

Reparations

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Today, as we observe Martin Luther King Sunday, I am here to issue to you an invitation. As individuals and collectively. This invitation is for you to begin to consider, in a thoughtful and careful way, the idea of making reparations to the African-American people of the United States for the crimes of slavery and of slavery's aftermath – the era of Jim Crow and now of the New Jim Crow – Mass Incarceration. I call you particularly to thoughtfulness and carefulness, because there has been a great deal written on this subject that is non-rational and uninformed. It is a difficult part of a very large and difficult subject – the subject of the history and present status of race relations in the U.S.

It is important to say that this is not a subject where blame, shame or guilt have a place. I urge you to let go of any sense of guilt, or being blamed or being shamed you might have. As well as any sense of taking this personally.

The issues I'm speaking of today are largely cultural, institutional and systemic and that is where the focus needs to be. At the same time, cultures, institutions and systems change only to the extent that the individuals who are part of them ***make*** them change. My hope is that after today, you might wish to consider, as individuals and as a community, taking some action towards systemic change regarding racism.

If addressing issues of racism were easy, we would have addressed them as a nation long ago. Most people in this country are people of good will towards others. But, addressing this issue is NOT easy, so it is important to try harder, to listen carefully and with open-mindedness, on issues of race.

Regarding reparations, first let's hear of the case for reparations for slavery – why would we even consider such an idea, what is its basis and rationale? Secondly, we'll address what is meant by the concept of reparations – what kinds of compensation or rectification are being proposed and for whom? Finally, I want to suggest to you that making reparations to African-Americans is an ***imperative*** for our country, and one that we are called to as Unitarian Universalists.

Before I begin with that, I will tell you why ***I*** care. You can see, that as singer Weird Al Yankovic says of himself in his wonderful song "White and Nerdy": ***I am whiter than sour cream***. Mostly of English and Scottish ancestry. With some Netherlands folks, too. I grew up in Richmond, Virginia, which has been for decades a majority African-American city. It was also the capital of the Confederacy. In my public high school, the final round of mandated Federal busing took place my sophomore year. The result was that most white students and teachers fled the system. Often to brand new white flight private schools started by . . . churches. By the time I graduated, my high school was over 90% African-American.

This was the early 1970s. It was the era of Black Power and Women's Liberation and protest against the war in Vietnam. So there was plenty of blaming and shaming flying around. Some of it aimed at me as a white person in my high school. As a teenager, I resented this. Why should African-American students and teachers blame me and make assumptions about me ***based simply on the color of my skin***? Why would they hold me responsible for stuff – like slavery – I had nothing to do with, ***just because of the color of my skin***? In defense of my having these thoughts – what can I say? I was 15 and just so ignorant. The ***irony*** of my thoughts didn't occur to me.

Part of white supremacy is that as a white person, I always get to assume that I will be known and understood and addressed individually – not as part of some larger group.

But these experiences of blame and yes, demands for accountability, left a deep impression on me, partly because of what I believed was their unfairness. They also inspired me as I grew older to seek understanding. To understand why anyone would want to blame me over these issues of race. To understand the history and experiences of African-American people in the U.S., as best I could. Beginning in my late teens, I started my own education on this.

The more I learned and studied about the history of the African-American people in the U.S. and the history of slavery and Jim Crow and Mass Incarceration. The more I have witnessed overt and covert acts of racism. The more I have seen the effects of systemic racism in all our national systems: health care; policing, courts and prisons; education; land and property ownership; employment and every other system I can think of. The more I have realized the extent to which I have benefited personally from my privilege as a white person, benefited from racism against African-Americans. Benefited from white supremacy.

And as I have witnessed the effects of white supremacy everywhere, including the UUA and in this congregation. The more I am convinced that the U.S. can never be the country that it wants to be, what it claims to be – BUT IS NOT – without addressing this issue directly and totally. And I believe that making reparations to African-American people for the crime of slavery is necessary, absolutely necessary, for our well-being as a nation.

At the same time, I don't feel the least sense of guilt and shame for racism – I think those emotions are a waste of time and energy in any situation. What I do feel is a sense of responsibility for learning and for changing myself, and for changing these systems of white supremacy. Not just because I am white. But because the situation of race relations in this country is offensive to my sense of decency, of morality, of justice as a citizen, as a Unitarian Universalist and as a minister.

So, when the talk is of “reparations for slavery” – what is meant? Let's look at the concept of “slavery” first. When those supporting the idea of reparations use the word “slavery,” it is shorthand for something larger than slavery alone. “Slavery” in this case does not refer only to the time of slavery in the United States itself, which lasted 246 years, from 1619 until 1865, but also to the 100+ years of apartheid or segregation, known as the Jim Crow Era, that followed the end of legal slavery.

And it includes our current time of the mass incarceration of black men and women, largely for profit, that has taken place as a consequence of the so-called War On Drugs. It is a reference to the small and large aggressions and discrimination that are visited upon African-American people in this country every single day.

And, most importantly, the reference is not only to the actual conditions of slavery and segregation, but to their consequences, as well.

The case for reparations, simply put, is that for over 400 years of slavery and its aftermath, continuing to the present day, African-American people have been – and are – subject to ongoing systemic violence, oppression and exploitation perpetrated by the dominant white society. The dominant white society, in turn, has benefited, without giving adequate compensation, from the contributions of African-American labor and creativity.

This systemic violence, oppression and exploitation of the African-American people has had and continues to have a direct and devastating effect on their lives. This is not only because of the direct pain and losses inflicted. But also because of the long-term consequences of being denied fair access and opportunities in the areas of education, law, housing, criminal justice, politics, employment and health care.

The result has been huge inequalities for African-Americans. Inequalities regarding educational attainment, wealth and inheritance, health status, imprisonment and employment that persist today. Adding insult to injury, African-American people have been told consistently that it is their own inferiority – of intelligence, of genetics, of initiative and of morality – that has caused their present day unequal status.

Before continuing to discuss these consequences, I want to remind you briefly of some of the direct pain and losses inflicted by slavery and its aftermath. African people were taken from their homes and brought to this country in conditions so horrible that one-half to two-thirds of the people died on the journey. Here the African people were sold as property into servitude. Not allowed to speak their languages, practice their religions or engage in their other cultural traditions. They often were not allowed to marry or form and maintain families. Their children were taken from them to be put into slavery elsewhere.

When the international slave trade was made illegal in 1807, African-American people were bred like livestock in the U.S. to ensure slavery's continuation. They were – and are – beaten, tortured and killed, without consequence.

After slavery ended in the U.S. in 1865, African-Americans were denied civil rights and assimilation into the broader society. Racial segregation was created and enforced in all areas of public life. In voting, housing, education, health care, transportation and all public spheres, institutions and agencies.

In the 20th century, at least 5,000 African-American men, women and children were lynched in ways so savage and barbaric as to make the acts of ISIS look tame, including right here in Omaha. In hundreds of cases of lynching, souvenir photographic postcards of the lynchings were created that white people sent through the U.S. Mail to their friends and relatives, in celebration. Many thousands more black people were killed and imprisoned unjustly with the complicity of the corrupt legal system – what may be called “legal lynchings.”

Between 1898 and 1930, over 50 African-American communities were attacked and partially or completely destroyed. Thousands of homes and businesses were razed to the ground and thousands of African-Americans were killed. I'm speaking of Wilmington NC in 1898, Greenwood OK in 1921 and Rosewood FL in 1925, among others. In the summer of 1919 alone, known as the Red Summer – red for blood and red for fire – over three dozen African-American communities were destroyed. These events were and still are termed “race riots.” A terrible and unjust term implying that the African-American people went on some kind of rampage when in truth it was they and their communities who were attacked.

And then, the most recent wound. Right under our Civil Rights noses, via the War on Drugs, the current era of Mass Incarceration began. There are more black men in prison right now than there were black men enslaved in 1860. Like the sharecroppers and prison workers of the Jim Crow era, modern prisoners are also exploited for very lucrative work and compensated at pennies per hour, if at all. Once they get out of prison, if they do, they are prevented from participation in normal civic life through the removal of their voting privileges, their rights to hold many jobs, to live in certain places, plus all the other oppressions visited on any African-American every day.

And of course, there are the attacks and killings and unjust arrests perpetrated by the police. These have been going on since the beginning of police departments. It is mostly because of cell phones and video cameras that we white people are more aware now of their hideously unjust nature. Although it seems clear that the militarization of police and a complete change of police department tactics regarding crime are playing roles as well.

The consequences of slavery and its aftermath for African-Americans include unemployment and underemployment, less education, less representation in political systems and structures, shorter life spans, more ill health, greater poverty and disproportionate incarceration, among many others. These negative consequences of slavery and Jim Crow and Mass Incarceration are amply documented and indisputable. They are not the result of any inherent flaw or lack in African-American people. Though that has been said, over and over. These conditions are the direct result of the treatment of African-Americans by their own country, its government and citizens.

Now, some people believe, and wrongly so, that African-American people today have equal opportunity and a level playing field in all areas of American life. If that were the case, then it might seem fair that future benefits to African-Americans should come only from their own efforts. However, current conditions of life for African-American people remain hideously unequal. There is no way, even if everything changed for the better tomorrow, that fairness would be possible going forward because of the present unequal status. If you start from behind, even if the rules change for the better, you will never catch up.

It is also important to note that the crimes against African-Americans, while always committed by individuals, were supported completely by an array of government, legal and other systems at the local, state and national level. The individuals responsible often were acting in systemic roles and at the system's demand. People such as elected officials, teachers and law enforcement officers. Our current government and systems of society are the direct continuation of the government and systems operating when the crimes of slavery and Jim Crow and Mass Incarceration were committed. We cannot disassociate ourselves from them.

Once we acknowledge this, we are bound by our commitment to justice and fairness to repair the injustice. As Unitarian Universalists, I think we are particularly called to right the wrongs against African-Americans by our Principles. That we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, that we affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations and that we affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.

And most of all, because as Unitarian Universalists, we rest our faith in the lap of love. We are committed to ***Side With Love***, as our campaign says, in all situations. The love side is always obvious! It is the side of nonviolence and compassion and justice in ***every*** circumstance.

Of course, we as a nation cannot go back and undo or change the course of the past. What is history is history. But we have all the control over the present and ongoing injustice and in shaping the future. And this leads to the second issue of reparations, which is, if we accept that efforts must be made to repair and restore the wrongs of the past and present committed against African-Americans. If we want to ensure that these wrongs will cause less harm in the future, what is it that we need to do? What ***can*** we do? What would reparations look like in this context?

There have been many different kinds of reparations discussed – mostly about monetary compensation to African-American individuals. It is this notion of monetary compensation to individuals that has aroused most of the negative reaction from the non-African-American members of US society, whites and others. This concept of reparations has also gotten most of the publicity and media. Most people assume that this is the only form reparations can take.

However, most of those supporting reparations argue that this is not a viable or useful approach. As our former UUA President, Bill Sinkford said to a small group of us when he visited my church in Richmond in February of 2002: *The minute the discussion focuses on compensation to individuals, we have lost the moral high ground.* ***[REPEAT]***

Giving money to individuals doesn't work for several reasons. How do you identify all individuals affected by slavery and its consequences? You would have to document slave ancestry. Because enslaved people were property, complete vital records were not kept – yet another degrading aspect of slavery. Requiring such documentation for reparations would only compound the wrong done by the original denial of full human status.

A larger problem is in naming the issue as a purely economic one at all. As if any sum of money given to individuals could compensate truly for wrongs given and received collectively. There is also the risk that once the checks are written, society would wash its hands of the problem. Would say: ***We're done with that – we paid – and we don't need to do anything more.***

What approaches could achieve better results? A good model is that of restorative justice. Restorative justice is a systematic response to wrongdoing that emphasizes healing the wounds of those wronged, the wounds of the offenders and the wounds of the communities that have been caused or revealed by the criminal behavior.

Practices and program reflecting restorative purposes respond to injustice by identifying and taking steps to repair harm, involving all stakeholders. Restorative justice transforms the traditional relationship between individuals, communities and their governments in responding to injustice. A central restorative idea regarding reparations is that we have ALL suffered from racism and the crimes of slavery and its aftermath – that this is not a problem for African-Americans alone, but for all of us, as citizens of the US.

Of course, white people have not suffered from slavery and its consequences in the same ways that African-American people have. In ***no*** way – to ***no*** extent. But we white people have suffered nonetheless. I attribute to Paul Kivel, the author of *Uprooting Racism*, this unpacking of the suffering that slavery and Jim Crow and

Mass Incarceration have brought to white people. As Kivel notes, white people have been given a distorted and inaccurate picture of history and politics because the truth about slavery and its aftermath have been distorted, denied and downplayed. The contributions of African-Americans have been denied and suppressed and the role of whites has been portrayed in a sanitized and noncritical manner.

For those of us who are white, we have lost the genuine presence of African-Americans in our communities, schools and relationships, for the most part. We have been given a false sense of superiority and our experiences are distorted, limited, and less rich the more they are exclusively or mostly white. We may have lost family members, friends and other relationships because of disagreements, fights and tensions over race. At the same time, we have lost the opportunity for deep and rich relationships with African-American people because the consequences of slavery and its aftermath make those relationships difficult to sustain.

Our feelings of guilt, shame, embarrassment and inadequacy about slavery and Jim Crow and Mass Incarceration lower our sense of self-worth. Because the consequences of slavery make a mockery of our ideals of democracy, justice and equality, it leads us to be cynical and pessimistic about human integrity and our future, producing apathy, blame and despair. These wounds are real. We white people suffer from them every day. They corrode our souls and spirits. We white people will continue to suffer from them until we have made reparation and restored justice.

What might restorative justice efforts look like in respect to slavery and its consequences? A restorative justice approach to reparations would begin with **acknowledging the fact of slavery and all its consequences to the present day.** This is about affirming the reality of the injustice, a reality that has been – and still is! – denied for so long. A useful second step would be **an apology from our national government for slavery and its consequences.** This is about taking collective responsibility for injustice. Some faith traditions have offered such an apology. Some educational and government institutions have made an effort to learn to what degree the labor and creativity of enslaved or oppressed African-Americans made their institutions possible. We could do much, much more.

Another step would be public education to ensure that all people understand the character of African-Americans as enslaved people and since slavery. Much of the conventional wisdom about the nature, history and character of African-Americans as enslaved people and afterwards is false and distorted because it was developed to **justify** slavery and segregation. We now have our National Museum of African American History and Culture – an idea demanded by those who want reparations – it has happened!

There should also be steps to ensure that the continuing and ongoing effects of slavery and its consequences are reduced as rapidly as possible. These could be major initiatives benefiting African-Americans generally in education, employment, housing and other areas of public life, of which efforts like Affirmative Action are only the tip of the iceberg. Some have proposed a trust fund emphasizing capital for investment in African-American education, health and economic development. These financial pieces would include payments to groups and organizations, as well as payments to individuals in the form of scholarships and business grants.

Another key ingredient of a restorative justice approach is forgiveness. Forgiveness on the part of African-Americans. Reparations cannot be about punishment or revenge on the part of African-Americans. **Though those are entirely understandable and justifiable desires.** And white people must forgive themselves for their crimes and sins regarding African-American people. True racial reconciliation must be part of the justice picture.

We are an intelligent and resourceful nation. We can figure this out. We helped rebuild entire nations after World War II, we have almost unlimited resources at all levels – there is nothing we cannot do if we set our minds and hearts to it. The creative opportunities here are enormous. And, we don't have to invent all of this from scratch. A number of countries, including South Africa, Australia and Canada have gone through significant reconciliation processes with oppressed and /or indigenous citizens.

And it will cost money – lots of it – being given to African-American institutions, organizations and communities – and yes, individuals. The cost likely will and should be far more than giving one-time single monetary payments to individuals.

It's important to look at the most common arguments against reparations. The most common rejection of the idea of reparations is based on an argument about the issue being over long ago; therefore there is no responsibility today for reparations. Some white and other people say that they should not be held personally responsible for slavery because they weren't alive then and therefore had nothing to do with it.

Variations on this theme are for some non-African-American individuals to say that their families came to this country after the time of slavery or that they themselves are members of groups that have been oppressed. In both cases, these situations are seen as excluding them from the need to make reparations. A related idea is to suggest that the government of the past was operating within the legal and cultural framework of the time; therefore our government today cannot take any responsibility for those then-legal actions.

Regarding our government. It is a bedrock principle of our legal system that our government has been continuous since its inception. Our government today is the same government we began with in 1776; therefore we cannot say that our government today cannot be held responsible for government actions in the past.

The claims of lack of individual responsibility due to a personal or family history of non-involvement in the oppression of African-Americans stem from a view of reparations as simply a monetary or other type of payoff to individuals, a one-way "gotcha" for the guilty. Of course it is true that no one alive today participated in creating the original conditions of slavery. And that is a mercy and blessing for us, a mercy and a blessing, because it frees us from any personal sense we might have of guilt and blame, which are not useful.

Rather, we white people should frame the issue as one of human rights and restorative justice. We acknowledge the damage done by racism to all people, including our white selves. Then, we can open up the possibility of gratitude for reparations as an opportunity to make things right. An opportunity to live up to our sense of who we are as a nation. Making all kinds of reparations would be a BLESSING in our white lives.

Others have said about reparations – why only African-Americans? Others can also rightfully claim membership in groups that have been systemically oppressed by our government and other institutions. Why not Native Americans, why not the descendents of Chinese and Irish immigrants, why not women?

Framing the reparations issue as one of human rights and restorative justice opens up the possibility of connecting the oppression of slavery and its aftermath with other forms of oppression. Of understanding the intersectionality of oppression. It opens up the opportunity to ensure the humanity and dignity of all people in

the U.S. If reparations take other forms than payment to individuals, then opportunities multiply to improve the conditions of dignity for all. To restore all those who have been oppressed. But whatever is done, it will cost money – lots of it. And it should.

When Tom told you the story of Greenwood earlier, he said that it had a UU connection. The editor of the *Tulsa Tribune*, the person who wrote the false story and the editorial proposing lynching, was Richard Lloyd-Jones. He was a Unitarian and the founder of Tulsa's All Souls Unitarian Church. His home in Tulsa was designed by his cousin, Frank Lloyd Wright. Richard's father, Jenkin Lloyd Jones, was one of the greatest Unitarian ministers of the late 19th century – a radical socialist, social justice advocate and missionary church builder on the western frontier. Richard's descendants attend the All Souls congregation today. In part because of this connection, in 2001 the Unitarian Universalist Association agreed to participate in a Tulsa fund to make annual payments to the 118 living survivors of the destruction of Greenwood. **This has been a restorative action – and there are many more to be taken.**

A few years ago, I read an excellent book on reconciliation and forgiveness, titled *A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Story of Forgiveness* by Pumla Gobodo Madikizela. Dr. Madikizela is a South African clinical psychologist who served on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. Over the course of some months, she also interviewed Eugene de Kock, the commanding officer of South Africa's state-sanctioned death squads.

In the course of her interviews with him, she came to believe that he had developed genuine remorse for his crimes against individuals and the nation and she also developed an empathic and compassionate response to him. Speaking from the viewpoint of one who has suffered oppression directly, and from her variety of experiences with de Kock and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Dr. Madikizela raises critical questions for countries such as the US, who have systematically oppressed entire segments of their population. She writes:

If showing compassion to our enemies is something that our bodies recoil from, what should our attitude be to their cries for mercy, the cries that tell us their hearts are breaking, and that they are willing to renounce the past and their role in it? How do we transcend hate when the goal is to transform human relationships in a society with a past marked by violent conflict between groups? This question may be irrelevant for people who do not have to live as a society with their former enemies. But for those whose lives are intertwined with those who have grossly violated human rights, who sometimes even have to live as neighbors with them, ignoring these questions is not an option.

It is no different here in the United States.

This question of transcending hate cannot be ignored as long as the injustice continues. I suggest to you that making reparations to African-American people for slavery and its consequences is one way to begin to transcend that hatred, that sorrow and that pain.

I urge you to begin a careful and thoughtful examination of the case for reparations, I am convinced that reparations are an essential part of healing the wounds of left by slavery and its consequences on our nation and in each one of us. I am certain that as Unitarian Universalists, that is to say, as justice-loving people, we are called to engage in this work. This work is not work of the head, but mostly of the heart – the heart that cries for mercy, the heart that breaks for injustices given, the heart that is willing to know the pain of the past and the present, and seek healing for it. So may it be. Amen. Blessed be.