



Two Contradictory Emotions

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At the end, even after watching him wage his campaign day in and day out for more than 20 months, it was stunning Tuesday evening to see Barack Obama take to the podium in Chicago's Grant Park to claim victory - not only for himself, but for a nation not sure that it was yet prepared or able to break such a profound barrier.

For weeks, there was the steady accretion of Obama pins on the lapels and knapsacks of New Yorkers of all stripes. That wave movingly crested in the tears I saw at the Democratic victory party at Midtown's Sheraton Hotel, the crowds that jammed Times Square, and the shouts of joy bouncing around Flatbush Avenue at 1 a.m. all the way from the Manhattan Bridge to Prospect Park.

The change that beamed out from Chicago to the world was, as ever, elegant and inspirational, but, as we have grown increasingly convinced, it was also remarkably self-possessed, intelligent, and substantive. America has already changed profoundly; it's hard not to believe that it will be for the greater good.

Still, a friend of mine called Wednesday and said, "For queers, it was like McCain won yesterday." He was referring to our losses in marriage amendment fights in Florida, Arizona, and most devastatingly - because we thought we had won there just six months ago - California. And to add insult to those injuries, there was the wholly gratuitous slap from Arkansas, where just to ensure that gay people don't get their hands on orphaned children, all unmarried couples were barred from adopting or being foster parents.

The California battle was hard fought, so we know better than from some other experiences just how indecent were the lies our opponents told. That our marriages would deny them of religious freedom. That our unions would become mandatory curriculum for the youngest of public school children. Thirty years after Anita Bryant launched her anti-gay jihad with the blood libel "Save Our Children," this hatred is still flung at us with alarming impunity.

So, just as Rachel Maddow does every night on her MSNBC show, I am looking for others to talk me down.

In a press release Tuesday night, the Human Rights Campaign noted that the pendulum has swung back, and that "our years in the wilderness are over," even if it is not yet clear precisely at what locale we have exited the Bush. In a telephone interview on Wednesday, Joe Solmonese, HRC's president, said our community will no longer be talking to allies only on Capitol Hill, we will also have friends in the administration and at the White House.

It's true - to some degree, we've been there before. Bill Clinton placed impressive numbers of openly LGBT officials in his administration, some at his side. But to look back to the Clinton years and assume we jump right back on where we got off invites bitter memories of our disappointments under his administration - especially with the Defense of Marriage Act and the Don't Ask, Don't Tell military policy.

In fact, our civil rights movement is a "progressive disease" to borrow (okay, perversely) the

phrase for describing alcoholism's advance even during the years when one has resisted picking up the bottle. We are not getting back on the escalator where we got off in January 2001 because we are not the same, our friends and allies are not the same, and the world is not the same.

Rea Carey, the new executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, put it well when I spoke to her one day before the election. "We will be moving into a territory we've never been," she said. There are, of course, longstanding legislative goals we are still at - though "we are not starting at zero." But there are "other conversations, big conversations about all sorts of issues that affect our community" - taxes, the economy, health care.

Progress is slow on the marriage equality front, but, Solmonese argued, meaningful incrementalism is now possible in Washington. "We can't get the 1,049 rights and benefits of marriage now?" he said. "Give me your top five. You can't pay the taxes you owe on your domestic partnership benefits? I think we can do that."

As for the amendment defeats this week, Evan Wolfson, who heads up Freedom to Marry, said, "The most important message, as painful as it is, is this is not the last word, even in California." The issue of fairness made solid progress in nearly every demographic relative to the first vote on this issue there in 2000, and, he said, "thousands and thousands" of straight allies put their hearts into our cause this year.

With the State Senate flip in New York, marriage equality grows closer here, and New Jersey is a good bet at a legislative win as well. Given a once-in-20-years chance to call a constitutional convention just weeks after the marriage ruling in Connecticut, voters there passed it up by a 60-40 vote.

And the same year that Colorado's Wayne Allard, the Senate sponsor of the attempted federal marriage amendment, retired, his House sidekick, Marilyn Musgrave, also of Colorado, was turned out by the voters.

What all this adds up to is our responsibility to simultaneously hold within ourselves emotions that may be at war with each other. To dwell on yesterday's reversals as a way to avoid working on the challenges and opportunities that tomorrow presents could be to give up just before the miracles begin.

"This is our era," Wolfson told me, "and we should not sit this out."