On January 20, the world watched in awe as Barack H. Obama was sworn in as the 44th president of the United States of America. Most were utterly amazed by the election of our first African American President.

Somewhat dumbfounded, many are still asking, “Is this real, and how did this happen?” Well I can answer that. It happened because of you…and you…and YOU. Yes, you did it! You sacrificed and answered his call for help. You counted up your change from your money jar and sent it. You sent your $5, $10, and $25 dollar donations to his campaign because although it wasn’t much, it was what you could spare. You sent those chain emails to everyone in your address book telling them to make sure and vote. You picked up your friends (and maybe even a frenemy) who had no transportation and took them to vote. And look what happened! YOUR $5 was added to your neighbor’s $5, which was then added to grandma’s $10, which was added to Oprah’s mega dollars, and on and on it went until there was enough money to spread the message of hope and change. That message was the one that most of us wanted to hear, so by overwhelming majority our nation elected President Obama.

In his inaugural address our president has called upon us to for more help. He has asked us to commit to our nation’s recovery in a similar way-by helping our neighbors in need. He has challenged us again to rise to our potential and volunteer to help strengthen and rebuild our communities. He has asked for all hands on deck. So whether you are the young, the old, the rich, the poor, the employed or the unemployed you have been summoned to answer another crucial call right now. I know what you are about to ask, “How and where should I get started?” (If that’s not what you were going to ask, shame on you!) Keep reading and I will give you a few suggestions.

Where do my interests and passions lie? That is the first question you’ll want to ask yourself, because the answer will give you clues about the types of environments in which you could most effectively serve. If you love children, then a school or tutoring program would be an obvious choice. If you are detail-oriented and have strong organizational skills, you may consider helping at the nearest public library. If your computer skills are fairly strong, then you

could volunteer to help those with no computer skills. Serving in your local church is also a great way to get involved.

There is this great website that I would recommend called www.volunteermatch.org . Their mission is to strengthen communities by matching volunteers with good causes. They work to bring together nonprofits, volunteers, and the business community who all collaborate around civic involvement. They are the preferred Internet site for over 62,000 nonprofit organizations. Whether you are a crafter, musician, writer, or computer operator, you'll have many volunteer options. VolunteerMatch has received many awards for its work, including being featured as one of Time Magazine's top ten websites of 2007.

Another popular way to volunteer is through the United Way, www.unitedwaytwincities.org . For over 70 years, this organization has been serving the community by fighting to reduce hunger, eliminating long-term homelessness, and helping to promote financial stability within local families.

For those who are commitment-shy and erroneously believe volunteerism kills social lives, there is even a type of one-night-stand volunteer opportunity for you! Check out www.onebrick.org . This organization supports other nonprofits in a no-strings-attached approach. No paper to fill out, just look on the volunteer events calendar and show up if you want. Oh yeah, to infuse a social element, everyone is invited to meet for dinner after the volunteering. Pretty cool, huh?

Right now it's downright stylish to help others, but that's not why I am encouraging you to get involved. Here's the real deal-regardless of your current situation, when you extend yourself in service to others, you win-EVERYTIME! To be clear, your win may not come in the form which you expected, but you must keep your eyes open for the win. The win might be in the form of improved self-confidence, or a greater sense of peace and thankfulness. It might come in the form of a new healthy friendship or satisfying mentorship. Maybe it will show up by way of a new job opportunity or a new set of skills. The point is that you must be available and open to unknown possibilities. Sometimes the best opportunities arrive like an unexpected visitor; without advance notice. They arrive at your doorstep announcing, "Ready or Not, Here I Come!" Will you be ready to answer the call? I hope so. Get involved, stay involved and Enjoy!

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