

## It Was On Fire When I Lay Down On It

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A tabloid newspaper carried the story, stating simply that a small-town emergency squad was summoned to a house where smoke was pouring from an upstairs window. The crew broke in and found a man in a smoldering bed. After the man was rescued and the mattress doused, the obvious question was asked: "How did this happen?" [The man replied] "I don't know. It was on fire when I lay down on it."<sup>1</sup>

The top vote getter in Tuesday's Cincinnati City Council Election, Democrat John Cranley, stated that crime reduction was his top priority; if Cincinnati can reduce crime the city will flourish. Many other local candidates, Democrat and Republican, campaigned on a similar platform. Yet, three months ago I heard Rick Biehl, Executive Director of the Community Police Partnering Center in Cincinnati, and a retired 25-year veteran of the Cincinnati police force, discuss the realities of urban policing.

Biehl, who is white, noted that videotaping crime areas has minimal success. The liberals gathered to hear him speak were shocked. The problem he explained, no one has time to watch multiple, daily, 24-hour loops of videotapes, and after criminals realize this, and they ignore the cameras. Asked about more police on the streets, Biehl noted that as a general plan this is unsuccessful at solving crime. However, in unique instances it can be very successful if trained units receive extra staff to police specific areas.

Biehl noted that since the Police Collaborative went into affect four years ago there has been a dramatic reduction in vehicle stops. Cincinnati's black community has long complained that traffic stops targeted them (pulled over for "driving while black") and that excessive force, such as gun draws, were regularly used, which created a climate of poor police community relations. In the face of a dramatic reduction in stops, have traffic accidents dramatically increased? The statistics are in and the answer is "no," not at all. Seems our black neighbors were telling us the truth.

Biehl says that officers must improve police community relations by getting out of their cars and walking the streets, meeting the locals, and earning their trust (which was not happening during frequent vehicle stops with gun draws). Incidentally, Biehl explained to us that police officers in the State of Ohio are commissioned as "Peace Officers" not "Law Enforcers."

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, the average age of a homeless person is 9 years old.<sup>2</sup> As a society, this is one way for us to educate our children, but not the way I choose. A few weeks ago I drove by the Interfaith Hospitality

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Fulghum, *It was on Fire When I Lay Down On It*, (1988), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Darlene D'Agostino, "Suffer the Children" in *City Beat* (March 15-21, 2001).

Network bus driving down Interstate 75. The Interfaith Hospitality Network houses homeless families in different congregations every week. During the day the kids try to go to school, and the mothers (they are almost always with mothers, not fathers) try to look for jobs. I looked at the young girl in the front seat of the bus, and saw the restrained concentration and fear on her face. She looked to me as if she knew she was riding into hell, and she is.

I am so mad, mad at Democrats and Republicans, but especially mad at middle and upper class liberals who turned a blind eye to the realities of American economics and fell asleep in a bed on fire. Those of us in this contingent, and I count myself here, have enjoyed individual freedoms while dropping the ball on economic equality, convincing ourselves that freedom for groups equaled gain for all. The political and cultural freedoms of the 1960's were the moral and intellectual seduction of liberal America, the reaffirmation of the middle-class and rich over the poor, who are so often, people of color.

When Martin Luther King, Jr. came to Memphis, Tennessee in April 1968, he came to support the striking sanitation workers. The strike of the sanitation workers quickly led to outrage and disgust. Memphis was full of ugly, smelly trash piles in every neighborhood. Imagine your trash sitting in your backyard, your front yard, then heaped on corners, outside your office, by your bus stop.

The sanitation workers, almost all black, wanted economic justice. They picketed wearing signs that read, "I am a man." I am a man. I am a human being. Trash was rotting, folks were scared. The workers said, "I am a man." The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. was working on economic justice and wanted to lead a poor people's march in Washington that summer. Memphis was his trial run. He never got to Washington. On April 4<sup>th</sup> a shot rang out in the Memphis sky.

Many middle and upper class liberal activists sat out the election of 1968 because of the Vietnam War, enabling Richard Nixon to become President. American justice and poverty is always second to other issues (war, abortion, affirmative action, always second, if mentioned at all). For this reason the 1960's make me gnash my teeth - a cultural and sexual revolution, the rise of feminism, Stonewall, black power, *and* we left the sanitation workers, our poor neighbors, carrying signs that read "I am a man." I protest the blind selfishness of class that went with the 1960's.

In Ohio child poverty increased 50% between 1979 and 1998.<sup>3</sup> The rich became richer and everyone else lost net worth. Recently Oprah aired a compelling program on America's poor. From this program I learned that 42% of single mothers live below the poverty level, and 63% of children living in poverty are African American and Hispanic. It is time for us to stop blaming someone else for our collective willing ignorance, particularly the Republicans. President Clinton was in office during both the 1990's stock market boom (dividends for the rich) and the most recent welfare reform (strikes against the poor).

Al Gerhardstein wrote me about today's sermon

Your topic reminds me of the high hopes I had when I set out to be a civil rights lawyer upon entering law school in 1973. I was energized by the strides made by African Americans, women, prisoners, and others that had for so long been on the

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<sup>3</sup> D'agostino.

margins of power. I actually thought that by principled, reasoned argument we could build a society that empowered everyone. The root evil was an economic system that accepted and even required an underclass – a system that fed on poverty. That had to be illegal! I had hope. The Warren court had already ruled that indigency could not be a basis to deny criminal defendants fair treatment . . . Similarly, in the 60's and early 70s the Court struck down high filing fees that had been charged to run for office and imposed on those who filed civil court actions, including divorce. Surely these incremental steps would lead to a “right” to a more equal society. Wrong. The progressives targeted wealth in the case of *San Antonio School District v. Rodriguez* (1973). In that case the plaintiffs said that a system funded solely by property taxes inherently led to poor schools in poor communities and rich schools in rich communities. Since education was “fundamental” to our very existence as a free society, we should look at such funding schemes with “strict scrutiny” . . . In a 5 – 4 decision the Supreme Court rejected the argument . . . The level of disparity the court was willing to stomach was totally disheartening. In the end as in so many areas the court was not willing to ride principle past the boundaries of popular will and the people seem satisfied with a land of opportunity that delivers only for the privileged. And the privileged are heavily invested in our inequality. The people have not pressed hard enough for change and in recent years our economic inequality has only gotten worse. So civil rights lawyers can only pick around the edges while real reform is left for political movements. And I am still waiting for the political movement that tackles poverty!

I now watch retirement ads for baby boomers wearing berets, listening to a voice over pitch that goes something like “Your generation changed America, shouldn't you have a retirement plan that does as much for you?” The soundtrack is always Joni Mitchell, Bob Dylan, Joan Baez. I cringe. If us and mine have enough in my pocket, my work is done? We were seduced by money, you and I, bought, sold, and silenced on the American dream.

Yes, I have a pension and I care about its growth. Yes, I have more money now than my parents did at my age, *and* my husband and I both work full time. Neither of us could manage the feat that our fathers pulled off, which was they worked, and our mothers stayed at home. Let me be precise, I am currently the highest wage earner in my household, and my income alone could not support our family. As a woman I have the right to work and respect as a minister and economically I and most of you, have lost net worth since the 1960's.

The defining moment in my season of anger this year, and the reason for this sermon, came three days into Hurricane Katrina. Driving in my car I forced myself to listen to Mike Brown tell us there weren't people trapped in the New Orleans Convention center without food and water, while a reporter on site grippingly narrated the truth, people were without food and water and in danger. The television at nights showed shocking photos of hysterical people, dehydrated babies, tearful children, elderly people lying on the floor, almost all of them black. I wept and I know you did too. It was a tragedy. I have never been so embarrassed to be an American. These pictures are the

truth of economic injustice in America, coupled with racism, ignorance, and denial, and it was devastating to behold.

My Israeli friends were dumbfounded. The military can move and rescue massive amounts of people and supplies within short notice. This they know. Where were they? Meanwhile looting became a problem in New Orleans. You know, if I didn't have food or water, I would break a store window to get some. You and I watched the police arrest mostly desperate, despairing people searching for food. I watched and waited for someone in authority in New Orleans to have the vision and will to systematically open all the downtown Wal-Marts, Targets, drugstores, grocery stores, and systematically distribute items, which, were all going to be written off as a loss anyway. It didn't happen. We protected personal property over human life.

Our seventh UU Principle is respect for the interdependent web of which we are all apart. The threads of the web tore, and we let our most vulnerable citizens fall. I am a man.

It is a mistake to think that adding police will solve the problems of the city, just as finding housing for the homeless will not solve all our urban challenges. So it makes me nervous when I hear crime named as a "top" issue without addressing other problems, police community relations and continuation of the collaborative, affordable mixed housing, the city schools, raising the minimum wage, job creation, corporate job training partnerships. I recently read an article where Cincinnati Police Chief Streicher said the police cannot solve the economic and educational disparities that make their work so hard.

So what's it going to be for our new City Council? Without economic truth telling we will not move forward. We ignored the poor as long as possible and then we were horrified by what we saw, and this is our country, and these are our people, and this is what we created.

So I volunteered. I reached a bottom and decided to engage in our democratic process to create positive change because I could not and cannot and never will accept the images from Hurricane Katrina. For the first time ever I volunteered for a campaign, the Damon Lynch III for City Council campaign. I know, some of you are groaning. Not him again. Yes, him again. As much as some people don't like him and his tactics, I have never heard someone give me a good professional reason not to work with him, and yes, he now lives and works in the city.

Four years ago he chided Cincinnati for building a stadium and ignoring its 52 neighborhoods. He says the same thing today. Four years ago he said more police on the streets wouldn't necessarily change anything. Seems he was right. So you didn't like the boycott. I didn't like all of it either, but I still think that Lynch is the one person who continues to speak for the poorest Cincinnatians, like that young girl riding the Interfaith Hospitality Network bus. Which Council member speaks for her – Jim Tarbell who sponsors the arts, Leslie Ghiz who is concerned about home owner rights, Jeff Boering who works at Bengal Stadium, John Cranley who is concerned about crime? Who speaks for her?

I stood at a polling station, co-hosted a house party, did phone banking, planted yard signs. Here are some things I learned. Campaigns live and die on money, volunteers, and campaign managers, so give generously to and volunteer for the issues and candidates of your choosing. Candidates with money run television ads, post

billboard signs, pay poll workers or campaign managers. Everyone else runs at a deficit from the beginning. Lynch's campaign budget was shoestring. It is much harder to get your message out without money. I did note that many of the winning council members ran television ads and posted billboards. Money wins votes.

Poor people love Lynch and he has an image problem with the middle and upper class (black and white). I spoke to one man who told me he would not vote for Lynch because he had dread locks. Since I think the length and style of someone's hair is irrelevant compared to economic justice, I wanted to ask, but didn't, if his concern was really with Lynch's hair, or that Lynch is a consistent, articulate advocate for the poor, a thorn in the side of liberal complacency.

I particularly reflected on my conversation with Mayoral Candidate David Pepper's father, John Pepper, at a Pleasant Ridge polling station on Election Day. I'm still not sure, but I could have sworn that with his charm and intelligence he was subtly trying to undermine my opinion about Lynch. I am in no mood to be subtly manipulated by an extremely wealthy and powerful person. The bed is on fire and I happen to be painfully aware of that.

Most liberals will congratulate themselves on the election of two Democratic governors in New Jersey and Virginia this week, and the defeat of all four of Governor Schwarzenegger's proposals in California, a positive sign for Democrats heading into the 2006 election year. Few will consider a more disturbing trend. Two recent articles by veteran New York journalist Juan Gonzalez detail the New York mayoral election of Republican billionaire, Michael Bloomberg.

Bloomberg will break mayoral election spending records in the United States by spending an estimated \$100 million of his personal fortune on the election, while his opponent, Democrat Fernando Ferrer has spent \$6 million. As Gonzalez notes

Many well-meaning progressives, unfortunately, have yet to grasp the stakes in this race, and that failure is rooted in two persistent weaknesses of the progressive movement. 1) Class and racial divisions among progressives themselves and 2) A lack of any rigorous analysis of the economic and political forces that are rapidly transforming everyday life in our nation's cities. I do not say these things lightly.<sup>4</sup>

Gonzalez goes on to document how Ferrer, the Democratic challenger, has been cut out by the New York City Democratic elite in Manhattan, who, for financial and ethnic reasons prefer Michael Bloomberg. Over the last few months the general message is that Ferrer is inept and Bloomberg has done well. However, Gonzalez notes

[Bloomberg] is on track to spend \$100 million on the race itself, but what has not been getting a lot of attention is that Bloomberg was a philanthropist before. He was giving about \$25 million to \$30 million a year in contributions to charitable causes. Then, the year before he began running for mayor, he suddenly sharply increased those charitable contributions to over \$100 million a year and has continued to escalate them . . . That means that over the last five years, Michael Bloomberg has given out close to \$600 million in charitable donations to groups,

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<sup>4</sup> Juan Gonzalez "Where Have All the Fighters Gone: An Analysis of the New York City Mayoral Race of 2005," online at [www.democracynow.org](http://www.democracynow.org) (November 3, 2005)

most of them in New York City, in addition to the \$100 million he is spending on this race, in addition to the \$73 million he spent to defeat Mark Green in 2001, so he is on track, basically to have spent close to \$1 billion to maintain his control of the New York City government.<sup>5</sup>

\$1 billion could make a lot of people look good and anyone else look inept. Gonzalez goes on to explain that in every borough of New York, in conjunction with the mayor's office, enormous tracts of land are being purchased by developers proposing upper-class shopping and residential facilities. Minority and immigrant communities, particularly Hispanic communities, although demographically outnumbering the elites, are being pushed out, which Gonzalez argues is exactly what both the local Republican and Democratic leaders need in order to maintain their political control.

Individual freedoms are not equality for all and discrimination, enforced through poverty and billion dollar candidates, is relentless, as our French friends are learning. The reading I shared with you this morning is not from the Cincinnati riots, as I led you to believe, but from the riots of Arab and Muslim suburbs outside over 300 French cities. There has been two weeks of rioting, sparked by the accidental death of two French Arab teens that were fleeing the police. Sound familiar?

The rioters are men and boys in their late teens and early twenties (sound familiar?). Unemployment is profound (sound familiar?) in these segregated (sound familiar?) Arab neighborhoods. The rioters are the children of Arab and African immigrants who came to France two or three generations ago, but French discrimination of Muslims has been fierce, and the communities have become impoverished and volatile.

Just substitute "African American" for "French Arab" and everything else matches, down to leaders suggesting that a curfew and more arrests are necessary to quell the rioters. And then what? What? Look. Our bed is on fire. Paris is burning. America is burning.

Our first UU Principle is the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Everyone is equal. Our second principle is justice, equity, and compassion in human relations. No one gets left, particularly not the vulnerable. So, I am not interested in hating the Republicans. I am not interested in "charismatic" or "moderate" or "religious" Democratic candidates.

I am interested in tax cuts for the working poor and middle class, and I am very interested to learn which corporations receive how many tax cuts and what they offer the people in return. I am interested in affordable, mixed housing, job creation, an increase in the minimum wage, community oriented policing and the DOJ collaborative, repossessing and developing absentee landlord property in Over the Rhine and other blighted areas of the city.

At First Church our renovation will be complete in two months. Our capital campaign pledges will finish in a year. Then what? Renovated building, urban congregation, mission statement with urban focus. Then what? Then what?

Individual freedoms and economic opportunity for all is the prize. My vision for First Church is that we focus on more economic justice issues, raising the minimum wage

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<sup>5</sup> Juan Gonzalez "Juan Gonzalez Analyzes the New York city Mayoral Race," online at [www.democracynow.org](http://www.democracynow.org) (November 3, 2005).

in Ohio, partnering with Janitors for Justice, possibly hosting homeless Interfaith Hospitality Network families, but only if we advocate for economic change at the same time. I am not satisfied to offer women and children a smoldering bed to sleep upon and then silently watching as they drive off into hell.

Targeted economic justice is where my mind and heart rests. I don't know how to do this, so I am asking for your help. I have passion, but not a plan, yet. Where does your mind and heart rest? If this is not your passion, tell me. I need to know where you stand so I can shape my, and maybe, our plan.

Oh, freedom  
Oh, freedom  
Oh, freedom over me  
And before I'd be a slave  
I'd be buried in my grave  
And go home to my God and be free.