

Leadership: Idealizing and Disappointment
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On November 4, 2008, nearly 70 million people, 53 percent of the nation, voted to elect Barack Obama as President of the United States. In Chicago, a great victory rally was held with the young candidate speaking before hundreds of thousands of cheering supporters while millions watched on television. Here in Washington crowds gathered near the White House to celebrate. I do not recall any other time in my adult life when so many people have been so excited about the election of a new President. It was a wonderful feeling.

However, I was skeptical. Two days after the election I wrote a column for our church newsletter. Now, a year after Barack Obama took office, I want to read it to you again. I wrote:

When it comes to Presidents, we are in a pattern of idealizing followed by disappointment. The winning voters have high expectations. In their imaginations, the President-elect is a super hero, a savior. However, after four or eight years, many people are disenchanting.

A year later one poll reports that 45 percent of voters say they somewhat approve of the President's performance, while 54 percent disapprove.

I could focus on particular issues such as health care or the environment or the economy or the wars, and speculate about how these are the cause of the downturn in the President's popularity. However, what I find interesting is the pattern. In my adult life, it seems to happen with every President.

I remember in 1964 I was 13 and with my father, I attended a rally for Lyndon Johnson at the Phoenix airport. Thousands cheered. The voters elected him in a landslide -- the candidate who promised peace in contrast to the impulsive senator from Arizona, Barry Goldwater. Yet by the spring of 1968, his popularity had disappeared. One Sunday evening I was watching television when the President said to the nation "I shall not seek, and I will not accept, the nomination of my party for another term as your President." The next day in high school history class, I was taking a multiple-choice test. When I got to question 23, I read this message from my teacher: "I am watching television while I'm typing up this test and Lyndon Johnson has just announced that he will not run for reelection. Out of unparalleled joy and happiness I give you all credit for the next five questions. Free." The principal nearly fired my teacher for this, but in fact, my teacher reflected the mood of the country. The same idealistic people who elected Lyndon Johnson in a landslide cheered when he announced he would not run for reelection.

When I was 19 years old, I shook hands with President Richard Nixon at the same Phoenix airport where I had seen Lyndon Johnson six years before. He too was enormously popular when

he was first elected, and the voters reelected him in 1972 in an enormous landslide. Nevertheless, disappointment set in. In August of 1974, I took a group from Arizona Boys Ranch to the Salt River east of Phoenix where they went swimming. I watched them swim while I listened to the radio. President Nixon said, "I shall resign the Presidency effective at noon tomorrow."

The public idealized President Gerald Ford for a month. His honeymoon ended when he announced "a full, free, and absolute pardon unto Richard Nixon for all offenses against the United States which he, Richard Nixon, has committed or may have committed or taken part in . . ." Although they had elected Richard Nixon, most people in the country were not in the mood to give the former President mercy or forgiveness.

After the feeling that Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon had lied to us, the nation wanted a man of honesty and candor. Jimmy Carter is a man of great personal integrity. However, by 1980 disappointment set in with President Carter. Most people only know their President through television, and they wearied of President Carter's toothy grin and Georgia accent.

The nation found a new leader to idealize, a movie and television actor, a man with a wonderful voice who knew how to tell stories, a man who understood the importance of makeup and hair dye. Still, by 1987 disillusionment had set in with Ronald Reagan. We discovered that a Presidential aide had secretly broken the policy of not swapping arms for hostages, secretly arming the Iranian Armed Forces and secretly funding a civil war in Nicaragua.

At one point in his presidency, poll takers recorded that George Herbert Walker Bush had a record-high approval rating of 89 percent. However, the economic recession and the breaking of his "no new taxes" pledge caused a sharp decline in his approval rating. The first President Bush was defeated in the 1992 election.

Bill Clinton became the first Baby Boom President. Many people felt great excitement as this young man, the third youngest President in history, took the oath of office. However, scandal about his sexual behavior plagued his last years in office. He became only the second President to be impeached by the House and tried by the Senate.

George W. Bush became the second and perhaps the last Baby Boom President. Over an eight-year period, President Bush's high approval ratings steadily declined while his disapproval numbers increased significantly.

A year ago, on January 20, 2009, millions of people came to Washington to celebrate, projecting onto President Obama their greatest dreams for a better life.

As has happened before, the idealizing is fading and is being replaced with disappointment. The electorate is already in search of the next new savior, and the media speculate about the former Governor of Alaska.

This may be interesting, but what does it have to do with religion? I have noticed the same pattern of idealization and disappointment can occur in marriages and in churches.

When I first became one of your ministers, I took classes from Rabbi Edwin Friedman, who died in 1996. Rabbi Friedman called this pattern of idealizing and disappointment “blame displacement.” By this, he meant the tendency we humans have to blame other people for our problems, instead of looking at our strengths and potential strengths to solve our problems. About politics, Rabbi Friedman wrote:

Perhaps the outstanding example of blame displacement and chronically anxious America is what has come to be called anti-incumbency, the tendency of voters to reject whoever is in office almost irrespective of their party affiliation. This flailing at the political winds amounts to a collective responsibility on the part of voters seeking magical, quick fix answers to a complex range of the problems of existence. Instead of focusing on their own response to the challenges of change, these voters find fault in their political stars. And, it is not just a political phenomenon; it is occurring with regard to coaches, educators, CEOs, and clergy, not to mention marriage partners and parents. (Friedman, Edwin, *A Failure of Nerve, Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, 1999, page 99.)

A year after the inauguration, the people of Massachusetts elected a centerfold conservative Republican to fill the seat of Senator Ted Kennedy. “Anti-incumbency is a reactive response to the voters’ own personal frustration, general unhappiness, loss of hope, and feelings of helplessness.” (Edwin Friedman)

This pattern of idealizing and disappointment, this “blame displacement” also occurs in marriages. Some people have a pattern of falling in love with someone, feeling that they have finally found the perfect soul mate and then after a few months discover that the soul mate is not perfect. They end the relationship, find a new perfect soul mate, and repeat the pattern, moving from idealization to disappointment. Being a wife or a husband is like being a leader. We project onto our partner our highest hopes. Each new partner represents a dream factory, the possibility of perfection in a flawed world, the opportunity to have every wish come true. I am speculating here, but I wonder if the increase in the number of divorces in our country, and the increase in the number of people living alone is the result of the high-idealized hopes that the media encourages us to have when it comes to a so-called soul mate. No partner can live up to the idealized expectations created by movies, television, and advertising.

This pattern can also occur in religious communities. One example is the reading this morning about the Dalai Lama. Thousands came to hear him speak, idealizing him. Yet after the speech a reporter was disappointed, saying of the Dalai Lama, “He’s not exactly the brightest bulb in the room.” (Iyer, Pico, *The Open Road*, page 73.)

This pattern also occurs in Unitarian Universalist congregations. Some clergy theorize that this pattern has been on the increase since the impeachment of Richard Nixon.

In 1996, Rabbi Friedman wrote about this. He said:

The displacement of blame on leaders may be even more salient in churches and synagogues and in the political arena. Over the last ten to fifteen years, I have witnessed a tremendous increase in the collective reactivity of religious congregations to their ministers, irrespective of gender or belief. The clergy of every denomination have been increasingly thrust into a panicky national game of musical chairs, as each minister leaves one disappointed congregation only to be eagerly snatched up by another in the false hope that this new one will be better than the last, . . . (Freidman, Edwin, *A Failure of Nerve, Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, 1999, page 100.)

Given this pattern of idealizing and disappointment what is a leader to do? What advice do I have for President Obama? What advice do I have for a man or a woman interested in a partnership or marriage? And what advice do I have for members of the clergy who wish to minister to a religious community?

On the one hand, effective leaders know that they are human beings and therefore not perfect. Presidents, spouses and clergy should periodically say to anyone who will listen, “I am imperfect. I am human. I will make mistakes, fail sometimes, and let you down sometimes. I will do foolish things and stumble. An effective leader does not believe the idealizing things that others say about her. I like the phrase “good enough parent” because it communicates the idea that human beings are not perfect. Instead of looking for perfect leaders, we need to look for good enough leaders.

On the other hand, effective leaders know that although they are not perfect, they do have strengths, skills and intelligence. Presidents, spouses and clergy should periodically say to them, “I have knowledge. I have wisdom. I have skills. I can make a positive and constructive difference in the world. I am smart enough to be constantly learning.”

Rabbi Friedman called this self-differentiation: Friedman, Edwin, *A Failure of Nerve, Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix*, 1999, page 236)

- Self-differentiation is the capacity to take a stand in an intense emotional system.
- Self-differentiation is the power to say “I” when others are saying “you.”
- Self-differentiation is the ability to control one’s reaction to others instead of impulsively reacting, to make a decision “Is this something I can let go of or is this something I need to respond to?”
- Self-differentiation is the willingness to maintain a non-anxious presence in the face of other people’s anxiety.
- It is the wisdom to know where I end and another person begins.
- Self-differentiation is the capacity to take responsibility for my own emotional being and

destiny rather than blame others.

- Self-differentiation is the power to be clear about one's own personal values and goals.

Three personal values and goals guide my ministry. (These are a modification of rules Rev. David Rankin taught me in the mid-1970s when he was a minister of the San Francisco Unitarian Church and I was a student minister.)

First, I believe in my relationships with people I should always strive for honesty and candor. I do not engage in Machiavellian maneuvers, and I do not have a hidden agenda. The most effective weapons in the ministry are truth, humor and silence. We should ban all others.

Second, I believe that my calling does not require me to focus on the negative. I have limited patience with chronic complainers, character assassins and political manipulators. Being critical is sometimes helpful. It is always helpful to affirm, to praise and to encourage.

Third, I believe my family is entitled to every moment I am free of the church. I encourage the congregation to put your families first. In a year, no one will remember whether I attended a particular church committee meeting. However, my children will remember whether I attended my son's concert or my daughter's play.

Therefore, that is my advice to leaders, my advice to President Obama, to spouses and to my fellow clergy. Strive for candor and honesty. Focus on the positive. Find time for your family.

Of course, leadership offers many satisfactions. Whether you are a politician, a husband, wife or a member of the clergy, the role can be enormously fulfilling and deeply meaningful.

It is an opportunity:

To share in the lives of other people.

To probe the meaning of human existence.

To affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of others.

To give and receive compassion and comfort.

To work together to help others.

To work to live in harmony with each other and with the earth.

The rewards of the roles of leadership are very real and special.

A year ago, January 20, 2009, millions of people came to Washington to celebrate. Here at this church hundreds of us gathered in this room to witness the inaugural on our screen. When Senator Dianne Feinstein said to the crowd at the capitol "Everyone please stand," we in this room stood also and watched as the President took the oath of office. It was a wonderful moment.

Now a year later, let us judge our President and ourselves not by some impossible goal of

perfection, but by a realistic understanding that all of us are human, all of us have faults, and knowing that, let us do our best to love each other.