

Witnessing history in the making: My thoughts about President Barack Obama becoming the first African-American president of the United States.

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Abstract

During this past month, I have heard many African-Americans express their feelings of what it felt like to have witnessed Mr. Barack Obama become the first African-American President of the United States of America. History is defined as a chronological record of significant events including an explanation of their causes. This definition personifies or represents what happened on January 20, 2009 up to and during the swearing in of the first African-American as President of the United States. History was being recorded; and for many African-Americans, we remembered our history and what led the nation to elect our 44th President. Questions that arose during President-Elect Obama's campaign was— how did we get here, to this moment in time, to elect a Black President? Another question was: if elected, what changes what it mean for Blacks living in America? I questioned what was the defining moment for me to want to see Mr. Obama as my President? Finally, I asked *why* Mr. Obama as opposed to Rev. Al Sharpton, Rev. Jesse Jackson, Senator Alan Keyes; and Ambassador Carol Moseley Braun – all African-Americans who had previously attempted a presidential run. I have had many days since President Obama's inauguration to ponder these questions. I wish to share with you my subjective feelings about witnessing history in the making; and what I have concluded as a result of my witnessing this historical moment—the first African-American who became the President of the United States.

Wow! That is the word that I continued to use throughout the day on January 20, 2009. Wow! Is this really happening? Wow! I just watched history in the making. Wow! What a legacy to leave my grandchildren. Wow! I actually witnessed, during *my* lifetime, the swearing in of the *first African-American* President of the United States. Wow!

On January 20th, Henderson State University set up a big screen television for viewing of the inaugural ceremonies in one of the auditoriums on campus. I choose to go and view the inauguration event in the auditorium as I wanted to be connected with someone – anyone - who could understand what I was feeling on that day.

As I made my way across campus, I remembered feeling like this cannot be happening. Is it true? Has this country elected the first African-American President? These were the questions that propelled me across campus to witness this historical moment on television. While I was not able to attend the inaugural event in person; I knew that I wanted to be a part of this great day by witnessing the swearing in of the President-Elect who would become the first African-American President. I wanted to witness this event so that I could later say, I was a part of history - me – little old me - I saw the first African-American take the oath of office as the 44th President of the United States! Wow!

When I arrived in the auditorium, it was not as crowded as I had thought. This was somewhat disappointing to me I believed that every student (Black, Hispanic, Asian, and White) should be in this room witnessing this historical moment. As time progressed; however, the room began to fill with students, staff, and faculty alike. I made my way down toward the front of the auditorium to join several of my colleagues. As I sat with my colleagues, it dawned on me that at this moment in time, it did not matter that we were not all of the same ethnic background. We were all here to witness history in the making.

How did we get to this moment in time to elect a Black President?

As the moments ticked by and after the first lady of soul, Ms. Aretha Franklin, sang “My Country, 'Tis of Thee,” my anxiety quickened. There are no other words to describe my feelings. One might ask; anxious for what? I sat there with my colleagues and began to reminisce about from where I had come. I thought about my own background; who my forebears were, and from where they had come. I believe that for many African-Americans, witnessing this particular inauguration was about looking at *how far* we had come as a people; thinking back to *where we came from* as a race, and remembering the struggles that our forbears made to get us and Mr. President-Elect to this day.

The reason I was feeling anxious was because I understood that this was a moment in time –a moment in history -that would mark a significant change for this country for months and even years to come. I was anxious because this historical moment represented a change and shift in the way that America thinks about equality. Witnessing the first African-American to be sworn in as President of this country; that, in and of itself, represented a change in the ideology of many Americans about race and equality. After the inauguration, I heard many people say that change in America was about us electing the first African-American as our President. I also heard others say that having a Black President would change how America will now view African-Americans. What I do know is that for a country that has a deep-rooted history of racism and inequality - to put aside race and do what was best for this country represented a significant movement toward a new paradigm shift of thinking as it relates to equality and race.

I remember growing up in the south in a little town called Union Springs, Alabama. Even though I was born in Chicago, I was sent to live with my grandmother for the first five years of my life. What an education I received; and I was not even old enough to attend school! Even at that young age, I remember the many days that my grandmother had to work in the cotton fields. I remember her hands and how ugly-looking they would be with blood on them after her many hours of cotton-picking. I distinctly remember when she would take the sack of cotton up to a wagon; they would weigh the sack, and then would give my grandmother something like a dollar or a few dollars and some change for her day of hard work in the field. I remember thinking it strange that the White gentlemen would not help my grandmother or the other ladies pull their sacks up to the wagon. I thought that strange because we were taught at an early age that men were stronger. I could not fathom why grandmother was struggling with her sack of cotton when there was a strong man standing in the wagon right in front of her.

Granted, I did not understand at that time the struggles and pain that she was going through; nor did I understand at that time about inequality or racism. I just loved being in the cotton field with my oldest sister because that meant a day of fun for me; running wild and loose, with no supervision, just listening to the old men and women sing gospel hymns while they picked cotton all day.

However, as I sat waiting for the swearing in moment on inauguration day, I reminisced and thought about the times that grandmamma and I would travel to the local Five & Dime store. During my early years, my family went through many doors that had the “colored only” signs. Now some 50 years later, here I sat in a university among my White colleagues; and I understood how grandmamma’s struggles in that cotton field had ended. It ended with her, along with other grandmothers, having paved the way for Mr. Obama to be sworn in as the first African-American President of the United States.

So, it was on the morning of January 20th as I sat on the row with my colleagues who were non-African-Americans; I reminisced about my grandmother, and the many other men and women who paved the way for this young Black man, Mr. Barack Obama, whom we would, in just a few moments call, Mr. President. How did we get here? It was clear to me that because Mr. Obama would soon walk to the podium and take the oath of office to say something like: “....*I do solemnly swear that I will faithfully execute the Office of President of the United States; so help me God;*” we got here because of the past struggles of our foreparents. Wow!

If elected, what changes what it mean for Blacks living in America?

For me, I believe that African-Americans can now be viewed by some, if not all Whites, as somewhat equal counterparts - being able to achieve the same levels as Whites. While this may not be the views of all Americans, this is my belief based on my witnessing the first African-American elected as President of the United States. Some Blacks have remarked that we as African-Americans have now taken our rightful place in history. But for me, more importantly, what this change represents is the fact that African-Americans now *know* that we *can* achieve and aspire to become anything that we wish! There is no limit to that achievement! No longer can we say that America will not accept us because of the color of our skin; or that America would not tolerate us in high level positions. Witnessing Mr. Obama become President represents motivation for our younger generation to aspire to become the Commander-in-Chief of the oval office. This change speaks to the manifestation of Dr. Martin Luther King’s dream for this nation to view all persons as being equal. I witnessed that equality in the auditorium on the morning of January 20th - equal opportunities for all people to aspire to be even the Commander-in-Chief of the highest office in the United States. Wow!

What was the defining moment for me to want Mr. Obama as my President?

The anxiety that I felt while waiting for the new President to take the oath of office was caused by the mere fact that I, and maybe others, felt what an awesome burden to be placed on

this man's shoulder! The closer it got to the swearing in moment, the more anxious I became. If you recall, signs of the recession had begun in 2001. But during the President-Elect's campaign, I believe African-Americans, and perhaps the entire nation, began to really understand the economic crisis this country was facing. As Mr. Obama honed in on the mortgage crisis of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, followed by the downfall of Wall Street's banks and mortgage crisis, and even as the job cuts worsened, followed by the gradual [or was it sudden] collapse of the automobile industry, I began to see Mr. Obama's intensity and his passion for helping the country rise out of the spiraling crisis toward which it would eventually head.

The defining moment for me to want to see this Black man become the President of the United States was when I realized Mr. Obama's work as a community organizer in some of the most poverty-stricken communities on the south side of Chicago made him understand what it meant to be on the brink of losing your home to foreclosure; or having an uneducated and undereducated society; or being without healthcare. I felt that Mr. Obama gets it! He gets it because [in the Black community, we refer to it as preaching]; on the campaign trail, he *preached* that it would take change to move this country to a nation of stability. I realized that this man is very well-equipped, knowledgeable, and prepared to address the issues of poverty, low educational attainment of our young people, and the other myriad of social and economic problems that our country faces today. He had been living it, working toward change his whole political career. I began to feel that if anyone could breathe new life into this country and began to rebuild our country to what our forefathers intended it to be, it would be someone like Mr. Obama - a man who understood and articulated the issues so clearly. That was the defining moment for me to want to see this Black man run this country.

The amazing thing I saw on inauguration day was the same expression on most everyone's face (both Blacks and Whites). The expressions portrayed the fact that this was indeed a historical moment. As the appointed moment approached, one of my White colleagues reached for my hand. I looked into her eyes which had tears in them; and as the tears swelled in my own eyes, I whispered to her; "*I can't begin to explain to you what this moment means to me.*" She replied back, "*I know what it means to you and to us.*" Wow! I think for many of us, Blacks and Whites, we just got tired of "business or politics as usual". We were tired of this country spiraling further into a recession and economic crisis. Lastly, for many of us, I believe we felt Mr. Obama would and could bring about the change that this country needed in order to become the great country that it is intended to be. He represents the catalyst to close the gap of housing, education, health care, and employment for the millions of people of all races who live in this country.

Why Mr. Obama as opposed to Al, Jessie, Chisholm, Keyes, or Braun?

I am a believer that all of us have a purpose on earth. I knew my purpose the moment I started counseling years ago. Listening to other people's problems and being a small part in helping them to realize a resolution to their issue is what I was put on earth to do. I believe that President Obama's purpose and all that he did prior to inauguration day led him to fulfill his

purpose – that of becoming the 44th President of the United States. It is rare that any individual will say at two, three, or four years old; when I grow up, I want to be this or that. I believe we become who we are as a result of our evolution and years of honing our attributes. President Obama is living the life that he was destined to fulfill. When I read his history and the history of his family, I see areas where preparation was evident that he could be our Commander-in-Chief. Also, as a spiritual being, I believe that God predestined us to be who we eventually become. So, it was not destined for any other African-American - Rev. Al Sharpton, Rev. Jessie Jackson, Ms. Shirley Chisholm, Mr. Alan Keys, or Ms. Carol Moseley-Braun - to be the President of the United States; not at this time or at the time that they ran for the Presidential office.

Conclusion

Are my thoughts grounded in any theological ideologies? Maybe. Do I speak for the entire Black race about what we were feeling on January 20th as we witnessed history in the making? Maybe. Are there any theoretical assumptions to my discussions about why the nation felt inclined to support and elect a Black man as the President of the United States? Maybe. What I am most certain about is that as African-Americans, we do feel such pride; and we have strong emotions having witnessed the swearing in of the nation's first African-American as President of the United States. I am also certain that we, as Blacks, feel proud to be an American. At the moment that I witnessed Mr. Obama being sworn in as the first African-American President of the United States, I was not an African-American. I was an American standing beside my White colleagues, proud as a peacock because I saw us [African-Americans] as a Black people take our place in history. Wow!

Now that I have calmed down and the nation is moving along in the midst of its economic crisis, I realize that having witnessed history in the making does not mean that we, as African-Americans or as a country, can now rest on our laurels waiting for President Obama to do all the work. President Obama called for a “new era of responsibility”. I now look at responsibility in a whole new light. My responsibility to the students at Henderson State University is to assure that they receive the best services that we can provide in order for them to reach their God-given purpose in life. Just as I was one of those responsible for putting our 44th President in office, the first African-American President, I have a responsibility to my part to assure an educated society, a clean environment, and a safe world. These are my thoughts of witnessing history in the making; electing the first African-American to be President of the United States. Wow!

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Biographical Sketch

Pamela Bax is Henderson State University's director of the federally-funded TRIO Programs which are designed to prepare and enroll students into post-secondary education. Dr. Bax earned her Doctorate of Administration from Northern Illinois University in 1999; an Ed.S. degree in 1995 from Northern; a Masters Degree in Counseling Psychology from Chicago State University and a B.S. Degree in Behavioral Sciences in 1985 from National Louis University. Her entire adult life has been devoted toward assisting individuals to become educated. Her philosophy is that every person deserves to receive an education because education can transform human capabilities into achievement, accomplishments, and potentials.