

**9 November 2008 * “Dear President-Elect Obama”
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“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” ~ Margaret Mead

Dear President-Elect Obama,

You did it! Wait – that’s not quite right: *we* did it. Yes we did! Congratulations to you for running one of the most inspiring campaigns in memory, and to the more than fifty-two percent of the electorate who elected you and Joe Biden into office.

I speak to you from Live Oak Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Goleta, California – a small congregation that upholds progressive spiritual and religious values, where many of us have been walking on air since Tuesday night – although not necessarily *all* of us. As I see it, our task in the coming days is to celebrate your win without gloating, and to pledge ourselves to the shared work of bringing the United States back into balance without succumbing to the siren call of that ubiquitous affliction, liberal arrogance.

First, though, there are a few things I want to say to you here. This is neither a political letter nor a mash note (that would’ve been too easy); it is simply, to use an old-fashioned term, one servant-leader speaking to another, across our respective arenas. It’s *not* so strange, I believe, to use this time – smack in the middle of worship, surrounded by members of a religious congregation – for a minister to convey her thoughts, and thanks, and promises to you... because I don’t know how to separate who I am, as a person of faith, from who I am as a citizen.

This is not the same thing as mixing church and state – not exactly. I suppose you could say that my beliefs about what it means to be a good citizen are deeply informed by my religious and spiritual values, which thread through every facet of my identity – as a woman, a daughter, a minister, as community activist. In any given role that I inhabit, at any given time, I’m always trying to respond, first, to the call to hold all members of the human family on equal standing... to use my powers to heal rather than to harm, to help rather than to hinder; to bless rather than to curse; and to serve the Spirit of Life.¹

I don’t think you’re so different, Mr. Obama. I dare say that what drew you into a life of public service is not so different from what compelled me, for example, to a life of religious leadership, or what draws anyone to seek prophetic religious community. It’s one of the reasons that I admire you so greatly: the spark that feeds your life’s work is holy fire, born of belief and conviction, not merely ideology or an appetite for power. In fact, I suspect that we – my congregation and I – share a number of your core values, chief among them a belief not only in our connection, but also in our *need* to be connected.

The world has already witnessed your powerful ability to connect people to each another – nowhere was this more visible than on Tuesday night, when you were declared the forty-fourth President of the United States. Every single channel showed some variation of ecstatic crowds (whether they were in Boston or Bangkok), and two constants were apparent in each one of those crowds: tears of joy being wiped away, and cell phones being pulled out to call family, friends, and others who rejoiced in your victory. Even amid a crowd of thousands, it seems, when we're moved beyond happiness into tearful joy, all of us need to connect with people – whether to shift our disbelief into reality, or to simply rejoice.

But “connection” goes beyond a shared source of gladness; it pulls us forward into responsibility, into action. We believe, as Unitarian Universalists, that we belong to one another as human beings, echoing the words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who said “We are caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.”²

You've expressed this same sentiment, Mr. President-Elect, in many of your speeches: a conviction that “we are connected as one people.” You've gone so far to say that the belief that “I am my brother's keeper, I am my sister's keeper... makes this country work. It's what allows us to pursue our individual dreams, yet still come together as a single American family. ‘E pluribus unum.’ Out of many, one.”³

In general, we people of liberal faith don't cotton to merging the political and the spiritual; most UU's (like those in my congregation) get a little squirrely when politicians invoke God, sin, and redemption in their speeches. A confession, though: I'm taken with how easily you employ religious language. I like it. I like it when *you* speak in religious terms, because I trust you to model faith without fundamentalism. Not many Democrats have mastered the trick of speaking about their spirituality in a measured, authentic way. You have, and in doing so you've been described as having “redrawn the religious map”⁴ – and it desperately needed to be not just redrawn, but reclaimed from the hands of the religious right. They don't own God.

I'm just as grateful for the facility with which you label issues as “moral,” not just political. I believe that it enriches our national dialogue when, for example, health care and our dependence on fossil fuels are defined in terms of what we, as a people, have done, what we have failed to do, and what we are called to do.

We know that the crisis of health care – and the lack thereof – in the U.S. has damaged lives, and entire families. We know that our appetite for oil has poisoned our planet, that we're stripping the Earth of its natural resources, and that climate change is a looming, cataclysmic threat to the planet. So when you frame energy policy, for instance, as an “urgent moral challenge,”⁵ you're asking us to consider how we ought to live.

Even though you're drawing new lines of "right" and "wrong," Mr. President-Elect, your years of public service demonstrate your belief that our society is strengthened when individuals are made stronger; our country is served by drawing in those at the margins. In the opening words of your acceptance speech on Tuesday night, you addressed the "young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Latino, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, disabled and not disabled."⁶

Your invoking the gay community, you drew loud cheers. What millions of Californians didn't know yet is that this would be a bittersweet week for the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community, and their allies.

Many of us are deeply saddened – stunned, although not altogether surprised – that on Tuesday a majority of our fellow Californians chose to push some of its citizens to the margins, drawing down the limits of civil rights, by narrowly voting in favor of Proposition 8. Our state, which is usually a vanguard of justice and acceptance and progressive ideas, absorbed tens of millions of dollars from out-of-state donors who flooded California with divisive, dishonest campaign material. And so, for now, same-sex couples have lost the legal right to marry. *For now.*

I speak for many when I say that this fight is not over. Like Cornell West, I believe that "love of country" is all about finding, and righting, injustice,⁷ so that all are seen as equal citizens. Discrimination of any kind is unacceptable; we will not pass this civil rights struggle on to the next generation. *We will* restore same-sex marriage rights here, and celebrate as other states follow. It is not our time now. It will come soon.

The declaration that we will restore this civil right presumes that the *first* civil rights movement has achieved closure.

You know well, Mr. Obama, about discrimination, and the pain that arises when lines of privilege are drawn to hold some within and keep others out. Throughout this campaign, much has been made of your race. Less than half a century after Selma, forty years after Dr. King delivered his "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech (the night before he was killed), our country has elected an African-American to its highest office.

In his "Mountaintop" speech, Dr. King declared

...we are determined to be men. We are determined to be people. We are saying... that we are God's children... We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop... And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land!

There are many who would say that your election is evidence that “the promised land” has been reached. Your victory is a “racial milestone,”⁸ a defining moment in our country’s history. While that may be so, here’s another confession: I’m not certain that I agree with the pundits and the patriots – and you yourself – that your election proves that “anything is possible” in the United States. One election victory does not a promised land make.

I can’t help but see a stark disparity between two groups of historically oppressed people. Many African-Americans feel that the “promised land” just might have reached this week – the same week that gays and lesbians were shown how far away it is.

You yourself have acknowledged, Mr. Obama, the “racial stalemate” that America has “been stuck in for years.”⁹ Whether it’s fair to you or not, I hope that you will continue to invite us, your country, to the mutual work of examining race, and racism. I hope it invites deeper conversation about other forms of oppression. I hop it’s the case that your presidency will invite us Americans to address, and begin to resolve, the racial tension that often gets swept under the nation’s carpet. I need to keep hearing your “firm conviction... that working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice if we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union.”

This is what all of us want: a more perfect union – we just want it to include *everyone*. A world made saner by a country made stronger, through healing the discrimination that divides us, the policies that punish us, and the ideology that imprisons us.

Because so many of us want to realize that world, in the original sense of that world – to *make real* – I can promise you two things (on top of my commitment to win the fight for same-sex marriage rights): you won’t be alone, and (as you yourself have joked) we won’t pretend that you were born in a manger.

What I mean by the latter is that I won’t hold you to messianic expectations. I don’t expect you to untangle all of the mistakes that weren’t yours. As Alice Walker wrote to you this week, “you did not create the disaster that the world is experiencing, and you alone are not responsible for bringing the world back to balance.”¹⁰

I also promise, therefore, that we won’t stand back and let you and your administration repair the country by yourselves for the next eight years. As you told us on Tuesday night, “the road ahead will be long. Our climb will be steep. We may not get there in one year or even one term, but... we as a people will get there.”¹¹ And so I pledge to answer the summons that you issued: to fulfill the “spirit of... service and responsibility where each of us resolves to pitch in and work harder and look after not only ourselves, but each other.”

I know that I can do this, and I know that my congregation can do this – it's who we are as people, and it has nothing to do with politics.

I can promise these things because I'm so full of passion and hope, but most of all because I'm so full of gratitude. Thank you for restoring, to those who had lost it, pride in our country. Thank you for daring us to believe that all of this could come to be.

We all made it happen, and we will all keep making it happen together.

Yours in faith,
Rev. Erika Hewitt

Endnotes

1. The words from our November chalice lighting reading, which is adapted from a Passover Haggadah (*Singing the Living Tradition* #453).
2. This reading appears in *Singing the Living Tradition*, #584.
3. Barack Obama, in his keynote address at the 2004 Democratic National Convention.
4. National Public Radio...see <http://community.adn.com/adn/node/133379>
5. See [www.ap.org/elections2008/fournier/fournier_081907\(2\).pdf](http://www.ap.org/elections2008/fournier/fournier_081907(2).pdf)
6. You can read the full text of Obama's Nov. 4th speech here: www.chicagotribune.com/news/politics/obama/chi-barack-obama-speech,0,524762.story
7. West was a guest on Bill Maher's show.
8. The words of presidential historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, commenting on "The Daily Show," Nov. 3rd.
9. Barack Obama's "A More Perfect Union" speech, delivered on March 18, 2008.
10. From "An Open Letter to Barack Obama from Alice Walker." See <http://scrutinyhooligans.us/?p=6342>
11. Nov. 4th speech.