

## **Reparations and Soul Repair**

*A Sermon by the Rev. Molly Housh Gordon*

*Delivered to the UU Church of Columbia, MO*

*Sunday, February 24, 2019*

February is the month at UUCC when every year we talk about money. And this year February the month we're talking about power. And both of these topics can be incredibly uncomfortable to talk about.

I believe one of the key reasons these conversations are so uncomfortable is that we know we won't have to dig very deep into money or power before we stumble upon deep structural inequity and the ways that we ourselves either benefit or suffer, or both, in relation to those inequities.

We live in a country founded on land theft and stolen labor, and we don't have to talk about money or power very long before we tread dangerously close to the soul wounds that those realities still leave aching very close to our skin, no matter our ethnicity, culture, or proximity to wealth.

Recently, I was reading a bit about moral injury, which is a term coined by folks who work with veterans, to help explain the soul wounds sometimes caused by participation in war. One study of this phenomenon defines moral injury as: "disruption in an individual's confidence and expectations about his or her own moral behavior or others' capacity to behave in a just and ethical manner...."

As I was reading about this, I thought about the experience that many white folks have when waking up to the reality of racial inequity and harm embedded in the many systems and structures which we did not create, but from which we benefit.

I thought about how when I woke up to some of these truths I wanted to go right back to sleep because everything I knew about myself as a moral actor and the world as a just place was stripped away. Staring down this reality was like standing at the edge of an abyss. What have I done, without ever knowing? What have I been a part of, without ever giving my consent?

Reflecting on my own experience, I began to wonder if we could think of white supremacy culture in folks socialized as white as an inter-generational moral injury, passed down from our collective ancestors across centuries, from that first land grab at Plymouth, that first plantation in Virginia, and beyond.

It's a wound we try not to acknowledge, because it is deeply threatening to have our understanding of our own moral behavior and the justice of the world thrown into question. But perhaps identifying the injury can bring us hope for healing in a way that ignoring it never will.

We are separated from one another based on race because of embodied systemic circumstances that were created by our forebears.

We are separated from one another in ways that land, as Ta-Nehisi Coates points out, squarely on the body. Slavery, lynching, segregation, redlining, mass-incarceration, all the ways that black and brown bodies have been systematically shut away from resources, power, and thriving. These things still live between us, in memory, in our economy, in our very bodies.

Simply getting in the same room with each other doesn't mitigate these material circumstances. If it did we'd have fixed it by now.

Instead, we know from our experience of cringing discomfort and intuited separation that we all carry the body- and soul-wound of white supremacy with us into the room. We won't get free together, or be free with one another, until we heal the wound.

And we cannot heal the wound until we make *material* repairs - reorganizing systems of wealth and power alike as a first step toward healing our bodies and lives.

Systemic racism and white supremacy are not our fault. They are the wound we have inherited across generations. But they are our responsibility, in the very literal and hopeful sense that we are the ones who can now respond.

Healing from moral injury is possible. It requires moral reorientation. It requires halting harm and making amends.

I believe that repair to our souls requires repair to the *material reality* that systemic racism has created. I believe our moral injury, our soul wounds, will only have a chance of healing when we have found a way to engage in systems change *and* reparations.

My colleague the Rev. Ashley Horan recently recalled in a sermon that reparations are: “the redistribution of land and wealth as a way of beginning to pay damages to people of color and Indigenous communities who have been systemically harmed by white supremacy.”

Our country has only taken reparations seriously on two occasions: Immediately and very briefly after the civil war, leaders promised freed slaves 40 acres and a mule, only to revoke the promise abruptly after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. And in 1988, the Civil Liberties act authorized the government to pay \$20,000 each to surviving Japanese-American who had been interned during World War II.

For the most part, however, conversations about Reparations are quickly silenced, particularly reparations compensating Black communities for the legacy of slavery and the following centuries of policy systematically denying Black communities from broadly acquiring wealth or power.

Rev. Horan writes: “For the past 29 years, for instance, Rep. John Conyers has introduced to congress Bill HR 40 — the Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act. It has never once made it past committee.”

Even in progressive circles, which might be more open to the idea of reparations, we often jump immediately to the bewildering question of how such large scale resource redistribution could ever work logistically. Confronting by this legitimately brain-twisting conundrum, we write off the idea as impractical and leave the current systems, tragically but inevitably, in place.

When we let ourselves get stuck this way, we essentially push aside our soul wounds and resign ourselves to them. But it doesn't have to be that way.

We cannot accomplish a wholesale shifting of resources all by ourselves, but we can work to redistribute the small resources to which *we* have access, knowing that our own spirits may begin healing by the act, and that we may plant seeds for greater transformation.

Indeed, Rev. Horan is working with a network of folks in Minnesota to do just that - mapping the resources of congregations who have benefitted from structural privilege and then seeking to match those resources with the needs of organizers of color in their community. Small scale reparations.

So, today I want to talk to you about a big resource that we have.

Specifically, I want to talk to you about this building.

Knowing that we need an elevator to match our mission of radical welcome, and some major deferred maintenance projects, and probably some additional meeting and office space, our board of trustees is entering into an agreement with an architect to help us create a master plan for this space.

They are doing this because they see the potential of this space to be a resource we can share, as well as our spiritual home, and they want to develop that reality.

Now, our congregation is particularly aware of the soul wound of white supremacy culture and racial segregation in our town, and some among us have suggested that we would be better off leaving this building behind and moving downtown in order to better serve marginalized populations. I assume in these conversations that “downtown” is shorthand for some area of Columbia that is more racially and socioeconomically diverse than our current neighborhood.

I hear in this desire a deep and beautiful longing to overcome the wounds that separate and segregate us from one another and to be together at last, worshiping as a sacred diverse community.

Unfortunately, it seems clear from the research of the building needs task force's research that the cost of such an act would undermine any hope we might have of sharing or re-distributing our own resources toward the material healing of the soul wounds of systemic racism.

Essentially, our building needs team found that because of the un-market-ability of our location, the financial assets we hold in this building are locked up in this building. For a variety of reasons, we would expect to sell this building at a loss, before then needing to raise \$2-4 million to build or convert a facility in a more desirable place, or spending away operating budget and other assets on rent in perpetuity. At that point, the assets we have in our current facility would not be something we could be reallocate or redistribute. We'd just be losing them.

And here's the thing. Wherever we go, there we are, with all the culture that has formed us and every soul wound that separates us. We could move smack into the middle of the most racially and socioeconomically diverse neighborhood in Columbia, and with out deep cultural and material transformation work, we would still be exactly who we are in a different locale.

The work that I think we long for isn't actually work that's accomplished by a simple move. It's accomplished by the long slow work of healing our souls, and the urgent work of remaking the material systems that hold us apart from each other.

**At this point it seems clear to me that moving would center our desire for access to diverse populations... to the detriment of our ability to resource diverse populations in the work that *they* desire.**

What if instead we planted ourselves where we are and set about healing the soul wound we share?

I've heard the argument about how it's difficult to get over here on a bus. And now with further cuts to public transit it's more like impossible. And that's true. How unjust is it that folks in our town can't get where they need to go, even to church! Let's fight like hell for a transit system that works for everyone, knowing that we are working for our *own* wellbeing then, as well as the well-being of others.

I've also heard the argument that some people of color might not be comfortable in our neighborhood because of unexamined bias in our mostly white, mostly well-off neighbors. Let's be clear first that there is plenty of that inside our own doors, and we must start there if we ever want to grow rich in diverse identity.

And then let's say, yes, that's true. How unjust that people should feel worried about walking through a neighborhood because of how often in this country wealthy white people call the police on black bodies minding their own business. And how deeply terrible that black bodies are often in mortal danger when encountering the police. Let's canvass our neighbors to talk with

them about internalized bias and alternatives to policing, and let's work like hell to insist upon community policing in Columbia and investing in alternative models of community care.

Maybe the way to really serve populations harmed by systemic oppression and structurally shut out of resources, is not to move our church building closer to where we think they live and encourage them to join us, but rather to utilize our influence to shift the power balance and mobilize our assets to redistribute resources in their direction.

What if we planted ourselves where we are and actually set about healing the soul wound we share?

We have a building here with a lot of financial, cultural, generational, and spiritual wealth infusing it. Imagine what it would be like to leverage this beautifully tended asset of ours for black liberation, whether or not a critical mass of black folks ever choose to worship with us.

What if we added more comfortable, beautiful, well-appointed meeting space that would always be available, free of charge and at short notice, to organizers, activists, and individuals of color doing liberation work?

What if we increased our office space, and earmarked one office as a perpetual incubator for black social change agents trying to get new work off the ground?

What if those change agents knew that when they need white bodies and resources to show up, the white folks among our congregation would be there en masse, because we are in relationship to the critical work that they are doing?

My dream for our upcoming building improvements is that we make this building fully accessible, sustainable, and hospitable so that we can leverage it as a hub for progressive and radical organizing in our community.

And I want to tell you some things about our building that you might not know. We've already started this work. It turns out our location at the meeting place of I-70 and Highway 63 is actually rather ideal for statewide justice organizations looking to gather their folks for strategizing, support, and advocacy work.

Last year we hosted the first ever Missouri Summit for Black and Rural Organizing, uniting farmers and leaders of color from across the state to build political power to transform the narrative about race in Missouri and so doing to change people's lives.

For years now, we have been the site of staff meetings, statewide convenings, board retreats and more for Missouri Faith Voices, one of our country's few Faith Based Organizing Collectives headed by a black woman and staffed by a majority of black organizers.

And we also regularly host a whole slew of events, meetings, and retreats for Jobs with Justice, one of the organizations doing the best multi-racial, multi-class work for the rights of workers in our state.

We do all of this free of charge, as a clear exercise of our mission.

From these stories, I find evidence that we have a valuable capacity to be a resource just as we are, and to grow from right here in how we imagine the resource redistribution that will lead to soul repair.

My dream for our upcoming building improvements is that we raise the money to make our facility accessible, hospitable, and functional as a thriving spiritual home *and* as a hub for progressive and radical organizing that prioritizes black liberation, knowing that investing in black liberation is how we will all get free.

My further dream while we're at it is to raise enough money to simultaneously create a Soul Repair fund that gets serious about reparations in Columbia, Missouri, by investing financial resources in black leadership.

What this looks like, I feel uniquely unqualified to imagine. Those working to get free know what they need, and when I imagine this dream fund, it is administered by a board of women of color to whom we entrust it fully.

Maybe we fund business start-ups seeking to create a new black business district where the Sharp End was systematically destroyed. Maybe we invest in theological education for black pastors serving bi-vocationally in Columbia. Maybe we go all in on the work of Missouri Faith Voices. Probably we fund something beyond the capacity of my wounded soul to imagine.

The thing I can imagine, is the deep joy of finding actionable steps toward righting a wrong that hurts my humanity.

The thing I can imagine is the flesh of my spirit beginning to knit back together, knowing that I am doing what I can to participate in possibility and not in harm.

The thing I can imagine is the hopeful, embodied seeds of soul repair.

Let us join together to make it so.