

«Thoughts on this Inauguration»

Sermon by Rev. Patty Hanneman, January 11, 2009

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

Opening Words

May we be reminded here of our highest aspirations, and inspired to bring our gifts of love and service to the alter of humanity. May we know once again that we are not isolated beings but connected, in mystery and miracle, to the universe, to this community and to each other.

Words for all ages – The Audacity of Hope

Audacity – to be bold, fearless, courageous, beyond reasonable expectations, defiance, pluck

Hope – use the image of the daffodil (narcissus) as a flower that bursts through all kinds of adversity (snow, ice, freezing) to show itself every spring; as if it has some kind of memory of last spring; coming from the dark; sometimes our lives can seem gloomy and dark; we can remember the daffodil and its audacious ability to bloom every spring

Sermon

On the eve of this presidential inauguration, which in many ways will be an historic event, I want to begin this morning by bringing us back a few years, to remember who we were, what the world and our nation was like just before 9/11 in 2001. What were your main concerns? What were your hopes for our future? We were either pleased about or resigned to the fact that Al Gore was not our president, but beyond that, we seemed to be pretty much on track. I remember, as a matter of fact, George Bush spending a lot of time in Texas, not much was going on. In my personal life, I had just started seminary, and after a year in Duke Divinity School I was preparing for my first January session at Meadville Lombard in Chicago. I was also beginning a three-year ministry at Duke as the UU campus minister.

I remember my first week that fall as a campus minister:. I remember campus ministry staff setting up tables to welcome incoming freshmen. I remember feeling envious and competitive. The Campus Crusade for Christ group, very right-wing, had four full-time staff and hundreds of incoming freshmen on their list to contact. I was there a few hours a week and had eleven freshmen who'd identified themselves as Unitarian Universalists to contact. Like many liberals at the turn of the millennium, I felt bombarded with right-wing ideology; the culture wars were very real; I was appalled at the lack of humility in the White House. The religious life staff on Duke campus seemed to be an extension of the politics that were taking hold of the nation. As I was setting up my table that day, I thought to myself, how will I ever bring liberal faith to this campus? Will Willimon, the dean of Duke Chapel, broke into my thoughts by saying, Patty, why don't you set up your table over there, to the far left of the rest of us?

That was the first week. The second week of campus ministry, I was in the basement of Duke Chapel preparing for my first worship service with our students when I heard that the World

Trade Center towers in New York had collapsed. That evening we began our worship service by setting up an altar and lighting our chalice, and tears that had been held in check all day began to flow. And with that release I thought about all the campus ministry groups that were meeting that night, using their own sacred rituals to build communities of trust and comfort, and I realized, there is no competition here. We are all bound in a sacred covenant to provide space for our students to be vulnerable in their pain, their confusion, and their loneliness.

That moment was a huge cognitive shift for me, providing soft ground on which to plant some new ideas about how to be a liberal religious leader on a staff and campus much more conservative than myself, and on a grander scale, new ideas about how I wanted to be an American citizen. My most important teachers that fall were my students. We talked a lot about politics, and I learned that this new generation was tired of liberal/conservative dichotomies. They were tired of the culture wars that had defined my generation. Their biggest complaint about the baby boomers was that the in-your-face activism that we had engaged in, which had been successful in bringing about social change, was now serving to stymie action, as Republicans and Democrats fought to hold ground. Winning small battles, they said, had become more important than finding common ground.

In January that year, 2002, I took my first class at Meadville Lombard on the University of Chicago campus. On Martin Luther King Day, the faculty excused classes for two hours so we could attend the celebration at the cathedral down the street, which they promised us would be spectacular, with hip-hop dancers, African drummers, piped-in King speeches, and celebrity speakers. But there had been a snowstorm in Chicago that morning, and the keynote speaker was not able to get into town. So at the last minute, they asked a state senator who lived just down the street by the name of Barack Obama to fill in for the scheduled speaker. At first disappointed that the real speaker wasn't there, within five minutes, we were spellbound. I remember him talking about what King's work had meant to him, personally, as a black man. But I remember most vividly his passionate vision of the America he said Dr. King had wanted us to have.

An America of steady progress toward justice-seeking, yes, but also an America where those of differing opinions respect one another, and where respectful dialogue leads to a sense of hope, not fear. He talked about Dr. King's close relationship with Lyndon Johnson and how King's work relied on that bond of respect and trust. He seemed to echo much of what my students had been saying that fall; he talked of a different kind of activism, grounded in relationships of trust and common goals rather than relationships of one-up-man-ship and cynicism. We wept to think how far we were missing the mark of Dr. King's vision. And we talked about this Barack Obama for days, saying, can you imagine someone like that in national politics?

That was seven years ago. And now something we could hardly imagine then is coming to pass this week. I feel that in a very significant way, the voices of the generation that was represented by those incoming freshmen at Duke that fall of 2001 have been heard – through their votes, their unflagging work during this election cycle, their quiet but dedicated grassroots organizing. Much has been made of the fact that we will have our first African American family in the White House, that we have realized one of Dr. King's dreams, and I am excited about that. But for me, the most wonderful and significant thing about Obama's election is that he has the heart

and disposition of a community organizer and all signs point to the fact that he plans to bring that disposition to his administration. If he can do that, we will see real change in how government functions. I'd like to reflect for a moment on some of the changes I hope to see, based on my limited experience with community organizers.

First, central to the community-organizing model is an emphasis on building relationships of trust and respect between interested parties before any agendas are considered. Once these relationships have been formed, all sides of an issue are invited to participate in a collective strategy. Community organizers call this step "acting into clarity." One thing I have come to understand and truly appreciate is that this work takes a lot of time and energy. In many cases, forming these relationships can take years before an agenda can be advanced successfully. And this work doesn't generally get noticed, because it doesn't include public statements or public witness. But these relationships become the "grease" that allow people to trust the intentions of the other. It is truly an "anti-maverick" way of doing business. I heard an interview Friday night with David Brooks who said that Republicans in Congress have said that they already have a better repair with the Obama administration than they ever had with the Bush administration. Richard Land recently said that although Obama's politics are even more liberal than Hillary Clinton's, he doesn't generate the same heat on Capital Hill. He is using the grease of the relationships he has nurtured to keep friction to a minimum. I hope for that trend to continue.

Second, I know that as a liberal religious person, I will be disappointed in many of his decisions. He has promised to be a president for all Americans; he has promised to be a uniter, not a divider, and that means he will likely not concentrate on what I have traditionally thought of as the "liberal" agenda. A recent example was his choice of Pastor Rick Warren to deliver his inaugural prayer. For those of you not familiar with Rick Warren, he is the author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, a very influential and popular evangelical from California, who was a visible leader in promoting California's amendment to ban gay marriage. Many LGBT people felt betrayed when Warren was chosen for that slot... Hillary Clinton probably would not have made that choice. But I believe Obama's choice of Warren is consistent with his core message: "I want to be everyone's president – I want to bring this country together," he said. So he chose a minister who would be known and admired by evangelicals, signaling to them that he cares about them, that they, too, will be a part of the America he will serve.

Rick Warren is serious about his Christian faith, which has led him to be serious about fighting AIDS and global warming and poverty. He is enormously popular with millions of American church-goers, especially younger ones. I do not agree with Warren's theology, nor his views on marriage, but I do respect and trust his intentions and many of his ideas, and I believe he is a man of deep integrity. I also believe that one of the most effective ways to deal with people like Warren who I strongly disagree with on some important issues is to have them at the table, invite them into conversation, ask them why they hold the positions they do, and then listen with an open heart.

Third, Obama will focus on the uniting emotion of hope, not the dividing emotion of fear, as our previous administration has done. After 9/11 the Bush administration used our natural response of fear to further divide us in order that they might further their own agenda. They

attacked the patriotism, faith, and integrity of anyone who opposed that agenda. By demonizing half of our citizenry, they created fear, not only of our “enemies” out there, but of one another. *Enemies are us*. In his second book, *The Audacity of Hope*, Barack Obama writes about the events of the last few decades that have led to decreased congeniality and increased rigidity of doctrine at state and national levels of politics. Politics, he writes, became a contest, not just between competing policy visions, but between good and evil. Politics, in fact, may be the only area in which Unitarian Universalists believe in good and evil. The hope of this nation, he writes, lies in our ability to rise above these divisions to tackle the concrete problems that affect us all. But in order to do that, we need to let go of our fear of one another, and begin to trust again that each of us in our own way wants our system of government and our nation to fulfill its promises. Fear gives power to others, and as we are encouraged to give more control to the person in charge, we begin to feel hopeless. The audacity of a leader to encourage hope is a radical act. It encourages us to take back some of that control, some responsibility for our own future.

I read a book last year by the Rev. Jim Wallis called *Great Awakenings*. The book is about the waves of religious fervor that have swept through America since the 17th century. We often think of these Great Awakenings in terms of the old tent revivals, emotional conversions, baptisms in icy cold rivers, but they also brought about passionate debates about correct doctrine and how church should play a role in state decisions. Wallis claims that church historians see these emotional upheavals as only the beginning of a religious awakening. Groups first have to struggle against each other to find their turf and define themselves. But the real Awakening only comes to fruition when people begin to find ways to bridge those differences to create lasting social change. The truly Great Awakenings eventually find their roots in hope, compassion, and justice-seeking.

Jim Wallis argues that we are on the brink of another Great Awakening. We have seen in the last few years a widening in the difference between the right and the left. We have struggled as a denomination to figure out who we are and what we stand for as Unitarian Universalists. Wallis suggests that it is time for us to stop focusing on the politics of left vs. right in order to dig deep, deep to those issues that transcend politics and creed. When our world seems most broken, social movements and the leaders to lead them will rise up, and the most powerful movements have always been those nurtured by people of faith who find their way past their differences, back to the audacity of hope for a better world.

What this inauguration says to me is that maybe, just maybe, we have turned a corner and are ready for that awakening to begin. To bridge those differences among us to work on those deep issues that the voters have said matter most. Finding common ground and working for common causes in any given community is hard work, because we work alongside people very different from ourselves. Being “community focused” means that I as a lesbian woman will be sitting down to the table with another minister who preached to his congregation this past Sunday about the evils of homosexuality, but we are both there because we both care that the public housing development down the street has lead paint that is chipping and peeling and poisoning children.

This is not the kind of activism Unitarian Universalists have focused on. Because our free faith has always been on the cutting edge of social change – that’s been our role in society – we have become most comfortable working alongside other cutting edge, liberal religious folks. But

my sense is that this administration will model and expect from us a reaching across the isle, listening to and learning from and building relationships with people we've not worked with before. A kind of activism that is grounded in relationships of trust and common goals, in each of our communities, in our community of Hillsborough, North Carolina – this, Obama has said, is what we need to bring about that beloved community that Dr. King dreamed about. May it be so.

Closing Words

(Excerpt from *The Audacity of Hope*, last page of epilogue; Obama is talking about how when he begins to feel his work is useful to no one, he runs along the mall, ending with the Lincoln Memorial) – see page 361-362.