

Saving the World, Eight at a Time
A homily on President-elect Obama and Small Group Ministry
the Rev. Edmund Robinson
Unitarian Universalist Meetinghouse in Chatham
November 9, 2008

Every day I eat my meals on my grandmother's mahogany dining room table, sitting on one of the ornate mahogany chairs with green-striped cushion. Sometimes as I sit, I think about the conversations I used to hear around that table when I was growing up in the 1950s. We would gather for Sunday dinner, and I would hear reports of the goings-on at three Episcopal churches in Columbia. And I would hear a lot about politics and race.

Somebody said that the election of Barack Obama was the end of the Civil War. My parents and uncles and aunts and cousins didn't talk directly about the Civil War in the 1950's, but they did talk about segregation and how to preserve it against the Supreme Court and the forces of the federal government. My grandmother, in many other ways a saint, was just as imbued with the racism of the time and place as anyone else.

I listened to those conversations and at some point I decided that my elders were fundamentally on the wrong track. Gradually I went over to the other side and supported the claims of the civil rights movement, both in high school and college. I wonder what my grandmother would have thought about the night my fiancée and I spent filling sandbags for the Black Panthers in New Haven to put in the walls of their headquarters in case of a shootout with the police.

My grandmother died in 1978, and her house was sold to a friend of mine who was liberal like me. It was a large, gracious house in a quiet, dignified old neighborhood in Columbia. I only went in it one time after it was sold. That was to attend a fund-raising event for a presidential candidate. I remember thinking of the acute irony of my grandmother's house being used to garner support for Jessie Jackson. There was a crowd of about forty people, and Jackson spoke very movingly of his plans for the country. I probably wrote him a check, thought of course I did not think that I would ever see an African American elected President in my lifetime. But having the event there in my grandmother's house gave me hope that we were slowly undergoing some kind of transformation.

This event from a quarter century ago came back to me on Tuesday night as I watched

the crowd in Chicago waiting for the President-elect to speak. The camera panned the crowd, and then focused in on one face. When I saw the tears streaming down Jesse Jackson's face, something broke in me too.

It was like I was at a high point on the road of my life and could look back at where I had been, all the twists and turns, from a childhood where the drinking fountains and rest rooms and even the waiting rooms in my doctor's office were separate for white and colored people, through the sit-in and the marches and the Civil Rights Act. My parents' generation spent a lot of energy fighting to keep black kids and white kids from going to school together and from eating in restaurants together. A sort of a doomsday scenario was predicted around that dining room table over and over if any fabric of the Southern Way of Life was rent. And then one day the Civil Rights Act went into effect and blacks and whites were eating at restaurants together and the most surprising thing happened: nothing. It was like, what was all that fuss about?

I said last week that we should not expect racial salvation from the election of a biracial president. But we can all be proud of how far we have come. And there is one thing for sure. No one can accuse him of being a token, advanced because of his color or expected to be window dressing. Clearly this country is in one heckofa fix, and Barack Obama would not have won the confidence of the electorate if they could not see his clear intelligence, wisdom and strength of character. He will need all the support and prayers we can muster.

I pray that this can be the time when hope and history rhyme, when we can get beyond the stuck places and make some basic changes to the way we do business.

Joan talked about transformation. The seed becomes a shoot which becomes an onion. I think we are witnessing a transformation in our national life. I note that one of the first benefits of the election is to bring the Iraqi government closer to resolving their differences over US troop withdrawal. All over the world, people are reassessing the US's role and image in light of this election. The current administration has tried to spread democracy in this world by force of American arms, but this vaunted war on terror has largely succeeded only in making new terrorists. It would be a biting irony if the election of a biracial man to our presidency does more to spread the ideal of democracy in the world than have the wars and armaments for which we have all paid so dearly.

We are transformed by the stories we tell. We can take this election as one more chapter in an American story of living out the best ideals of the Founding Fathers. I have tried to show

here one way this fits in my personal story. Each one of you has a personal story to tell against this broader national backdrop.

The telling of our stories is an essential part of being human. Church is a place where we can learn to be human, and part of that is telling our stories. We have many ways of doing this, though it's not part of the central ritual, our Sunday morning worship. In UU churches where there is an open mike Joys and Concerns, many people use that time to tell their stories, but that has its own problems. So one of the places we have set aside in this church to tell our stories is the Small Group Ministry program. Here is how it works. People are assigned to one of the small groups now meeting and are asked to commit to attend most of the meetings, which are either monthly or twice a month in private homes. Each group of 6 to 8 people has one or two facilitators. The group meets and a chalice is lit. There may be some opening words. Then there is a check-in, in which the members can say how they are feeling or what is going on with them at present. Then the facilitator will read a short reading relating to the topic that the group has agreed to discuss, and then each person can say how that topic intersects their lives. The meetings last 90 minutes.

A very simple framework, and maybe those of you who aren't in the program are saying "so what?" or "I don't have time for that." Now I can't tell you what it would mean in your life for you to participate in the program, but I've invited some people who have participated to tell you what it has meant to them.

JoAnne Arnold

Mickey Barnes

Nancy Terry

Dave Reed

Helen Keating Smith

In this life, we are alone a lot of the time, and need to be alone a lot of the time. But we also need to be in relation with each other, and spiritual growth, transformation, is in that relating. Small Group Ministry is a place where you can come to know in depth, and be known by, a small group of people. This is a different way of doing church.

If any of this has piqued your curiosity, I invite you to come tomorrow night at 6 PM to share a simple meal with us and then try it our for yourself.
Amen.