

## A Reflection on Obama's Election

“If there is anyone out there who doubts that America is a place where all things are possible; who still wonders if the dream of our Founders is alive in our time; who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer” (Barack Obama, victory speech, November 4, 2008).

Last Tuesday was a milestone event for this nation as we elected our first African- American president. We all share as Americans in the triumph this election represents—a break from the shameful history, older than our nation, of the brutal enslavement and systematic oppression of black people on American soil.

One of my most vivid memories of last Tuesday night is the image of the Rev. Jesse Jackson standing alone in the crush of Obama's victory celebration with tears running down his face. Jackson said the next day in a National Public Radio interview that he was thinking of all the martyrs who had given their lives so that our nation could come to this moment. Each of us remembers those who gave their lives for African- American emancipation. I will name just three: Emmett Till, the Rev. James Reeb, and the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Alice Walker, the African- American writer and social activist, wrote a letter to Obama the day after the election:

Dear Brother Obama, You have no idea, really, of how profound this moment is for us. Us being the black people of the Southern United States. You think you know, because you are thoughtful, and you have studied our history. But seeing you deliver the torch so many others before you carried, year after year, decade after decade, century after century, only to be struck down before igniting the flame of justice and of law, is almost more than the heart can bear...We knew, through all the generations, that you were with us, in us, the best of the spirit of Africa and of the Americas. Knowing this, that you would actually appear, someday, was part of our strength. Seeing you take your rightful place, based solely on your wisdom, stamina and character, is a balm for the weary warriors of hope... (www.theroot.com).

No matter how you voted last Tuesday, no matter what you think of Barack Obama, you can rejoice and be proud today. As *NY Times* columnist Gail Collins wrote, “Even if you voted for John McCain, be happy. You've got the best of both worlds. Today you can bask in the realization that there are billions of people around the planet who loathed our country last week but are now in awe of its capacity to rise above historic fears and prejudices, that once again, the United States will have a president the world wants to follow.

Then later, when things gets screwed up, you can point out that it's not your fault" (*NY Times*, November 6, 2008, A33).

At my polling place on Tuesday morning I was in awe and near tears to see people lining up peacefully, without fear, many with their children by the hand, to cast their votes for the highest offices in the land. I thought of the many places in this world where voting can get you killed, and of the legions in our own nation who have gradually become enfranchised over the last two hundred years: the young, the poor, all of the women and all people of color.

Today in our Joys and Concerns ritual and during the congregational sharing and at coffee hour and in all the other places and times when we speak our hearts to each other in this community, I hope each one of us will have the courage to speak our truth about this election. As we share our personal stories and feelings, let us listen deeply to each other and honor all of our perspectives. In this place of caring, where diversity is welcome, may each one of us be open to hear from others whose experience is different from our own.

In this way we can embody the dream of unity that our president-elect expressed in his remarks last Tuesday:

This is our moment. This is our time — to put our people back to work and open doors of opportunity for our kids; to restore prosperity and promote the cause of peace; to reclaim the American Dream and reaffirm that fundamental truth that out of many, we are one; that while we breathe, we hope, and where we are met with cynicism, and doubt, and those who tell us that we can't, we will respond with that timeless creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes, we can. (November 4, 2008 in Chicago, IL).

Barack Hussein Obama, whose first name means "Blessed" in Swahili, will make mistakes, and he will encounter obstacles that will seem insurmountable. Each one of us can be accountable to move the nation toward the lofty goals our president-elect has set for himself and for us. We can speak and act in ways that will further right relationship, justice, and peace. I pray for Obama's safety every day and for our great nation, that we may come together and move together in unity toward the best that is within us. May it be so.

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