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My Compassion Forum Experience

By Matt Lettieri

It was about 9:30 last Sunday morning when my phone rang. I had no idea who it could've been and I would've ignored it if my roommate hadn't gotten up to answer. Little did I know I was about to receive what everyone had been hoping for and dreaming of the past few weeks - a golden ticket to Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory...er, I mean...the Compassion Forum at Messiah College.

I was obviously excited to attend the event and see Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama in person. But I was really looking forward to seeing how our dear school in the little town of Grantham would fare in the national spotlight.

When I arrived at Messiah, I was surprised by how calm everything was. I expected to be greeted and interrogated by a secret service agent before being allowed on campus, but there were simply Messiah volunteers directing traffic. The real activity was down by Eisenhower circle, which had been turned into a media tailgate party. CNN had two large satellite trucks and was joined by ABC 27, FOX 43 and the local channel 8 news. As we stood in line waiting to get in, reporters were interviewing students and conducting live news updates.

Brubaker Auditorium had a different vibe than usual. The lighting was brighter and black drapes hung along each wall. CNN had numerous cameras set up throughout the room with one big production table in the back. The producers of the program for CNN addressed the audience before hand, encouraging us to be lively and react to what the candidates had to say.

The forum itself was engaging and thought-provoking. Both candidates gave

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Obama and Clinton greet each other at the Compassion Forum. Image Courtesy of Google Images.

The Compassion Forum

By Devin Thomas

Held before an audience of diverse faith leaders, educators, students, and others from across Pennsylvania and the United States, the Compassion Forum—a bipartisan event coordinated by national non-profit Faith in Public Life and broadcast live on CNN—was held at Messiah College on April 13. Featuring conversations with Democratic presidential hopefuls Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, the Forum was moderated by Campbell Brown, anchor of CNN's election center, and John Meacham, editor of *Newsweek* magazine.

The event, held in Brubaker Auditorium, garnered national media attention for its emphasis on the intersection of faith and public life. With the Pennsylvania primary only days away and the

2008 presidential election more heated than ever before, the Forum—according to Messiah College's press release—"provide[d] the opportunity for candidates to discuss how their faith and moral convictions bear on their positions" on social issues like AIDS, global poverty, welfare, torture, abortion, climate change, genocide in Darfur, and other issues. Sponsors for the event included social justice organizations like The One Campaign and Oxfam America, as well as religious organizations like the Church Communication Network and the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities.

Brown, who introduced the Forum during a live broadcast at 8 p.m., described it as a chance to "take the conversation [about compassion issues] beyond the candidate's standard policy points." Leaders from groups as diverse as the Southern Baptist Convention and the Islamic Society of North America attended the event.

Senator Clinton, the first candidate to speak to Brown and Meacham, described

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Community

Forum

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her faith as “a gift of grace that has, for me, been incredibly sustaining.” Addressing questions on the availability of low-cost prescription drugs and the role of U.S. economic sanctions against China as a way to temper the violence in the Darfur region of Sudan, Clinton spoke to many of the important policy points that have shaped her campaign thus far, calling the Bush administration’s policy toward China “incoherent” and describing herself as an “outspoken advocate in urging . . . pharmaceutical companies . . . to get . . . drug costs down.”

A more daunting moment for the senator from New York occurred when Meacham, speaking with a deadpan more suited to a satirist than a journalist, asked Clinton why “a loving God allows innocent people to suffer.” Clinton responded with characteristic wit (“I don’t know [and] I can’t wait to ask him”) as well as gravity: “In the face of suffering, there is no doubt in my mind that God calls us to respond. . . . Maybe . . . the Lord is just waiting for us to respond to his call, because this despair, this impoverishment of body and soul is what we are expected to be spending our time responding to, and so few of us do.”

Obama, who followed Clinton in speaking with the moderators, charmed the audience with the humor and thoughtful candor that have garnered unprecedented popular support for a junior senator with less than a full term of experience in Congress. Speaking to issues like abortion, euthanasia, and AIDS in Africa, the senator from Illinois was unafraid to draw from personal experience; he mentioned both his mother’s long and debilitating struggle with cancer (which he also described in his memoir *The Audacity of Hope*) and his multiple visits to his father’s homeland of Kenya, where he and wife Michelle publicly took HIV/AIDS tests as a way to emphasize the importance of disease testing.

Like Clinton, Obama faced a num-

ber of theologically complex questions about faith and, like his opponent, managed to spin a query only marginally related to matters of public policy into an important point about his would-be presidency. For instance, when asked by Brown, “did God really create the world in six days?”, Obama took a stance on the relationship between religion and science: “I do believe in evolution. I don’t think that is incompatible with Christian faith. . . . In fact, the more I learn about the world, the more I know about science, the more I’m amazed about the mystery of this planet and this universe. And it strengthens my faith.”

Additionally, after a question from *Sojourners* president Jim Wallis in which the faith leader stated that “one in six of our children are poor in the richest nation in the world,” Obama committed to halving the U.S. poverty rate in ten years. The senator noted that such action begins by stemming the problem at its roots by “investing in early childhood education; working with at-risk parents; drastically improving our education system . . . by paying our teachers more and demanding more from them; making sure that we have after-school programs and summer school programs.” Obama also unequivocally rejected torture by the U.S. military: “Our government does not torture. That should be our position. . . . [And] we don’t farm out torture. We don’t subcontract torture. . . . That will be my position as president.”

In closing, Brown hinted at the possibility of a future reprisal of the Compassion Forum featuring “the eventual Democratic nominee” alongside Republican nominee Senator John McCain, who turned down an open invitation to participate in the April 13 event.

Experience

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glimpses into more personal aspects of their life. The raucous applause for most of Obama’s statements made it clear that a majority the crowd favored him. However, the biggest ovation of the night wasn’t for either of the presi-

dential hopefuls. It was for the *actual* president. When Kim Phipps addressed the audience before the forum began, the crowd showed their appreciation for her and her husband Kelly’s efforts in bringing the event to Messiah.

Obama stuck around for a few minutes to mingle with the crowd afterwards. I got within about 15 feet of him but didn’t get to shake his hand like many other students did. As I left Brubaker, I couldn’t help but laugh at all the students who were lined up behind CNN’s live reporters, waving and jumping with their cell phones to their ears. It was even funnier when I got back to my friend’s dorm room and watched it on TV.

The best part of the day was when I saw Obama and Clinton in Lottie Nelson Dining Hall getting lunch. They were in line for chicken cordon bleu, but the server would only give them one piece each. Obama said the situation called for change, and led the students in a chant of “Yes, we can...have more than one! Yes, we can...have more than one!” Clinton began drawing up a plan that would provide universal chicken cordon bleu to all Americans.

(Yes, the last paragraph is indeed false.)

A Few Reminders

Pennsylvania Residents: Remember, April 22nd is Primary day, so get out and vote.

Earth Residents: Remember, April 22nd is also Earth Day, so do something nice for your mother earth.

Want to write for the Broad Street Journal?
Contact Douglas Yeisley at
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The Mountain Goats

By Devin Thomas

“Hi, we’re the Mountain Goats,” said John Darnielle, stepping onstage with an acoustic guitar slung over his shoulder. At a concert venue like Philadelphia’s First Unitarian Church, where Darnielle made his pronouncement, this would seem like a typical introduction to the band—if Darnielle weren’t the only person standing onstage. For almost twenty years, Darnielle—who looks like a ’90s cable-access version of Bob Saget—has been the stalwart member of the Mountain Goats band, accompanied by a rotating series of instrumentalists who have helped to record the sixteen albums attributed to the Mountain Goats name.

Darnielle began the concert with a solo, all-acoustic set featuring some of the band’s more obscure songs, including a cover of the traditional hymn “Abide with Me” and “Duke Ellington,” which appeared on an indie rock compilation disc in 1995 (alongside, as Darnielle quipped before beginning the song, “such famous bands” as Fertile Virgin and Pest 5000). The segment highlighted the singer-songwriter’s talent as both an instrumentalist (the delicacy—and occasional indelicacy—of his guitarwork merely adds to the lyrics) and as a writer, knowingly emphasizing and reimaging the significance behind each word through his intonation and timbre, rather than simply imitating the album recording of each song.

By the time he was joined onstage by long-time collaborator Peter Hughes and a guest drummer for the “full band” portion of the show, Darnielle had already whipped the audience into an anxious-for-more frenzy with his patently awkward-yet-endearing brand of banter: decrying the plague of the omnipresent concertgoer who only calls out for the band’s popular songs (“I’m glad that guy wasn’t feeling well tonight,” Darnielle said) and outlining his policies for the inevitable John Darnielle/Ron Paul presidency (“Step 1: Consolidate power. Step 2: Thin

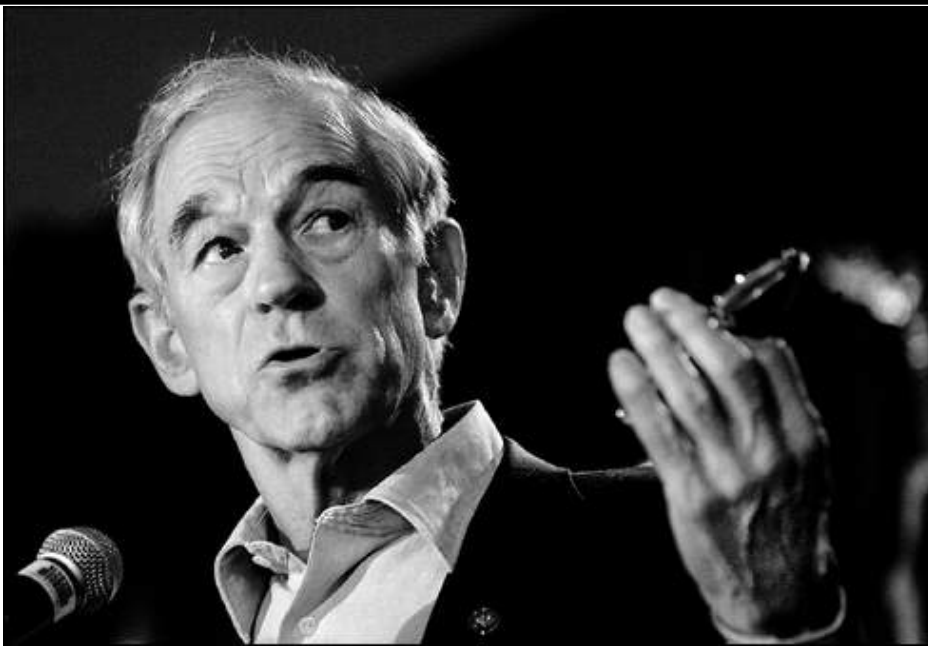


Image Courtesy of Google Images

Ron Paul Supporters Rally Around

By Katie Manzullo

Last Friday, while the Secret Service continued to comb over Messiah’s campus in preparation for the Compassion Forum featuring Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, an entirely different event was underway in Gettysburg. I found myself at the Majestic Theater in downtown Gettysburg with my friends Scott Edwards and Matt Dean for a presidential candidate’s rally. He was introduced as “the next president of the United States of America” but you might not even know who he is. We were at a Ron Paul for President rally.

Back in Grantham we wouldn’t even be able to get to our mailboxes on the day of the Forum because of the heavy security. CNN correspondents reported live from Eisenhower circle for days. Students, faculty and staff waited by their phones to hear if they had received one of the proverbial golden tickets. At the Majestic we just strolled right in without having to bother with any sort of security measures. And while the theater was impressively full for a man who’s

not going to be President, there were empty seats scattered around us.

The crowd was nevertheless pumped up. They worked themselves into a frenzy before Paul even showed his face. The most enthusiastic among us started a series of call-and-response cheers. (Who believes in freedom? Ron Paul! Who’s the next president? Ron Paul, of course!) The ornate theater was teeming with Ron Paul paraphernalia—including a series of mystifying signs. “Ron Paul- The Enema America Needs” was our favorite. “It Has Been Said That Angels Walk Among Us” was also a popular addition. Not everyone was won over by the exuberant crowd. Matt leaned over to me and said in a whisper as to avoid the ire of the crowd around us, “If only this group of three hundred people could actually do anything I would be really impressed.”

When the head of the College Republicans greeted us to the event, which was sponsored by Gettysburg College, he intoned, “Welcome to the revolution!” and said that his group would be providing scripts for those who wanted to know how to work Dr. Paul’s message into conversations with friends, family and coworkers. I couldn’t help but have flashbacks to being instructed in Christian evangelization techniques.

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Urban Living

Ron Paul

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When the 72 year-old Paul finally took the stage his devoted followers greeted him with thunderous applause and by chanting his name. The rowdy crowd soon settled down as he began to talk about the intricacies of foreign policy and the dreary state of our economy. He lectured like a professor of Constitutional Law, or perhaps your grandfather at the dinner table. This wasn't your typical stump speech with quippy one-liners just begging for a standing ovation. Instead Paul batted around such witty lines as "We are systematically destroying our middle class with the degradation of our dollar." At times he gave the crowd what they were looking for, a reason to go wild, especially when he brought up his anti-war stance. "You can't spread goodness through the barrel of a gun," he said, "We don't need to spread the war, we need to *end* the war."

Paul's campaign has been all about grassroots politics and he's gained quite a following on the Internet among those who hold to his message of personal freedom and sticking to the Constitution. The government shouldn't interfere in people's lives, he told us, giving the example of being allowed to drink unpasteurized milk if one so desires. This led to a chant (which may or may not have been started by myself and my companions) of "Raw milk! Raw milk!"

Congressman Paul of Texas, who is currently on his tenth term, is a Republican candidate who in all reality has no chance of garnering his party's nomination. For all intents and purposes, John McCain has sealed the deal and will be the nominee. Rudy Giuliani, Mike Huckabee and Mitt Romney have all dropped out long ago but Ron Paul is another story. He's still going strong and says he will continue to campaign as long as he has supporters, a message and money in the bank. "This campaign has only just begun!" he promised us, and we almost let ourselves believe him.

I'll admit we pushed ourselves through the crowd (the woman in line before us had her copy of the Constitution signed) to get a handshake and a

picture with the man himself. And in the spirit of transparency I'll also admit that I cast my vote for Dr. Paul in the Illinois republican primary. After all, the man's delivered 4,000 babies. It was the least I could do.

Mountain Goats

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Lizzy"). As flashbulbs popped through the dark auditorium, Darnielle deconstructed the idea of taking mid-concert pictures: "[If] people conflate looking very bad [in pictures] with looking real . . . y'all meet me tomorrow morning at 7:30 when I wake up, naked and bloated, and we'll get some hot ass pictures."

Self-deprecating charm aside, Darnielle's full-band set merely magnified the subtle perfection of the acoustic set. Even in studio recordings, it is attitude, articulation, and lyrical evocation that give the Mountain Goats' music its emotional weight; in concert, Darnielle's performance infuses these components with a sense of urgency and immediacy that seems to elevate the music above its pre-recorded counterpart. He can sing, he can scream. And his deft control over vocal pitch adds important nuance to each piece.

The set list included only a few songs from the band's latest album, *Heretic Pride*—"Sept. 15 1983," "In the Craters on the Moon," and a loud, rousing interpretation of "Lovecraft to

Brooklyn"—and perhaps for good reason: this latest release certainly isn't the strongest ever put forth by Darnielle, mostly in its lyricism: overall the album lacks the redolent, almost tactile songwriting Darnielle has displayed previously. Take, for example, a lyric from the track "Michael Myers Resplendent": "I am ready for my close-up today / Too long I've let my self-respect get in the way." Ignoring the important character insight suggested by the juxtaposition of "self-respect" and the idea of the always-self-indulgent close-up, the lines lack the depth of detail and playful linguistic mastery typically associated with Darnielle's lyricism. In another album, the lyric would have been unpacked and laid bare; in its present state it seems lifted from any number of mediocre Sheryl Crow ditties. Despite a few notable standouts (particularly "Sept 15 1983" and the weirdly scientific love ballad "Autoclave"), the album as a whole seems remarkably slipshod for a wordsmith so otherwise attentive to minutia.

But not the concert. Playing live, Darnielle doesn't seem to have lost his knack; perhaps his choice of "forgotten" gems (mostly from the band's heralded lo-fi days) during the acoustic set provides insight into his own feelings about later, more widespread studio albums. In any case, the concert expressed Darnielle true-to-form: quirky, neurotic, and unarguably insightful, full of sorrow and regret and that slightest glimmer of hope.



Image Courtesy of Google Images