

## Election 2008: Meaningful Moments, Among Other Things

BY JEN BENKA AND  
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The most meaningful moment I experienced toward the 2008 general election came in a conversation with a friend last year.

Jen has a longtime friend who is a nonprofit administrator working in D.C. She is far more savvy than me on the workings of politics. We exchanged who we were liking for the Democratic nominee; I said Obama. She said Edwards, and, further, she feared we were not ready for a black president. Humbled by an awareness of my comparative political naiveté, and by the awareness that she, white, is raising a 7-year-old African-American boy, I still had to ask: doesn't it only become possible to elect a leader of color if we assert, together, that it is possible?

To my surprise, She conceded that I was right on that point.

Jen reminded me that when Harold Washington ran for mayor of Chicago he pointed out to his supporters that they had the votes to win. That they could elect him if they wanted to. And he won, he was the first African-American mayor of Chicago. —CM

**"If people feel they don't have power to change a bad situation, then they do not think about it." —Saul Alinsky**

There was a knock on the door. A woman reluctantly answered, and when she saw that the person standing on her porch was wearing a John Kerry button, she quickly pronounced her support for George W. Bush. "He is pro life, like me," she said.

The canvasser, who was with a major union, said that he respected her religious views, but wondered if she had a few minutes to talk about health care. "Do you have health insurance?" he asked.

"Actually, no," she said. And then slowly the story came about their debt from the time she had to go to the emergency room, and her fear about getting sick again. The canvasser listened to the woman, and then explained where George Bush and John Kerry stood on the issue of health care coverage. As the canvasser left, the woman thanked him for talking with her. She said she used to believe that an election wouldn't impact her family directly, but now she felt a little hope. —JB

### He Might Be Assassinated

The thought never seemed to cross our collective American mind when George W. Bush was a candidate for president. Or even when he ran for re-election on a record that included sending thousands of young men and woman from the U.S. to their deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan, and overseeing actions that killed tens of thousands of civilians in those countries. Not to mention golfing during Hurricane Katrina. But we're nonchalant about voicing the possibility that this fate may await Barack Obama?

After I expressed an interest in the Obama campaign, he angrily asked, "Why should I vote for Obama just because he would be the first black president?"

"Who said anything about him being black?" I said. And then, trying to calm the waters a bit, she added, "I'd hope you wouldn't vote for any candidate for just one reason or one issue." "But electing a black president would be a healing step for our country."

"Electing a woman would have been, too," he said.

"Yes, but women weren't kidnapped and brought to this land in shackles and chains and made slaves."

"When I say he'll probably be assassinated anyway, I'm not being racist," he said.

Sure you are. Sure we all are. —JB

### I'm tired of cynicism. It's a luxury we can't afford.

Three days before Barack Obama announced his V.P. selection, the moderator of a political listserv to which I subscribe posted that he heard from a reliable insider that Joe Biden was the pick. Another member of the group responded with, "Get used to the phrase 'President McCain.'"

I understand disdain for mainstream politics. In the 2000 general election I voted for Nader and LaDuke. Not only did I vote for them, I rallied with them in Long Beach, Calif.—a memorable event—and to this day, I don't regret that vote. It felt important to participate in the general election based on positive statements rather than a process of elimination. Do I feel responsible for Al Gore's loss? No, I am among those who believe he didn't lose. Did I vote for Nader again in 2004? No, for two reasons: first, the stakes had changed because of the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and occupation of Iraq; second, John Kerry was not



Jen Benka outside a polling place in 1992

**'If we focus on what we want more than what we don't want, we might realize something like a better day.'**

objectionable to me as Al Gore had been.

In 1999 I had a co-worker who was active in protesting the U'wa tribe from being pushed off their land by Occidental Petroleum. Al Gore's links to Oxy were and are deep. I was educated by someone on the front lines of this conflict and it informed my vote. Change is personal. An additional consideration for me in 2004 was John Kerry's being the Working Families' nominee. I was able to vote with the Working Families party rather than the Democrats—most of whom supported the Iraq occupation—and vote against Bush while voting for a platform she felt closer to than that of the Democrats'.

It is common and easy to bemoan the political machine. But if we focus on what we want more than what we don't want, we might realize something like a better day. —CM

### What's the point of conventions?

We watched some of the Democratic National Convention. We were a bit lukewarm to turn it on; we knew we wouldn't hear substantial policy proposals, and we knew there was no real "work" being done at that convention. We asked, what's the point of conventions?

And then we were moved. We were moved by Michelle Obama's speech, and by Ted Kennedy's perseverance and remembering all the tragedies endured by that family. We were moved during Chelsea Clinton's narration of her mother's bio and during Hillary Rodham Clinton's speech. We were moved to learn Donna Brazile, who served as presidential campaign manager for former Vice President Al Gore, designed those Hillary signature signs. And we were moved by Barack Obama's acceptance speech.

When we gather, we renew our faith. We remember what

we value, what we strive for. We realize one another as human beings, not as soundbytes. We realize we're not alone in wanting to make things right. We realize ourselves in solidarity. Gathering for a political rally versus reading the news or submitting online petitions is akin to the difference between going to a poetry reading or play versus reading a text in solitude.

For those of us in the poetry world, we can concern ourselves with how many people are reading and buying poetry or we can engage our art passionately, in community, and understand that our convening is in part the art itself, for those real events enable our transformation. —CM and JB

### Prepare to be disappointed.

In 1992, I left my job at a homeless shelter to work for six months as an organizer for NARAL in Wisconsin to turn out the pro-choice vote for Bill Clinton. I coordinated busloads of volunteers to distribute Clinton literature to houses across the state. They walked in sub-zero temperatures, door-to-door, and talked with potential voters. I helped plan fundraisers and rallies, build coalitions with ACT-UP and Queer Nation, and ran Get-Out-The-Vote phone banks. Having vowed never to call myself a Democrat, Bill Clinton made my 24-year-old self believe in his political party. He cared about gay rights, would protect abortion rights, and help end poverty. I worked 12-15 hour days, exhausting myself, but it didn't matter. Clinton was going to turn the country around, get us back on the right track. Every generation has a chance to elect a visionary leader, and I thought this was mine.

We did it. We elected and then watched Clinton pass Don't Ask Don't Tell, then the Defense of Marriage Act, and then welfare reform. I returned to my job at the shelter. We had more people than ever, especially women, in need of housing and supportive services. —JB

### Prepare to be disappointed.

In Summer 2007 I campaigned for Barack Obama in Fort Greene, Brooklyn. Jen warned me, prepare to be disappointed. A few days before I was to talk to people on the street about Obama's candidacy, Obama announced that he did not support same-sex marriage but was in favor of civil unions for same-sex partners. When I gathered with the other volunteers that Saturday morning, I registered my distress over Obama's discrimination against same-sex couples with a regional campaign manager. After that I wrote at least three letters via barackobama.com saying I would not send any more donations since I no longer felt included in the campaign, and asked them to acknowledge that marriage at the federal level affords families an estimated 1,138 rights.

I never did get a proper acknowledgment for my letters, but I did see Barack Obama on the Tyra Banks and Ellen shows, and on both occasions Obama stated that his version of civil unions for same-sex couples would include the more than 1,100 rights afforded by marriage. His plan is still separate but equal, but at least it is legally and financially equal, if not culturally and politically.

Should this and other promises come to pass under an Obama administration, it would be something like a better day. Should this and other promises not come to pass under an Obama administration—and we know some portion will certainly not—we will not be silent. —CM

Keep loving, keep fighting!

## A 2008 Election Night Extravaganza

**This Tues., Nov. 4,  
7:30 p.m.**

Free w/2-drink min.

**Sidewalk Café  
94 Ave. A, NYC**

featuring

**R.E.M.'s Green performed live by Liv Carrow, Peter Dizozza, Dan Fishback, Casey Holford + Daoud Tyler-Ameen, Phoebe Kreutz, and Ben Krieger**

**Plus Election  
Results  
on the  
Big Screen**

**Political Poets** CAConrad,  
Vivian Demuth, Eliot Katz,  
Frank Sherlock, and Nathaniel Siegel

**Solo Musical Sets from**  
Peter Dizozza and Phoebe Kreutz

Hosted and curated by Casey Holford and Boog  
City editor and publisher David Kirschenbaum

**Directions: F/V to 2nd Ave.,  
L to 1st Ave. Venue is at E. 6th St.**

**For further info: 212-842-BOOG (2664)  
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