

For What Dare We Hope?

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Prayer

Sheltered by this old house, just as generations have been sheltered here for longer than the life of our republic, our great experiment in democracy...

Sheltered by this house, warmed by the company of one another, inspired by one another's dreams...

We pause in meditation, finding a centeredness in our heart's peace, our heart's love.
And we pray...

That as we begin a new political era, we will have the energy to engage in the issues of our time, and that we will have the courage to reach across lines of party and ideology and religion that too often divide us as we work together to create more justice and more peace, as we work together to heal the earth, as we work together to bring more compassion and kindness to our communities, our nation, our world.

And we pray...

That our leaders, including our new president, will be blessed with wisdom and steadfast purpose as they lead us in these challenging times, lead us in the direction of, in the words of Dr. King, a more beloved community.

Reading

From *The Audacity of Hope*, by Barack Obama; reflections as then Senator Obama prepared his speech before the Democratic National Convention in 2004.

...I thought about the voices of all the people I'd met on the campaign trail. I remembered Tim Wheeler and his wife in Galesburg, trying to figure out how to get their teenage son the liver transplant he needed. I remembered a young man in East Moline named Seamus Ahern who was on his way to Iraq – the desire he had to serve his country, the look of pride and apprehension on the face of his father. I remembered a young black woman I'd met in East St. Louis whose name I never would catch, but who told me of her efforts to attend college even though no one in her family had ever graduated from high school.

It wasn't just the struggles of these men and women that had moved me. Rather, it was their determination, their self-reliance, a relentless optimism in the face of hardship. It brought to mind a phrase that my pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright Jr., had once used in a sermon.

The audacity of hope.

That was the best of the American spirit, I thought – having the audacity to believe despite all evidence to the contrary that we could restore a sense of community to a nation torn by conflict; the gall to believe that despite personal setbacks, the loss of a job or an

illness in the family or a childhood mired in poverty, we had some control – and therefore responsibility – over our own fate.

It was that audacity, I thought, that joined us as one people. It was that pervasive spirit of hope that tied my own family's story to the larger American story, and my own story to those of the voters I sought to represent.

Sermon

Forty-nine hours from now we will have a new president, President Barack Hussein Obama.

And we all have our hopes for his presidency.

Thirteen-year-old Shannon Yip from Seattle wrote to the next president: "I really hope you put America back together. No pressure though."

Six-year-old Catherine Galvan from Chicago wrote to him: "If I were president, I would tell people to not talk too much. It wastes time. I'd also say to war: no more, no more, no more!"

Well... do *we* dare hope so extravagantly?

A year ago we were in the thick of the primary campaign, many of us holding our breath – whomever we were supporting – holding our breath each week as the next primary or caucus loomed. What a year of tension and anxiety we have experienced.

And now we actually begin. Most Americans – young or old – surely do harbor hopes as we approach the beginning of this presidency. Yet... dare we hope too much? Look at all we face: the economy... wars... global warming tipping points...

Dare we hope? If so, for what dare we hope?

It is said that crisis brings opportunity. It is said that challenging times in the past have been the seed-ground for great presidencies. Yet some presidents have been crushed by challenge.

Is Barack Obama the man we need to lead us now?

I, for one, can't imagine anyone who appears better suited to this moment, with his keen intelligence, broad and deep knowledge, even temperament.

Even so... for what dare we hope?

Surely not that all our problems be solved once and for all, surely not in the next four or eight years.

Global warming stopped in its tracks... check.

Ecological sustainability achieved... check.

Enduring peace in the Middle East, in South Asia, actually world-wide... check.

Perfect health care system up and running... check.

No one on the planet hungry, no one homeless, malaria and AIDS under control... check, check, check.

To expect anything like such results is not about hope; it is a puerile idealism doomed to disappointment.

But the alternative to such high-flown idealism need not be a sad façade of world-weary realism. Instead, the alternative can be the kind of hope of which Martin Luther King Jr. spoke when he said:

If you lose hope, somehow you lose the vitality that keeps life moving, you lose that courage to be, that quality that helps you to go on in spite of all. And so today I still have a dream.

Do we? I do.

And my dream today is not only of racial harmony, but also of a world at peace, an ecologically sustainable national and global economy which meets the needs of all the world's people, which treats the natural world as the treasure it is. Of *course* that's my dream – probably yours too.

But hope is not the expectation that we will attain the dream next year or in the next eight years or even in the lifetimes of any of us living today. It better not be... if it is we will be sorely disappointed.

No, hope, as Martin Luther King, Jr. said, is less about expectation (and certainly not about an expectation of perfection) and more about a vision that connects us to that vitality in the human spirit, that courage, that keeps us going “in spite of it all.”

Hope was what kept Martin Luther King Jr. going as he sat in solitary in the Birmingham jail. Hope was what kept him going as he marched in Selma. Hope was what kept him going when he spoke out against the war. Hope was what kept him going when he marched with the sanitation workers in Memphis. Hope was what kept him and thousands, millions, going as they/we sang “We Shall Overcome” – sometimes changing the last word from “someday” to “today”.

Hope.

Not hope in some sweet bye and bye, without any help from us in the bitter-sweet here and now.

Rather, hope rooted in that same vitality of the human spirit, which means hope rooted in our *engagement* with one another, with the great issues of our time, with the world in which we live.

I keep returning in my mind these days to that word... engagement.

For whatever we might hope or dream when it comes to the great challenges we face, whatever we might hope when it comes to results, we can at the same time and with down-to-earth realism hope for renewed engagement, with a renewed feeling that we are all in this together.

President-elect Obama himself offers sturdy reasons for believing that whatever else we achieve during the coming years, we can (we must!) realize *this* hope, that we *can* together (no longer so divided and contentious, for we are so weary of “you are with us or against us” rhetoric) effectively engage the challenges that confront us, that together we *can* make progress in many directions, progress that would perhaps have been seen as impossible or impractical just a few short months ago: To begin with, no torture, closing GITMO, and perhaps most important of all passing realistic yet visionary climate legislation.

Obama's own life, after all, is a living example of the triumph of the hopes (hopes connected to that vital human spirit of engagement) of generations of African Americans and their white allies.

I hardly need re-tell the stories.

From slaves “wading in the water” to escape to freedom, abolitionists never giving up the struggle for emancipation, Lincoln, Frederick Douglass... to the civil rights era a mere

generation ago... the marchers, those who gave their lives: Medgar Evars, the young Unitarian Universalist minister James Reeb, and tragically King himself.

The achievements were many. But great as the achievements were, few then would have hoped or imagined that in their lifetimes they would see a black man in the White House, not as part of the corps of butlers or custodians, but in the oval office.

This said, the dreams of the civil rights era, certainly the dreams of Dr. King were – like our dreams – yet wider and richer. In his 1964 Nobel Peace Prize lecture, Dr. King spoke of the “world house.” He said:

We have inherited a large house, a great world house in which we have to live together – black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu – a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live together with each other in peace.

I believe President-elect Obama knows that this is our situation on the planet today, and I fervently hope – and expect – that he will at least strive to lead us in this direction. He must. And how do we create this more peaceful world house? We heard King’s words earlier:

We must pursue peaceful ends through peaceful means. We shall hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.

And the foundation of this great effort, King also affirmed, is love. For it is love which moves us to... engagement.

Presidents don’t often speak of “love.” I suppose it would be deemed too sentimental. Even so, perhaps it is this way:

Preachers *do* speak of love. Politicians, the best of them – and we can hope our new president is in that company – strive (whether or not they think in such terms) to *manifest* love through policy and projects and programs that serve the poor, that heal the environment, that make peace among the nations.

So again that word... engagement. Whether as politician or as citizen, we must link extravagant hope with daily engagement – nothing wrong with extravagant hopes and dreams as long as we connect them to daily engagement, the manifestation of love.

I have, for example, personal hopes – for the health and well-being and a secure future for those for whom I care so dearly.

But hope alone won’t make it happen.

I must engage – with love – in the daily work of household and relationship and career to make it happen.

I have hopes for our congregation, as I know you do – that we will be strong and healthy well into the future, a welcoming community for anyone in need of spiritual shelter and sustenance, a beacon for justice and peace, an example of sustainability.

But hope alone won’t make it happen.

I and all of us together must – with love – engage in the daily work of caring for each other, caring for our beloved Old Ship community, caring for this old house that shelters us, that shelters our dreams.

Likewise I hope – as do we all – for more justice, for more peace, for the creation of a more ecologically sustainable “world house.”

But hope alone won’t make it happen.

All of us must – with love – engage the challenges before us, often reaching across differences of race, religion, political ideology to do so effectively. For we have indeed for too long isolated ourselves in communities of left or right, blue state or red state, liberal or conservative. But we are *one* people, *one* humanity, *one* family of life. And yes, I believe our new president knows this too.

All this said... however engaged we are in our daily lives of love and hope, we would do well to remember that we do not have ultimate control over outcomes.

Yes, we can hope and dream how we would wish our lives or the world to be someday.

But we only have control over how we live *this* day – so as ancient wisdom reminds us we would do well to let go of undue attachment to distant results, the eventual fruits of our labors and our love.

Yet, as I’ve been affirming this morning, if our shared dreams for a better nation and a better world might ever come to some greater fruition... we *must* choose to engage – with love – in making it so. No one of us can do it all. Barack Obama cannot do it all or do it for us. But each of us can choose at least one thing we care about, and then we can do something about that. And then do the next thing. And then the next.

As Gandhi said, what we do may seem small, even insignificant. All the more reason, he said, to do it, and to do it now.

Or as Mother Teresa said, we must do small things with great love.

So, we join together today in the great and continuing work.... for it *is* great work, to live in the direction of a more just and sustainable world. And perhaps much of it is not so far from reach.

After all...

We think these days we have troubles?

Think of the slaves who never gave up in their quest for freedom.

Think of the civil rights workers beaten yet never gave up.

Think of the generations of women and men working for universal suffrage.

Think of the struggle for gay rights and equal marriage rights.

Think of the workers in the Gdansk shipyard and the millions under the crushing thrall of communism... never giving up.

Yet a generation passes, and another – generations of engagement without apparent result – and finally the dream, the hope is realized.

Yes, in our generation we may or may not see all the results of our work. But dare we give up?

We cannot. We must not. My colleague Rebecca Parker has said that in our lives we have fallen into covenant – with one another as a liberal religious people, with one another in our nation’s democratic experiment, with all human beings, with life, with cosmos.

It is not a covenant we need to *make*. It *is* a covenant we simply need to *accept* wholeheartedly and *affirm* with our lives.

How do we accept this covenant with life? First notice it with gratitude for the beauty and for the love.

Then, as Rebecca Parker puts it in words I often echo: Choose to bless the world.

This is of course what I’ve been talking about this morning. For this is a choice of loving engagement which is our only hope, that holds all the other hopes. It is a deep hope and it is a realistic hope: For it is in our hands.

Yes we might wonder “how it will all turn out”... where we are in the arc of history. Yet even the youngest among us will only live to know the barest sliver of what comes next.

Even so, *every* one of us will live long enough to know how we contributed.

Within the past year we have dedicated several children right here – just since the election we have dedicated two dear children. During the year to come we will no doubt dedicate another child, and then another...

What do we owe these new ones among us, many of whom will live into the 22nd century?

We owe them our lives.

We owe them our loving engagement in blessing the world.

We owe them the audacity of our hope.

Yes, let us join together – in the spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr., with our new president, with one another.

For the next four years, eight years. For our lives...

Together again! Isn’t it good?

So may it ever be.