

Why Character Matters Again

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I'm deep into former President Obama's book, "A Promise Land," which I received as a Christmas gift from my spouse. Honestly, I can't put it down: His words are evoking, in me, an emotional response that I didn't expect.

Obama has written a political memoir that is at once both brash and humble. More than a mere chronicle of his personal and political life, the president offers thoughtful insights on his faith and beliefs. This passage that opens chapter four stands out:

Rarely does a week go by when I don't run into somebody — a friend, a supporter, an acquaintance, or a total stranger — who insists that from the first time they met me or heard me speak on TV, they knew I'd be president.... I'll smile and say that I wish they had told me this back when I was thinking about running: It would have saved me a lot of stress and self-doubt.

The truth is I've never been a big believer in destiny. I worry that it encourages resignation in the down-and-out and complacency among the powerful. I suspect God's plan, whatever it is, works on a scale too larger to admit our mortal tribulations; that in a single lifetime, accidents and happenstance determine more that we care to admit; and that the best we can do is try to align ourselves with what we feel is right and construct some meaning out of our confusion, and with grace and nerve play, at each moment, the hand that we're dealt.

"A Promised Land" by Barack Obama, 2020, p. 65

Thinking we know God's plan is foolishness. Believing that things are preordained is fatalism. Rather, we fashion our lives from "accidents and happenstance," as our former president writes, trying to do what is right, making meaning out of confusion, and trusting in grace.

Not surprisingly, President Obama's understanding of God and life sound very Unitarian Universalist: He perhaps was influenced by his attendance at Sunday school at the First Unitarian Church in Honolulu, his grandmother's congregation, from 1975 until his high school graduation in 1979.

What Obama doesn't say explicitly in this passage, but which echoes from page to page throughout his book, is that *character matters*. The trajectory of his life — and the life of those who make a positive difference in their communities and the larger world — is determined, in large measure, through one's own character.

I can't help but recall the ancient saying from Greek philosopher Heraclitus, "character is destiny" — *who* we are and *what* we are matters as much or more than anything in the trajectory of all our lives.

As we recover and heal from four years of a clumsy, corrupt, and cruel administration in Washington, we are forcefully reminded that character matters — and, now, character matters again — perhaps more than ever.

Rather than pronounce a political remedy to our damaged character as a nation, let's first consider what we can do, as patriotic citizens and people of faith, to reclaim and renew our personal character and begin our own recovery and healing.

So we ask first: *What constitutes character? What are its key attributes? How do we not only think about character but put character into practice so that we, each of us, can contribute to our national recovery and healing?*

What comes to mind first is *honesty*. We must be honest with ourselves and with others. Not a harsh honesty but a loving honesty. Not an honesty that judges but one that rebuilds and repairs relationships.

Another attribute of character is *integrity*: Doing *not* the expedient thing but the *right* thing grounded in strong ethical principles and moral rectitude.

Honesty and integrity: They're the two legs of a person's character — but I think there are a few more:

What about humility? — keeping our pride in check and putting others' needs and feelings first.

What about lovingkindness? — showing care toward each other and compassion toward all *not despite* our differences but *because* of them.

What about equanimity and forbearance? — maintaining serenity in anxious times and persevering even with the slowness of social and political change.

What about generosity? — giving more than we get, being respectful toward others, and believing that another's gain is our gain too.

What about reality and truth? — grounding in the world as it *is* and dreaming of what the world may yet *be*; not allowing beliefs to harden into intolerance or ideas into unbending ideology.

Finally, what about grace? — trusting that when the long day is over, after we've done all we can do, we accept both our successes and failures with gratitude and allow divine grace to guide us into the morning of a new day.

What is character? Character is rooted in basic honesty and integrity; flourishes with lovingkindness, humility, equanimity and forbearance, and generosity; and comes to fruition in the truth and grace of this broken but holy world.

Next, we ask: *How do reclaim and renew our personal character not only in thought and intention but in word and deed?*

I'd suggest some practice, something like the Merriam-Webster word-of-the-day, but more than expanding our vocabulary we might enhance our character traits with a daily practice of character-building. Call it "habits of character," a practice that is both hard-headed and heart-centered.

Let's try a daily practice of "honesty," for example. Today, in my interaction with family members, friends, or colleagues, I'm going to find an opportunity to speak honestly but kindly. I'll make a mental note, reflect on the interaction at the end of the day, maybe journal it, and then ask for divine guidance to help me sustain the practice of honesty so that it becomes a daily habit.

Or "integrity." On another day of practice, I'm going to do the right thing, even if it's hard, even if I don't benefit directly, even if I'm vulnerable. Again, I'll make a mental note, reflect on the interaction at the end of the day, maybe journal it, and then ask for divine guidance to help me sustain the practice of integrity so that it, too, becomes a daily habit.

A similar daily practice for the other attributes of character that I've named — and others you might name yourself — would work as well.

Come accidents and happenstance. Come reality and truth. Come grace. Character stands firm and strong.

Then, destiny unfolds — not in ways humans or God can predict, but in ways that are full of meaning and purpose, in ways that serve each of us and the common good.

Thank you, Barak Obama, you call us to character again. Your voice is still heard and your vision inspires us still.

Amen.