

Cautious Optimism, Wild Hope

The Rev. Sue Spencer

UU Congregation of Danbury

January 18, 2009

© 2009 by Suzanne R. Spencer

These last few days have certainly been packed with emotion. First, the heroic ditching of an airliner in the Hudson River, and the breathtaking rescue of its passengers. Then, a terrible apartment house fire in Danbury, leaving at least 30 people homeless – but with the quick response of firefighters, the Red Cross, Danbury residents, and members of our own congregation.

All this, and it's only Sunday! We haven't even gotten to the remarkable convergence of events taking place this coming week: Tomorrow, the 80th anniversary of the birth of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and on Tuesday the inauguration of America's first black president, Barack Obama. The thought of it sends shivers down my spine, and brings tears to my eyes.

It's natural for us to wonder, "if Dr. King had lived, what would he be thinking this week?" I imagine that he'd be thrilled at Mr. Obama's election. In my mind's eye, I can picture him as a special guest at the inauguration – perhaps invited to give the invocation! I can see him on the platform, his hair turned white, a few lines etched on his face, tears glistening on his cheeks. And he wouldn't be the only one shedding tears of joy and gratitude.

At the same time, Dr. King would almost certainly be prophetic. He would be challenging the new president, and the nation, to make good on its promises of "liberty and justice for all." He would remind us – and Barack Obama would surely agree – that the election of a black president does not by itself eradicate the systemic evil of racism. He would urge the new administration to go way beyond addressing the current financial crisis - and to do something about the terrible, chronic poverty that afflicts 13 million children in America, and 23.5 million adults.

Marian Wright Edelman points out, in the current issue of *Sojourners*,

[Dr. King] would be pushing our new leaders, and all of us, to achieve long overdue health care for all, beginning with all children and pregnant women; to end the 'Cradle to Prison Pipeline' that will afflict 1 in 3 black and 1 in 6 Latino boys born in 2001 unless we act together with urgency to dismantle it...to create a public school system that expects all children to learn and provides them supports needed to succeed and compete in our globalizing world. (We Know What to Do," *Sojourners*, January 2009, p. 13.)

Speaking personally, I find myself with two sets of emotions as the inauguration approaches. They're not conflicting, exactly, but they run on parallel tracks, never meeting. On the one hand, I feel a certain cautious optimism – that Barack Obama's promise of change will be realized, at least in part. I am cautiously optimistic that – although I know this new administration will not be perfect - there will be noticeable improvements over the last one: in civil liberties, in the handling of the economic crisis, in the treatment of environment, in international affairs.

On the other, there's this wild, buoyant hope, something I've felt ever since Election Day. This is not optimism, and it's not based on logic – rather, it's “the thing with feathers, that perches in the soul,” in Emily Dickinson's words. This wild hope has to do with seeing barriers crumble – seeing happen what had been thought impossible, not that long ago.

This wild hope took flight for me even before the election results were known; it overwhelmed me Election Day morning, as I prepared to vote. As I walked into the polling place at Pembroke School, I suddenly realized that this was the 40th anniversary of my *first* vote for President – back in 1968, not long after Dr. King's death. Memories of that time washed over me. And then my breath caught in my throat, as I realized that I was about to walk into a voting booth and mark my ballot for an African American president. Could I have imaged this was possible, back in 1968? Probably not.

* * * * *

In thinking about Martin Luther King, and about the meaning of this year's momentous inauguration, I find myself drawn to a story:

The date is December 1, 1955. The place is Montgomery, Alabama. Rosa Parks, a respected, law-abiding citizen of Montgomery, is riding the bus home from work. She's sitting in the middle section of the bus, known as “no-man's land.” She's an African American, so Alabama law forbids her to sit in the front, so-called “white” section.

Pretty soon, the bus fills up, so that some white people are standing. The white driver orders four African-Americans in “no-man's land” to relinquish their seats, and move to the back. Three of them comply. But Mrs. Parks doesn't move. The driver repeats his demand, but Mrs. Parks stays right where she is. He threatens to arrest her, but still she doesn't move. Finally she's taken to the police station, where she's booked, and fingerprinted, and jailed.

This ignites sparks, which in turn ignite other sparks. For a long time now, E.D. Nixon, who heads up the local NAACP, has been itching to go to court. Ever since the Supreme Court overturned school segregation, he's wanted to challenge Alabama's bus segregation law. All he needs is the right plaintiff, and Rosa Parks is perfect.

Jo Ann Robinson, head of the professional Women's Political Council, also gets the word about Mrs. Parks' arrest. For some time, the Council has been looking for a cause to rally them, and they quickly decide: This is it! Late at night, the women meet at Ms. Robinson's office at Alabama State College. They work at drafting a letter of protest. But suddenly an intriguing idea pops up: What if every African American in Montgomery were to stay off the buses for a day?

The women call E.D. Nixon, who in turn makes other calls. One of these is to the 26-year-old pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. Would he endorse a bus boycott? And could 50 community leaders use his church for a meeting?

Before E.D. Nixon's call, this young pastor had been getting restless in Montgomery. Not enough was happening, he thought. He'd even gone and interviewed for a university faculty position in

another state. Not long after Nixon's call, however, he decides that maybe Montgomery's not so boring after all - maybe he'll stick around for a while.

The rest, as they say, is history. The meeting of 50 leads to a meeting of thousands. The daylong boycott becomes a yearlong boycott, through massive and painstaking organizing. The legal case goes all the way to the Supreme Court, and the bus law is overturned. And the young pastor is catapulted into the spotlight, and into the great stream of history. His name, of course, is Martin Luther King, Jr.

* * * * *

This story reminds us of the power of community. It's easy to become transfixed by a few towering figures, easy to subscribe to "great man" or "great woman" theories of history. But Dr. King didn't appear out of nowhere. What he achieved, he could not have done by himself.

Great leaders don't arise in isolation. They exist in relation to great currents in history - and in relation to communities. Without Rosa Parks, without E.D. Nixon and JoAnn Robinson, without Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, and without the fortitude of all those working people who stayed off the buses and walked for a year, Dr. King would have remained a talented parish pastor, or maybe a gifted university professor. We might have heard from him from time to time - but would he have become what he is for us now? Probably not.

Similarly with Barack Obama. Like Dr. King, he's an exceptional human being. His intellect, temperament, emotional intelligence, and oratorical skills give him the potential to be a great president, *if* he charts a bold enough course. But of course he didn't come out of nowhere, either. As a community organizer, he'd be the first to acknowledge that his victory was impossible without "We the People." Posted on his web site is this quotation from one of his speeches: "I'm asking you to believe - not just in my ability to bring about real change in Washington...I'm asking you to believe in yours."

In other words, the election of a new president doesn't let us off the hook. Recently, the *New York Times* asked 200 people in 14 states to say what they hoped Barack Obama would accomplish during his presidency. From these interviews, they derived 29 different "hopes," and I found myself agreeing with 22 of them! To achieve *our* hopes for this country - to create a society that respects the inherent worth and dignity of all - we'll have to stay engaged, as people of faith and as citizens. No one else, not even the president, will do it for us.

You've no doubt heard this story about Franklin Delano Roosevelt. During his presidency, a group of reformers approached him and asked him to take action on an issue that they were passionate about. His response was, "I agree with you. I want to do it. Now make me do it."

* * * * *

So how do activists "make" a president do things? The answer boils down to what UU ethicist James Luther Adams called "the power of organization and the organization of power" - something he names as one of the fundamental principles of liberal religion. Such organization of power

comes from the voluntary association – people coming together to create the political will for change. This, I believe, is the *real* source of hope for the long haul – though I admit it’s fueled, in part, by the wild, euphoric hope that so many felt on election day.

One of the most hopeful books I’ve read in a while is environmentalist Paul Hawken’s *Blessed Unrest: how the largest movement in the world came into being and why no one saw it coming* (New York: Viking, 2007). Hawken, through research, has come to an estimate – that there are *one to two million* organizations, all over the world, representing tens of millions of people, working for social justice and the healing the planet. Most of these groups have sprung up spontaneously; no central authority coordinates them. A few of the organizations are large and well known. Others are small, local, and very effective.

Together, Hawken suggests, these organizations represent Earth’s “immune system” coming to life. As such, they represent a great source of hope. As Hawken notes, “When asked at colleges if I am pessimistic or optimistic about the future, my answer is always the same: If you look at the science that describes what is happening on earth today and aren’t pessimistic, you don’t have the correct data. If you meet the people in this unnamed movement and aren’t optimistic, you haven’t got a heart.”

Let me close with the words, slightly altered, with which Dr. King ended his last Sunday sermon, in the National Cathedral in Washington:

“May we be participants in this newness and this magnificent development. If we will but do it, we will bring about a new day of justice, and sister-brotherhood, and peace.

“And that day the morning stars will sing together, and the children of God will shout for joy.”