

2008-11-09 And So.doc MLB

## **Kindling of the Chalice**

### **Opening Words**

We are here

*on the weekend after a significant election*

to worship, to let go of the superficial

*that we might go deeper, within and around us.*

Called to honesty, we face our fears.

*Called to love, we take hold of love.*

**And so, though our ways of thinking and feeling about the meaning of our days may differ, we agree to journey together, side by side, face to face. Within this circle of strong spirit, mutual care, and ethical vision, may we ourselves remain open to being transformed by a welcoming heart and emerging justice.**

### **The Sequence**

Look! The harvest time comes in the fall  
of the year, when the leaves fly off the branches  
red as can be, and ginkgo trees turn into sunlight.  
Pumpkins and apples, bright wheat and corn.  
So much abundance, color, nourishment, joy!

The harvest time comes in the early years in this century, when feet of many colors,  
worn smooth from marching, rest for a while;  
and when souls who resisted humiliation  
for years stand up straight again for a while;  
and when eyes whose tears before the lynching  
tree and broken ballot box are finished weeping  
for a while,  
and they all bring out the sharp sickle of their joy and reap the sweet yield of harvest day.

The harvest time comes today,  
when the week's warm sun and cold rain  
joys, worries, ecstasies and sorrows,  
emotional somersaulting, and exhaustion  
finally make it through the finale of ads and signs, painful commercials and daily wincing

into the bright clearing of this moment,  
where the quietness is neither red or blue  
or even purple, but where now we reap  
some abundant silence to feed us for a while...

*silence*

The harvest of a lifetime spreads before our inner eye, all the faces of our years rise before us, the loves and losses, the challenges and disappointments, the suffering and the strong. Some especially rise before us at this time, led their by our hearts. These let us recognize and name or see inside us, or name out into the shared and safe space of this place...

*naming*

The harvest of days, of good-bye and hello,  
of rising questions and rhythmic salutations  
now flows out of the cornucopia called music:

**The First Reading** *is from the great novelist, and essayist James Baldwin, who wrote the following words in his 1972 essay Malcolm and Martin.*

The hope of the world lies in what one demands, not of others, but of oneself.

**The Second Reading** *is a poem written by my late mentor, Harry Scholefield's great granddaughter, while a freshman in college. (It was written as a Christmas present to her great-grandmother, Diene Bull Scholefield,) The title is On the Question of Race, Alicia Chambers 2007.*

They ask me to write down my race

And I think  
And I think  
Very seriously

And I consider  
Writing down the truth  
And have my answer read

I have a strong woman  
Colored like coffee  
Whispering the secrets of our past  
Inside this body

I have a wise man  
Dark as chocolate  
Beating his drum, fighting for freedom  
Inside this body

I have a brave woman  
Pale as snow  
Reminding that we are more

Than meets the eye  
Her secret is safe  
Inside this body

I have a lost man  
Colored like me  
He is weak  
Stumbling from place to place  
Trying to find his way home  
Warning me of everything  
I do not want to become

I have all this music inside this body  
The rhythms guiding me  
Salsa  
Meringue  
Swing  
Songs of freedom and hope  
A name that can't begin to  
communicate  
Where I've been or where I plan to go  
Inside this body

They ask me to write down my race

And I think  
And I think  
Very seriously

And I consider  
Writing down the truth  
And have my answer read

I have the heart of my great-  
grandmother  
The strength of mi abuelita  
The spirit of my grandfather  
And my mother's understanding  
Inside this body

I have jacks  
Dr. Seuss  
Lullaby and Good-night  
And marbles  
Inside this body

I have Ray Charles  
James Taylor  
Bob Marley  
Sly and the Family Stone  
And We Five  
Inside this body

I have a brother whose appearance  
Does not reveal his culture

I have all our past  
And so much future  
Inside this body

But I stop and simply write down  
“Other”

### **Sermon**

And so? Now what?

Well, first, I have to say that my tears seem to be drying up, at least for a while. I did cry a lot Tuesday night late. My tears, as many of you know, are very accessible to me, but on Tuesday, I didn't stop sobbing for a long, long time. My tears kept on welling up.

My tears started when I heard Senator McCain's concession speech. I thought it both gracious and beautiful, enough to prime my tears.

Then I heard president-elect Obama's acceptance speech. As a man who struggles with his writing and with his over-writing, I heard something that night which I could only call a masterpiece, maybe even a Gettysburg Address for our century. Simple words, short in length, unmistakable clarity. Power.

And, when he was done, I felt fully included as a citizen of my nation. And so I wept.

I don't always feel that way. Fully included as a citizen. Does that surprise you? Most states, including this benighted one, have cheerily passed laws relegating me to second class citizenry. It does not make me happy.

And, many people of color tell me they find that they do not feel themselves fully included either. I found it interesting how many people with entirely European ancestry claimed to be completely surprised by that simple fact when they heard all of the angry sermons of Rev. Jeremiah Wright making that plain on television and across the computer screens of America. But Rev. Wright was always expressing *more* than just his own personal feelings.

And my gay and lesbian friends in California all claim a great deal of alienation right now because of Proposition 8, which changes the constitution to forbid people of the same gender to marry in that august state. I've heard people I love, sensible folks all of them, say that riding on the subway is a new experience now, as they gaze at folks around them wondering who voted to keep them second class citizens, who voted to mock and vilify their very real love for their very real spouses. Their paranoia and pain is palpable, especially since many of them put so much time into this election. Only the presidential candidates raised more money in their cause than the people both fighting and supporting Prop 8.

And so, there are tears of sorrow after this election, as well as tears of joy for me. I have a sense of trouble in my heart, even as my heart beats with new hope. But this mixture of trouble and hope does not surprise me. The ancient story of Pandora you heard this morning reminds me that hope and trouble are always loose in the world, and there is probably not going to come a time when I can actually stuff all the troubles of the world back into some box leaving hope outside, and sit around smiling hopefully forever without those troubles snapping at me like demons...

Now talking about the sadness in California helps me make my way into the main point of this sermon. Pay attention now. Here comes the transition.

Now many of you have heard me say this before, but I need to say this again to get this going. Words like *gay* and *straight* and *bi* are *political words only*. They do not offer any information about the personal reality, the "existential" reality (if you don't mind me pulling out the five dollar words) of every human person's sexuality. Every sexuality is unique...political terms like gay and straight merely help us to work together without letting those personal details get us all confused.

In the same manner, black and white can both be seen as political terms. White, as I have mentioned before, is not descriptive, since I do not really resemble fresh fallen snow; but it is a political term. It was deliberately created in the fifty years after the Baker Rebellion of 1676 in the Virginia Colony. The word "black," which, although not descriptive either, (since my friend Devere does not resemble a stick of licorice one bit) was indeed used since Roman times as a poetic description of people of African origin. But even still, it never referred to a "race"...a completely false notion biologically, till after Immanuel Kant invented that terminology, and the privileged few in Virginia began to compact all people of African origin into that utterly perverse and ridiculous category imported from Europe: race. "White" as a race was created at around the same time, in Virginia, to maintain the privilege of the upper-classes and get the lower classes...of both African and European origin...to fight it out among themselves.

But in reality, each of us is unique in personal history, ethnic blend and rooting. Even me. Yes, I can trace my history back hundreds of years in Emilia, Italia, through all four of my grandparents. The last name of one of my grandmother's was Turchi. The last name of one of my grandfathers was Galli, which means "a citizen of Gaul," i.e. a land

populated by Celtic tribes. And even the Etruscan people, which appear to root my most ancient ancestry arrived in Italy on ships from somewhere in the Asian part of the Middle East, a place where they read alphabets from right to left, unlike the Romans, and us, who read left to right. Go back long enough, and all of us are "mixed."

And so, as we move into the next years under President Obama, I would love it if we each can commit to naming ourselves as unique people, as well as members of political communities. I say this although we will need to maintain, at least for a while, all the politicized categories of black and white and Asian and Latino and gay and straight and men and women, etc. We do need to all work together to get things done, after all. But I think our *spiritual* health and wholeness rather depends on each of us remaining faithful to our uniqueness, our otherness. We may have to come together across our boundaries of uniqueness to fight the good fight and achieve political and ethical ends. But our souls will be saved by being entirely honest about ourselves.

Like Alicia Chambers says in her moving poem, she does not fit into any category certain people might put her in because of the color of her skin. She is simply "other." She is neither black, or white, or Latino. She does contain within her African, Latin and Scandinavian realities. She is Alicia, a human person worthy of every dignity... *just like every single other person alive.*

White and black and Latino do have very real and complex cultural associations. I hardly am denying that.

But it's also true what Alicia says:  
*I have a wise man Dark as chocolate  
Beating his drum, fighting for freedom  
Inside this body  
I have a brave woman Pale as snow  
Reminding that we are more  
Than meets the eye  
Her secret is safe Inside this body*

*I have a lost man Colored like me  
He is weak Stumbling from place to place  
Trying to find his way home  
Warning me of everything I do not want to become.*

And this is true, I must say, of President-elect Obama. Barack Obama is seen as a black man by our media. I understand that politically. So does Obama, since he's a smart guy. But existentially, really, honestly, he is more like Alicia: "other." With a white woman and a black man inside him, music from several continents, the wisdom of several cultures, including our own culture, Unitarian Universalism, since one set of his grandparents faithfully attended a Unitarian Universalist congregation out west for a while.

When he stood before that amazing crowd in Chicago, with all those different faces and sizes and ages, it seemed to me that Senator Obama actually embodied, in his flesh, the new America, where you can't just check off a box to say who you "are," but you are bold and happy to admit that you are "other."

Jolinda Stephens, our thoughtful Director of Religious Education, pointed out to our teachers in her weekly blog that Obama's grandmother (the one who helped raise him, and who just died in Hawaii) was a white woman. "I was just thinking," she wrote" of what President-elect Obama said about his beloved grandmother during his speech on race a few months ago. He said that she had poured all she had into him, and yet, she ...had prejudices and stereotypes about black folks. It's important that we find ways to help our children, more diverse than the adult congregation, yet still very 'white,' feel that it is important to keep trying to work for fairness for all people and to speak up when we see unfairness, even when we don't do it perfectly. It's better to make mistakes than to do nothing."

I agree.

I would imagine that is part of the reason Obama told that story. And I think this is the other part of the reason he told that story:

Back when I was a child, I remember being transfixed when I saw President Kennedy, on our small black and white TV, pausing dramatically before he uttered, in his famous Bostonian accent, "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country." His election was amazing too, because no Roman Catholic had ever before been elected President of our nation. But that sentence of his resonated even with folks who despised the Catholic Church, as many did in those days, because it was an undeniably wise statement. It wasn't just a clever platitude mind you, but an invitation to take seriously the old saw from President Lincoln (a saw he in turn borrowed from Unitarian minister Theodore Parker) that we are "a government of the people, by the people, for the people."

And so I turn to the wise words of James Baldwin, who said: "The hope of the world lies in what one demands, not of others, but of oneself." I've noticed that Obama, from the start, has been asking us to make demands of ourselves. To take political work seriously. To show up. To understand that showing up is the real and only privilege worth fighting for in this life. Not to be blue or red, white or black, not to be more powerful, more connected, more fashion conscious, but to simply show up. Like his grandmother, struggling with her own prejudices.

He is asking us to take our work seriously, to organize, together, as the people of a single nation, because without organizing to create a nation that welcomes its *own* people, let alone immigrants, there is no hope at all. Just wishful thinking, a sense of lazy entitlement, a whole lot of mindless bureaucracy, and late night television infomercials selling snake-oil to dupes by the gallon.

And so, the gift of organizing to make a world where no one feels exiled to the outskirts of the nation is not over because the election is over. My depressed friends in California, and elsewhere, are aware of that, even in the depths of their sadness. There is more work for them to do, once we've rested...and wept...wept both tears of joy, and tears of grief. And, in all fairness to what I said earlier, not all gay and lesbian people voted for Obama, and not all of them voted against Prop 8, just as not all Republicans voted for Senator McCain, and vice versa. You see, no category tells the story. *Ever*. And the honesty it takes to tell the true story, to claim our uniqueness, is hard and relentless work.

The vision of America lifted up by President-elect Obama in his acceptance speech is not going to make everyone happy. Fox News and Mr. Limbaugh are already firing every spear of innuendo and implication they can.

And a vision is a vision, not final reality. But how comforted I am that the man lifting up this vision is, in his very flesh, heritage and soul, an actual *embodiment* of that vision.

### **Offering**

For the support of this congregation and its vision, we offer this time of giving. Some give by mail and electronically, but others like offering their support within the context of this morning celebration, which is the time when we express the deepest values and visions of our hearts in the context of hope and history. The morning offering will now be given and received.

### **Gloria**

Glory, Glory, Halleluiah!

In this month of gratitude, I thank you Anna Dickinson and Frederick Douglass and a thousand nameless men and women of many colors, for working so hard to bring the voting box to the disenfranchised of color in this nation. May you still stand with us in the flow of history. And may we stand by you. Glory, Glory, Halleluiah! I thank you Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone, Lucy Burns, Alice Paul, Carrie Chapman Catt, and so many others, both women and men, for bringing the ballot box to women in this nation. May you still stand with us in the flow of history. And may we stand by you. Glory, Glory, Hallelujah! I thank you Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King, and Unitarians James Reeb, and Viola Liuzzo and so many others of every color and gender for risking life itself to tear down the ridiculous walls which claim the power to divide us all. May you still stand with us in the flow of history. And may we stand by you. Glory, glory, Hallelujah! I thank you Harvey Milk, Bayard Rustin, Keith Boykin, Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon and so many others of every gender and color for daring to be who you are without fear of what cruelties folks might say about your sexual orientation. I thank you allies, and the utterly sympathetic. May you stand with us in the flow of history. And may we stand by you. Glory, Glory, Hallelujah!