

## Only in America

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness....”

A replica of the Declaration of Independence hung in a prominent place in the living room of my home when I was growing up. My father would test my brother and me on being able to recite the preamble, which he regarded as the two most important paragraphs in the history of human freedom.

The inauguration of Barack Hussein Obama as the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the United States is the ultimate fulfillment of the ideal of the Declaration of Independence, freedom from tyranny, slavery, racism, and segregation. Jefferson remarked, when the Constitutional Convention of 1787 failed to resolve the issue of slavery, “I weep for my country when I reflect that God is just.” True equality is yet to come, but let us not underestimate the gigantic symbolic importance of President Obama’s arrival in the White House, not only to the minority citizens of our own land, but also to the worldwide community. We can all say with pride, “Only in America.”

Regardless of party loyalty, we can all rejoice as fellow Americans, because it is truly a triumph of the American spirit. As I watched the deeply moving inaugural ceremony and address, I reflected that only two years ago, it seemed that we were headed toward one party rule. That shocking turnaround of the mid-term election, I wrote about in a previous column entitled “Madison Had it Right”, reflecting Madison’s sense that the political pendulum would swing one way or the other, but our system would always allow for the center to eventually hold.

I also reflected how far we have come on the issue of racism, and fair treatment of all of our citizens, from my experiences as a young boy in the rural South, the “Tobacco Road” section of North Carolina.

I remember vividly the separate drinking fountains, “white” and “colored,” the back of the bus, and separate schools and restaurants. What I remember most was my black nanny, Grace. My family was what we would call “dirt poor,” but the blacks were worse off by far than we. As little money as we had, we were still able to employ a black woman to do some cleaning and take care of me. I was very close to Grace. She was like a furnace radiating warmth and heat. As I came later to understand, like Freud’s nanny, she was my oedipal mother. But nonetheless, no matter how many times it was explained to me, I could not understand why she couldn’t eat with us at our table.

Fast forward to high school, when school integration began to move into high gear, I was the editor of our school paper. I was not allowed to publish op-ed pieces on the subject of race, on the grounds that it “was not our concern.” My father was outraged at the resistance to integration and the threats to close the schools. His response was to write Jonathan Swift style letters to the editor of the local paper, lampooning the white supremacists. We got threatening phone calls, and on one occasion, a cross burned on our lawn.

At that point, we lived a few miles from Charlottesville, Virginia, on land that was part of the estate of Thomas Jefferson's father, Peter Jefferson. He had built a church for his slaves, which still stood on the back part of our land. My father became a great patron and friend of the black congregation and would often attend church there.

In spite of being raised in that kind of a home, when I came north to medical school at Harvard and saw my first racially mixed couple, I have to admit it was a shock. Our bacteriology professor was a black man from South Africa. When he gave his first lecture, I was startled to hear a rich British accent coming out of his mouth. These experiences made it clear to me that even in the kind of home I grew up in, the racial stereotypes were still with me.

I believe the deepest and most profound insight I experienced was in the writings of William Faulkner. I had the good fortune to have Faulkner as a teacher at the University of Virginia, where he was writer-in-residence. I came to know him quite well and had many conversations with him. His writings are permeated with the sense of doom and foreboding of the South, which he clearly felt was based on the ancient sin of slavery, and which could only partially be expiated by the blood of the Civil War.

Certainly the election of President Obama does not mean that racism has been entirely eliminated. As psychoanalysts, we know that racial prejudice is as old as humankind itself, and finds its roots in our first identification of what is "me" and "not me." Freud made this clear in his "Group Psychology", the first work to clearly identify the primal need to identify with one's own group, at the expense of others.

However, what does seem clear is that we can pause for a moment and feel good about how far we have come. And then, taking a deep breath, we get back to work.

In our advocacy efforts we have been in close touch with first, the Obama Transition Team, and now his Administration. President Obama has made it clear that a reform of the health care system is very high on his agenda. Central to his plan is the establishment of a system of electronic medical records. He has said that within five years all health records should be electronic. We are working closely with contacts in his Administration and in Congress to try to insure that privacy safeguards are included in pending legislation. Funds to the tune of \$20 billion for electronic medical records have been included to the stimulus package, which is on a fast track to pass. Promotion of the Information Technology (IT) industry is also touted as one way of stimulating the economy.

We are working with the Obama team to insure that this does not happen at the expense of privacy or the right to contract privately. We have sent open letters to the Obama team advising them of those matters that are critical to our patients and our profession. Those letters have been signed by other professional groups we are working with, including the NASW, the American Psychological Association, and the American Psychiatric Association.

As we move into this new era, we will need the help and support of all our members to ensure the success of a health care reform that will benefit all of us, patients and therapists alike. Please stay tuned.