Deval(uing) Government

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A Reason to Believe: Lessons From An Improbable Life
By Deval Patrick
Broadway $21.99

"If you don't understand something," Harvard Dean Jeremy Knowles told his students, "the reason may be that you are simply standing in the wrong place." It took a while for Deval Patrick to learn this lesson and force himself to try new perspectives. But he did.

Born in a basement apartment in the South Side of Chicago, abandoned by his father when he was four years old, Patrick overcame poverty and "the curse of being black" (always wondering "whether the things that go wrong in your life are on account of your race") to become the first African-American governor of the state of Massachusetts, and one of only two black governors elected in the history of the United States.

In A Reason to Believe, Patrick provides an exquisitely-written and moving memoir of his "improbable life." Although he is a Democrat, his message is traditional, one might even say Republican: when you learn to focus less on where you are than on who you are; on how to love and be loved; on taking personal responsibility for your choices; and on pulling yourself up by your bootstraps, life's journey "can be wondrous." You will be able to find or form a community with those who share your values. "And that is reward enough."

Less clear, alas, in A Reason to Believe, is Patrick's sense of the role government -- the collective "we" -- can (and should) play in guaranteeing that everyone in America will have a chance, a genuine shot, to attain happiness, empowerment, and success.

Patrick writes compellingly about his journey. Neither his mom, who worked at the post office, nor his dad, a jazz musician, expressed their love to Deval. His grandparents, with whom the Patrick family lived after his father moved to New York, maintained "two separate economies," with their own shelf in the refrigerator, off-limits to Deval and his sister. A loner as a child, he spent many hours under the back steps, playing in the dirt with toy soldiers; as an adolescent, he poured over the real estate section of the Sunday paper, imagining what life would be like in a model home.

Hungry for company, attention, and affection, Deval was thrilled when a teacher at Milton Academy, A.O. Smith, invited him to spend a weekend with his family on Cape Cod. On the first night, as he made sure the bed was comfortable and the towels fresh, Smith said "I love you," Deval let it "wash over him," convinced, perhaps for the first time, that he had value in the world. Smith became a surrogate father, and Deval grew more comfortable expressing love, "openly, generously, and conspicuously," insisting, to be sure, on "high standards and accountability, which is its own expression of love." Affirming a "special connection," he reminds us, enriches both the giver and the recipient, and serves as the foundation of strong communities.
Patrick acknowledges that he got some breaks. Thanks to Mrs. Weissenberg, a teacher at DuSable Middle School, he connected with A Better Chance, a philanthropic foundation that identifies academically-talented but economically-disadvantaged students, and places them in prep schools. Along with other mentors, Mrs. Weissenberg taught him that his "circumstances, though difficult, need not be permanent, even if he was "surrounded by adults who had every reason to curb [his] dreams." If he had good values, expected a lot of himself, and worked hard, he could "reject the cycle of despair that had trapped so many others" -- and shape his own destiny.

Drawing on these experiences, Patrick suggests that poor people and racial minorities in the United States "just have to be reminded that they have plenty to contribute -- they have all the power they need to make the changes they want."

Patrick's "Yes, We Can" optimism is important as well as inspirational. Self-esteem, a sense of personal responsibility, and a strong will are, indeed, building blocks to success and fulfillment. But not everyone is a Deval Patrick. Nor is it true that the "have-nots" have "all they need to make the changes they want."

Let's face it: government is the only institution with the power and resources to make equal opportunity more than an empty slogan. Patrick, no doubt, agrees. But he says precious little in this book about his stint as Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights or his policies and priorities as governor. These days, when so much is at stake, it's disappointing that Patrick does not draw on his life experiences to explore, with some specificity, where we need to go, as individuals and as a society, and how we might get there.

Like his good friend, Barack Obama, he seems reluctant at times to go beyond exhorting his fellow citizens to "think and act big," to assert, unambiguously and unequivocally, to say it long and say it loud, that Washington -- and I don't mean Booker T. Washington -- should provide many reasons to believe.

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