

## SERVING A CITY AT THE CONFLUENCE: REFLECTIONS FOR A RESILIENT FUTURE

The Clark Lecture, First Unitarian Church of St. Louis

Delivered by Alderwoman Heather Navarro, November 12, 2017

Thank you. It's an honor to be with you here this morning. I have been in office for just over three months and I feel like I've been drinking from a firehose when it comes to absorbing new information and meeting new people. I'm grateful to be able to step back and reflect with you today on what it means to do the work that I do - at the city and at the Missouri Coalition for the Environment.

I didn't grow up in St. Louis but I call it home now. I came here as a kid on vacation and loved doing all the tourist-y things with my family. Later, my four years in undergrad at Washington University, as the first in my family to attend college, shaped me in ways I never expected. Over the last 20 years, I have come to love St. Louis—including raising my family here—and that's what inspired me to run for alderwoman this past summer.

It's tough some days to love St. Louis right now. We are an old city, struggling with poverty and homelessness, trying to provide for all of our people fairly and equitably. We are divided in many ways - with racial and economic disparities evident as you drive from one part of the city to another. But I believe our ability to be a great city will come from our resilience.

What do I mean when I say resilience?

It's the ability to face and overcome difficulties, hardships, crises, and tragedies. This can be applied to natural disasters, economic downturns, and long-standing racial injustice. I spend a lot of time talking about resilience in relation to climate change - how well our city is prepared to deal with increased rain—like we saw recently in Houston, increased temperatures and higher electricity demand.

But it's more than how to get through these tough times. It's how to emerge stronger. It's about leveraging solutions to these problems to benefit a range of long-term issues. An example of this is to address the issue of more rain by improving the design of neighborhoods; enhancing green spaces with more plants and less pavement helps provide a place for the rain to go and increases property values in underserved areas. Healthier trees in a neighborhood mean increased air quality, more shade, lower electric bills, and even better mental health. Resilience is facing such challenges head on and bringing our strengths to find comprehensive long-term solutions.

So what does it mean to be a resilient city at the confluence?

The St. Louis region is surrounded by natural boundaries - there is no other place like St. Louis. We sit at the intersection of the country's two greatest rivers - the Mighty Mississippi and the

Big Muddy Missouri River. Between these two rivers, plus the Meramec and the Bourbeuse, the St. Louis region is almost an island.

To be surrounded by that much water has shaped who we are. Municipality boundaries, bridges, and parks are laid out along river lines. It has become part of our culture, our history - from slaves who saw it carry family members away in the slave trade to Mark Twain and his stories of river life.

Unfortunately, today many of us rarely see the river on any given day. But we have more water than we know what do with. What we do know is that it's great for diluting pollution, so we have used it to flush our waste - residential, industrial, and agricultural. And on the Mississippi, we use it for moving barges.

Over the last 100 years, we have systematically severed ourselves from the river. To support those commercial and agricultural uses we have walled ourselves off with levees. Most people's experience with the rivers is seeing the Mississippi when they visit the Arch, which is probably rare for most St. Louisans, except when driving over them on a highway bridge.

In addition to our natural boundaries, we have an intricate overlay of political boundaries - over 90 municipalities on the map, then school district boundaries, congressional districts, wards, and neighborhoods to name a few. Just like we have leveed ourselves off from the river, these lines have become barriers in many ways, leading to disparity, inefficiencies, and competition that hurt the collective whole. And these lines often divide us by race.

Despite these boundaries, we are still dependent on those big rivers. Barry Commoner, a scientist from Washington University and one of the founders of the Missouri Coalition for the Environment (MCE), would have turned 100 this year. He coined the principles of modern day ecology - one of which is, "everything is connected to everything else." Whether we're talking about water pollution, crime, or the economy, these boundaries are meaningless. We don't fix any of them by staying within those fictional lines. What we do in one place often causes a reaction where and when we don't expect it. We see this in Missouri's rivers which often flow underground. You can drop dye in a river on the western part of the state and see it pop up in a river in the Ozarks even though those two rivers never meet above ground.

My organization does a lot of work on the West Lake Landfill in Bridgeton. The story of West Lake began in the 1940's when this country decided to make nuclear weapons for the Cold War, for the Manhattan Project. We took uranium from halfway round the world, the Belgian Congo, enriched it downtown St. Louis, and then turned it into weapons to be used around the globe. Today the leftover waste from that process sits in the Missouri River floodplain with nothing separating it from the groundwater or the air except dirt and rock. The risks of it getting into the air or water are many - an underground fire that burns right now, earthquakes, tornadoes.

We can't escape the decisions of the past and our actions today will be felt by our children and grandchildren for generations.

Working on issues like this can make it hard to find hope sometimes. To be resilient you have to believe you can make things better. At a retreat, I asked my staff at MCE why do you do this work? You can imagine that when you put six environmentalists in a room and they get going on climate change, urban sprawl, the corporate takeover of America, and radioactive waste, it gets real depressing real quick. But when asked why they do what they do, they replied:

- Awe for the natural world and what it offers us in terms of peace, solitude, and joy.
- Gratitude for clean air and water and open spaces and wanting to ensure those resources are available to everyone - future generations and all people no matter their income level.
- The belief that by doing this work we can make things better.

I haven't asked all of my colleagues at the Board of Aldermen this question, but I've heard it or witnessed it from many of them, too. They believe they have an opportunity in public office to improve the quality of life for others. Some of the aldermen I've gotten to know are single moms raising their young kids while also diving into complex city problems that they didn't create but desperately want to fix. Some of them work multiple jobs to make ends meet. Some of them have dedicated themselves to working on issues for decades that they will get little credit for. They get criticized and humiliated publicly and they keep going.

To be resilient we have to believe we have the power to make a difference. We also have to face our challenges head on. I think it's our nature to avoid difficult situations and conversations. Michael Brown, Anthony Lamar Smith, and Forward through Ferguson have placed some very difficult conversations right in our laps so that we can no longer ignore them - conversations about racial inequity and personal and systemic racism. These conversations have been playing out for years but the divided nature of St. Louis has meant that many of us could go about our lives, attend university, raise our children, move up the professional ladder and not feel compelled to look at race in St. Louis.

I recently attended a racial equity indicators workshop sponsored by the Mayor's office. Present at the workshop were over 60 people representing city departments, elected offices, institutions, and nonprofits. The subjects of white privilege and white supremacy were raised brought up more than once. We didn't see that language in that sort of setting 10 years ago.

To have conversations such as these, we have to be vulnerable, willing to be transformed, and we have to face our own personal demons. We are creating safe spaces in St. Louis for us to have these conversations - to share our emotions and our own personal stories. It's messy but we are creating room for us to struggle and wrestle with these difficult questions. One of the eye openers for me personally was being at a lecture with Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the*

*Woods.* During the Q & A, a teacher from University City asked about the imagery used by many environmental groups. She said that trees are often used and you can probably imagine an image or a logo that uses a single tree, a stately old oak or such, standing alone on a plain. While for many people it brings to mind the values of stewardship and conservation and feelings of solitude and awe, for many in her community she thought first of a lynching tree.

Her words pierced me. It's hard to take something that has such deep meaning and realize that it can be hurtful and oppressive to others. It drove home how our work and its message are limited by the fundamental make-up of the people who comprise that community. It is a challenge I hold up every day in our work at MCE, that we need to broaden who we are and who and what we represent.

Someone recently asked me, "How many tough days do you have to have before you call it quits? How many bad days until you'll know political life isn't for you?" Every day could be bad, and yet this is still the best place for me to be. I didn't sign up to be a public servant because I thought it would be easy. I don't work for a nonprofit because I thought it would be fun or I would get rich. If it's too easy, then we're not doing it right. Change doesn't come easily. You can't get through the stages of grief without first wading through all of the pain. You can't heal if you don't confront the hurt.

And it's getting loud in St. Louis - on the streets and in town hall meetings. I think we are confronting the hurt and we are starting to face our challenges head on. And we're going to get where we need to be by playing to our strengths.

I've talked about the people. People like my staff, my colleagues at the Board of Aldermen. I've met city employees who work tirelessly for no credit on the big issues that many of us complain about.

I also find strength in our children. When I decided to run for office, I knew I had to ask my kids first. We sat down for dinner and I laid it out: if I ran and if I won, it would mean more meetings, more weekend events. I'd be on my cell phone at their volleyball games. It might mean mom would get stressed and cranky (and they looked at me like, "what's new?"). My son's eyes lit up, he smiled and he said, "You've gotta do it." My daughter assumed it meant we would move into a bigger house, but once I explained that it didn't come with any upgrades, she was also behind me. I have had wonderful conversations with my kids about what's happening in St. Louis and the world - and to see how they approach these problems, to hear their depth of their questions, it tells me that even when the rest of us get frustrated and burnt out, it is our children who will provide the inspiration to keep us going. When we doubt ourselves, they will believe in us - that we can make things better.

St. Louis has many other strengths - our unique, characteristic neighborhoods. We are a great place for entrepreneurs. We have four beautiful seasons, lots of free things to do, and—relative to other places in the country—it’s a place you can afford to raise a family. Still we get caught up in comparing ourselves to other cities. Why can’t we be more like Denver or Memphis or Chicago?

We are Saint Louis. People have been drawn to this area for thousands of years. And it had nothing to do with a sports team, a Fortune 500 company, or a prestigious university. Those things play a role now but what brought them here was the river. There is something here that you can’t find anywhere else in this country - the confluence of the country’s two greatest rivers. I mentioned some of the ways we have used and abused the rivers: the levees we have built have not only disconnected us but they’ve disconnected our floodplains, the land that would naturally absorb floodwaters, the land that receives the nutrients and sediments to feed future crops and provide habitat for wildlife. We have the opportunity now to ask ourselves are we putting our rivers to the highest and best use? In light of everything we know about the devastation of floods, about our lost connection to nature, about the importance of water to public health, are we doing the best we can as stewards of our rivers?

When we look at the challenges ahead of us, I see that we have everything we need to be resilient. Between the people and the natural environment around us, we have what we need. We now need to be intentional about entering into the challenges we face together, with vulnerable hearts, open minds, and willing spirits.

They say you never step in the same river twice. The water rushing past St. Louis right now will be in New Orleans soon. The Mississippi and the Missouri are floodplain rivers - if left free they would meander back and forth over time, their banks moving up to a mile over a matter of seasons. We think of floods as devastating, tragic events. The way we know floods, they come with great loss. They scour the landscape, clearing out the old, cutting a new path. Floods are also the catalyst for rebirth. They replenish the soil with everything it needs to be a thriving, healthy ecosystem.

If we want a resilient St. Louis, we must honor the forces at play in our city and our region - both the natural dynamics of rivers and the dynamics of race. Our future depends on our ability to reconnect to our greatest natural resources and reclaim the natural cycle that has fed this region for thousands of years. And it depends on us to enter willingly into turbulent waters that will loosen the earth beneath us, challenge us to let go of what’s familiar. In doing so we will discover a new, resilient St. Louis, stronger and more vibrant than we thought possible.

Thank you.