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Breakfast With Obama, With a Side of Protest?

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So... there I was minding my own business, swimming around in my own self-induced fatigue -- so many deadlines, so many commas, apostrophes and periods -- when I received an email mid-week from a colleague and friend, [Annie Sprinkle](#). I had penned several stories about Sprinkle in the past and had attended/performed in two of her performance art weddings to Elizabeth Stephens, a UCSC prof.

The email was wonderfully flowery, as Annie's always are. She was alerting me and those cc'd in the note that a friend of hers had purchased two tables at an Obama

Victory Fund breakfast at the posh St. Regis Hotel in San Francisco. Annie couldn't go, her partner Beth, could... And would any of us like to attend?

Great opportunity, I thought, and immediately wondered if they'd serve Blueberry Buckwheat Pancakes. Well, and President Obama would be in attendance, of course. Win win.

Intrigued, I scrolled down further. And then... breakfast became the farthest thing from my mind.

The "friend" -- Oakland activist [Naomi Pitcairn](#) -- also wanted to let Obama politely know that she was

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concerned about the treatment of Pvt. Bradley Manning, the alleged leaker of U.S. military docs that were posted on WikiLeaks. The concerns stemmed from Manning being held in solitary confinement in Virginia since his arrest in May, 2010.

Well, I thought, I suppose Naomi, has every right to voice her concerns. I read on, only to discover that she wanted to do it in song.

OK. Now that was original! As in... *Glee*? A la *American Idol*? I was confused. I kept reading.

Oh -- as in... "performance art."

With the president?

And that's when I thought: I won't be eating pancakes with Obama on Thursday morning.

Admittedly, I'm not much of a protester and activist. (I do enjoy writing about some of them, though). In fact, I tend to wave more poms poms and scream, cheer, jeer -- whatever -- not so much for political affairs, but for any number of psychologically rich, or emotionally fruitful discoveries of the heart, mind and soul. I'm better at managing mood swings. (Debatable actually.) And really, a simple plate of eggs, toast and applause for what the president had been doing for the country thus far -- and some encouragement to keep forging ahead, perhaps a bit more aggressively -- seemed more my speed at the moment.

Besides, I reasoned silently, I'm a horrible singer. (Protests have been held against me.)

Needless to say, I let it go. Timing, logistics and other events didn't seem to align. Perhaps this wasn't in the stars for me.

But then it hit me. How many times is somebody invited to a breakfast gathering for the Commander in Chief? I could still attend. If I didn't quite jive with the whole singing-a-song thing, I could still honor the originator's position to feel she had the right to do so. (It's America, after all.) Besides, I'm a "writer" in this world. I observe. I write about my experiences in books and magazine articles. Perhaps this would unravel into quite the "experience?"

It did.

A posse of nearly 200 supporters, who doled out anywhere between \$5,000 to \$35,000 apiece to attend, were on hand. U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein, former SF Mayor Willie Brown, Lt. Gov. Gavin Newsom and House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, among others, were all in the house. (So was Will.i.am. and MC Hammer.)

Pelosi introduced Obama, who received a standing ovation from the crowd -- he had already generated buzz with his appearance at Facebook and Masonic Auditorium earlier in the week. The president looked dignified and spoke eloquently about a hopeful future and making politics work. I was so entranced that I forgot about Pitcairn at the other table. But then... I, too, was genuinely surprised when she stood up and said, "Mr. President, we wrote a song... can we sing it for you?"

Obama suggested that the ditty happen after his speech, but then the group at Pitcairn's table smoothly launched into their song, a cappella. It's hard to illuminate quite how everything unfolded next. The proverbial elephant had walked into the dining room and it wasn't going to go away.

This, I thought, watching the entire scene unfold, was clearly a breakfast to remember.

A few of the lyrics in the song, which was sung in a pleasant, polite manner, noted the \$5,000 ticket price for the event. Later, the singers crooned: "We paid our dues. Where's our change?"

This went on for about 60 seconds or so. I turned to scan the room. Some politicians looked stunned; others amused, and most, simply curious. And Obama? He listened graciously, giving Pitcairn et al some time. Others at the table held up small placards that read: Free Bradley Manning. (Which room attendants quickly came and tried to remove.)

Heart racing, I wasn't sure what would happen next, but then Pitcairn collected her belongings and asked Obama if he liked the song. He smiled, complimented the singers and noted that it was much better than he could have ever sang it. He also noted that the song was creative.



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And then he thanked them. And then I grinned, remembering that, yes, Obama can be, and is a classy guy.

And off he went, gracefully getting back on track with his speech. Later, he shook hands with those lined up to greet him. (Firm handshake -- always a good sign.) He even took time for an extended discussion about Manning with somebody in line who had questions about the issue.

Meanwhile, outside Pitcairn greeted broadcast crews, garnering attention for what unfolded. FYI: Pitcairn's actions didn't turn out to be the huge "incident" or quite the severe "disruption" as some news reports have already reported. Nor was the president "heckled."

Bottom line: there's nothing like "performance art" to get a point across.

Could Pitcairn, as colorful and inventive as she is, have illuminated her point in a different way? Sure. But few would have turned their heads. Did the incident thwart the overall Obama experience in San Francisco? Hardly. From where I was sitting, it actually enhanced it--in a way only a true liberal Northern Californian could.



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