

“Because My Faith Compels Me”
Adam Gerhardstein, Guest Speaker
First Unitarian Church
536 Linton Street
Cincinnati, Ohio 45219
513.281.1564
November 25, 2007

This is an excerpt from a pastoral letter written by the Rev. William G. Sinkford, the current President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and the first African American President. He wrote it on the 6th of September in 2005 – eight days after the levees broke in New Orleans. It is titled *A Gentle Angry People*.

I am so angry.

These last days have provided a picture of what racism and classism and privilege look like. Racism is not about individual prejudice. Classism is not about individual poverty. And privilege is so often allowed to be invisible.

I am so angry. Look at New Orleans.

Tens of thousands of American citizens, almost all of them poor and Black, living in unimaginable conditions with no food and water, waited for days while evacuation buses passed them by to pick up tourists from luxury hotels. Isn't it deception to say that this disaster was a surprise when government reports have predicted it for decades? These reports predicted that the poor, Black neighborhoods in the lowest lying areas of the city would be the most devastated. Funds for the Iraq occupation took precedence.

Racism and classism mean that the concerns, even the very lives of people of color and poor people, remain invisible. In response to the disaster, Unitarian Universalists have opened their wallets, and many have opened their homes and their hearts to the hundreds of thousands of now homeless New Orleanians. But even our generosity has been tinged with the racism and classism that sullies the soul of our nation. One Unitarian Universalist wrote to me of “a disturbing message from a member of our congregation speaking from the pulpit this morning, regarding social action plans to help evacuees who reached [our town]: this person said ‘These are people who left town in their cars before the hurricane hit. They're good families. You don't have to be afraid of them.’”

We are a gentle and generous people. But let us not forget our anger. May it fuel not only our commitment to compassion but also our commitment to make fundamental changes. Our vision of the Beloved Community must stand against a vision that would allow the privilege of the few to be accepted as just and even holy. Our religious vision must again and again ask the Gospel question “Who is my neighbor” and strive always to include more and more of us as we intone the words that gave birth to this nation, “We the people...”

We are, and we should be, both a gentle, and an angry people.

It is a great pleasure to be here today with all of you. I am here to talk about my social justice journey and I have to start by simply saying *thank you*. My journey began right here, in this supportive community of so many gentle, angry people. Seriously, there has been someone from First Church right next to me, during every major step I have taken in my life.

Thanks to your support, my first social justice venture, Ugali, has been providing educational opportunities to dozens of Kenyan youth since its founding in 2001. That work grew out of the religious values I absorbed through my many role models in this community. One of those role models and one of the earliest supporters of Ugali was Betty Brothers, whose absence I am feeling today. The first major donation to Ugali was her late husband's coin collection. After Betty donated it to Ugali, I spent days sorting through a large box of rare and beautiful coins, feeling like the richest man in the world. Since learning of her death, I have been thinking about how her donation got Ugali off the ground. Despite thanking her at every opportunity, I never got to the point where I felt I had said thank you enough – her generosity meant that much to me.

This morning, I will be sharing the three distinct ways I have felt myself grow over the past one and a half years while working for the Unitarian Universalist Association. First, the lens through which I see my work has been highly influenced by the anti-racist/anti-oppressive movement within Unitarian Universalism. Secondly, I am learning to confront the structures that support injustice and make the institutional changes necessary to bring about our vision of beloved community. Thirdly, I have discovered that the driving force behind my social justice work is my faith.

Before I launch into those lessons, I would like to put them in context by getting everyone on the same page about what the UUA is and what it does. For those of you who are not familiar with the UUA, its full name is the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. It is the official connection between our 1,035 congregations. Based in Boston, the UUA develops resources, such as the Our Whole Lives Curriculum; it sends out UU World Magazine; it develops and facilitates anti-racism/anti-oppression workshops. It also supports district staff – yes, there are Unitarian Universalist districts, 20 of them and First Church is in the Heartland district. Annually, the UUA also gathers thousands of UUs from across the country for General Assembly, where the business of the Association is conducted and hundreds of workshops are put on about everything under the sun. If you've ever sought community as a UU, I highly recommend going to General Assembly – you will see UUism as you have never seen it before.

Another aspect of the UUA's work, the work I am most familiar with, is the UUA's commitment to being a prominent, consistent, and insistent voice for justice in the public sphere. The UUA's Advocacy and Witness team carries out that mission through supporting our congregation's social justice committees, building international relationships, and advocating for justice from our government. As part of that team, I work for the UUA's Washington Office for Advocacy where our mission is to influence public policy decisions made by the U.S. Congress and Administration on issues of concern to the Unitarian Universalist Association.

The President of the UUA is currently Rev. William Sinkford, whose words I shared earlier. Many of you probably know Rev. Sinkford better than I do. He grew up in this church and then served First Church as a lay leader later in his life. Last year, Rev. Sinkford was in D.C. for World AIDS Day and I had arranged for him to speak at a rally, at an UNAIDS event, and do a couple of lobby visits. As we were walking from the Senate side of Capital Hill to the House side, we had a few moments to chat. After we talked about my family and about how I was doing in the job, there was a moment of silence. I decided to ask a question, “Bill, what is your job description?” He laughed and said, “Well Adam, I don’t have a job description. I lead by faith.”

In the short one and a half years I have been in D.C., Rev. Sinkford has come to visit numerous times. He marched with UUs to end the Genocide in Darfur; he called for our government to get serious about effective HIV prevention; he lobbied Congress with UU youth for Comprehensive Sex-Ed in our schools; he went to the Hill with 17 UU clergy to support lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered rights in the workplace; and he delivered a petition of over 13,000 UUs to the Senate and House leadership asking them to end the war. Look where his faith, our faith, has led our association.

Rev. Sinkford has also been a driving force behind the UUA’s growing commitment to make our religion and our world more anti-racist and anti-oppressive. This movement has contributed to the first of the three major shifts in my social justice journey. Anti-racism/anti-oppression work is focused on helping people better understand identities, privilege and marginalization. Its goal is to shift how you see yourself in this world, and to make the invisible visible. As Rev. Sinkford watched the man-made disaster unfold in New Orleans he observed that “Privilege is so often allowed to be invisible.”

A presenter at a multi-cultural conference I attended illustrated the invisibility of privilege by saying, “George Bush was born on third base and believes he hit a triple.” While some of us would like to believe the invisibility of privilege is just another one of our American shortcomings that belongs to George Bush – that is over *there* – this is one quality that many of us may share with him. Throughout my life I have begun to recognize the many privileges I have.

An autobiographical Jim Borgman cartoon hangs in my father’s office that tells Jim Borgman’s story of looking for housing after college. He finds a nice place by the river and sits down with the landlady to sort out the details. She remarks, “I’m glad to rent to a nice man like you instead of, you know, one of those coloreds.” This cartoon and its blatant racism stung when I first saw it. Since then I have sought out and found five apartments without ever fearing I would be turned down based on my skin color. I am beginning to see my white privilege.

In college I attended a sexual assault awareness event. The facilitator asked the men in the crowd to raise our hands if we thought we were non-threatening. After raising my hand, the facilitator asked the women to raise their hands if they would feel threatened by me if they were walking on campus alone at night. Almost every woman raised her hand. I realized that by being larger than most women and by being male I am inherently

threatening. Never in my college years did I feel unsafe walking alone on campus. I am beginning to see my male privilege.

Not long ago as I was reveling in a new love, I found myself kissing on street corners and walking arm in arm completely lost in the new relationship. Later, in conversation with a bisexual friend, I learned that she is always conscious and aware of her surroundings when she is being affectionate with a female partner in public. When showing affection with another woman, she is aware of their physical and emotional safety, something she never has to think about when she is partnering with a man. I had known my public displays of affection may have been inappropriate at times, but I never thought twice about reaching out and holding my partner's hand. I am beginning to understand my straight privilege.

Privilege is so often allowed to be invisible. Perhaps I too was born on third base. My work for social justice has been made more accountable by this growing awareness of privilege. In working for justice I have been learning the importance of looking towards the margins for my leadership. As I am expanding my understanding of who my neighbor is and what my neighbor struggles with, I am also reevaluating how I can struggle with my neighbor for justice.

Before launching a social justice campaign, I now make sure that I am in relationship with organizations that legitimately represent marginalized people. I have seen this modeled on the job, as our office works in partnership with the NAACP, the Human Rights Campaign, Advocates for Youth, the National Low Income Housing Coalition, and many others. Doing justice work *for* marginalized communities is not as effective or as empowering as working for justice *with* marginalized communities. Here at First Church, the truth and reconciliation work with the W.H.G Carter family is highly respected at the UUA as a genuine effort towards staying accountable to those who have been marginalized. You are doing great work.

The second thing I want to talk about is making institutional changes to bring about our vision of beloved community. In my current work as the Legislative Assistant for International Issues at the UUA Washington Office, I work with broad coalitions of religious and secular organizations to try and end the war in Iraq, stop the genocide in Darfur, reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS, and curb global warming. I am doing advocacy. I am trying to change laws and create laws. This is very important work that is absolutely necessary to bring about the large-scale social change many of us would like to see. Advocacy is way too important to be left to lobbyists in Washington D.C. If you want to see significant shifts in the direction of our public policy I can not encourage you enough to send letters, make phone calls, and, if you really want to bring about change, then organize.

Jean Schmidt won her congressional seat in 2006 with 3,000 votes. She has since cast a very controversial vote opposing the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP). Suppose she was invited to a community meeting attended by 1,000 constituents who presented her with 15,000 constituent petitions, including a few of her major donors, and she was asked right then and there to support SCHIP. Politicians are people like you and me; they can change their minds – and they most often do this when

enough of their constituents get organized and ask them. Creating political change requires wading in the waters of power and diving into the depths of votes and money. Contrary to appearances, I believe this to be some of the most spiritual work you can do. If there ever is a place that will test your faith it is the world of politics. For it is in that world where Rev. Sinkford's words have the most weight, "Our vision of the Beloved Community must stand against a vision that would allow the privilege of the few to be accepted as just and even holy." Our vision of beloved community needs more than believers, it also needs strong committed advocates.

The third area of growth I have felt in my social justice work has been realizing the driving force behind it. What I have found to be the true driving force behind my work, and my intense enjoyment of it, is my faith. Rev. Rob Hardies, minister of my new church community, All Souls Unitarian Church of Washington D.C., spoke last year of the Unitarian Universalist bait and switch. He observed that a lot of us come to Unitarian Universalist churches because we find out that we can believe whatever we want to believe – the bait. The switch occurs when we realize that our faith does not allow for us to believe whatever we want; our faith is such that we believe what we *must*. Ours is a compelling faith.

Last spring I traveled to New Orleans for a week-long service trip with 70 members of All Souls Church. The anger that Rev. Sinkford felt a week after the levees broke was reborn in my soul 18 months after the storm. It was deeply disturbing to work in a disaster zone. But it was even more disturbing to read the paper, talk to locals, and tour the city, because there I learned the story of Katrina. The thing about my Unitarian Universalist faith is that I don't just hear stories – I live them. I listen in a different way. It was all of my family pictures that were lost. It was the house my great grandfather built that sat in three feet of water for two weeks and was then taken away by the government because I didn't have the proper documentation to prove I owned it. It was my handicapped FEMA trailer that came without a ramp and with a light switch under the table. It was my city that was abandoned and flooded for two weeks because my government would rather buy guns and bombs than decent levees. In our faith, at its best, there is no *them*. If we see pain being felt, we are feeling it too. Consequently if we face injustice, we are compelled to confront it, because it is happening to us as well. As Dr. King said, "Injustice anywhere, is a threat to justice everywhere."

"We are a gentle, angry people." Said Rev. Sinkford, "May that anger fuel not only our commitment to compassion but also our commitment to make fundamental changes." In the one and a half years since I left Cincinnati and First Church, I have been discovering my privilege; confronting systems of injustice; and finding my faith. As I learn and grow everyday, I am mindful of where my journey began. Without the support of First Church, and the support I am now receiving from All Souls D.C. and the UUA itself, my social justice journey may just be beginning. I love the work I am doing and I plan on doing it for a long time. Consequently, I am thankful for two great blessings in my life. I am thankful that our faith compels me to work towards justice and I am thankful that our faith community accompanies me and propels me along that journey.

Amen.

**Go Out into the world in peace.
Have courage.
Hold onto that which is good.
Return to no person evil for evil.
Strengthen the faint hearted.
Support the weak
Help the suffering.
Honor all persons.**

