

Work Still in Progress

January 25, 2009

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Somehow it doesn't seem *fair*. Eight years ago, George Bush was elected, or should I say selected by the Supreme Court, to be President of the United States with less than a majority of the popular vote. He claimed to be a *uniter* not a divider, yet his political appointments and policies quickly signaled, along with massive tax cuts for the rich, corporate welfare, and two unpopular wars of foreign aggression, that *his* Administration was for *his* base constituency, leaving liberals out in the cold. It isn't partisanship to notice this if it is true. Now a liberal Democrat has been elected President by a clear majority, although demonized by conservatives as the most liberal President of all time, he speaks of a post-partisan America. His cabinet and his policies already include centrists as well as liberals, Republicans as well as Democrats. After eight years in the wilderness, it doesn't feel entirely fair, but it does *feel right* that all Americans will be once again united, under an Administration seeking the good for all the people. Obama set the tone in his inaugural speech: "Today I say to you that the challenges we face are real. They are serious and they are many. They will not be met easily or in a short span of time. But know this, America—they will be met. On this day, we gather because we have chosen hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord. On this day, we come to proclaim an end to the petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn out dogmas, that for too long have strangled our politics. We remain a young nation, but in the words of scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things. The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness."

This is a time of transition between Presidents, but even more so it is a time of transition between generations. Our country celebrated Martin Luther King Jr. last weekend, and he very much felt like God had taken him to the mountain top, to see and dream of all that could be for his people: the oppressed, people of color, and all those who could not fully participate in the American dream. He knew that his generation would not live to see our society transformed, but he trusted it would be transformed. Barack Obama and at least some people in his generation speak of themselves as the Joshua generation, able to enter into this land of milk and honey as full participants in the American dream, made possible by the faith, leadership, and sacrifices of that generation that came before them. But they dare not enter into this new role as victors, lording it over those who have held power here before them, but rather seek to transform our very basis of power so that we are all blessed.

And it is hard to imagine any person better suited by personal history and temperament to lead us all in this transformation. While his grandfather fought in WWII, his grandmother worked as Rosie the riveter at the Boeing plant in Wichita, Kansas. They later joined the East Shore Unitarian Church in Bellevue, Washington; so when Obama says he learned his core values from his beloved grandmother, those were UU values. In his “Call to Renewal” Obama says, “In our household, the Bible, the Koran, and the Bhagavad Gita sat on the shelf alongside books of Greek and Norse and African mythology. On Easter or Christmas my mother might drag me to church, just as she dragged me to the Buddhist temple, the Chinese New Year celebration, the Shinto shrine, and the ancient Hawaiian burial sites.” He says he learned that “underlying these religions was a common set of beliefs about how you treat other people and how you aspire to act, not just for yourself, but also for the greater good.” He describes his mother’s beliefs as secular humanism. His father, and his step-father, both grew up as liberal Muslims, and while living in Indonesia Barack Obama was educated for two years at a Muslim school and attended the mosque with his step-father. He also attended Catholic school for two years in Indonesia. Most of his adult life Barack Obama has worshipped at Trinity United Church of Christ, which is the largest black UCC church in America, where he converted, married, and adopted his postmodern Christianity.

This is another generational transition. While most Americans over the age of 50, regardless of religious affiliation, hold a modernist view of reality, many Americans under the age of 50, regardless of religious affiliation, tend to a postmodernist view. So being a postmodernist Christian, Barack Obama seeks to achieve common ground and a common understanding with like-minded folks whether they be Catholics, Protestants, Mormons, Evangelicals, or Jews. In his book “The Audacity of Hope,” Obama derives his pro-choice position from his Christian faith, though he recognizes that many Christians are unable to do so. He prefaces his discussion of civil unions and gay marriage the same way. He says, “For many practicing Christians, the same inability to compromise may apply to gay marriage. I find such a position troublesome, particularly in a society in which Christian men and women have been known to engage in adultery or other violations of their faith without civil penalty. All too often I have sat in a church and heard a pastor gay bashing as a cheap parlor trick—‘It was Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve!’ he will shout, usually when the sermon is not going so well.” Obama continues: “I believe that American society can choose to carve out a special place for the union of a man and a woman as the unit of child rearing most common to every culture. I am not willing to have the state deny American citizens a civil union that confers equivalent rights on such basic matters as hospital visitation or health insurance coverage simply because the people they love are of the same sex—nor am I willing to accept a reading of the Bible that considers an obscure line in Romans to be more defining of Christianity than the Sermon on the Mount.” Obama’s postmodern Christianity informs his liberal politics, and he is able to reach out to a Rev. Warren, a post-modern Evangelist, and find common ground. I was surprised however when Rick Warren got far more grief from fundamentalists for agreeing to do the invocation at Obama’s

Inauguration than President Obama got from gay rights activists for inviting Warren to pray. With America still deeply divided over social and cultural issues, finding common ground on which to base government policies will be difficult, but not impossible, if we are to be one people. When Barrack Obama's parents were married, over 80% of Americans disapproved of interracial marriages and they were illegal in most American states. Today 80% of Americans are fine with interracial marriages and they are legal in all 50 states.

If we are going to find common ground on same-sex marriage in this generation, it will be by persuading post-modern Christians that such belief can be consistent with the teachings of Jesus. I am not concerned that in reaching for the consensus middle that Barack Obama is not there yet. After all in Lincoln's first inaugural address Lincoln said, "I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so." Yet it was not three years later that Lincoln gave his Gettysburg address and then signed the Thirteenth Amendment fully outlawing slavery in the USA. The path may still be long, but it feels like we are on the way. For old lefties and liberals, who have been waiting eight years in the wilderness for a return to power, it can be devastating to discover that President Obama seeks to be the President of all the people, not just progressive people, and seems to seek to govern from the middle rather than from liberal positions that he held as a US Senator. This is good for our society, even if it requires patience for our politics. It is time to reunite this land. We need to become once again the United States of America.

And we should keep in mind that President Obama is not a Biblical prophet, thank goodness, but is a Chicago politician. He is a shrewd operator, one who knows how to make deals. As a politician he will seek to build a composite majority for his policies. Those majorities will not always be willing to support what we (or even he) might feel are right and necessary. But the President's role is to build an emergent community around what is possible, rather than what is simply preferable. The role of prophet, crying in the wilderness, is not and cannot be his to do. We still need prophets, willing to cry out on behalf of the poor, the oppressed, and especially those who do not have a voice in the councils of power, but Obama is not that person. Like all politicians, indeed all human beings, he has feet of clay. Now it happens that in earlier times, when constructing great commemorative statues, it wasn't always desirable to construct the entire figure from the most expensive and durable metals; fine metals were rare and could make a statue prohibitively expensive. So the head might be the finest gold, the torso silver, the legs of steel, and if metals or money ran low, the feet might be of the cheapest iron and clay that could be smelted. Such a figure might look great but would be inherently unstable since should something shatter the feet then the whole edifice with all its dreams and glories will then come crashing down.

This image is famously portrayed in the book of Daniel, but can be applied to anyone who holds great power, for Daniel in chapter 2:31-35 interprets the king's dream for him as follows: "You were looking, O king, and lo there was a great statue. This statue was huge, its brilliance extraordinary; it was standing before you and its appearance was frightening. The head of that statue was of fine gold, its chests and arms of silver, its middle and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of clay. As you looked on, a stone was cut out, not by human hands, and it struck the statue on its feet of iron and clay and broke them to pieces. Then the iron, the clay, the bronze, the silver, and the gold, were all broken in pieces." American politics, by its very nature, deals with composites, some of which are grand, but which are vulnerable to toppling. Now having feet of clay is fine as long as you are struggling, up to your hips in the muck and mire, so that your struggles on behalf of a great cause sustain you, and hip deep in muck and mire no one ever much notices or cares what your feet are like. However raise that same figure up onto a pedestal, and hose them down until they are pristine without a trace of the muck and mire remaining, and that statue is enormously vulnerable. Let's not put Obama up on a pedestal, lest he become overly vulnerable, but let him govern deep in the muck and the mire that is Washington politics.

This is an extraordinary moment in time, one that will fascinate historians for many years to come, but it is just one moment. Americans as a people are still very much a work in progress. As Obama said in his inaugural address: "We know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus—and non-believers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this earth; and because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war and segregation, and emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united, we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace.... For the world has changed, and we must change with it." Are we prepared to change and be changed by grappling with this new generation? Unitarian Universalists are uniquely prepared to rise to this call for a new America. As part of this society, we have our share of having created this problem, we ought to share in its solution. To do so we keep our eyes fixed upon the beloved community that we seek to build, and always remember that it is *our* hope, *our* faith, and *our* love which ultimately make the realization of *our* dreams possible. As the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr reminds us: "Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love." We enter this age with the audacity of hope, the consolation of faith, and the certainty of love incarnate in community. I love you all dearly. Blessed Be and Amen.