

This letter has been circulating among some of my networks. To me, it contains much wisdom for many aspirant 'change leaders': particularly in relation to honouring the past, and defining one's own and others' responsibilities very carefully. Ultimately, a change leader's potency, legacy and 'light' are almost certainly determined by the quality with which she/he tends to their own, 'inner' dimensions...

Nick Mayhew, Oikos

Open Letter to Barak Obama from writer Alice Walker Nov. 5, 2008

Dear Brother Obama,

You have no idea, really, of how profound this moment is for us. Us being the black people of the Southern United States. You think you know, because you are thoughtful, and you have studied our history. But seeing you deliver the torch so many others before you carried, year after year, decade after decade, century after century, only to be struck down before igniting the flame of justice and of law, is almost more than the heart can bear. And yet, this observation is not intended to burden you, for you are of a different time and, indeed, because of all the relay runners before you, North America is a different place.

It is really only to say: Well done. We knew, through all the generations, that you were with us, in us, the best of the spirit of Africa and of the Americas. Knowing this, that you would actually appear, someday, was part of our strength. Seeing you take your rightful place, based solely on your wisdom, stamina and character, is a balm for the weary warriors of hope, previously only sung about.

I would advise you to remember that you did not create the disaster that the world is experiencing and you alone are not responsible for bringing the world back to balance. A primary responsibility that you do have, however, is to cultivate happiness in your own life. To make a schedule that permits sufficient time of rest and play with your gorgeous wife and lovely daughters. And so on. One gathers that your family is large. We are used to seeing men in the White House soon become juiceless and as white-haired as the building; we notice their wives and children looking strained and stressed. They soon have smiles so lacking in joy that they remind us of scissors. This is no way to lead. Nor does your family deserve this fate. One way of thinking about all this is: It is so bad now that there is no excuse not to relax. From your happy, relaxed state, you can model real success, which is all that so many people in the world really want.

They may buy endless cars and houses and furs and gobble up all the attention and space they can manage, or barely manage, but this is because it is not yet clear to them that success is truly an inside job. That it is within the reach of almost everyone.

I would further advise you not to take on other people's enemies. Most damage that others do to us is out of fear, humiliation and pain. Those feelings occur in all of us, not just in those of us who profess a certain religious or racial devotion. We must learn actually not to have enemies, but only confused adversaries who are ourselves in disguise. It is understood by all that you are commander in chief of the United States ! and are sworn to protect our beloved country; this we understand, completely. However, as my mother used to say, quoting a Bible with which I often fought, "hate the sin, but love the sinner." There must be no more crushing of whole communities, no more torture, no more dehumanizing as a means of ruling a people's spirit. This has already happened to people of color, poor people, women, children. We see where this leads, where it has led.

A good model of how to "work with the enemy" internally is presented by the Dalai Lama, in his endless caretaking of his soul as he confronts the Chinese government that invaded Tibet. Because, finally, it is the soul that must be preserved, if one is to remain a credible leader. All else might be lost; but when the soul dies, the connection to earth, to peoples, to animals, to rivers, to mountain ranges, purple and majestic, also dies. And your smile, with which we watch you do gracious battle with unjust characterizations, distortions and lies, is that expression of healthy self-worth, spirit and soul, that, kept happy and free and relaxed, can find an answering smile in all of us, lighting our way, and brightening the world. We are the ones we have been waiting for.

In Peace and Joy,
Alice Walker