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Heaven Is a Place Called Elizabeth Warren

By REBECCA TRAISTER

On the campaign trail in Massachusetts last month with the Senate candidate [Elizabeth Warren](#), I bore witness to acts of extreme giddiness: a 20-year-old student jumping up and down, exclaiming, “Oh, my God, I am obsessed with her”; a third-year law student of Warren’s comparing her to a superhero (“Wonder Woman *wishes* she could be Professor Warren”); a man stopping Warren on the street and introducing himself as the guy who recently passed her a mash note on a plane (“I was hitting on you,” he said).

Warren has been something of a left-wing idol for a couple of years now. While heading Congressional oversight of TARP, she more than anyone asked tough questions about what, exactly, was done with all that bank bailout money. And on her subsequent mission to create the [Consumer Financial Protection Bureau](#) — which was designed to enforce long-ignored rules meant to protect consumers entering into everything from credit-card agreements to mortgages — Warren became a regular guest of Bill Maher’s and Jon Stewart’s, and both went weak for the straight-talking professor. Stewart told her he wanted to make out.

But this fall, at exactly the time our economic forecasts started souring again and Barack Obama appeared to be at his most ineffectual, Warren’s entrance into the race for Ted Kennedy’s old seat turned her from a cult-hero crusader into something far bigger. A clip of Warren at a fund-raiser in Andover, Mass., talking about how “there’s nobody in this country who got rich on his own,” reminded liberals that there was someone out there who could still articulate a muscular progovernment worldview. “If more Democrats were able to make the case for the underlying social contract as effectively, our discourse would be vastly less mind-numbing,” wrote Steve Benen in a Washington Monthly article that

summed up what many liberals across the country were feeling.

Over its first weeks, Warren's campaign raised an impressive \$3.15 million, about 70 percent of which came from out of state and 96 percent from donors giving \$100 or less. That last metric is crucial, because a consumer advocate who recently said, "The people on Wall Street broke this country," is not likely to enjoy big-ticket backing from the financial sector. By late October, three of her biggest primary challengers had dropped out.

Even though she's running for the Senate and not for the presidency, the early devotion to Warren recalls the ardor once felt by many for Obama. On its face, this is odd: Warren is not a world-class orator, she is not young or shiny or new, she doesn't fizz with the promise of American possibility that made the Obama campaign pop. Instead, she's a mild-mannered Harvard bankruptcy-law professor and a grandmother of three, a member of the older-white-lady demographic (she's 62) that was written off in 2008 as being the antimatter of hope and change.

And yet, on a deeper level, her popularity makes perfect sense. Embracing Warren as the next "one" is, in part, a way of getting over Obama; she provides an optimistic distraction from the fact that under our current president, too little has changed, for reasons having to do both with the limitations of the political system and the limitations of the man. She makes people forget that estimations of him were too overheated, trust in his powers too fervid. As the feminist philanthropist Barbara Lee told me of Warren, "This moment of disillusion is why people find her so compelling, because she brings forth the best in people and she brings back that excitement."

At the annual Massachusetts Women's Political Caucus dinner at the Fairmont Copley Plaza, Warren, who was not part of the night's program, cruised from table to table before the event, introducing herself to guests and blithely ignoring an M.C.'s request for people to settle down. Slipping out the door as the program began, Warren was swarmed by a trio of college students. There was actual shrieking. When I observed to Warren that she has fangirls, she replied, "I know," with a self-assuredness that female candidates have often found difficult to convey.

"It makes me feel very responsible," she said as she watched the young women

disappear into the night. “Very excited, but very responsible.”

Among other things, what Warren offers is a reasonable, expert face for the free-floating anger currently on display at Occupy Wall Street and elsewhere. She can get wonky about the economy when she wants to, but what sets her apart is her ability to tell a coherent, populist story about it in a way that other members of her party are either unwilling or unable to do.

She has had plenty of practice talking about these issues. When she was a bankruptcy-law scholar, Warren spent decades interviewing not only judges and lawyers but also people filing for bankruptcy. In the process, she upended the assumption that Americans who were going broke were merely irresponsible overspenders. She and her two collaborators (Jay Lawrence Westbrook and Teresa A. Sullivan) argued, long before the collapse of the banks and the mortgage crisis, that years of deregulation left an American economy so fragile that families could be pushed into bankruptcy by a single factor, like job loss, divorce or illness.

It also helps that Warren has never run for office before. Like Obama in '08, she's a blank screen onto which admirers can project whatever they most want to see. Over the course of her career, Warren has been able to advocate for struggling people without actually having to work for— and thus inevitably disappoint — them. What her admirers on the left see is a woman who rises above everything wormy in Washington, including indiscriminate partisan loyalty. As chairwoman of the Congressional Oversight Panel monitoring TARP, Warren barbecued not just Bush's Treasury chief, Hank Paulson, but also Obama's appointee, Tim Geithner. In public hearings in 2010, she pressed Geithner on the banking system's exposure to bad commercial loans and failures with the home-mortgage-foreclosure program. A believer in a regulated market who used to be a Republican, Warren refused to tell me whether she voted for Ronald Reagan in 1980, remarking that even her husband of 30 years, “doesn't know who I voted for, and he sleeps with me.”

Temperamentally, Warren presents as the opposite of certain bombastic and arguably chauvinistic members of Obama's economic team. Katherine Porter, a former student who is now a bankruptcy-law professor at the University of California, Irvine, said that “a strong epithet for Elizabeth is ‘golly gee.’” Warren told me of an afternoon, about 10 years ago, when she picked up her office phone

and was shocked to hear a man cursing on the other end. “I thought, Whew! My first obscene phone call!” Just before hanging up, Warren paused. The accent sounded familiar. She put the receiver back to her ear, waiting for the speaker to take a breath before asking, “Senator Kennedy?” It was indeed the man whose old seat she is now competing for, phoning from the Senate cloakroom to report that Democrats had unexpectedly won a fight over bankruptcy legislation. “He was so revved up!” Warren said.

But the expectation that she’s Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle also allows Warren to wield a shiv. Carol Kenner, a retired bankruptcy judge, recalled watching her friend Warren, who went to college on a debate scholarship, fiercely engage another legal scholar who was attacking her. “It’s exercise for her,” Kenner said, “like swimming a faster lap.”

While fighting for the creation of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, Warren told The Huffington Post that if she didn’t wind up with a strong consumer agency, her second choice would be “no agency at all and plenty of blood and teeth left on the floor,” a phrase that has already been overlaid on images of Wall Street protesters in a Republican attack ad. Questioned at the time on CNBC about words that sounded “unnecessarily aggressive,” Warren replied: “Gee, I don’t know. That doesn’t seem aggressive at all to me.”

Warren’s fierceness in the land of suits has earned her plenty of enemies, but it has also mobilized a demographic yearning for a candidate to call its own. Congress remains only 16 percent female, and Massachusetts has an especially long and rotten history of women in politics. Since Puritans settled there in the early 17th century, more Massachusetts women have been hanged in the Salem witch trials (14) than have been elected to the House of Representatives (4), the Senate (0) or the governor’s mansion (0, though Jane Swift served as acting governor from 2001 to 2003). Backed by politically engaged women most recently frustrated by the lackluster campaign of Martha Coakley, who lost disastrously to [Scott Brown](#) in 2010, Warren is very likely to benefit from four centuries worth of pent-up energy.

The cost of that energy is that she will be asked to live up to a fantasy that has plagued other history-makers: that by virtue of being different from those who preceded her, she will govern differently.

“If you look at countries that have elected women presidents,” Barbara Lee told me, “very often, they’ve elected a woman when things were so bad they gave the woman a chance.” I suggested that the instance in which power is handed over only when it becomes so gnarled that it ceases to be any kind of power at all is a grim victory.

Lee nodded. “Whatever it takes,” she replied.

The question of what it would take for Warren to maneuver through the Senate is particularly prickly given that Warren’s aims sound as outsize, and perhaps as naïve, as the expectations of her followers.

“I don’t want to go to Washington to be a co-sponsor of some bland, little bill nobody cares about,” she told me. “I don’t want to go to Washington to get my name on something that makes small change at the margin.” Responding to my suggestion that she must run a grass-roots campaign in part because she won’t have support from banks, Warren said: “That’s absolutely true if you think the objective is to win. For me, it’s about more than that.”

And those last words, which edge into cliché, provide a hint of the central tension she’ll face over the next year. She has derived her strength from the candor and specificity of her speech, but that strength is sapped as soon as she starts dealing in the anodyne language of political campaigns. In the past, Warren has been clear that she doesn’t take to being reined in. At the start of a lecture she gave at the University of California, Berkeley, in 2010, while she was setting up the C.F.P.B., she groused about living “in a world in which someone has to read my speech in advance.” Twenty minutes later, she went off-script, complaining, “I hate being tied to something; I feel like this is a boring speech.”

She insists that regulation of her words is less of a problem now that she’s a candidate, technically answering to voters and not to the federal government. But asked by phone if her communications team felt anxiety about her perceived liberty on this account, she replied, “Oh, they’re anxious, you bet,” and joked that she could hear her campaign spokesman “on the other end of this call, breathing heavily.”

You can see the transformation happening already. When pressed on what kind of formidable legislation she would actually pursue in the Senate, Warren’s

organization served up a snoozy list of the priorities that Democrats have been talking about for years: she will push for spending on infrastructure, education and renewable energy. She will work to strengthen labor unions and advocate for the reregulation of the big banks while easing regulations that make it difficult for small businesses and community banks to compete with giants.

These are fine notions; there's a reason they've long been the mainstays of an imagined liberal revolution. But they're also the ideas that cause Congress to immediately grind to a halt and that, when packaged in nonspecific campaign-speak, are quickly drained of meaning.

Warren's stated commitment to going out on her shield also sets her up for charges of inconsistency or hypocrisy. Already Warren has been nudged for accepting PAC money; for hiring a lobbyist, Doug Rubin, to advise her campaign; and for accepting a \$1,000 donation from a General Electric lobbyist. Recently, the right has made hay of her half-million-dollar-a-year income, presenting the illogical but perhaps resonant argument that a wealthy person fighting for less wealthy people must be a false prophet.

Some critics also argue that Warren will need to recalibrate her message so that it is less about the terrible things that have befallen the middle class and more about how voters can empower themselves. "The danger of her campaign is that it is predicated on the notion that people are victims," says Jim Kessler, a senior vice president for policy at Third Way and former policy director for Senator Charles E. Schumer of New York. "If her entire campaign is about how people need to be rescued from powerful forces around them, I think it will be more limited in its appeal than what it could be." Kessler adds that he nonetheless believes that Warren will prevail.

How to sell hope when so many feel hopeless is Warren's biggest messaging challenge. Her supporters may be willing to forget the past four years and renew their faith in her as their next salvation, but Warren clearly thinks about the dissonance of what happened when the last change-peddlers hit Washington.

"I thought, 2008, that's it, that is the watershed moment," Warren says. "We put sensible people in the House, in the Senate and in the White House." But even with the new leadership, Warren said, "the people who broke the market doubled down on the failed policies. This was not supposed to happen. But it did happen."

Warren described how, in her work for the C.F.P.B., she was flabbergasted by the “phalanxes” of lobbyists who forced her to move aside in Congressional hallways; by how, after a meeting, she might head back to her office to look up figures while lobbyists would “get on cellphones to an army of well-trained lawyers preparing to do a customized memo.”

Warren’s frankness about the forces lined up against the current administration gets muddled when she talks about what she herself would be up against. In fact, one of her chief psychological strategies seems to be turning a blind eye to depressing realities. She told me of how, while working in Washington, reports said “there were now a zillion lobbyists for every single member of Congress.” Warren said, “I just had to look away, because no reasonable person would have kept on fighting at that point.” When I suggested that should she become a senator, her office would also be overrun with lobbyists, she laughed as if the thought were preposterous. “Mmm, that will be fun,” she said. “I just want to savor that image.”

But the lobbyists will be there. Zillions of them. And while Warren may see through their customized memos, that doesn’t mean she won’t burn hours engaging with lobbyists or that she won’t be forced to cut deals with them.

“As a friend of hers, I worry about whether it’s the highest or best use of an extraordinary person’s capabilities to be in the United States Senate,” says Rob Johnson, a former economist for the Senate Banking Committee. He added that he doesn’t question Warren’s integrity, “but with regard to anyone’s capacity to be functional in Washington, it’s a long shot in the other direction.”

If Washington were a place where one brave politician is able to triumph, Warren wouldn’t be running for the Senate at all; she’d be running the consumer-protection agency she created. But Obama didn’t even nominate her for the position. Perhaps he didn’t want to have the fight with Republicans determined to block her; perhaps he was worn down by those on his own team who didn’t mesh with Warren or by Democrats like Chris Dodd, who suggested publicly that she lacked the managerial experience to run the agency. But that’s the point: Warren is headed toward a legislative body that will most likely wear her down, too. She will be pushing her attempts at substantive change right up against the same Republicans whose very existence cowed a president, in a Senate that now

requires 60 votes to pass a greeting card.

And it's not just Republicans who won't be lining up alongside Warren. There are Democrats who talk a good game on financial reform but remain deeply and firmly beholden to banks. Members of her own party may hate Warren more than her ideological opponents, because if in fact she is as uncompromised as her acolytes think her to be, she is going to make them look bad.

Tim Geithner was rumored to have opposed Warren's appointment to head the C.F.P.B. after the public scrutiny she subjected him to, while Democrats like Dodd found ways to discredit Warren without publicly assailing her vision of an economically just America. Criticism of Warren has already included gender-inflected barbs designed to diminish her, like anonymous leaks out of the Treasury Department about how Warren focused more on media appearances and repainting her office than on setting up an agency.

Warren described her motivation to enter politics by recalling the time Barney Frank called her to the Capitol during the first days of writing the latest financial-regulation bill. Warren didn't understand much about the process but observed as representatives argued about individual issues until Frank asked, "Can everybody live with that?" When he was met with nods, he said, "Done!" and aides wrote down the agreed-upon language. Warren watched the process several times before Frank asked if anyone had anything else to add.

"I said, 'What about credit-reporting agencies?'" Warren said, noting that the bill should include monitoring to make sure those companies engaged in fair practices. "Barney looks around the room and says, 'Anybody got a problem with that?' And they say, 'No,' and he says 'Done!' and everybody writes it down. I thought, Whooaah." Credit-reporting jurisdiction was added to the bill. "That was the first time," she said, "that I understood — and real well — what it means to be in the room."

Having the right person in the room can mean something. It just doesn't change everything.

It's not that Warren's supporters shouldn't get lathered up about her. Staid appreciation for competent candidates has never made ballot boxes burst, and political dedication by its nature requires a degree of magical thinking: a

privileging of optimism over lived experience.

But many of the people looking to Warren, as they did to Obama before her, are expecting material things — like readable credit-card pitches or safe bridges or jobs or a vote on a bill to create jobs — that are, at the moment, figments as imaginative as dragons and their slayers. And that's dangerous, because when the person we decided was going to fix it all isn't able to change much, it's not just that we get blue but also that we give up. We mistake the errors of our own overblown estimations for broken promises. And instead of learning, reasonably, that one person can't do everything, we persuade ourselves that no person can do anything.

The key is not just emotional investment in election-year saviors but also an engagement with policy. A commitment to organized expressions of political desire — like those that have been harnessed so effectively in recent years on the right — have been absent for far too long in Democratic politics. Now, with labor protests, campaigns to block voter suppression and personhood measures and the occupations of cities around the nation, there seem to be some small signs that liberals are remembering that politics requires more of them, that they need movements, not just messiahs. But their engagement must deepen, broaden and persist beyond last week's elections and well beyond next year's elections if there is any chance for politicians like Warren to succeed.

Because while she might provide her supporters and her constituents a voice that, if properly tuned, will rattle doors that are now gummed shut, what Elizabeth Warren cannot do is fix this mess herself.

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