

Iris Hsiang, VT – 2022

The biggest thing I learned during Washington week was that it is the stories that we choose to share and pass on that change the course of history as it sweeps in its forward motion. There were many speakers during Washington week whose resumes were incredibly impressive, and whose positions were of interest; but the story of Washington Week I choose to pass on is that of U.S. Senate Historian, Betty Koed, because the stories she shared changed the way I view our country.

Senate Historian Betty Koed reminded me that the thing that is more important than the stories we share, are the ones we don't. The many lives, people, and stories we choose to forget are most indicative of who we are as a people and who we are as a nation. Dr. Koed shared the stories of the Senate that I had never heard, the ones that were left out to create narratives that would feed into policies that would continue to leave those stories out. In sharing these stories, she reminded me that for every story told there are so many more that are intentionally cast away to the edges of our nation, deemed unworthy to share.

While other speakers reminded me that the past has an impact on us today, Dr. Koed emphasized the fact that the way we recount that past, and the narratives we choose to display and discuss, are not only connected to the future, but determine it.

The theme of our Washington week this year was “a more perfect union.” The idea of a more perfect union is intimately tied to history, as we attempt to be better than we were. But even more than that, it is connected to the history we choose to tell. The formation of a more perfect union is rooted in the idea that we are improving as a nation. To some, improvement means the removal of fault and impurity through the erasure of the unpleasant parts of our nation's history.

That is not what a more perfect union means to me. Senate Historian Betty Koed reminded me that the true meaning of a more perfect union is the embrace of imperfection. A more perfect union is formed by knowing the things that make our nation imperfect, the many flaws we have, and the atrocities our nation has inflicted, and then moving forward. Because while the stories we choose to tell and choose to forget are inherently political, shying away from the faults of the past that reverberate into the present, only serves to amplify the resonance of them we feel today.

Washington Week was an important reminder for me that it is the stories that are uncomfortable, hard to hear, and hard to tell, that are the most important. When we choose which stories we will pass on, we must understand the stories we are leaving out, because they are always there. We must actively choose improvement in the form of growth over ignorance. This Washington Week has reminded me that when we come together and share stories, (and white chocolate Capitol domes) we become a more perfect union.