

“In Praise of the Elite”

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Just before the 2008 presidential election, I read a story about an Atlanta congressman accusing Barack and Michelle Obama of being “elitists”. Until then, I thought I had understood what that word means, and nothing in it is even remotely connected to the Obamas.

I was challenged to re-think the definition of the word elitist and came away thinking, if those two are elitist, then I want to be one too.

The definition I had was that elitists are those people who *think* they’re better than other people, yet have no verifiable evidence proving such a thing.

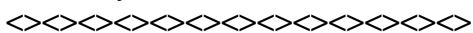
As always, the words we use can get us into trouble. In fact, I wish I had called this sermon, “In Praise of the Elite” rather than “Elitism”. They have very different meanings.

The dictionary explanation says, “Elitism is the belief that certain persons or members of certain classes or groups deserve favored treatment by virtue of their perceived superiority, as in intellect, social status, or financial resources. Additionally, there is a sense of entitlement enjoyed by such a group or class, so that their perceived superiority gives them the right to control, rule, or dominate those around them.”

Everybody knows people who are born into privilege, perhaps with a silver spoon in their mouths. Sometimes these people deserved to be considered elites and most often they are not.

Back when the Obama accusation was made, my favorite columnist Mark Morford wrote a neat column called “18 Ways to Tell If You Are an Elitist”. Here are a couple of them. You are an elitist if:

1. You don’t talk like a normal person. Only normal people talk like normal people. Using words that have more than one syllable is clearly elitist, especially if there are more than one of them in a sentence.
2. You are an elitist if you think lower-middle-class voters with minimal educations can run the most powerful nation on the planet and steer massive military juggernauts and immense economies and affect the destinies of millions, yet don’t have any idea how to do it. You are an elitist if you think that the dumber you sound, the more effective you are at leading the country. Did you know this already? You typical elitist!
3. You are an elitist if you think “Barack Obama’s oratory power, strength of character, and subtle understanding of complicated issues has actually served to dissolve a venerable portion of the acidic pessimism that’s been eating into your very soul for eight solid years, causing you to actually begin to believe that maybe, just maybe, nuanced intellectual acumen and the nearly bankrupt American experiment do not necessarily have to be mutually exclusive. Only elitist snobs know what “venerable” means. Or “acumen.” Or “you.”
4. “You speak a foreign language. This implies you might understand something of the world, have an interest in a culture other than your own, or have perhaps even traveled to some exotic foreign land that isn’t Texas or New Jersey or Hawaii, a place where they like weird cheeses and don’t fear gay people and ride bicycles to the opera.”
5. “You read the *New York Times*. Also, you read.”
6. “You are an elitist if, for some godforsaken reason, absolutely convinced all the way down to your most profound sense of what is divine and truthful in this strangled world that violence and bloodshed are rarely the answer, that the irrefutable spiritual laws of the universe confirm that ‘like attracts like’, and even at a quantum level there is a profound pull toward a divine, benevolent dynamic equilibrium, and therefore constructing a malicious national policy of torture and surveillance and pre-emptive aggression merely shames the better nature of the human animal and invites a particularly violent energy into the national bloodstream and poisons the human heart as it creates nothing but more turmoil and unrest and hate in the world. Man, only an elitist would tolerate a ridiculous run-on sentence like that.”



Words! They are always getting in the way. And in this case, they are actually used as weapons. To be an elite or not to be an elite. Or, to accuse someone else of being an elitist, as a way to defame that person.

There are many ways to look at this concept. On one hand I like the idea that some people are *the best* at what they do. The recent Winter Olympics showcased a lot of superior skaters and skiers and snowboarders—they are the best in the world. They are the elite in the world of sports.

And of course, their “best-ness” is not in their minds, but in accordance with certain very high standards of performance. It must be said that sometimes a champion must believe in his or her greatness in order to achieve the acclaim. But always, there are external standards by which greatness is granted.

Another aspect of this is the notion that the word elite is a comparative word. People are only considered to be the best *compared* to others. It’s like the word *excellent*, also a comparative word, which can only be realized in relationship with others. As in the word, *excel*, to move beyond the pack, to go ahead, to be the best.

So we run into the conceptual phrase is “good, better, best”. Also, “above average”. So when Garrison Keillor claims that in Lake Wobegone, “all the children are above average”, our cognitive processes come to a halt. Everybody can’t be above average, right? Or can they?

That’s what I want to speak about today: the possibility that everybody—every person—has the potential to be in the elite, to be the best, to be excellent. This belief comes directly from our First Principle: the affirmation in “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.”

We all start out that way, with what Matthew Fox calls “original blessing”. (Not “original sin”, as some religions believe.) That is our gift, offered freely and without qualification.

However, there’s a downside to that. For even though we are all inherently worthy, it makes all the difference in the world *what we do* with that gift. How do we take the gifts that have been given to us and move them into the world to make it a better place—the best places, the best actions we can take.

Naturally, we recall Rebecca Parker’s time-honored prayer, “Choose to Bless the World”:
Your gifts, she says, whatever you discover them to be, can be used to bless or curse the world.

*The mind’s power, the strength of the hands, the reaches of the heart,
the gift of speaking, listening, imagining, seeing, waiting, any of these can serve to feed the hungry, bind up wounds, welcome the stranger, praise what is sacred, do the work of justice, or offer love.*

And of these can draw down the prison door, hoard bread, abandon the poor, obscure what is holy, comply with injustice, or withhold love.

You must answer the question: What will you do with your gifts?

Choose to bless the world!

When we say all people are endowed with worth and dignity, we are proposing that their gifts—whatever they may be—are to be identified and explored and developed. All along the way we can make choices about how to do that. To me this explains how it is that even though all have this gift, some people choose the “dark side”, to curse the world and turn into Hitler, while others choose to follow the light and become Desmond Tutu and Mother Teresa.

Rebecca advises us to choose to bless the world, knowing that we could choose—and many do—to curse the world.

Everybody sitting in this room possesses this endowment. My message today is that each person can be *the best that they can be*, according to their gifts and according to the choices of how to grow one’s potential and what direction to point it.

(That phrase, “Be all that you can be”, was once used as a marketing tool by the Army to recruit young people into its forces. I always resented the Army using those words, since my whole life has been a repudiation of the idea that the military is the way to become great. But that’s me; maybe you have a different view of it.)

