

## **We Too Are America**

**A Sermon by  
Dr. Tony Stringer**

I, too, sing America.  
I am the darker brother  
They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the kitchen,"  
Then.

Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed-----

I, too, am America.

Langston Hughes

The poet, Langston Hughes, wrote those words as he was attempting to return to the United States from a kind of self-imposed exile. He had been admitted to Columbia University, but left in 1922 after only a single year. This was a northern university, one that did not openly bar black Americans. Not openly. But Hughes found the experience of being there far from welcoming. Though he had gained academic admittance to the school, he had not gained admittance into the social network of his student peers. Isolated, alone, friendless in his first year of college, he decided Columbia was not for him.

Hughes left in 1922 on a freighter for Africa. After traveling the continent of his black hereditary forebears, he went to Europe, and traveled extensively there as well. But when it was time to return to the United States, to the country of his birth, to the country that was home despite its history of maltreatment of people who looked like him, Hughes

found that his country didn't want him back. He was barred from passage on the ship that should have taken him home because he was black. "I, too, sing America," Hughes wrote in response to this incident. "I, too, am America."

Hughes did manage to return to America, of course. He lived here until his death in 1967, long enough to see shattered many of the discriminatory practices that had constricted and constrained his life. Long enough to become one of America's most celebrated poets. Long enough to be named an official U.S. State Department cultural emissary to Africa and Europe, despite the irony of America once attempting to bar his return from those continents. Hughes lived long enough to come out of the kitchen, but not long enough to come safely out of the closet. Hughes' sense of isolation in the country of his birth was not only because he was openly black, it was also because he was secretly gay. He never came out of the closet. "I, too, sing America," Hughes wrote as a black, gay man, intentionally recalling the words of Walt Whitman, his white literary forebear who was also secretly homosexual. "I, too, am America."

We face an historic presidential election. That's kind of a silly thing to say. All presidential elections are historic. But this one is perhaps more so than others. And you know why. People are coming out of the kitchen in ways only the poets and prophets of former generations could have imagined. A black American just a thin vote margin away from the presidency. A woman, perhaps, just a heartbeat away from the presidency. It's an historic election.

I'm not here to advocate for any candidate, nor would it be appropriate for me to abuse this congregational pulpit by doing so. But I do want to talk about what it means to me, as a black American, to have someone of my ethnic community this close to the presidency. And I want to talk about what it means to me, a father to three daughters, to have a woman this close to the presidency. This isn't a conversation about liberal or conservative in the political sense, nor is it a conversation about Democrat or Republican. It is a conversation about emergence in America. About coming out of the kitchen, if not out of the closet.

Whether it is now, or some year in the future, when an African American becomes president, it will transform my community of origin. And we are so desperately in need of transformation. It is such a confusing time in the community of my birth. African Americans have never had so much wealth, never held so much power, never had the options and opportunities that we have now. And paradoxically, I don't think we have ever been as culturally bereft.

Despite our unprecedented wealth, power, and opportunity, we live in a time in which 70 percent of all black American children are born to mothers who have never been married. We live in a time when more than 80 percent of the youngest generation of black children are likely to spend the majority of their childhood living apart from their

fathers. Where are all these black men? If they are under the age of 30, one in three is in prison. More African American men go to jail today than go to college and some of them even think it is a badge of honor. It is proof of toughness, proof of manhood, proof that one is from the streets and knows how to keep it real.

We live in a time in which black popular culture glorifies gangsters and pimps in its music. We live in a time in which black popular culture values athletic prowess over intellectual achievement, a time in which our children believe that education begins in the streets rather than in the classroom. Cynthia Tucker, the black woman senior editor for the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* newspaper noted in one of her editorials that black children who make good grades, speak the King's English, and avoid the use of profanity are routinely ridiculed by their peers for "trying to be white." "Imagine a culture so self-hating," Ms. Tucker writes, "that it assigns all appropriate behaviors to another racial group."

And yet, as a people, as a community, African Americans have never been wealthier, never been as powerful, and dare I say it, have never been as privileged, as we are today. Never as privileged and never as bereft.

Now I am not so naive as to believe that an African American presidency, whenever it might come, will be an antidote for the social virus infecting African America. But I do believe that a black president would be a powerful, indeed a transformative, cultural symbol; A cultural symbol that argues convincingly to a generation without fathers that there is an alternative to the street, to the basketball court, and to the jailhouse; A powerful cultural symbol at a time when transformation in the African American community is so desperately needed.

I will also tell you that with every fiber of my being I believe that an African American presidency-----whenever it may come, or a female presidency-----whenever it may come, will transform America itself. And America is so desperately in need of transformation.

Consider how little credibility, how little moral authority we can still claim on the international stage:

- What do we say to a developing China about its pursuit of economic growth through carbon intensive technology when we are the world's largest contributor to global warming, and refuse to cooperate with other nations in reducing our carbon footprint?
- What do we say to a resurgent Russia as it moves to reclaim its sphere of influence after our own attempt at nation building in Iraq?
- What do we say to Pakistani tribesmen who permit honor killings of young women

who refuse arranged marriages when we remain the only Western democracy that allows capital punishment?

- What do we say to a myopic Myanmar government that will not allow foreign aid for its cyclone victims after the disgrace we allowed to play out in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina?
- What stand can we take against political persecution in the world today now that the world knows about Abu Ghraib and water boarding?
- What do we say to the impoverished Columbian farmer who grows the coca leaves that become the cocaine to which we as a nation are addicted, when there is no other crop that will allow them to subsist? In this case, I can tell you what we say. We say that 1.3 billion of our American dollars will go to pay the Columbian military-----the military with the worst human rights record in the western hemisphere-----1.3 billion dollars so that they can continue the same repressive policies against their own citizens that so far have done nothing to stop the supply of drugs from keeping pace with our demand for them.

We are a nation desperately in need of transformation. Desperately in need of the moral authority that was probably our most potent weapon on the international stage. Military power wins wars, but moral authority is what wins and keeps the peace. Moral authority is what transforms nations and bends the arc of civilization towards justice-----moral authority. And we have lost ours.

It is not that we were ever a perfect nation. African Americans and women of all ethnicities are experts on the imperfections of America, having borne the brunt of their consequences. It is that intimacy with America's imperfections that place us among America's greatest patriots: For we know what America is, and we are tireless in insisting upon America living up to what it can and should be.

But identity politics, that is, politics based on racial, ethnic, or gender identity, will take you only just so far. A Barack Obama presidency is not the same thing as a Colin Powell presidency, though both would transform America, as well as the community of African Americans. A Sarah Palin presidency would not be the same thing as a Hillary Clinton presidency, though both would transform America and the lives of American women. A "lipstick on a pig" comment would seem to be appropriate here, but I'm just not sure how to make it work.

Identity politics-----politics derived from race, ethnicity, or gender-----will take you only just so far. Identity is important in an America that still relegates portions of its population to the kitchen and to the closet. But identity politics is simply not enough. There must be something deeper.

I am suggesting to you this morning that the something deeper can be found in our liberal religious faith. And please note, I am using the word "liberal" in a faith sense and not in a political sense. I am suggesting that you, that we, claim our moral authority as liberal religious citizens of these United States, because we too are America. We may sometimes wish we were Canadian, but my friends, we are not. We too are America. And we have a role in America's political life. Indeed, a fundamental role, given the disgraceful path chosen by our conservatively religious brethren.

What is the role of liberal religion in politics given the path chosen by conservative evangelicals and fundamentalists? What is the role specifically of Unitarian Universalists, given our unique religious history and theology? Let me tell you what I think that role is and then you'll decide what you wish it to be.

We Unitarian Universalists believe in inherent human worth and dignity. And we should demand no less than this from any and every candidate to political office, whether high or low. That means a commitment to policies and laws that respect the worth and dignity of all people-----including those people our nation of late has chosen to denigrate: immigrants. People who have yet to figure out that sometimes America doesn't mean what it says. People who have yet to figure out that sometimes America forgets what it is. People who believe the words of Emma Lazarus: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me."

Remember those words? They are still engraved upon the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. They are still the foundation of an immigration policy that respects human worth and dignity. This is the high standard to which we should hold those seeking public office. We expect our doctors to do no harm, our accountants to engage in no malfeasance, then why do we not expect those to whom we invest the greatest authority to act with the highest decency. Human worth and dignity. Let the politicians answer to us liberal religious folk, if they cannot respect this most basic principle.

We Unitarian Universalists believe in justice, equity, and compassion and we should demand this of our politicians as well. Justice, equity and compassion extending to gays and lesbians who want nothing more than what every other consenting adult has: The right to be as happy together, or as miserable together, in matrimony as the rest of us are; The right to be with one's partner when the unthinkable happens, so that a loved one does not face death alone; The right to give one's inheritance to one's partner in life, however long or short that life may have been. From those who would deny equity to gays and lesbians, let us demand to know why? Whether Democrat, Republican, Libertarian, or Independent, let us not accept glib blather about the states deciding, or about marriage being this or that. Let us demand to know why there is not compassion in their hearts. We Unitarian Universalists believe in justice, equity, and compassion and we should demand this of our politicians as well. Let the politicians answer to us liberal

religious folk, if they cannot respect this most basic principle.

We Unitarian Universalists search for truth. Ephemeral as it may be, we are committed to the search for truth and should have no patience for untruth. No tolerance of the untrue. Especially not from those who seek the public trust. This doesn't just mean that we should expect honesty. Honesty is the minimum, not the maximum expectation we should have of our elected officials. We should also expect them to not be stupid.

I tell you, one of the most ridiculous trends I see in American politics is this notion that our elected officials should be just plain old folks. The kind of people you want to have a beer with. I took an airplane to be here today. Now I don't know how to fly airplanes, and I appreciate the fact that the pilot does. I don't want him or her to be the kind of guy or gal that I'd just love to have a beer with. It's fine if he or she is, but that's not a qualification for a pilot license. How did it become a qualification for the presidency?

I want an elitist president, if elitist means he or she actually knows something. People have a right to their own opinions, but they do not have a right to their own facts. If you think creationism is a scientific theory, if you think global warming is a liberal scare tactic, if you think a scripture written 2000 years ago-----however inspired it may be-----is an infallible guide through all the complexities of modern living, then maybe the presidency ought to be beyond your reach. For it is certainly beyond your intellectual grasp. Let's have a little more elitism in our presidential candidates, if that means we get candidates with the knowledge, wisdom, and intelligence to use the awesome power with which we invest them.

We Unitarian Universalists place a higher value on truth than we do on creed, a higher value on truth than we do on ideology. We should expect our politicians to value both truth and truthfulness as much as we do.

We Unitarian Universalists respect the interdependent web of existence, and you know the amazing thing, increasingly so do our more conservative evangelical brethren. We are no longer alone in wanting to save our planet. We have more allies in this endeavor than we ever imagined possible. God's creation is sacred and should not be despoiled by man, the evangelicals tell us. Yes, the language is theistic and sexist, but the principle is the same as our own. Woe to the politician who hasn't heard this message. Not only will the latté drinking liberals be after them, but so will the bible thumping conservatives, and you don't want to get both groups riled up and coming at you at the same time.

Brothers and sisters, brothers and sisters, let our voice be heard loud this historic election year. Let the politicians know we are watching with high expectation. Let them know the highs to which we expect them to rise, and that we will not tolerate the lows to

which they are so prone to sink. Whether Obama and Biden or McCain and Palin are your choices, let us let them know that liberal religious folk are a part of the America to which they must answer. We're out of the kitchen and out of the closet, because we, too, are America. Amen.