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“The Bark of a Pine”

by

State Senator Stan Rosenberg

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Thank you Headmaster Chase for your kind invitation to speak tonight, and for your suggestion that I talk about Barack Obama and what I think his presidency might mean for the future of America.

I have to admit up front that this assignment proved to be more difficult than I first thought it would be. There are so many facets to the ascendancy of Barack Obama, so many aspects of his character that could have profound impacts on our future, that I found myself mentally bouncing around like a pinball. His intelligence, his eloquence, his skin color, his personal history, his demeanor, his ability, overnight, to change the way the rest of the world sees America . . . I could spend 20 minutes on each of these. But I’m not going to, so relax. My point is simply this: Regardless of our political persuasion, regardless of whether we voted for the guy, I think we can all agree that we haven’t seen

a president like him in . . . well, OK, we've never seen a president like him. He is unique in the American experience, and because of that, he is, as political commentators of all stripes have described him, "a transformational figure," a rarity among our presidents.

Now, the discussion really gets interesting when we start talking about the nature of this potential transformation. Some pundits believe that the Obama Era, for better or worse, will be a time of revolutionary transformation. For example, some commentators have declared that the Obama administration will transform our capitalist system into a socialist paradise, or a socialist purgatory, depending on your ideology, while others have suggested that the racial divide we've experienced in this nation from our founding days will be magically healed, or inexplicably widened, because we have a black man in the White House.

Those are all interesting things to ponder, and they certainly make for entertaining TV and talk radio. And no doubt the ultimate truth of the Obama Era, to be decided by future historians, will contain some elements of these revolutionary concepts.

But I'm not sure I really see it that way. I proudly admit that I supported Obama and I have been nothing but impressed by his skills and intellect. But I also know that campaigning is not the same as governing, and, although I have high hopes for President Obama's abilities, I'm not really hoping for, or even expecting, revolutionary change. No, I don't want revolution. I want evolution. George Washington led the American Revolution, a fight that finally ended. I want President Obama to lead the American Evolution, a process that will endure.

And I think I got some of what I was looking for in President Obama's Inaugural Address. In fact, there was a strong hint that evolutionary forces would be at work during

his administration in the first three words he spoke as the 44th president of the United States:

“My fellow citizens . . .”

Did you catch that? President Obama called us “fellow citizens,” not “fellow Americans,” as most presidents of the modern era have typically done. Why? Why do you think he did that? Was it an accident? Was our new president simply daring to be different? Linda Hirshman, a former professor of Philosophy and Women’s Studies at Brandeis University, doesn’t think so.

Writing in a recent on-line edition of *The New Republic*, Professor Hirshman dissected those three words and concluded that they have set the direction for the Obama Era.

“There are two kinds of participants in the American Republic,” Professor Hirshman writes, “Citizens and Americans. . . . Citizens achieve positive liberty, *freedom to*. Americans enjoy negative liberty, *freedom from*. Almost nothing Barack Obama says is accidental. He chose ‘citizens,’ not ‘Americans’.”

In her article, Professor Hirshman goes on to remind us that in the democracy of ancient Greece, formal citizenship was bestowed only upon those individuals wealthy enough to contribute arms to defend the city-state. “But in its deep meaning,” she writes, “citizenship meant an obligation to do your duty to your society, to use your capacities to make your society shine.”

In other words, Americans have rights and privileges. Citizens have obligations and responsibilities. Or to say it another way: Americans enjoy the rights and privileges that citizens work to provide.

Here's how President Obama himself summed it up later in his Inaugural Address: "What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility - a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world, duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task."

That, I thought, was the most refreshing and inspiring statement in President Obama's speech. When was the last time you heard an American president tell us that something was going to be difficult, that we might actually have to make some sacrifices to prepare our nation for a better future?

I'm waiting.

It's been a while, hasn't it? I recall that President Kennedy, in 1962, told us that going to the moon would be difficult, and that's why we were going. And let's not forget Jimmy Carter, who told us in the '70s that the energy crisis was real, worldwide and a threat to our national security. And let's not forget that his reward for this bit of tough love, among other perceived shortcomings, was an electoral drubbing by another transformational president, who later removed Mr. Carter's solar panels from the White House.

To be sure, there have been isolated cases of presidents treating us like adults, but for the most part, our leaders, for the past 50 years or so, have not rallied us to a common purpose. More often than not, we've been encouraged to go about our business and enjoy the blessings of being an American, not necessarily as a people divided, but certainly as a people separated from a sense of duty.

We've not been asked to unite as citizens.

My hope, my fervent hope, is that the transformational change President Obama will herald will be the revitalization of citizenship. And if he can do that, then I believe he will have set us on the evolutionary path to a new and higher sense of patriotism, something I think is desperately needed.

I started thinking a lot about patriotism during the presidential campaign, especially when then-candidate Obama was being criticized for, among other things, not wearing a flag lapel pin, and it disturbed me that an American's patriotism, his or her love of country and community, could be called into question because of something so superficial. I mean, come on. What difference does it make, especially when you consider that the lapel pins are probably made in a foreign country anyway. And this led me to ask: What does patriotism really mean?

If it means chanting "USA, USA" and "We're Number One" at our political rallies and sporting events, which, by the way, are increasingly indistinguishable, then yes, we are patriotic. If it means flying flags and slapping "Support the Troops" bumper stickers on our cars, then, again, the answer is yes. If placing our hands over our hearts when we hear the National Anthem and becoming misty eyed at the sight of the Statue of Liberty, despite the fact that it was a gift from France, if these actions define patriotism then we are patriotic indeed. It's what we do. It's who we are.

But is that really patriotism? Such actions represent the trappings of patriotism, to be sure. But are we really Number One? Are we really as great as we seem to think we are?

I recently came across a study by a fellow named Adrian White, a psychology professor at the University of Leicester, near Birmingham, England. In this study, Professor White sought to quantify the highly subjective concept of happiness by examining such national characteristics as health care, education, national wealth, employment opportunities, vacation time, crime rates, etc. He determined that Denmark, yes that Denmark, the home of Hamlet, where everybody died ignoble deaths, is the happiest country on earth. Danes are happy, Professor White concluded, largely because health care is universal, higher education is free – in some cases, students are actually paid to attend universities – employment is plentiful and employees are commonly granted six weeks of paid vacation a year.

Apparently there's nothing rotten in the state of Denmark, or at least very little.

The United States, where happiness is practically a Constitutional right – you know, that whole “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” thing – ranked 23rd.

“We're 23rd! We're 23rd!” isn't very catchy, is it?

Now, of course, a lot of these studies are highly subjective, and we all know that Mark Twain's mistrust of statistics was well founded, so I am in no way suggesting that what I've just related should be taken as incontrovertible fact. But I do think that these things are indicative of something disturbing about the American character. I find it disturbing that our sense of patriotism appears to be limited only to reverence for the *symbols* of patriotism. It's disturbing to me that the person who most vigorously waves the flag is sometimes interpreted as being more patriotic than the person who works to make sure that the flag is made in America, by an American worker in a safe environment, who earns a decent wage, can comfortably own a house and raise a family,

has access to health care and education and can afford to take a vacation once in a while.

In other words, contemporary American patriotism, it seems to me, is not so much about having a happy, well-adjusted, smooth-functioning society. American patriotism is . . . well . . . about appearing patriotic.

A couple of years ago a movie came out that really zeroed in on what's most important, or at least what I consider most important in my work. The movie, set in the not-too-distant future, explored what happens to societies when all hope for the future is lost.

I'm not going to give anything away, but I would like to quickly recap the movie's premise: Humans inexplicably stop being able to have children. Scientists can't figure out why the species has suddenly become infertile, but the implication is clear and unavoidable: Humanity is finished. Human beings will be extinct in less than 100 years.

The result of this knowledge is that, in the movie, societies all around the globe are rapidly plunging into despair and chaos.

What was so powerful, and disturbing, to me was that the images of chaos and despair depicted in the movie had the ring of truth. Why do we adults work and maintain our social, cultural and governmental systems? Partly to secure our own comfort, and that of our families, to be sure. But we also do it so that future generations can inherit what we've built. If there aren't anymore future generations, then what's the point?

I came away from that movie with one overriding thought: If civilization will collapse without children, then why are we so unwilling to do more for them?

Let's set aside ideology. My remarks tonight are intended to be non-partisan. Here's a factual, objective look at what we are leaving our children:

Debt. Lot's of it. The numbers are so huge that Stephen Hawking probably can't figure them out.

A crippled economy.

An entire planet in crisis.

And those are just the really big ticket items. There are a lot of other "smaller" things, like national infrastructure, health care, education, the environment, all of which, when you put them together, add up to civilization. Civilization is in the balance and we, only a month into the Obama Era, are just now taking the first baby steps toward addressing these issues. President Obama is right. This is going to be difficult. And it's going to be even more difficult because for the past few decades we have not made the tough decisions good citizens should have been making all along. Somewhere along the way, our sense of patriotism wrapped its flag-draped arms around avoiding responsibility and the two have been inseparable ever since.

My hope, my fellow citizens, is that President Obama will use his bully pulpit to help rewrite the American narrative that has told us, for far too long, that we can have something for nothing, that we are somehow not responsible for the success of future generations. My hope is that we, as players in this drama, will evolve into citizens with a higher sense of patriotism.

I have an idea for such a story. It's nothing as shocking or disturbing, or, frankly, as exciting, as the movie I mentioned, so you'll never experience it anywhere but here.

Try not to imagine that deep-voiced, movie trailer guy while I'm telling this.

One day, the Statue of Liberty, one of our most enduring symbols, begins to fade. It's actually dematerializing, like a ghost, until after a time, it's gone, completely gone. Lady Liberty has vanished, transformed from something into nothing.

Well, you can imagine the consternation this causes. Although no one was hurt during this vanishing act – this is a G-rated story – many voices cry out: This is an act of war! It's an attack on our freedom! It's the French, they must have somehow taken it back! Shock quickly gives way to anger, which, inevitably, leads to calls for retribution. You know how it goes. We've seen this part of the story before.

But there's no violence in my story. No, in my story a group of art students from Eaglebrook School see this as an opportunity to re-interpret the Statue of Liberty. So they set to work on another statue, another monument to replace the one that has mysteriously disappeared.

When they unveil it, the nation is flabbergasted to see that the new statue is not a replica of the previous statue, or a monument to shopping, or commerce or anything like that. No, this statue is a depiction of an adult lifting a child to a greater height. The monument is called "The Statue of Obligation," and it bears the following inscription:

"In every deliberation we must consider the impact on the seventh generation . . . even if it requires having skin as thick as the bark of a pine."

That, of course, is the Great Law of the Iroquois. That statement formed one of the foundations of the Iroquois Confederacy, the union of six Native American nations, who, some 800 years ago, created what is now the oldest participatory democracy on earth. The framers of our own Constitution saw the wisdom, the strength, and the foresight embodied by this confederacy and used it as a guide. In my mind, that one

phrase serves, not only as the basis of democracy, but as the definition of true patriotism – thoughtful, dedicated, and self-sacrificing.

Well, immediately upon the unveiling of this Statue of Obligation, the Statue of Liberty begins to re-materialize. It's not solid, not by a long shot, but it's there again, back where it was, visible, but insubstantial, like a light mist.

As the years pass, each time we Americans do something that lives up to the Statue of Obligation, the Statue of Liberty becomes a little clearer, a little more substantial.

Each time we provide health care . . .
Each time we provide education . . .
Each time we provide jobs . . .
Each time we confront poverty and homelessness and hunger and inequality . . .
Each time we sacrifice a little today for the sake of our children's tomorrows . . .
Each time we earn the name "American Citizen". . . .
Each time we do something that threatens to nudge Denmark to Number Two . . .
. . . Lady Liberty shines a bit clearer in the eyes of Americans . . . and maybe, if we're lucky, even in the eyes of the world . . .

I don't really have an ending for my story. In fact, now that I think about it, I don't want it to end. I think I'll leave it so that Americans are constantly evolving, constantly working, working for the future, working for the seventh generation, building up some calluses on our tender skin. I think I'll leave it so that when Americans rest, we do so only to regain our strength for the work still left to do, never because we think the job is finished.

And as for the Statue of Liberty? Well . . . I think I'll leave it so that she never actually becomes a statue again. Almost, but not quite. No, in my story Liberty will always stay well within sight, but always just out of reach, something more than a mirage, but less than an oasis.

That's the funny thing about liberty. It won't last unless we, we the self-sacrificing and dedicated and thoughtful patriots that I hope we are, live up to the obligations liberty demands.

And the funny thing about obligations is that they are never entirely fulfilled.