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Hope and history turn a corner

by Morna Murray

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In 2008, Barack Obama was swept into office on a tide of almost overwhelming optimism, idealism and new hope for the future of our country. Young voters, and voters in general, turned out in record numbers. Many of those who supported him believed in a post-racial America, an end to Washington gridlock, the promise of genuine reform. It was one of the most inspirational times I can remember in my adult life.

Then some realities set in. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell made his famous announcement that the No. 1 Republican priority was making Obama a one-term president. Polarization grew to an all-time high. I would argue that the utter disrespect shown the office of the president in these last four years has been a national disgrace. (Joe Wilson shouting "You lie!" during the State of the Union is just one example.)

Despite this, the country witnessed a president who made tough decisions in staving off a depression, ending gross abuses by Wall Street, passing historic health care reform, resurrecting the U.S. auto industry, ending the war in Iraq. The list goes on.

Yet many of his supporters weren't satisfied. Obama hadn't made good on all that "hope" he promised: immigration reform, tax increases for the wealthy, green energy, creating genuine bipartisanship, marriage equality, etc. When these things didn't materialize, many liberals became disenchanted with the president.

I was always irritated by these arguments. The president faced an absolutely herculean task. People can talk about the blame game all they want, but the fact is: recovering from the economy Obama inherited takes years. And passing legislation requires a Congress that can do so, not a House of Representatives that was willing to risk global economic meltdown rather than compromise. Compromise became a dirty word with the tea party backlash in the 2010 midterm elections. The standstill on Capitol Hill has been

unprecedented. See McConnell's remark.

All those things aside, I believe what we witnessed last night was hope turning a page. I have been a supporter of Obama, even through his toughest times. But what I saw last night was a majority of this country, despite having endured extremely difficult times -- and disappointment -- seeing the light ahead. And in doing so, they have come to realize what a difficult job this president has had and how steadfastly he has held the course and rejected cynicism. It is hope grown up.

My favorite line from the president's victory speech is this:

I have always believed that hope is that stubborn thing inside us that insists, despite all the evidence to the contrary, that something better awaits us so long as we have the courage to keep reaching, to keep working, to keep fighting.

That stubborn thing inside us insists on courage: Keep working, keep fighting. That is real hope. That is grown-up hope. That is the measure of a man who was swept in on a tide of idealistic hope and showed us he could take a long-term view, make unpopular decisions and begin the extraordinarily difficult and painstakingly long task of turning idealistic hope into genuine change.

I believe what we have witnessed is historic. And it is a phenomenon held by virtually all religious traditions. Politics and religious traditions came together last night as hope triumphed over cynicism. I grew up learning and believing that good always wins out. Republicans bet on cynicism -- perhaps not all, but many. I'm not going to say it was Harry Potter vs. Voldemort (but some have). But in my opinion, in the never-ending struggle between good and evil (hope and cynicism, light and darkness, pick your metaphor), we chose to believe in our own goodness and the candidate who reflected that back to us.

Once again, last night, hope won out. With our eyes slightly more open, we chose hope -- the grown-up version. Hope and history turned a corner.

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[Morna Murray is a public policy expert and children's advocate. She previously served as senior counsel to Democratic Sen. Robert P. Casey Jr. of Pennsylvania. She also served as executive director of Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, as vice president and counsel for First Focus, Washington, D.C., and as director of youth development for the Children's Defense Fund.]

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