

## Readings for the African American Read In

February 24<sup>th</sup>, noon

Campus Center room CC101 at Murray

Room 3 at AHEC

Still I Rise

By [Maya Angelou](#)

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may trod me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

Does my sassiness upset you?  
Why are you beset with gloom?  
'Cause I walk like I've got oil wells  
Pumping in my living room.

Just like moons and like suns,  
With the certainty of tides,  
Just like hopes springing high,  
Still I'll rise.

Did you want to see me broken?  
Bowed head and lowered eyes?  
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,  
Weakened by my soulful cries?

Does my haughtiness offend you?  
Don't you take it awful hard  
'Cause I laugh like I've got gold mines  
Diggin' in my own backyard.

You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Does my sexiness upset you?  
Does it come as a surprise  
That I dance like I've got diamonds  
At the meeting of my thighs?

Out of the huts of history's shame  
I rise  
Up from a past that's rooted in pain  
I rise  
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,

Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
I rise  
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,  
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise.

<http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15623>

### **Jay-Z : Run This Town Lyrics**

Songwriters: Carter, S; Fenty, R; West, K;

(Rihanna)

Feel it comin' in the air  
and the screams from everywhere  
I'm addicted to the thrill  
It's a dangerous love affair

Can't be scared when it goes down  
Got a problem, tell me now  
Only thing that's on my mind  
Is who's gonna run this town tonight  
Is who's gonna run this town tonight  
We gonna run this town

(Jay-Z)

We are, yeah I said it, we are  
This is Roc Nation, pledge your allegiance  
Get y'all black tees on, all black everything  
Black cards, black cars, all black everything

And our girls are blackbirds ridin' with they Dillingers  
I'd get more in Depth if you boys really real enough  
This is la familia, I'll explain later  
But for now, let me get back to this paper

I'm a couple bands down, and I'm tryin' to get back

I gave the other grip, I lost a flip for five stacks  
Yeah I'm talkin' five comma, six zeros, dot zero, here it go...  
Back to runnin' circles 'round niggas, now we squared up  
Hold up

(Rihanna - Chorus)

Life's a game, but it's not fair  
I break the rules, so I don't care  
So I keep doin' my own thing  
Walkin' tall against the rain

Victory's within the mile  
Almost there, don't give up now  
Only thing that's on my mind  
Is who's gonna run this town tonight  
Hey, hey, hey, hey  
(Is who's gonna run this town tonight)

(Jay-Z)

We are, yeah, I said it, we are  
You can call me Cesar, in a dark CSAR  
Please follow the leader, so Eric B. we are  
Microphone fiend, it's the return of the god  
Peace God

Uh, uh, , and ain't nobody fresher  
I'm in Mason, uh, Martin Margiela  
On the table screamin' fuck the other side, they jealous  
We got a banquet full of broads, they got a table full of fellas

And they ain't spending no cake  
They should throw they hand, then, 'cause they ain't got no spades  
My whole team got dough  
So my Bankhead is lookin' like millionaire's 'fro

(Rihanna - Chorus)

Life's a game but it's not fair  
I break the rules so I don't care  
So I keep doin' my own thing  
Walkin' tall against the rain

(Kanye West)

Victory's within the mile  
Almost there, don't give up now  
Only thing that's on my mind  
Is who's gonna run this town tonight  
Hey, hey, hey, hey  
(Is who's gonna run this town tonight)

It's crazy how you can go from being Joe Blow  
To everybody on your dick, no homo  
I bought my whole family whips, no Volvos  
Next time I'm in church, please no photos

Police escorts, everybody passports  
This the life that everybody ask for  
This a fast life, we are on a crash course  
What you think I rap for, to push a fucking RAV-4?

But I know that if I stay stunting  
All these girls only gonna want one thing  
I could spend my whole life good will hunting  
Only good gon' come is as good when I'm cumming

She got a ass that'll swallow up a g-string  
And up top, uh, two bee stings  
And I'm beasting off the nesling  
And my nigga just made it out the precinct

We give a damn about the drama that your do bring  
I'm just tryin' to change the color on your mood ring  
Reebok, baby, you need to drop some new things  
Have you ever had shoes without shoe strings?

What's that 'Ye? Baby, these heels  
Is that a may, what, baby, these wheels  
You trippin' when you ain't sippin', have a refill  
You feelin' like you runnin', huh, now you know how we feel

(Rihanna)

Hey, hey, hey

We gonna run this town tonight!  
Wassup!

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[http://www.elyricsworld.com/run\\_this\\_town\\_lyrics\\_jay-z.html](http://www.elyricsworld.com/run_this_town_lyrics_jay-z.html)

<http://www.metrolyrics.com/run-this-town-lyrics-jayz.html>

<http://www.lyricsreg.com/lyrics/jay-z/Run+This+Town/>

## Sapphire's Story: How 'Push' Became 'Precious'

November 6, 2009

Even though the film *Precious* packs quite a wallop, the gritty realism of the novel upon which the movie is based is even more intense. Originally called *Push* (but recently renamed *Precious* to coincide with the film), the book, by the writer known simply as Sapphire, tells the story of a dark-skinned, heavy-set, illiterate African-American girl who has survived multiple pregnancies by her father.

Sapphire tells Michele Norris that she began the book in 1993, just as she was about to leave her job as a remedial reading teacher in Harlem to attend Brooklyn College's MFA program: "I had the intense feeling that if I didn't write this book no one else would."

The author says that she encountered girls like Precious while teaching — overweight girls who didn't fit into the confines of our society's beauty paradigm, girls who were essentially "locked out" of the broader culture.

### Related NPR Stories

[When Life Is This Hard, Stubbornness Is A Virtue](#) Nov. 5, 2009

[A Director's 'Precious' Project](#) Nov. 4, 2009

[Oprah, Tyler Perry And A Painful, 'Precious' Life](#) Sep. 28, 2009

"I wanted to show that this girl is locked out through literacy. She's locked out by her physical appearance. She's locked out by her class, and she's locked out by her color," says Sapphire. "I encountered this. I had a student who told me that she had had children by her father."

I wanted to show that this girl is locked out by literacy. She's locked out by her physical appearance. She's locked out by her class, and she's locked out by her color.

- Sapphire

Almost as soon as the book was published, Sapphire received proposals to turn it into a film. But she turned them all down — including an offer from director Lee Daniels. But then she saw Daniels' films *Monster's Ball* and *Shadow Boxer* and reconsidered:

"I just knew this was the person who could do this, although none of his films dealt with the issues in the book," she says. "But because he had gone over the edge with his own work ... I thought, 'This is someone who will not back up from the material and will present something true and vital to the public.'"

Though she initially worried that allowing her work to be adapted to film would reinforce negative stereotypes about the black community, Sapphire says that times have changed in the 13 years since her book was written.

"In 2009, we have a tremendous range of black families in the media, from the Cosbys to the Obamas, so now, I think, we are safe enough and secure enough to show this diseased situation with the hope that we can see it as something that needs to be healed, as opposed to something that we need to hide from the public's view," she says.

And, Sapphire says, she hopes that her film will inspire people to have more understanding and compassion for girls like Precious. Recently she was approached by a white woman in Utah who told her that after seeing the film that she would never look at an overweight black woman again with the same judgment:

"After seeing this film, she had to deal with an obese black woman as a feeling, intelligent person as a person who dreams, as a person who wants the things that she wants. So we brought up a stereotype, and we cracked it open, and a human being comes forth."

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=120176695>

## Excerpt: 'Precious (Push Movie Tie-in Edition)'

*LANGUAGE ADVISORY: This excerpt contains language some might find offensive.*

1

I was left back when I was twelve because I had a baby for my fahver. That was in 1983. I was out of school for a year. This gonna be my second baby. My daughter got Down Sinder. She's retarded. I had got left back in the second grade too, when I was seven, 'cause I couldn't read (and I still peed on myself). I should be in the eleventh grade, getting ready to go into the twelf' grade so I can gone 'n graduate. But I'm not. I'm in the ninfe grade.

*Precious (Push Movie Tie-in Edition)*  
By Sapphire  
Paperback, 192 pages  
Vintage  
List Price: \$13.00

I got suspended from school 'cause I'm pregnant which I don't think is fair. I ain' did nothin'!

My name is Claireece Precious Jones. I don't know why I'm telling you that. Guess 'cause I don't know how far I'm gonna go with this story, or whether it's even a story or why I'm talkin'; whether I'm gonna start from the beginning or right from here or two weeks from now. Two weeks from now? Sure you can do anything when you talking or writing, it's not like living when you can only do what you doing. Some people tell a story 'n it don't make no sense or be true. But I'm gonna try to make sense and tell the truth, else what's the fucking use? Ain' enough lies and shit out there already?

So, OK, it's Thursday, September twenty-four 1987 and I'm walking down the hall. I look good, smell good-fresh, clean. It's hot but I do not take off my leather jacket even though it's hot, it might get stolen or lost. Indian summer, Mr Wicher say. I don't know why he call it that. What he mean is, it's hot, 90 degrees, like summer days. And there is no, none, I mean none, air conditioning in this mutherfucking building. The building I'm talking about is, of course, I.S. 146 on 134th Street between Lenox Avenue and Adam Clayton Powell Jr Blvd. I am walking down the hall from homeroom to first period maff. Why they put some shit like maff first period I do not know. Maybe to gone 'n git it over with. I actually don't mind maff as much as I had thought I would. I jus' fall in Mr Wicher's class sit down. We don't have assigned seats in Mr Wicher's class, we can sit anywhere we want. I sit in the same seat everyday, in the back, last row, next to the door. Even though I know that back door be locked. I don't say nuffin' to him. He don't say nuffin' to me, now. First day he say, "Class turn the book pages to page 122 please." I don't move. He say, "Miss Jones, I said turn the book pages to page 122." I say, "Mutherfucker I ain't deaf!" The whole class laugh. He turn red. He slam his han' down on the book and say, "Try to have some discipline." He a skinny little white man about five feets four inches. A peckerwood as my mother would say. I look at him 'n say, "I can slam too. You wanna slam?" 'N I pick up my book 'n slam it down on the desk hard. The class laugh some more. He say, "Miss Jones I would appreciate it if you would leave the room right NOW." I say, "I ain' going nowhere mutherfucker till the bell ring. I came here to learn maff and you gon' teach me." He look like a bitch just got a train pult on her. He don't know what to do. He try to recoup, be cool, say, "Well, if you want to learn, calm down—" "I'm calm," I tell him. He say, "If you want to learn, shut up and open your book." His face is red, he is shaking. I back off. I have won. I guess.

I didn't want to hurt him or embarrass him like that you know. But I couldn't let him, anybody, know, page 122 look like page 152, 22, 3, 6, 5—all the pages look alike to me. 'N I really do want to learn. Everyday I tell myself something gonna happen, some shit like on TV. I'm gonna break through or somebody gonna break through to me—I'm gonna learn, catch up, be normal, change my seat to the front of the class. But again, it has not been that day.

**Excerpted from *Precious (Push Movie Tie-in Edition)* by Sapphire Copyright 1997 by Sapphire. Excerpted by permission of Vintage, a division of Random House, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher.**

## **Book Excerpt: Barack Obama**

By [BARACK OBAMA](#) Sunday, Oct. 15, 2006

Two days after I won the Democratic nomination in my U.S. senate race, i received an email from a doctor at the University of Chicago Medical School.

"Congratulations on your overwhelming and inspiring primary win," the doctor wrote. "I was happy to vote for you, and I will tell you that I am seriously considering voting for you in the general election. I write to express my concerns that may, in the end, prevent me from supporting you."

The doctor described himself as a Christian who understood his commitments to be comprehensive and "totalizing." His faith led him to strongly oppose abortion and gay marriage, but he said his faith also led him to question the idolatry of the free market and the quick resort to militarism that seemed to characterize much of President Bush's foreign policy.

The reason the doctor was considering voting for my opponent was not my position on abortion as such. Rather, he had read an entry that my campaign had posted on my website, suggesting that I would fight "right-wing ideologues who want to take away a woman's right to choose." He went on to write: "Whatever your convictions, if you truly believe that those who oppose abortion are all ideologues driven by perverse desires to inflict suffering on women, then you, in my judgment, are not fair-minded. ... I do not ask at this point that you oppose abortion, only that you speak about this issue in fair-minded words."

I checked my website and found the offending words. They were not my own; my staff had posted them to summarize my pro-choice position during the Democratic primary, at a time when some of my opponents were questioning my commitment to protect Roe v. Wade. Within the bubble of Democratic Party politics, this was standard boilerplate, designed to fire up the base. The notion of engaging the other side on the issue was pointless, the argument went; any ambiguity on the issue implied weakness.

Rereading the doctor's letter, though, I felt a pang of shame. Yes, I thought, there were those in the antiabortion movement for whom I had no sympathy, those who jostled or blocked women who were entering clinics; those who bullied and intimidated and occasionally resorted to violence. But those antiabortion protesters weren't the ones who occasionally appeared at my campaign rallies. The ones I encountered usually showed up in the smaller communities that we visited, their expressions weary but determined as they stood in silent vigil outside whatever building in which the rally was taking place, their handmade signs or banners held before them like shields. They didn't yell or try to disrupt our events, although they still made my staff jumpy. The first time a group of protesters showed up, my advance team went on red alert; five minutes before my arrival at the meeting hall, they called the car I was in and suggested that I slip in through the rear entrance to avoid a confrontation.

"I don't want to go through the back," I told the staffer driving me. "Tell them we're coming through the front." We turned into the library parking lot and saw seven or eight protesters gathered along a fence:

several older women and what looked to be a family—a man and woman with two young children. I got out of the car, walked up to the group, and introduced myself. The man shook my hand hesitantly and told me his name. He looked to be about my age, in jeans, a plaid shirt, and a St. Louis Cardinals cap. His wife shook my hand as well, but the older women kept their distance. The children, maybe 9 or 10 years old, stared at me with undisguised curiosity.

"You folks want to come inside?" I asked.

"No, thank you," the man said. He handed me a pamphlet. "Mr. Obama, I want you to know that I agree with a lot of what you have to say." "I appreciate that."

"And I know you're a Christian, with a family of your own."

"That's true."

"So how can you support murdering babies?"

I told him I understood his position but had to disagree with it. I explained my belief that few women made the decision to terminate a pregnancy casually; that any pregnant woman felt the full force of the moral issues involved and wrestled with her conscience when making that decision; that I feared a ban on abortion would force women to seek unsafe abortions, as they had once done in this country. I suggested that perhaps we could agree on ways to reduce the number of women who felt the need to have abortions in the first place.

The man listened politely and then pointed to statistics on the pamphlet listing the number of unborn children that, according to him, were sacrificed every year. After a few minutes, I said I had to go inside to greet my supporters and asked again if the group wanted to come in. Again the man declined. As I turned to go, his wife called out to me.

"I will pray for you," she said. "I pray that you have a change of heart."

Neither my mind nor my heart changed that day, nor did they in the days to come. But I did have that family in mind as I wrote back to the doctor and thanked him for his email. The next day, I had the language on my website changed to state in clear but simple terms my pro-choice position. And that night, before I went to bed, I said a prayer of my own—that I might extend the same presumption of good faith to others that the doctor had extended to me. p> It is a truism that we Americans are a religious people. According to the most recent surveys, 95% of Americans believe in God, more than two-thirds belong to a church, 37% call themselves committed Christians, and substantially more people believe in angels than believe in evolution. Nor is religion confined to places of worship. Books proclaiming the end of days sell millions of copies, Christian music fills the Billboard charts, and new megachurches seem to spring up daily, providing everything from day care to singles mixers to yoga and Pilates classes. Our President routinely remarks on how Christ changed his heart, and football players point to the heavens after every touchdown, as if God were calling plays from the celestial sidelines.

Today, white evangelical Christians (along with conservative Catholics) are the heart and soul of the Republican Party's grassroots base—a core following continually mobilized by a network of pulpits and media outlets that technology has only amplified. It is their issues—abortion, gay marriage, prayer in schools, intelligent design, Terri Schiavo, the posting of the Ten Commandments in the courthouse, home schooling, voucher plans, and the makeup of the Supreme Court—that often dominate the headlines and serve as one of the major fault lines in American politics. The single biggest gap in party affiliation among white Americans is not between men and women, or between those who reside in so-called red states and those who reside in blue states, but between those who attend church regularly and those who don't. Democrats, meanwhile, are scrambling to "get religion," even as a core segment of our constituency

remains stubbornly secular in orientation, and fears—rightly, no doubt—that the agenda of an assertively Christian nation may not make room for them or their life choices.

There are various explanations for this trend, from the skill of evangelicals in marketing religion to the charisma of their leaders. But their success also points to a hunger for the product they are selling, a hunger that goes beyond any particular issue or cause. Each day, it seems, thousands of Americans are going about their daily rounds—dropping off the kids at school, driving to the office, flying to a business meeting, shopping at the mall, trying to stay on their diets—and coming to the realization that something is missing. They are deciding that their work, their possessions, their diversions, their sheer busyness are not enough. They want a sense of purpose, a narrative arc to their lives, something that will relieve a chronic loneliness or lift them above the exhausting, relentless toll of daily life. They need an assurance that somebody out there cares about them, is listening to them—that they are not just destined to travel down a long highway toward nothingness.

If I have any insight into this movement toward a deepening religious commitment, perhaps it's because it's a road I have traveled.

I was not raised in a religious household. My maternal grandparents, who hailed from Kansas, had been steeped in Baptist and Methodist teachings as children, but religious faith never really took root in their hearts. My mother's own experiences as a bookish, sensitive child growing up in small towns in Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas only reinforced this inherited skepticism. Her memories of the Christians who populated her youth were not fond ones. Occasionally, for my benefit, she would recall the sanctimonious preachers who would dismiss three-quarters of the world's people as ignorant heathens doomed to spend the afterlife in eternal damnation—and who in the same breath would insist that the earth and the heavens had been created in seven days, all geologic and astrophysical evidence to the contrary. She remembered the respectable church ladies who were always so quick to shun those unable to meet their standards of propriety, even as they desperately concealed their own dirty little secrets; the church fathers who uttered racial epithets and chiseled their workers out of any nickel that they could.

For my mother, organized religion too often dressed up closed-mindedness in the garb of piety, cruelty and oppression in the cloak of righteousness.

This isn't to say that she provided me with no religious instruction. In her mind, a working knowledge of the world's great religions was a necessary part of any well-rounded education. In our household the Bible, the Koran, and the Bhagavad Gita sat on the shelf alongside books of Greek and Norse and African mythology. On Easter or Christmas Day my mother might drag me to church, just as she dragged me to the Buddhist temple, the Chinese New Year celebration, the Shinto shrine, and ancient Hawaiian burial sites. But I was made to understand that such religious samplings required no sustained commitment on my part—no introspective exertion or self-flagellation. Religion was an expression of human culture, she would explain, not its wellspring, just one of the many ways—and not necessarily the best way—that man attempted to control the unknowable and understand the deeper truths about our lives. In sum, my mother viewed religion through the eyes of the anthropologist that she would become; it was a phenomenon to be treated with a suitable respect, but with a suitable detachment as well. Moreover, as a child I rarely came in contact with those who might offer a substantially different view of faith. My father was almost entirely absent from my childhood, having been divorced from my mother when I was 2 years old; in any event, although my father had been raised a Muslim, by the time he met my mother he was a confirmed atheist, thinking religion to be so much superstition.

And yet for all her professed secularism, my mother was in many ways the most spiritually awakened person that I've ever known. She had an unswerving instinct for kindness, charity, and love, and spent much of her life acting on that instinct, sometimes to her detriment. Without the help of religious texts or outside authorities, she worked mightily to instill in me the values that many Americans learn in Sunday school: honesty, empathy, discipline, delayed gratification, and hard work. She raged at poverty and injustice.

Most of all, she possessed an abiding sense of wonder, a reverence for life and its precious, transitory nature that could properly be described as devotional. Sometimes, as I was growing up, she would wake me up in the middle of the night to have me gaze at a particularly spectacular moon, or she would have me close my eyes as we walked together at twilight to listen to the rustle of leaves. She loved to take children—any child—and sit them in her lap and tickle them or play games with them or examine their hands, tracing out the miracle of bone and tendon and skin and delighting at the truths to be found there. She saw mysteries everywhere and took joy in the sheer strangeness of life.

It is only in retrospect, of course, that I fully understand how deeply this spirit of hers guided me on the path I would ultimately take. It was in search of confirmation of her values that I studied political philosophy, looking for both a language and systems of action that could help build community and make justice real. And it was in search of some practical application of those values that I accepted work after college as a community organizer for a group of churches in Chicago that were trying to cope with joblessness, drugs, and hopelessness in their midst.

My work with the pastors and laypeople there deepened my resolve to lead a public life, but it also forced me to confront a dilemma that my mother never fully resolved in her own life: the fact that I had no community or shared traditions in which to ground my most deeply held beliefs. The Christians with whom I worked recognized themselves in me; they saw that I knew their Book and shared their values and sang their songs. But they sensed that a part of me remained removed, detached, an observer among them. I came to realize that without an unequivocal commitment to a particular community of faith, I would be consigned at some level to always remain apart, free in the way that my mother was free, but also alone in the same ways she was ultimately alone.

In such a life I, too, might have contented myself had it not been for the particular attributes of the historically black church, attributes that helped me shed some of my skepticism and embrace the Christian faith.

For one thing, I was drawn to the power of the African American religious tradition to spur social change. Out of necessity, the black church had to minister to the whole person. Out of necessity, the black church rarely had the luxury of separating individual salvation from collective salvation. It had to serve as the center of the community's political, economic, and social as well as spiritual life; it understood in an intimate way the biblical call to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and challenge powers and principalities. In the history of these struggles, I was able to see faith as more than just a comfort to the weary or a hedge against death; rather, it was an active, palpable agent in the world.

And perhaps it was out of this intimate knowledge of hardship, the grounding of faith in struggle, that the historically black church offered me a second insight: that faith doesn't mean that you don't have doubts, or that you relinquish your hold on this world. Long before it became fashionable among television evangelists, the typical black sermon freely acknowledged that all Christians (including the pastors) could expect to still experience the same greed, resentment, lust, and anger that everyone else experienced. The gospel songs, the happy feet, and the tears and shouts all spoke of a release, an acknowledgment, and finally a channeling of those emotions. In the black community, the lines between sinner and saved were more fluid; the sins of those who came to church were not so different from the sins of those who didn't, and so were as likely to be talked about with humor as with condemnation. You needed to come to church precisely because you were of this world, not apart from it; rich, poor, sinner, saved, you needed to embrace Christ precisely because you had sins to wash away—because you were human and needed an ally in your difficult journey, to make the peaks and valleys smooth and render all those crooked paths straight.

It was because of these newfound understandings—that religious commitment did not require me to suspend critical thinking, disengage from the battle for economic and social justice, or otherwise retreat from the world that I knew and loved—that I was finally able to walk down the aisle of Trinity United Church of Christ one day and be baptized. It came about as a choice and not an epiphany; the questions

I had did not magically disappear. But kneeling beneath that cross on the South Side of Chicago, I felt God's spirit beckoning me. I submitted myself to His will, and dedicated myself to discovering His truth.

Discussions of faith are rarely heavy-handed within the confines of the Senate. No one is quizzed on his or her religious affiliation; I have rarely heard God's name invoked during debate on the floor. Beyond the Senate's genteel confines, though, any discussion of religion and its role in politics can turn a bit less civil. Take my Republican opponent in 2004, Alan Keyes, who deployed a novel argument for attracting voters in the waning days of the campaign. "Christ would not vote for Barack Obama," Mr. Keyes proclaimed, "because Barack Obama has voted to behave in a way that it is inconceivable for Christ to have behaved."

Already disadvantaged by a late start and a lack of funds, Mr. Keyes had, during the course of a mere three months, managed to offend just about everybody. In that sense, he was an ideal opponent; all I had to do was keep my mouth shut and start planning my swearing-in ceremony. And yet, as the campaign progressed, I found him getting under my skin. For he claimed to speak for my religion—and although I might not like what came out of his mouth, I had to admit that some of his views had many adherents within the Christian church. His argument went something like this: America was founded on the twin principles of God-given liberty and Christian faith. Successive liberal administrations had hijacked the federal government to serve a godless materialism and had thereby steadily chipped away at individual liberty and traditional values. The answer to American renewal was simple: Restore religion generally—and Christianity in particular—to its rightful place at the center of our public and private lives and align the law with religious precepts. In other words, Alan Keyes presented the essential vision of the religious right in this country, shorn of all compromise. Within its own terms, it was entirely coherent, and provided Mr. Keyes with the certainty and fluency of an Old Testament prophet. And while I found it simple enough to dispose of his constitutional and policy arguments, his readings of Scripture put me on the defensive.

Mr. Obama says he's a Christian, Mr. Keyes would say, and yet he supports a lifestyle that the Bible calls an abomination. Mr. Obama says he's a Christian, but he supports the destruction of innocent and sacred life.

What could I say? That a literal reading of the Bible was folly? Unwilling to go there, I answered with the usual liberal response in such debates—that we live in a pluralistic society, that I can't impose my religious views on another, that I was running to be a U.S. senator from Illinois and not the minister of Illinois. But even as I answered, I was mindful of Mr. Keyes's implicit accusation—that I remained steeped in doubt, that my faith was adulterated, that I was not a true Christian.

In a sense, my dilemma with Mr. Keyes mirrors the broader dilemma that liberalism has faced in answering the religious right. Liberalism teaches us to be tolerant of other people's religious beliefs, so long as those beliefs don't cause anyone harm or impinge on another's right to believe differently. To the extent that religious communities are content to keep to themselves and faith is neatly confined as a matter of individual conscience, such tolerance is not tested.

But religion is rarely practiced in isolation; organized religion, at least, is a very public affair. The faithful may feel compelled by their religion to actively evangelize wherever they can. They may feel that a secular state promotes values that directly offend their beliefs. They may want the larger society to validate and reinforce their views.

And when the religiously motivated assert themselves politically to achieve these aims, liberals get nervous. Those of us in public office may try to avoid the conversation about religious values altogether, fearful of offending anyone and claiming that—regardless of our personal beliefs—constitutional principles tie our hands on issues like abortion or school prayer. Such strategies of avoidance may work for progressives when the opponent is Alan Keyes. But over the long haul, I think we make a mistake when we fail to acknowledge the power of faith in the lives of the American people, and so avoid joining a serious debate about how to reconcile faith with our modern, pluralistic democracy.

To begin with, it's bad politics. There are a whole lot of religious people in America, including the majority of Democrats. When we abandon the field of religious discourse—when we ignore the debate about what it means to be a good Christian or Muslim or Jew; when we discuss religion only in the negative sense of where or how it should not be practiced, rather than in the positive sense of what it tells us about our obligations toward one another; when we shy away from religious venues and religious broadcasts because we assume that we will be unwelcome—others will fill the vacuum. And those who do are likely to be those with the most insular views of faith, or who cynically use religion to justify partisan ends.

More fundamentally, the discomfort of some progressives with any hint of religiosity has often inhibited us from effectively addressing issues in moral terms. Some of the problem is rhetorical: Scrub language of all religious content and we forfeit the imagery and terminology through which millions of Americans understand both their personal morality and social justice. Imagine Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address without reference to "the judgments of the Lord," or King's "I Have a Dream" speech without reference to "all of God's children." Their summoning of a higher truth helped inspire what had seemed impossible and move the nation to embrace a common destiny. Of course organized religion doesn't have a monopoly on virtue, and one not need be religious to make moral claims or appeal to a common good. But we should not avoid making such claims or appeals—or abandon any reference to our rich religious traditions—in order to avoid giving offense.

Our failure as progressives to tap into the moral underpinnings of the nation is not just rhetorical, though. Our fear of getting "preachy" may also lead us to discount the role that values and culture play in addressing some of our most urgent social problems. After all, the problems of poverty and racism, the uninsured and the unemployed, are not simply technical problems in search of the perfect 10-point plan. They are also rooted in societal indifference and individual callousness—the desire among those at the top of the social ladder to maintain their wealth and status whatever the cost, as well as the despair and self-destructiveness among those at the bottom.

I am not suggesting that every progressive suddenly latch on to religious terminology. I am suggesting that perhaps if we progressives shed some of our own biases, we might recognize the values that both religious and secular people share when it comes to the moral and material direction of our country. We need to take faith seriously not simply to block the religious right but to engage all persons of faith in the larger project of American renewal. Some of this is already beginning to happen. Megachurch pastors like Rick Warren and T. D. Jakes are wielding their enormous influence to confront AIDS, Third World debt relief, and the genocide in Darfur. Self-described "progressive evangelicals" like Jim Wallis and Tony Campolo are lifting up the biblical injunction to help the poor as a means of mobilizing Christians against budget cuts to social programs and growing inequality. And across the country, individual churches like my own are sponsoring day-care programs, building senior centers, and helping ex-offenders reclaim their lives.

But to build on these still tentative partnerships between the religious and secular worlds, more work will need to be done. The first and most difficult step for some evangelical Christians is to acknowledge the critical role that the establishment clause has played not only in the development of our democracy but also in the robustness of our religious practice. Not only has America avoided the sorts of religious strife that plague the globe, but religious institutions have continued to thrive—a phenomenon that some observers attribute directly to the absence of a state-sponsored church.

Moreover, given the increasing diversity of America's population, the dangers of sectarianism have never been greater. Whatever we once were, we are no longer just a Christian nation; we are also a Jewish nation, a Muslim nation, a Buddhist nation, a Hindu nation, and a nation of nonbelievers.

What our deliberative, pluralistic democracy demands is that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values. It requires that their proposals must be subject to argument and amenable to reason. If I am opposed to abortion for religious reasons and seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point to the teachings of my church or invoke God's will and expect that argument to carry the day. If I want others to listen to me, then I have to explain why

abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all.

For those who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible, as many evangelicals do, such rules of engagement may seem just one more example of the tyranny of the secular and material worlds over the sacred and eternal. But in a pluralistic democracy, we have no choice. Almost by definition, faith and reason operate in different domains and involve different paths to discerning truth.

The story of Abraham and Isaac offers a simple but powerful example. According to the Bible, Abraham is ordered by God to offer up his "only son, Isaac, whom you love," as a burnt offering. Without argument, Abraham takes Isaac to the mountaintop, binds him to an altar, and raises his knife, prepared to act as God has commanded. Of course, we know the happy ending—God sends down an angel to intercede at the very last minute. Abraham has passed God's test of devotion. He becomes a model of fidelity to God, and his great faith is rewarded through future generations. And yet it is fair to say that if any of us saw a 21st century Abraham raising the knife on the roof of his apartment building, we would call the police; we would wrestle him down; even if we saw him lower the knife at the last minute, we would expect the Department of Children and Family Services to take Isaac away and charge Abraham with child abuse. We would do so because God doesn't reveal Himself or His angels to all of us in a single moment. We do not hear what Abraham hears, do not see what Abraham sees, true as those experiences may be. So the best we can do is act in accordance with those things that are possible for all of us to know, understanding that a part of what we know to be true—as individuals or communities of faith—will be true for us alone.

This is not to say that I'm unanchored in my faith. There are some things that I'm absolutely sure about—the Golden Rule, the need to battle cruelty in all its forms, the value of love and charity, humility and grace.

Those beliefs were driven home two years ago when I flew down to Birmingham, Alabama, to deliver a speech at the city's Civil Rights Institute. The institute is right across the street from the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, the site where, in 1963, four young children—Addie Mae Collins, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesley, and Denise McNair—lost their lives when a bomb planted by white supremacists exploded during Sunday school, and before my talk I took the opportunity to visit the church. The young pastor and several deacons greeted me at the door and showed me the still-visible scar along the wall where the bomb went off. I saw the clock at the back of the church, still frozen at 10:22 a.m. I studied the portraits of the four little girls.

After the tour, the pastor, deacons, and I held hands and said a prayer in the sanctuary. Then they left me to sit in one of the pews and gather my thoughts. What must it have been like for those parents 40 years ago, I wondered, knowing that their precious daughters had been snatched away by violence at once so casual and so vicious? How could they endure the anguish unless they were certain that some purpose lay behind their children's murders, that some meaning could be found in immeasurable loss? Those parents would have seen the mourners pour in from all across the nation, would have read the condolences from across the globe, would have watched as Lyndon Johnson announced on national television that the time had come to overcome, would have seen Congress finally pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Friends and strangers alike would have assured them that their daughters had not died in vain—that they had awakened the conscience of a nation and helped liberate a people; that the bomb had burst a dam to let justice roll down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream. And yet would even that knowledge be enough to console your grief, to keep you from madness and eternal rage—unless you also knew that your child had gone on to a better place?

My thoughts turned to my mother and her final days, after cancer had spread through her body and it was clear that there was no coming back. She had admitted to me during the course of her illness that she was not ready to die; the suddenness of it all had taken her by surprise, as if the physical world she loved so much had betrayed her. And although she fought valiantly, endured the pain and chemotherapy with grace and good humor to the very end, more than once I saw fear flash across her eyes. More than fear

of pain or fear of the unknown, it was the sheer loneliness of death that frightened her, I think—the notion that on this final journey, on this last adventure, she would have no one to fully share her experiences with. I carried such thoughts with me as I left the church and made my speech. Later that night, back home in Chicago, I sat at the dinner table, watching Malia and Sasha as they laughed and bickered and resisted their string beans before their mother chased them up the stairs and to their baths. Alone in the kitchen washing the dishes, I imagined my two girls growing up, and I felt the ache that every parent must feel at one time or another, that desire to snatch up each moment of your child's presence and never let go—to preserve every gesture, to lock in for all eternity the sight of their curls or the feel of their fingers clasped around yours. I thought of Sasha asking me once what happened when we die—"I don't want to die, Daddy," she had added matter-of-factly—and I had hugged her and said, "You've got a long, long way before you have to worry about that," which had seemed to satisfy her. I wondered whether I should have told her the truth, that I wasn't sure what happens when we die, any more than I was sure of where the soul resides or what existed before the Big Bang. Walking up the stairs, though, I knew what I hoped for—that my mother was together in some way with those four little girls, capable in some fashion of embracing them, of finding joy in their spirits.

I know that tucking in my daughters that night, I grasped a little bit of heaven.

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