

**2009 Ware Lecture  
UUA General Assembly  
Salt Lake City**

**Faith and Reason: Race, Justice, and American Politics**

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**INTRODUCTION**

I come to you straight from my family's weeklong start-of-summer vacation trip. Together my best friend and I shoved three generations of two families into a rental at Cape May in New Jersey. In many ways this vacation has taken us a decade to plan. Ten years ago we finished graduate school together. We promised then that we would make summers a time to reconnect.

But I married, then she married, I had a baby, then she had a baby, I divorced, she moved, I was working to finish the book for tenure, then she was scrambling to get hers done, I had major surgery and couldn't travel, then her parents relocated and she had to be there to help them move. Money was always tight for both of us. In short order we went from twenty-somethings who were facing a lifetime of summers to thirty-somethings who were building lives but rarely taking time to live.

This year we decided there were no more excuses. We packed kids, parents, and partners into our cars and got ourselves to the beach. Money was still tight. And on our first days the skies were gray and waters cold. But that did not deter us. After 10 years we were going to make the most of our few days together.

Still, I have to admit it was not an easy time for me to tear myself away from my work as a political scientist and political commentator. I have been incredibly privileged to have a front row seat for the sweeping political changes and events that have marked the past two years. One day I'm living in Hyde Park, Chicago collecting survey data about my obscure state senator who is making a historic bid to be Illinois' second black US Senator. The next thing I know this same man is running for President of the United States and as a scholar of African American politics I am suddenly an expert on something with broad national interest.

From the moment Barack Obama announced his unlikely bid for the US Presidency I have been caught up in the unrelenting momentum of televised political life. And politics on television is a hungry monster that needs to be fed 24 hours a day.

In the week before the beach vacation the rising democratic tide in Iran had me glued to my television set, scouring the papers, and obsessively following my twitter feed. It is

disappointing but true that so many of the political stories I am have an opportunity to comment on are “human interest” or electoral horserace coverage. They have little enduring value.

But the escalating crisis in Iran is different. Right up until the moment that the SC Governor disappeared with his Argentine girlfriend and just before musical icon Michael Jackson unexpectedly and prematurely died, the political news was substantive.

We were having real discussions of power, protest, democracy, leadership, and citizenship. The Iranian elections, the protests that followed, and the repressive government actions in response have afforded real, compelling, and meaningful opportunities for political work, solidarity efforts, and concrete discourse. Yes the images are hard to stomach and the implications of authoritarian repression are difficult to observe, but there is also something so compelling about these movements of young Iranian people determined to have a voice.

How could I go to the beach at a time like this? But again, it had taken a decade to plan this trip. So I turned off the TV, disconnected from the internet (at least most hours of the day) and actually went on vacation.

That is how I found myself on Tuesday afternoon standing in the cold Atlantic Ocean, nearly up to my chin in salt water. I turned away from the beach, faced the horizon, and took in the enormity of the sky and water. It felt like such a perfect UU experience. Standing in the ocean I felt our transcendentalist forefathers whisper to me. I was taking in the wholeness of nature, recognizing and even reveling in the smallness of my self.

The NJ skies have been gray the entire month of June, but on Tuesday afternoon the clouds broke and I saw the sun sending rays onto the water. It glistened like jewels. As I stood there I thought, “Yes, this is how I will begin the Ware lecture, with Emerson, with nature, with our commitment to the interconnected web of life.” I could picture myself standing before you offering soaring, inspirational rhetoric. So I flung open my arms and tilted my face further to the sky.

So as not to fall I dug my toes deep into the ocean floor ...And then a crab pinched my toe... Hard.

That too was a perfect UU metaphor. Just as I was floating off into an ecstatic spiritual experience I was reminded, quite literally, of the gnawing realities on the ground. And that is where I would like to spend a little time this evening: right in the tension between soaring expectations, ecstatic faithful assurance of something larger, and the biting, stinging, difficult realities that ground our lives and work.

Faith and Reason: this is the juncture that marks our religious community as Unitarian Universalists and as citizens in a deeply flawed democratic Republic.

We need both faith and reason to work toward a more just world. Sometimes UUs are too willing to relinquish the power of faith in the pursuit of cool rationality. We are a people held together most profoundly by a shared commitment to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Many of us come to Unitarian Universalism from religious traditions that we felt encouraged blind faith and asked us to leave reason at the door of the church. So we cling to our rationality the marker of our religious identity. We refused to be duped by faith; we look for evidence!

But I want to ask us to embrace both. We need our arms flung wide to the sky embracing the whole earth with reverence and hope, and we also need enough sense to remember that crabs are in the sand beneath our feet.

## **New Orleans**

Let me start first with another story of about the power of water.

In August 2005 the levees of New Orleans broke in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The order to evacuate the city had come twenty-four hours earlier. Many of the city's residents had fled in advance of the storm, but a significant portion of New Orleans' citizens remained. It was, after all, the end of the month. Working class and poor people in the city were still a week away from payday. More than one in four individuals living in the city of New Orleans lived below the federally defined poverty line. More than a quarter did not own private vehicles. Unable to escape, they fled to shelters of last resort in the city's Superdome and Convention Center. They headed to the attics of their homes. And they huddled to pray and wait for the storm to pass.

Although the city was spared a direct hit by the eye of the storm, Katrina's sideswipe was powerful enough to unleash the lake waters that surround the city. As the city flooded, the stranded citizens of New Orleans waited again: this time for rescue.

For days the rescue did not come. The power went out and the flood waters rose. Food and water became scarce. The shelters became centers of disease, starvation, agony, and death. The nation watched in horror, but no national guard came. No mass evacuation began. Air Force One did not land.

The victims of the storm were left to manage on their own as their world collapsed, flooded and burned. In the midst of the baffling silence of the federal government and the deafening cries for help from citizen survivors, one inescapable fact became clear: those who were left behind in New Orleans were vastly disproportionately black.

Tens of thousands of African American men, women and children were labeled refugees by the U.S. media. Early news coverage focused more on narratives of criminal activity than on stories of massive human suffering. But as the crisis wore on, the public, the victims and local elected officials became increasingly confused by and angry about the

lack of coordinated response to alleviate human suffering and evacuate trapped citizens. The lives of black people seemed unworthy of saving.

Even as government officials denied the role of race in disaster response, black Americans became increasingly convinced that what they were seeing on their television screens meant that black people had been abandoned by their government. In the days immediately following the flooding in New Orleans the Pew Research Center conducted a public opinion survey whose results revealed an enormous racial divide over the meaning of the disaster. A full 66 percent of blacks believed the government would have responded faster if the victims were white.

Just a few weeks after the storm I traveled to New Orleans. There I talked to dozens of survivors who were beginning to trickle back into the city. Nearly every African American believed that racism was at the heart of the disaster. They told me about municipal neglect of the inadequate levees in black and poor neighborhoods. They told me that race motivated the national government to abandon them during the flood. Some believed the city destroyed levees in predominately black areas in order to save white neighborhoods. They were angry that news reports referred to them as refugees and distressed that their suffering seemed already to have been forgotten.

African American responses to the storm were not just emotional, they were rooted in the evidence of centuries of racial inequality. For most of our history our country has remained steadfast in its refusal to grant the basic rights of access to public education, government aid, voting rights and social equality. Although real gains have been made in the past fifty years, persistent structural inequality remains. The nation's history is littered with the black bodies of citizens victimized by institutional racism that went by names like "states rights" "Southern custom" "separate but equal" "selective sterilization" "meritocracy" "war on drugs" and "welfare to work." Hurricane Katrina was a reminder of this history.

The evidence in New Orleans was clear to me: with mile after mile after mile of destroyed homes, infrastructure in shambles, leadership with little conscience or competence, people with few resources, and a federal administration with no interest beyond the city's oil producing shoreline and liquor distributing tourist sector. It was completely clear to me that New Orleans could not be rebuilt.

I penned a piece of the American Prospect magazine criticizing "the demand for complete and simultaneous rebuilding of all neighborhoods." Citing reason and evidence I argued, "Most experts agree that given the vast area of destruction, this demand is unrealistic." I argued for fair cash payments, changing lending structures to help survivors resettle, and free physical and mental health care for those in the Katrina Diaspora. The evidence on the ground in the city was clear to me: New Orleans could not be rebuilt.

In short, the crab bit my toe so hard that I looked down into the murky waters and no longer at the horizon. The utter hopelessness of the situation pulled me under like a

powerful wave. I wasn't sure I wanted to be part of a country that forty years after the Civil Rights and Voting Acts would let black people starve to death on television.

But like it or not, this is my country. My father's people were enslaved in the U.S. South. My mother's people were Mormon pioneers who came West pushing handcarts. This is my country, my story, every bit of it.

And despite all evidence, something amazing began to happen in the months following Katrina. A whole series of unexpected occurrences began. Thousands of people came back to New Orleans. Though they had few resources, they were indelibly tied to their city. They came back and lived in blighted homes and contaminated trailers. They worked long hours for stagnant wages and then started their second shift: gutting houses, clearing debris, and rebuilding nail by nail. Not only that: they organized, they marched, and they demanded redress. They filed papers and claims. They sat on the phone for hours with government agencies.

And they were not completely alone. Young people of all races streamed into the city from all over the country. New Orleans emerged as ground zero for social justice, like the Mississippi Freedom Summers 40 years earlier; the question was "what have you done to help rebuild the city?" And these young people came not just for Spring break work trips, they have settled in the city, founded nonprofits, worked with local leadership, and adopted a new identity as New Orleanians.

Not only that, but the televised suffering of the people of New Orleans changed the tide of American politics. George W. Bush never recovered from his failure to respond to Katrina. In the midst of this crisis the Democratic Party found its voice. The suffering in New Orleans allowed it the first sustained and successful opportunity to criticize the Bush administration. Along with the newly emboldened mainstream media, Democrats asked: how can a government that is unable to get water to an American city for three days be trusted to prosecute a foreign war? The Democrats' 2006 midterm win, widely understood as a referendum on the war, was also made possible by the images of New Orleanians trapped on the roofs of their homes.

New Orleans's inadequate levees revealed how crony capitalism reduced border defense to profit motivation rather than government priority. Not even the Gulf Coast's critical oil industry was sufficient to make levee maintenance, repair and reinforcement a national spending priority. Michael Brown's incompetent leadership of FEMA revealed the Bush administration's utter disregard for citizen safety compared to personal patronage. The choices that made New Orleans unsafe meant that the entire country was vulnerable.

So it was the televised suffering in New Orleans that set the stage for the Democratic win in 2006 and Obama's victory in 2008 just as surely as the televised brutality against civil rights demonstrators in Selma set the stage for passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Katrina is the wedge that opened the door for a new era of American politics.

## Contemporary Politics

I tell the story of New Orleans, not because it is a clean victory, not because everything is fine in the city, not because there is now some great national will for justice. Not at all.

The struggle for decent housing and fair wages in New Orleans are immanent. There have been as many losses as wins. Poor people are still desperately poor in the city. Residential segregation remains entrenched. Schools, churches, and small businesses are still fighting to find a way. Families are still separated. There is still a preferential option for tourists over residents in many city policies.

But because despite all the evidence, despite the clear impossibility of it all, the work to rebuild, recover, and restore continues. I tell the story of New Orleans because it reminds me that the best and most important work we do for politics, justice, and fairness comes from committing ourselves fully and wholeheartedly to causes we are unlikely to win in our own lifetimes. Justice cannot be only or even mostly about strategically choosing the causes we can win, it is about embracing the battles we are likely to lose.

I must admit I am terribly jealous of last year's Ware lecturer Van Jones. He was blessed to come to you during the heat of the election. What a great moment last summer was. Candidate Barack Obama had stood in the shadow of defeat in New Hampshire and declared "In the unlikely story that is America, there has never been anything false about hope."

An enormous multiracial coalition of Americans young and old, gay and straight, urban and rural, male and female was coming together and chanting YES WE CAN! SI SE PUEDE!

Last summer we were stretching our arms to the horizon, feeling warmed by the sun. Yes We Can! In November the win was so clean, victory declared before midnight, the weather perfect in Chicago, as though Mother Nature herself were smiling about the victory. Yes we can.

But even as we stood with arms to the sky, eyes on the horizon, the crabs were preparing to bite our feet. Californians went to the polls and pulled one lever for Obama and the other for Proposition 8. Maybe only some of us can?

With the searing pain of Prop 8 still fresh in the coalition, President-elect Obama invited homophobe Rick Warren to pray at the inauguration. Maybe we don't want to?

Among his first acts in office Obama promised the closure of Guantanamo Bay, but just yesterday rumors circulated of an executive memo allowing indefinite detention of terrorism suspects. Maybe we can't?

We have restarted a national conversation about health care reform, but Democrats have aggressively taken single payer off the table. Maybe we won't even try?

But let me remind you once again of what Van Jones said last year. He warned last year, “Get prepared to govern.” Yes, I said it, he *warned* us to be prepared to govern. In the midst of our enthusiastic embrace of the election I think many progressives forgot to heed this warning. Get prepared to govern indeed. Progressive politics is often oriented toward protest from the outside. But, now we must be prepared to govern. Governing with a friend in the White House may be even harder on for those who are used to simply arguing from the margins.

The crabs are at our feet and it is time to govern.

In the United States today babies born to black women are two-and-a-half times more likely to die before their first birthday than white babies.

In the United States today people with disabilities are routinely denied housing and employment even though the law is supposed to protect against such violations.

In the United States today there are women forced to give birth handcuffed to jail beds and their only crime is working long hours for little pay without official documentation.

In the United States today fewer than 25 percent of black women have bachelor’s degrees and the unemployment rate for black women is more than double that for white women.

In states across our country LGBT individuals can be fired, denied housing, and lose custody of their children with impunity simply because of their identity.

In the United States today the median wealth of even modest white families is ten times that of black families and 12 times that of Hispanic families.

In the United States today Microsoft CEO Bill Gates has more wealth than the bottom 45 percent of American households combined

Today more than 80 percent of the world’s population lives in countries where income differentials are widening

Today nearly a billion adults are unable to read a book or sign their names.

Today less than one per cent of what the world spent last year on weapons could put every child into school.

Today an estimated 40 million people are living with HIV/AIDS,

Today nearly half of the world’s 2.2 billion children live in poverty.

Today women and girls are sold into sexual slavery on a booming international market.

In a world where those living in industrial nations struggle to stay thin, nearly 1 billion people are living with daily hunger and life threatening anemia.

Today our entire planet is threatened with extinction as glaciers melt, sea levels rise, and we continue to consume with ravaging appetite for more of everything.

Yes, the realities are bleak. The evidence is biting. Any attempt to imagine a nostalgic past when things were easier or fairer is simply a delusion. By all evidence, by all rationality, there is little reason to think that a fair and equal world is possible.

But I firmly believe that we cannot rely solely on our rationality. We also need to envision something for which we have no evidence of at all. We must believe that something greater is possible. We must believe we are not alone, and that we can still be part of great movements that can redeem us all.

The point of the 2008 election is not, and was not ever, the greatness of Barack Obama. The point is the greatness of us, as a people, who can debate, create vision, and work toward something that we have never actually seen before.

### **Unitarian Universalism**

And so here is the work of our religious community now that the hard project of governing has begun.

I was raised a Unitarian Universalist and I've always felt particularly well suited to UU-ism. After all I am a social scientist. My gig is to use evidence empirical to search for truths. Because I am a student of African American politics there are so many unrecovered truths. The history and contemporary political realities of black people in America remain shrouded in unconscious stereotypes and willful ignorance.

But I am both a UU and a Christian. As a black woman I find it impossible to ignore that it was the spirit of love, accepted by enslaved black people in the stories and theology of Christianity that pointed a way out of no way. My search for truth has led me to study at Union Theological Seminary. I am there because I still stand in open mouthed wonder as I try to understand how black people in America came to believe in a loving, benevolent, and just God when there was so little empirical evidence to back that claim.

To be black in America is to be a problem. In his prophetic turn-of-the-century treatise *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Du Bois reflected on the experience of being black in America as a constant awareness that others view one as a problem--to be observed, analyzed and solved. For black Americans our very self is the object of the slavery question, the miscegenation threat, the Jim Crow solution, the Negro problem, the black family crisis, the welfare dilemma, the crime concern or the nation's racial scar. I am humbled in the face of comprehending that women and men who were born into slavery, and never expected anything but slavery for their children and grandchildren, nonetheless believed that they were equal human beings worthy of the love of a benevolent and

intervening God. It is a different kind of knowing, one with at least as much power as reason and evidence.

Now I know that those of us in liberal religious traditions bristle when we talk of faith in the public sphere. Our national history is replete with examples of how religion has been misused to divide, to abuse, and to justify horror.. White slaveholders wrapped a twisted theology around their ideology of White Supremacy. Selectively quoting scripture; they asserted that black people were cursed from the time of Noah and that God established slavery. Similar theologies were distorted to fit ideologies of patriarchy, segregation, imperialism, and oppression. Today many Conservative spokespersons continue this tradition of misusing religion. They selectively quote scripture, employ religious imagery, and deploy twisted religious rhetoric to support policies of unprovoked international aggression and domestic oppression. They exclusively discuss issues of private morality while ignoring public sin. They discuss moral absolutes while ignoring the teachings of Grace.

In this context its easy to simply write off faith talk as inherently divisive. But if we do this then we cede faith to those who will use it as a weapon and we lose it as a tool in our own struggles for self, community, and justice.

Our commitments to reason, rationality, and evidence can become a kind of cynical self-righteousness. We can easily make ourselves feel superior because we have an analytic lens that allows us to see the injustices of the world. But that reason without faith can also paralyze. We need to know that we are not always right.

Faith is a practice of intellectual humility: a habit that reminds us of our own limitations and encourages us to remember that we don't know everything, can't predict every outcome, and don't control variable.

And so we come together in this place as Unitarian Universalists with the most audacious faith claim of all. Not a particular story about a particular deity. Not a claim about a special people in particular covenant with God. Not a claim about a single special book or a perfect set of laws and rules. We have come here today, stand here together to make the most ridiculous, unlikely, and powerful faith claim of all: that we can join together to make a world that recognizes the inherent worth and dignity of each person and that we can make that world using the power of love.

We are determined to use the power of reason to identify the inequalities and injustices in our world. We are determined to marshal evidence as a tool in our work for fairness. But we must be equally determined to stamp out cynicism with hope, to fight hate with love, and to refuse to lose our faith.

Despite the crabs at our feet we can stand together in a vast ocean, turn our face to the sky and fling wide our arms.

On the day Barack Obama was inaugurated the U.S. presidency the campaign ended and the governing began. If you were paying attention then you might have heard poet Elizabeth Alexander warning us that now the hard work of faith begins.

She said:

Praise song for struggle, praise song for the day.

Praise song for every hand-lettered sign,

the figuring-it-out at kitchen tables.

Some live by love thy neighbor as thyself,

others by first do no harm or take no more than you need. What if the mightiest word is love?

Love beyond marital, filial, national, love that casts a widening pool of light, love with no need to pre-empt grievance.

In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air, any thing can be made, any sentence begun. On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,

praise song for walking forward in that light.

Indeed, my faith community, let us walk forward in that light.