

Promise-Making and Full-Throttle Democracy

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The candidates are out of the gates and away to the races. They are making tracks across the land, kissing babies, shaking hands, collecting money, debating viciously and making promises. And as they run, they need us as active citizens to hold them accountable, for the sake of our wider and wider communities and for the sake of the earth, and for the sake of the future.

In this remarkable and wild democratic ride, we must guide the candidate's feet while they run their races; for if we don't hold the candidates accountable we will get exactly the government we have worked for: a government that cares little for the people because we have cared so little for it.

We must hold the candidates accountable, for how they behave with each other and the public. We must hold them accountable for how well they know all the issues facing this nation. But as the candidates rev their engines, blowing smoke in all directions, trying to prove in all dimensions they are the fastest, loudest and best-est, we do not, I repeat, we do not have to hold them accountable for all the monster-truck promises they are making.

Politicians on the campaign trail make all kinds of promises. Remember these? "A chicken in every pot and a car in every garage!" "Four more years!" "Read my lips – no new taxes." All broken promises. Beached whales washed up on the shores of history and stinking to high heaven. Promises, when fresh and swimming freely in the blue ocean of hope can be beautiful, elegant, majestic, even. But talk is cheap.

As Mae West reminds us, "An ounce of performance is worth pounds of promises."

The thing about a promise is that when someone makes one, you kind of expect them to follow through. When they don't, especially if it's a promise which touches your heart, when someone breaks a promise like that, it pierces you through with disappointment – trust is broken, faith is shattered under the best of circumstances. For the sake of protecting our delicate hearts, and not to appear too gullible, we need to think of campaign promises as proposals, marketing proposals,

rather than as binding contracts. Seriously, given that we know every single politician, if elected, would renege on most of their campaign vows, it's amazing that anyone ever bothers going to the polls. Frankly, it's a bit of a mystery that democracy works at all.

So why do they break their promises? It certainly doesn't help their credibility. You don't want to vote for anyone who has proven again and again that they solemnly agree to do one thing and then, once in office, do something entirely different. You'd think, if you were an honest politician who wanted to be re-elected someday, it would be in your best interest to follow through with all the things you promised your constituency before they voted you in. But that never, ever happens. Why?

Believe it or not there are three really good reasons that politicians break their promises. First, situations change. Simple example: Roosevelt promised that the US would not enter the WWII, but then Pearl Harbor changed everything.

Situations change. Flowers fade, spiders flee, leaves fall, our bodies age, the earth erodes. Everything changes. And politicians, like the rest of us, need to be flexible and respond to the times.

The Second reason politicians break their promises is that some issues are election season specials and we lose interest in them once the campaign is over. It makes sense for the savvy politician to promise us whatever we want to hear, and then quietly let the issue fade with our fading interest. For example, we tend to get all hopped up about trade issues, like NAFTA, while all the candidates are duking it out. But once the dust clears, really, who wants to hear all the nitty-gritty details of tariff and non-tariff measures, value-added services and all the exceptions to all the rules? Yawn. We walk away from these promises which once consumed us sometimes even before the candidates break them. After all, we have lives to lead with much more pressing matters. I mean, who's taking Suzie to ballet this week anyway?

And then then there is the third and the most interesting reason politicians break their promises. Simply put: politicians promise us what we want to hear. And if we got all the goodies in every

stump speech we would have terrible government. An election is like going to an all-you-can-eat buffet. We tend to gorge ourselves on the rich, salty, sweet promises and forget that what we really need is a plate laden with colorful vegetables. Mashed potatoes, delicious as they are, don't count! If we got everything we wanted during the campaign we would make ourselves sick. Not only do we treat political campaigns like all-you-can-eat buffets and focus only on the most appealing flavor-of-the-day issues, we really don't know what is going on in the kitchen. We don't know how the sausage is made. Even the most informed voter doesn't know the whole picture. City Hall, the School Board, Albany, Washington are all a whole lot more complicated than we would like to believe. In an ideal world each campaign promise would be presented with the whole back story, but the political process doesn't allow for that. It would be ideal if all the candidates would just tell it like it is, "Sorry folks, we have to raise taxes and cut spending to make ends meet. But vote for me anyway!" But we don't live in an ideal world, so what politicians promise and what they can deliver are very different things. Someone once said, "Dishonest government is sordid, but the idea of honest government, a government that actually followed through with all the promises made on the campaign trail, is just plain scary."

If we are honest with ourselves, we would admit that situations change, that we are fickle in our interests, and that we don't know the whole story. If we were honest with ourselves we would admit that we don't need to hold politicians accountable for their campaign promises, it's a waste of energy. Rather we would do best to elect good people who understand the issues, who are authentic in their demeanor, who are grounded when the going gets tough, who are flexible as the world changes, who genuinely care about the most vulnerable in society, and who can lead us into a better tomorrow. If we are honest with ourselves, regardless of any promises made, we will look for leaders who will make good decisions on our behalf, on the behalf of our neighbors, and on behalf of the earth.

Enough about campaign promises, especially during this off-year election season, let's go to a topic that's really interesting: you and me and all of us together. After all, politicians aren't the only ones who make promises, are they? We all do it. All the little and large, formal and informal, spoken and unspoken agreements of the day and of our lives. All the commitments we

make to ourselves and others. Appointments, New Year's resolutions, wedding vows, contracts, covenants, diets, pacts, rules. Theologian Martin Buber went as far as to say human beings are promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing beings. That's just who we are. That's just how we roll.

Our promises, our broken promises, our trust, our loyalty, our faithfulness, and all our failures and all our reconciliation define us, describe us, describe our place in the world. Why do we make promises? For the same reasons as politicians. We want to describe the relationship we will have with one another. Why do we break those promises? For the same reasons as politicians. Because situations change and we need to be flexible, or because the promises we once made don't interest anyone anymore, or because we didn't have the whole story when we made the promise in the first place and now we know better.

We make promises

We keep promises

We break promises

And we renew promises

Democracy works, community works, friendship works, family sometimes works, and Love works because we don't give up. Even though we have broken our vows a thousand times, we don't give up. We continually use promises to define and redefine who we are in relationship. So, bring your whole self to the table, to the relationship that we are constantly defining and re-defining. Bring your best self and your struggling self; bring your changed and changing self; bring your mistakes and your triumphs; bring your shortcomings and your strengths and above all, bring your recommitment to strive for good. Bring your whole self into community. Open yourself to the great ocean of hope.

Most of us are trying desperately to walk together in peace; striving to overcome division, and fear, and all that separates one from another. Most of us will, on occasion, fall short, but held in the transformative power of Love, we try again. "Stay," we say to our Loves, "Stay in relationship, even though you have broken your vows a thousand times, and even though I am a changing being, growing, transforming every day, and even though the weather, the seasons, the

world are shifting with every moment. Stay.” We say to our Loves and our Loves, our true Loves, reply, “Always, always.”

For further Study...

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