

Dear friends, Hope you are all well and enjoying the “winter” weather. I say that because here it feels more like spring than winter. While spring is always a joyful time, it is more joyful when it comes after a long and dreary winter. While I love the sunny weather, I have fallen in love with the seasons here. It feels like that rhythm has been broken this year. Nevertheless, I try not to lament the lack of snow or climate change but rather focus on the optimism that spring brings. Let us hope that this spring a thousand flowers of peace bloom and the world comes together to heal the planet. I know that sounds like a fantasy but by the law of averages I think the world is due for some unexpected positive surprises this year. Moreover, the world has really been getting better, according to Steven Pinker's “The Better Angels of Our Nature.” Just that you wouldn't know that from the news.

On the personal front we are just recovering from a nasty virus that has been going around. For the first time in the past few years I had to just surrender to the virus. While I was able to teach my classes last week I didn't have energy for anything else. One afternoon I went home and slept for almost fifteen hours! Can't remember the last time that happened. We watched the “Descendants” which I highly recommend. It is a thought provoking and spiritually awakening movie. I also couldn't resist watching some of the Republican debates. It was entertaining for a little while. Needless to say I continue to be a big admirer of Obama. Nicole sometimes makes fun of my religiously listening to his speeches. I am sure many of you have wondered, what is it with Sankar and Obama? Well, the answer to that question and others I try to give in sections 9 and 10 of this collection of random thoughts. Some of it is based on conversations with some of my friends who happen to be, like yours truly, between the left of center and the far far left of center. Some of us still like Obama but some of us are disappointed. But if one were to make a mathematical scale of political ideology, we will all be contained in the interval $(-\infty, -L)$ where L is the lowest score of all among left leaning Americans. Seriously, let us take a little poll here. When was the last time that you even contemplated reading the Wall Street Journal?

Anyway, I hope you enjoy reading this. As always, look forward to hearing from you!
Sankar

1. (12/28/2011) When someone is in their spiritual infancy, it may be good to have faith in an absolute authority, such as a particular teacher or a book. Much like a child needs guidance from its parents. Then again, how good that guidance is depends on how wise the parents are and how intelligent the child is.
2. (1/7/2012) Yesterday the US navy rescued 13 Iranian sailors from Somali pirates. In the navy ship that captured the pirates and rescued the hostages were an Indian American (Sikh) who spoke in Urdu with the Iranian captain (Urdu is a mix of Persian and Arabic, spoken in Pakistan and Northern India) and a Pakistani-American. It seems to me, and I hope it is true, that the children of immigrants forget the differences from their ancestral land.
3. (1/11/12) I was sitting in my office today and for a moment noticed the stillness, how the mind was focussed on the task and thoughts were flowing like a clear stream. It lasted just for a few moments before being interrupted by all kinds of extraneous noise. In this day of TV, internet and phone we do not get enough quiet moments. Blessed are those who can go without the noisemakers! There was a nice article by Pico Iyer about this: <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/01/opinion/sunday/the-joy-of-quiet.html>
4. When I was young I used to spend much time trying to "control" the mind, getting it to be still. At some point I realized that the very process of checking whether it was quiet is what was making it

unquiet. Kind of like Heisenberg's uncertainty principle. But I used to think there was something wrong with me because my mind wouldn't be still. At that time I didn't even think that I was capable of much productive thought. Now I realize that, productive or not, all this thinking and the resulting analysis paralysis is just something that has been handed down to me by evolution. None of us can escape it. Some of us have a certain natural calmness of mind. But with much practice, concentration, meditation and communion with nature it is possible to develop that natural calmness. I highly recommend regular exercise and allocating some time everyday to some task that gives you joy and occupies your mind completely, be it gardening, cooking, home improvement or playing a sport. Something that can bring about total concentration of body and mind.

5. (1/21/12) The rise of Gingrich has been baffling to many of us. How could people overlook all his obvious problems? I think this is a case of the Republicans getting burned by the fire they stoked. They have been playing to the anger / hatred of their conservative base against liberals and Obama by demonizing both with distortions and misleading propaganda. Now that base is willing to overlook Gingrich's flaws because he is able to direct their anger /hatred at liberals and Obama more forcefully than Romney and deflect it away from himself. They are able to believe him when he says it is all a conspiracy by "liberal" media against him. (2/26/12: This sounds really dated and obvious now, after one month!)

6. (2/18/12) In general the Republican party and the conservatives are a leaderless and rudderless group now, basically drifting with the wind. Boehner, Cantor, McConnell ...none of them are really good leaders, able to command the respect and allegiance of the party as a whole. Neither are any of the top candidates. The only people that really command a following and stand on their own feet are Limbaugh, Beck and Palin but again, not of the entire party. Fortunately amongst the democrats, Obama and Pelosi while not agreeing on everything are able to jointly command the following of the entire party.

7. (2/18/12) People follow a leader because they see something in him or her that is part of themselves. Thus each of the republican candidates so far are proxies for certain groups of American society. Each group thrusts their aspirations and hopes on to this person. They see this person as fighting on their behalf, in fact they see themselves fighting, vicariously, through this person. My hope is that the failure of all these candidates functions as a mirror and helps their supporters to see the flaws in their own attitudes and approach.

8. (2/24/12) The oil company barons and the US chamber of commerce are not stupid people. They know the truth about climate change. But they are fighting legislation because it will hurt their bottom line hard. If it is impossible to find a way to pass such legislation without hitting their bottom line, then we should at least find out in what ways climate change will affect their personal well-being and property. Right now they are banking on the fact that, with all their wealth, they can adapt to climate change, and they have said so explicitly. Unfortunately, most of the people of this planet whose lives will be affected the most cannot adapt. There needs to be an MLK or Mandela or Gandhi fighting against climate change.

9. What is it with me and Obama?

Much of the answer lies in the paragraph #6 above. It is not just because he is black or that I am married to a black woman. I fell in love with Nicole for who she is, because she simultaneously mirrors and complements my deepest characteristics and tendencies. Similarly I am a strong supporter of Obama because I can see my own tendencies and attitudes and guiding principles in him. I have a hard

time understanding why people are so critical of him, both on the left and the right. I find it very hurtful and insulting when people casually assume they know better than him, and that his supporters are deluded. Here I try to explain briefly what I like about him, why I think he has done well, and also try to see if I can refute some of the common criticisms. I will write more about this in future, for sure, as I get more time. Meanwhile if you need a good place for a list of Obama's achievements and read about their significance I recommend obamaachievements.org Trust me, they are many and they are significant. You can spend hours going through the website and the articles referenced there.

He has managed to stabilize the economy during the most trying, turbulent times in recent history, overcoming extreme obstruction, hatred, partisan bickering and malicious propaganda. He has maintained his calmness, his willingness to seek common ground and to see the good in everyone. He has managed to respond correctly or at least not worsen each of the many crises that have come his way -- starting with a pandemic flu to a tsunami to tornadoes and earthquakes and hurricanes and oil spill and violent upheavals in many parts of the world, both economic and political. Through all this he has still managed to maintain his focus on the bigger picture and lay down the foundations, at least, for a new energy economy, better education, better environment, better healthcare, and a more responsible financial sector.

This is but a small part of his accomplishments. Now that the storm has subsided it is easy to forget the enormity of it. I hope people don't belittle his achievements just because he has not done what they wanted him to do or because things are not where they expected them to be. If you want a more utopian world (as I do especially when it comes to the environment) you should start something like the occupy movement. Obama is the President and leader of the Democratic party. His aim is to move the country in a more progressive direction by increments. I believe in incremental change (see #12 below). If we are not satisfied with the incremental approach, we can try to speed it up by providing a popular upwelling of support for progressive causes. More about this in #11 below. But let us look at his achievements in the context of the circumstances he found himself in and put them in perspective against the scale of the problems he faced. Also let us judge his accomplishments on their own merit, not in contrast to our expectations. Whether it is in healthcare or education or environment or civil rights or nuclear disarmament or energy he has achieved results each quite significant in its own right, that also lay the groundwork for future progress.

The one thing I most admire about Obama, the one reason I still support him so strongly, is his commitment to appeal to the better angels of people, trying to bring people together. I think he is exactly the right person to be the leader of the free world during these precarious yet promising times when the world (and as a microcosm of it, the US) are being joined together more closely than ever, and disparate forces need to be reconciled. I think his agile intellect and amazing ability to process the intricacies of today's world and arrive at rational solutions is a real asset. I think he is a progressive at heart who is trying to do what is best for the country given the political realities. I sincerely believe that the best way to approach the problems of this country is the way Obama has adopted: to have a vision of where we want to go in the long term, to be patient and understanding of others and have a long term strategy in terms of achieving one's goals, to understand where the country is at and try to advance the general population in a more progressive direction while also understanding their needs and desires.

His election by itself was momentous. Can you imagine a Muslim becoming Prime Minister of India? Much as you can argue Lincoln's presidency and winning of civil war was epochal so is Obama's presidency. Because what America has gone through is not just the election of a black man. It is the idea that anyone can truly aspire to anything in the US. It is a demographic and cultural and socio-economic transition that a big section of the population finds truly frightening. Of course the question

is what has been done after the election. The fact that he was able to steer the country through the tea party tumult, manufactured as it was, hold things together and still get things done will be judged properly high I think by history. This is truly one of the most turbulent times since the sixties, and one must credit Obama for keeping things reasonably calm and under control during this time.

As Ezra Klein says in "With a second term..." we have to ask what might have happened if Obama had not been President. What if it had been someone less steady, less rational, more confrontational? We can argue all we want about what Obama has done and what he should have or whether it was all good or bad and so on. Ultimately it boils down to a question of whether you trust this man or not? Do you trust that he cares about the country? Do you trust that he has the ability? Do you trust that he cares about the planet? Do you trust him to do his best? In all cases, my answer continues to be a strong Yes.

10. About criticisms of Obama:

Much as I question myself, I also question Obama's policies. Again, I will write more in time but here is a brief response to some common criticisms.

Obama was the vehicle for the aspirations of the young and the progressive. The bar was set very high, expectations were stratospheric. But remember that if the economy hadn't fallen off the cliff, we might be talking about McCain and Palin right now. So let us not assume that Obama was elected mainly to close Guantanamo and stop all wars. Much as that is a noble cause, that is not why most people voted for him. Just because we campaigned for him doesn't mean we own him.

It is easy to interpret the 2008 elections as a tidal wave against the Iraq warmongering and financial shenanigans. While there was widespread opposition to all that, here are some facts from the 2008 exit polls:

Liberal--22% Moderate --44% Conservative --34%

For 63% economy was ****most important issue****, and Obama got 53% of their vote. Only for 10% Iraq war was most important issue, and 59% of them voted for Obama. For 9% healthcare was most important, and 73% of them voted for Obama. So effectively, only 6% of the vote can be said to be for Obama to undo the damage from the Iraq war. More people wanted him to fix the economy and the healthcare system than cared about closing Guantanamo or fight climate change or change the immigration system. And yet he tried. There was too much opposition, even from his own party. Congressmen are beholden to their voters. If voters in a conservative democratic district are against something, their representatives can only stray so far. Yet he got people to vote for healthcare reform and he and the Democratic congressmen paid a very high price for it. If we want more progressive policies on fighting terrorism or climate change or immigration first we need to change people's minds. As James Fallows says in "Obama Explained," even Jimmy Carter disappointed the left so much that he faced a crippling primary challenge from Ted Kennedy. That is not an excuse but shows the limitations of the office. JFK is probably the best comparison because he was young, a Senator, and not from the mainstream at that time. Remember that JFK had to continue his predecessors' policies against the USSR. As for the civil rights issue he was pushed into it by the growing movement. RFK's man John Seigenthaler worked behind the scenes to get the protestors to not provoke more confrontations, during the freedom rides. Only the most ignorant or in denial would say that race has not been a factor in Obama's presidency. You may argue, if it made things harder because he was black, maybe US wasn't ready for black President? Apart from the irrelevance of it, this also begs the question, would it have been different if Hillary had been President? In fact, we already know how she would have been demonized.

Valid criticism; has not been the transformational President he campaigned as. But it is not fair to say

he didn't try. Also one has to consider the fact of the extreme obstruction from the Republicans, to the extent of denying him even the chance to appoint cabinet members. This is historic and unprecedented, and people have to be galvanized against it, instead of blaming Obama. It is a glaring fact -- no other President has to my knowledge faced an opposition so cynical, so reckless, so uncooperative. He had to find ways to work around it, and I think he has done a pretty good job. History will show, I believe, that his tactic of patient bipartisan effort at first followed by aggressive campaigning against the Congress was the right one. Andrew Sullivan's "Obama's Long Game" does a good job of describing this. I think that with his campaigning for higher taxes and for clean energy he has changed tactics and if he were to get reelected would become more of a transformational President. Even his administration's deportation record is supposed to be laying the groundwork for comprehensive immigration reform. One could disagree with this approach (see next paragraph) but I hope time will show that it has been effective.

Possible missteps: Carrots before sticks. As he himself admitted, making a third of the stimulus go to tax cuts first, to attract Republican support, may have been a mistake. He should have started with a much more spending oriented plan. As Paul Krugman never tires of pointing out, the stimulus succeeded in doing what it supposed to do, but it was too small to do what was needed. Similarly he should have gone after the Wall street firms harder, so that he could get in to a better negotiating position when it came to Dodd-Frank. Same with the health-care reform--giving Congress too much of a free hand at first was not a good idea. Personally the biggest disappointment for me was not getting climate change legislation passed because by that time they were worn out and left with no political capital. Assuming that these were all mistakes, and assuming we don't give him the benefit of doubt or margin of error or acknowledge our benefit of hindsight, I still find it kind of silly to harp on them considering the scale of problems he faced and what could have resulted if things were not brought under control. Also, I ask, is it not better to look at the bigger picture? Do we just fight for what we want, never compromising, like children? Should we not make concessions to help the country succeed as a whole? We criticized Bush for being uncompromising and heavy handed and now we criticize Obama for compromising with the Republicans? Conservatives actually are saying Obama is too uncompromising and has rolled over the Republicans on many issues and pulled a fast one on them on others. Both cannot be true.

Obama may not be a Roosevelt or a Reagan. He may not be a JFK. He may not even be an Eisenhower or Lyndon Johnson. I think he will be the first to admit that. He has been humbled by his three years in office. If anyone needs proof of that just watch him speak after the midterm elections. But he is Obama, and in his own way he has achieved magnificent things. He is making his own history, and as James Fallows says, with the lessons learned in the past 3 years he will be stronger and accomplish more things. Let us give him credit for what he has done. I certainly will.

11. As John Nichols points out in "How to push Obama" conservatives were able to get Bush pass a lot of right wing stuff because they already created the bandwagon for him to jump into. So on the democratic side, something like the Occupy movement must have started long time ago. Conservatives have been doing their propaganda through think tanks and organizing in local elections for decades now. If liberals want the same kind of popular success they need to organize more. Also the Occupy movement itself will fail if it does not operate in a Gandhian fashion, and does not speak for the main concerns of the majority. I am obviously opposed (at least for the duration of Obama's presidency) to a green party presidential candidate. I am more favorable to developing local and state-wide green party candidates. But if we build enough popular support for progressive causes it may not be necessary. The green platform will become the democratic platform. I think it is silly to label people politically but just for the sake of simplicity let me say I am a liberal or progressive. It has been dismaying for me to see the rightward shift of the US. The younger generation seems to be more progressive and that is

something to be hopeful about. Nevertheless we hope that people would change. It is possible to get people to want a more progressive world (and not put it all on Obama's shoulders). But first we need to stop scolding people and try to think about common grounds. We need to see what they want and how that can be achieved in a sustainable way. We should show people how a more progressive world is better for them and for the planet. Need to get out of blogs, whole foods and hip parties and meet with people who are different. Maybe go out to the countryside and meet some farmers. These are good people who have been led to believe that progressives are "the other." People live in their own little enclaves and interact with only others who think like them, leading to more polarization.

There is a real dialogue going on, and there are differing approaches, both complementary and necessary. Society needs both conservatism and progressivism. One wants to conserve what exists and the other wants to move forward. Some things are worth conserving and some are not. Some changes can be good for society, some not. The tension and the dynamic balance between them keeps society moving and stable at the same time.

We can learn from the recent work on offshore energy development in Maryland. In general faith based groups such as Evangelical Environmental Network, Sojourners and Interfaith Power and Light have done a good job of speaking to people about environmental issues from a moral perspective. We should also work to create jobs in clean energy and a sustainable market instead of demonizing corporations and capitalism. If we don't listen to what the majority of Americans want, but instead only ridicule or condemn them for their "materialistic" ways, then we cannot complain when they say we hate them. The corporations and the oligarchs are able to succeed because they convince people that they are giving people what they want. It cannot be all the result of advertising. There must be at least a small element in it of people feeling that this is what we want. We cannot blame people for wanting a nice home, a car and other material goods. Those are universal aspirations. The middle classes everywhere in the world are aspiring for those things. You cannot fault corporate advertising for all that. It is upon us to find ways to show people that a certain level of comfort can be attained in a sustainable way and that true happiness does not lie in material possessions alone. And this has to be shown to them in a way that appeals to their better angels, not by berating or debating them. And if they don't want to listen to us, and want to live life in their own way, they should have the freedom to do so, as long as it does not hurt the life and liberty of others.

12. I believe in incremental change, in building on what exists. Nature itself proceeds incrementally. Evolution, erosion, sedimentation, growth, decay, all happen incrementally. Change is imperceptible in the short term. Even the curvature of the earth is imperceptible to our senses.

13. I love the tree in front of our house. I was just looking at it through the window in the unseasonably warm and sunny February afternoon. Some sparrows were busy chirping away. I could spot them between the juniper needles. It gives me enormous satisfaction that I did not cut it down and now the tree shelters so many birds. It has grown about 9 feet in the past 9 years. The dropping of the birds in turn helps the tree to grow which provides shelter and berries to them. It is in itself a such a wonderful miniature ecosystem.

14. Computers have undergone an amazing transformation. From room sized machines with diode valves to personal computers to laptops now to handhelds...In fact today's handhelds are more powerful than even yesterday's desktops! What next? Something that can be implanted in one's brain?

