

## 33. The American Dream

**Walt Whitman**

***I Hear America Singing* (1837)**  126

*The speaker of the poem hears 'America singing', and then describes the humble people who make up America – the mechanics, the carpenters, shoemakers, mothers, and seamstresses. They all give their own contribution to the building of the nation which offers opportunities to everyone.*

I hear America singing, the varied carols I hear,  
 Those of mechanics, each one singing his as it should be blithe<sup>1</sup> and strong,  
 The carpenter singing his as he measures his plank or beam,  
 The mason<sup>2</sup> singing his as he makes ready for work, or leaves off work,  
 5 The boatman singing what belongs to him in his boat, the deckhand singing on the steamboat deck,  
 The shoemaker singing as he sits on his bench, the hatter singing as he stands,  
 The wood-cutter's song, the ploughboy's<sup>3</sup> on his way in the morning, or at noon intermission or at  
 sundown,  
 The delicious singing of the mother, or of the young wife at work, or of the girl sewing or  
 10 washing,  
 Each singing what belongs to him or her and to none else,  
 The day what belongs to the day – at night the party of young fellows, robust, friendly,  
 Singing with open mouths their strong melodious songs.

(From *Selected Poems*)

1. **blithe**: carefree, joyous

2. **mason**: someone who builds with stone

3. **ploughboy**: a boy who guides animals across a farm, drawing a plough

## Defining the American Dream 127

*The passage reports people's opinions about the American Dream.*

‘To me what the American Dream is that no matter what your background is, what country you’re from, what incoming background you’re from, that no matter what, you can be anything you want to be. And for the most part, I think that’s true... as long as you work hard enough in this country, I think you can get where, uh, you need to be.’

5 The economy may be tanking but according to a new national poll by the New York Times and CBS News, the American Dream is alive, if not entirely well. If that sounds contradictory – well, it is. On a sunny spring day, we asked some people in New York City for their impressions of the American Dream.

10 ‘I think for me the American Dream is just to have a... great family and a great home on the beach somewhere and just have enough means to support myself and my family.’

‘I wanna become a lawyer and then I wanna be a judge.’

‘Well, I think it’s being able to have the opportunity to... you know... meet your dreams, achieve whatever success or however far you wanna go in life.’

But achieving it is another thing.

15 ‘Umm, I still got a little work to do [laughing], I think we all do; I don’t think we ever really stop.’  
‘I definitely do not think I’ve achieved that yet [laughing].’

20 Less than half of the people in the Times/CBS poll said they had achieved their dream, and even for people here in affluent midtown Manhattan, the long-time dream of upward mobility can be elusive. ‘When I was growing up in nearby Patterson, an old industrial town, the American Dream *\*was\** that whatever your origins, that if you worked very hard, and if you were a little bit lucky, that things would be fine for you and better for your children. It was palpably available to people now it’s just not.’

25 ‘It was about hope, like you could build towards a future. You’d save a little bit each year and by end, you have enough for retirement, you could raise a family, you could put your kids through, take a vacation, take care of your elderly parent if you had... [them]... and that... and the last couple of years, it seems to be like [tshhht], up in smoke or up in credit default swaps.’

30 Here’s something kind of puzzling: the nation is a recession, but the polls show that more people think they’ve achieved the America Dream now than had four years ago. Why is that? Experts say when times are hard people shift their definition of the American Dream. It becomes more about values like freedom and opportunity, and less about things like material success.

‘In my opinion, what the American Dream is... is... uhm... coming here from another country, like me, and uh just trying to achieve what you want; there is no... not so many boundaries I think, as where I come from – I’m from Belgium. So for me, that’s a lot of freedom and that makes me happy.’

35 And some people are already living the American Dream because their parents achieved it for them. ‘But I guess for, maybe a first generation immigrant, we have achieved the dream, uh other people in our situation, in other countries, probably would dream to be in our shoes.’  
This is Katharine Seelye for the New York Times.

## Barack Obama

### Yes We Can



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*This speech was written and delivered in 2008 while Obama was still campaigning against Hillary Clinton for the nomination on the Democratic ticket.*

A few weeks ago, no one imagined that we'd have accomplished what we did here tonight. For most of this campaign, we were far behind, and we always knew our climb would be steep.

But in record numbers, you came out and spoke up for change. And with your voices and your votes, you made it clear that at this moment – in this election – there is something happening in America.

There is something happening when men and women in Des Moines and Davenport; in Lebanon and Concord come out in the snows of January to wait in lines that stretch block after block because they believe in what this country can be. There is something happening when Americans who are young in age and in spirit – who have never before participated in politics – turn out in numbers we've never seen because they know in their hearts that this time must be different.

There is something happening when people vote not just for the party they belong to but the hopes they hold in common – that whether we are rich or poor; black or white; Latino or Asian; whether we hail from Iowa or New Hampshire, Nevada or South Carolina, we are ready to take this country in a fundamentally new direction. That is what's happening in America right now. **Change is what's happening in America.**

You can be the new majority who can lead this nation out of a long political darkness – Democrats, Independents and Republicans who are tired of the division and distraction that has clouded Washington; who know that we can disagree without being disagreeable; who understand that if we mobilize our voices to challenge the money and influence that's stood in our way and challenge ourselves to reach for something better, there's no problem we can't solve – no destiny we cannot fulfil.



Our new American majority can end the outrage of unaffordable, unavailable health care in our time. We can bring doctors and patients; workers and businesses, Democrats and Republicans together; and we can tell the drug and insurance industry that while they'll get a seat at the table, they don't get to buy every chair. Not this time. Not now.

Our new majority can end the tax breaks for corporations that ship our jobs overseas and put a middle-class tax cut into the pockets of the working Americans who deserve it.

We can stop sending our children to schools with corridors of shame and start putting them on a pathway to success. We can stop talking about how great teachers are and start rewarding them for their greatness. We can do this with our new majority.

We can harness the ingenuity of farmers and scientists; citizens and entrepreneurs to free this nation from the tyranny of oil and save our planet from a point of no return.

And when I am President, we will end this war in Iraq and bring our troops home; we will finish the job against al Qaeda in Afghanistan; we will care for our veterans; we will restore our moral standing in the world; and we will never use 9/11 as a way to scare up votes, because it is not a tactic to win an election, it is a challenge that should unite America and the world against the common threats of the twenty-first century: terrorism and nuclear weapons; climate change and poverty; genocide and disease.

All of the candidates in this race share these goals. All have good ideas. And all are patriots who serve this country honorably.

But the reason our campaign has always been different is because it's not just about what I will do as President, it's also about what you, the people who love this country, can do to change it.

That's why tonight belongs to you. It belongs to the organizers and the volunteers and the staff who believed in our improbable journey and rallied so many others to join.

We know the battle ahead will be long, but always remember that no matter what obstacles stand in our way, nothing can withstand the power of millions of voices calling for change.

We have been told we cannot do this by a chorus of cynics who will only grow louder and more dissonant in the weeks to come. We've been asked to pause for a reality check. We've been warned against offering the people of this nation false hope.

But in the unlikely story that is America, there has never been anything false about hope. For when we have faced down impossible odds; when we've been told that we're not ready, or that we shouldn't try, or that we can't, generations of Americans have responded with a simple creed that sums up the spirit of a people.

Yes we can.

It was a creed written into the founding documents that declared the destiny of a nation.

Yes we can.

It was whispered by slaves and abolitionists as they blazed a trail toward freedom through the darkest of nights.

Yes we can.

It was sung by immigrants as they struck out from distant shores and pioneers who pushed westward against an unforgiving wilderness.

Yes we can.

It was the call of workers who organized; women who reached for the ballot; a President who chose the moon as our new frontier; and a King who took us to the mountaintop and pointed the way to the Promised Land.

90 Yes we can to justice and equality. Yes we can to opportunity and prosperity.

Yes we can heal this nation. Yes we can repair this world.

Yes we can.

And so tomorrow, as we take this campaign South and West; as we learn that the struggles of the textile worker in Spartanburg are not so different than the plight

95 of the dishwasher in Las Vegas; that the hopes of the little girl who goes to a crumbling school in Dillon are the same as the dreams of the boy who learns on the streets of LA; we will remember that there is something happening in America; that we are not as divided as our politics suggests; that we are one people; we are one nation; and together, we will begin the next great chapter in America's story with

100 three words that will ring from coast to coast; from sea to shining sea: **Yes, we can.**

(From Barack Obama's 'Yes We Can' Speech, January 8, 2008)