

Seizing the Moment
A Sermon offered at
Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist, Palatine IL
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Reading

President Barack Obama

I am both surprised and deeply humbled by the decision of the Nobel Committee. Let me be clear, I do not view it as a recognition of my own accomplishments, but rather as an affirmation of American leadership on behalf of aspirations held by people in all nations. To be honest, I do not feel that I deserve to be in the company of so many of the transformative figures who've been honored by this prize, men and women who've inspired me and inspired the entire world through their courageous pursuit of peace. But I also know that this prize reflects the kind of world that those men and women and all Americans want to build, a world that gives life to the promise of our founding documents. And I know that throughout history the Nobel Peace Prize has not just been used to honor specific achievement; it's also been used as a means to give momentum to a set of causes.

And that is why I will accept this award as a call to action....

Some of the work confronting us will not be completed during my presidency. Some, like the elimination of nuclear weapons, may not be completed in my lifetime. But I know these challenges can be met, so long as it's recognized that they will not be met by one person or one nation alone. This award is not simply about the efforts of my administration; it's about the courageous efforts of people around the world.

And that's why this award must be shared with everyone who strives for justice and dignity; for the young woman who marches silently in the streets on behalf of her right to be heard, even in the face of beatings and bullets; for the leader imprisoned in her own home because she refuses to abandon her commitment to democracy; for the soldier who sacrificed through tour after tour of duty on behalf of someone half a world away; and for all those men and women across the world who sacrifice their safety and their freedom and sometime their lives for the cause of peace.

That has always been the cause of America. That's why the world has always looked to America. And that's why I believe America will continue to lead.

Thank you very much.

Sermon

By now it's old news – isn't it? Friday morning the President of the United States was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. By Friday afternoon every news outlet in creation was reacting to the announcement. Those on the far right were outraged –claiming that he is weakening the image of the United States and emasculating us in the eyes of the world. Those on the far left were bleeping sure that he didn't deserve it since there isn't world peace yet and the economic crisis is still deep. I figure when you irritate people on both ends of the political spectrum – as if there are only two ends – you must be somewhere near the center – or, at the very least, a pragmatist. In any case – it's not a *gift* that was bestowed upon Barack Obama – but a challenge and a burden. I know that

the *pressure is really* on President Obama now. One side wants him to fail, the other side is scared that he will fail and skeptical that anyone at all can succeed. A burden of history has been placed upon his shoulders. Yet, it wasn't just the President who was delivered this challenge – but all of us. It's as though the world turned to us and said – okay USA – you're the most powerful -- the king of the roost – now – lead us into the 21st century and an era of peace – yes – you can. I don't know if little Barack used to dream of being President so that he could save the world – but this is where he finds himself now – in the hottest of hot seats – with more visible power than any one else in the world. It may very well be that little Barack never had such a dream. It may even be that, when he stood to make his speech at the Democratic national convention he just thought he was saying stuff he believed in and taking one shot at being heard and never dreamed that it would turn into the White House – scant years later. I know that he wasn't groomed to be president – but to be a good and committed person. Still, he didn't *stumble* into the White House. He knew enough, at each turn, to seize the moment and make it his own. So, here he is – in the company of the most dedicated men and women that the 20th and 21st centuries have recognized thus far. And just as much as it's his moment now – with all its troubles and obstacles – it is our moment – to rise to the world's expectations. All the bickering and debating is just a symptom of our fear that we might not be up to the task.

Last week I talked with you about leadership. One key for leadership is to know how to read your context – and to seize the moment. As we think ahead to the challenges we have laid before ourselves – how to answer the call of our times and of our faith -- actively – in the world we surely need to read our context and seize our moment. One of the problems that people of good faith face is that as we turn to know our context and our world – what greets us is dauntingly huge – the first task is to divine where to begin to address the complexity that faces us.

Program Council met this week and there was a palpable surge of energy in the room as we asked ourselves – “how might we move forward as a congregation”? You know the way a horse looks as it comes up to a hurdle and takes to the air – all that power, momentum, and grace – that's what I felt in the room. Ready to leap.

There's no special stone tablet with a detailed list, no vial sent through time by Leonardo da Vinci with a secret code to give us directions, no blueprint in the Torah, the Gospels, the Koran, the Bhagavad Gita, the Dhammapada, only clues – yet our direction is right in front of us and among us right now.

Yesterday a small group of family and friends gathered in Batavia at the graveside of Bob Atherton, a member of this congregation. His death a few weeks ago had prompted me to read the book *Three Cups of Tea* about Greg Mortensen – a mountain climber like Bob himself. Just two weeks before Bob died he'd gone to see Mortensen at Loyola University. Actually, quite a few people in this congregation went that Friday night to hear this unusual man speak. And Bob went – working for every breath and every step he took. It really piqued my curiosity that so many folks were going and that Bob would see this man as worth such an exertion. How many of you here today got to see Greg Mortensen when he was here? How many here have read the book about his quest to transform the world by building schools?

Okay – it wasn't just Bob that got me to read *Three Cups of Tea*. It was Danial Noorani – Karen Noorani's husband, who regularly goes to Pakistan to help support

schools throughout the country. Our Social Action Committee has raised money to help these schools – with books and school supplies. I hate to display my ignorance – but I wondered – it seemed so random – why schools in Pakistan? So, when I asked what the book *Three Cups of Tea* was about and I heard that it was about schools in Pakistan – I had to read it. Let me just say that everyone here ought to read that book – it'll be well worth every page you eagerly turn.

Here's the thing: Greg Mortensen travelled to Pakistan to climb a mountain –that, ultimately, had a message for him – an opportunity. It gave him three cups of tea joining him with a community that cared for him when he was in need and as he recovered he saw that they were in need as well. And he knew – though he was not wealthy by our standards – that he was wealthy and privileged by their standards and that he could make a world of difference by using his privilege – his American homeland, the generosity of strangers, and the excess of a comfortable nation. He went home, lived in his car for two years, worked, saved, wrote 580 letters, and begged until he gathered the 12,000 and then he returned to the people who had extended themselves to him and built the first school. And since then has built more than 40 schools in places where ignorance, hunger, suffering, and oppression breed anger, hopelessness, and all too often, terrorism. With the creation of a school he has created new choices, especially for women and girls – not only is hope born from this – but so are new choices – earning power, self-esteem, creativity, family planning, community pride, progressive thought and allies for America. We can't all be like Mortensen – he's an rare man with physical and emotional strength that I find, frankly, daunting and a family that embraces his calling. But, simply: he saw a need -- right in front of him – he saw it and he let it speak to him. He let it awaken his heart and unsettle him and call him to greater service. It was what Mike Durall calls – recognizing opportunity.

Once I read *Three Cups of Tea* I knew the answer to the question – why are we raising money for schools in Pakistan? On one level – it's because Pakistan, Afghanistan and other such countries need our help. On a deeper level – if we hope to fight a real war on terror it's with friendship, education, and compassion that we will win that war – and the “we” will be our community that is safer and with that safety will come wealth, peace, righteousness, and hope for our home planet. It's because we can't stand amidst the suffering of the world and not respond. On the simplest level – we help these schools because someone in our midst can help us get help there – not wasted on bureaucracies – opportunity knocked and we answered, because one of us saw the faces of the children – just as Greg Mortensen did – and knew that they were his children and our children.

Recently I also read Muhammad Yunus book, *Banker to the Poor*. There, too, I found an inspiring story of determination: Yunus was an economics professor at Chittagong University in Southern Bangladesh in 1974 when the country was struck by famine and thousands starved to death. He was teaching theories about the marketplace when suddenly he was confronted by real starving people – and his theories shattered. They were all about big ideas and took no care or notice of the real lives of people and the micro realities that actually make up the macro picture. Yunus wrote: "Nothing in the ... theories I taught reflected the life around me. How could I go on telling my students make believe stories in the name of economics? I needed to run away from these theories and my textbooks and discover the real-life economics of a poor person's existence." Life and history were knocking at his door.

As he recognized that tiny resources make a huge difference he began a small loan banking movement, the Grameen Bank, that has benefited so many people that he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. On one level it's about knowing that what counts for a few month's train fare to and from Chicago can revolutionize the life of a family in a struggling nation. On another level it's about seeing how gaining a livelihood brings independence and self-esteem to countless people. On a larger level it's about the ways that despair is reversed and whole communities thrive all on account of a small loan. But at root it's about one person who saw a need right before his eyes and simply followed that need with all his heart. I served two years on the Minister's Financial Education and Advocacy Committee of the UUMA and in that time, from my colleague the Reverend Sydney Morris, I learned about socially responsible investing – one form of which is the Grameen bank. It's my hope – and Sydney's – that our Unitarian Universalist congregations will take resources and put them to work in marginal communities – at home and in struggling nations where a dollar goes much farther – and with our small resources – make a huge difference in people's lives. Simply because Sydney asked me – I have some passion for this.

A couple of years ago our congregation was fortunate enough to discover a program – called All My Money – Now called Making the Most of Your Money. It helps people find their way out of overwhelming financial hardship and helps them live differently for a more empowered financial future. It even gives their children new skills and understandings of money. I don't know the whole chronology of the program's history here – but I think that Dave Cohen went to Palatine Township and asked if there was something that we could do to help in our community. A number of our members – too many to name – have become involved – as mentors, as snack bringers. Lives are changed. And it's not only our folks who help with this program. Last year, for our work – for David's perseverance and that of many others – we were given an award by Palatine Township. Finally, we became involved because someone simply looked around, learned something that needed to be done – and made it happen. The program is still here – it still needs people to help out working with individuals and families along with a great team of other volunteers, to bring snacks, to offer child care. It's one way that we can offer our resources – our time and hospitality -- to make a difference for people – closer to home. If you want to feel something good, come here on a Wednesday evening while a session is going on and you'll experience the warmth that fills our congregational home as mentors and families connect. It happens because someone looked – right where they were and we became involved.

Two years ago – following our human hearts -- this congregation voted to become a Welcoming congregation – welcoming and affirming the presence, the rights, the equality, the dignity and the rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered people and committed to actively standing on the side of love. Today Dan Yokas and Tim Walsh are marching in Washington DC at the Great Equality March -- may our hearts march with them! The Welcoming Congregation is a gift to us – and a resounding knock on our doors calling us to action.

When we met with Mike Durall, the church consultant, two weeks ago – over and again – people talked about yearning for a sense of purpose and service – for making a difference in the world. Our hearts are ready – our time has arrived. As we raise the money for our capital Campaign – strengthening the present, building for the future, we

will dedicate at least 5% toward service and social justice work because it is this great work for which we yearn. This yearning arises from something else that Mike talked with us about, that I talked about last week and that Program Council discussed: spiritual maturity -- that stage that we reach when we recognize that we are part of a larger whole, that we belong to that whole, that, as a result of being born into this world we are part of that great cycle to give back even as we receive -- to help others -- even as we are helped -- to know -- not only on an intellectual level -- but down to our very bones -- that we may be struggling at times -- but there is always something of value to share and that we have to move out into the world in order to share it. Just as Greg Mortensen did, as Muhammad Yunus did, as Danial Noorani does, just Tim and Dan are doing today, just as the Making the most of your Money team does, and others have, as Marty Atherton does through her work with American Women for International Understanding. Just as any child has to move out and move on when she or he grows up -- God willing -- so our hearts and souls must grow up and move out into the world -- be filled with the world and move toward the world in love and service. That is spiritual maturity.

As a congregation we're ready. We'll never stop growing, evolving -- and at this time, we're taking a great step forward. On an episode of 30 Good Minutes -- the Chicago based interfaith television show -- the Reverend Frederick Beuchner said: "So what are we going to be when we grow up? Not what are we going to do, what profession are we going to follow, what niche are we going to choose for ourselves, but what are we going to be inside ourselves and among ourselves? No matter how old we are, how much we've achieved, or dream of achieving, we're not truly grown up until this extraordinary thing happens. Every once in a while I think we actually long to be what out of darkness and mystery we are called to be. We hunger for holiness even so, even if we never use the word... can a nation be holy? It's hard to imagine it. Nations should think of what the world could be, the friends we could be to each other as nations, the common problems we could help each other solve, all the human anguish we might join together to heal. You and I are the eyes... the ears ... the heart. It's never too late, never too early, to grow up... Children that we are, even you and I, who have given up so little, know in our hearts that it is more blessed to give than to receive..." Amen Reverend Buechner.

It is our time to live into our yearning and far beyond our dreams. The world is knocking. Whatever the pundits -- wise or foolish -- say in the wake of the President receiving the Nobel peace prize -- we know the prize was given to awaken our nation and ask us to grow up and become part of the world community -- not as an enforcer or muscle man -- though there may be times when we must be -- but to teach, to share, to be a beacon of democracy -- the best of democracy -- to be a beacon of pluralism -- to be a source of strength and healing to nations who have suffered far more than we have suffered.

Countryside Unitarian Universalists -- the world is knocking -- and it is time to answer.

It is our time to move out into our world -- to nurture this place, this space, this sanctuary of spiritual growth and affection -- but also to move outward and to serve our world -- to leave the loving touch of our hands and the legacy of our faith. I know that we are ready -- our human hearts are wide open, we are spiritually mature. The world has knocked -- we are ready to answer.