

# “Now What?”

A Sermon delivered by Reverend Marlin Lavanhar  
At All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, OK, Sunday, November 9, 2008

*We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal.* This declaration was penned in 1776 and ratified November 4th, 2008. It may be Fall here in America, but it sure feels like Springtime to me! There is a rebirth of faith in the American dream and a resurrection of hope that “We the People” *can* create a more perfect union.

There’s a sense, as Ronald Reagan once said, that “It’s morning again in America.” And it feels this way even though the economy is spiraling downward with increased unemployment, mounting foreclosures and high-profile bankruptcies. The nation is at war in two fronts, tensions exist with Russia, Pakistan, Iran and elsewhere around the globe, and we are approaching a trillion dollars in dept. That does not sound like the recipe for a nation celebrating a new dawn. Yet this week Americans were dancing in the streets from coast to coast. People were banging pots and pans together on the sidewalks in Brooklyn, setting off fireworks from Philadelphia to Florida to Fairbanks Alaska. There were people cheering in Washington, Wisconsin and Waikiki. And there’s no doubt that the incredible sense of possibility that’s blowing through our land and all over the world right now, is due to the election of Barack Obama, but it is also much bigger than any person or politician.

It’s yet to be seen whether Mr. Obama will fulfill his immense potential. But what we saw this week was America fulfilling its potential – at least the next stage of its potential. I’m not here in this pulpit to celebrate a partisan political victory. That’s not my point. No, I came to address the question: If faith is a lie and hope an illusion, then how come the march of progress continues onward? This moment is not about a person or personality – it is about a promise. And the continuing promise of America is shining still and shining brighter today. Lady Liberty has a new luster and a twinkle in her eye.

Keep in mind that when the founders drew up the founding compact and constitution of this nation Barack Obama was not included in “We the People.” He was not considered a whole person in the eyes of the law. Black men and woman were still mostly seen as property and were forbidden to own property. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, only 40 some years ago:

*When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note, to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as*

*white men, would be guaranteed the “unalienable rights” of “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” It is obvious today [King said] that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked “insufficient funds.”*

And now, today, even with our banks in crisis and our nation in debt, America has finally found the funds to make good on that old promissory note. This election marks the end of a long period of pain, indignity and injustice for African-Americans, and for so many others of us. It is now inevitable that there will someday soon be a woman president in the white house. It is a reaffirmation of America’s most basic ideals – ideals that are founded in hope and faith.

With the election of George Washington in 1789, an ever-evolving process began. It was a process grounded in hope, and in a faith in democracy and liberty and justice for all. The American Revolution was founded on such a hope and faith. The civil-war was won due to such hope and faith. And it was with such hope and faith that countless people endured mobs and dogs and fire-hoses, enslavement and lynchings and families wrenched apart, and times when the blood seemed like it might never stop flowing. It was with a faith and hope that almost defies imagination that African Americans have held fast to the promise that is America. But hold fast, they have!

We all need hope and faith. But not just any kind of hope and faith. We need a hope and faith that has the moral power to shape us and shape our future. Not hope and faith in fiction and fantasy, but faith and hope that help us reckon with what’s real. Such a faith and hope is resurgent today.

There’s a stirring in people’s hearts around the world. Obama’s victory is the world’s victory, because it offers new hope for the formation of respect for the “other.” And respect for the other who is different from us is critical today, because the time is coming soon when our only choice will be the *kinship* of humanity or the *destruction* of humanity.

This victory offers hope that in America anything is possible. That a person who comes from little financial means, who is raised outside the streams of power and wealth, through education and dedication has the chance to create a new life and to attain a position of prominence and power and prestige. And there’s no better weapon to defeat terrorism than for America to truly embody its ideals.

It’s a lot harder today for terrorists to make the case that American democracy is a sham. We are demonstrating that the promise of democracy is real, when a biracial man with African heritage, with the middle name of Hussein, can become the leader of the free world

through peaceful means and the will of the people, it makes it a lot harder for our detractors to decry that America is the Great Satan. It sends a powerful signal that Democracy and Liberty promise opportunity that violence and insurgency cannot.

As Arthur Miller liked to say, the essence of America is its promise. And we've found our story again! It's a story bound together by faith in a universal brotherhood and sisterhood which we continue to achieve step by step and stage by stage. It is an affirmation that justice, in the long run, cannot be denied. That love is superior to hate. And that humankind is destined to become one family. It is a faith that stirs a dedication to the cause of a better world, one that is more free, more just and more united. And a faith that everyday people, like you and me, can and do participate in creating such a world. This week, you and I went to the polls, and regardless of who you voted for, we changed the world.

Can you imagine living a life that is devoid of significance? Can you imagine living in a world that is destitute of meaning? Well, if our world is devoid of significance and our lives destitute of meaning, then someone will have to explain to me why our country and our world are overflowing with a new found pride and hope today. The day has finally come when all Americans, white men and black women, Jews and gentiles, and people of every heritage and hue, every party and position are able to sing with new meaning, "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing!"

It's been said, "Nothing can sing, that has no song in it" – and America is singing again. From where does this song resound that unites America? Does it come forth from our land? Our history? Our economy? Our money? No!

Our song rings out from our faith in freedom and the promise of progress and possibility. It is a melody born of a faith in basic human decency and true human equality. And all people need a faith they can believe in and a song they can sing. Especially when through uniting and singing this hopeful song, the old worlds of fear and division and greed crumble like the walls of Jericho crumbled at the sound of Gabriel's trumpet.

Did you know that on this very day, 40 years ago, November 9th, 1968, the man who went by the name of *The Godfather of Soul* and *Soul Brother #1*, Mr. James Brown, added his audacious contribution to the melody that is America's song. Like a modern-day Gabriel, his new single helped blow down the walls of white supremacy with the words, "Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud!"

After this election we might all feel like singing, "Say it loud, I'm American and I'm proud." But let it not be the kind of pride that makes us go out and tell others how to live and how to govern themselves. Anyone who's a parent knows that the only real way to influence

others is to lead by example. For too long now we have been acting like parents who say one thing while doing another. We've been saying *freedom* while taking away civil-liberties. We've been saying *justice* while advocating torture and while perpetuating indefinite imprisonment without a trial. We've been saying *leave no child behind*, while leaving too many children without medical insurance and good schools. And saying we're *pro-life*, while engaging in capitol punishment, a war of choice, and while resisting scientific research. But we've been given another chance to be America – to lead by example and to earn back the admiration of all the people on the earth. And it will take each and every one of us to keep our country accountable to the ideals and the promise that make our nation grand.

Many people wonder what is the source of this faith and hope that makes people dream, and has given people the courage to fight through the night and to die for what's right. The source is a living spirit that resides within the mystery of life, a spirit that some prefer to leave nameless, but that others call God. By whatever name, there is a spirit alive in the world over which death has no dominion. A light which no darkness can extinguish. It may have many names and many expressions but the most universal of these is love. Not the love of Hollywood movies, but the love which stirs the hearts of poets. The love that echoes in great music, and that causes us to dream. The love that moves us, to long for the impossible, and gives us the courage to attain it. The love that A. Powel Davies said, "makes, and breaks and shapes the world." It is of *this* that hope is born, and faith endures. Upon whose wings civilizations rise and great leaders are fashioned. It is of this faith that America came-to-be through dreams. And through visions of far-off and yet unknown possibilities. And it is this hope that America presents and promises to the world.

We cannot defeat evil in the form of terror and tyranny and totalitarianism with guns and bombs. We cannot win a war if our goal is to maintain our economic hegemony or our military superiority. The contest that is going on in the world will not be won by those with the strength of armies alone, but by those who hold true to the living spirit that is exemplified in true democracy and the universal laws of justice and love.

It is a purpose we cannot forsake. We must learn to love one another or die. We must continue to repair humankind's broken brotherhood and sisterhood. And it's not just the work of our nation, it is the work of our church. Because it is holy work. We must provide an example of a healthy faith, not based in fear, and a religion that shuns exclusive claims and intolerance. We know that all great religions are partly true and partly false. And that what is true in any of them – is true for all of them.

Let us continue to hold up such a beacon of hope and truth and freedom in the world. Ours is a church that, like our nation, is dedicated to the principles of Democracy and freedom and that seeks to put an end to intolerance. And it is with this faith, that we know for what we live. And we know that life is worth living.

We can create a better world than we have known today. And just having such a vision for our future, changes the present. We came from dust, and came to have breath and minds. And out of this primordial soup from whence we've come, we've created something we can be proud of. But we must stand watch, to ensure that love and not fear is at its heart. So that we can honor the dreams that dreamed it, the lives that shaped it, and the music through which our freedom sings.

There has been a longing for such a world as this from time immemorial. A world that celebrates in gladness, the brotherhood and sisterhood of all. From ages past, we've witnessed so many of the hopes we've dreamed come true. And that assures us that our hope is not deception. And our faith is not a fantasy. No matter how dreary the outlook may seem, as we gather around this dawn's fresh light, a new day has begun.

Amen.