

**Now What?**  
Rev. Kenneth Read-Brown  
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)  
Unitarian Universalist  
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**Meditation**

And now we can breathe –  
the long campaign is over...  
we have cast our ballots for one candidate or the other...  
the results are in.

Now we can breathe... the future opens before us.

Yet before we rush forward,  
may we reconnect with the deep wellsprings of our lives...  
our values...  
our spiritual sustenance however we name it or experience it...  
our sources of comfort and of inspiration.

Before we rush forward:

May we be present for this moment as we are meant to be present for every moment...  
May we hold one another in our hearts,  
whatever our differences, may we hold one another in our hearts...  
may we hold all that we love in our hearts,  
may we hold life in our hearts...

**Readings**

The first reading is from Psalm 122  
translated and freely adapted by Stephen Mitchell

I rejoiced when I heard them announce,  
“The time of warfare is past.  
No more will brother hate brother  
or violence have its way.  
No more will they drown out God’s silence  
and shut their hearts to his song.”

Pray for peace in the cities  
and harmony among the races.  
May peace come to live on our streets  
and justice within our walls.  
With all my heart I will pray  
that peace comes to live among us.  
For the sake of all earth’s people,  
I will do my utmost for peace.

The second reading is from the “Epilogue” to *The Audacity of Hope*, by Barack Obama:

...I like to take a run along the Mall. Usually I go in the early evening, especially in the summer and fall, when the air in Washington is warm and still and the leaves on the trees barely rustle. After dark, not many people are out – perhaps a few couples taking a walk, or homeless men on benches, organizing their possessions. Most of the time I stop at the Washington Monument, but sometimes I push on, across the street to the National World War II Memorial, then up the stairs of the Lincoln Memorial.

At night, the great shrine is lit but often empty. Standing between marble columns, I read the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address. I look out over the Reflecting Pool, imagining the crowd stilled by Dr. King’s mighty cadence, and then beyond that, to the floodlit obelisk and shining Capitol dome.

And in that place, I think about America and those who built it. This nation’s founders, who somehow rose above petty ambitions and narrow calculations to imagine a nation unfurling across the continent. And those like Lincoln and King, who ultimately laid down their lives in the service of perfecting an imperfect union. And all the faceless, nameless men and women, slaves and soldiers and tailors and butchers, constructing lives for themselves and their children and grandchildren, brick by brick, rail by rail, calloused hand by calloused hand, to fill in the landscape of our collective dreams.

It is that process I wish to be a part of.

My heart is filled with love for this country.

## **Sermon**

Ebenezer Gay spoke from this pulpit on the Sunday following the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Imagine the sweep of American history since then – times of tragedy and shame, times of triumph and progress, as we all-too-slowly have moved toward more perfect fulfillment of those truths we hold to be self-evident.

So that here today I have the remarkable privilege of speaking from this pulpit on the Sunday following the election of the first African-American president of our United States, Barack Obama.

Yes, as the anthem we’ve just sung (“Lift Every Voice and Sing” by James Weldon Johnson) proclaims, with “weary feet” yet “steady beat” today we can indeed “sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us, facing the rising sun of our new day begun...”

And let it be said:

This song of renewed hope and a newly rising sun is not and must not be only a song of the Democratic party.

This is and must be a song of American democracy for us all.

Nor is this a song only for those of African American heritage, though without doubt it holds a deep and special poignant meaning for African Americans that the rest of us cannot fully imagine.

Even so, this is also a song for all Americans, a song to celebrate what civil rights leader and congressman John Lewis has named our coming of age as a multi-racial democracy; a song which celebrates this as a moment at which we all might embrace more fully the reality that to be a true American is not to be of a particular racial heritage or ethnic background, not to be of a

particular religious faith; rather, to be an American is to embrace an *idea*, an idea of equality, an idea of liberty, an idea of democracy, an idea of democracy which transcends and yet at the same time celebrates our differences, an idea whose time in its full realization – this may truly be so – is not past, not failed, but rather is indeed more present than ever and more present yet in a future we may now be able to re-vision as more open to our deepest hopes and most radical dreams.

On Tuesday evening at 11:00, I was surprised, utterly taken aback by the tears that filled my eyes as the words “Barack Obama has been elected the 44<sup>th</sup> president of the United States” were spoken by the news anchor, and again as the words “President-elect Barack Obama” were bannered across the edge of the television screen.

Now, though as your minister I cannot and did not publicly endorse a candidate, as a private citizen I had made my choice and did my small part in trying to elect that candidate of my choice.

But I do believe that my surprising tears transcended partisan choices. Indeed, I expect that there were partisans on both sides who were moved and moved to tears...

When hearing the voices of those who marched forty and fifty years ago, who were beaten, who were jailed for freedom...

And when hearing the hopes of those whose children of color can now realistically imagine that they too can strive for anything in this American democracy...

As for me, my tears were also tears for my children and, should it be, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. For ours has been a nation to which millions have looked as a beacon of democracy and freedom and possibility. Yet we have, or so I believe, for too long squandered our resources and our reputation... putting in extreme jeopardy the well-being of our children and generations to come... putting in jeopardy the very living systems upon which we depend for life and sustenance.

So my tears – as for so many others in our nation and around the world – were also for the possibility that perhaps once again we can with some realism imagine a future worth hoping for, worth living for... for us, for the next generation... and the next.

Yet... now what?

Most of us have had the experience in our personal lives of awaiting for a long time some special event, perhaps some moment we have long worked for and hoped for – a diploma or a dream job.

Then the moment comes!

And the next day the same sun rises. And if not that day, then maybe the day after or the week after we may feel the proverbial letdown. “I achieved this great thing... and not everything has changed! Not all my problems have been solved! I have not entered the promised land of milk and honey!”

So then... now what?

Those of us who voted for John McCain may be asking the question with trepidation. Yet those of us who voted for Barack Obama worry too – the challenges are so great.

Well, first we need to breathe. I know I do. To begin with because I’m exhausted by the months, the years of this campaign; exhausted too by the last eight years; exhausted, among much else, by an administration which – to put it mildly – did not live up to the ideals of our American democracy, exhausted by the refusal of our government to address the peril our planet faces.

So I need to breathe. I expect we all do. Just to recover from these months and years. Yet also to breathe again the air of hope and possibility, the air of this multi-racial democracy, of

this renewed sense of what it means to be an American and of what might yet be possible on the planet. Breathe air in which we may no longer need to be a nation divided by what we fear, but rather, with respect for those who differ from us, united by what we hope.

In a related spirit, I believe it is the Dalai Lama who says that when the press of obligations and events and issues becomes ever more urgent, instead of meditating and studying for two hours... he increases the time to three or four.

I may have the details wrong, but the lesson is clear. In times of crisis we need ever deeper and more consistent spiritual and ethical grounding. So, however we find that depth for ourselves, we need to find it and hold to it, whether through prayer or meditation, through study and reflection and writing. As a community of faith, we can find it here on Sunday or across the street in a class or conversation.

Yet however we find it, we must ever find, hold, and deepen our spiritual and ethical grounding in this time of crisis and possibility – to sustain us and to inspire us.

And *then* we turn – sooner than later – turn to the work that lies before us, the work in the direction of hopes and dreams far larger than any election... to answer the question “now what?” with our lives – as individuals, as communities of faith, as a nation, as a world community. A President Obama will not do the work for us – but with us and us with him. Both candidates *spoke* of change. Yet neither could by himself *bring* change. *We* must change... and we must work together to change the world.

As Thoreau wrote of dreams near the conclusion of *Walden*: “If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.”

So, it will be with “calloused hands” in the words we heard earlier from our president-elect (from *The Audacity of Hope*) that we set to the work that must be done, and done together across the lines of party and opinion, class and race and religion, lines that too often divide us; we must set to the work we have already begun and must simply continue to create a more peaceful, just, and sustainable world.

With all this in mind... on his transition web site – [change.gov](http://change.gov) – President-elect Obama has invited our suggestions. A national suggestion box! Think of it!

So I’ve written him a letter. I invite you to do the same, whomever you may have voted for on Tuesday. Here’s mine:

Dear President-elect Obama:

First, congratulations! You have achieved something that only forty-three other human beings have achieved. And you have achieved something that no African American has achieved. You have opened a door that many thought would not be open for a long time yet. What a moment! Congratulations!

Second, though I wish (and maybe you do too) that you could follow Woodrow Wilson's example and go to Bermuda for a month following your election (for you need the rest, and we need a rested, energetic president to lead us in these times)... instead, just be sure rest when you can, and be sure to keep up your running and your time at the gym. Shoot some hoops. (Maybe get some truly mixed teams together – you know, Democrats *and* Republicans – no reason that bipartisanship can't begin on the gym floor.)

And of course take time to be with Michelle and your daughters.

And, as you always have, read. But don't just read policy papers. Read whole books. Naturally enough, read things you'll mostly agree with and that will help you fine-tune your policies and goals: Right now I would recommend Thomas Friedman's *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*; and Van Jones' *The Green Collar Economy*, both of which sketch an overarching agenda that will address climate change, energy, poverty, and indirectly peace too.

Yet be sure to read books by people who have different ideas from yours too – you never know where a good idea might hiding. But don't stop there. Read novels and poetry to nurture the spirit. Read the Bible, as I'm sure you will. Read Buddhist scripture too. Read the Koran.

In any case, read and reflect! We need a president who is intellectually active, ethically grounded, and spiritually nourished.

Third: The big question for you and for our nation is, as we all know, "Now what?" We have just witnessed, no been part of, what John Lewis called a non-violent revolution, the culmination (though not the end) of centuries of struggle to fulfill the promise of our democracy.

But now what? In these times... now what?

Your transition web site outlines your agenda – and there is a lot there.

But... *now* what?

In the broadest terms, here's what I would like to see.

I – and I'm sure I'm not alone – would like to see you really seize this moment!

This is not a time for small, incremental thinking. You have spoken, as Martin Luther King, Jr., did, of "the fierce urgency of now." In spite of, or maybe because of, the economic crisis, I believe it is all the more urgent for you to inspire us to think big as together we create a green and just economy, and not only for our nation but as an inspiration for all the nations of the world.

We have entered a new era, an era which demands that we dream, and demands that (to paraphrase Thoreau) we now – *now!* – put the foundations under those dreams.

So please do your best – *now* – to lead us to a world in which we work in cooperation with other nations, in which we lead by example when it comes to human rights, when it comes to addressing poverty, when it comes to climate change and the development of alternative energy, when it comes to seeking peaceful solutions to conflict, when it comes to eliminating nuclear weapons.

You can lead by example too. Make sure all the light bulbs in the White House are energy efficient – and have someone turn off the ones that aren't being used. Turn down the thermostat. And put solar panels back on the roof – maybe a windmill in the back yard too! And use local union labor to do the work – a lot of good people need the work.

In other words, as Gandhi advised, lead us to *be* the change we wish to see.

Now, I don't expect you to be perfect – no one does. And I'm close to certain I won't agree with everything you do or say. (I have grave concerns, for example, concerning your assertion that increased military involvement can lead to peace and reconciliation in Afghanistan.)

But agree or disagree, I do – we all do – expect you to be honest and inspiring. We expect you to help re-unite us as Americans. And we expect you to ask us to help, to ask us to serve, to ask us to change.

So... may I conclude by quoting you – those words at the top of your transition home page?

“Today, we begin in earnest the work of making sure that the world we leave our children is just a little bit better than the one we inhabit today.”

Know this: As long as you're with us on that one... we're with you.

Yours sincerely,

Rev. Kenneth Read-Brown

And as for the rest of us – once again: let us breathe this air of possibility and hope, let us respect and learn from those with whom we differ, let us deepen our ethical and spiritual grounding, and let us turn to the work at hand.

So may it be.