

Thoughts of the Rev. Mike Young, Minister of the First Unitarian Church of Honolulu

[President-elect Barack Obama and his family held the memorial for his grandmother, Madelyn Payne Dunham, at the First Unitarian Church of Honolulu. Pacific Central District Executive Cilla Raughley asked the Church's minister, the Rev. Mike Young, if he would write something about the experience.]

Many years ago Madelyn Dunham brought a small boy to the First Unitarian Church for Sunday School. On December 23rd, he came back to celebrate her memorial service. She had died two days before he was elected President of the United States.

This time he came with his family, his sister's family and a few close friends; and a huge contingent of Secret Service Agents, bomb sniffing dogs, and snipers. The whole property was locked down. Every nook and cranny of the church was searched. The event was successfully kept a secret for two weeks ahead of time to protect the privacy of the family.

The service was a simple one, with music by Dion Hangtree. Barack and his sister, Maya, spoke warmly remembering their grandmother, "Toot," (The Hawaiian word for grandmother is Tutu.) She had been a local bank executive. The president mentioned that she was the sort of bright, strong woman who, if she had been born 20 years later, would have been president of the bank. Her ashes were later scattered in the ocean off Lanai Point, South Oahu. This is from the opening I wrote for the service:

Madelyn Dunham chose this land of gentle and violent beauty for her final resting place. We stand now in the leeward shadow of the majestic Ko'olaus, in the distance the rich and fecund Pacific. Along this coast, Punchbowl, Diamond Head, Koko, Hanauma, craters of the ancient birthing of this land in fire. Wrapped in moist trade winds scented and spiced with pikaki and ginger. Mauka, the verdant mist washed valleys watering a fertile garden of the human spirit. From the most ancient Kanaka Maoli to today's rich diversity of peoples whose spirits are rooted in this land, here have you come. Here will her ashes and the good wishes of those who loved her be joined with the elements of this place. We come here today to seek the blessings of this land upon her repose. Once, she admired this beauty as she moved through its spaces. Now she will be a part of it; greeting the dawn and the sunset, storm and calm, from within the very heart of that beauty.

I was honored to have shared this moment with the family of President-elect Barack Obama.