African American History Program of the National Academy of Sciences
National Academy of Engineering
Institute of Medicine

200 Years After Darwin and Lincoln
Freedom, Choice, and Human Survival in the Contemporary American Democratic Society
Lecture by Reed V. Tuckson

Billy Colbert, Land of Unnecessary Fears
Mixed Media on Aluminum, 24 × 20 inches, 2004
From the collection of Janice Blanchard

African American History Program Annual Lecture Series
First Inaugural Address 2009
During the AAHP inaugural address in 2009 at the National Academy of Sciences, Dr. Reed V. Tuckson spoke of issues facing our nation – specifically the intersection between social issues, community, and individual accountability. The visual themes within the artwork reproduced on the cover of this brochure resonate with the social issues that Dr. Tuckson explored in his lecture. Titled *Land of Unnecessary Fears*, this painting by Washington, D.C.-based artist Billy Colbert reflects an interest in visual changes that have occurred in the Shaw district of Washington, D.C., during the past several decades due to gentrification. The central figure of an African American male whose identity has been covered by a collage of cultural iconography and patterns suggests a tension between the individual and community.

Supported by the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, and the Institute of Medicine, the goal of the African American History Program (AAHP) is to heighten awareness of the contributions of outstanding African Americans to science, engineering, medicine, and the nation's welfare. The events and programs organized by AAHP and its collection of online biographies of African Americans are tools for promoting the understanding of science, engineering, and medicine. AAHP was established in 1986 and is sponsored by the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, and the Institute of Medicine. Institutional partners of AAHP include Cultural Programs of the National Academy of Sciences (CPNAS) and the Koshland Science Museum.

Dr. Ralph J. Cicerone, President of the National Academy of Sciences
Dr. Charles M. Vest, President of the National Academy of Engineering
Dr. Harvey V. Fineberg, President of the Institute of Medicine

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The Institute of Medicine was established in 1970 by the National Academy of Sciences to secure the services of eminent members of appropriate professions in the examination of policy matters pertaining to the health of the public. The Institute acts under the responsibility given to the National Academy of Sciences by its congressional charter to be an adviser to the federal government and, upon its own initiative, to identify issues of medical care, research, and education. Dr. Harvey V. Fineberg is president of the Institute of Medicine.

The National Research Council was organized by the National Academy of Sciences in 1916 to associate the broad community of science and technology with the Academy’s purposes of furthering knowledge and advising the federal government. Functioning in accordance with general policies determined by the Academy, the Council has become the principal operating agency of both the National Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Engineering in providing services to the government, the public, and the scientific and engineering communities. The Council is administered jointly by both Academies and the Institute of Medicine. Dr. Ralph J. Cicerone and Dr. Charles M. Vest are chair and vice chair, respectively, of the National Research Council.
200 YEARS AFTER DARWIN AND LINCOLN
Freedom, Choice, and Human Survival in the Contemporary
American Democratic Society

Dr. Reed V. Tuckson
Inaugural Address

February 20, 2009

National Academy of Sciences
Washington, D.C.
Supported by the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, and the Institute of Medicine, the goal of the African American History Program (AAHP) is to heighten awareness of the contributions of outstanding African Americans to science, engineering, medicine, and the nation’s welfare. The events and programs organized by AAHP and its collection of online biographies of African Americans are tools for promoting the understanding of science, engineering, and medicine. AAHP was established in 1986 and is sponsored by the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, and the Institute of Medicine. Institutional partners of AAHP include Cultural Programs of the National Academy of Sciences (CPNAS) and the Koshland Science Museum.

The mission of the office of Cultural Programs of the National Academy of Sciences (CPNAS) is to explore the intersections of art, science, and culture through the presentation of public exhibitions, lectures, and other cultural programs.
INTRODUCTION

Dr. Harvey V. Fineberg
President of the Institute of Medicine

In 1926, African American historian, author, and journalist Carter Godwin Woodson wrote, “What we need is not a history of selected races or nations, but the history of the world void of national bias, race, hate, and religious prejudice.” Woodson was the founder of what would eventually become known as African American History Month and is considered the first person to conduct a scholarly effort to popularize the value of Black History Month.

We are proud to join in this rich tradition through our African American History Program (AAHP), which has been active in the Washington, D.C., community since 1986. The goal of AAHP is to heighten awareness of the contributions of outstanding African Americans to science, engineering, medicine, and the nation’s welfare. AAHP strives towards this goal through an online collection of biographies of leaders and innovators and a variety of events that, beginning in 2009, includes an annual lecture. Through the lecture series, influential leaders are invited to share their insight and experiences about issues important to contemporary society and to challenge us to consider the pertinent African American perspective and role.

We are grateful to Dr. Reed V. Tuckson, who delivered the Inaugural AAHP Lecture on February 20, 2009, at the National Academy of Sciences building in Washington, D.C. Dr. Tuckson is executive vice president and chief of medical affairs at UnitedHealth Group, where he is responsible for improving the quality and efficiency of health services. The title of his talk was 200 Years After Darwin and Lincoln: Freedom, Choice, and Human Survival in the Contemporary American Democratic Society. In his talk, Dr. Tuckson explored the intersection between social issues and individual accountability in healthcare. People make complex behavioral choices about health care that are shaped by their social, political, and cultural reality.
Dr. Tuckson challenged his listeners to consider the well-documented disparity that African Americans have in health status and clinical outcomes.

A member of the Institute of Medicine, Reed V. Tuckson formerly served as senior vice president of professional standards for the American Medical Association (AMA). He is a former president of the Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science in Los Angeles, has served as senior vice president for programs of the March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation, and is a former commissioner of public health for the District of Columbia. Dr. Tuckson has held a number of federal appointments, including cabinet-level advisory committees on health reform, infant mortality, children’s health, violence, and radiation testing. Most recently, Dr. Tuckson was named one of Modern Healthcare’s “Top 25 Minority Executives” in healthcare for 2008 and was on Ebony magazine’s “2008 Power 150: The Most Influential Blacks in America” list. He is a graduate of Howard University, Georgetown University School of Medicine, and the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania’s General Internal Medicine Residency and Fellowship Programs.

In his career, Dr. Tuckson has ascended the heights of professional achievement. Here, he offers a valuable and informed perspective, an ideal start to the National Academies AAHP Lecture Series.
200 YEARS AFTER DARWIN AND LINCOLN
Freedom, Choice, and Human Survival in the Contemporary
American Democratic Society

Dr. Reed V. Tuckson

It is a privilege to be with you tonight and to deliver this inaugural address during Black History Month. It is an honor for me to share some thoughts with you from the perspective of an African American man. I am an African American man who is extremely proud of his heritage, and I am extremely appreciative of the gifts that my heritage has provided me. I draw on this, in a conscious way, every day of my life, and I am very sensitive to the reality of being a black man in America.

I am also happy to be here as a physician who is appreciative of his membership in this great Academy and as a physician who has focused much of his career fighting on the front lines of health and human survival. As a physician, I am interested in advancing the concept of professionalism as it relates to duty, calling, and a commitment to translate knowledge into service to others. That is a big theme for me tonight—this sense of professionalism and the obligation of the Academy to translate its duty, its calling, and its expertise into service to others.

Because so much of what I am going to say has the potential for being controversial and getting me into trouble, I want to begin by resorting to prayer. This is a nondenominational prayer, so don’t get scared. It is a prayer written by a great friend of mine and a great hero of the Civil Rights movement named Marian Wright Edelman. She is terrific. I get to, on occasion, have dinner with her, sit in the kitchen, and visit with her. I ask you to open your heart and your mind as she reflects,

O God of all children

Oh God of the children of Somalia, Sarajevo, South Africa, and South Carolina.

Of Albania, Alabama, Bosnia and Boston. Of Krakow and Cairo, Chicago and Croatia.

Help us to love and respect and protect them all.
O God of black and brown and white and albino children and those all mixed together.

Of children who are rich and poor and in between.
Of children who can speak English and Russian and Hmong and Spanish and languages that our ears cannot discern.

Help us to love and respect and protect them all.

O God of the child prodigy, and child prostitute, of the child of rapture and the child of rape.

Of run or thrown away children who struggle every day without parent or place or friend or future.

Help us to love and respect and protect them all.

O God of children who can walk and talk and hear and see and sing and dance and jump and play and of children who wish they could, but they can’t.

Of children who are loved and unloved, wanted. unwanted.

Help us to love and respect and protect them all.

O God of beggar, beaten, abused, neglected, homeless, AIDS, drug and hunger-ravaged children.

Of children who are emotionally and physically and mentally fragile, and of children who rebel and ridicule, torment and taunt.

Help us to love and respect and protect them all.

O God of children of destiny and of despair, of war and of peace

Of disfigured, diseased and dying children.

Of children without hope and of children with hope to spare and to share.

Help us to love and respect and protect them all.¹
I embrace this idea of coming together. This topic that I was encouraged to choose is more than a little ambitious and a little more than intimidating. As I thought about it, it does provide some interesting opportunities for reflection and for conversation. It is interesting that there really is an intersection between Darwin and Lincoln, not only that they share the same birthday, born exactly the same day two hundred years ago, but also that it falls in the month that we celebrate Black History Month.

Both Darwin and Lincoln were, of course, unifiers. They were individuals who set in motion extraordinary forces that, while used by many different people with many different agendas and purposes, were remarkable for their effect in shaping the characters and the contours of modern life, of defining modernity, of shaping our contemporary civilization with its aspirations for democratic ideals. Their work, one operating from the discipline of science and the other one operating from the power of political action, forces us to grapple with the essential relationships that we have with each other as individuals and as races within the family of man. Their work forces us to think about the relationship that we have as humans with our larger biologic and social environment. They put these important issues before us.

Two hundred years ago, Darwin arrives for the purpose of providing a unifying foundation bringing together the life sciences—the sort of transformative unification of a broader set of sciences that I am arguing for tonight. Two hundred years ago, Lincoln is delivered to us for the purpose of evolving an inclusive and healing vision of the nation, one that serves as a model for our recently inaugurated president.

And so it is interesting that thirty-one days after the inauguration of President Obama, there is this discussion across the land that maybe we are in a “post-racial world” now. We have elected a black president. Everything must be just fine. Return to your homes. All is well. There ain’t no more problems. If we can do this, what else is there to worry about? And so there is a robust conversation about the land as to whether we are, in fact, in this post-racial environment.

We are here, thirty-one days after President Obama observed the following in his inaugural speech: He says, “For we know that our patchwork heritage is strength, not a weakness.” He also says, “We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and nonbelievers. We are shaped by every language and culture drawn from every end of the Earth and because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war and segregation and emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united, we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass, that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve, that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity will reveal itself.”

It is interesting to note the temporalness in this quote, that the old hatreds shall someday pass, that the lines of tribe shall soon resolve. Hold that thought in the air and we will leave it in suspended animation for a minute.

Let me introduce you to one more player in this Lincoln-Darwin drama—Carter G. Woodson, who is the reason that we, in fact, are here today. He is the person who had the
vision in 1927 to invent Black History Month. It was his vision that we needed an effort to popularize the history of black people in America within the context, again, of an inclusionary and interconnected humanity. He had a prophetic vision in 1927 that really did not exist, but he says, “What we need is not a history of selected races or nations, but the history of the world void of national bias, race, hate and religious prejudice.” This is what we need, he says in 1927, a prophetic vision of a world that was not quite there. He had to fill a gap, and so he chose February for his celebration. Why? Because it was the birthday of the great warrior, Frederick Douglas; because it was the birthday of Lincoln; and he was aware, of course, of the granting of the Fifteenth Amendment in February one hundred and thirty-nine years ago, which allowed folks like me the right to vote.

The Fifteenth Amendment says the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied because of race, color, or previous condition of servitude. It was a very important therapeutic injection of democratizing molecules. However, like most of the clinicians and physicians in the room, you understand that sometimes the injection needs more than just one dose, and so just the Fifteenth Amendment, in and of itself, was fairly inadequate. Interesting to me personally as I observe that, ninety-three years after that injection of democratizing molecules, my sister-in-law, Vivian Malone had to stand on the steps of the schoolhouse at the University of Alabama and confront then-Governor George Wallace for permission to be able to attend that segregated university.²

So, we learn that our unifying vision, our democratizing molecules require a lot more support. Vivian was able to attend the University of Alabama in 1963 because of the power of government, the power of the federal government that forced change, and specifically it was the power of the Justice Department that allowed her to gain admission to the University of Alabama. It is fascinating to me that as history goes round, only a few days ago, my brother-in-law was sworn in as the first black attorney general of the United States, so it is all in the family.

Woodson understood the act of publicizing history as an action of transformative significance and that setting history straight shines light on reality, thereby serving to inspire, but also to stimulate, enraged interventional action. Allow me to meld a couple of his thoughts into one, but with a connecting logic. Essentially Woodson says that “those who have no record of what their forebears have accomplished lose the inspiration that comes from the teaching of biography in history. If a race has no history, it has no worthwhile tradition. It becomes a negligible factor in the thought of the world. [It stands in danger of being exterminated, Mr. Darwin.] To handicap a student by teaching him that his black face is a curse and that his struggle to change his condition is hopeless is the worst sort of lynching. I am ready to act, if I can find brave men to help me.”

I was really excited to come here to the National Academy of Sciences, to find some brave men and brave women—people, such as you, who are enlightened, who represent the best of our nation, and who represent much of the power of our nation. I understand the
power of the National Academy of Sciences. I am clear that the National Academy of Sciences has an extraordinary opportunity to affect the course of events.

In the civil rights movement, there is a tradition called “speak truth to power.” I am going to try to speak truth to power, but what I really want is the National Academy of Sciences to speak truth to even greater power. I want you to decide, today, in every way possible, to continue to vigorously advance some key concepts.

We have an emergency before us. The election of an African American male to be president of the United States notwithstanding, we have an emergency before us. Woodson makes a point about the need to document the success and shine light on what has occurred as a way of inspiring; we also need to document and shine light on what is not going well as a means to stimulate and to motivate action and outrage.

We have an emergency, and the National Academy of Sciences understands how to respond to emergencies. You are the engineers who make the sirens and the beeps on the machines that say, “We’ve got a problem. There needs to be an intervention.” The physicians of the Academy understand how to interpret beeps that are going off, formulate an action plan, and ask, “What does our data tell us?” That data tells us that the Darwinian question of survival is still an issue. It is well known that white Americans live much longer than black Americans, and this has been going on for a very, very long time. It gets discussed, but it does not get discussed in the context of being a hole at the heart of the American democratic civilization. It gets discussed as an oddity as opposed to a centrality of the national agenda. It is a “ghettoized” conversation, not a central conversation that deals with the realities of the American democratic experience.

Let me tell you a statistic. The gap between the high-risk urban black men and Asian women in survival is twenty-one years. Now human protoplasm is not that different. It is not twenty-one years worth of difference. In this country, there are differences of twenty-one years of survival between black men and Asian women, 15.4 years between black men and Asian women, and the gap between rural black women and Asian women is thirteen years. These are extraordinary statistics, but none of them are as damning as the reality that black babies die more than twice as often as white babies in this country. And this is especially troubling given that the infant mortality rate of America is twice that of Japan.

The fundamental obligation of a society is to organize itself to make sure our babies survive the first year of life and grow up to maximize the full extent of their God-given human potential. What else is the point of a society or civilization? It certainly was not mainly to build bridges, and it was not to paint pictures, important as those activities are. What is amazing to me is that it is possible, two hundred years after Darwin and two hundred years after Lincoln, to have an infant survival statistic like ours not be the central agenda of our civilization.

So, as we engage in the health reform discussion important issues such as health information technology will be discussed. That is really important, lots of money goes for that, and, indeed, it should. But you cannot open that discussion and not start with the reality that infant
mortality is twice as high for black babies. Black babies are dying. How can you have a democracy if that exists? Worse, how can you have a democracy when this issue is not prominently discussed? “It is okay. We will write that part off. We do not care about that part. It is not important.” You cannot have a democracy if this issue is not attended to as a first matter of social issue. So, we have to deal with that.

Black History Month is also concerned about the idea of “freedom.” Today, one out of eight black men in their twenties is in jail or in prison on any given day. If the current trend continues for another few years, one-third of black boys born today will spend time in jail during some point of their lifetime. This is America. Somebody should say, “Wait a minute. That cannot be true.” It is true, one-third. And two-thirds of that is not for violent crime—it is nonviolent crime that predominates. The implications of this statistic are extraordinary, and for those of you who are health-concerned people, I think it does not take much for you to understand that the consequences of these statistics reverberate well beyond the individuals who are incarcerated. This takes out a whole swath of society, and the effects on the other victims are profound.

One of the most sensitive and impactful indicators of freedom, choice, and democratization of a population in America is access to public higher education. It should not surprise you that very few African Americans, especially males, are in college. Five percent of all of the students in institutions of higher learning, total, are African American men, and two-thirds of those do not graduate within six years. Interestingly, ten percent of the undergraduate population are black men, but thirty percent of the division one athletes are black men. Fifty-five percent of the football players and sixty-one percent of the basketball teams are black men.

What is going on here? Seven percent of medical school graduates are African Americans, a very small number to augment the 25,000 black physicians practicing in this country today out of a population of more than 700,000 physicians.

The Academy needs to respond and our responses have to be more aggressive, more muscular. First, responding requires people who are alive enough to care, people with the capacity to care, and people who do more than care—the capacity to act. It requires a transformative unification of the sciences, the biological, the technical, and the others. For a great deal of my life, I have observed the tyranny of the hierarchy between the “hard” sciences and the “soft” sciences. The docs, the engineers are “gods,” and the rest of those people who do that “other” stuff, whatever it is, it is soft. The social stuff is soft and less worthy somehow.

I urge the Academy to use its power to break down those stupid artificial walls because the problems that are confronting our nation and confronting a significant number of our citizens require a transformative unification of sciences in a Darwinian mode, evolved now to the modern times, which says that we have to find a unifying concept that brings the biological, the technical, and the nonbiological sciences together in a transformative vision. We will not be able to have the knowledge base to solve our problems if we cannot do that.

As a physician, I have learned to understand that health is the place where all of the
social forces converge: to express themselves with the greatest clarity and the most importance. Let me say that again: Health is the place where all the social forces converge to express themselves with the greatest clarity and the most importance.

I was the health commissioner in this town for a number of years, and among my duties was to be the epidemiologist for the city. I was the scorekeeper. I attested that so many people died of this disease and so many of that disease. When I went back and did as I had been trained at Georgetown Medical School, which is to understand the etiology, the causation of disease, you go back and you trace, okay, how and why did this happen? You find yourself working your way back and ultimately you are standing in the intersection of all of the forces of the society. That is what did it. It was all of the other stuff swirling around the person that ultimately caused the illness or exacerbated it.

So all of the wonderful machinery with beeps in the night and the technology that I was trained to fall in love with, which is terrific, did not do diddly squat with how we were going to deal with the real issues, which were standing in the intersection of all of those forces in this society. I remember worrying about infant mortality, and I met a guy who was an obstetrician-gynecologist who said, “My job is to catch the baby. That is what I do. I catch the baby. And if the baby is teeny weenie, little teeny weenie and small because mama is addicted to nicotine, clamping off the uterine vasculature depriving the baby of oxygen and polluting the system with all kind of junk and the baby is born teeny weenie little and small, hey, I don’t see myself as fighting against tobacco. I catch the baby.”

“And if there is a little teeny weenie baby, we do have a solution. It is called the neonatal intensive care unit and we will just hook him or her up to every anti-death drug we can find because, hey, I just catch the baby.”

Well, I was at that time the president of Charles Drew University Medicine and Science, so I tried to go see if I could find the essay that this guy wrote to go to medical school. You know what it said, “I want to go to medical school and be a doctor to make sure that every baby grows up to maximize the full extent of their God-given human potential and can participate in shaping the American ideal.” We need a transformative scientific vision that allows us to put the pieces of the puzzle together that work on every level that is required.

Second, responding requires understanding that we are all in this together. This is the intellectual dichotomy of what I am asking you to consider tonight. On one level, I am asking you to think about these challenges to a specific people during the occasion of Black History Month. But at the end of the day, we are all in this together. Ralph Cicerone, president of the National Academy of Sciences, and Harvey Fineberg, president of the Institute of Medicine, authored in December 10, 2005, a commitment of support from the National Academy of Sciences to the universal declaration of human rights. They committed the Academy to enforcing and upholding the principles and rights of nondiscrimination, freedom of movement, and right to education around the world. It is a beautiful document!

So, we are in this together in the United States and around the world. These challenges
of education, of incarceration, of freedom are all issues that we enjoy here. But we have to worry about these issues here and around the world. We are in it together whether we like it or not because we are connected by viruses, by airports, by mosquitoes, by violence, by anthrax, by escalating healthcare costs, by predatory marketing practices of the death merchants of tobacco. We are all connected by so many forces. On my way here, I heard somebody coughing on my plane three rows behind me, and by the time we landed I had multiple-drug-resistant tuberculosis. We are all connected.

In California, they just finished addressing their budget problem. They had the same budget problem when I was running an academic medical center in Los Angeles about fifteen years ago. Their response to the budget problem then was that they were going to close the public health clinics, and they actually sent pink slips out to the staff to close them. The newspaper reporters from the LA Times interviewed people like me and asked us, “Why should the average Los Angelino care? Why should the ‘normal’ people care what happens to the poor people?” It was a very odd question. I thought about it for a minute and I said “Well, you know, thankfully I have done the definitive scientific study and it says that when the normal people in Los Angeles retreat to their homes behind their gated community, that the tuberculosis bacilli can just about squeeze through those iron bars.” And they said, “Oh.” I then asked, “Who is cleaning your house and taking care of your children?” We are all in it together, and so we have to find some way of realizing that this agenda should not be a ghettoized agenda, but it has to be a common agenda.

I fear that the things that I am talking about will have a hard time in this current economic climate, because we are going to retreat to too many other problems. “Everybody is suffering. We do not have time for that. Pull yourself up by your bootstrap. It is your fault. Get it together. There is nothing else. There is nothing for you. We do not have any time for you.”

What is going to happen, for sure, is that as we go through these economic challenges, people will drink more alcohol. They will take more drugs. Men will be more desperate. They will hit more wives. There will be more people going to shelters for battered women. People will self-medicate. This is the reality of what happens when people are scared and when they are under tension, and so the fact that we are all in this together will have some very interesting dynamics.

Therefore, responding required better personal decision making. This is difficult to talk about, because it is heavy-loaded with political drama and all kinds of inferences. There is no question that people in my community—African Americans—have got to take more responsibility for their choices and their decisions.

Some of you may recall that during the campaign Jesse Jackson got in trouble for making an unguarded comment about then-candidate Obama. It was played on every TV, maybe one-hundred-million-trillion times. The person he said it to was me, and let me tell you the story. We were in a TV studio at Fox. They were in New York, and we were in Chicago. We were there to talk about premature death from cardiovascular disease for poor people and
people of color. I am on a crusade to fight that problem. I had enlisted Reverend Jackson in that fight and got him engaged to mobilize the black churches to help be a part of a screening activity to try to identify the risk factors early. That is what we went on Fox to talk about.

A few days prior to our interview, candidate Obama gave a speech on his faith-based initiative that focused, in part, on the need for African American men to take more responsibility for their behavior.

Just before we went on the air, the producer informed Reverend Jackson, “We are going to ask you a question about Obama’s faith-based initiative. Are you okay with that?” He then leaned in to me and made the now-famous comment, which he regrets terribly and I regret terribly because he put me all over the news with him.

The essence of the issue is the tension between individual responsibility and the inability to artfully and successfully realize that accountability. The concern is that the mean-spirited part of the society that says, “You folk who are not doing well do not deserve the resources of the society because you are bad people. You are not good folk and, therefore, the society is going to turn its back on you because it is your fault and that is it.” Are you giving credence to that? Or, are you blaming victims for their victimization? These are very powerful thoughts, and it is hard to have a conversation because it becomes a proxy for so many agendas.

Common sense is, obviously, that people have to take responsibility for their behavior. The question is how do you create the environment and the conditions that allow people to actually do it? In the absence of the concept of the possibility of a meaningful future, it is very difficult to make that agenda work. “Dear young woman, please be sexually responsible. Do not be a baby making babies. Do not be sexually active until you are old enough to make mature and rational decision. Just say no. Okay, goodbye.”

There is a great writer named Toni Morrison, and I read her and I think she is important, and, by the way, it is important for all of you to read as many people as possible—turn the stupid television off and just read. Read Amy Tan, read Jimmy Santiago Baca, read Gabriel Garcia Marquez, read everybody from everywhere so we can get this unifying sense of a common humanity.

Toni Morrison’s character in one of her books says, “She imagined a brightness that could be carried in her arms and distributed if need be into places as dark as the bottom of a well.” Why so dark? She was raped when she was thirteen, fifteen, and seventeen. She cannot get it out of her head. “Do not be sexually active dah, dah, dah, just say no. Here is our four-color brochure.” It does not work in that context.

“Dear young African American man, do not smoke tobacco. We do not want you to get cancer when you are forty-five, heart disease when you are fifty. Just say no.” The African American man replies, “Doc, please. The leading cause of death in my community is homicide. I am not going to live to be past twenty. You are worried about cancer at forty-five, heart disease when I am fifty? Get real.”

“Yeah, young man, don’t be sexually active. We don’t want your baby making babies.
We don’t want you to get a sexually transmitted disease. We don’t want you to get AIDS. Just say no.”

“Doc, please. What happens when I walk across the street? Everybody that I know walks to the other side. The women grab their pocketbook and hug them closer to their vests. The only time I am ever seen on television is with my hands tied behind my back or my blood flowing red down the city’s concrete. I am never, ever, ever recognized for being wonderful and terrific. The only person that ever says they love me, that I am wonderful and fantastic is the woman I make love to. [she says,] ‘Oh, Johnny, you were wonderful. You were powerful. You were terrific. When are you coming back?’ Doc, come on what are you going to give me in trade?”

I have very little patience with silly agendas, and I have very little patience with ideals that do not translate into saving lives. I deal in death. I deal with it all of the time. It is around me all of the time. So ideals that do not translate into this sense of reality are, to me, silly. Having said that, we have to find a way to get past this idea of blame and finger pointing.

In this town, I used to try to talk about HIV disease, and I would go on radio shows all of the time and I would say to people, “Wear a condom, blah, blah, blah, blah.” Inevitably the first question when they opened up the phone lines would be from an African American man somewhere who would say, “Remember Tuskegee and the syphilis experimentation? AIDS is a plot from the CIA and Langley and blah, blah, blah, blah.”

I would always say in response, “What has that got to do with you wearing a condom tonight? I mean, what are you talking about?” But, that sense of distrust and so forth is so real and so many people have a hard time getting past it, and I was having a hard time getting past it until I got invited to give the second commemorative lecture at the creation of the Tuskegee Memorial Institute for Ethics. Before I came on, they brought in the last living survivors from Tuskegee. These men, who were unlettered, poor, broken physically, suffering from the ravages of this horrendous disease, walked or hobbled in with an aura of dignity that was so profound that there was no speech to give other than my simply saying, “Ladies and gentlemen, behold these people.” They just were so dignified, and when they were asked to speak, the only thing they said was one phrase, “We forgive.”

So, I do know in my heart it is possible to get to a different place. Lincoln, during his second inaugural address, was deep into the war. His speech, if you go back and read it, started with a hardcore commitment to perseverance through all the bloodshed, death and misery. He was not about to back off or let down his resolve. Then, all of a sudden, as he was making his speech, he flipped a switch in the middle of it. He said, “With malice toward none, with charity for all.” What a great line.

He got to a different place; he envisioned a different place. Now a lot of people, if you start them on Lincoln, will tell you that Lincoln used to use the “N” word. You can get into a whole lot of issues with Lincoln and the “purity” of his motives. But incredible people like W.E.B. Du Bois thought well of Lincoln and finally concluded, “You know what? What I appreciated about what he did was he got from one place to another. He evolved.” Du Bois said
that he cared more for the toe of Lincoln than for the whole body of George Washington with all of his perfection and cherry trees and who was as uninteresting as hell. Lincoln absolutely captures the imagination. Those of you who love Washington, don’t get mad at me.

So, personal responsibility. Our children have got to come to believe that they are special, that there are people who care about them and who believe in their possibilities, that there are people willing to bet on them, that we see them, that we see something in them, a glimmer of possibilities that they do not even see. We have to find a way, all of us, to see these kids and say, “I see you. It is possible. I believe in you and I am willing to bet on you.” Their communities need them. Their nation needs them. They have no idea that the community and nation needs them and that it is possible to succeed if they change things. These kids need spare time, time to think and to imagine.

I tried to remember how much of my childhood, because of my mother, I was allowed time to lay on my back in fields, look at clouds, and wander around. I spent a lot of time just idly wandering. How many of the children in inner-city American wander around? First of all, they unfortunately have that damn “boomp diddy boomp diddy boomp diddy boomp” music all day long in their head. There is no space for a thought. There is no room. Yes, I believe in personal responsibility, but we have to clear out a little space. Let these children have their childhoods back. They do not have that.

So we need to find a way to give them a chance to be curious, the courage to explore complex ideas, and the opportunity to grapple with those ideas and make them their own. Our children need to have some chance to understand the discipline of solitary study. They need to seek out mentors, and mentors need to be there for them so these kids are not afraid of successful people. Let me tell you why I am so pissed off. Last year I went to a health-careers weekend retreat, that flew in a thousand black, brown, and Asian poor children who professed an interest in science. It was organized by the Association of Minority Health Professions Schools, which is comprised of the black medical schools, the veterinary school at Tuskegee, and Xavier College of Pharmacy. You should have seen these young people. It was the first time many of these children have ever been away from home. It was the first time many of them had to sit in a restaurant and figure out how to use the little fork versus the big fork—all of it was new. They had to be in this space, this hotel space, and they had to negotiate all of that. They were lucky to have had people to assist them. We had scientists present to them, engage in discussions with them, and then we listened to the children. One of them lives in a car. He lives in a car, and still he is doing good science, and he stands up and eloquently presents his poster on the science he is doing. He lives in a car, and yet he is doing good science.

This year they do not have any money to do this program. They have no money to do the program, so only a few kids will go this year, only a very few. My wife and I wrote our check, and I wrote a letter to every business that I know of and begged people for money. How can it be, in America, with all of these statistics I have cited that we cannot even provide this single opportunity to these kids who want to achieve? We as a society cannot even get these
kids who want to be successful to a place where they have a chance to be inspired, to be around mentors, to have this space to think, and so forth and so on.

So I am going to ask the National Academy of Sciences to write a letter to somebody somewhere for support. When I was at Charles Drew in the middle of Watts, LA, we had what we called a Saturday Science Academy. Kids who each Saturday came to the school, seven to fourteen, wore white coats, and were all called “doctor.” If you put a white coat on a kid from Watts, I guarantee you not one of them will hit another kid upside the head. Not one of them will cuss, and they will sit in their chairs with remarkable posture.

We filled every chair in the school and taught them how to launch rockets on the lawn of the school and calculate the trajectory of the rockets based on the effect of the wind. We dissected dogfish sharks. We took snakes and let them play with roaches. During the time when Hillary Clinton was the First Lady, we brought her out there to spend time with the children, and, with a hundred million cameras, those kids taught her how to use the otoscope and the ophthalmoscope. “No, no, Mrs. Clinton, you do it like this.” That program is almost out of business—no money.

The MARC and MBRS program at NIH are the programs that train young minority scientists. Wiped out. How can you have a democratic civilization and these sorts of things occur and, worse, occur unnoticed and unprotested? We need you. We have to reach out and deal with this issue of substance abuse and the criminal justice system. That is why all of those kids are in jail—through stupid, dumb polices. We do not treat kids when they have a substance abuse problem, and then these interdiction and incarceration programs wipe out all of their futures through abnormal sentencing. It is just stupid and it is dumb and it doesn’t make sense. And, above all, it don’t work.

Lastly, as interventions we will need to deal with better medicine and better medical care and more specific care. Carolyn [Clancy], who runs the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, is my hero in so much of this work. She is the one who is responsible for developing the guidance for better care to deal with health disparities. She has made disparities a key issue on her agenda.

Genetics is going to be important. I just finished six years of service on the Secretary of Health’s Advisory Committee on Genetics, most of it as chairperson. I will tell you that I am very interested in what this is going to mean to the society as we begin to deconstruct the individual, based on genetics versus social/racial classification. It will be interesting to see the relative relevance of classifying people as, “well this is a black person, or a brown person.” These will be less meaningful when it comes to the genetic issues that will define our therapeutic intervention, that will define the probability of disease, and that will define our interventions.

It was interesting to observe one of the great African American thinkers, our brother from Harvard, Skip Gates, who did the show on PBS focused on having his DNA analyzed. Skip was really pissed when he learned how much northern European ancestry he had. He was very distraught, especially when Chris Tucker, the great comedian, discovered he was a one-
hundred-percent African in origin and traced his roots back to his village of origin. So Chris is going home, having a party, and Skip was wandering around saying “Who am I?” It was really a mess.

This idea of genetics as it relates to individual intervention versus the population social dynamic’s effect on the determinates of disease and expression of the natural history of disease once present is going to be powerful. So, how do we unify and put those together like Darwin did?

Well, I have to close out so let me just say, I wonder where we will be in two hundred years. Where will we be in two hundred years when they give this talk? Will there even be a need to have a Black History Month? Will, as President Obama suggests, the lines of tribe have dissolved by then? Will our science and our politics have unified our conceptualization of problems and our response to them in a whole new dynamic?

Well, theoretical concerns about the far-distant future aside, I am worried about today and tomorrow. I want to embrace a singular national vision of a great democratic civilization—one that is fully evolved to represent the best of what our species, Mr. Darwin, can become. I know that we are not there yet and cannot be there as long as we are willing to tolerate our babies dying in the first year of life as often as they do.

For me, it is not theoretical—it is deeply personal. I have seen too many premature autopsies. I have recorded too many preventable deaths. I have even buried a son, Kobie, a victim to the rising tide of confusion, chaos, despair, and hopelessness that accompanies so many of the policies and realities of our society. I do not know about two hundred years from now, but I do know about today and tonight and tomorrow. I am not ashamed to make my appeals to you, National Academy of Sciences. I have grandkids to raise. We need you.

I will leave you with the words of James Baldwin, the great African American writer. He says, “We must learn to deal with despair and dishonesty, the things that keep people from knowing each other. We must say yes to life and embrace it wherever it is found and it is often found in terrible places, but nothing is fixed forever and forever. Life is not fixed. The Earth is always shifting. The light is always changing. The sea does not cease to grind down the rock. Generations do not cease to be born and we are responsible to them because we are the only witnesses that they have. The sea rises, the light fails, lovers cling to each other, and children cling to us. The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out.”

Good night, Kobie. Happy birthday, Mr. Lincoln. Happy birthday, Mr. Darwin.


4Ibid.


11Toni Morrison (born Chloe Ardelia Wofford on February 18, 1931) is a Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize-winning American author, editor, and professor.

12Amy Tan (born 19 February 1952) is an American writer of Chinese descent whose works explore mother-daughter relationships.

13Jimmy Santiago Baca (born 2 January 1952, Santa Fe, New Mexico) of Apache and Chicano descent is an American poet and writer.

14Gabriel José de la Concordia García Márquez (born 6 March 1927) is a Colombian novelist, short-story writer, screenwriter and journalist.


17William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (February 23, 1868–August 27, 1963) was an American civil rights activist, Pan-Africanist, sociologist, historian, author, and editor.
Reed V. Tuckson, a member of the Institute of Medicine, is executive vice president and chief of medical affairs at UnitedHealth Group, where he is responsible for improving the quality and efficiency of health services. Formerly, Dr. Tuckson served as senior vice president of professional standards for the American Medical Association (AMA). He is a former president of the Charles R. Drew University of Medicine and Science in Los Angeles, has served as senior vice president for programs of the March of Dimes Birth Defects Foundation, and is a former commissioner of public health for the District of Columbia. Dr. Tuckson is an active member of the Institute of Medicine and has held a number of federal appointments, including cabinet-level advisory committees on health reform, infant mortality, children’s health, violence, and radiation testing. Most recently, Dr. Tuckson was named one of Modern Healthcare’s “Top 25 Minority Executives” in healthcare for 2008 and to Ebony magazine’s “2008 Power 150: The Most Influential Blacks in America” list. He is a graduate of Howard University, Georgetown University School of Medicine, and the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania’s General Internal Medicine Residency and Fellowship Programs.
During the AAHP inaugural address in 2009 at the National Academy of Sciences, Dr. Reed V. Tuckson spoke of issues facing our nation – specifically the intersection between social issues, community, and individual accountability. The visual themes within the artwork reproduced on the cover of this brochure resonate with the social issues that Dr. Tuckson explored in his lecture. Titled *Land of Unnecessary Fears*, this painting by Washington, D.C.-based artist Billy Colbert reflects an interest in visual changes that have occurred in the Shaw district of Washington, D.C., during the past several decades due to gentrification. The central figure of an African American male whose identity has been covered by a collage of cultural iconography and patterns suggests a tension between the individual and community.

Supported by the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, and the Institute of Medicine, the goal of the African American History Program (AAHP) is to heighten awareness of the contributions of outstanding African Americans to science, engineering, medicine, and the nation's welfare. The events and programs organized by AAHP and its collection of online biographies of African Americans are tools for promoting the understanding of science, engineering, and medicine. AAHP was established in 1986 and is sponsored by the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, and the Institute of Medicine. Institutional partners of AAHP include Cultural Programs of the National Academy of Sciences (CPNAS) and the Koshland Science Museum.

Dr. Ralph J. Cicerone, President of the National Academy of Sciences
Dr. Charles M. Vest, President of the National Academy of Engineering
Dr. Harvey V. Fineberg, President of the Institute of Medicine

Events of the African American History Program are organized by:

**African American History Program Committee**
Sandra Matthews, Co-Chair
Shelia Wright, Co-Chair
Martha Davidson, AAHP Research Associate

**Cultural Programs of the National Academy of Sciences**
JD Talasek, Director
Alana Quinn, Senior Program Associate

**Koshland Science Museum**
Patrice Legro, Director
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The [National Academy of Sciences](https://www.nasonline.org) is a private, nonprofit, self-perpetuating society of distinguished scholars engaged in scientific and engineering research, dedicated to the furtherance of science and technology and to their use for the general welfare. Upon the authority of the charter granted to it by the Congress in 1863, the Academy has a mandate that requires it to advise the federal government on scientific and technical matters. Dr. Ralph J. Cicerone is president of the National Academy of Sciences.

The [National Academy of Engineering](https://www.nae.edu) was established in 1964, under the charter of the National Academy of Sciences, as a parallel organization of outstanding engineers. It is autonomous in its administration and in the selection of its members, sharing with the National Academy of Sciences the responsibility for advising the federal government. The National Academy of Engineering also sponsors engineering programs aimed at meeting national needs, encourages education and research, and recognizes the superior achievements of engineers. Dr. Charles M. Vest is president of the National Academy of Engineering.

The [Institute of Medicine](https://www.iom.edu) was established in 1970 by the National Academy of Sciences to secure the services of eminent members of appropriate professions in the examination of policy matters pertaining to the health of the public. The Institute acts under the responsibility given to the National Academy of Sciences by its congressional charter to be an adviser to the federal government and, upon its own initiative, to identify issues of medical care, research, and education. Dr. Harvey V. Fineberg is president of the Institute of Medicine.

The [National Research Council](https://www.nas.edu) was organized by the National Academy of Sciences in 1916 to associate the broad community of science and technology with the Academy's purposes of furthering knowledge and advising the federal government. Functioning in accordance with general policies determined by the Academy, the Council has become the principal operating agency of both the National Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Engineering in providing services to the government, the public, and the scientific and engineering communities. The Council is administered jointly by both Academies and the Institute of Medicine. Dr. Ralph J. Cicerone and Dr. Charles M. Vest are chair and vice chair, respectively, of the National Research Council.
African American History Program of the National Academy of Sciences
National Academy of Engineering
Institute of Medicine

200 Years After Darwin and Lincoln
Freedom, Choice, and Human Survival in the Contemporary American Democratic Society
Lecture by Reed V. Tuckson

African American History Program Annual Lecture Series
First Inaugural Address 2009

Billy Colbert, Land of Unnecessary Fears
Mixed Media on Aluminum, 24 × 20 inches, 2004

From the collection of Janice Blanchard