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## Empty ground: The Obama presidency

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El Rio Debajo del Rio

?New seed is faithful. It roots deepest in the places that are most empty.?

--cpe

The night after the election of Barack Obama, Collin Powell was interviewed by CNN. He did not say about Barack: ?Look what he did!? Instead Powell said about the people: ?Look what *we* did!?

**Ironically, what has been brought to the fore in this election cycle, appears not to have occurred because we were plush-full with certainty, but rather from us being chronically emptied out ?**

Imagine, emptiness being one of the few conditions that attracts fresh assertion of worthy ideals.

There is a certain kind of emptiness; an accidental or purposely prepared vacancy -- in which everything once held sacred has been rooted out by fate and/or by free will ...

Then, ?a receptive void? is created in our hearts and minds ... one that is very likely to be filled to the good again ... or, as the old prophets might say, fulfilled ... *if* we can only hold the space open long enough, let it pass through the fire and cook deeply enough. If we can both work and wait, all at the same time.

This peculiar kind of cultivated emptiness that often leads to something greater, works something like this

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## **Prima Gravida: I once grew a forest from scratch.**

I began to grow a forest behind my house, as an active prayer in honor of my refugee dear ones, and to entreat the strongest intercession and blessings to be shed down on those millions in the world who, of necessity, often not of their choice, struggle to walk an unfamiliar or painful road ... away from a life that has literally or spiritually, been burned to the ground.

To create this living prayer -- this homemade forest-- I began by digging out all the crabgrass/ Kentucky blue tangle in the large expanse behind the house, making certain ablutions over the black soil, as is our ethnic custom. It took a long time. Crabgrass holds on deep with all its thousand hands.

Afterward, as my father and his father and his father's father had done for generations before on the farmlands, I set the ground afire -- a low, hot fire trenched on all sides on a completely windless day.

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I watched as anything dry or dead, burnt down to gray and black ashes with glowing red rubies amongst them.

Then, I left the smoking ground fallow. Cooked and empty. Emptier than empty. Broken, really. Perhaps close to "beyond hope." This was the way it was supposed to be in order that, as my grandmother used to put it, "a miracle might be attracted."

That first year and onward, a sufficient amount of tears were cried into the soil so that the ground could be proclaimed properly christened. But nothing came of it. Neither plant nor seeds nor animals appeared on any day of creation there. Just blankness. Not even weeds wanted that smoky-smelling soil.

So I waited and watched painfully long over that empty, "nothing's happening and getting worse" plot of ground.

### **Holding Faith During Unpromising Times**

Perhaps you are similar: I have an almost semi-pathological optimism about faith ... not "believing," but *knowing* that we will, ultimately not be stranded by Creator. But even that began to tremor a bit as I waited with my fallow ground and nothing changed.

I asked myself, "In the midst of our brick-bungalow village, would any seed really be able to find its way to this fieldless field? Maybe not. Maybe all that hip aching labor to empty everything that could be emptied ... would come to nothing?"

Neighbors and passers-by stopped to ask why the land behind the house was "torn up." "Why is it so naked?" "Didn't I plan to put down some nice Kentucky Blue?" "You gonna build a big garage?" I stood by my homely fallow land.

"You're growing a what?"

"I'm growing a forest in the city, an urban forest."

People went away scratching their heads.

A village inspector stopped by. He said he had heard that someone in the neighborhood was building a forest in their backyard.

"Doesn't look like a forest," he said.

"Wait." I said.

"Might be illegal," he said.

"As you can see, sir, at this point it is only 'a forest in the air.'"

"Hmmf," he grumped.

**But in the second year, there came the faithful miracle.** Tiny trees began to appear in the fallow ground, trees so small that one would be tempted to tell children that these were lived in by elves.

Those who came to find the emptiness were the tiniest sprigs of spruce, a delicate red-stemmed maple, and seven baby bays from a huge mother tree down the road.

At the end of the third year, there were two maples four feet tall, fifteen bays, two ash trees almost five feet tall, three golden rain trees whose small puffed up lanterns had bloomed twice, and twenty-seven elm starts.

As amazing, it appeared that the earth remembered its own most ancient patterns -- like we do remember and still purely love justice even when others are severing and unjust with us-- for beneath the saplings, little grape ivies, fern leaf, and other 5,000 year old ground covers began to grow again.

Isn't it so, that the seed somehow hid in the soil far down, no matter what had been jockeyed over it by developers' and builders' executions? Wasn't that like the human spirit too? Full-headed clover-- another ancient greening that had been invaded and extincted by 'lawns' --now broke through the skin of that emptied earth as well. The earth, emptied -- like us -- still remembered its elemental self, longing to return. And, did.

Next, flickers, sparrows and woodpeckers, and foxes and raccoons and coyotes brought seeds of various sorts. There began the start of a wild strawberry vine, and wild onions. There was yerba buena, mint, yanica, and other herbs -- all creature carried into this emptiness, new life.

Everything began to thrum and thrive as though Nature has tremendous love for humans, to grant us plantings both medicinal and beautiful.

Onto that plot of land that once held so little, also came new butterflies, the flying red-spotted ladies, and crickets -- not the usual tired-out urban crickets who say 'twe-twe,' but the crickets who sing four-part harmonies and ring like bells, 'twetwetwetwetwetwe ...'

There too, stood an old wooden garden wall that protected the little tree farm from north winds in winter. The stars overhead could now shine, I thought/ hoped, on another tiny part of Eden that everyone had thought had gone down for the count.

But, it hadn't. It only appeared so.

**New Life was not reclaimed by beginning with the lush and vibrant, but with the dusty dry, the smoky sallow, the hopeless looking, the broken down, the emptied out.**

Sort of like my own life sometimes, maybe somewhat like yours sometimes too? Sometimes like our culture, our political parties, our hierarchies, our best laid plans ?of mice ... and more mice.? All gone down to nada.

Yet even so, the empty ground waits in such fertile conditions ... even whilst looking so bleary and bleak for so long.

**Our culture, our personal and cultural politics, our spirits renewing themselves from abject emptiness is not a new artifact, but an ancient story told many different ways.**

This miracle of new life springing up in fallow ground occurs in the classical Greek myth of Persephone, the maiden Goddess of the earth. She was captured and held for a long time underground. During that time, her mother Demeter, the Earth herself, so missed her daughter's lovely spirit that she became barren, and a cold and sterile Ever-winter fell across the land.

As we tell the story in our family, when Persephone was finally released from the travails of hell, she returned to the earth with such joy, that every step of her bare foot that touched the emptied ground instantly caused a swath of green and flowers to spread in every direction.

Similarly, the emptiness, the exiling of certain principles, somehow producing a return of the holy ... in that leitmotif, the Passion and Crucifixion story is no different ...

- down to bones we go ...
- the dark of the tomb is our only light ...
- the harrowing of hell turns on us too ...
- the climbing ascent up through darkness ...
- the return and Resurrection ...
- then, the living out of the Promise, pragmatically

The central point is about nearly absolute emptiness ... but then holding faith that it will be filled again ... and fulfilled. And it is.

**How odd to find that transformational momentum of our times ... comes in good part from our principles and ideals having been burnt to the ground ...** loss of habeas corpus, governmental approval of torture of human beings, incomprehensible wars and rationalized loss of lives, hierarchical fiats, non-stop screed-fests on television, radio and in print, valuing a human life on ability to pay rather than thinking how to help this soul live, disregard for creatures of the Ark, pollution of life-giving water, and torment of precious Nature ...

I think one of the most harsh gift-lessons to accept, and one of the most powerful I know, is that life repeats itself, renews itself, no matter how many times it is stabbed, stripped to the bone, hurled to the ground, hurt, hunted, ridiculed, ignored, scorned, looked down upon, tortured or made helpless.

That some version we can recognize as Eden, ever lies underneath any emptied field of psyche, religion, work, love-life, politics, family, culture.

**No matter how disheartened we might grow, new seed goes first to the empty and open places -- even when the open place is a grieving heart, a tortured mind, or a devastated spirit.**

In any time, including this extraordinary time ... What is this faithful process of spirit and seed that

touches empty ground and makes it rich again? It's greater workings I cannot claim to understand. But I know this: when we change our hearts and minds ... and when enough of us do, when a tipping point of emptiness occurs ... then, new life most often finds its way in, and takes firm hold.

And that new life? Call it Holy Spirit, who inhabits many different human forms-- each one imperfectly-- but perfectly enough to let us see as we stand in the care of this faithful force, that

- what has seemed dead is dead no longer,
- what has seemed lost is no longer lost,
- that which some have claimed impossible, is made clearly possible,
- and what ground is fallow is only resting-- resting and waiting for the blessed seed to arrive on the wind with all Godspeed.

It will.

And for many on earth at this moment, during this election cycle, it surely already has.

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