

Passing on “Blankie”, November 3, 2004

By Jo Anne Bander

It is not only infants and toddlers who become attached to their “blankies”. My sister Natalie and I were attached to the same one, the tattered green plaid wool blanket that lived on the sofa in the TV room. After Mother died, I got it in trade for a lamp. I still have my “blankie” and only now, 44 years after the election of John F. Kennedy, am I giving it up because it is time to pass it to a new generation crying out for the idealism, hope and true family values that it has meant to me.

The T.V. room in our two-story New England colonial was the place where we were together as a family and where I became a political junkie watching the evening news and talking politics and current events. Mother sat with the newspaper, or maybe her knitting, a cup of coffee and a cigarette; Daddy lounged on the sofa, cigar in his mouth. Natalie and I sprawled on the floor under “blankie”, a utilitarian lap robe made of thin, coarse wool that quickly stiffened with age. Over the years it incorporated the musty smell of being in an enclosed space dominated by a cigar smoker and a cigarette smoker as well as memories.

In that den, and under the green blanket, I experienced my political coming of age. I stayed up warmed by it watching the 1960 Democratic Party Convention when John F. Kennedy got the nomination, and cuddled by it on November 8th as I listened through the election results of that very close race to learn, finally, that John F. Kennedy would be the next president. That election spelled a change of generation in American politics and inspired my pre- baby boomer generation with idealism and belief in public service. John F. Kerry, the Democratic candidate this year, made that same election his reference point for a life in public service, pursuit of the presidency and commitment to a just and equitable society.

“Blankie” has traveled many miles since then. When I claimed it in 1990, it accompanied me to Coral Gables, Florida, where it did its duty staying up with me for the 1992 and 1996 Conventions and general elections, when Clinton won. It was with me in Maine for the 2000 Conventions and back in Florida for the non-decision of November 7, 2000 election night when I finally gave up and went to bed with the results undetermined.

“Blankie” now lives in the house we bought in Maine, buried in a closet, replaced for daily cuddling by a mohair blue plaid blanket, but brought out for political conventions and election nights. I brought it to Coral Gables for election night 2004, not as a talisman, since its record of delivering my candidates is mixed, but as a connection to things past—my idealism, my sense that I could make a difference, my hope for the future, continuity.

This election has been the most polarizing that I can remember and I have been more involved than ever before. I wrote checks to Kerry and the Democratic National Committee and raised money; did a wave and honk for a Senate candidate on primary day and poll watch; canvassed likely Democratic voters in western Palm Beach County the weekend before the presidential election; and helped MoveOn get out the vote.

Like so many of my friends and family, I talked politics with anyone and everyone, but mostly with people who thought like I did. I reveled in the fact that the editorial pages in Florida were full of endorsements for Kerry, with traditionally conservative papers such as the Orlando Sentinel endorsing him and the Tampa Tribune not endorsing Bush. But I also opened myself up to different views, some unintentionally received.

The canvassing in Palm Beach was focused on homes in working class neighborhoods. We walked streets where the signs for Bush-Cheney appeared to outnumber those for Kerry-Edwards some 7 to 3 or 6 to 4. Where there were not signs, there were often iconic American flags. One knock at a home where my canvassing sheets showed two registered Democrats brought out a 40 something male head of household who, with his wife, had early voted for Bush. “We might be registered Democrats, but we have voted Republican for years. The Republicans express our values”. There it was—the values word.

The analysis of this election and Bush’s win is already focusing on the role that simple messages and “moral values” played in mobilizing his base. It is the attention to values, and how they are defined, that has made me throw “blankie” into the washing machine with Woolite to get it clean and cuddly and ready to pass on to my children’s generation.

The values that shaped me as I lay under that blanket in the ‘50’s and ‘60’s were tolerance, loyalty, peace, truth, diversity, social justice, economic equity, privacy, choice and separation of church and state. The “moral values” that I heard this election were values of denial--denial of gay rights, choice and government engagement to protect the disenfranchised. The “family values” were a deeply felt nostalgia for a time and place when family was defined as a unit of four headed by a working father and staffed by a stay at home mom and tolerance was easier because we knew our neighbors and they were all like us.

While my values and idealism are the same as when Kennedy was elected, the world is different. This world requires a new generation of leadership who have the years it will require to reclaim the high moral plane we were on when I drank my first political nectar and take us forward with a world view that recognizes that the United States must lead with the commitment to justice and inclusion that is the true morality underlying democracy. Many of our potential next generation leaders surfaced this year, putting their hearts and souls into the election convinced that their passion, votes and grass roots organizing would change our country’s leadership. They are now feeling the bitterness of defeat by a stealth force disguised in a morality that claims to be superior to theirs.

I am ready to be a coach and history teacher, one who wants to reflect with them on the meaning of a declaration made over two hundred years ago. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal. That they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. That among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” But first my generation must offer comfort, hope and perspective to our blossoming idealists who could easily lose their vision and commitment in their first battle. To them I pass “blankie”, cleaned of soil and smoke but still infused with hope, values and continuity.

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