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Political Detox

A sermon offered on Reverend Nathan C. Walker, Sunday, November 9, 2008

I can no longer deny it. It's time to take the first step and admit the truth.

Hi. I'm Nate. I'm a political junkie. (*Hi, Nate!*) It's so nice to have your support. I also want to thank those of you who participated in my intervention. I'm now enrolled in the *Rehabilitation Center for the Politically Obsessed*. I have come to realize that there is life after politics. Admittedly, my cravings for an election-fix still persist.

I first knew there was a problem, when in June my friends asked me, "So what did you do on your day off?" "I, uh, read poetry, did yoga prepared a lovely dinner..." It was all lies. The truth is my Saturday was spent curled up with greasy take-out food and streaming 6 hours of C-SPAN. I'm not kidding. I *had* to watch the Democratic National Committee determine the value of Florida and Michigan delegates. I am a political junkie.

In the last few months, most of my nights have been spent flipping back and forth from CNN and FoxNews while simultaneously using my laptop to read articles from the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal and my favorite, RealClearPolitics.com. I am a political junkie. I'm afraid it's not just me. It might be hereditary.

You all met my mother last weekend. Isn't she cute? Well, on Halloween Eve, she and my aunt sat in these pews as our fierce Desiree' played the pipe organ during a silent horror classic. The scary and yet cheesy part of the film is when the shadow of the Dracula-like creature creeps onto the girl's throat as the organ crescendos. We laughed about this cinematic moment as we left the church. Just then my mom pulls out her... iPhone. She starts shaking and says, "Natie, the Gallup Traditional is up by 8 and the Gallup Expanded is up by 9." Without a beat she gasped, "And Minnesota went from solid to leaning."

The truth is, all weekend, whether in line to see Betsy Ross' house or before going to bed, my mom was fixed to the news like Dracula feeding on blood. If it weren't for that damn iPhone, my mom might have a life. Instead, she gives me nightmares – in the distance the pipe organ is heard as a rectangle-like shadow comes toward my neck. I scream – no, it's the iMom!

Political Withdrawals

Hi. I'm Nate and my mother is *the* iMom. She is a political junkie. I am too. Because in normal circumstances, you would find both of us asking to be removed from the mass

email chains – but not during this political season. We love them. We crave them. We are addicted to blogs. We ache for talking heads. We covet pundits. We long for stump speeches. We watch political ads for fun.

So on Tuesday night, while folks were dancing in the streets... and while millions around the world were cheering and crying... just picture me wandering the streets aimlessly going through political withdrawals... foaming at the mouth.

I need help. I've gone through periods of excitement, then relief from the tension, then a feeling of letdown. I'm now, frankly, caged by depression. My rehab center now has me going through detoxification. I have to admit my fierce cravings to return to the "Situation Room". I just want to stay informed without getting sucked into the "gotcha media." Sounds simple, right? Wrong.

Marriage Inequality

I opened the iPhone browser and begin to read an article in the... (fake organ music) *Washington Post*. It explained how Arizona was the first state to defeat an anti-marriage constitutional amendment in 2006 and yet last week overturned its previous decision. All but one county voted to ban marriage equality in Arizona. The same was true of Florida, when all but one county voted to ban marriage equality – that's over 4.8 million Floridians. I became depressed. I put the phone down in despair, then picked it up again get my fix of junk. In Arkansas, over 57% of the voting public legalized a ban on gay couples adopting children. Oh my God. What happened to the politics of hope?

Another article¹ stated that, "The same voters who turned out strongest for Barack Obama also drove a stake through the heart of" marriage equality in California. "Seven in 10 African Americans who went to the polls voted yes on Proposition 8" which eliminated the right of same-sex couples to marry.

Oh. I see. This is the rehabilitation exercise – to identify that which is toxic and then begin to purge. I accepted the challenge by reading on.

The article attributed the results to "... the deeply ingrained religious beliefs of an African American community that largely declined to see the issue through a prism of equality." For example, "Jasmine Jones, 25, who is Black said, 'I think it's mainly because of the way we were brought up in the church. I'm not really the type... to stop people's rights. But I still have my beliefs, and if I can vote my belief that's what I'm going to do.'" She says, "'God doesn't approve it, so I don't approve it. And I approve of [capital-H] Him.'"

I felt the poison rise in me. I felt anger toward her and toward Christianity and to all the religions and the countries that banished and stoned and psychologically enslaved homosexuals. I was maddened by the irony of the oppressed becoming the oppressor.

¹ Karl Vick and Ashley Surdin (2008), *Most of California's Black Voters Backed Gay Marriage Ban*, *Washington Post*, Friday, November 7, 2008.

Then it hit me. What was really happening in this article was that Blacks were becoming a scapegoat for homophobia in all ethnic groups – sure, blame it on the Blacks, as if this one poll somehow proves a disproportionate level of homophobia. If this is believed then it permits me – a gay white man – to make Blacks “the other” the one to be feared. Do people like me then feel entitled to perpetuate our own internal racism? Yes We Do. That’s when we fail. It’s sad to admit but far too long we, too, have been addicted to the discriminatory mind.

You see, when we make each other “the other” is junk spreads. The fact is, whether we fear race or same-sex marriage... to fear difference is an *insidious disease of the soul*. A disease known by every minority group, that plagues every state, every person – even me. I know the poison of racism. I know the poison of internalized homophobia – even now, listen to me try deepening my voice, and preach like Jeremiah Wright all while shackling my Mariah Carey hand-waving.

I no longer need the fix. I need a cure. This internal monologue about the online article revealed the toxins within me – the substance that leads me to know the true meaning of a Political Junkie.

Defining Political Junkie

Being a political junkie is different than being addicted to a substance like alcohol or drugs. You may know that the term junkie comes from heroin use, heroin being the “junk”. In that context, the addicts are to rid themselves from the junk – the goal is to separate themselves from the substance. But political junkies are not cured when they rid themselves of politics. They are cured when they are able to name the junk in politics – the homophobia, the racism, the sexism – and say this junk has no place in our democracy. The political junkie is cured when they filter the politics of fear by diagnosing the poison, the phobias. Then the remedy: to smother the toxins with the healing balm of humility, the balm of understanding, the balm of compassion. In doing so, we realize “we are the ones we have been waiting for” – only we can transform the disease of discrimination within ourselves.

I’m here to remind us that the political junkie’s cure is found in *principled political engagement*. The goal is not to cure the junkie from politics... but to cure the junk in politics, so as to emancipate our imprisoned souls.

And so my conscience calls me to engage these ideas as part of my political detoxification plan – a process that requires me to see the same situation through the eyes of those who hold different beliefs. Let me try and unpack the historical context of this election in relation to the state of marriage. Let’s go back to the Christianization of African Slaves.

Christianization of Slaves

We know Africans were bought and sold in horrendous sea voyages and were forced into a brutal life of over 240 years of slavery. “Those slaves converted to Christianity.”

What was one of the motives? “To create a bond [with their master which lessened] the atrocities... For many slaves, Christianization served as a means of resistance.”²

And here we are, in 2008, having just elected a Black Christian to the highest office in the land. I, too, have wept with joy for our country taking one step toward building a perfect union – where anyone despite race or gender would be seriously considered for the presidency. I stood in awe at the images of those all around the world who wept, who wept for freedom. These tears are born of the knowledge of America’s greatest sin: slavery. Bound by racism, many of America’s slaves found comfort in the idea of a Christian heaven. “For heaven promised a reward for suffering in the physical world.”

Theological Slavery

Put simply, the religion of the master – the same religion that was used to scripturally justify slavery – has become the religion of many racial minorities, who are taught to use the scripture to oppress sexual minorities. This is a form of *theological slavery*. Enslaved by the religion of their master, White Supremacy continues to rule when Blacks, like Jasmine Jones, use scripture to oppress sexual minorities. But they are not the only minority group who is bound by theological slavery.

Collective Transference

There is a unique American Christian tradition – Mormonism – that was and continues to be marginalized by the stigma of polygamy. And how do they tend to their feelings of marginalization? Mormons radically define marriage between one man and one woman. I call this *collective transference* – when a group projects their fears onto another minority group so as to assimilate themselves into the dominant belief system and thereby overcompensate for their own feelings of inferiority. Do you see the pattern – we become what we set out against. Marginalized people want to feel like we matter, but when we become the majority, we use our power to marginalize. There’s one way to heal this pattern. To understand one another’s story.

Understanding Heals

Once upon a time, there was an outreach director for the *Protect Marriage Campaign* of California. As a Black Christian, Derek McCoy, was ecstatic about the results of the presidential election and with the passing of Proposition 8. He said, “[Gay marriage] is not a civil rights issue... the gay community was never considered a third of a person.” I think he meant the three-fifths – referring to the time when confederate states counted three-fifths of the slaves for enumeration purposes.

What Derek McCoy may not understand how race-based legal restrictions on marriage were not removed until 1967³. After that point interracial marriage became a civil right. He also may not know that it wasn’t until 1973 that the *American Psychiatric Association* removed homosexuality from its official mental disorders. Just as interracial couples

² *The Christianization of Slaves* by Jeffrey K. Padgett

³ U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Loving v. Virginia*

were receiving legal legitimacy with marriage, gays were emancipated from the label of having a mental illness.

It's true that gays may not have been sold into slavery but, like the Jews, we know what it was like to be imprisoned in concentration camps and exterminated. It is true, gays were never bound by Jim Crow laws – but we do know the meaning of “separate but equal.” Laws continue to separate “civil unions” for homosexuals and “marriage” licenses to heterosexuals. We may not have experienced lynching but we do know gay bashing – as seen in Matthew Shepard who was strung on a fence and left to die. It is true, gays were never considered three-eighths a person, but we do know the consequences for revealing that fraction of ourselves that is so much a part of our identity. I share this history not to pit the suffering of Blacks against Gays– but to solicit Derek McCoy's empathy, with hopes that one day he will tell our story, just as we seek to tell his.

Privileged Oppression

In order to do this, we in the Queer community to admit that we have been engaging in cultural misappropriation, by claiming the Civil Rights movement as our own. The fact is homosexuality is a *privileged oppression* because for the most part we can choose when to reveal our minority status.

In spite of the discrimination we have faced, many gays choose to stand before our true love, our religious community, our country, to express sacred vows. In doing so, we preserve our dignity. We express our faith. We experience liberty. Same-sex marriage does not threaten different-sex marriage. One couple's love does not take away from another's. Let me make the same point in the context of this historic election. When Barack Obama was elected, it wasn't only Black America that experienced emancipation – it was a moment of liberation for the entire United States and for the world!

When freedom rings for one, it rings for all.

On paper, our Constitution may say that we are all endowed by our Creator with unalienable rights... but if we learned anything from America's story, we'd know that for many... it is not self-evident that we are created equal. When will it become self-evident? When we first heal our own pain. Because we all know that “hurt people hurt people.”

Benediction

You see, my name is Nate. I am a political junky. I am aware that my addiction to politics is born from my pain. I am aware that my engagement in democracy comes from my disappointment and dissatisfaction with the state of our union. I am compulsive about being an informed and engaged citizen. I am obsessed with liberty. I love freedom. Not just mine, but everyone's freedom. I crave equality. I am addicted to justice. I'm afraid it's not just me. It might be hereditary.

Just as my *iMom* purged her fears and unconditionally embraced her gay son... just as she wove her passion for justice into my heart, that same drum of liberty beats in every

being's heart. If we listen, if we listen to our collective heartbeat we hear a sacred sound – it's the whisper of a new declaration, a Declaration of Interdependence... that calls us to preserve liberty for all.

This whisper is addictive. It's a compulsion born of compassion. It's the same whisper that - as one wise person said – “inspired Rosa to sit, which called Martin to march, which empowered Barack to run, which allows the next generation to fly.”

Oh yes, it is a new day – a day for the *secret whisper* to infect us with a *public compulsion* to detoxify, once and for all, the discriminatory mind.

Amen.

Please rise for a litany of restoration, by my colleague Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, who died in 2006.

“If recognizing the interdependence of all life, we strive to build community, the strength we gather will be our salvation. If you are black and I am white,

It will not matter.

If you are female and I am male,

It will not matter.

If you are older and I am younger,

It will not matter.

If you are progressive and I am conservative,

It will not matter.

If you are straight and I am gay,

It will not matter.

If you are [Mormon] and I am [Unitarian Universalist],

It will not matter.

**If we join spirits as brothers and sisters,
the pain of our aloneness
will be lessened,
and that does matter.**

In this spirit, we build community and move toward restoration.