

**THE BLOG**

On Having Your (Political) Heart Broken

By Marty Kaplan

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The e-mail came when I was in Mexico, at a fitness resort that — in pursuit of wellness — confines BlackBerry use to guests' rooms.

“Need to chat briefly with you regarding John Edwards and the effects of this scandal on his future political career.” It was from a reporter I know at *People*. I had no idea what he was talking about. Though I'd cut way back on my news intake, not to mention my beloved carbs, while at the ranch, I figured that my furtive web browsing during the week was keeping me reasonably well informed on the big stuff.

His follow-up message, in response to my away-from-my-e-mail auto-reply, vibrated in my pocket during dinner, where no one else at my table had a clue what scandal had erupted. I stole a look at the screen, my transgression, I hoped, concealed by the tablecloth.

“What do you think are going to be the effects on John's political future, most notably his chances for a vice presidential nod from Obama? From your perspective, where does this scandal, if you will, rank in the history of American politics? Why do you think so many people are appalled by these developments? His wife's illness?”

It would be 24 hours later that I fully re-introduced media toxins into my body. Ingesting the *National Enquirer* account of Edwards' purported Beverly Hills Hotel visit to the purported mother of his purported love child turned out to be as shocking to my system as the I Can't Believe It's Not Butter! Light that I unthinkingly smeared on the ranch bread, won at bingo, that I'd brought home with me.

But the e-mail alone — “appalled,” “his wife's illness” — was enough to get me to contemplate the awful, unsubstantiated conclusion the moment I got it. I know enough to mistrust rumors. But I couldn't help hypothetically feeling the same nausea, the same kicked-in-the-stomach wallop that hit me when Bill Clinton fessed up to his sexual infidelity and to lying about it. Appalled? No, more like heartsick.

I had spent the weekend before the Iowa caucuses — still undecided, even after the torture of watching what seemed like a gazillion pre-primary debates — taking in every minute of every Democrat's stump speech that I could find on C-SPAN. Some online issues poll I'd taken told me that Dennis Kucinich was the candidate closest to my views, but I was in no mood to be romantic or sentimental about my choice.

What surprised me was that Edwards turned out to be my candidate. I wanted a fighter, someone as furious about what had happened to America and to the Constitution as I was, and Edwards — unlike Barack Obama, who struck me as having been snookered by high-minded editorial writers' jonesing for bipartisanship — seemed ready to kick butt and take names. And much as I respect Hillary Clinton's smarts, I was world-weary of the pols and hacks who surrounded and spoke for her, and her stump speech sounded uncannily like what I had written for Walter Mondale; much as I respect him, 2008 isn't 1984.

Edwards' populism rang my bell. He had some political problems — the haircut, the house, the lackluster performance in the Cheney debate — but watching him ignite crowd after crowd that snowy weekend, I experienced him as sublimely authentic. Plus, of course, there was Elizabeth.

It wasn't just her bravery in the face of cancer that made people love her. It wasn't just the young children. It was also how authentic she was, and how smart, and the sacrifice she was prepared to make, the trade of precious family time for a higher purpose.

John Edwards couldn't recover politically from his loss in Iowa. As I write this, his camp is dismissing the *Enquirer* story as typical tabloid trash. That may be entirely true, just as other political scandals, from John McCain's love child to John Kerry's swift-boating, have also turned out to be smears spread by political enemies. Is mentioning the *Enquirer* story *lashon hara*, the evil tongue? If you can't talk about contemporary political discourse — all of it, even the vile — you can't talk about contemporary politics.

Even if the *Enquirer's* story turns out to be no more than a hit job, I won't soon forget the feeling that those e-mails from *People* churned up in me.

As potentially appalled as I was for Elizabeth Edwards, as potentially amazed as I was by what would have to be John Edwards' colossal arrogance, what disturbed me most was the possibility that I may have been played for a chump, that I had been as politically naïve as any greenhorn who'd just fallen off the turnip truck, that my belief in Edwards — not just in the message, but in the message-bearer — demonstrated that, for all my years of accumulating a justifiable cynicism, I was still susceptible to the stagecraft of political authenticity.

The night that Obama won the Iowa caucuses, I found myself, like many Americans, thrilled by his rhetoric and moved by his story. The Edwards "scandal" has made me mindful of how inclined I have become to believe in Obama. His recent positional shifts, while disconcerting, I have chalked up to a misguided effort to chase voters who will never be for him anyway. But the emotional whiplash engendered by the *Enquirer* allegations has reminded me that Kool-Aid, like in-room cable news, was also absent at the wellness ranch.

I believed in "I still believe in a place called Hope" until the blue dress. Do I still believe in the "audacity of hope"?

New York Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan once remarked, "There's no point in being Irish unless you realize that sooner or later the world will break your heart."

He may just as well have said Jewish.

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This is my column in The Jewish Journal. Besides posting a comment here, if you'd like to email me or the Letters editor there, or if you just want to read about Hollywood Jews, well then, go for it.