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Obama and the spirit of Hawaii

On this day when we vow to begin again, a prayer for a sea change in America.

By Gary Kamiya

Jan. 20, 2009 |

From where I am sitting I can see distant waves crashing on a spit of lava rock. Beyond that is endless ocean, part of the longest stretch of open water in the world. The rolling Pacific waves break on these shores 2,000 miles before they arrive on the West Coast.

I'm on the Big Island of Hawaii. As the eyes of America and the world turn east, following the train carrying the president-elect to a frozen city on the Potomac, I have headed west, into the sunset, toward the place where Barack Obama grew up, the place he has called "a part of my core."

You could choose anywhere to celebrate this moment, and it would be the right place. Obama won in regions of every description and among a dazzling variety of people. You could be in Iowa, or New York, or New Mexico, or California, or in a state that didn't go for Obama, and own this victory. You could be male or female, white, black, Latin or Asian and claim it.

So you certainly don't have to be in Hawaii to hail this moment. But for me these enchanted islands, the newest part of America and its farthest frontier, feel like the perfect spot from which to celebrate the beginning of the new era that begins today.

Some of this is personal. I've always loved Hawaii. These islands contain the mystery of the Far East, the soft languor of the South Seas and the mighty power of Neptune -- and they're in the *United States*. I always have a slight, delirious feeling of successful sin when I'm in Hawaii: This much magic should not be available at the mall. I have been here with many of the important people in my life. I have watched my year-old daughter paddle in the surf. I came here with a pal to convalesce, drink and play inappropriately violent beach sports right after I had surgery for [colorectal cancer](#). That same year, luckily having a reporter girlfriend whose paper kept sending her here, I returned two or three times when I was doing chemo. Those were unforgettable trips, with victory in sight but not yet assured, all the colors brighter, an undercurrent of sadness and a stronger one of life pulling at me as I walked away from Diamond Head, not knowing if I would see it again.

Hawaii, for me, will always be the place where I not only survived, but partied in paradise while doing it. I'm still here, and now Obama -- a native son, no less! -- is president. So when Obama takes the oath in the frozen capital city on the opposite end of the country, I will be celebrating twice. And praying that just as I was healed, a sea change will come upon America like a great wave, washing away the last eight years.

Sea changes must go beyond politics. Things rich and strange are not conjured solely out of tax policy and health plans. Beginnings are a time for generosity, for personal dedication. Forty-seven years ago, a young president touched the hearts of his countrymen when he said at his inauguration, "Ask not what your country can do for you -- ask what you can do for your country." Today, another young president is calling for the same selfless commitment.

But as we watch the exit of the most destructive presidency in American history, it isn't easy to feel generous. Those of us who have watched in horror as George W. Bush and his accomplices wreaked havoc are torn today between joy and anger, the desire to turn the page and the need to see reality acknowledged and justice done.

I cannot forgive Bush for what he did. With reckless arrogance and blind stupidity, he trashed the country I grew up in and love. He has the blood of hundreds of thousands of people on his hands. He exalted greed and selfishness. He spied, tortured and kidnapped. He brought shame to our nation's name.

There must be a reckoning for such grave acts. Unless we acknowledge the grievous damage Bush did -- to the environment, to the economy, to Iraq and the Middle East, to our cherished tradition of civil liberties, to a world that desperately needed a wise and compassionate America -- we will leave ourselves open to making the same mistakes again. Unless we hold those who committed crimes accountable, we will degrade the rule of law, our highest values and morality itself. To free ourselves of the cancer that was the Bush years, we must see it clearly and cut it out.

But clinging to anger, however righteous, eventually corrodes one's soul. You become the thing you hate. You can't get to where you want to go if you are forever looking backward. Like millions of Americans, I have been living with anger and bitterness for much too long. In his second inaugural address, Abraham Lincoln asked Americans to finish their great appointed task "with malice towards none, with charity for all."

Lincoln also spoke, in words Obama borrowed in his eloquent [Jan. 18 speech in Philadelphia](#), of "the better angels of our nature." Those angels have been slumbering, and to wake them, we must begin to bridge the divisions between us. For the first time in decades, that task seems possible. In fact, that's one of the great and hopeful things about this moment in American history, whether you're a Republican or a Democrat: A new consensus has appeared, one that could actually bring this split and still unformed country together. But to do that, we must first dig out from under the wreckage of the last eight years so that we can discover the things that once held us together, and still do.

Those things are not complicated, nor are they really different from the things people believe in around the world. They are the bedrock values we all share as Americans. We believe in fair play. We believe in looking after our neighbors. We believe in liberty, tempered by responsibility. We believe that it is our duty to take care of the world, both the natural world and the one we have made.

For almost a decade, foolish, frightened, power-hungry men have twisted and distorted those values almost beyond recognition. But if our country has been wounded, it is still very much alive. It is too big, too strong, too fundamentally decent, to be destroyed by the likes of George W. Bush. It is a country ready to wake up, to make real sacrifices, to rebuild not just its roads and its parks, its small businesses and its inner cities, but its soul.

Those values are found across America. But they exist in a unique way in Hawaii, and they helped make Obama who he is. As Michelle Obama said, "You can't really understand Barack until you understand Hawaii."

This means understanding Hawaii's unique and uniquely relaxed attitude toward race. Hawaii is the ultimate melting pot, a place where people are so casually familiar with the infinite mixtures of colors that they have special expressions to denote them. Like Obama, I am the child of a father of color (in my case a Japanese-American) and a white mother. Many years ago, the Nisei (second-generation

Japanese-American) proprietress of the fleabag Waikiki hotel where I was staying, after staring intently at me, asked me, "Are you half-Japanese?" When I told her I was, she squinted at me one more time, then said in an offhand way, "You're strong white." There is no other place in the country where this particular expression would be used in this guileless way, a neutral statement of what one particular hapa looked like that didn't cause everyone involved to put on their racial armor. That's because white people are only one group here, and not in all ways the dominant one. Obama's cheerful understanding of and comfort with the subtle minglings of his own, and America's, ethnic and racial identities is purely Hawaiian.

This is more significant than many people realize. It has often been remarked that Obama is utterly comfortable with his identity. Just being comfortable with who you are does not ensure wisdom: George W. Bush became utterly self-assured once he was born again, with unfortunate results. But Obama's self-awareness, which he learned not just in the relaxed racial world of Hawaii but in the harder-edged racial world of the mainland, is of a different order: If he manifests less fake humility than Bush, he also has a far more genuine openness to other people and other ideas.

That openness, that willingness to reach across every American divide, is desperately needed after the suspicious, hostile separation that marked the Bush years. "Elevating the tone" has become a cliché, but it means much more than instilling better national manners. It means promoting better national thinking. If you're too angry to even hear what your opponent is saying, your own thinking will never evolve beyond a certain point.

Racial enlightenment, and a tolerant live-and-let-live attitude, is part of what Hawaii bequeathed to Obama. But according to Obama himself, Hawaii's gift to him is deeper. In a 2004 speech, he said, "No place else could have provided me with the environment, the climate, in which I could not only grow but also get a sense of being loved."

"Love" is not a word that politicians use very much, unless they are talking in formulaic fashion about how much they love their country. But as Obama's words suggest, the spirit of Hawaii, the spirit called "aloha," is about love.

I felt that spirit on the day my brother and sister, who have both lived on Hawaii for extended periods and visited it innumerable times, took me and our cousin to meet their old friend Poli. Poli is 81 years old, and they have known him for more than 30 years. A farmer, fisherman and former lumber mill worker, he lives in a modest, almost ramshackle house he built himself on the beautiful south Kona coast. Like so many Hawaiians, his family is of mixed-up ancestry: His father was Chinese and Native Hawaiian, his mother Native Hawaiian, and his seven children, 30 grandchildren and 40-plus great-grandchildren cover the racial-ethnic spectrum. He is an amazingly spry man, who clambered nimbly up a left-leaning 10-foot ladder to pick oranges for us from high branches in one of his overflowing trees. He is also, my brother and sister told me, one of the kindest and most generous human beings they have ever known.

We sat in Poli's shabby but comfortable living room, open to a covered porch from which you could see the ignored ocean, and talked about his work in the mill, his late wife, his church, his children, why dark-grained mango wood is better for woodworking. We looked at the shrinelike wall of pictures of his family on the wall, and at his photo albums. From time to time he let loose with a wonderful little laugh, something like a high-pitched whinny. He looked at us with childlike innocence and impish curiosity, but mostly I remember him beaming at us, with the look of someone seeing his children after years of separation. When the conversation turned to our backgrounds, Poli said with a big smile, "It doesn't matter where we come from -- we all have the same blood!" When we left, he embraced each of us very firmly, pressing his ancient body, hard as a wire, against us. And when we got into the car, he leaned in, grasped our hands and said, "I love you."

For most Americans Hawaii is a place where they come to take a vacation or a honeymoon, to thaw out and slow down. But behind the postcard image, the aloha spirit still exists. And Barack Obama has some of that spirit in him.

But the American spirit is a vast tapestry, made up of many strands. The spiritual openness of Hawaii is one of those strands, but so is the tough friendliness of New York, and the solid neighborliness of the Midwest, and the clear-eyed optimism of California, and the graceful intelligence of the South. As an American, Obama can call upon a heritage that is made up of multitudes. And he will need them all.

In one of the climactic moments of his autobiography, "[Dreams From My Father](#)," Obama describes an argument he had with his friend Regina, who was angered by his cynicism and selfishness. In a moral epiphany, Obama realizes she was right. Then he imagines Regina's grandmother, "her back bent, the flesh of her arms shaking as she scrubs an endless floor. Slowly, the old woman lifted her head to look straight at me, and in her sagging face I saw that what bound us together went beyond anger or despair or pity. What was she asking of me, then? Determination, mostly. The determination to push ahead against whatever power kept her stooped instead of standing straight."

Then Obama's vision broadens. "The old woman's face dissolved from my mind, only to be replaced by a series of others. The copper-skinned face of the Mexican maid, straining as she carries out the garbage. The face of Lolo's mother [Lolo was Obama's Indonesian stepfather] drawn with grief as she watches the Dutch burn down her house. The tight-lipped, chalk-colored face of Toots [Obama's white grandmother] as she boards the six-thirty bus that will take her to work. Only a lack of imagination, a failure of nerve, had made me think that I had to choose between them. They all asked the same thing of me, all these grandmothers of mine."

On this day when our country vows to begin again, let all our grandmothers be with the man who is charged with the task of leading us back to ourselves.

-- By Gary Kamiya

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