think women could do. For instance, I would not have been comfortable in those days seeing a woman in the pulpit. I'd never seen it. I didn't know how to imagine it—any more than I could have imagine,

then, a woman governor. A woman president. I had a lot of discovering to do, about myself, my own silent, unacknowledged attitudes.

Later, when I turned this same kind of searchlight on myself in terms of racial bias, I discovered whole worlds of secret, silent racism I didn't know I possessed. They were my birthright as a person growing up white in this country. That, too, has been a big part of my journey—coming to understand that the forces arrayed against the very principles I believe in—equal rights, equal opportunities, social and political justice—are not only outside me but inside me.

Today I can name a lot of those forces: racism, misogyny, patriarchy, paternalism—universal forces that women and people of color have long been working hard to overcome all around the world. But there's one particular negative force that I think is unique to some of us in Oklahoma. Betty Friedan in her 1963 groundbreaking work, *The Feminine Mystique*, wrote about what she called “the problem that has no name.” She was looking to identify the sense of dissatisfaction and yearning American women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century when the male-dominated culture told them their only role in life was to seek fulfillment as homemakers, wives, and mothers.

In my young life, I faced my own version of a problem that has no name—it was a kind of diffidence and uncertainty inside me, a lack of confidence that was tied not just to my identity as a female but to my identity as an Oklahoman. I didn't imagine that one could create art coming from Oklahoma, that one could be a novelist, or a lawmaker, a mover and shaker on the national stage. And that's where my eyes were, the national stage. That's where I thought the world was—out there. I certainly didn't think it was here in dusty flat nondescript nobody-ever-writes-about-us-or-thinks-about-us-or-even-knows-where-we-are Oklahoma. My home state seemed to me then a black hole in the center of the country. I came of age biding my time till I could shake its dust off my heels and make for the coasts, because that's where I thought the real world was.

In 1980, I quit my job in Tulsa, sold my pickup truck, cobbled together a few hundred dollars and a handful of phone numbers, and headed to New York to become a famous actress. That was my ambition. It took a few years and the encouragement of the man who would become my husband and a considerable number of acting jobs that I *didn't* get before I turned from acting to writing. That felt like a failure, you know. I'd gone to New York to act, I'd

declared that to the world, and now I was going to switch gears, shift identity, say, Oh, I'm not *that*, I'm *this*. Making that decision was one of the hardest things I ever did in my life—harder really, than making the decision to go to New York in the first place. But something in me knew the truth—that I was more fundamentally a writer than actor. I wasn't that. I was this.

Still, I had no idea I would write about Oklahoma. I had no idea that Oklahoma was a place worthy to be written about. When I first turned my hand to writing, I wrote stories set in the place where I then lived, New York City. I wrote stories set in places I'd visited, Mexico City, California. I wrote one story set somewhere I'd never been, a train rattling through the night in Yugoslavia. Because I believed these were the kinds of places fit for fiction. I didn't think the little oil company town of Bartlesville, where I grew up, or the hardscrabble mountains of southeastern Oklahoma, where my family had lived for five generations, were places worthy of fiction.

It took outsiders, really, to tell me that they were. I went back to school to study creative writing, and in my writing workshops at Brooklyn College, when I brought in a story about a girl who meets a boy at Falls Creek or one written in my grandfather's voice or another about the last official Choctaw execution that took place near my family's hometown of Red Oak, it was the other writers in the workshop who said, "You know, Rilla, you've got something here. This is authentic. This is a voice." And I said, "Well, okay." And, so, I began.

It was a while longer before I began to discover Oklahoma's true history, how complex, and heartening and heartbreaking it is. That's a subject of such paradox and violence and nuance and depth, that I'll leave it for another time.

But the point is, for me, it took the validation of others—of outsiders—to affirm for me what Angie Debo and Clara Luper and Wilma Mankiller apparently knew on their own. That Oklahoma is worthy. That the causes of justice and equality and truth-telling are worth fighting for right here. When I was young, as you are, the "problem that had no name" was for me an unconscious condition. I didn't know that I carried a sense of unworthiness, a sort of low self-esteem and lack of confidence that was tied to the place I came from. When I was young, as you are, I didn't understand that the woundedness of this place, the conditions of poverty and discrimination, violence and faith that I was simultaneously ashamed of and appallingly ignorant about, were the very forces that would shape my life's work.

Even today it would be easy to have some of these same feelings. We have, as I know you know, a lot of problems in Oklahoma. We rank 48th in the nation in funding for education. And first in our rate of incarceration of women—first not just in the nation, but in the world. We rank 4th in the nation in numbers of women killed by men. We have a woman governor but only 14% of our state legislators are female. The 2015 national Status of Women Report Card gives us a D in Political Participation

Here are our other grades:

Employment and Earnings D+

Work and Family C+

Poverty and Opportunity D-

Reproductive Rights D+

Health and Wellbeing D-

You probably know the statistics, and if you don't, after this week, I expect you'll take it upon yourselves to learn them. And you'll be the ones to change them. That's what is so exciting about the Women in Leadership program. We need you here. We need your work, your courage, your activism, your voices. Here in Oklahoma.

The novelist Richard Ford tells young writers: "Find what sets up a commotion in your heart and write about that." I would say the same thing to all of us here today: Find your life's passion—that thing that sets up a commotion in your heart—and follow it. Because that's what will give you the key traits that all heroes have: Relentlessness. Resiliency. Persistence. Perseverance. I know these seem like similar characteristics, but there are subtle differences. *Relentlessness* means to me a kind of enduring presence or pressure, showing no lessening of strength or intensity. *Persistence* is firm or obstinate continuance in a course of action. *Perseverance* is steadfastness, endurance in the face of adversity, a profound determination to overcome.

Persistence, that ability to continue an action in the face of disapproval or difficulty, is good. And yet I would say, if that commotion in your heart changes, as it did with me, from acting to writing, go with it. That's part of what it means to be resilient: not being afraid to change course as we discover new truths about ourselves—including ways we've internalized the very forces that would stop us, if they could—the forces that say, No, you dare not. Don't go there. You can't. If that force has a name, call it out. If it doesn't, maybe you can make one up.

For the problem that had no name in my own life, I jokingly came up with “misanthro-anti-Okie-ism,” though I doubt that term will ever catch on. But, even leaving it nameless, I do know I had to acknowledge that negative force was there and see how it lived in me in order to be able to resist it.

If, like the good fairies in “Sleeping Beauty,” I could wave a wand and grant today’s young women gifts, it wouldn’t be, as in that old patriarchal fairytale, beauty, wit, grace, dance, song, and goodness. It would be Passion. Grit. Resiliency. Persistence. Resistance. Perseverance. But then, even if I could, I wouldn’t need to wave that wand over the young women here today. These gifts: you’ve already got them.