

FORUM

An American, Finally



Julianne Malveaux
Guest Columnist

Every morning when I wake up I have a conversation with God. This practice goes back about 12 years, to a turning point in my life when I realized that only recognizing a higher power would make my life work.

Being the contrarian I am, however, I was not prepared for ritual. Instead, my morning with God is as casual as a talk I'd have with a friend.

Morning, God, I say. It's Julianne Malveaux. You know. The sister who tries to serve you.

It's good to be alive today. And then I do some Bible reading, listen to some gospel music and simply pray.

On November 5, I changed my conversation. For the first time, I acknowledged my nation, praying, "It's good to be alive in the United States of America today."

Yes, it is good to finally consider and enjoy the perks

that go into being an American.

A man who looks like me will have his face in a history book. An elegant sister will preside over all those state dinners. Two little Black girls, with grins like those of my godchildren and baby cousins, will roll their eggs over the White House lawn on Easter Monday.

It will be our house, not a remote house, accessible, not unattainable. As I saw my face in the mirror called victory, I felt like an American, finally.

In honesty I have never felt much like an American before. An African-American, certainly, but not flag-waving, Mount Rushmore-embracing, hit the Monument loving American.

For all of my life I've been an American, reluctantly. Came here in chains. Advanced by my brains and by the legacy of struggle and dignity. I sing, "Lift Every Voice" as if it is rap because it is history, poetry, poignancy and a capturing of every step African-Americans have taken. How can you sing, "stony the road we trod" and feel fully American? How can you put your mouth around the phrase, "treading our way through the blood of

the slaughtered" without wondering about the democratic integrity of our nation?

The very lyrics of the Negro National Anthem belie the notion of a level playing field. And still, Senator Obama won.

This election, in and of itself, will not close racial economic gaps, clean up the environment, address the gender gap, provide health care to everyone, end the war in Iraq, or do anything else.

Electing Senator Barack Obama is simply a step in the right direction. All of us who have held back our faith, belief, enthusiasm, and hard work now need to embrace the Obama team with all of our energy.

They want change. We want change. And the election of Obama makes me want to be a better, and more productive citizen.

So my alter ego, Sister Cynic, is on break for just a minute. She is going to sit on ice while the joyful soul lifts up and embraces this possibility of change.

It is an exciting possibility that was affirmed by a greatly collective vote. I really thought "they" would steal Florida and Ohio and that the Bradley effect would have put Pennsylvania in another

column. So I'm wrong, wrong and gleefully wrong.

There has been magic in the air, despite a plummeting stock market and grim economic indicators. We know that President-elect Obama did not cause this mess, but we know the mess is real.

At the same time, I am observing people greeting each other with kindness and civility, recognizing all that which may happen as our nation moves forward. While it is absolutely clear that differences remain among Americans, aspects of the atmosphere suggest that we are attempting to mute at least a few of our differences.

There is much work to do, but there must be a moment of celebration. And so, as I send Sister Cynic on vacation, and put my inner analyst on suspension, I am among those who embrace and admire this moment of history. There is joy in the Obama victory, for the nation, and for me. I am unabashedly proud to describe myself as an American, finally.

Noted economist Dr. Julianne Malveaux is the president of Bennett College for Women.

Obama aide reassures Black America



George Curry
Guest Columnist

Many African-Americans are asking: Now that Barack Obama has won the White House, will he be so eager to govern from the center that he will forget about his obligations to Blacks?

Valerie Jarrett, a long-time friend and one of his closest advisers, gave an emphatic reply to that question on Sunday - No.

In a private meeting with the Trotter Group, an organization of African-American columnists, Jarrett fielded numerous questions about Obama's commitment to Blacks. And, in each instance, she left no doubt that the president-elect, who has a straight-A Senate rating from the NAACP, will remain true to his past.

Jarrett, one of three chairs of Obama's transition team, was asked why so few African-Americans are being mentioned in speculation about future cabinet posts. She replied, "There isn't a single name on that list that you've heard from President-elect Obama. There's not a single name on that list that you've heard from me, or from John Podesta or from Peter Rouse," she said, referring to the three co-chairs of Obama's transition team.

"Or, now from Rahm Emanuel. So the five people who actually do know the names on the list, you haven't spoken to them. So what I think you see in the newspaper is what everybody speculates. I haven't seen the list but my guess is they're speculating on the people who are most com-



Valerie Jarrett with N.C. A&T's DeWayne Wickham at the recent Trotter Group gathering.

monly thought of."

Some of that speculation has centered on Jarrett, a Chicago real estate executive. Some have suggested that she might become Secretary of Housing and Urban Development or head the Commerce Department. But there are news reports out of Chicago that she is the front-runner to replace Obama in the U.S. Senate. In her meeting with journalists, Jarrett said she would be willing to serve in any capacity that Obama sees fit.

On the question of Obama's commitment to diversity, Jarrett was unequivocal.

"President-elect Obama, as should be no surprise to anyone in this room, would like his cabinet to be diverse - both in terms of race, in terms of perspectives, in terms of party, in terms of geography," she said. "So he is looking to have a cross-section of America. Spending the amount of time with him as I do, I can assure you this is something front and center of his mind. Not because it's the politically expedient thing to do, but because he would make better

decisions by having diversity. He really believes in that."

Asked the most surprising thing about Obama, she replied: "I'm not sure people understand how pragmatic he is. ...He really wants to get things done."

Jarrett recalled staff meetings where the tone was set by Obama.

"In that room, there's a certain element of pragmatism: Let's make sure what we are trying to accomplish is doable and is actually going to change the lives of the American people. Let's not just be idealists, but let's be realists. I think that's the part of him that will make him an extraordinary president."

In the don't get mad, get even world of politics, Obama is an anomaly, according to Jarrett.

"I can remember after the primaries, some people had been very strong Clinton supporters - including some members of my own family - said to me, 'How's Senator Obama going to respond to me? I wasn't with him.' I said, 'You all don't get this. He is as inclusive as he could be. He does not hold grudges.'"

Jarrett is close to both Barack and Michelle Obama. In fact, she met the president-elect through Michelle, when the couple was engaged. She had hired Michelle for a job in City Hall. The three went out to dinner and a strong bond developed between Jarrett and the couple. Obama said he speaks with Jarrett everyday about a variety of issues.

According to Jarrett, Michelle is focusing her attention on Malia, 10, and Sasha, 7, preparing them for the upcoming move to Washington, D.C. and finding the right schools for them. Michelle revels in her role as mom-in-chief and has no interest in serving as her husband's co-president.

That does not mean that, like every first lady, she will not have her pet projects.

The First Lady-in-Waiting has spent a lot of time with military spouses who try to balance a career with motherhood while their husbands serve in Iraq and Afghanistan. She has also been part of the volunteer movement and has a deep interest in education.

But the question uppermost on my mind when we met with Jarrett, the daughter-in-law of the late Vernon Jarrett, an icon in journalism, was whether Obama can keep his promises in view of the Wall Street debacle, fighting two wars simultaneously, high joblessness, unprecedented deficits and record home foreclosures.

Jarrett's reply was as self-assured as Obama's demeanor: "We can't not do this."

George E. Curry, former editor-in-chief of Emerge magazine and the NNPA News Service, is a keynote speaker, moderator, and media coach. He can be reached through his Web site, www.georgecurry.com.

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The Chronicle was established by Ernest Pitt and Nubisi Egemonye in 1974, and is published every Thursday by Winston-Salem Chronicle Publishing Co., Inc. The Chronicle is a proud member of:

- National Newspapers Publishers Association
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