

“Angela for President”

A Message delivered by the Rev. Angela Herrera and Kelsey Atherton
First Unitarian Church
June 28, 2020

Good morning, my fellow Americans and friends. It is my humble honor to stand before you this morning and announce that today, for the next twenty minutes and the next twenty minutes only, I am running for US president.

Okay, okay, I know what some of you are thinking, and you are right... First Unitarian is a tax-exempt religious organization, which means that we don't get involved in electoral politics. We share information about values and issues. We encourage you to vote. But we don't tell you who to vote for.

But don't worry. Unlike real candidates, who tell you what they think in order to further their candidacy, I'm just using my “candidacy” to tell you what I think.

I'm running for president this morning because it's so important to pause, to pan back and look at this moment, almost precisely in the middle of the year 2020, and for all of us to think about our location in history. It is important to do this so that we imagine, visualize, and co-create the path forward, rather than just staring at our feet.

As a minister, I have thought a lot about the intersection of the infinite and the finite; which is to say, I have reflected often on our spiritual values and our historical context. That is my job. To lead us in connecting this day, which is part of history, with our values. And so that is what I will do. In the form of a presidential platform.

Now, although I know quite a bit about history and values, I don't have much foreign policy or security experience. So, I am pleased to be joined this morning by Kelsey Atherton. You may recognize Kelsey from previous presidential campaigns in this church. Our Senior Minister Emerita the Rev. Christine Robinson “ran for president” for 20 minutes back in 2008, and she recruited a much younger Kelsey to speak then. He was nineteen, and just back from his first year of college.

Christine knew the 2008 election would especially impact our nation's youth. Kelsey had grown up in the church, and she wanted us to hear what he had to say. Well, I don't want to sound like we're taking credit [wink, wink], but he went on to major in Political Science and History. After college, he moved to Washington DC and became a journalist specializing in foreign policy and defense. Then, when Christine ran for president again in 2016, he returned as a campaign advisor.

Today, Kelsey is back again as my presidential campaign advisor. Good to have you—and your extensive campaign experience— with us, Kelsey!

My fellow Americans and treasured friends from other lands, when the election takes place this fall, there are two things we can count on.

First, we will still be very much in the midst of the pandemic. When the votes are counted, we will still be in this pandemic. When the inauguration takes place, we will still be in this pandemic.

The truth is, we will be in this thing until herd immunity is somehow achieved. And at that point, we will be coping with all that we have lost and making decisions about what we want to have gained. We will have lost so much, but we also will have gained some things, like perspective. Including, perspective about how quickly large-scale change can occur.

How will we proceed from there? I've heard people wish aloud that things would return to normal. But should we return to normal? This question brings me to a second thing we know will be true when the election takes place this fall.

A second thing we know is that we will still be facing the same moral and humanitarian crises that preceded the pandemic, and which the pandemic has made even plainer for all to see. Especially racism.

Racism, in truth, is the deadly epidemic that precedes COVID-19.

Last week was Juneteenth. That's June 19th, the day news of Emancipation finally reached Galveston, Texas in 1865. It was two and a half years after Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation ending *most* slavery in the United States. It was two months after the end of the Civil War, during which those who fought to maintain slavery *lost*. And the news finally, finally reached Galveston. It's hard to believe the slaveholders there really did not know the war had been lost. But on Juneteenth, *everyone* heard it and were at last freed from being the legal property of others.

After that, Reconstruction began. In Reconstruction, black people and white people were elected and worked together in state legislatures. They rewrote constitutions. Laws were written guaranteeing free public education, letting elections be decided by popular vote, and raising taxes to compensate former slaves. Reparations. After all, for 250 years whites had profited off of slavery, and not only off of the unpaid labor, but off of what you might call the slavery industrial complex.

As Ta-Nehisi Coates points out, insurance companies made money off of policies slaveholders purchased to protect their investment in slaves. Auction houses profited. Banks made interest off of loans used to purchase slaves. Slave sales were taxed. There were auctioneers and notaries.¹ Wealth had been generated and brutally stolen. So legislatures considered reparations. Some legislatures in the south were majority black or majority black and white coalition.

But white former slave owners resented this shift in power. In 1872, the KKK formed, and a so-called "redemption movement" began. It was actually *deconstruction*. It took apart what people had begun to build. Voting rights were blocked with a poll tax, a literacy test, and

grandfather clauses, which grandfathered people not in but out, by denying the vote to anyone whose grandfather had not been eligible.

The white proponents of these laws said they weren't racist, because they didn't specifically say black people couldn't vote. They argued that any black person who met the criteria would be eligible to vote. So it was a law that didn't mention race, but clearly had an impact on a particular race.

And that, my friends, that, my fellow Americans, is how racism is made structural and systemic. Structural, systemic racism happens when laws and the way things are done clearly, disproportionately disadvantage black people, indigenous people, and other people of color, without ever having to mention race.

Today, voting is limited by the days and hours polling places are open, the distance people have to travel, and voter ID laws. These also disproportionately impact people of color.

With all of that deconstruction, the Jim Crow era began.

A few generations later, a second Reconstruction occurred. This was the Civil Rights Era. Social security was expanded to include people of color who had been shut out through—you guessed it, structural, systemic racism. Voting rights were re-secured, schools were integrated. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr led the Poor People's Campaign to end poverty, and there were diverse coalitions of people pushing these things forward together. Some of the gains from that time lasted. But there was another kind of deconstruction, too.

This time the *deconstruction* that followed used code phrases like "entitlement reform," "states rights," "big government," and "law and order." It focused on "cracking down on crime," through laws that actually had the effect of punishing people of color more harshly and more often than whites—again, the very definition of structural racism. And after a criminal conviction, when a person got out of jail, many times they no longer had the right to vote, to go to school, or find a job due to their criminal record. The effect was—and still is— a lot like Jim Crow. In fact, the lawyer and scholar Michelle Alexander wrote a book about it called *The New Jim Crow* and you may remember me preaching about that.

Deconstruction. Structural, systemic racism. That is how we came to today where there is a growing moral uprising against the way black lives are harmed or ended by state violence and by poverty, health disparities, and more, and it is why it is necessary and appropriate to say out loud Black Lives Matter.

Sometimes people want to turn that into "all lives matter." But that takes the focus away from the fact that Black lives are specifically being treated as if they don't.

It's like if you were at a dinner party where everyone had a plate of food, except for Bob. Sorry, Bob. Imagine that Bob said, I deserve food. And the table said, sure, Bob, everyone deserve food, but Bob never did get any. It would be obvious that people were not truly recognizing the problem, right? When Bob is the one without food, it's important to be

specific that although we said everyone, Bob still does not have any and *Bob* deserves food, and the longer everyone else eats right in front of him without fixing this issue the more the whole dinner party starts to look like a creepy scene from a movie by Jordan Peele.

Black lives matter. Saying it and responding to it is really a theological imperative for UUs. For us, who have as our very first principle “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” It is also our theological imperative to protect indigenous lives, trans lives, and immigrant lives, and the lives of people with disabilities, and people who are poor.

We UUs whose fifth principle is support for the democratic process have a theological and moral imperative to remove all the barriers to full participation in our country, a country that promises “the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” And if we believe, as we profess in our sixth principle, in the goal “peace, liberty, and justice for all,” then what is called for now is nothing less than a third Reconstruction. And so, my friends, I am running for president on a Reconstruction platform.

In this platform, I am closely aligned with today’s Poor People’s Campaign: a national call for moral revival.ⁱⁱ Today’s Poor People’s Campaign was all over the news last weekend for their virtual moral mass march on Washington. I hope many of you joined me in participating that day. They call their platform a Moral Justice Jubilee Policy platform and they have spelled theirs out in lots of detail. You can find it on the poor people’s campaign website. Here’s what I want to lift up as I encourage you to vote for me, not really, but here’s what I’d be doing if I were president:

I would work to end structural and systemic racism, and restore the right to democracy and equal protection under the law. End all policies which have a disproportionate negative impact on people of color, including voter suppression. And expand voting rights, restoring them to those who have served their time.

I’d lead our country in ending police violence and mass incarceration. No longer would the US lock up more people than any other country. No more criminalization of addiction. No more children dumped into foster care when their mother is jailed for a non-violent crime stemming from poverty or addiction. No more jailing people simply because they are too poor to pay fines and court fees.

And it’s time to reimagine the police. What we have now is not working. Reform, retraining, and additional funding have all failed.

Along those lines, I’d take the Immigration and Customs Enforcement out of the Department of Homeland Security. The Department of Homeland Security’s stated mission is “to secure the nation from the many threats we face.” Immigration is not a threat. It’s a process. You know what is a threat? Hate groups. I’d set my sights on those. We should protect, not target, immigrants. That is a fundamental teaching of the world’s religious traditions. Welcome the stranger. Provide hospitality. God’s messengers arrive as strangers, but again and again Love has to beg to be let in. When will we learn?

Next, I'd create a national truth commission to study and speak the truth about the impact of racism in America. I would want that to include racism against the native peoples of this land. And I'd do something that is not specifically named in the Poor People's Campaign, as far as I can tell, that that is also establish a commission to study the idea of reparations.

Every year for almost three decades, Congressman John Conyers Jr. introduced a bill to do just that. To study the idea of reparations. Not even pay them, but just actually spend time with the question. Regardless of which party was in control, that bill never went anywhere in congress. Like many of our legislators who profess that Americans today are not responsible for the harm done to black people in the past, Conyers lived through Jim Crow, lynching, redlining and land theft from black homeowners, black Americans not being able to get mortgages or business loans, mass incarceration, and more. He died last year at the age of 90. Now Sheila Jackson Lee carries that bill forward. It's time to act on it.

I'd invest in and improve public education and further desegregation of schools. And I'd tend to the public safety net. People have a right to a basic, adequate standard of living.

When the pandemic hit, there was a sudden bipartisan recognition that the unemployment system was not adequate. I'd maintain the expanded version. We also witnessed the illogical outcome of tying health insurance to employment. When a pandemic shuts down jobs, people lose their health insurance during a pandemic! No, no, no. Time for everyone to have access to healthcare no matter what.

People also need a living wage. And they need basics like running water and electricity. Did you know that nearly one in three Navajo families do not have running water in their home? The pandemic has had a devastating impact on the Navajo nation. As Kelsey put it the other day, "... when washing your hands is a first line of defense, not having running water due to structural systemic racism is a deadly form of racism."

By redirecting funding away from militarized policing and mass incarceration, and raising taxes on the wealthiest corporations and people, and investing in the programs I have described, we create a country that is better for everyone. We need these things, and a healthy environment in which to live. Our next president needs to recognize climate change as the national emergency it is, and act swiftly.

Finally, for too long tax payers have been funding, and for-profit private companies have been profiteering from, America's military aggression in foreign lands. Not only that, our involvement abroad is directly connected to state violence at home. It does not have to be like this. Here, I'm going to turn the pulpit over to my advisor for a few minutes.

Kelsey:

What does it mean to mean to be safe in the world?

From the moment we step outside our front doors, if we are fortunate enough to have shelter, we are in this world, and every day we place our trust in thousands of strangers, that we can go about our lives, and make it home safely.

I am here to talk about foreign policy, but I would be remiss if I did not start by saying how arbitrary and human-created these divisions are. As our neighbors to the south in Las Cruces and El Paso-Juarez can attest, the truth is we are deeply connected, through and around the force that draws borders between lives.

We are in the midst, domestically, of an uprising against police violence, one sparked by the police killing of George Floyd. The history of policing is one of colonial violence, and the tools of militarized policing have their origins in the interplay between war abroad and violent repression at home.

The precursors to police were armed slave patrols in the South, and armed anti-Native night watches throughout the colonies. The moment those patrols set foot outside the stockades and walls of European settlements, they transformed from enforcers of the law into a paramilitary, armed for war against people seen as foreign enemies.

Today, when the military gives police departments heavy armored cars, it sends the same message as when those vehicles are used overseas: to be among people is to expect violence. Rubber bullets and tear gas, both nominally less-lethal weapons, have their origins in wars of colonial occupation, in the violence between domestic and foreign policy.

When we see calls to defund and then abolish police and prisons, those calls are rooted in a bold premise: that we as a community can build alternatives to violence, and we can build them together.

We are called, as Unitarian Universalists, to honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person, and to seek justice, equity and compassion in human relations. Together, these principles read as a call to solidarity, of working with strangers to take care of people we do not know. We've all done a bit of that during the pandemic, from staying home to halt the spread of COVID, to wearing masks every time we go out in public, making sure that our very presence does not inadvertently cause someone harm.

Solidarity requires us to start from the premise that we are not enemies. That we are, instead, one international community, within and beyond our borders.

Community is work, and cohabitating our shared blue boat home means that people and nations have to hold each other in covenant. It is easy for world leaders to distract from their own failure to prevent tragedy by telling an us-versus-them story. But there is only us on this planet, and while we may not like every (or even

any) government in power, we have to start from acknowledging first, that we are in community together, and building from there.

The United States, at home and abroad, is built to fight enemies, but it does not have to remain that way.

The Poor People's Campaign calls for a sweeping change to the violence-first culture of permanent war that defines US foreign policy. The campaign calls for defunding the Pentagon's budget by \$350 billion, enough to bring about meaningful changes in what the military buys, in how it is deployed across the globe, and in how easy it is for Presidents to start new wars. Reallocated, that money could instead take care of the basic needs of millions within the US, and it could fund diplomacy, foreign debt relief, and humanitarian assistance abroad.

The Poor People's Campaign also reminds us that deprivation, too, is a kind of violence, and calls for an end to sanctions on nations including Iran and Venezuela. Sanctions are designed to deprive people so much they revolt against their own governments. Sanctions have never succeeded in that aim, but they do consistently hurt poor people.

If we are to build that beloved international community, we have to start from trust, and good faith, instead of violence and coercion.

This means, in part, rejoining treaties recently abandoned. It means agreeing to work together, on everything from halting and reversing climate change to specific nuclear stockpile reductions to building a shared infrastructure of global health.

Being part of a community means promising this work to each other, and then promising it again even when we fall short.

If we are to build a global community that can rise to the challenges of the pandemic, and to climate change, and to whatever else the future throws at us, we cannot do so from a permanent state of war.

Thank you

Angela:

Can you imagine it? A country where everyone can live with dignity. In safety. With health and education. It would be a lot of change. But a gift of the pandemic is that we now know how quickly a huge change can occur. Change is possible.

Ok, my campaign is now ended. And I mean it. We UUs do not mess around with our votes. So don't vote for me. Vote for someone who is still in the race! Vote for the leader who you think will best represent your UU values and will lead our country toward reconstruction and healing.

And then, here's the thing. We're not going to let up. Because this isn't about a particular political party, and this kind of change isn't going to happen without a sustained movement behind it. This is a movement, not a moment. So we will continue, relentlessly, fearlessly, to imagine, visualize, and co-create the path forward, together.

ⁱ https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/?gclid=EAIAIQobChMImuug9rag6gIVDb7ACh1eUgEIEAAYASAAEgK9Z_D_BwE
ⁱⁱ [<https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org/about/moral-justice-jubilee-policy-platform/>]