

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York

“A More Perfect Union – Ten Years Later”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore March 18, 2018

Call to Celebration

We are taking a nostalgia trip this morning back to a time when many of us were experiencing hope in a way we hadn't since the World Trade Center towers fell. As 2009 began, a black man was taking the oath of office, becoming one of the most powerful men in the world.

Let us begin with some of the inspirational words Barack Obama spoke the day he became president that are as powerful now as they were then.

On this day, we gather because we have chosen hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord. On this day, we come to proclaim an end to the petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn-out dogmas that for far too long have strangled our politics. We remain a young nation. But in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things. The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness.

In reaffirming the greatness of our nation we understand that greatness is never a given. It must be earned. Our journey has never been one of short-cuts or settling for less. It has not been the path for the faint-hearted, for those that prefer leisure over work, or seek only the pleasures of riches and fame. Rather, it has been the risk-takers, the doers, the makers of things -- some celebrated, but more often men and women obscure in their labor -- who have carried us up the long rugged path towards prosperity and freedom.

Spoken Meditation

My words for reflection this morning come from the great African American minister Howard Thurman. Thurman served as dean of Rankin Chapel at Howard University and as dean of Marsh Chapel at Boston University. In 1944, he co-founded, along with Alfred Fisk, the first major interracial, interdenominational church in the United States.

I invite you to turn inward to receive Thurman's words from his book *The Inward Journey*:

There is a profound ground of unity that is more pertinent and authentic than all the unilateral dimensions of our lives. This one discovers when one is able to keep open the door to the heart. This is one's ultimate responsibility, and it is not dependent upon whether the heart of another is kept open for him or her. Here is a mystery: If sweeping through the door of my heart there moves continually a genuine love for you, it by-passes all your hate and all your indifference and gets through to you at your center. You are powerless to do anything about it. You may keep alive in devious ways the fires of your bitter heart, but they cannot get

through to me. Underneath the surface of all the tension, something else is at work. It is utterly impossible for you to keep another from loving you.

Sermon

Barack Hussein Obama's candidacy for President confronted a serious problem in the winter of 2008. That problem was the Rev. Jeremiah Wright. Wright was Obama's pastor. He had officiated at Barack's wedding to Michelle. He had baptized their children. Now video of him screaming "God damn America" was looping 24-7 on news channels with commentators linking Wright to Obama.

That was the context for Obama's game changing speech on race ten years ago today. His speech, titled, "A More Perfect Union," came to the attention of an estimated 85% of American Adults – it had enormous reach to bring the nation to the subject of race. I played for you some of the memorable quotes and messages to remind you of his powerful words. YouTube will easily take you back to it again if you want to listen to more of those stirring words.

Obama carefully rejected the edited words of Wright taken out of context while embracing the man and his ministry. He defended Wright's ministry in Chicago comparing it to Jesus' ministry and message through outreach projects "by housing the homeless, ministering to the needy, providing day care services and scholarships and prison ministries, and reaching out to those suffering from HIV/AIDS"

He went on to say:

In my first book, *Dreams From My Father*, I describe the experience of my first service at Trinity:

"People began to shout, to rise from their seats and clap and cry out, a forceful wind carrying the reverend's voice up into the rafters. And in that single note — hope! — I heard something else: At the foot of that cross, inside the thousands of churches across the city, I imagined the stories of ordinary black people merging with the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, the Christians in the lion's den, Ezekiel's field of dry bones. Those stories — of survival and freedom and hope — became our stories, my story. The blood that spilled was our blood, the tears our tears, until this black church, on this bright day, seemed once more a vessel carrying the story of a people into future generations and into a larger world. Our trials and triumphs became at once unique and universal, black and more than black. In chronicling our journey, the stories and songs gave us a meaning to reclaim memories that we didn't need to feel shame about — memories that all people might study and cherish, and with which we could start to rebuild."

The genius of the speech was the way Obama integrated the black experience into the American experience. This is no easy task since the Black experience in America from day one has been slavery, oppression and marginalization. Yet Obama's life experience of being black growing up after the civil rights era planted in him a vision of America that Wright didn't have.

Obama, son of a Kenyan man and an American white woman from Kansas, embodies the multicultural vision of what America can be at its best. Growing up in Hawaii and Indonesia, he directly experienced both the possibilities and the problems of multiculturalism. Experiencing his black identity in Southern California and at Harvard and in Chicago, helped him formulate a pluralistic vision of America that came through loud and clear in this speech.

His method was to extend the inclusion process that brought Irish and German Catholics and southern and eastern Europeans into the Protestant dominated vision of America of early Northern European settlers. The bridge that had knit them together in the past was common values. Obama's appeal for the full inclusion of non-whites was shared values too. Hear his words again:

This was one of the tasks we set forth at the beginning of this presidential campaign — to continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America. I chose to run for president at this moment in history because I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together, unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction — toward a better future for our children and our grandchildren.

The value focused approach to national identity deeply resonates with Unitarian Universalists because that is how we approach religious identity. We have values that are identified in our Purposes and Principles that form the foundation of our unity. Even though we come from different religious backgrounds and hold different religious beliefs, we can find unity in shared values. Perhaps Obama's mother's Unitarian leanings left a mark on him, or ... maybe there is deep truth in our religious approach that is mirrored in Obama's vision our national identity.

Unitarian Universalists were very excited by Obama's speech and the hope for racial reconciliation his candidacy held for America. As we gathered In Channing Hall to watch his Inauguration in January, there was a palpable feeling that the nation was taking a dramatic turn for the better in race relations.

Sadly, that is also when the turn was missed. Not just once but again and again.

President Obama was deeply committed to being everybody's president and not giving special favoritism to People of Color. In this way, he wanted to be the example of what a post-racial presidency could be. By doing so, he missed the opportunity to draw the nation into a communal experience of self-reflection and consciousness raising about the sins of the past that continued into the present.

Not that he didn't have the opportunity presented to him again and again to take up this challenge.

The first notable opportunity was the arrest of Harvard professor Dr. Henry Louis Gates for breaking in to his own house by Sergeant James Crowley who assumed he was a burglar. Obama named it racial profiling in a news conference but stepped a little too far by calling the arrest "stupid." That led to the memorable "beer summit" between the three men that turned into an apology by Obama for insulting the officer. Obama went silent on race issues for the next three years.

The February 2012 killing of Trayvon Martin, the unarmed teenager walking home from a convenience store at night by neighborhood watch vigilante George Zimmerman opened another opportunity for a national engagement around race. Obama pointed out that “If I had a son he would look like Trayvon...”. When Zimmerman was found not guilty, three days later Obama spoke out forcefully with his reaction. He spoke of what it meant in the African American community and what it meant to him personally who could have been Trayvon 35 years ago. Many got excited that Obama, finally safe in his second term would tackle race in America. No such luck.

The killings of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice by white police once again gave Obama an urgent platform for action. Once again powerful words of empathy. Once again no action.

Obama’s impulse was to generalize the black experience as the American experience that was larger than race. He said:

When anybody in this country is not being treated equally under the law, that’s a problem. It’s incumbent on all of us Americans ... that we recognize that this is an American problem and not just a black problem. It is an American problem when anybody in this country is not being treated equally under the law.

Yes, and the issues of racial discrimination and profiling are real too and need national attention.

Guess who was taking advantage of this vacuum dealing with the race issue? You know who of course, Donald Trump stirring up the birther controversy. Trump of course knew this was a bogus issue. But what it did was help him find his White Supremacist constituency and begin building it into a tool to try to undermine the first Black President and begin turning the clock backward rather than forward. He was completely uninterested in giving the post-racial vision of leadership a go, far from it. He and the congressional Republicans were dedicated to prove that it was a bad idea that needed to be reversed.

From Obama’s first day in office the battle lines were drawn. Obama must be a one term President. Everything he touches must fail. Nothing he does can succeed. For the success of a Black man as President of the United States of America undermines the white supremacy faith deeply woven into our history. The one that we heard in the journal entries of Emerson. The one over which the Civil War was fought. The one that the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior died fighting almost 50 years ago, April 4th.

Ta-Nehisi Coates in his book, *We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy*, puts it this way:

To accept that even now, some five decades after [King] was gunned down on a Memphis balcony, the bloody heirloom remains potent—even after a black president, and, in fact, strengthened by the fact of the black president—is to accept that racism remains, as it has since 1776, at the heart of the country’s political life.

This could be a moment to despair about a lost opportunity for national transformation. I know the night Trump was elected in November of 2016 began a year of despair for me watching him systematically working to dismantle Obama’s legacy, striving to erase him from the national memory.

That is why remembering the vision of that speech he gave ten years ago is so important. The only America that can command the loyalty of all its people must be one that transcends race, culture, sexual orientation, class or any division of identity and unites us around common values. That vision is as good and beautiful now as it was when Obama offered it to us in word, body, soul and spirit.

What was missing was action, the doing part. It is a flaw to which Unitarian Universalists are quite vulnerable as well. We are very good at coming up with beautiful ideas and visions, dreams of how we can live together in unity with peace and justice. But if we don't turn those words into deeds, they are hollow and empty. Beautiful words don't change hearts and minds, especially of our opponents. Significant, risk taking and costly actions that enact those words in love can change hearts and minds.

There are two levels to that action. One is being willing to do the inner work. Racism is a social disease that infects everyone in different ways. It seeps into our brains from the white supremacy culture that surrounds and conditions our behavior on a daily basis. It takes a lifelong commitment to deprogram ourselves of its layers of toxic social programming. And the most destructive dimension of it lives in our emotional brain centers where it can quietly stimulate wordless racist reactivity.

The second level we are far more familiar with is the structural and institutional manifestations of racism that infect our congregation, our schools, our government, our police departments and our foreign policy. There is much for us to identify and speak out against. There is much for us to dismantle as we strive to create the kind of post-racial world that Obama tells us America can be.

Thankfully, your Inclusivity Team is on this. We are having a series of movies for consciousness raising and discussion. Next Wednesday, March 21, we'll be showing 13th at 11am in the morning. Eileen Casey-Campbell and I are repeating our Robin D'Angelo class for those who missed it in the fall starting Tuesday evening, April 3rd at 7pm. Consider helping tutor children in West Hill at Sheridan Prep. Consider joining Interfaith Impact on our Lobby Day to advocate for the end of the abusive use of solitary confinement in prisons. Especially consider joining the Inclusivity Team and its social transformational anti-racist work.

Again, if you need to renew your vision of what is possible for America, go back and listen to Obama's speech again. I'll close with a few words from his June 30, 2008 speech, "The America We Love:"

[Our national identity cannot be] just loyalty to a place on a map or a certain kind of people. Instead, it is also loyalty to American ideals—ideals for which anyone can sacrifice, or defend, or give their last full measure of devotion. I believe it is this loyalty that allows a country teeming with different races and ethnicities, religions, and customs, to come together as one.

Benediction

I close with Obama's closing words for his 2009 Inaugural address:

In the year of America's birth, in the coldest of months, a small band of patriots huddled by dying campfires on the shores of an icy river. The capital was abandoned. The enemy was

advancing. The snow was stained with blood. At the moment when the outcome of our revolution was most in doubt, the father of our nation ordered these words to be read to the people:

"Let it be told to the future world...that in the depth of winter, when nothing but hope and virtue could survive... that the city and the country, alarmed at one common danger, came forth to meet [it]."

America: In the face of our common dangers, in this winter of our hardship, let us remember these timeless words. With hope and virtue, let us brave once more the icy currents, and endure what storms may come. Let it be said by our children's children that when we were tested we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn back nor did we falter; and with eyes fixed on the horizon and God's grace upon us, we carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations.

Sources:

Obama's America: A transformative Vision of Our National Identity by Ian Reifowitz (highly recommended – downloaded electronically from the Upper Hudson Library system Overdrive)

Buyer's Remorse: How Obama Let Progressives Down by Bill Press (for section on Obama's inaction on race)

We Were Eight Years in Power: An American Tragedy by Ta-Nehisi Coates

The Black Presidency: Barack Obama and the Politics of Race in America by Michael Eric Dyson

(all in the library system)

Obama legacy <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38536668>

Wiki on the speech [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_More_Perfect_Union_\(speech\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_More_Perfect_Union_(speech))

video of speech <https://www.c-span.org/video/?204469-1/obama-campaign-speech-race>

text of speech <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=88478467>