

## The Audacity of Hope

Be the change you want to see in the world. – Mahatma Gandhi

Lift every voice and sing! As we come to MLK weekend and approach Tuesday's inauguration, we have much to celebrate and many reasons to be grateful.

The stole I am wearing today is made of kente cloth, an African textile woven in Ghana by the Akan peoples, for whom it is sacred. Originally worn by kings, it signified royalty. Today it is the best known of all African textiles and has come to represent the African cultural heritage around the world.

Many different patterns and color combinations carry symbolic meanings: black stands for maturation and intensified spiritual energy; blue, for peacefulness and harmony; green, for planting, harvesting, growth, and spiritual renewal, and so on.

Legend has it that two friends created kente cloth after they came upon a spider weaving its web while they were out hunting in the forest. According to the story, they stood and watched the spider for two days and then came home and wove the first piece by imitating what they had seen the spider do (Wikipedia).

I wear the stole to honor the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., President- Elect Barack Obama, and all African Americans at this time of reconciliation and hope for our nation.

Jim Wallis, a Christian activist, writer and editor, has written,

To remember King is to act like him. The change that King led is not contained within museums, monuments, or mausoleums, but lives vibrantly on in the people of social movements—people who believe that, step by step, a divided country can be united and broken spirits can be uplifted...We recognize that the challenges of the economy, the environment, and threats to life and peace across the world look like mountains before us. This is why we are rooted in faith, because faith is in the mountain moving business...Faith is believing in spite of the evidence and then watching the evidence change” (SojoMail@sojo.net 01.15.09).

Tomorrow afternoon at the Paramount Center for the Arts in Peekskill, a program in honor of Dr. King sponsored by the Mount Olivet Baptist Church and the Peekskill Area Pastors Association will bring together all of our communities. I hope you can be there.

The postcard invitation for this celebration highlights the connection between Dr. King and Mr. Obama: “No Tuesday without Monday.” It means that without the effort of King and his associates during the Civil Rights Movement, we would never have arrived as a nation at the time when an African American could be elected our president. No Tuesday without Monday.

Writing in today’s New York Times Book Review, Anthony Lewis confirms and expands upon this claim.

Barack Obama’s election as president had a thousand fathers in the long history of the struggle against American racism. But three

events stand out as decisive in creating the possibility of an African- American president. The first, in 1863, was Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, which promised freedom but was followed by a century of harsh discrimination. The second was the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, signaling the end of legal tolerance for discrimination. The third was the ["I have a dream"] speech the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave at the March on Washington in 1963, 100 years after Lincoln's proclamation...It is a commonplace now to associate Obama with Martin Luther King. This is not just sentiment. Without King, Barack Obama would not be taking the oath as the 44<sup>th</sup> president of the United States.

We didn't all vote for Obama. Some of us were for the other guy, and some of us think the 43<sup>rd</sup> president of the United States did a good job. But no matter who you voted for, no matter what you think about the last eight years in our nation's history, we can come together and celebrate today. The orderly transfer of power. The election of an African American, a man who says he will be the president of all the people. Your president. No matter who you voted for. Let us celebrate the upcoming inauguration as one people. It's been a long time coming, and we could use a party.

This sermon title, "The Audacity of Hope," comes from Obama's latest book by that name. Its subtitle is *Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. In his earlier book, *Dreams from my Father*, Obama tells about hearing a sermon with this title preached by the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, who was then Obama's pastor and subsequently became an embarrassment and a source of controversy in the presidential campaign.

The audacity of hope. How dare we have hope in these times? How dare we have hope in the face of the international and domestic problems

that engulf us. How dare a pilot decide to ditch his plane in the icy Hudson River instead of trying to make it to the nearest airport? The success of that audacious risk has filled our newspapers and airwaves and our hearts—we are so parched for hope, so tired of despair.

So it is with our nation. We have much cause for despair, and yet we hope. We have hope for our future, we have hope that things will get better, we have hope for change. And much of our hope is centered on one man, our new president.

This week in the Economist magazine, their lead essay lays out some of the challenges Obama is facing:

Shortly after midday on January 20<sup>th</sup>, Barack Obama will sit for the first time at the desk where the buck stops. The American presidency is always the world's hardest and most consequential job, but it seems particularly so this month. A global recession of a severity not seen for perhaps 80 years; a new war in the Middle East and old ones in Africa; missions far from accomplished in Iraq and Afghanistan; a prickly Russia and a rising China. These international challenges must jostle for the president's attention alongside noisy domestic concerns like rocketing unemployment, the desperate need for a better health-care system, exploding deficits and failing cities. The burdens are, surely, too much for one man to bear.

Yet neither America nor the world seems to see it that way.[The millions who gather in Washington and the billions who will watch the inauguration on television] ...will do so in a spirit that has been missing for a while—one of optimism...Next week's inauguration... bears witness to America's awesome power of self-renewal. Because he is young, handsome, and intelligent, and also because as the child of a Kansan and a Kenyon he reconciles in his own person the world's most hateful divisions, Mr. Obama carries with him the hopes of the planet...The next four, or eight, years may be a disappointment, a triumphant renewal or something in between. Mr. Obama is inexperienced, and right now the world looks

especially forbidding. But he is a respectful and thoughtful man, and that is a good start” (January 17, 2009, 11).

This week, it seems, and for the next four years at least, the whole world will be watching Barack Hussein Obama.

For the rest of our time together this morning, I invite you to turn away from your focus on the president- elect. In the spirit of democracy, of government by the people, I invite you to take a look at yourself and consider how you will be in relationship with this new government, this new president.

What gifts can you bring to our president- elect? As a citizen and a person of faith, with hope in your heart and all your critical faculties intact, what can you offer to the partnership between our government and its citizens?

A New Yorker cartoon I saw soon after the election last November shows a donkey on the couch in the therapist’s office. “So you won the election,” the therapist says. “How does that make you feel?” For those of us who supported Obama, the feelings include elation, excitement, and hope, for sure. Also, perhaps, disorientation. And fear. How much of our armor can we shed? Can we trust Obama’s promise of change?

Many of us have been sour on the people in the White House for eight years. We have cultivated habits of mistrust, mockery, disrespect, contempt. We have refined our satirical skills and strengthened our vocabulary of disregard. Some of us became unable to watch the

president on television. Those of us who hold our sitting president in low regard have developed a knee jerk reaction to the presidency of the United States. We have come to believe our government is riddled with incompetence and bad faith.

These attitudes may not be easily undone. Our impulse to form quick judgments and negative evaluations is mirrored everywhere in the culture of political commentary around us. Yet withholding judgment is the beginning of compassion and seems only fair, given the scope of the challenge facing this new government.

The Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti said, “To observe without evaluation is the highest form of intelligence.”

To be aware implies observation through space—that is, having space in your mind that you are able to observe without opinion, without evaluation, without conclusion. Most of us have no space in our minds because we come to everything with an idea, with an opinion, with a judgment or evaluation; we condemn, approve, or justify what we see, or we identify ourselves with it, so there is no space at all in which to observe. To be alert, active, sensitive, the mind must have space in which to look at things without the background of what it already knows. You are simply observing what is” (*The Collected Works of Jiddu Krishnamurti*, Krishnamurti Foundation of America, 1991, 320- 322).

Viewing the work of our new administration with dispassionate interest and an open mind will take quite a reversal of energy and direction for many of us. And there are few models in the culture to follow. I can hardly think, outside perhaps of Jim Lehrer, of a political commentator on television who even pretends to be objective or

dispassionate. Everybody's got an opinion, and everybody's shouting. To take a step back and just try to see what's in front of us will be a real challenge, a big change.

Krishnamurti goes on to explain how we can become aware and create space in our minds:

[To be aware is] to watch your bodily activity, the way you walk, the way you sit, the movements of your hands; it is to hear the words you use, to observe all your thoughts, all your emotions, all your reactions. [You must also be aware] of the unconscious, with its traditions, its instinctual knowledge, and the immense sorrow it has accumulated—not only personal sorrow, but the sorrow of man. You have to be aware of all that; and you cannot be aware of it if you are merely judging, evaluating, saying, "This is good and that is bad. This I will keep and that I will reject..." (op cit).

The Tao Te Ching offers a succinct suggestion for conducting yourself in these times: "Express yourself completely,/then keep quiet...If you open yourself to insight,/you are at one with insight/ and you can use it completely" (#23, translated by Stephen Mitchell).

Another gift we could bring to our new president is some empathy for his situation. Writing about values in *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama himself holds up empathy, "not simply as a call to sympathy or charity, but something more demanding, a call to stand in somebody else's shoes and see through their eyes" (66).

He goes on to tie empathy to public policy:

I find myself returning again and again to my mother's simple principle—"How would that make you feel?"—as a guidepost for my politics...We wouldn't tolerate schools that don't teach, that are

chronically underfunded and understaffed and underinspired, if we thought the children in them were like our children. It's hard to image the CEO of a company giving himself a multimillion-dollar bonus while cutting health-care coverage for his workers if he thought they were in some sense his equals. And it's safe to assume that those in power would think longer and harder about launching a war if they envisioned their own sons and daughters in harm's way.

I believe a stronger sense of empathy would tilt the balance of our current politics in favor of those people who are struggling in this society. After all, if they are like us, then their struggle is our own. If we fail to help, we diminish ourselves (67- 68).

Earlier in the book, Obama talks about meeting President George W. Bush for the first time and liking him. Here, he continues,

I am obligated to try to see the world through George Bush's eyes, no matter how much I may disagree with him. That's what empathy does—it calls us all to task, the conservative and the liberal, the powerful and the powerless, the oppressed and the oppressor. We are all shaken out of our complacency. We are all forced beyond our limited vision.

No one is exempt from the call to find common ground (68).

As we wish the best to our president-elect, it would be well to cultivate some empathy, perhaps even some humility, in the face of the responsibilities he is taking on. After all, his job, to repeat the assessment from the Economist, is “the hardest and most consequential [in the world].” No one is exempt from the call to find common ground.

Finally, a gift we could bring to our community, our nation, and also to our new president is to renew our commitment to service. Jim Wallis writes, “With the great challenges before us, we know that moving

mountains takes more than just one day of service. We must remember the words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.:

On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will only be the initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway.

The call to transform our personal and family lives, build up our own communities, and change this country on the really big issues is before each of us now...I invite you to make a commitment to hope and change—not just for one day, but...for a lifetime” (op cit).

In the Hebrew Bible, when God promises the children of Israel renewal after a time of trouble, this promise is sometimes expressed as regaining their heart. Ezekiel 11:19, for example, “I will give them one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh.” This new administration seems to me to be an opportunity for our nation to get its heart back, to change our hearts from stone to flesh.

It's complicated and it's difficult and it's frightening, and I believe that if we bring our gifts of nonjudgment, empathy, humility, and commitment to service in the weeks and months ahead, we can contribute to the hope and change that Obama has promised. I pray for his success and his safety every day.

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