

AMERICAN STORIES

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American Stories

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Not since I was a child waiting for Christmas has time moved so slowly waiting for this election. Not even Tina Fey helps pass the time anymore. It feels like NPR has been telling me the same news every day for the past month. Two weeks ago, comedy writer, Larry David said: "I can't take much more of this. I'm at the end of my rope. I can't work. I can't eat but mostly standing up. This is like waiting for the results of a biopsy. Actually it's worse. Biopsies only take a few days, maybe a week at the most, and if the biopsy comes back positive, there's still a potential cure. With this, there's no cure. The result is final. Like death."

A lot of people you talk to say they can't hold their breath too much longer. It's no wonder that so many people are voting early this year, only most of them don't realize it's early. More than 150,000 people voted last week in Utah alone, and I'm sure many of them went home to watch the results on TV. (What? It's still not the election?)

Assuming that November 4th ever arrives, what's really at stake? I believe that Tuesday will be nothing short of a referendum on the American story. It's a story that began with the Puritans, and John Winthrop's declaration that God had made a special covenant with the Puritans, choosing them to lead the other nations of the earth. Winthrop expressed this idea metaphorically as a "City upon a Hill." The Puritan community of New England would serve as a model community for the rest of the world. Intrinsic to this faith in God and America is what is called American Exceptionalism. The United States, as is often implied, was founded on a creed, giving our nation the quality of an "ism" - Americanism.

Winston Churchill helped clarify the distinction between nations that have a sense of themselves derived from common history as distinguished from a nation defined by ideology. In 1940 Churchill addressed a proposal that England outlaw the communist party. In his famous speech to the House of Commons, he said that as far as he knew, the Communist party was comprised of Englishmen, and he did not fear Englishmen.

In Europe, the concept of nationality is related to community. One cannot become un-English or charge a fellow Swede as being un-Swedish. But we know all too well as Americans that our identity as Americans is not a birthright, it's not a matter of belonging to this community, but a matter of subscribing to an ideology. If I reject that ideology comprised of narrowly defined American values, then I am un-American.

American values (this notion of American exceptionalism), extend back not only to the Pilgrims, but was wrapped up in the Jacksonian idea of Manifest Destiny which catapulted the expansion of the country westward. Manifest destiny, ordained by God, justified our entrée into the Oregon Territory, the Texas Annexation, and the Mexican cession. It was used later at the turn of the 20th century to seize former Spanish colonies in the Philippines, Puerto Rico, Cuba and Panama. We could not escape the belief of American exceptionalism, nor did we want to. America was chosen to lead other nations on this earth. This is our creed.

Last month at a rally in Nevada, the Republican vice-presidential candidate, Sarah Palin said: "We are an exceptional nation. America is an exceptional country." Loving the word, "exceptional," she then added, "You are all exceptional Americans."

Here's the question we are all facing this election: What does American exceptionalism look like in the year 2008? Is American exceptionalism even a viable ideology in today's world ?

In a New York Times op-ed column by Roger Cohen a few weeks ago, he made the astute observation that what lies behind Palinism, that is, what lies behind her intractable faith in our nation as separate and distinct from other nations...what lies behind her belief in American exceptionalism, is anger. It's been growing as America's relative decline has become more manifest in falling incomes, imploding markets, massive debt and rising new centers of wealth and power from Shanghai to Dubai.

I saw this anger in an MSNBC interview with Joe the Plumber following his sudden emergence as a mascot for the McCain campaign. After politely declining to reveal for whom he was voting, he went on a tirade about America as the greatest nation on earth. He despised anyone who tore America down after all it has done to bring freedom and democracy to Iraq. He echoed the rage of everyone believing in the American creed and in America's special mission to the world at a time when American power is suspect, and the era of Americanism is fading.

I never understood why we had to believe that America was the greatest nation on earth or the most powerful or the most intelligent or the wealthiest. Even Gov. Huntsman in a political commercial proclaimed Utah as the best state in the nation. (What is this competitive need?) I always assumed that the folks in Norway led very happy lives without believing that their nation was the greatest nation on earth. But to believe otherwise in this country is to be un-American. That is, until this election.

Let us be reminded first of all, of the foundation of Unitarian Universalist values: We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. I believe this principle was stated far more clearly in Buddhist scripture several thousand years before the UUA. The Lotus of True Law states simply and succinctly: "All beings support each other."

All beings support each other constitutes a Buddhist practice. If you do not practice this true law, it leads to suffering. The basic concept is interdependence. We are all related. There exists a bond among us all and we respond to one another by working together. If we don't support each other we suffer.

A very divisive and inhibiting factor in working together interdependently lies in the story in how we portray ourselves and others. Stories limit the reality that we are all interconnected. Stories separate us from others. There are stories about "those people:" African Americans are like this; Hispanics are like that. There are stories about Republicans and Democrats; stories about terrorists and Muslims; stories about socialists and redistributionists of wealth; stories about Godless Unitarians and zealous Mormons; stories about America that we are uniquely blessed by God and are therefore exceptional.

Stories limit the reality that we are all interconnected. Many citizens in this country are beginning to recognize that stories about other people and other cultures serve only to separate us from them. American stories are about how we are different from others, and mostly how we are better and greater and can act unilaterally in the world because we believe in Americanism.

Many in our nation are re-examining the American story and conclude that just because we are Americans we are not free to torture prisoners authorized at the highest government level. We are not free in the environmental concerns facing the entire globe to continue our wasteful consumption. We are not free to ignore the demand for investing in alternative energy sources.

Stories limit the reality that we are all interconnected. So destructive and counter-productive, if not delusional is the story that REAL America (as told by the Republican ticket) consists mostly of small

towns where people are patriotic and work hard. Representative Robin Hayes from North Carolina told a crowd at a McCain rally, "Liberals hate real Americans that work, and accomplish and achieve and believe in God."

Stories about people and culture divide us and as a consequence we suffer. All beings support each other is the lotus of the true law.

American exceptionalism, according to Roger Cohen, has become the angry refuge of the America that wants to deny the real state of the world. American exceptionalism has morphed into the fortress of those who see themselves threatened by "one worlders," read as Barack Obama.

The American stories about how exceptional we are have run squarely into the world of 21st century interconnectedness. Have we not learned in just the past eight years that the problems we face from terrorism to nuclear proliferation to gas prices to a global recession requires – no demands - joint action. To deny that and continue citing American exceptionalism in this new century of cooperation will truly lead to suffering. And that is why everything is on the line for this election. It's not just a contest between personalities or party platforms or even the social wedge issues such as Roe V Wade and Gay Marriage. There's that, too, as in every election, but Tuesday's election will decide the fate of Americanism...the creed of American exceptionalism...the fulfillment of the lotus of the true law and it will decide the fundamental concept of whether or not we are interdependent thus calling for mutual support around the world.

This election could finally end the philosophy of damn-the-world, God chose us...and bring us into conversations and negotiations with other cultures around the world with no airs of American superiority. A new attitude might prevail in that we can actually learn from other countries about health care and child care, and diplomacy.

In 1899, William James publicly rejected the philosophy called Social Darwinism which asserted the superiority of the Caucasian race over all others. Mark Twain joined William James by confessing his own disillusionment of the ruthless suppression of Filipino insurgents by United States troops. Mark Twain wrote that America had lost its fundamental purpose in the world, and thus proclaimed himself as an anti-imperialist. This view, however, appealed to relatively few Americans whose jingoism endorsed the imperialistic enterprise of the United States.

The American public in 2008 has suffered from American imperialism in the Middle East and American exceptionalism has saddled an enormous debt upon generations yet unborn. Our public today feels the ravages of fighting two wars, a devastating financial collapse, and the repercussions of oil dependency. Americanism – that unbridled faith in this country ordained by God to be the best and strongest among all nations, must now decide between the story of American uniqueness and the reality of America locked into an interdependency with all nations on this fragile planet.

The world has grown much smaller since John Winthrop planted the seeds of American exceptionalism. The vision for the 21st century calls for one world cooperating together. The stories that separate us from one another with accusations of socialism are not scary in the dawning of a new age. The stories that try to mark people as elitist are out of place if we value liberal education. The stories that America is the greatest country in the world fail to spark the imagination. The stories that America is the most powerful nation on earth are irrelevant. And to their credit, some of the most influential conservative thinkers, some of them the midwives to the neoconservative movement, realize that this election is different and they must transcend party loyalties.

Kathleen Parker, Charles Krauthamer, George Will, Christopher Buckley, son of William Buckley, David Freedman, son of Milton Freedman have all endorsed a candidate referred to as a "One-worlder." And they are joined by moderate Republicans like Susan Eisenhower, William Weld, and Colin Powell. And Peggy Noonan, William Bennett, and David Brooks are almost there, and have hinted that they will probably vote for Obama if Election Day ever arrives...

We have all grown up on American stories, this puritan creed, the belief in our own specialness among other nations. How different we are from others. But have we not reached the point where we recognize that these stories of separation have led, just as the Buddha predicted, to a kind of suffering. Our soldiers in the Middle East so needlessly killed, our disregard for Muslim civilian life now feeding the flames of greater terrorism, our endless greed resulting in a total economic collapse.

We're ready for a new story...a new paradigm...a new way of working together...a new way of honoring the bond among us all...a new acceptance that we are all related...a new way that sees we are already in relationship with others whether we want to be or not.

And we wonder why this election is of such enormity and scale? Why young people are inspired like never before? Not even the 60's were like this. This election could begin the composition of a whole new narrative for this nation called America: That this nation that will join with other nations around the table in solving global problems together. This nation which will have to drop the "ism" of its creedal Americanism; no longer exceptionalism but participating on equal terms with other nations. The 21st century calls for and demands nothing less. The election will decide the fate of our children and grandchildren. It will decide the fate of the world. Only 37 hours remain until the polls open. Good luck to us and to everyone around the world.