

The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts On Reclaiming The American Dream

Barack Obama. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006. 364 pages, including index.

Reviewed by K.D.Kragen, KaveDragen, Ink., <http://www.kdkragen.com> (9 June 2008)

"There is another story to be told, by millions of Americans who are going about their business every day.... A government that truly represents these Americans...will require a different kind of politics.... We will need to understand just how we got to this place, this land of warring factions and tribal hatreds. And we will need to remind ourselves, despite all our differences, just how much we share: common hopes, common dreams, a bond that will not break" (*The Audacity of Hope*, pp. 24-5).

This review is strictly in response to Barack Obama's book published in 2006 and written around the time of his first year in the US Senate. It is not a general critique of Obama the presidential candidate. For me *The Audacity Of Hope* has been a fascinating introduction to Obama and his life in his own words. I encourage anyone interested to look more closely at presidential candidate Barack Obama that a good place to begin would be to read *The Audacity Of Hope*. But keep in mind it is a starting point. It is not the place to stop and then cast one's vote in November. It is the place to begin.

As a novelist, I feel Obama's book is stylistically a little uneven and at times rushed. In many places it literally shines with eloquence, polished beauty, and near poetry; at other time it succumbs to generalizations, vague platitudes, and pedestrian prose. It would appear the book could have born more editing, cutting down and polishing up. I suspect the pressure of getting the final draft to press outweighed the luxury of the many rewrites that the novelist considers absolutely essential.

If it were 1964, I would vote for Barack Obama in a heartbeat. Here's why. He brings a strong vision of healing between ethnic communities, black, non-black, Latino, Italian—*Italian?*—Asian. He brings fresh blood and a fearless intensity of intellect to Washington. He has a passion for environmental justice. He articulates positive ideas on faith-based community support programs. He believes government should encourage day-care and maternity leave programs for low- and middle-income families. He knows school teachers deserve better pay.

But why 1964? After reading *The Audacity Of Hope*, I have certain reservations for an Obama administration today. Since the early 1970s, moral relativism has permeated society, and epistemic nihilism about the possibility of knowing true from false has dominated cultural and political thought. Thus, pro-abortion ideology was established into law in 1973 (*Roe v. Wade*). In the same year, the normalization of pansexualism led the American Psychological Association to cut from *DSM III* homosexuality, or gender identity disorder, as a psycho-sexual dysfunction. In the last few decades, both in the media and in public discourse, we have seen the idealization of the worst of the 1960s-70s era, painting the moral and philosophical anarchy of that decade as positive, liberating, great fun. This is not to deny the good which came out of the 1960s and 70s—the maturing anti-nuke and anti-war movements, the progress of the civil rights movement, the best in feminist liberation (excepting of course the violence of abortion-on-demand as the only answer to crisis pregnancies, freeing men from the responsibility of child support and once again laying all the burdens of responsibility on women).

There are two strains of thought that weave their way through *The Audacity Of Hope*. The first is *epistemic*. Epistemology concerns the nature of truth, what can or can't be known about reality, whether knowledge claims are possible or valid, how we form beliefs about things, reliably or not so reliably, rationally or irrationally. Obama's underlying worldview and relativism about ethics, religion and science, culture and human nature constitute the first thread weaving through the narrative. The second thread is *ideological*: Obama's specific views and perspectives on public policy, government and international relations, the Constitution, education, family and community. Throughout the book these two strains battle each other for ascendancy like bacteria and white blood cells.

When Obama speaks of the Constitution and Abraham Lincoln, abolition and civil rights, education reform, faith-based community activism, he is not only filled with passion and hope, but

great eloquence. His cultural-political critiques appear fresh and well-thought out. But when he talks about the highly-idealized 1960s and its "radical cultural critique," he falls into sophomoric cliché and sound-bite "liberal-Democratic" drivel.

On the one hand, I believe Obama would be a wonderful, healing influence on the multi-cultural landscape of this country. He states, "Not so far beneath the surface, I think, we are becoming more, not less alike" (p. 51). We've needed just such a perspective since the beginning of the civil rights movement in the mid 1950s. Jesse Jackson was a disappointment for many of us who supported him; Obama has the chance to accomplish what Jackson could not. On the other hand, Obama's relativism, and the policy-pragmatism which flows from it, leads me to the conclusion that the Obama I read and understand now may be very different from Obama six months in office, or two years in office.

Concerning Constitutional law, Obama distinguishes between a strict constructionist view versus a deconstructionist view of Constitutional hermeneutics. Discussing his pull toward both analyses, he writes, "And just as I recognize the discomfort offered by the strict constructionist, so I see a certain appeal to this shattering of myth, to the temptation to believe that the constitutional text doesn't constrain us much at all, so that we are free to assert our own values unencumbered by fidelity to the stodgy traditions of a distant past. It's the freedom of the relativist, the rule breaker, the teenager who has discovered his parents are imperfect and has learned to play one off the other—the freedom of the apostate" (pp. 91-92). He admits here the powerful influence of his mother, a paradigm secular 1960s rebel.

Obama then counters himself, "And yet, ultimately, such apostasy leaves me unsatisfied as well. Maybe I am too steeped in the myth of the founding to reject it entirely. Maybe like those who reject Darwin in favor of intelligent design, I prefer to assume that someone's at the wheel. In the end, the question I keep asking myself is why, if the Constitution is only about power and not about principle, if all we are doing is just making it up as we go along, has our own republic not only survived but served as the rough model for so many of the successful societies on earth?" (p. 92).

And, again: "The best I can do in the face of our history is remind myself that it has not always been the pragmatist, the voice of reason, or the force of compromise, that has created the conditions for liberty. The hard, cold facts remind me that it was unbending idealists like William Lloyd Garrison who first sounded the clarion call for justice; that it was slaves and former slaves, men like Denmark Vasey and Frederick Douglass and women like Harriet Tubman, who recognized power would concede nothing without a fight" (p. 97). Notice here how Obama tends to equate the abolitionists' convictions about justice and moral truth with the voice of passionate non-reason. "The answer I settle on—which is by no means original to me—requires a shift in metaphors, one that sees our democracy not as a house to be built, but as a conversation to be had" (p. 92). Translation: There is no objective reality, no facts of the matter about anything ultimately, only conversation, discussion, talk, talk, talk.

When Obama considers Lincoln and Abolition, the Civil Rights Movement and faith-based activism, he wants more than anything for the social and moral absolutes of those bygone activist to exist. "To say that men and women should not inject their 'personal morality' into public-policy debates is a practical absurdity; our law is by definition a codification of morality, much of it grounded in Judeo-Christian tradition" (p. 218). But his secular-relativist upbringing and pragmatist philosophy fights against that intuitive longing. Therein lies his Achilles' heel as a potential leader of this country, therein is the unknown variable that renders vulnerable his influence for good.

In another example, Obama states the reason he switched from opposition to gay marriage to unequivocal support. "Perhaps I am sensitive on this issue because I have seen the pain my own carelessness has caused. Before my election, in the middle of my debates with Mr. Keyes, I received a phone message from one of my strongest supporters. She was a small-business owner, a mother, and a thoughtful, generous person. She was also a lesbian who had lived in a monogamous relationship with

her partner for the last decade" (p. 223). He goes on to tell about this nice person who felt hurt by his opposition to gay marriage. "Her phone message...had been prompted by a radio interview she had heard in which I had referenced my religious traditions in explaining my position on the issue...; she felt that by bringing religion into the equation, I was suggesting that she, and others like her, were somehow bad people" (*ibid*).

"I felt bad," he adds, "and told her so in a return call. As I spoke to her I was reminded that no matter how much Christians who oppose homosexuality may claim that they hate the sin but love the sinner, such a judgment inflicts pain on good people—people who are made in the image of God, and who are often truer to Christ's message than those who condemn them. And I was reminded that it is my obligation, not only as an elected official in a pluralistic society but also as a Christian, to remain open to the possibility that my unwillingness to support gay marriage is misguided, just as I cannot claim infallibility in my support of abortion rights" (p. 223). Obama's struggle over the influence of a self-identifying lesbian mother, irregardless of the larger psychological and physiological issues, reveals how Obama can be so easily swayed by emotion. He shows himself ill-informed about issues surrounding GLBT and pansexuality. He succumbs to the shallowest gay propaganda which has never had the support of solid scientific research whether from gay-affirming or non-affirming psychiatrists.

One more place one sees the struggle in Obama's mind between his secular relativist bias and his vague Christian faith and value-system is near the end of the book when he discusses family. He seems to be a wise father and an honest husband, a man of integrity, caring for his two daughters. He understands the social and cultural value of "traditional" family grounded in Judeo-Christian ethics, the value of a two-parent household (male dad and female mom), of putting family and marriage ahead of work and wealth. But again, his relativism forces him to compromise what he intuitively or feels is true and what he tends to believe is proven by modern science and social-psychology, that gender identity is fluid and pansexuality is as true about human nature as heterosexuality.

Once again the news is filled with a case of Mormon polygamy. However, this time around there is a new current of ambiguity and indifference as to any basis for condemning the practice of "consensual polygamy." Such confusion is precisely due to an almost universal acceptance of gender fluidity and multi-gender, alternative family units. There is no longer a solid basis or precedence, epistemically or judicially, for our culture to even begin to know how to critique the practice of polygamy. Likely, soon, other related issues will dog the present cultural milieu and its ability to address such challenges as female genital mutilation or the arranged marriage of underage girls. This is good news for the growing number of Muslim men immigrating to America. Ironically, Mormons, and Muslims in the west, may have to admit a debt of gratitude to thirty years of gay activism.

If Barack Obama is elected president in November 2008, given his epistemic relativism and pragmatism, he will likely play out much of the old standard Democrat party platform agenda. Despite that, Barack Obama could also be the best thing for this country in terms of environmental justice, faith-based community services, better relations between ethnic communities, education reform, relief for college students burdened by massive loan debt, and poverty relief. Concerning the latter, he notes, "Any strategy to reduce intergenerational poverty has to be centered on work, not welfare—not only because work provides independence and income but also because work provides order, structure, dignity, and opportunities for growth in people's lives" (p. 256).

Either candidate, Obama or McCain, will be a mixed blessing. It will be neither a simple nor an easy choice come November. Reading *The Audacity Of Hope* can be an excellent place to begin consideration of that choice in the months ahead.