

NOW WHAT DO WE DO?

A Sermon Delivered to the Unitarian Society of Menomonie,
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We won! All the work, all the effort, all the lonely miles we put in when it seemed as if there would never be either an end nor a payoff, the endless stretch into the horizon toward an ever-diminishing goalpost, it all won out, it all comes down to these two well-earned words. We won. The horse we backed crossed first, the team we pushed made it, our ship has come in. We won. Now, it is time to take a well-deserved, well-earned nap for another four years. Maybe, if we're feeling our oats and the opposition seems particularly energized, three years.

Au contraire, mon dude. We have neither the luxury nor the time for napping.

Some of you may remember a sermon I gave four years ago, right about now, when it looked as if John Kerry was going to be president, and then it all came crashing down around our heads. The title of that one was "In the Name of God, What Do I Do Now?" and it encapsulated

pretty neatly what many of us, especially me, were feeling. I was feeling pretty demoralized, pretty defeated. Everything we'd worked for, everything that had seemed so sure, everything that made a difference—we were not only certain of our impending victory over George W. Bush, we were certain of the rightness of it, the moral certitude of our goal—everything, in short, that would come to fruition the morning after the election, that when the returns were counted and tallied and we were defeated—and it didn't strike us as a political defeat, no, it was a resounding defeat, to put it in Hobbit terms, by Sauron of the brave fellowship of the ring led by Frodo Kerry, and now all the shire would become Mordor—that it was like a solid kick to the gut by the hobnailed boot of Dick Cheney. How, we asked, how could a majority of American's have been so wrong, had opted to retain the safety of the Bush Administration, with its Iraq War, its Guantanamo, its Abu Ghraib—photos of the tortures at Abu Ghraib had just come out that year, you'll remember, and they all but had Bush and Cheney's fingerprints on them—its Downing Street Memo, over the potentially risky but surely less-corrupted possibilities of a Kerry and Edwards Administration?

It was, we knew, a fix. The fight was determined before the first bell rang and the ref was in on the deal. We had watched it happen in the waning months of 2000, the Republican operatives under John Bolton, later our—can this have ever been? our representative to the UN—pounding on the observation glass while harried election judges tried to parse the difference between dimpled, pimped and hanging chads and the Rhenquist Court tried to make us believe thousands of retired Jews voted for Pat Buchanan over Al Gore. That had been in Florida and now we were seeing it in Ohio where Ken Blackwell, who'd run the Bush Reelection Campaign in that state, and who was the Ohio secretary of state, oversaw the purging of thousands of Democratically-leaning black and new voters from the rolls, again handing George

W. Bush a tainted and ugly victory. Bush was Augusto Pinochet and the only difference between John Kerry and Salvador Allende was that you didn't need to use a bullet in America but a ballot. We saw the results and we openly wept and some of us, Hunter S. Thompson most famously and most permanently, gave up.

My sermon then was a question of fear and trembling and led to a wail of defiance by many of us. George W. Bush, we swore, was not our president. He had been uncertainly and illegally placed in office in a bloodless coup and now his illicit administration had been given new life and an imprimatur, as they saw it, to go on humping the leg of America and the world. Tens of thousands of adults and toddlers and hamsters and even stuffed animals posted photos on websites saying "Sorry Everybody." We had let down the world and ourselves and the future. It was a dark, nasty time to be an American.

We saw the same thing coming this time around. The fix, we told ourselves and each other, was in, and while John McCain was not as nasty or divisive as Bush, and for all her silliness Sarah Palin was no Dick Cheney, we weren't going to let our hopes get as high again, only to watch them plummet into the icy depths of despair. President McCain. President Palin. We'd just have to get used to saying those things. Or, like me, we'd spend the next decade avoiding using anything other than the title or a last name, assuming everyone knew who we were talking about.

But it's happened, what we couldn't quite let ourselves believe would happen. The Dark Horse Candidate—and I use that phrase very intentionally—the one we were certain couldn't make it past the barriers that the bigots and blue meanies had crowded before him, and who we couldn't quite allow ourselves to entirely have faith in, stuck it out and made it to the starting gate and then onto the track and then into the lead pack and finally into the winner's circle. He

did it. The “Sorry Everybody” website has been rechristened “Hello Everybody.” We did it. Now we can rest. Lay back and let the next eight years roll down like justice. Let the sweet water of triumph wash over us. Let ourselves be taken reverently into the bosom of love and compassion and rocked to gentle slumber.

Isn't it pretty to think it will be that way. I am here to tell you, it will not be. It simply will not be.

And I want to be clear about something. It's not a case in which we can't rest because the opposition and our enemies will be knocking at the door or will be themselves sleeping with one eye open, hoping to catch us when our pants are down, as it were, and hold us up to derision, mockery, ridicule. All that's true, to an extent. One of the more entertaining email subject lines I've received has been, “Hide your guns and your unborn children: Obama will take both away.” But it will not be because it simply cannot be. Complacency and contentment, while they are good for the individual, are death to the group. If people are similar to koalas, a brief scurry to find the tastiest eucalyptus tree and then settling in for the long haul, political organizations are more like sharks, needing to eat and move continuously or die.

I spent the week after the election talking with students about the results and their role in them and strangely enough, despite everything we think about being on the cutting edge of history—and don't mistake me, we are—some of the younger ones among us are not buying it. While Obama easily captured 66% of the much-coveted 18 to 30 demographic nationally, and 65% in Minnesota where I teach, I'd estimate he took at best about 30-40% of my students in that age group, especially the males. Perhaps it was the fear of a black president, or perhaps it was fear of the unknown and the unknowable, but suburban college males in my classes went

overwhelmingly for McCain, at least as they told it to me, and Obama was even almost eclipsed among them by Bob Barr.

This would seem pretty in keeping with some of the odder results of the election—Michele Bachmann’s victory in Stillwater after her incredible gaffe a week before the election (who can forget her call for the media to check into Obama’s anti-American sensibilities and those of other members of the House and Senate), and California reversing itself by voting to constitutionalize anti-same-sex marriage amendment—but it still remains something I find hard to wrap my head around. How many people in California managed to find it in themselves to vote simultaneously for a black man for President of the United States and against equal rights for same sex couples?

It’s said the mark of a mature individual is the ability to hold two contradictory beliefs. If that’s true, the contradiction to the above is the incredulity—a happy incredulity, I hasten to add—many of us feel at the results of the election. I’m not the only one finding it hard to hold all this inside. The satirical weekly *The Onion* has an article in this week’s issue in which a sportswriter covering a basketball game can’t finish a sentence without rambling on about Obama’s win to the effect “I can’t believe it, we actually made history, how incredible is this?” I relate. Sometimes I’m astounded to have whole conversations during which neither I nor my partner suddenly stop mid-conversation about, I don’t know, upcoming changes in English requirements to mention the mind-blowingness that “we won!” or our “pinch me, I must be dreaming” moments. Who can forget that euphoria less than two hours into the vote tallies when the networks, naturally smarting from the errors of the 2000 election, felt confident enough to call the night—already, so soon?—for Obama? Or those just as important moments immediately

after the shouting when we all stopped and looked at each other, saying, mostly to ourselves but some out loud, “Did that really just happen?”

Talking with my students became a kind of cathartic activity for me on this subject. I admitted to being one of those crazy people—crazy according to all the better-thinking people—who was certain the two Bush-won elections were fixed and who wouldn’t have been surprised had this last one been called in the final tally of Diebold-counted votes for McCain. In fact, in some ways I was disappointed, I explained to them. Many of you are in a similar situation I think: we came of age at the time of Watergate, when we were made aware that, contrary to what we learned in American history and social studies, the people in government weren’t always looking out for our best interests. There were people, maybe a majority, who were in it for themselves, and in fact the deck was intentionally stacked against us and in favor of the wealthy and the permanent government, that shadowy cabal that was somewhere behind the scenes, never elected, not having allegiance to either party or to a particular ideology except the one that said, “Every man for himself.” We were certain that these people, this system, this unelected shadow kingdom would ensure the radical change that people so seemed to want would not come about. Perhaps you remember the Frank Capra classic *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* and its scenes of the actor Edward Arnold playing newspaper magnate Jim Taylor, confidently on the phone extinguishing all coverage in his home state of any news that ran contrary to what he thought the people should hear, and Jimmy Stewart as Jeff Smith, throwing telegrams to the floor telling him to give it up, give in, and saying he’d go on fighting because the lost causes were the only ones fighting for. And you might remember that the whole film might have come to a different conclusion if Claude Rains had been able to keep his cool and his conscience under control and not tried to shoot himself.

That was how we saw government. It wouldn't let an Obama win. I'm glad to say we were wrong. But it's a hard thing to admit, because it means maybe we were wrong all along. This result suggests the X-Files was wrong. There isn't a shadowy cabal with its alien fingers in every pie, its Cancer Man behind the scenes manipulating events to their predetermined ends. Most frighteningly, it suggests most Americans really did vote for George W. Bush.

Will Barack Obama survive to take office? Of course he will. If there is an eternal member of government it's the Secret Service, and they're well-aware that this historic president requires historic means to protect him. And while there are any number of crazies for whom Obama's head in their sniper sights would be the culmination of a life's work—and at least an equal number of non-crazies, people for whom it would be all in a day's work, a bigger payday than most—I think we can trust, we need to trust, an organization whose *raison d'être* is exclusively standing between one man and all of them.

But while his life is probably not in danger, everything else about him is. Consider, we've made a historic decision. How easy it will be to leave him to it and let him stand or fall entirely on his own. How easy it will be now to say, "My job's done." The opposite to the "hide your guns and unborn children" headline is another that reads, "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus." An Obama presidency has two possible extremes. In one, he is so compromised by pressures placed on him, not only by the losing party's interests, but by factions within his own party itself and the more revolutionary left of which I count myself a part, that the Obama presidency is a single term marked by the same lack of progress suggested during Bill Clinton's first six months, when the opponents arrayed against him suggested his proposals were so out there they couldn't possibly work or were in fact harmful, that nothing was accomplished and the presidency seemed dead in the water. The other extreme is that Obama is Neo. This is a favorite

topic of right-wing talk radio: he is The One. We will spend our days genuflecting to him as he miraculously points out issues and problems and they are themselves immediately, irreparably resolved. In the words of Julian of Norwich, “all will be well and all manner of things will be well.” At what point, now that he’s won and we’ve patted ourselves on the back for having the courage to buck the historic trend and elect a skinny black kid with a funny name into the top political office, does Obama become an icon and cease to be a human being?

We’re coming very, very close. Every newsmagazine and even several that aren’t is pasting his face and his victory on the cover, overtly or not so overtly pointing to both its precedent and its historicity. I won’t deny it: there’s something beautiful about America that I can go into the grocery store in small town Wisconsin and see row upon row of this smiling black presidential face. It satisfies something in me, something good and right and proud. Although I might also note with some curiousness that often the only black faces I see in those groceries are on magazine covers, but no matter.

No matter. This matters. It’s not in the nature of icons to make mistakes, to screw up, to blunder and err. It is very much in the nature of human beings. President Barack Obama seems to have two choices, to be a great or a lousy president. It is unfortunately also in the nature of things that while the American people can elect in Bush a white C student for president, we must have an exceptional first black president. Obama’s tenure has yet to be seen. He may someday join the pantheon of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and FDR, and it will be wonderful if he does.

But he has equal chance of joining Andrew Johnson, Herbert Hoover, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan. Or, worse, of place holders, mediocrities like John Tyler, James Buchanan, Millard Fillmore and Warren Harding. A worst case scenario involves an Obama administration

so ineffective and passionless that for decades after pollsters will report the disinclination of the electorate to vote in “that kind of person” again, by which they’ll say they mean young and inexperienced, but everyone will understand they mean “black.”

That must not be the case. I like to think that, had John McCain won, we would not simply step back saying, “The people had their say, it’s time to let him do what he wants, I wash my hands of it.” I like to think we’d be in the streets, protesting, celebrating, whatever. We would make noise. This is what we must do with President Barack Obama. There are points with which I am already at odds with President Obama: on whether we ought to be at war, on the efficacy of government bailouts of Wall Street, on the rights of same sex couples to marry, of agricultural reform and immigration reform and health reform and education reform. Politics, I remind you, is not something done only by politicians. It’s a constant process of relationship between people. Not just a tug of war between competing interests but a series of agreements and compromises between individuals. We honor a friend best by letting him know when we take issue with him and that we remain his friend. These items and any number of others that will, doubtless, come in the future will be points of contention between President Obama and many of us. And they should be.

Obama’s victory means a heavier workload for us, both as social and as religious liberals. President Obama is not the answer to our prayers, not the last, best hope of America, not the avatar of change. He is not Neo. He is a man who will make mistakes—we already know he smokes too much—and who will need to be corrected by us, the angels of his better nature, who will ourselves need to rely on the angels of our better natures to know the difference. We must look on an Obama Administration the same way we looked at the Bush Administration: we must treat America like the baby she is, love her unconditionally and change her when necessary.