

The Herald of Hope

Bereft of hope for so long, with little more than gallows humor to sustain them, Americans are seizing upon this last best hope, this last chance for national redemption.



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Occasionally, when life seems especially consonant and accommodating, I'll play the lottery. Not that I'm under any delusion about the odds against winning; I know my chances are better for being struck by lightning. But the five or six dollars lavished on this private toast to life's possibilities seem a small extravagance and negligible risk for the quickening fantasy of instant wealth and power. The possibility, however remote, is an incitement to the imagination and all sorts

of plans suddenly in the making. Sometimes I won't check for the winning numbers for days, stretching the psychological and physiological effects of anticipation well beyond the demise of even the remote possibility of winning. And I never lose, since I always get what I pay for: hope, however audacious and fleeting.

I take it where I can find it, which is sometimes in surprising places. Until recently, I would have thought the chances of a black man becoming president of the United States to be about as good as mine for winning the lottery. Like most everyone I know, I said not in my lifetime, not in this America, where racism has a half-life longer than that of uranium, and the long-term prognosis for healing has been anything but hopeful.

Our government, as former State Department analyst William Blum has documented, has long been in the business of killing hope, both at home and abroad. And when America's Pandora let the Bushies out the box, it seemed she'd slammed shut the lid on hope, as if hoping to suffocate it these past seven years. But hope is irrational. And it persists stubbornly without justification or even air.

The production and distribution of hope are what governments are supposed to be about – hope for the tired, the poor, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. So wrote Emma Lazarus in her poem "The New Colossus," engraved in bronze at the base of the Statue of Liberty. But Lazarus is dead and no doubt turning over in her grave. And unlike her namesake in the Bible, few, it seems, have had sufficient faith in the possible to rise up out of the nation's moral rigor mortis, take up her immortal words and walk the walk. Instead, we have stumbled dazed and zombie-like through seven years of bad luck and trouble and

"days when hope unborn had died." And in the absence of hope, a culture of nihilism and despair has flourished on the one hand, and on the other, paranoid nationalism, xenophobia and the denial of ethical responsibility and caring for others. The homeless and tempest-tossed have mostly been turned away, except for those willing to work for slave wages in our homes and gardens and then disappear back to wherever they came from so as not to sully the picture of American prosperity. The magnanimous and genuinely hopeful sentiments of "The New Colossus" have been supplanted by small-minded, bigoted cries for "border control" that have been targeted mostly at Mexicans and Muslims.

But in the midst of all this, somehow, hope got out the box, and suddenly the national mood has brightened. Bereft of hope for so long, with little more than gallows humor to sustain them, Americans have seized upon this last best hope, this last chance for national redemption. Barack Obama has fired their imaginations and reinvigorated the electoral process. The all-time high of thirty-five million votes cast in the 1988 primary season will be surpassed this year by millions more voters who see in him a way up out of the grave that Congress and the current President have dug for us. They see light on the horizon, a new day and an end to the long night of lies and fear mongering that kept everyone in the dark. Children will not have to fear being rounded up and turned into ignorant asses (like Pinocchio) to the rallying cries of "no child left behind."

Just in the nick of time, hope, courageous hope, has intervened. It is a hope that has inspired the imagination, creativity, plans and actions. More than just the hope of happiness after years of ignorance, depression and despair, the happiness of hope itself is propelling people forward in great leaps with great expectations. And in the process of recovering hope and a national will and purpose, we may yet rediscover an American identity worth reclaiming – one closer to the vision of America that Emma Lazarus held. Erik Erickson, the late noted developmental psychologist, once posited as an axiom of identity the statement, "I am what hope I have and can give."

As individuals and as a nation, we answer the question who and what we are to the extent that we express life's fundamental drive to endure and thrive and inspire others with confidence. Hope is an indication and measure of personal and national vitality. Hope in spite of history. Hope in spite of the hazards strewn before us. Hope in the face of the cynical denigration of hope as hopelessly naïve. For while there is no salvation for America in hope or faith without good works, there is no life and no will to work for the good without hope. Hark the herald. Hope till hope creates from this decadence, depression and wreckage the exemplary nation it contemplates. Ω