

AN INAUGURATION OF HOPE?

By Michael A. Schuler

January 18, 2009

SELECTION FROM PROSE

From Harold Bloom *The NEW York Times*, October 12, 2008

In the Spring of 1837, a great depression afflicted the northeastern United States. All the banks in New York City, Philadelphia and Baltimore suspended cash payments, as did many in Boston. Of the 850 banks in the United States, nearly half closed or partly failed. If the crisis of 2008 was caused by poor lending, the panic of 1837 also featured speculation and inflation... Ralph Waldo Emerson's vision of America was deeply informed by the crisis of 1837...

It may shock that the Sage of Concord reacted to the catastrophe with a certain glee... He was energized by the financial storm and wrote:

"I see a good in such emphatic and universal calamity as the times bring, that they dissatisfy me with society... Behold, the boasted world has come to nothing. Prudence itself is at her wits' end.

"Pride...and expediency, who jeered and chirped and were so well pleased with themselves...behold, they are all flat, and here is the Soul erect and unconquered still. What answer is it now to say, 'It has always been so?' I acknowledge that, as far back as I can see the widening procession of humanity, the marchers are lame and blind and deaf. But to the soul that whole past is but one finite series in its infinite scope. Deteriorating ever, and now desperate.

"Let me begin anew. Let me teach the finite to know its master. Let me ascend above my fate and work down upon my world...

"The wealth of the universe is for me. Everything is explicable and practical for me... I am defeated all the time, yet to victory I am born."

SELECTION FROM POETRY

From Denise Levertov

But we have only begun to love the earth.
We have only begun to imagine the fullness of life.
How could we tire of hope?

So much is in bud.
How can desire fail?
We have only begun to imagine justice and mercy,
Only begun to imagine how it might be to live
As siblings with beast and flower,
Not as oppressors.
Surely our river cannot already be hastening
Into the sea of non-being?
Surely it cannot drag in the silt, all that is innocent?
Not yet, not yet -
There is too much broken that must be mended,
Too much hurt that we have done to each other
That cannot yet be forgiven.
We have only begin to know
The power that is in us if we would join
Our solitudes in the common struggle.
So much is unfolding that must complete its gesture.
So much is in bud.

** REFLECTIONS **

In November of the year 1800, **Abigail Adams** moved with her husband **John**, the newly elected president, to Washington D.C. and into an unfinished White House. Needless to say, she had little positive to say about either her new accommodations or her community. In a letter to a Massachusetts friend, she called the District of Columbia "a city in name" that would require "a more hardy and industrious race than its present inhabitants" to raise it to "any degree of respectability."

Continuing, the First Lady observed that:

The effects of slavery are visible everywhere, and I have amused myself from day to day in looking at the labor of 12 negroes from my window who are employed...to remove some dirt in front of the house... Two of our hardy New England men could do as much work in a day as the whole 12, but these slaves are half fed, destitute of clothing, whilst the white owner waits about idle... The universal character of the inhabitants of this city is want of punctuality, fair promises and he who expects performance will assuredly be disappointed.

The nation's new capital on the Potomac River was carved from Maryland and Virginia, two slave-holding states, and many of the skilled and unskilled laborers who

drained its swamps, erected its buildings and paved its streets were black men imported from surrounding plantations. The city commissioners had elected to use slaves both to keep labor costs down and to prevent too many poor, working-class whites from settling in Washington. The commissioners - many of them land speculators - wanted to attract a class of people who would pay a premium for a piece of property on which to establish a home or business.

In just a couple of days, the 44th First Lady will take up residency at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. **Barack Obama's** ancestors were not the victims of America's "peculiar institution," but **Michelle Obama's** were. The record clearly shows that her great great grandfather, **Jim Roberson**, was the property of a South Carolina plantation owner and his parents were almost certainly slaves as well.

Despite their lofty, egalitarian rhetoric, the founding fathers and mothers of this republic could never have envisioned such an event. Gazing out her window, that decorous New Englander, Abigail Adams, would have found it inconceivable that a descendant of one of slaves working in her yard would someday rise to her own status. The "Great Emancipator," Abraham Lincoln couldn't have foreseen this development either. Fifty years ago many still thought it unlikely that a Roman Catholic could be elected president, much less an African American.

One individual who did see this day coming, who felt that the nation was on the verge of a momentous transformation, was Martin Luther King, Jr. Forty years ago, in his last public speech, King uttered this prophetic statement:

(God) has allowed me to go up to the mountain. 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!

For African Americans **Barack Obama's** election may well be the most significant event since Emancipation. This is "the very realization of what so many black parents have told their sons and daughters to aspire to for years," **Lucas Johnson** writes. **Andrew Delbanco**, a professor of American Studies at Columbia, reports that his daughter, who teaches at a Harlem Charter School, has witnessed an unprecedented surge of excitement among youngsters whose lives are notably short on hope. **Will Rogers**, an African

American father who until November had always supported Republican candidates says: "I take every opportunity to talk to my twelve year-old son because this proves that he can be anything he wants to be." Having an African American family in the White House introduces a new sense of possibility. Lessons about hope, hard work and ambition that once rang hollow now have real credibility.

People in other countries also realize that something remarkable has occurred. Not since the Berlin Wall went down in 1989 has he seen such a high level of excitement among the residents of Paris, London, Berlin and Delhi, **Darryl Pinckney** reports.

But intoxicating and promising as this transition in leadership might be, it is wise to remember that we are merely on the threshold of a post-racial society - the Promised Land of **Martin Luther King's** vision. The process of consolidating this achievement is going to take a long time and a lot more effort. The new president and a sympathetic Congress are facing problems the like of which has not been seen for seventy years. And, thanks to the improvident policies of the outgoing administration, the new order will have limited means at their disposal to address those problems. Moreover, some of the environmental and financial ills we face are global in scope, and thus beyond any single nation's power to remedy.

As citizens, we need to be hopeful, but not naïve, recognizing that while something truly momentous has occurred powerful forces of resistance are still active. The public answered the call for "change" and has high expectations of the new administration, but it's important that we set a higher standard for ourselves as well. A window of opportunity for social, economic and political transformation has been opened, but in order to make the most of it, Americans will need to put their differences aside and pull together in a way they haven't since the Second World War. As the urban environmentalist **Van Jones** recently told a group of African American teenagers:

I love Barack Obama...but I tell you this. One man is not going to save us. I don't care who that man is. In fact, if you want to be real about this, not only is Barack Obama not going to be able to save you - you are going to have to save Barack Obama.

It has been a long time since citizens of this country have been asked to undertake something difficult or to sacrifice much of anything. We have been fighting two wars

without a tax increase or military conscription; we've been tooling around in gas-guzzlers while the planet has been overheating; we tried to create an "ownership society" primarily on credit. We've been told that we are entitled to our profligate way of life and that it isn't negotiable.

The question is, after so many years of complacency, will Americans be able to rise to the occasion, sharing responsibility with our leaders for restoring our country's strength and its credibility. As my colleague in Brookfield, **Suzelle Lynch** wrote recently,

We have the ability to demand change, and to create change. And we can begin by paying attention to every decision we make - consumer decisions, voting decisions, investment decisions, charitable contribution decisions, decisions about memberships and associations - as though each one were a declaration of our faith.

The slogan of the **Obama** campaign - "Yes we can" -- has become something of a mantra for many who admire what that man has achieved against formidable odds. **Van Jones** is one of them. Until fairly recently a little-known community activist working out of Oakland, **Jones** has spearheaded a movement to equip poor inner-city residents with the necessary skills and tools to retrofit buildings, install solar panels and wind turbines on rooftops in order to create a "green" urban infrastructure. Unemployment, pollution and energy inefficiency are serious problems in our major cities. **Van Jones** thinks he has found a way to solve them in tandem and last year he persuaded Congress to provide \$125 million dollars to train 30,000 people to do this work.

But **Jones** has even bigger plans -- a \$33 billion federal program that would pay 600,000 people to "green" the inner cities. "I wouldn't have believed in myself enough to come forward with an idea that bold," Jones said, "But now you've got somebody headed for the White House whose telling people, "Let's be bold."

In a recent open letter to **Barack Obama**, Canada's best known environmentalist, **David Suzuki** reminded him of Sputnik - the satellite launched by the Soviet Union on October 4, 1957 that ushered in the space age. The late-fifties was another era of complacency, a feel-good period between Korea and Vietnam when business was booming and people's standard of living was steadily rising. But

Sputnik was a wake-up call, alerting Americans to the technological prowess of their arch-enemy.

The United States responded, **Suzuki** reminds us, with an all-out effort to catch up. NASA was established; federal funding for scientists, university research and teaching programs was ratcheted up. Within 12 years the United States had landed men on the moon and was the undisputed leader in rocket, aeronautic and satellite science. "This all came about because the United States made a commitment and threw everything into it," **Suzuki** told **Obama**. What we need today is an equal degree of determination, commitment and boldness. Be bold, Mr. President! Suzuki urges.

Despite the mounting problems the present generation faces - dwindling resources; turbulence in the financial world; unresolved conflicts in Europe, Africa and the Middle East; a broken criminal justice system; glaring economic inequality; climate change; industrial stagnation - it's vitally important to stay hopeful. In that Memphis speech of forty years ago, during an equally troubled and anxious time, **Martin Luther King** spoke to the seriousness of the situation. But he also offered this reassurance: "I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars."

To keep hope alive, we need to look for those stars, the bold, generous and visionary people engaged in "some new thinking that will surprise the world," to borrow a phrase from president **John Adams**.

Michelle Chan is another one of those stars. For the past few years she has been working with Friends of the Earth and other advocacy groups to change the way commercial banks do business. At this point **Chan** has convinced over sixty banks to take environmental and social considerations into account in making their investments - to bring basic ethical principles to bear their lending policies. "The American public," **Chan** says, "is ready to see a return to soundness, sustainability and decency in our financial system." She's committed to making that happen.

A similar concern prompted a successful entrepreneur, **Rinaldo Brutoco**, to open the World Business Academy in Ojai, California twenty years ago. For too many years business was encouraged to raid communities rather than help build an economically just society, **Brutoco** observes. "When greed dominates, you get exactly the kind of crisis we see now," so the World Business Academy encourages managers to look beyond short-term profit and strive for

sustainability in all areas of their businesses, from relationships with employees to interactions with suppliers.

Brutoco wants to create a new paradigm for the business community and has enlisted some important allies, like the Kellogg school of business at Northwestern University. Business may be part of the problem, but he expects it to be a large part of the solution.

The competencies of business, properly motivated and directed, can solve every problem in the world better than any other institution...but the key is for business people to add values, not just value.

Barack Obama and many of the people he has recruited as advisors are known as pragmatists and experts at compromise. One hopes this is not where their talents end and that they will be able to heed the new president's advice to "be bold" because a measured boldness, as well as patience and prudence, is going to be needed these next four years.

There can be no more "tinkering around the edges," **Bill Vitek** writes. Many of the difficulties that have arisen on this overcrowded, under-supplied planet are reaching crisis proportions and will persist well into the future. Only a quantum shift in our expectations and behavior will suffice to contain and eventually correct those problems. What is demanded is a "change in our way of life as inconceivable to us as the invention of the modern factory or heart transplant would have seemed to a peasant or professor in medieval Europe," **Vitek** insists.

Like the dissolution of the Soviet Empire, or the reconciliation of English and Irish after four hundred years of strife, or the peaceful end of apartheid in South Africa, this fall's election has proven that nothing is a foregone conclusion and that the impossible is waiting to happen. If the great, great granddaughter of slaves can become the mistress of a house slaves once built, corporations can learn to operate in a manner that promotes the common good, humans can adapt to a post-carbon world and Jews and Muslims can find a way to coexist peaceably in the Middle East.

Again, our own responsibility for the future of this country did not and does not end at the ballot box. As **Van Jones** told those teenagers, **Barack Obama** isn't going to save us. We have to save **Barack Obama**.

Sixteen years ago during another economic downturn an upstart named **Bill Clinton** campaigned against an unpopular president, **George H.W. Bush**. A week before Americans went to the polls in 1992 my distinguished colleague in New York City, **Forrester Church**, delivered an election sermon. Some of his words are worth recalling, and with them I will end.

I want a president who will inspire hope, but as Americans we need to remember that the votes we cast for president are much less important than the votes we cast for our neighbors and ourselves, the votes we cast with and in our own lives.