

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
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Home Free

For the record, it was abolitionist and Unitarian minister Theodore Parker who first said, *The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.*¹

On Wednesday morning, November 5th, having greeted our downstairs neighbors, Laurence, a French immigrant to America, and her husband Jared, an American Jew, I left to go out for a run. I yelled good morning to Marcio, a Brazilian American, who was working on the house. Out in the street, our friend Jen, an African American, was arriving at work. We embraced in joy.

Running out Main Street in Concord and then cutting into the woods, I headed for the North Bridge, approaching it from the British side. Good morning to the National Park Service ranger, an Asian American, and up and over to the side of the patriot farmers who had held their ground on April 19th, 1775, and fired the first shot of the American Revolution, “the shot heard ‘round the world.” As I passed the statue of the Minuteman, I said a prayer of gratitude to all those who had bent the arc toward the justice of this day, this new revolution. Stopping into a café afterwards, the Kenyan American who often serves me chai stepped out from behind the counter; we hugged and wept.

“It’s a great day in America!” I said. “Congratulations!”

“Congratulations,” he replied, “Thanks be to God!”

I think of poet Gwendolyn Brooks:

We are each other’s business;
 we are each other’s harvest;
 we are each other’s magnitude and bond.

¹ In words made famous by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. a century later, Parker predicted the success of the abolitionist cause: “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one... And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.” see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodore_Parker

These are my people. This is my home. This is our America. *Welcome home!*

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After the United States invaded Iraq on March 20th, 2003, I saw a sign at an anti-war rally that said *I miss America*. It was exactly how I felt. For those of us who, in the intervening years, have missed America; for those of us who have wondered, at times quite seriously, whether or not we would like living in Canada, or Australia, or somewhere other than the United States; for those of us who did our best to uphold a counter-cultural standard for liberty and justice for all – for democracy – but who were clearly out-manuevered by wave after wave of repression and injustice, our dreams for our homeland can be surfaced, once again, and shine on. *Welcome home!*

O beautiful for spacious skies,
 For amber waves of grain;
 For purple mountain majesties
 Above the fruited plain!
 America! America!
 God shed His grace on thee,
 And crown thy good with brotherhood,
 From sea to shining sea.

We can tweak² Katharine Lee Bates' poem and feel that prayer for grace for our homeland, this place of possibility and promise; pray for a return to prosperity and peace, pray to restore dignity to our good name.

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Thanks to the Shalom Center's Rabbi Arthur Waskow, I hold in my mind and heart two super-imposed images in two American cities, forty years apart. Here is a vision of our progress, our evolution:

In Chicago's Grant Park:

Then: In late August of 1968, the park thronged with barbed wire-laced jeeps. Tear gas billowed and heads were cracked³ as police charged and beat antiwar demonstrators to prevent their marching to meet up with the African Americans who lived on Chicago's South Side and, together, confront the Democratic National Convention and protest the Vietnam war abroad and

² i.e., unbind the language (God/His and brotherhood) to make it inclusive

³ see geocities.com/Athens/Delphi/1553/

racism at home. By the end of the convention, 668 protestors had been arrested.⁴

And now: On election night, weeping tears of jubilation, more than 100,000 North Americans of all colors joined to celebrate the election of the black, antiwar, presidential nominee from the 2008 Democratic National Convention.

And in Washington, D.C., at 14th and U Street:

Then: On April 5th, 1968, this intersection was the epicenter of rage against the previous day's murder of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

And now: On election night, North Americans of all colors wept and hugged and laughed and danced together here.

The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

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In response to the sense that we in the United States get excited about politics every forty years, comedian Will Rogers quipped that “We have to go sleep it off.” How extraordinary to have lived to experience this “fundamental re-alignment of our national purpose.”⁵ And how vital that we not go back to sleep, now; that we wake up and stay awake to do our part in insuring the promise of this new time.

A school of Asian philosophy holds that “history moves not in a circle, but in a spiral. Whether as an individual or as a nation, whatever lessons we were presented ... and failed to learn will [be repeated] ... in a different form.” Author and spiritual leader Marianne Williamson writes, “During our forty years in the desert [-- she is referring to the forty years since Bobby Kennedy and Dr. King were murdered --], we learned many things. Then, we marched in the streets; this time, we marched to the polls. Then, we shouted, ‘Hell, no, we won’t go!’ This time, we shouted, ‘Yes we can!’ Then, we were so angry that our anger consumed us. This time, we made *a more compassionate humanity* the means by which we sought our goal as well as the goal itself.”⁶

⁴ see geocities.com/Athens/Delphi/1553/c68chron.html. Meanwhile, 308 Americans were killed and 1,144 more were injured in the war in Vietnam. How many died in Iraq during election week, 2008?

⁵ Marianne Williamson, *Yes We Did*, e-mail, 11/6/08

⁶ *ibid*

The next forty years lie before us, my beloved compatriots, and they are in our hands. As always, it's up to us to take the arc of the moral universe in our hands and bend it toward justice.

The Torah portion that Jews read last Friday is the first verse of the twelfth chapter of Genesis. God is speaking to Abraham and Sarah; Rabbi Waskow translates the passage, "Go forth, go forward, into your best and deepest self - to a place I will let you see, that you do not yet know."⁷

Here is something very cool: God says, *Lekh I'kha*. In Hebrew, these two words have the same consonants. They are the same word, written twice - *Lekh I'kha* - but we have to guess where to insert the vowels, and there are choices, and different possible meanings. Rabbi Waskow writes, "The closest I've ever come to an adequate translation is "Outward bound," or "Unbind inward."⁸ Outward bound or unbind inward: At this juncture, we are called to do both.

I want to thank our own Peter Lowber for directing me to Amy Goodman's interview on this past Tuesday with Pulitzer Prize-winning author, poet, and activist, Alice Walker. Amy Goodman begins by quoting the celebrated Uruguayan writer, Eduardo Galeano, who said, "I would like that Obama ... never forgets that ... [the] White House was built by black slaves."

Here is Alice Walker's response:

"... It's incredibly wonderful that he is going to live there, and partly because it was built by our ancestors, it will be his home. And one way of thinking about that is that even when they were building it, you know, in chains or in desperation and in sadness, they were building it for him, that ancestors take a very long view of life, and they see what is coming. And so, he should know that they were actually building it for him. They knew he was coming.... And this is a great victory of the spirit and for people who have had to live ... by faith."⁹

What does it mean to live by faith? What does it mean to us to live by faith, and be the bearers of the vision of the ancestors? Each of us is called to answer with our lives.

⁷ Genesis 12:1

⁸ Rabbi Arthur Waskow, "Calling Us ALL to the Path Ahead, Toward Our Truest Selves," 11/5/08

⁹ *Democracy Now! The War and Peace Report*, "Pulitzer-Winner Author Alice Walker on Obama's First White House Visit as President Elect," 11/11/08. See democracynow.org

I close with the words of President-Elect Barack Obama, from his victory speech, November 4th, 2008:

“The road ahead will be long. Our climb will be steep.... There will be setbacks and false starts.... We know that government can’t solve every problem....

“[Above] all, I will ask you to join in the work of remaking this nation, the only way it’s been done in America for 221 years: block by block, brick by brick, calloused hand by calloused hand....

“This victory alone is not the change we seek. It is only the chance for us to make that change. And that cannot happen if we go back to the way things were. It can’t happen without you.

“So let us summon a new spirit of patriotism; of service and responsibility, where each of us resolves to pitch in and work harder and look after not only ourselves, but each other.... This is our chance to answer that call.”¹⁰

My spiritual companions, *the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice*. Now we are citizens of a changed United States of America. Home, sweet home. Home safe. Home free. May each of us take our rightful and joyous place in making it so.

Amen.

¹⁰ “Obama Victory Speech,” *The Huffington Post*, huffingtonpost.com/2008/11/04/Obama-victory-speech_n_14

Benediction

Our benediction is from The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., from his address to the Hawaii Legislature in 1959, two years before President-Elect Barack Obama was born in Honolulu. Having declared that the civil rights movement aimed not just to free black people but "to free the soul of America," Dr. King ended his speech by quoting a prayer from a preacher who had once been a slave.

May we share in this prayer for the America we dream; and I quote:

Lord, we ain't what we want to be;
we ain't what we ought to be;
we ain't what we gonna be,
but, thank God, we ain't what we was.¹¹
Amen.

¹¹ Nicholas D. Kristof, "The Obama Dividend," *The New York Times*, 6 November, 2008
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