

The Anointing of Barack Obama - And Ourselves

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"He's the new Messiah!" So read a sign held up by someone in the huge crowd gathered to hear Barack Obama in Germany last summer. Thomas Hand, SJ, a few years ago said that, "We humans are forever looking for heroes and heroines, for ideals and archetypal figures. We instinctively need a person who can embody the highest form of some creative energy. By devotion to such a person, we connect with that special energy and are transformed."

Barack (a name derived from the Semitic and Kiswahili words for "blessing") Obama clearly has been responded to as such an archetypal figure for our time. As in the famous Isaiah passages of the suffering servant, he is expected by many millions of people in the world to bear our many social troubles and draw us through them to a new day of well-being and community. His inauguration is his anointing to this calling by so many people. He has brought fresh hope and a vision of unity and caring for human needs across many lines. His very family lineage has crossed those lines: as a Euro-American and African-American, with a half-Asian sister. His work settings also have crossed lines: as a community organizer, lawyer, teacher, legislator, father, and husband, and so have the far-flung places he has lived.

In the famous Isaiah passages of the suffering servant, the servant can be seen as a single person as well as a symbol of the whole people of Israel. We can see the same symbolism with Barack Obama. He speaks of what we can do together, not what he can do alone. He can be the lightning rod for our collective willingness to rise above isolated self-concern and offer our gifts for the reform and upbuilding of our commonwealth, our whole earth community, in ways that are desperately needed today. Barack cannot be a "blessing" without our best kind of responsiveness, as well as his own.

He also can't be a blessing unless what he says and does itself is blessed, anointed, by the gracious One who flows through our lives. Such blessing will not always happen. President Obama is a fallible human being and he will sin and make mistakes like the rest of us, and like all the "anointed" before him in all fields. Yet in the heart of his impassioned vision we see some central principles that can transcend the fallibilities, principles that reverberate some basic contemplative discoveries and Biblical mandates:

1. We are a unity in diversity; we, including the earth, belong to one another in God. All of us are called to recognize this mutual interdependence.
2. As individuals and groups we are given distinctive callings to help care for the common good, even if it involves sacrifice of our separate good. The common good is our good, too; we are mirrors of our neighbors, including our poorest and most oppressed neighbors; love your neighbor as yourself.

Barack Obama does not directly address our communion in God. He is not a mystical spiritual Messiah in the way Christians see Jesus and other religions see their founders,

those people whose direct in-touchness with the divine shows us our deepest identity, belonging, freedom, and capacity for creative love. Yet the called-for fruit of such in-touchness overlaps with elements of Barack Obama's vision.

Early in the campaign a conservative commentator said he had to admit that, "Obama brings out the angels in us." My hope and prayer is that he indeed will help to bring them out: that what he says and does will be an instrument of God's blessing that brings out our best selves, leading us to listen for our part in caring for an inclusive, peaceful and just earthly community. President Obama will not always be such an instrument, and neither will we, so my prayer also is for a discerning heart for him and for us that helps everyone to see and let go whatever is not inspired by the undercurrent of radiant Love mysteriously flowing through us day by day.

Our societal time ahead is a momentous one, full of challenges and possibilities that most of us would never have dreamed of even a year ago. May we all live into this time with a sense of being anointed in our own way to let the Spirit lead through us, as well as through our new American President.

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