

On the Pulse of Morning

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I remember the first time I heard Maya Angelou's poem "On the Pulse of Morning." It was my first day of work as the biology lab assistant at Hunter High School in Manhattan, and I, along with several classes of students and many other faculty members, crammed into a classroom to watch Bill Clinton's inauguration as the 42nd President of the United States, sixteen years ago this Tuesday.

Perhaps a little over-the-top in her inclusiveness, Angelou's poem fit the occasion and its promise well. It was a time of optimism for a broad spectrum of Americans who dreamed of a new era in our nation's history, who were promised such by the incoming President.

And yet the opportunity for such an era was quickly squandered, because the center-left Democrats of the day had forgotten, in their years of opposition, how to govern a nation.

The promise of universal health care became the debacle of "Hillarycare," with undue and unfair blame being attached to the then-first lady. Insurance companies, associations of doctors, and conservative and libertarian think-tanks banded together to scare the public by unearthing the only-recently-buried specter of socialism. (Wikipedia) Harry and Louise, their ad characters, struck the first blow in the dismantling of the optimism that was in the air in January of 1993.

The promise of opening military service to people of all sexual orientations quickly became "don't ask, don't tell," a policy that has done more harm than good over the last fifteen years, and a new era of witch hunts and dishonorable discharges.

And the promise of a government that worked for the benefit of all people ended with the 1994 Contract with America, and was later buried with the passage of things such as welfare reform legislation and the Defense of Marriage Act, both signed by President Clinton in 1996.

Today, we once again stand on the edge of a new day in our nation's history.

And once again, the possibility looms that our hope and optimism for a better future will quickly become disappointment and frustration.

Now, I don't mean to be "Debbie Downer" here, raining on the inaugural parade before it has even begun. I certainly don't want to dismiss the power of hope to inspire change, or ignore its necessity to people who face oppression day in and day out. I don't even want to predict failure where success is both so possible and so necessary.

Yet here, on the eve of our country's celebration of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., an annual day of remembrance that will be followed by the historic inauguration of the first African-American president of the United States, we stand as a people next to a massive rock, placed at the banks of the stream of history by a movement seeking to change the course of that stream.

In 1993, Maya Angelou stood at the lectern on the Capitol steps and declared, “The rock cries out today, you may stand on me, / But do not hide your face.” (Angelou)

In 2009, we once again have the choice of using that rock as pedestal and lookout, a place from which to plot the change in course our nation and world need, or we can choose to use the rock instead as a defensive rampart to shield us from those who would uphold the status quo.

And make no mistake—it is *we* who have that choice, not our President-elect or his cabinet, not our Congress or our governor. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.

And that power is in our hands.

Van Jones, the founder and President of the organization Green for All and author of *The Green Collar Economy*, was invited to give the Ware Lecture—the equivalent of a keynote address—at the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly last June. In that speech, here’s part of what he said:

“This denomination, this community, has held up the banner for human rights and for justice through a very difficult period in this country’s history.... And as we begin to move forward now, it’s a result of your resolve, your persistence . . . that we stand on the threshold of a new era in American politics. . . . You will make the difference between success and failure for this new president, this transition to a clean, green economy, our exit from this horrible war.” (Van Jones, in French)

Let me be honest: Somewhere deep down, I harbor just a bit of fear—it surfaces from time to time. Fear that our incoming President, as much as I support him, and as much as I was excited by his election, is disturbingly naïve about the reality of what it will take to get his agenda passed over the next four years. I am at times gravely concerned that he has, to use a word favored by our current President, underestimated the resistance that his changes will find among both lawmakers and citizens.

In order to make real change in our country, the President and his advisors will need to find ways to bridge some very serious philosophical and regional divides. They will have to convince people to accept sacrifices for changes that are in the best interest of our nation and our future, and they will have to create political will to restructure our lives and our government in some very fundamental ways.

These are not necessarily Democrat-vs-Republican issues, or liberal-vs-conservative ones either.

In order to address issues of climate change and our addiction-like dependence on petroleum, we will need to change the ways vehicles run and invest in mass transit so that cars are no longer the centerpiece of American transportation policy. Lawmakers from states with large automotive industries—Democrats and Republicans alike—have long stood in the way of policy initiatives that included such things as increases in fuel efficiency, and will certainly bristle at the thought of fewer cars on the roads.

We will also need to address the issue of where our electric power comes from, especially if we’re soon going to be plugging in our cars at night. We need to invest in power generation that is carbon-free and environmentally-friendly. On this front, we have several problems.

Lawmakers from both parties who represent coal-producing regions will surely block energy legislation that refuses to endorse the mythical and unrealistic notion of “clean coal,” and their counterparts from Nevada, including the Senate Majority Leader, will block anything that includes a national repository for nuclear waste.

And no less than Senator Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts, otherwise and in almost every way a staunch environmentalist, is hoping to stand in the way of the development of a major off-shore wind farm that would ruin his family’s view from the beach in Hyannisport. If he is successful, can you imagine a single Congressman or Senator from a coastal area that would allow such development where they’re from?

If we are to have any chance at universal health care in this country, the lawmakers of both parties who are in the pockets of insurance- and pharmaceutical-company lobbyists need to find a way to vote for plans that change the ways in which insurance works, plans that allow our government to negotiate lower costs for prescription drugs.

If our nation is to use its power in the world to create peace, we’re going to have to find someone willing to compromise and someone willing to stand up for what is right despite great personal cost. Whether in Gaza or Pyongyang, Georgia or Darfur, seemingly-intractable problems await a President who promises a different way of addressing them.

And I am *so* not looking forward to the fights over which infrastructure projects are the most “shovel-ready” or have the most potential for job creation. All over the nation, towns, cities, and states are already trying to position themselves for the economic stimulus windfall they imagine is coming their way soon. Fayetteville, Arkansas wants new roads, Mamaroneck, New York wants a new sewage treatment plant, and the island-dwelling residents of Ketchikan, Alaska still need a bridge to their airport, thanks to political wrangling that labeled that airport “nowhere.”

If we are to stand on the shores of the river and declare that a new day is dawning, we must not assume that a President alone can create the change needed to see that new day.

Change is notoriously hard to come by, my friends. It must be actively sought, it is never passively agreed to.

And the more firmly-entrenched the status quo is, the harder change is going to be.

Martin Luther King knew that.

In his day, King faced much opposition. That opposition was not only from the forces of bigotry and intolerance in our country. He also had to fight people who said they were on his side—many of whom were white liberals who thought that the change King sought would come about without protest or direct action—that it could and should happen through solely-political means.

In January of 1963, as King planned a non-violent civil disobedience campaign, eight ministers from liberal denominations published an open letter urging him to wait. They urged him to let government take the time it needed to enact new policies of integration and civil rights. They warned that they could not support direct action.

And from a jail in Birmingham, Alabama, having been arrested in an act of non-violent resistance, King wrote a letter to those white liberal ministers. In it, he wrote:

“One of the basic points in your statement is that our acts are untimely. Some have asked, ‘Why don’t you give the new administration time to act?’ The only answer that I can give to this inquiry is that the new administration must be prodded about as much as the outgoing one before it acts. We will be sadly mistaken if we feel that the election of Mr. Boutwell will bring the millennium to Birmingham.” (King)

Later, he continued:

“We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation.” (King)

King knew that silence in the face of evil amounts to complicity with that evil. King knew that, in the words of Frederick Douglass, power concedes nothing without a demand. King knew that the loftiest dreams and the most impassioned speeches needed to be accompanied by the direct action of non-violent resistance, even in the face of water hoses and dogs and stones and bats.

Dr. King knew how much work it was to change our country.

We live in an amazing nation; a nation in which only forty-five years after Dr. King first spoke of his dream on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, an African-American man was elected our President; elected because of the content of his character without regard to the color of his skin.

On Tuesday at noon, Barack Hussein Obama, son of an African man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas, will stand at the opposite end of the Mall in Washington, DC, take the oath of office, and become the 44th President of the United States of America.

Much celebration will surely follow—from the official festivities of parades and balls to the private jubilation that will be expressed in countless living rooms and classrooms across the country.

It is good and right to celebrate this historic event. Whatever your political beliefs, whomever you voted for last November, I hope that you can find some joy on Tuesday: joy in our nation’s progress, joy in our ability to pass power smoothly between administrations with such different philosophies, joy in knowing that the possibility of change is in the air.

I hope that you find a way to share that joy this Tuesday, in whatever way you can.

Because Tuesday will be the day for celebration, and Wednesday we must get to work.

On Wednesday, those of us who believe in justice for all people must get to work ensuring that it comes to pass.

On Wednesday, those of us who believe in caring for our fragile planet must get to work doing that.

On Wednesday, those of us who believe that torture is wrong, that war is not the answer to our problems, and that civil rights are inalienable must get to work making sure our government's policies are changed in these arenas.

On Wednesday, those of us who believe that all Americans deserve quality health care, those of us who believe that all people deserve enough to eat, and those of us who believe that the dream is within reach must get to work pushing this great country with all our might so that we can together take the next steps in our nation's progress.

Here, on the pulse of this new morning, we have work to do.

Let us honor both the dreams of Dr. King and the hopes of President-elect Obama by doing that work.

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