

## Midwifing a New America

By Vincent Harding, PhD

I think it was sometime early in 2007 that I began to find myself almost possessed by a profound premonitory sense that the next year, *this* year, 2008, would be filled with a special power. At first I was unable to articulate or explain my feeling with any more clarity than a deep and growing conviction that we were approaching what my Buddhist friends would call a propitious historical moment. Although I realized that the likelihood of an amazing presidential electoral possibility was a part of the story, I knew there was more at work. I began increasingly to suspect that there was a relentless connection in my mind (and heart) to the fact that the spring of 2008 would mark 40 years since the assassination of my friend and brother, Martin King. Grounded as I am in the biblical accounts of 40 days and nights of rain, 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, 40 days of testing and preparation for Jesus' ministry, I could not resist the possible symbolic associations and what meaning they might have.

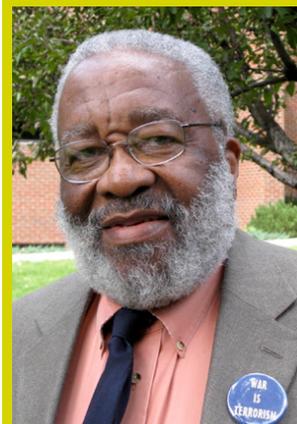
Earlier this year I shared my ruminations with Rabbi Arthur Waskow, a long-time friend and co-worker. Art said that he had often sought to understand the persistent presence and power of the number 40 in the Hebrew texts. What had begun to be evident to him, he reported, was the fact that while we usually speak in our culture of nine months as the normal time of a woman's pregnancy before giving birth, the more precise and traditional period is actually given as 40 weeks. As soon as I heard Art's words it became clearer to me what I had been feeling, sensing so deeply. And I began to try to articulate it for myself and others: *Something is trying to be born in America*. Again, I'm not quite certain what it is, but the new emerging reality seems firmly related to the visionary calls of King and the earlier urgent hope of Langston Hughes ("O, let

America be America again/The land that never has been yet/and yet must be /The land where every [one] is free.") Suffusing all of it I hear as well the beautiful wisdom and strong challenge of June Jordan: "We are the ones we've been waiting for."

So as this year went on, as I sat one August night in Denver among the tens of thousands of on-site witnesses to Barack Obama's acceptance speech, it seemed obvious to me that my young brother was related to all of this, but more as an opening, an opportunity, a new space. He seems to offer the place where all the "we" people can stop our waiting and carry on our work to create the pathway, the birthing channel toward "The land that never has been yet, and yet must be." Indeed, as I wrestled with Biblical symbols, the birthing imagery and the calls of Langston, Martin and June (herself the marvelous offspring of Ella Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer, Ann Braden and Amzie Moore), I could not escape another revelatory metaphor. Not only is something trying to be born in America, but some of us are called to be the midwives in this magnificent, desperately needed and so painfully creative process.

As so often happens, the midwife metaphor overtook me before I knew what it really meant. So I turned to Selena Green, a gifted, compassionate and socially-conscious midwife, and asked her to tell me something about what she does. Selena said that one of her most crucial roles, especially toward the final days of a pregnancy, was to help assure the mother that "you can do this," and that she is not alone in the very difficult journey. Then this highly skilled practitioner shared with me another extraordinary element in the description of her loving ministry (of course Selena's work deeply fulfills the basic definition of ministry as "an act of serving"). → →

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## Midwifing, continued

Often, especially in the last stages of a pregnancy, this spiritually-grounded companion of hope said she also speaks to the infant in the womb.

Recognizing the deep sense of safety and security experienced by the womb-kept child, imagining the great joy involved in having all his/her needs supplied almost effortlessly, Selena said she shares words of encouragement with the infant as well. Like a womb-whisperer, she says something like, “I know how good you feel, how surrounded you are by a protective nurturing ocean of love. I realize it feels as if this is the only world you need to know. But, my child, when you start to feel the urgent life forces beginning to move you down, to push you out, to press your tender head into that seemingly impossible opening, go. Let yourself move toward the light, painful though it may be. The fullness of your life is waiting for you on the other side. Go, come, my child. You can, you must make it through. You can do this.”

Even as Selena shared her marvelous work and words with me, I began to see their meaning for our nation and its social midwives. We Americans are both mother and infant, giving birth, seeking new life, full of fear, full of pain, turning away from the possibility of even more pain, feeling “the urgency of now,” wondering if we are able, afraid of what the new life demands and costs, fearful of giving up all we know (or think we know) so well, grasping all that keeps us from new beginning, from new life. Afraid of the pain, afraid of the unknown, afraid of the hope, we live urgently in need of midwives. Are we the ones?

Over the past several weeks, as I have shared these searching reflections with other people in what I like to call “democratic conversations,” my own perceptions have been expanded. For instance, in one of Atlanta’s Historic Black Colleges, a group of Morehouse men immediately grasped and celebrated the idea that *they* could be midwives for the nation (following in the steps of their most renowned alumnus, Martin Luther King, Jr.). In another Atlanta session two women who had given birth years before remembered their own labor. One of them recalled screaming, pleading with her midwife to find some way to stop the labor process and its agonizing pain. Then, she also shared with us the power that entered her being when her midwife urged her, encouraged her, helped her to face the pain; “turn into the pain, don’t run away,” her helper said. Facing the pain, the mother recalled, she endured and overcame. In Boston, a female hospice doctor called my attention to how much my womb-whisperer friend, Selena, was like their hospice service – helping, encouraging that fetus to give up one surely satisfying life for the great possibility of moving toward something magnificently more. So midwives and hospice attendants may work together in this powerful moment, helping us face the pain of dying and being born, letting America become the land that never has been yet, and yet must be.

Perhaps this deepening of my own vision was why I needed to return last week to Denver and share the midwife call in a class I was visiting at the Iliff School of Theology (where I taught for 23 years before retirement – whatever that means). There, a student came up to me at the end of the class, identified herself as a midwife and said “When I go through the pain with my mothers, not only do I say, ‘you can do it,’ I say, ‘you *are* doing it.’” Is it possible that those are the words, the hope needed for a nation now filled with political, social, economic and spiritual crisis? Perhaps the Chinese pictograph for the word “crisis” is the word that midwives must carry: “Crisis: time of great danger/time of great opportunity.” Perhaps we are the ones who will walk through the great danger into the marvelous opportunity for helping our nation begin in a new way to realize its best possibilities – to be born again. Perhaps we are not only the ones we’ve been waiting for, but we are the ones who have already begun to do the work of creating a more perfect union. And we are not alone. 🌐

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