

Power and mystery

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [May 19, 1999](#) issue

This column is adapted from remarks James M. Wall gave on April 30 at an event celebrating his 26 years as editor of the Christian Century and welcoming John Buchanan as editor/publisher.

We are here to acknowledge the old and welcome the new, and to anticipate the role of our publication in the 21st century. We regret that Jesse Jackson was unable to be here, as had been planned. He is, as you know, on a mission to Belgrade. We wish him a successful journey and a safe return.

I could on this occasion be homiletical and preach, or I could be historical and talk about the changes in American religious life in the past 27 years. Or I could talk about the changes in publishing in those years, from manual typewriters to word processors, from dial telephones to cell phones, from hot type to computerized images.

My reference point, however, will be a novel by Henry Adams titled *Democracy*. It was written in 1880, four years before the founding of the *Christian Oracle*, the magazine that in 1900 was renamed the *Christian Century*. Adams modeled his characters on various figures in the White House and the Senate of his time. A professor of history at Harvard, Adams chose to tell his story anonymously. His secret was safe; his real identity was not revealed until after his death in 1918—which shows right away one of the differences between the media of the 1880s and that of the 1990s. *Primary Colors*, Joe Klein's book about Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign, was published anonymously, but the author's identity was revealed less than a year after publication.

Adams is best known as the author of *The Education of Henry Adams*, which was just named the top work on a list of the 100 best nonfiction works published in this country. *Democracy* is a precursor to *Education* in that it reveals Adams's disillusionment and yet fascination with the workings of this still new experiment in government. The nation that Adams's grandfather and great-grandfather had served as president was mired in scandal and greed.

I share Adam's ambivalence over democracy and over the stuff of politics. I am critical of its workings, yet I admire those who take up the challenge of making it work.

The novel begins with the story of a young widow from Boston, Madeleine Lee, who moves to Washington, D.C., because "she was bent upon getting to the heart of the great American mystery of democracy and government. . . . What she wished to see, she thought, was the clash of interests, the interests of forty millions of people and a whole continent, centered at Washington; guided, restrained, controlled, or unrestrained and uncontrollable, by men of ordinary mould; the tremendous forces of government, and the machinery of society at work. What she wanted was POWER."

Democracy is not a great novel; it is, however, a good and intriguing novel, more didactic than revelatory, written by a historian torn between his love for democracy and his resentment over what politicians have done to the process. It is interesting to note that at the center of the novel is a scandal involving a U.S. senator who wants to be president. He plots toward that end while courting Madeleine Lee—she who seeks power. Senator Ratcliffe, from the great state of Illinois, knows that the widow Lee would make an excellent First Lady. There is a scandal in his past, however, which could undermine his plans, and it could cost him his desired First Lady.

As a reminder that politics really does not change much, consider that the scandal in the novel involves a campaign finance contribution given to Ratcliffe to influence his actions as a Senate committee chair. He defends his action to Mrs. Lee, saying that the money was never in his possession; he simply passed it along to the national party. He took it, he said, to guarantee the election of his party and to prevent a certain national disaster if the opposing party won the election.

And consider this description of the senator at worship: "On Sunday morning Mr. Ratcliffe, as usual, went to church. He always attended morning service—at the Methodist Episcopal Church—not wholly on the ground of religious conviction, but because a large number of his constituents were churchgoing people and he would not willingly shock their principles so long as he needed their votes. In church, he kept his eyes closely fixed upon the clergyman, and at the end of the sermon he could say with truth that he had not heard a word of it, although the respectable minister was gratified by the attention his discourse had received from the Senator

from Illinois, an attention all the more praiseworthy because of the engrossing public cares which must at that moment have distracted the Senator's mind. In this last idea, the minister was right. Mr. Ratcliffe's mind was greatly distracted by public cares, and one of his strongest reasons for going to church at all was that he might get an hour or two of undisturbed reflection."

There you have a picture of part of what I find so fascinating about American politics. It is a mess, but it is our mess. It attracts flawed, ambitious leaders who are as fascinated by the mystery of democracy as was Madeleine Lee, and who are drawn to the political system, as she was, for power.

Power for what? For the sake of exercising power itself, or for the power to do that which is best for the common good? And how is the common good to be defined? Both Aristotle and Machiavelli tried, from different perspectives, to tell us how flawed leaders must perform in order to serve the common good. Making sense of those conflicting perspectives is one of the tasks that the *Christian Century* has tried to perform.

And how do we do that? Part of the answer is to adopt what I call a "mindful" response to the issues, as opposed to a mindless response—a rigid clinging to old ways of thought. A mindful response means risking the encounter with new ways of viewing the world, ways that we don't have to embrace totally, but that we may listen to with enormous benefit.

Let me point to an example from my own years as editor: One day, riding the train to Chicago, I got engaged in a rather heated exchange with a friend who was, and is, a fundamentalist Christian Republican, even more conservative than most of the DuPage County Republicans who ride the train from Elmhurst. I decided to develop a column out of our discussion. To keep his identity a secret, I dubbed my friend Deep Faith, a takeoff from the Deep Throat of Watergate days. A few months later I did another column on Deep Faith.

I found over the next few years that through my conversations with him I was able to voice my own grudging respect for some of his views. I didn't go over to his side, but I changed in my appreciation for his perspective. I hate to think what would have happened to my views if he hadn't moved away.

Aiding me in confronting ambiguity and in mindfully celebrating the political process in a fallen world has been the work of Joseph Sittler, one of my theological mentors.

Sittler insisted that we find God nowhere else but in the world of ambiguity, where he is present to us in his creation and in his love. In a sermon on "The Care of the Earth," Sittler said:

Observe in Psalm 104 how the Old Testament [writer] who sought to glorify God and enjoy him forever stood in the midst of nature. "He . . . gives wine to gladden the heart of man, and oil to make his face shine." "This is the day which the Lord has made"; he exults, "let us rejoice and be glad in it." Why? Not primarily for what he can turn the day's hours into, but rather on the primal ground that there are days —unaccountable in their gift-character, just there. And here he is—permeable by all he is sensitive to: texture, light, form and movement, the cattle on a thousand hills. Thou sendest forth thy Spirit and they are! Let us rejoice and be glad in it!

I'll end with the prayer that Sittler cites, by e.e. cummings: "i thank You God for most this amazing day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything which is natural which is infinite which is yes."