

JANUARY 20, 2009

I can hardly think about Barak Obama becoming president without crying. And I can't easily explain why.

I remember when JFK was elected. I was in a monastery then, a high school freshman. I was blown away - a catholic became president. Years before, when we lived in Virginia, my mom and dad told us we couldn't play with the neighbor kids. We were catholic and they didn't like that.

I remember, too, the day an old, black man stepped off the sidewalk, into the road, to let my mom and me pass. Tidewater Virginia in those days represented much of what made America shameful.

But JFK was elected. Viet Nam was just a place then, not a war. And Martin Luther King, a young preacher, faced the worst in us, and preached hope, that a change would one day come.

And it seemed for a time it would.

I was a senior the day JFK was killed. The principle told us to go home and pray. Stunned and silent, we did.

Then Martin was killed. Cities went up in flames. We were at war with ourselves. Hatred boiled onto the streets. I was a full-time student by day, a full-time police clerk by night.

That night, at shift change, the desk sergeant yelled, "King's shot dead". Some cheered. Sgt. Byrd fired his riot gun into the ceiling, an accident, he said. He was black - and angry. Me, too, but mostly scared.

Everything good had turned to stone - cold, damp, stones. Viet Nam drove it home. I was drafted. Being a conscientious objector helped, but pain, death were everywhere. Johnson quit. Nixon resigned. Ford, Carter, Reagan, Clinton, the Bushes all had their day.

Yet not since JFK and Martin Luther King have I heard a national leader ask us to be and do something bigger, better than we are. JFK said it was on us to eradicate poverty. Martin said we needed to build a just society. I was young then. I totally believed it, and in it, and in them. And it was all blown away. ALL BLOWN AWAY.

Maybe that's why I cry. I've kept so much, so bottled up, for so long. I just don't know how now to let it all go.

In 1969, 400,000 of us were gased and beaten on that mall. Today, 2,000,000 gathered there, peacefully, and, with a few words, solemnly spoken so all could hear, perhaps a nation, a world, rose out of a long, dark night.

And maybe that, too, is why I cry.