

“Overlooking the Obvious”

Karen Gustafson

First Unitarian Society of Madison

January 24-25, 2009

It's been anything but a quiet week in the old USA. On Tuesday morning many of the staff here at First Unitarian Society gathered in the Gabler Living room to watch as the much anticipated, historic inauguration of Barack Obama as the 44th and first African American President came and went in a wave of enthusiasm and hope and relative civility. We laughed. We cried. We ate coconut cake.

Throughout the day, like many of you, I followed the events on radio and later at home on the television. My greatest fear, the fear of some form of violence, was gratefully, unrealized. The fact that the incalculable millions of people who occupied our nation's capitol on Tuesday produced no arrests is more than a statement about tight security. It is a testament to the good will and good spirit that cynics would find impossible to imagine if it had not occurred before their very eyes.

The rhetoric was both soaring and sobering as we were reminded by our new President that “the challenges we face are real. They are serious and they are many. They will not be met easily or in a short span of time.”

And later he said, “For as much as government can do, it is ultimately the faith and determination of the American people upon which this nation relies...What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility – a recognition on the part of every American that we have duties to ourselves, our nation, the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving all to a difficult task.” As writer Marisa Silver commented, for her the most powerful aspect of the address "was the word 'we.' Taking the 'I' out of the equation makes us keenly aware of the power and responsibility that we, each of us, have to make differences."

Never in my memory as a voting citizen hearing an Inaugural Address, have I felt the challenge of my own part in the fulfillment of the Presidential promises. No royal we here as in “we the president” or even “we the administration” but really-o truly-o “we the everybody”.

Soaring and sobering, indeed.

Two days earlier, the Rt. Rev. Gene Robinson, Episcopal Bishop of New Hampshire, himself the first openly gay Episcopal bishop, offered his anticipatory prayer for the Nation and our next president which I shared with you earlier.

http://www.episcopalcafe.com/lead/faith_and_politics/gene_robinsons_prayer_for_pres.html

He asked the “God of our many understandings” for the blessings of tears; of anger; of discomfort; of patience; of humility; of freedom from mere tolerance; for compassion and generosity. He had not yet heard what Obama would say but he could well have included in his prayer the words, “because we’re really gonna need it”.

So much challenge.

“A new era of responsibility –“

“Blessed with humility –open to understanding that our own needs must be balanced with the needs of the world...”

“Blessed with discomfort at the easy, simplistic answers we’ve preferred from our politicians instead of truth about ourselves and the world which we need to face if we are going to rise to the challenge of the future.”

When I was a little girl I remember my mother saying from time to time, “Talk is cheap.” These are words that have been proven over and over again by the political rhetoric and the resounding prayers of my lifetime. “Talk is cheap” The real value comes from the living out of what we say we want and what we say we believe. We have judged our politicians and our religious leaders both by their words and by the congruence or the lack thereof between their words and their actions. I dare say, present company included.

What is different in the rhetoric of both Obama and Robinson is the clear and unambiguous emphasis on what WE need to do and the need for congruence between what WE say WE want and what we say we believe. It is WE who have called for change. It is now WE who must be changed.

Here we are being called to a new level of responsibility; to balance our own needs with the needs of the world; to face the truth about ourselves and the world and to rise to the challenge of the future.

So. How do we do that? What is it, today, tomorrow, next week, that you or I need to do to respond to this challenge? What does it MEAN to balance our own needs with the needs of the world? What is the truth about ourselves and the world that needs to be faced?

These are hard but perhaps obvious questions that are tempting to overlook. Frankly, I wonder how many of us have the time and the inclination to take them really seriously. I don't know about you, but I have multiple to do lists. I have a list of assumptions which allow my life to flow fairly smoothly thankyouverymuch. I live in a white, middle class educated ghetto in a liberal oasis in the American mid-west and I like it just fine. I pay my taxes and recycle my garbage and drive a little car. Both I and my spouse work in helping professions. None of my children are criminals and they all wear used clothing. What does this young upstart President mean "a new era of responsibility?" Surely he doesn't mean me.

Where am I going to find the time to accept "the blessings of tears for a world in which over a billion people exist on less than a dollar a day"? Or even time to attend to the homeless in my own community?

Where am I going to find the energy to be angry about injustice and discrimination?

How willing am I to feel discomfort? If I make you too uncomfortable, how long will I be welcome here?

These are, I believe just a few of the obvious questions that arise out of the rhetoric of the past week, questions that we overlook at the peril that the next four years will find this President accused of the same kind of empty rhetoric as those who preceded him. The hope of this presidency does not lie, it seems, so much in what he will be able to do with the clunky establishment that is the Federal Government but in what he can inspire us to do for ourselves and each other.

In the wake of the past week when so much has been promised and so much expected, I would be arrogant to assert that I have good answers for such questions even for myself. What I do know is that at the very least we need to make the time to ask them and to engage in the tension and the struggle to get them answered in a way that will change how we do our lives.

If ever there were a time, to redirect our energies and our resources toward the hope being generated by a new leaders, this is it.

Our lives have become complicated by accumulation of privilege – of belongings; of commitments; of expectations. We are awash with options and choices and possibilities all of which take time and energy and financial resources to navigate. For most of us here, our lives are driven by what we want or what we believe we deserve or what we believe we are entitled to. Many of us do, at the same time feel over worked, over committed and underappreciated. The line between what we need and what we want has become blurred in a variety of ways.

None of us set out to live a complicated life, so full of this and that that there is no room to consider what it might mean to engage in a “new era of responsibility” not just for ourselves and those inside our zone of comfort, but truly to be co-creators with and for a better place for everyone. But we are fast approaching the time when we can no longer overlook our obvious vulnerability in the face of past irresponsibilities of many kinds. It is now our jobs and our retirement funds and our health insurance that are hanging in the balance; our young men and women who could be drafted into military service. We are in many ways being forced into intimate connection with those for whom this has always been the overarching reality.

There is nothing like a crisis to test our adaptability, to force us into an examination of our assumptions about what is really important; to show us what we can do without; to pit our values not only against our desires but against our needs. If our economy does not recover, our children could become, like many of our parents, “products of the depression”. Have we paused to consider what we might have to do without? Will this become the way we are forced to balance our own needs with those of the world?

We’re not there yet. Maybe we can step back from the brink by taking up the challenge of our new President. By looking at the disconnect between our own values and actions and taking seriously the struggle to make them more congruent.

More and more I am encountering folk who are doing just that. Recently I had a conversation with someone who had attended the Madison Symphony concert on one of the coldest nights of this winter. They were not season ticket holders and had splurged on single tickets at the going rate. They parked in the lot and paid

the \$4.00 parking fee. They were early so they stopped across the street from the Overture Center and spent \$7.00 on a latte and a piece of carrot cake. On the way into the concert they encountered a homeless man on the corner who politely asked for a little cash. The woman who was not carrying a purse asked her husband to take out his wallet. On the spot, he did and proffered a dollar. "Not enough," said the wife. Reluctantly or not, the husband gave a few dollars more and they proceeded into the Overture Center. The woman reported that she could not push the image of the man's bare hands out of her head during the concert.

They did not discuss the incident until the next evening. When they did, they talked about what else or what different they might have done. The woman heard her husband's concern about cash as band-aid, the time honored justification about enabling addiction; about the fact that the Porchlight shelter, a charity they support, was just around the corner. The man heard his wife's concern about the inadequacy of the existing services to meet the needs of the growing population of people displaced by unemployment and mortgage foreclosure. They have an extra bedroom in their house that is warm and safe. How could they justify not using it to provide shelter? Fear? Imprudence? The scripted answers flowed between them, she said.

"What did you decide?" I asked.

"We didn't," she said. "But we need to."

An incomplete answer to Gene Robinson's prayer for "the blessings of discomfort- at easy, simplistic answers instead of the truth about ourselves and the world, which we need to face if we are going to rise to the challenges of the future."

Maybe it's time to start wearing those little bracelets that say, "What would Obama do?" How do any of our countless daily actions coalesce into the "remaking of America?"

It is in our deep and honest consideration of these questions and the others raised in these remarks and by the somber and soaring challenges of the past week that Gene Robinsons prayer will be answered, not by God but through our own attention to the issues that face our neighbors and members of our faith community.

Somehow we must set aside the accumulation of our too busy, too prosperous lives and find the blessings of humility and become open to the understanding that our own needs must be balanced with the needs of the world.

Change was the word that echoed through the Obama campaign. Oh, man. I thought he meant change in the government. Now I think he's really asking us all to change. And as W.H. Auden so eloquently wrote,

“We would rather be ruined than changed,
We would rather die in our dread
Than climb the cross of the moment
And let our illusions die.”

And yet if hope is to triumph, change is inevitable. There must be a critical mass of American citizens who are willing to identify those, “duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving all to a difficult task.”

I suspect that for each of us those difficult tasks will present themselves in a different way but we need to be actively seeking them lest they get swallowed up in the unconscious wash of our too busy lives. We will need as Richard Gilbert suggests in our opening words, to remind ourselves that “we are in charge of our lives” that we can make time for the actions that have most meaning and can make the most difference. We are a people blessed with education. We need to use it to engage with our elected officials to discern and reinforce the priorities that will make real change. We are people with compassion; we can use it in direct service to those with basic needs; we are still people with resources, we can share them in many ways. FUS has a social justice program whose role is to help direct and reinforce our best intentions toward the changes that are most needed at this time.

These difficult tasks are ours to claim. It is we who have the resources to engage the future. It is we who have the power to turn rhetoric into reality. May this faith community be a place where we struggle together to take seriously these questions and challenges not, as Bruce Marshall says, with optimism that a particular result will occur but hope to see and cherish and act upon signs of new life in all the places they occur.

