

Remarks of Associate Justice Melissa A. Long
January 11, 2021

Over the course of the last year, I have thought quite a bit about the Power of Believing. My dictionary defines “believing” as having faith or confidence in the existence of something, or having trust in the goodness or ability of someone. In my heart, and in my lived experience, I know that those definitions just scratch the surface. The Power of Believing is something more; something tangible, with tangible benefits. It gives strength and courage. Believing can be transformative.

As I stand here today, I want to start by thanking the many people who have believed in me.

I thank Governor Raimondo for trusting in my ability and nominating me to serve Rhode Island on the Supreme Court. During the interview process, she told me that she has always admired my ability to stand my ground, and acknowledged my dedication to public service. I appreciate that she valued those qualities as she made this appointment. She had a very talented group of candidates from which to choose, and I am honored to have been selected.

I thank Justice Frank Flaherty, whose seat I now occupy, for the example he set for a life dedicated to public service and to the administration of justice. A veteran of the Vietnam War, he returned to Rhode Island and spent a career serving people. Attorney Joshua Xavier, whom Justice Flaherty has mentored since Joshua’s days in Little League, explains that Justice Flaherty has always given his heart to the next generation. I am eager to follow his example, and hope to meet the high bar he set for his fellow, and future, justices.

I thank the Leadership and Members of the General Assembly, and especially the Rhode Island Legislative Black and Latino Caucus, for their impassioned speeches recognizing the importance of diversity in the Rhode Island courts. I note in particular Senator Metts’ moving and inspiring words read earlier.

I acknowledge and thank the Judicial Nominating Commission, as led by Chairperson Sarah T. Dowling, Esq., for their extraordinary work under her leadership. The Commissioners are public servants who have dedicated countless hours to vetting judicial applicants.

I thank my peers in the Rhode Island Judiciary. I have greatly appreciated the fellowship of female colleagues, including Maureen McKenna Goldberg and Alice Gibney. I am heartened by the example of Judge Rogeriee Thompson, and by her presence here today. A brief anecdote about Judge Thompson: Almost exactly one year ago, at the Martin Luther King, Jr., Celebration at Roger Williams Law School, I went to greet Judge Thompson. Without making any small talk, she looked me in the eye and declared matter-of-factly, “I hope you’re going to apply for the Supreme Court.” Judge Thompson, your belief in me – your believing in me - has been transformative for me. Today, it has also been transformative for our courts.

I also thank the communities that have embraced, challenged, and encouraged me, including Roger Williams Law School, City Year Providence, the NAACP, and the Thurgood Marshall Law Society. Dean Yelnosky, Jennie Johnson, Jim Vincent, Kas DeKarvalho and Bill Trezvant – thank you for all you have taught me, through our conversations and by your example.

Over the course of my career, I have spoken to many students and young lawyers about the importance of finding good mentors. I have been blessed to have had incredible lawyers and judges pushing me to be my best self in the last 30 years. I thank Professor Max Stearns for helping me build a solid foundation of legal skills. I thank Judge Marcus Williams for the honor of serving as his law clerk 25 years ago, and his faith in me as the Velvet Hammer. I thank Judge Nugent for having been in my corner since his days as the Public Defender. It is not hyperbole to say that his belief in the importance of diversity in the Rhode Island legal community profoundly influenced me. Each of these mentors has inspired me to strive to be a powerful role model for those coming up behind me. Oyindamola Adegboro and Simone Tubman: I try to be for you what my mentors have been for me. But please know that your belief in me has also given me strength and courage. Thank you for standing tall and proud with me, so that we can all be role models for other young people, including those who look like we do – young people like Cam and Wyatt; Michaela and Julianna; Kendra, Eva, Alex, Lena, CJ, Vivienne, Isaiah, and hopefully many others.

I also express my heartfelt thanks to several outstanding servant-leaders that I have had the privilege to learn from over the last several months. Chief Justice Suttell: your commitment to identifying, understanding, mitigating, and rectifying any and all threads of racism, inequality, and disparate treatment in our legal system is exceptional and will be a lasting legacy. Judge Clifton, your leadership of the National Consortium on Racial and Ethnic Fairness in the Courts, and your ongoing contributions to Rhode Island's Committee, are more valuable than I can express. I am honored and grateful to work with you, Judge Matos, Judge DuBose, Judge Smith, and all of the dedicated members of our Committee to enhance the public's confidence in our legal system.

There are not adequate words to thank my family for their love, and their belief in me. This certainly includes my work family: Lori Symonds-Bidon, Pam Newberg, and Aliko Wali. It also includes all of my dear friends who have supported me through this endeavor, and specifically those who testified on my behalf: Judges McGuirl, Matos, and DuBose, Carrie Bridges-Feliz, Christine Heenan, and Matty Lopes.

I thank my late grandparents, Mabel and George Austin, and Blanche and Paul Magill; they are the foundation upon which my parents, siblings and I have stood for so many years. I can only imagine how unbelievably proud they would be today, not only of me, but also of all their progeny.

I thank my wonderful children Noah, Haley, and Coleman, whose kindness, empathy, and keen sense of justice undoubtedly comes from the Austins, the Longs, the Magills, the Raymonds, and,

of course our beloved Deborah Laliberte. My children have continued to inspire me to be the best person I can be for more than 21 years.

I thank my husband Ted, who has been my best friend and tireless champion for more than a quarter of a century. My life is incredibly rich because it is interwoven with his.

I am forever grateful to my parents, Mel and Carole Austin, for raising me with a strong belief in the idea of America. Today would have been my late mother's 77th birthday. She and my father served this country honorably, and their faith in America's institutions – including its judicial system – was unshakable. That is vitally important, because as we've seen very recently, not believing can be transformative, too. We the people must have faith in our institutions. We must believe that judges administer justice fairly and impartially, driven by the law and facts applicable to each case.

As the Rhode Island Code of Judicial Conduct reminds us, "[a]n independent, fair and impartial judiciary is indispensable to our system of justice." We judges play a critical role in our constitutional democracy. We believe in justice and preserving the rule of law, and that belief has tangible benefits. We know that our decisions have enormous impacts on individual lives and can be transformative.

The arc of the moral universe is long, but it does, indeed, bend towards justice. Judges paved the way for my being here today: The schools my father attended as a little boy were desegregated after *Brown v. Board of Education*. The *Loving v. Virginia* decision decriminalized my parents' interracial marriage and allowed them to live and raise a family without fear of arrest.

I have just taken a solemn oath to administer justice without respect to persons, and to do equal right to the poor and to the rich. I will uphold that oath every day. I will bring my analytical skills, unique perspective, and good judgment to the challenges that come before me. Every day, when I arrive at the courthouse, I will recommit to taking the time to understand the stories of those whose cases come before me, and to appreciating that those stories matter. I will continue to be a fair and impartial jurist, and to respect my judicial office as a public trust. I will uphold my solemn duty to enhance the public's belief in our judicial system.