

One Stick at a Time

October 12, 2025

Friends, one of the things I love most about being part of the United Church of Christ is that we don't flinch from hard stories. We don't rush past pain or pretend that everything's fine. We listen. We learn. And then — we get to work.

That's who we've always been. We're the church that shows up after the cameras go home. We're the "dirty hands church," as my colleague Andrew Warner says. He means that we're a church that rolls up our sleeves, picks up one stick at a time, and starts rebuilding hope — even when it feels like the world's come apart.

This morning's reflection that our member Carolyn Friese is going to share is one of those moments. Her words remind us that what happened in New Orleans twenty years ago wasn't just a natural disaster — it was a moral reckoning, bringing into stark relief hard truths about race, poverty, and deep divides. And as she'll remind us, people of faith were — and still are — called to be part of the healing.

Her reflection reminds us why the work of justice and compassion is *spiritual work*. Why it matters that churches like ours keep telling the truth, keep teaching the next generation, and keep showing up in love.

In the UCC, we talk about "continuing testament." That means God is still speaking — through scripture, through story, and sometimes through reflections like the one you're about to hear.

So as Carolyn shares, I invite you to listen with open hearts. This isn't just history — it's a story that still has something to teach us about who we're called to be.

KATRINA

A reflection by Dr. Kristina "Tina" Campbell

Last Sunday I had the opportunity to observe Dr. Gloria Smith sit on the floor surrounded by young adults. She was addressing the 20th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, an event that took place before most of them were born. In her typically respectful posture toward the young, Dr. Smith carefully explained the rise of the storm and the circumstances that made it so devastating. She went on to clearly describe not only the real-life physical aftermath of Katrina, but the reality of those who were the most physically, emotionally and morally injured...the harsh reality for the poor and disenfranchised. However, Dr. Smith did not stop here. She talked about the importance of the concept of neighbor helping neighbor, how the UCC rolled up its collective sleeves, and began picking up one stick at a time.

Katrina slammed into New Orleans, reportedly as one of the worst five storms in American history, and like the open casket of Emmett Louis Till, forced Americans to see the ugly divide of race. I watched in horror as Brian Williams reported his personal experience with Katrina's aftermath in an NBC news special that appeared a year after the storm hit. Williams repeated

over and over again that the post Katrina situation did not resemble anything that could happen in the United States, and that the human suffering was incredible by modern standards.

As the crowd in the Superdome grew to more than 30,000, Williams lost his reporter's neutrality, and talked about the inhabitants as being "obviously poor" and mostly African American. He went on to report that the Superdome inhabitants were treated roughly by the National Guard, and the whole situation "felt bad."

After the storm passed, and the levees broke, flooding at least 80% of the city, Williams, hoping to use the media's influence in a positive way, further dropped his neutrality and pleaded with any authorities who would listen to recognize that there were people still in desperate need of help. Williams stated in an interview that he viewed the situation from his own standing as a father and husband, and related back to his childhood values that we are all of equal value. He summarized that the families of color in New Orleans were not treated with equal value.

This news special put my own mind and heart into motion. Who were these people who remained in New Orleans during and after the storm? Why did they stay? How did the rest of the country view them? Why didn't we know about them before?

The term "underclass" was coined in the United States by journalist Ken Auletta, and it focuses attention on the basement of the American social system (those who are viewed to be "under" the rest of us). Christopher Jencks suggests three different kinds of "underclass": economic (those who are working age and unable to get steady work); moral (those with deviant behavioral norms such as addiction) and educational (those lacking in cultural and social skills). These citizens are the least privileged in our culture. Many of those most harshly affected by Katrina were already the poorest of the poor. The people who remained during and after Katrina lacked basic resources to evacuate the area.

Barack Obama responded by saying, "I hope we realize that the people of New Orleans weren't just abandoned during the hurricane. They were abandoned long ago—to murder and mayhem in the streets, to substandard schools, to dilapidated housing, to inadequate health care, to a pervasive sense of hopelessness."

The moral question becomes: Will Americans continue to turn a blind eye to the underclass and support political decisions based on hate, privilege and prejudice or will we come together to form a community of hope, picking up one spiritual stick at a time? Will we learn the painful lessons that Katrina was trying to teach? Will we, like Dr. Gloria Smith, pass on our learnings to the next generation, roll up our sleeves, suit up and show up, and say a resounding "no" to hate and hopelessness? I say it's time to get to work.

After the Reflection

Thank you, Carolyn, for giving voice to that truth so powerfully, for that great example of "continuing testament."

What you just heard — that mix of honesty, courage, and hope — that's the heartbeat of this church. That's the kind of faith that doesn't stay safe and tidy, but wades right into the mess of the world to say: *God's love belongs to everyone.*

When we say, "*Because of YOU, Union Church changes lives,*" this is exactly what we mean. Because of you, young people learn what it looks like to be a neighbor. Because of you, stories like Dr. Smith's get passed on. Because of you, this church keeps forming people who believe that justice and mercy aren't optional — they're the way of Jesus.

That's what our tradition has always called us to do. And it's what *you* make possible. Your giving — your pledges, your time, your prayers — make this kind of ministry possible. It's how we keep the lights on, sure, but more than that, it's how we keep God's *light shining.*

So as we move through this season of generosity and prayer, may we remember that every gift — every dollar, every act of service — helps our church keep telling these stories, keep showing up, and keep picking up one stick at a time until God's world looks a little more like God's dream, not just for us but for all.

Amen.

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Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7, Luke 17:11-19
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