

“When Beloved Community Calls”  
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## Introduction

I have struggled with the invitation to write a paper on theology and race. There were all the practical reasons not to write a paper this year: job transition at an insanely busy church, middle school parenting, family and community commitments. Deeper down was the fear that I have not done enough of the hard work to have something relevant to say. Is it sheer chutzpah for a Jewish, European-American, middle class woman to address this topic? Or is that chutzpah exactly what is required to break the pervasive white silence on racism? Deeper down was trepidation about my own soul work. Is it a healthy sign to know that I don't know enough to bring all of the diverse and needed voices to this table? Or is it the ugliness of white privilege that despite having served in communities like New York City, Flint MI, and on the border of the Frogtown neighborhood in St. Paul, MN, I have reached my 19<sup>th</sup> year in ministry without ever having to articulate in one clear, concise statement how an anti-racist theology is core to our faith?

Suffice to say, I knew I couldn't say "no." For I believe that I am probably a typical representative of Unitarian Universalism in this struggle. I believe in the work of anti-racism and anti-oppression as a part of our calling to affirm the dignity of all people and justice for all. I have led, supported, and engaged in a variety of social justice efforts and community partnerships in the congregations and cities I have served. I have delved into enough of our history to know that we were not always on the nobler side: that for every abolitionist in our churches, we also had our share of slave owners; that for every supporter of the Unitarian Service Committee's effort at resistance and rescue in World War II, we had Unitarian ministers boldly preaching eugenics from their pulpits in the 20's and 30's. I have been a Unitarian Universalist long enough to experience the ways in which our congregational life today is still filled with far too many micro-aggressions on race, class, gender identity and more, despite our lofty ideals and longing for the good.

I have partial education, partial raised awareness, partial struggle with racism as a personal and institutional evil in our lives and in our own religious movement. But all of that knowledge and experience has lived primarily in the confines of my social justice identity as a Unitarian Universalist. It has not fully found its way into my core

theological identity. Why? In the over 35 years that I have been a Unitarian Universalist, this faith has been life-saving for me. Its deep liberal religious roots nourish, sustain, and stretch me. It teaches me the unity of the Holy and the Love of God for all people. Along with my Jewish heritage, it reminds me of the importance of history, questions, and life-long learning. My religious humanism teaches me the centrality of compassion and the miraculous courage of the human spirit in the face of evil, tragedy and despair (I've never been the "onward and upward" kind). Surely all the resources are there to speak to the racist reality that we have allowed our common humanity and global society to be violently and cruelly divided on the basis of a socially-constructed lie that benefits some at the expense of all.

In his essay decrying white theologians' silence on racism, Cone asserts that: "Awareness of racism as a problem of religious identity, not just a societal one, is the first step toward engaging it theologically."<sup>1</sup> I want to wrestle with Cone's challenge in this paper. Instead of writing about theology, I want to engage our theology and religious identity with you. But I know that to bring anti-racism into the heart of our religious identity, we have to examine those cherished foundations. We have to face the tension between those roots of our faith that have abetted white supremacy and colonial domination and those roots of our faith that hold the promise of liberation and sustenance for the long journey into wholeness. And we have to ask ourselves the risky, gut-wrenching question of whether or not our faith will hold up to this task. Perhaps the fear of that answer is the greatest reason that I, and other typical white UU's, have avoided furthering our soul work in anti-racism and anti-oppression. And yet, it is that very faith that calls upon us to face our fears. Reflecting on over 22 years of experience as a community-based urban minister and its struggles, Elizabeth Ellis reminds us:

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1 Cone, J. (2003). Theology's Great Sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy. In Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley and Nancy Palmer Jones (Ed.), *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue* (p. 5). Boston, MA: Skinner House Books.

“Whatever disciplines and traditions we incorporate into our movement to end the evil of racism, we cannot do so without the power and sustaining nature of larger faith.<sup>2</sup>”

For the purposes of engaging theology within the limitations of this paper, I will look at three core questions of theology that ground us and must be addressed to bring anti-racism to our religious center: the nature of God, the nature of humanity, and the purpose of Beloved Community. I believe that it is our answers to the first two that enable us to hear the call of the third. I will hardly come close to resolving, or even fully exploring, these issues. Rather, it is my hope that this paper will provide an example of the kind of theological reflection and conversation that needs to happen on a much broader scale, if Unitarian Universalism is going to rise to Cone’s challenge, do its collective soul work, and dare to be a force for transformation in our world.

### **Toward an Anti-Racist God**

The unity of God and the Sacred is at the heart of our original Unitarian heresy. “Egy Az Isten” (God is One) is the rallying cry of our Transylvanian brothers and sisters. And in the heart of the Transcendentalist revolution in Unitarian theology, Ralph Waldo Emerson called upon each of us to be a “a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost<sup>3</sup>” and to dare to directly experience God without mediator. The grand experiment of our creedless, multi-theological faith is often taught in our religious education classrooms through the Hindu story of the Blind Men and the Elephant. Each describes the elephant differently, depending upon if they are holding the ear, the trunk, the body, or the tail. None has the full truth, because their individual experience is limited, but each has a piece of the larger, shared truth of the elephant’s true nature.

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2! Ellis, E. (2003). A response to *The Other Side of Route Two: Some Autobiographical Struggles with Theology, Race, and Class* by Garry E. Smith. In Bowens–Wheatley and Jones (Ed.), *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue* (p. 71).

3! Emerson, R. W. (1838). The Divinity School Address delivered on July 15 before the Senior Class in Divinity College, Cambridge, MA. Retrieved from <http://www.emersoncentral.com/divaddr.htm>.

In countless classes for newcomers, I proudly tell the story of Emerson's theory of "pure religion", which he believed was present in each of the great religious traditions of the world, but which no one tradition could fully claim. He drew his understanding of pure religion into the first logo of the Free Religious Association: a strong, tall, deeply rooted tree. The trunk of the tree was pure religion. Out of that trunk grew many branches: Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Shintoism, Hinduism, and more. All of the sacred world religious traditions were deserving of reflection, engagement, and study, because all were connected to the same source of mystery, transcendence and wonder.

Growing up Unitarian Universalist, I find this concept of unity liberating. This expansive, interconnected view of the Holy is larger than any creed or doctrine. It is non-tribal, accessible to all, named by many names in all languages and lands. It is a bridge that enables interfaith dialogue both among Unitarian Universalists and in the larger religious community. The unity of the Holy reflects the hope and possibility of the unity of our humanity in the religious quest.

Or does it?

Cone's challenge to see awareness of racism as a problem of religious identity demands that I pause to reflect. Just as feminist theologians called us to examine our theological language and assumptions about God in order to address sexism, I have to hold up this image of the one God of pure religion and ask - what am I missing? What does an anti-racist, multicultural lens teach us about God, the Sacred, and culture today? What is this God's witting and unwitting relationship to white supremacy and domination theology?

These questions came to me just last week, as I was sitting in the sanctuary of Unity Church-Unitarian, watching the documentary film, "Disavowing the Doctrine of Discovery", with its creator Sheldon Wolfchild of the Dakota people. Wolfchild's mission is not just to make people aware of the devastating history and cruel horrors of the doctrine of discovery, but also to help them to understand how its cruelty and injustice still live out today in specific and concrete ways. There is no getting away from the brutality of the story, or the basic fact that the Europeans who found freedom from

religious persecution on the shores of this land committed murder and massacre with their own hands. The God of the radically democratizing Cambridge Platform and the pilgrims' City on the Hill was the same God of Colonial Conquest and Terror. While I was familiar with the history, the experience of the film gave me new insight in the ways that that God of Conquest lives on today, especially in our legal system, which is based on European religious and philosophical ideals.

Robert Williams explains the Rule of Law in these words: "This legal discourse on colonialism... unquestioningly asserted that normatively divergent non-Christian peoples could rightfully be conquered, and their lands could lawfully be confiscated by Christian Europeans, enforcing their peculiar vision of a universally binding natural law."<sup>4</sup> I found myself reflecting on whether or not my equally peculiar vision of a universally embracing God is just as dangerous in the lived experience of oppression. The one God of Unitarianism, broadly experienced, still has assumed characteristics in the way we tell our collective story: a God who cares about reason, individual character, moral strength, compassionate community and larger service to the betterment of the world. Contrast this image with George Tinker's description of the Laguna tradition: "In the Laguna explanation of the world, Spider Woman creates by thinking, and whatever she thinks about appears."<sup>5</sup> Spider Woman co-creates with her creation. It is her fundamental interaction with all beings that helps to write the story of the healing of the world. A God of universal moral law moves very differently in the world than a Goddess of creative interdependence.

Where is the unity of the Sacred in the gods and goddesses of the oppressors and the oppressed? How do we speak of the complexity and diversity of our understanding as to how the Holy moves in our lives? When I talk about the power of the image of pure religion in my own spiritual journey, how do I express it as a hope for connection

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4! Quoted in Tinker, G. (2003). *Racism and Anti-racism in a Culture of Violence: Dreaming a New Dream*. In Bowens-Wheatley and Jones (Ed.), *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue* (p. 81).

5! *Ibid.* (p. 79).

to a larger mystery, and not an assumption of sameness that obscures or denies someone else's lived experience and wisdom? Our longing to experience the unity of the Holy must beware the attempt to universalize the sacred from our own cultural bias. It is possible that Emerson's pure religion is not one tree, but an ecosystem. But before we can engage that question more fully, we need a deeper exploration of our own theological heritage and its rootedness in the American experience of racism. We need to understand the ways in which our call to the oneness of God liberates us to see the many faces of the holy. I believe that by engaging this work, we can liberate our theology from the legacy of dominion.

The God of Love is at the heart of our original Universalist heresy. By rejecting hell and promising ultimate reconciliation, this God subverts tribalism and affirms a larger Love that extends to all. This God calls us away from our theological smallness. This God bears witness to the potential for human beings to put love into action in the world and to hear its call. This was the God who caused Elhanan Winchester, the 18<sup>th</sup> century itinerant Universalist preacher, to decry the institution of slavery as being inconsistent with a belief in "one great family" and who compelled him to preach to those in bondage that Jesus "loved them, and died for them, as well as us white people."<sup>6</sup> This was the God who enabled the Universalists to ordain Olympia Brown.

From an anti-racist, anti-oppression, multicultural lens, it's hard to argue with such a God, who continually calls us out of safety zones and affirms the dignity of our humanity, even when other human beings do not. When Olympia Brown applied to theological schools, she was rejected by every one except St. Lawrence Theological School. The President wrote back to her and explained that he personally did not believe that women could be called to the ministry or that it was wise to ordain them in the current state of the church. However, he observed, it was not his to say what she felt the Great Instructor in the Sky was saying to her about her call. If she felt she was called and came to the school, they would teach her. He thought he had discouraged her from

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6! Morrison-Reed, M. (2011). *Darkening the Doorways: Black Trailblazers and Missed Opportunities in Unitarian Universalism*. Boston, MA: Skinner House Books (p. 89)

continuing. She read his letter and agreed with him. It was indeed between her and her God. She arrived on campus and stayed.

That story is one of the exceptions. Engaging our religious identity and theology as Universalists requires us to grapple with the many times that human beings have failed to meet the largeness of this God's vision and the radicalness of this God's message. In his book, *Darkening the Doorways: Black Trailblazers and Missed Opportunities in Unitarian Universalism*, Mark Morrison-Reed tells the story of Joseph Jordan, the first African American to be ordained by the Universalists, who founded a congregation, as well as a mission and a school in Norfolk, VA in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. While the congregation died much earlier, the schools and mission efforts served thousands of children and families in Eastern Virginia until 1984. And yet the national Universalist support waxed and waned through the years, forcing future leaders, like Joseph Fletcher Jordan to travel from church to church raising funds, arguing that "the Negro is as susceptible to Universalism as any other race (p.111)" to doubting listeners.

Such stories from our history invite us to define what love means in our theology today. When I speak of the Spirit of Life and Love, I mean that creative force which reveals to me my connection with all things, and which holds me accountable to them. Sacred love is often not comfortable, but a restless voice which causes me to rethink my responsibilities, to speak up, to face conflict and fear for a higher good. It demands that I stay engaged with my best self and the harder truths of this world. In her essay, "A Struggle to Inhabit My Country," Rebecca Parker articulates Love's call in the work of anti-racism in these words: "Love calls me beyond denial and disassociation. It is not enough to think of racism as a problem of 'human relations' to be cured by me and others, like me treating everyone fairly, with respect and without prejudice. Racism is more: It is a problem of segregated knowledge, mystification of facts, anesethetization of feeling, exploitation of people, and violence against the communion/community of our humanity.<sup>7</sup>"

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7! Parker, R. (2003). A Struggle to Inhabit My Country. In Bowens–Wheatley and Jones (Ed.), *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue* (p. 184).

## **Toward an Anti-Racist Humanity**

Unitarianism teaches the original blessing and essential goodness of humanity, a theological affirmation that we invoke each time we bless and dedicate a child born into our congregations. Universalism teaches the promise of reconciliation for all souls and argues that we do not need the threat of damnation in order to access humanity's capacity for the good. My religious humanism is inspired by the courage of the human spirit which rises up despite the tragic odds, again and again. Our faith tradition affirms a human nature that is capable of free will, moral agency, spiritual growth, redemption and personal transformation. Our congregational life is grounded in the covenantal tradition and our ability to be promise-making and promise-keeping people, despite our inevitable promise-breaking. Even if we no longer hold to the onward and upward optimism of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, or Channing's belief in a perfectible soul, as a religious movement we are still deeply rooted in a basic faith in and hope for humanity.

Throughout our religious history, this aspect of our religious identity has been the most tested, both from within and beyond our own tradition. When Rosemary Bray McNatt recounts her meeting with Coretta Scott King and her discovery of the reasons why the Kings chose not to make Unitarianism their religious home, she invokes King's own struggle with this aspect of religious liberalism: "There is one phase of liberalism that I hope to cherish always: its devotion to the search for truth, its refusal to abandon the best light of reason... It was ... the liberal doctrine of man that I began to question. The more I observed the tragedies of history, and man's shameful inclination to choose the low road, the more I came to see the depths and strength of sin... I came to feel that liberalism had been all too sentimental concerning human nature and that it leaned toward a false idealism. I also came to see that liberalism's superficial optimism concerning human nature caused it to overlook the fact that reason is darkened by sin... Liberalism failed to see that reason by itself is little more than an instrument to justify man's defensive ways of thinking. Reason, devoid of the purifying power of faith, can never free itself from distortions and rationalizations."<sup>8</sup>

**8! Quoted in Bray McNatt, R. The Problem of Theology in the Work of Anti-racism. In Bowens-Wheatley and Jones (Ed.), *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue* (p. 28).**

Cone's challenge to bring awareness of racism into our religious identity echoes King's concern. For the purpose of this paper and Unitarian Universalism's capacity to bring anti-racism into its theological center, I want to raise three areas of our doctrine of human nature that need to be addressed in order to bring our faith in humanity and an honest, no-holds barred assessment of the evil of racism into relevant theological conversation. I lift them up, albeit all too briefly, in order to invite ongoing dialogue and reflection. For not to attempt to answer King's critique, is to concede to white silence in our theology. These three areas comprise our understanding of sin and evil, the purpose of knowledge, and the role of the individual in community.

King considered liberals too sentimental and idealistic about humanity because of the depth, strength, and persistence of sin that he experienced. Much has been written about religious liberalism's capacity (or lack thereof) to account for evil and I won't recount all those debates and theological premises here. Even as most of us reject the concept of original sin, there have been some concepts of sin in our liberal lexicon. Missing the mark, from the Jewish tradition, speaks to our failures and imperfection. Tillich's concept of sin as estrangement from our best self captures the harm of isolating ourselves from the sacred and the good. Both the Greek concept of pride as a sin and the Christian image of sin as the fall from innocence are embedded in our culture. But have we tested these understandings of sin against the persistent violence we do in perpetuating racism?

We need to articulate, test, and explore concepts of sin that speak to both personal prejudice and the institutionalized oppression that has come from imposing the social construction of race on others. We need a concept of sin that can help us adequately name racism's harm today. Without it, we have no way to credibly speak to or respond to the reality of those who live the consequences of racism each day. For example, Tinker points out that native communities do not make a distinction of full or partial ethnic heritage. There is no language in his people for it. Instead, "it was the U.S. government late in the nineteenth century that decided to start tracking Indian blood. There have only been 3 peoples I know of in the world who have had to carry cards to demonstrate who they are to the body politic: Jews in Nazi Germany, blacks in South

Africa under apartheid, and American Indians today.<sup>9</sup> What is the sin, or human failing if you prefer, at work here?

Discussing this question in *Soul Work*, Paul Rasor defines racism of the problem of “othering,” or the sin of **holding some up as superior and putting others down as inferior**. Rebecca Parker acknowledges “not just the social construction of racism, but the social construction of heartlessness.<sup>10</sup>” It is not so important to agree completely about the nature of sin, but it is important that we find ways to give voice to what numbs us to compassion and connection with our shared humanity. Otherwise we will not be able to fully address how to heal it.

As a faith that prides itself on humanity’s capacity for reason, and the spiritual intersection of the mind and heart, the purpose of knowledge is an important topic. King was right to warn of reason *by itself* as “little more than an instrument to justify man’s defensive ways of thinking.” One of the most chilling examples of this in our own history are the writings of Unitarians and Universalists about the reasonableness of the new science of eugenics. Oliver Wendell Holmes is but one example: “We have seen more than once that the public welfare may call upon the best citizens for their lives. It would be strange if it could not call upon those who already sap the strength of the state for these lesser sacrifices... It is better for all the world if, instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind... Three generations of imbeciles are enough.<sup>11</sup>” How could they not have recognized the call to genocide and social control that was embedded in this perversion of science? Lack of humility

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9! Tinker (2003) (p. 92).

10! Parker (2003) (p. 123).

11! Quoted in Clement, Jackie and Cornish, Alison (2011). *Faith like a River: Themes from Unitarian Universalist History* (Handout 3). Retrieved from <http://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/river/workshop3/workshopplan/handouts/175715.shtml>.

and compassion in our reasoning is both deadly and dangerous. So is what Anita Farber Robinson defines as “designed blindness - the capacity to remain unaware of that which is knowable.”<sup>12</sup>

Rebecca Parker lifts up an important point as to the purpose of knowledge in her critique of the Garden of Eden story. What does it mean for our engagement with the world, if innocence is defined as godliness and knowledge as sin? She argues, on the contrary, that knowledge is essential to the spirit. The purpose of knowledge, life passed through the fire of thought, is to keep us spiritually awake. It helps us to weave together the broken fragments of our wisdom and understanding. It prepares us for action. But the kind of knowledge we choose to seek, the experiences to which we bring the power of our reason, matter.

I think about this topic a lot lately, as my portfolio at Unity Church-Unitarian includes adult programming and faith formation. Recently, the congregation’s Anti-Racism Leadership Team set a goal for 25% of our adult education to have an anti-racist focus or component. At first, I had to wrestle with what that meant – did only certain approaches or topics count? What is art and music’s role? What is anti-racism in the context of international work and cross-cultural understanding? In the end, I decided to understand my charge as any program that helps us to that break through our designed blindness; any program that awakens our knowledge of the complex ways in which racism is embedded in our collective lives. Whether we engage in the quest for knowledge in the journey of anti-racism through the musical stick-pounding of the Gullah tradition, or the community-wide reading of *The New Jim Crow*, or the artistic process of a Holocaust survivor, or the story of a pacifist Palestinian farmer, we are invited into a deeper experience of each other’s stories and a larger lens of human understanding. My colleague Rev. KP Hong, who leads religious education ministry for children and youth at Unity Church, talks about RE as that place where children are offered a safe container in which to touch what is wild and dangerous and true in the

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**12! Farber–Robinson, A. (2003). A response to Racism and Anti–racism in a Culture of Violence: Dreaming a New Dream by George Tinker. In Bowens–Wheatley and Jones (Ed.), *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue* (p. 94).**

world. The truth is we all need such a container to hold us accountable to our spiritual growth.

The last dimension of human nature that I want to lift up for discussion has to do with the role of the individual in community. In our creedless tradition, we tend to tell our theological and prophetic story in the language of individualism, personal choice, inner transformation, and self-reliance. The act of membership in most of our congregations is the act of each person signing their name on “their own dotted line of spiritual development.”

Yet, as I read the many voices of Unitarian Universalists of color in the essay collection, *Soul Work*, I was reminded that not all cultures and people with our faith embrace the value of the individual so highly. Patricia Jimenez offers that “From a Latino and Latina perspective, a theology of liberation addresses not only the individual and individual action, but the community as well.<sup>13</sup>” José Ballester explains that Latino culture has five components: family, faith, the arts, the community, and the people’s history or roots. “When Latinos and Latinas get together, the first thing we do is try to establish our history, our roots, and our family. Then community arises out of that. Ada María Isasi-Díaz, writes that we as Latinos and Latinas do not *write* theology, we *live* theology.<sup>14</sup>” Over the last year, I have had several mentoring conversations with a young Iranian-American student for our ministry who has enthusiastically embraced our way of religion, but is struggling with the reserved and introverted nature of our congregations.

This is a new area for me to contemplate in depth. To what extent does our theology of human nature rely too much on the European concept of selfhood? How does our language of individual spirituality and freedom, rampant throughout our worship and hymnal, unwittingly give the message that those who place community, or

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13! Jimenez, P. (2003) *Theology and Anti-racism: Latino and Latina Perspectives*. In Bowens–Wheatley and Jones (Ed.), *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue* (p. 43–44).

14! Bowens–Wheatley and Jones (Ed.) (2003) (p. 57).

other values, more highly are not as welcome? What is the theology of creative human community that we would practice and preach more fully? Entering into this conversation more fully could help us to set a larger, more welcoming table.

It matters that we wrestle with our understanding of human nature, in order to help cultivate a more anti-racist human community. In Cone's own words: "We are one people... Whites and people of color must learn to work together. Our future depends on it. But that can never happen creatively until whites truly believe their humanity is at stake in the struggle for racial justice."<sup>15</sup>

### **Toward the Beloved Community**

With a God who affirms the interconnectedness of creation and preaches a radical message of inclusion, and with a faith in humanity's capacity for growth, goodness and creativity, even amid our sins and failings, it is inevitable that our religious tradition focused on the kingdom of God in this world, not the next. But while we once interpreted this calling as an invitation to go off the grid to the peace of Walden Pond or to Utopian communities we created to embody our religious values, there is a different vision today of what it means to answer the call of beloved community.

"The Beloved Community" is a term that was first coined in the early days of the 20th Century by the philosopher-theologian Josiah Royce, who founded the Fellowship of Reconciliation. However, it was Dr. King, also a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, who popularized the term and invested it with a deeper meaning. For King, the beloved community was not a lofty utopian goal to be confused with the rapturous image of the Peaceable Kingdom, in which lions and lambs coexist in idyllic harmony. Rather, the beloved community was a realistic, achievable goal that could be attained by a critical mass of people committed to the brotherhood and sisterhood of all people and trained in the philosophy and methods of nonviolence.

When Unitarian Universalists evoke this image of and longing for the beloved community today, I believe that we are affirming our solidarity with King's original

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<sup>15</sup> Cone (2003) (p. 11).

vision. But we are also challenging ourselves to consider what it would take to make beloved community real in our congregations, our neighborhoods, and our larger world. Regarding the theology of anti-racism and anti-oppression work, Peter Morales reminds us that “our praxis needs to be creating spaces where people can interact.”<sup>16</sup> This, however, is much easier said than done. Sometimes we are afraid to truly meet in the spaces we have created. Sometime we meet and misstep, and struggle with how to heal. And sometimes, once we have formed the fresh, new, joyful bonds of community, it is not always clear how to continue in deepening relationship. For the last section of this paper, I want to share some current stories of praxis which are underway and whose future is still unfolding. I lift these stories up, because they are examples of what happens when beloved community calls and we decide to answer to the best of our imperfect ability.

The first story has to do with beloved community calling us into relationship congregation to congregation. A year and a half ago, while the senior ministers of Unity Church were in Europe for six weeks, a Pastor Danny Givens of Above Every Name, an emerging Black Pentecostal church, stopped by the church office on a Monday afternoon. His congregation was losing the space they had been leasing, and they were looking for a new rental home. He’d knocked on the doors of 20 neighborhood churches, but they had all said ‘no’ for various reasons. The Executive Director and I invited him to share his story and offered him an introduction to Unitarian Universalism in return. Not too long after that, we emailed the travelling ministers, saying “trust us” and we let the board know that with this new partnership, we had added a fourth worship service to our Sunday schedule. We all agreed to a non-binding six month trial, to see if it would work out for both parties.

Within a couple of months, it became clear that this was more than a rental arrangement. The two congregations were meeting each other in the hustle and bustle of Sunday activities. The children were eating donuts together in the Parish Hall. Members of each congregation were attending each other’s worship to get to know each other better. We were being lifted up in each other’s prayers and embracing

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<sup>16</sup>! Bowens–Wheatley and Jones (Ed.) (2003) (p 56).

meditations. At the same time, Unity was exploring teaching Dr. Mark Hicks' curriculum "Beloved Conversations: Meditations on Race and Ethnicity" The curriculum is written for the context of a single Unitarian Universalist congregation. But frankly, it seemed weird to hold meditations on race and ethnicity in a primarily white church with only ourselves. So Unity decided to invite members of Above Every Name and another neighboring, predominantly African American congregation, Morningstar Baptist, to join us.

It was through the experience of Beloved Conversations that the relationships got real and more intimate very quickly. Roughly sixty people participated, and leadership was provided from each congregation. Dr. Hicks consulted with us to adapt the lessons to a multi-congregational context. There were hard moments. Some people left and didn't come back. Others discovered friendships they hadn't imagined were possible. Still others had their ups and downs, but were ultimately grateful that they stayed the course. We held a joint Christmas Eve service that December and celebrated Palm Sunday together.

Once the class was over, there were hopes of continuing to meet. There was a longing to continue to create the space of honest, engaged community and to nurture the relationships that had been forged. But we had reached the end of the curriculum which offered the structured space for praxis. A list of ideas was brainstormed, but it wasn't clear who would follow up on them. Now, in the current church year, we are discussing where Beloved Conversations lives in the institutional life of the congregation. Is it a staff initiative? Is it under the umbrella of the Anti-Racism Leadership Team Education Subcommittee or in partnership with the Racial and Restorative Justice Outreach Team? Who will lead it? Who will create the new topics and sessions? I believe that the effort and relationships will continue, but we have wandered off the nicely detailed road map into the unknown and it has slowed us down. But the brief, lived experience of beloved community keeps calling us back to the planning table.

The second story speaks to what happens when beloved community calls to us into relationship congregation to neighborhood. Unity Church is located at the intersection of one of the richest communities in Minnesota and one of the poorest ones.

Five years ago, after another shooting of an African-American teenager due to gang violence, a group of grandparents got together to talk about what to do. They were tired of going to the funerals of their grandchildren and neighbor's grandchildren. One community elder had the idea of creating a neighborhood peacekeeping circle, where concerned members of the community, youth, police, and other concerned citizens could just come together and talk, build relationships, and hear each other's stories.

They needed a neutral space to meet. They asked Unity to sponsor them and have been meeting every Monday night at the church since. It is called the Circle of Peace Movement. Youth come from the neighborhood and are also bused from a local juvenile home. The beat cop attends regularly, and the St. Paul Police Chief has called it the single most effective crime preventing strategy he has seen in a long, long time. However, Russel Ballenger, who leads the Circle with his wife and partner Sarah, is clear that this is not a strategy or a program. He attributes its success to the fact that it is a movement of the people that creates a safe space in which to experience each other's truth and humanity.

Russel actively recruits participants to the circle. He spoke the other day about how important he feels it is for the circle to be balanced and reflective of the whole neighborhood. He says he has been known to walk up to a stranger in the store, engage them in conversation, and then invite them to attend because he needs their particular perspective. He admits that it can be rather bold to tell someone that he needs more Hmong in the group, or more African or Japanese, but as a man of color himself he feels that is it worth the risk because of the difference it makes in the quality of the community that the circle is able to build.

For a couple of years now, other neighborhoods have been asking if Russel and Sarah would help them to start a Circle of their own. Russel has struggled with the request and the longing to see the Circle expand in its transformational power. But how do you replicate a local grassroots movement, without losing its unique soul? How do you cultivate other facilitators who share the same commitment to the vision? And yet, even Russel admits that the Circle will not survive over the long haul if it is only embodied in the unique gifts of one person. Unity Church recently partnered with the Circle to apply for a St. Paul Foundation grant to fund its expansion into other

communities. The grant is likely to come in early 2015, and the experiment of expanding these circles of peaceful praxis will begin.

It is often easier to answer the call to practice beloved community in our local contexts. It can be harder to answer the call to practice in our larger society and community writ large. But this is, after all, where King's original vision and call to beloved community began. In *Soul Work*, Tinker calls upon us to address the fact that violence is a fundamental, longstanding American value. Cone challenges white theologians and religious people to break white silence. In the meantime, Unitarian Universalists show up in a variety of places in our yellow shirts and ask, what does it truly mean to stand on the side of love?

The upcoming 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in Selma has posed the question of why there was not a similar call and response to show up in Ferguson, after the murder of Michael Brown. An estimated 60 Unitarian Universalists were present in the first acts of protest and witness in Ferguson. In his blog post, "Who are My People? A Black Unitarian Universalist Reflects on Selma and Ferguson," Kenny Wiley reflects: "There are so many things to fight—and fight for—in the world. We mostly do a great job on climate justice and immigration. Our LGBTQ work has saved and changed lives. Black lives, too, are worth fighting for. When the next Ferguson happens—and sadly, it will—we can and must do more. We have to show up, be willing to follow others, and be willing to change ourselves... The next call to action for racial justice has arrived. My people: Will we answer? My people want to know."<sup>17</sup>

There are many ways to break white silence. There are many opportunities to show up. There was a recent crime of racism at a downtown bank in Minneapolis, where a man of color was physically and verbally harassed by security while peacefully waiting for his kids. At the last Racial and Restorative Justice Team meeting, we talked about why there had not been a spontaneous protest crowd as soon the story was

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**17! Wiley, Kenny (2014, October 15). WHO ARE MY PEOPLE? A BLACK UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ON SELMA AND FERGUSON. Retrieved from <http://kennywiley.com/2014/10/15/who-are-my-people-a-black-unitarian-universalist-on-selma-and-ferguson/>.**

known. I know for myself, when I don't speak up, and don't show up, it's usually because I haven't prepared. I'm not ready for action. Unity is planning now for a Beloved Conversations pilgrimage to Selma in March. But I wasn't ready for Ferguson, or the downtown bank. How might the call to beloved community and the theological works that remains for us to do help me to prepare?

## **Conclusion**

Tracy Robinson-Harris warns us that "the struggle against racism is both the practice of revelation and the work of transformation."<sup>18</sup> This paper reflects the humblest beginning into the theological depths of that struggle with our Unitarian Universalist tradition. It is my hope, however, that by offering the example of a more personal reflection with the challenge of making anti-racism central to our religious identity, that I have convinced you, my colleagues, of the importance of inviting all of us into this task. For only if we are in the struggle together, will the promise of beloved community ever have the hope of becoming real.

Last week, Unity had the privilege of hosting Daoud Nassar, a Palestinian Christian farmer, who told the story of his 25 year struggle to actively farm his family's land near Bethlehem. His story of resistance is rooted in the principles of non-violence and creating healing connection with the land. But the obstacles he has faced and continues to face are immense and daunting. At the end of his presentation, one woman asked him how he kept going, and why he didn't just give up. He told her that he sees each of us as a piece of a mosaic. Each of us has our life and does what we can, wherever we find ourselves planted. And he trusts that somehow, together, we create a larger picture and a new reality.

That image of the mosaic, as well as the Laguna Spiderwoman, have stayed with me. For I believe the work of anti-racism and justice are grounded in the power of co-

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18! Robinson-Harris, Tracy (2003). A response to Toward a New Paradigm for Uncovering Neo-racism by William R. Jones. In Bowens-Wheatley and Jones (Ed.), *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue* (p. 158).

creation and partnership. May we take up our soul work together, with faith and joy and hope.