



Waiting

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I sit at my computer and look up at a painting entitled 'Waiting for Godot' painted by a long-lost friend, Ashurbanipal Billah (whom we knew affectionately as 'Banny'), a cometary and amazingly multi-talented Assyrian Christian from Iran who streaked across our firmament during our sojourn in Beirut in the late 1960s and who eventually (last we heard) wound up happily in New York's gay community. We bought the painting for a song, but it is now among our household treasures. My son, Tom, has laid claim to it.

On the wall, it's bracketed by two smaller paintings I did when I was younger. The one, an abstract, shows flames engulfing a mother and child below tottering Muslim and Christian symbols, and on the other side is a more realistic scene of an ice storm's eerie power at night. In a sense they are both proleptic — fire and ice. But in between there's this very powerful study of two lethargic men under a full moon framed in the clutching branches of a stark tree against an almost black background below a vast and soaring arch ... waiting ... always just waiting. The arrangement of paintings was somewhat serendipitous, but it is evocative and I look at it every day. So too, in my imagination, do Banny and Samuel Beckett (RIP).

Between the fire and ice, we're waiting for something. What is it? Or, as Beckett commented, does "silence pour into us like water into a sinking ship?"

Having listened to Barak Obama's Inaugural Address on January 20th and having read the text very carefully, I here present my condensation of it. I call it 'The Condensed Obama'. Cutting and pasting as I did and inserting a few transitions as I had to, there's been some editing and the real risk of changed meaning. But this is what *I* heard (or *hope* I heard) Obama say, and you can judge the product.

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Amidst gathering clouds and raging storms, America has carried on because we, the people, have remained faithful to the ideals of our forebears and true to our founding documents.

We are in the midst of crisis: we are at war; our economy is badly weakened. These sap confidence and instill the fear that America's decline is inevitable. But we have chosen hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord.

Though we are still a young nation, the time has come to set aside childish things. This is not the path for the faint-hearted; rather it is the path of the risk-takers, the doers, the makers of things. We must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America.

We'll restore science to its rightful place, raise health care's quality and lower its cost, harness the sun and the winds and the soil for energy, and transform our schools and colleges and universities to meet the demands of a

new age. We will show what free men and women can achieve when imagination is joined to common purpose, and necessity to courage.

What the cynics fail to understand is that the ground has shifted beneath them. What we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works. Those of us who manage the public's dollars will be held to account. The nation cannot prosper long when it favors only the prosperous. We reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals: the rule of law and the rights of man.

To all other peoples and governments we say, America is a friend of each nation, and every man, woman and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity. Our power grows through its prudent use; our security emanates from the justness of our cause, the force of our example, the tempering qualities of humility and restraint. Those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents, we say to you now that our spirit is stronger and cannot be broken — you cannot outlast us, and we will defeat you. As the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself. America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace.

To the Muslim world we say, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect. To leaders around the globe we say, know that your people will judge you on what you can build, not what you destroy. Kindness, selflessness, courage, nurture, honesty, hard work, courage, fair play, tolerance, curiosity, loyalty and patriotism ... these things are true. Those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but we will extend our hand if you are willing to unclench your fist. To the people of poor nations, we pledge to work alongside you to make your farms flourish and let clean waters flow to nourish starved bodies and feed hungry minds. The world has changed, and we must change with it. As much as government can do, and must do, it is ultimately the faith and determination of the people upon which a nation relies. This new era of responsibility — the price and the promise of citizenship — we do not grudgingly accept, but rather seize gladly, giving our all to a difficult task.

In this winter of our hardship, let us remember the hope and virtue expressed in our past. When we were tested we refused to let this journey end; we carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations.

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Is this what we've been waiting for? Is Obama our Godot? Has he come at last? I look up at my paintings and I sigh. Fire and ice bracket the waiting.

In 1963 Nancy and I attended a performance Beckett's famous play. It was a Summer Stock off-Broadway production at an intimate little theater near Stony Point, New York, called The Red Barn. As the mesmerizing portrayal of both Estragon and Vladimir progressed, there was a young boy in the front row of the audience. During the oft-repeated litany that Godot was coming, at a certain point the boy couldn't contain himself any longer and in a clear high voice declared almost on cue, "But he's not coming!" To the credit of the actors, they picked up the naïve exclamation and

wove it into their dialogue. But the boy's interjection made the play that night. It was electrifying — "But he's not coming!"

And that's what we must remember. For all his rhetoric about the survival of hope and virtue borrowed from Thomas Paine, the most eloquent voice of the American Revolution, Obama is neither Godot finally come nor the returning Messiah. He's just a man with a very fraught mission. And the rest of the world is waiting, hoping in his virtue on "... the path of the risk-takers, the doers, the makers of things."

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As Obama's personal envoy, George Mitchell, the American peacemaker, has come upon the scene in the Middle East just in time to see Israel ratchet up its war machine again against Gaza. Mitchell contributed to peace in Northern Ireland, and he has Arab roots. After his father died, he was raised in his mother's Lebanese family as a Maronite. But, in the complexities of Middle East politics, that will not comfort Palestinians one little bit. The average Maronite attitude toward Palestinians is anything but cordial. It was the Maronite Phalangist militia that carried out the brutal massacres in Lebanon's Palestinian refugee camps of Sabrâ and Shatîlâ. These 'operations' were directed by Raphael Eitan and Ariel Sharon in September 1982 during the failed Israeli offensive that was to destroy the PLO and its Chairman, Yâsir 'Arafât. Now the Palestinian demon has been transmogrified into Israel's erstwhile client, Hamâs. Hold this space. As regards George Mitchell, we will wait.

Were he writing today, Shakespeare might well have observed that something's rotten in the State of Israel. Something's *certainly* rotten in the Palestinian Authority. Heavens! something's also rotten in America so long as it unquestioningly underpins and arms an Israeli regime that has no intention to see a Palestinian State emerge cheek-by-jowl with Israel. The ethnic cleansing of 82% of Palestine in 1948 remains to be addressed. That is the backlog. The right of return remains the moral and political right of every Palestinian. It is recognized in international law. The other option is genocide ... 'ethnic cleansing' in the rest of geographical Palestine. Between the two choices there is no ambiguity. I'd hate to see President Obama find himself 'on the wrong side of history' on this matter.

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President Obama's first diplomatic phone call was to Mahmoud 'Abbâs, President of the Palestine National Authority; only afterward did he call Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. His first official TV interview after taking office was with the Sa'ûdî sponsored Arabic TV network, Al-'Arabiyyah. My Israeli mentor, Uri Avnery, observed that these are interesting 'firsts' for an American president. And now the Arab and Muslim worlds want to see what the cash value of these things is.

The world now is waiting for "kindness, selflessness, courage, nurture, honesty, hard work, courage, fair play, tolerance, curiosity, loyalty and patriotism" ... these things that are 'true'. It is waiting for virtue exercised. It is a religious thing; it is a human thing; it is a universal thing. Mr. Obama ... we're waiting, caught as we are between fire and ice ... we're waiting for hope and virtue!

And I greet you from the Lands of the Morning.

NOTE: The longer Reformed Church in America missionaries serve, the more they come to see the ethical implications of Christian faith with the eyes of the people among whom they serve. We treasure our missionaries and are glad to know what they think. However, RCA Global Mission does not, itself, have partisan political views.