

Religious Perspectives on the Narratives of America

*The Search for Just, Honest, Inclusive
and Forward-looking Tellings*



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Foreword

*The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.
The Lord has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion
— to bestow on them **a crown of beauty instead of ashes.**
- Isaiah 61:1-3 (Common English Bible, emphasis added)*

The year 2020 was emotionally and spiritually draining, full of uncertainty, fear, loss and grief. An unwelcome and ruthless visitor, COVID-19, darkened the threshold of this nation. At the time, I was a denominational leader in the United Church of Christ responsible for UCC churches in the Catoctin and Shenandoah Associations of the Central Atlantic Conference.¹ As a religious leader, systematic theologian focused on Black theology and womanist theology, mother, daughter, sister, colleague and friend, I carried so much as this nation's legacy of systemic racial injustice played out in distressing ways as Black and brown communities suffered disproportionately under the catastrophic hand of this deadly virus and pandemic.²

In the midst of this viral pandemic, the racial injustice pandemic escalated to a new peak. The murder of George Floyd through the cold, callous and intentional actions of Minneapolis police officers in 2020, the trial of the officer directly responsible for Floyd's death and the live streaming of the jury verdict in 2021 brought on more layers of reckoning and reflection. Who is America truly? Who does America want to be?

With these emotional wounds exposed and searching for healing, another wound was inflicted. This one was even more personal. Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson became the first Black woman in US history to be nominated to serve on the Supreme Court. Her nomination was sent to the Senate on February 28, 2022, and her confirmation hearings were held by the Senate Judiciary Committee from March 21 to 24.

The narrative during these hearings raised both the brightness and hope within the country and also the ugliest and vilest narratives still rooted in this land. Watching the public malignment of this more than qualified female judge was disheartening and more. This historic nomination warranted a thorough and objective confirmation hearing. What the candidate and the moment did not warrant was an interrogation that was divisive. During a time when America could have demonstrated it was endeavoring to live a vision that fully embraces forward-looking and liberative narratives, it fumbled. The illustrative narrative was white, male senators on the Judiciary Committee degrading and dismissing a Black woman who dared to accept the nomination to serve on the high court. Justice Brown Jackson was ultimately confirmed. Like so many other episodes, the moment will become part of the American story containing the ashes of hate along with the crown of beauty that persevered.

1 The Central Atlantic Conference includes 167 United Church of Christ congregations in the Mid-Atlantic region covering New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, the District of Columbia and parts of Virginia and West Virginia.

2 Elisabeth Gawthrop, "The Color of Coronavirus: COVID-19 Deaths by Race and Ethnicity in the U.S.," APM Research Lab, October 19, 2023, <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race>.

After the confirmation hearing and months of contemplation, I joined the Aspen Institute’s Religion and Society Program. It was soul-stirring and heartwarming to join an institution that was committed to the liberative and prophetic mission of creating “a free, just and equitable society.” Amid the political, ideological and religious cacophony in this land, I came to the Religion and Society Program to further religious pluralism and explore religion’s role in racial justice. I believed there existed a counter-narrative to religious enmity, division and separation, one that illustrates the unity that exists within religious pluralism. The vision on the horizon is one of unity, affirmation and richness in difference, working together to promote a free, just and equitable society.

Once I encountered the Narratives of America project in its budding beginning, I knew it was a great foundation upon which a seminal work could be developed. The vision of capturing a diversity of voices with the shared purpose of articulating an honest, inclusive and constructive narrative would lead us to that horizon. The U.S. Bahá’í Office of Public Affairs and the Religion and Society Program believe that a meaningful, inclusive and forward-looking story of America cannot exist as a monolith. Consequently, the contributors within this publication embody a rich and deep tapestry of diversity. We are invited into narratives shaped by a variety of religious traditions: Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Universalist Unitarian, Sikhi, the Bahá’í faith and more. We are welcomed into narratives that provide a lens into the contributors’ cultural and ethnic communities: African American, Native American, Muslim, Asian American Pacific Islander and others. We are engaged by thoughtful voices that seek to move the reader toward a new horizon of justice and mutual affirmation of human dignity of all humanity, whether similar or dissimilar to our own being.

The transformative strength of this work is in the belief that narratives provide us with interpretive frames for understanding the world. Reading these essays gives me great hope because they provide interpretive frames through which a vision of an inclusive America materializes and is cast. America’s destiny is inextricably bound up with a global community of nations. As we march toward celebrating our nation’s 250th anniversary, may we carry these narratives and many more into America’s future as an inclusive and affirming nation of peoples. May we be an America upon which *a crown of beauty emerges from the ashes*.

The Reverend Audrey C. Price, Ph.D.

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Introduction

Faced with so many urgent practical and political problems, one can well ask whether we can afford to invest in the somewhat abstract exercise of thinking about and articulating narratives. But what if many of the problems we face are caused, in part, by the circulation of narratives that constrain our ability to solve problems together? What if, for example, our sense of polarization is itself part of a narrative that obscures the extent to which a majority of thoughtful and caring Americans share common interests, concerns, goodwill and agency? Articulating narratives that are unifying, ennobling and empowering is essential if we are to advance together, in all our diversity, toward conditions in which every individual and social group can flourish.³

The questions above and other related ones have been the subject of conversations with the authors of this collection of essays, and with other groups through the Narratives of America Project created by the U.S. Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs (Office of Public Affairs). The project has advanced in part through a collaborative relationship with the Aspen Institute's Religion and Society Program's Racial Justice and Religion Collective⁴ (RJR Collective). The Office and the RJR Collective have been working with narrative building and transformation together and separately, and our collaboration has led to this collection.

The Office of Public Affairs started following an emerging national discourse about the narratives of America a couple of years ago. The worldwide Bahá'í community works to advance social transformation within a framework that sees grassroots capacity building, community building, institution building, social action, engagement at the level of thought and discourse, and related efforts as potentially coherent and mutually reinforcing. The Office's niche is participation in national discourse and contributing to the evolution of thought and language in society. Through the Narratives of America Project, it hosts an ongoing series of conversations with diverse participants, capturing insights as they arise into an evolving concept note that is used to frame subsequent conversations.

The Aspen Institute's Religion and Society Program, started in 2012, ignites change through convening, catalyzing and researching the challenges and opportunities at the convergence of religion, culture and justice. Since 2015, the Religion and Society Program has intentionally and more deeply focused on understanding and sharing how religion can be leveraged to address social inequities and strengthen social cohesion. In 2023, the Religion and Society Program launched its Racial Justice and Religion Initiative and subsequently formed and convened a group of religious leaders, scholars, activists and leaders from historically marginalized communities who work on religion's role in racial justice and help bring their insights and expertise into the public square.

The work of both the Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs and the Religion and Society Program recognizes the important contribution narrative building can make to help us address the challenges we face as a society and take the opportunities in front of us for building justice and shared prosperity. As noted in the concept note mentioned above:

Narratives provide us with interpretive frames for understanding the world. They give meaning to our lives. They help us perceive more clearly our purpose, our identities, and our aspirations. They offer or preclude hope and possibilities for the future... Ultimately, all narratives are socially constructed. They can be appreciative or critical, they can provide a sense of belonging or stoke fear of the other, or both. They can, deliberately or not,

³ These lines are taken from a concept note titled "Constructing an Inclusive and Forward-Looking Narrative of America." The U.S. Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs uses this document to frame conversations about narratives of America. It is available at <https://www.narrativesofamerica.us/conceptnote1>

⁴ For more about the Aspen Institute's Religion and Society Program, see its website at <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/religion-society-program/>. For more about the Racial Justice and Religion Collective, see their website at <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/religion-society-program/racial-justice-and-religion/>.

*entrench injustice and sanction self-interested ambition or inspire sacrifice in the struggle for justice. They can obscure or manipulate. Or they can strive to embody profound truths—including moral or spiritual truths—in ways that enable diverse peoples to thrive together.*⁵

The discourse on narratives of America connects to many areas of interest and concern to the nation: racial and economic justice, the well-being of communities and families, our democracy, the social cohesion that underpins a functioning society, and so much more. As the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence approaches, the attention paid to our national story will undoubtedly intensify. Our collective challenge as a nation will be to make this a constructive moment of shared reflection and imagining of a just future for all.

An overarching narrative is not something that any one group or organization can compose on behalf of others. It must emerge through a diversity of perspectives engaging on equal footing. Any shared narrative of our society comprises a multitude of particular narratives. How do we understand, write or tell our particular and shared stories in ways that help us build a country where all can thrive? How do we find the connective tissue that can bring our different stories together into a shared story?

With the authors, we set out to explore how religious perspectives, teachings and experiences can contribute to broader discourse in ways that enrich current narrative framings. While humanity's historical experiences with religion include both benefit and harm, at its best religion has inspired individuals to arise in service — even sacrifice — for the common good, has unified contending groups, built community and more. The authors and editors hoped to elevate insights from religion that could help us overcome division and build shared vision and purpose for our society. For example, the founding ideals of the country, while they may be laudable as stated, do not necessarily reflect the full diversity of ideals embraced by our populace, or exhaust the relevant values that we need to commit to in order to live well together. Those ideals may not draw on the full range of human potential for contributing to shared well-being, but religious teachings and practice can cultivate capacities of the human spirit in ways that can be meaningful not just to a given set of adherents but to society as a whole. What principles and values might we add to our founding ideals from a diversity of religious perspectives? We hope in these pages the reader can glimpse answers to this question.

The process behind this collection has included several gatherings co-convened by the Religion and Society program and the Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs. We posed the following main questions in a prompt to the writers:

What is the vision (or forward-looking narrative) of America you would like to invite us into?

What can be shared from a religious perspective (the teachings of our many faiths or from the experiences of faith communities) that contributes to a nation-wide conversation about the narratives of America and the future of our society?

Many of the authors are members of the RJR Collective, and several are drawn from the networks of both convening organizations. The authors were invited to be in conversation with us and each other as they developed their responses. We hoped this process would help all of us advance our thinking.

The essays reflect the religious worldviews, personal experiences and convictions of the authors, and the aims of some of the organizations they represent. We did not expect these views to all fully align, but there is resonance among the spiritual insights they bring from their teachings and the practice of their communities. The essays are grouped in this volume in relation to themes drawn from the concept note we used to frame conversations about narratives of America. They speak to:

the importance of the narratives of the different peoples that have inhabited and continue to inhabit this land;

5 “Constructing an Inclusive and Forward-Looking Narrative of America.”

the spiritual, moral and religious insights that can be shared from different perspectives to help create social cohesion and heal the wounds of the past;

the forward-looking visions we might begin to articulate from different perspectives.

As mentioned, the process leading to this volume, the collaboration between the Office of Public Affairs and the Religion and Society Program, the creation of spaces for conversation, the framing of the conversation, the inclusion of diverse perspectives, and the building of relationships, these are as important to us as creating of this publication. This effort was undertaken in a spirit of learning how to create the conditions for building shared vision, shared purpose, shared narrative, and shared identity across diversity. We hope that the learning will continue as the circle of conversation widens. We invite you into the conversation. You can connect with the Narratives of America Project through its website or by reaching out to narrativesofamerica@usbnc.org, and you can reach the Religion and Society program at religionandsociety@aspeninstitute.org.

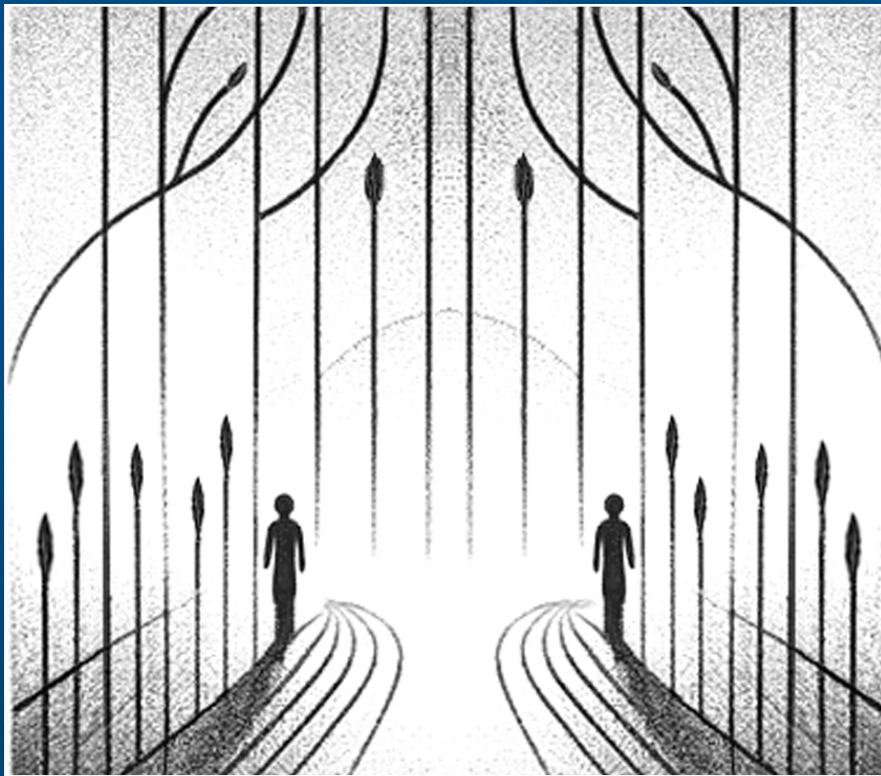
U.S. Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs

Aspen Institute Religion and Society Program

PART I

Stories of the Peoples and the Land

*How can the story of the land become our story,
encompassing all who have inhabited the land?*



The Language of an America We Hope For

Kaitlin Curtice

In 2026, we celebrate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, which brings both a celebration of the United States of America and the awareness and perhaps reopening of several deep wounds that have never truly been tended to before.

I am a citizen of the Potawatomi nation, the people of the place of fire. I descend from those who have celebrated their culture and those who have been silenced through genocide and oppression. I come from resilience and resistance, and continue to live that legacy today in an America that does not always acknowledge or respect who we are. Like Indigenous peoples all over the world, our very existence is political, and our voices matter as we work to create a better, more loving world.

In the Potawatomi language, we have a word for America as the institution that we know today, and that word is *chemokmankik*, which loosely translates to “land of the long butchering knives.” This puts a name and image to what happened to my people, the Anishinaabe Potawatomi people, in the past. This name refers to the settlers who showed up with their long knives and swords, and the beginnings of colonial violence on this land.

Language is incredibly powerful, and when we allow our Indigenous languages to rise to the surface of our experiences and lives we remember how much our languages and ancestors teach us about the history that lives through us and surrounds us every single day.

Chemokmankik is a testament to the America that we have known: an institution built upon the sacred lands around us, an institution built through violence, greed and power wrongfully claimed in the name of God. Look to the Doctrine of Discovery, a series of documents issued by the Roman Catholic Church that gave European Christian men dominance over peoples and lands. Ongoing white supremacy and colonization have deep roots, and we are still living fully in their legacies and realities today.

Language both shows us the truth of history and allows us to dream of the world we might one day create. Language brings the power of storytelling, the chance to find our way through our liminality to one another. Language is a tool that we share, a tool that reminds us of where we have been and where we are going. This is why so many Indigenous folks (and people from other cultures around the world) are working to reclaim our languages: so that our words are remembered, but also so that our cultures are remembered and celebrated for who we are today. Every time a Potawatomi person says “*Bodewadmi Ndaw!*” we are proclaiming we are Potawatomi, but in our own language, in a language that has nearly been completely stolen from us through Indigenous boarding schools and other forms of forced assimilation.

As we pay attention to the power of the many languages of many cultures that have created the America we know today, we must continue to reckon with the narratives told in and around us. We must tend to our deep wounds, the wounds named in *chemokmankik*, the wounds covered by bandages but never quite healed. It is our birthright as human beings to look at the institutions around us that have denied some their rights, and to tell the truth and tend to those wounds.

Bandages are helpful for deep wounds, but we need to know where the wounds came from in order to know how to treat them. I come from a family that was silenced about being Potawatomi, raised within a framework of assimilation and erasure as I grew up asking what it means to be a young Indigenous woman. Reclaiming my own story has meant learning the stories of my own people, telling the truth and making sure I find my way to others who are reclaiming their stories.

America is a nation of deep wounds, and many of them have been dealt with in superficial ways instead of examining how the wounds got there through colonialism, white supremacy, racism, greed and hate. Many of us come to these wounds from our perspectives and experiences, and that is shown in the power and nuance of storytelling. Religious perspectives should reinforce care for the vulnerable and the wisdom of the oppressed, which means decolonization should often be a goal of worldwide religions and spiritual leaders, fueled by the power of storytelling and story-sharing.

Across the world and throughout history, Indigenous peoples have used the power of story to care for one another, to hold onto their cultures, and to prepare for future generations. The Seven Generations teaching of our Anishinaabe culture asks us what those seven generations after us will have to work with, what we will leave them.⁶ It takes into account all of history up until now and a future that we cannot expect but are always a part of.

As Western thinkers, we are brought up in individualism and linear ways of thinking, within a colonized mindset that often leaves us feeling disconnected from ourselves, from one another and from Mother Earth. As humans it is part of our work to reconnect to our own stories through practices of embodiment, to push back against colonial tendencies and embodiments and to hold each other up as we gather movements that do the same. In doing this work, we ask who or what God or The Sacred or Creator might be and how we are called to love.

The Seven Generations teachings ask us to look to those who came before, to see what is happening in and around us now, and to look ahead. So, we have questions to ask about the America we know today:

How did America's story become so riddled with colonialism and white supremacy?

How is our history connected to the pillage and harm done to the lands around us?

Who are the spiritual teachers that will help us find our way back to ourselves again?

Who will America be in the future?

Can America ever truly be a land of the free for all people?

What stories do we need to tell moving forward?

Storytelling and story-sharing help us make sense of how we got here, what stories have been passed down, what stories have been buried deeply enough inside the bodies and minds of the oppressed. So when we allow our stories to rise, we reclaim what has been lost or buried, and we find our way to one another as well.

Story-sharing is an active, embodied work, and it involves each of us and all of us. Story-sharing is about both the individual and the collective, and as we do this work of naming the truth of our wounds, we bear witness to one another's stories and face the history that has not told the truth of who we are and how we got here.

No matter what spiritual or cultural background we come from, the power of stories remains an important tool for us. But the work must be sustainable for it to last seven generations, which means we have to slow down in a time when we feel like we need to speed up our own healing.

⁶ For an overview of the Seven Generations teaching, see James Vukelich Kaagegaabaw, *The Seven Generations and The Seven Grandfather Teachings*, Birchbark Books, 2023.

What does it look like to pause, breathe deeply, hold space with one another and our stories, with the truth, and also to infuse action and art into our work moving forward? We must recognize that we need all of us, using the gifts we already have, to imagine and create this better way.

That means we tend to our wounds for the sake of those who came before us, we spend time with one another's wounds in the present, and we commit to healing for the sake of future generations.

America is 250 years old, and instead of thinking of our own life in a linear way, how can we imagine circling back to the beginning of who we are? We must ask this not necessarily to recreate ourselves, but to examine the landscape that got us here and ask if we can imagine it anew, while casting a vision for an expansiveness we have yet to encounter on these lands. In our culture we practice *mino-bimaadiziwin*, which means living the good life, a life marked by care and compassion, by kinship and belonging. We all belong to one another, so asking who we are means asking how we can live that good life, walk in that good way that upholds and strengthens our connections to one another and Mother Earth.

Just like we have taken the land and painted violence over it, we ask what stories still remain, what lies at the foundation, and what we can build over what has already been built. This takes the work of editing, of paying attention, of telling the truth and of celebrating the legacy of diversity we are building right now.

Going back to the beginning means going back before we became *chemokmankik*, not because we can become who we were then, but so that we can learn from that moment how to become better examples of what it means to tend to this garden, to tend to our wounds, and to hope for those who come later to add their beauty to our ever-changing landscape.

I believe we need the power of artists, poets, writers, and thinkers alongside all the other builders of our future, so as we dream, we turn again to language, to words, to teach us what it means to heal, to dream and to find our way to an America we have not met yet but hope to embrace on some future horizon.

I am a poet-storyteller, and as I think about the work we have ahead of us and the legacies we hope to leave for the future, I think of these words and the landscape of an America we desperately hope for and need:

I've seen an artist
take an old painting
and add something to it,
stretch the frame
and re-orient us to
a different perspective
we did not notice before.
I've seen a musician
take an old song
and redefine it,
add melodies and
lyrics that create
a new home from
an old one.
I've seen a writer
re-create a classic
and allow it to breathe
with diversity and care,
becoming better than
it once was.
So I want to be
an artist too,
and take the
landscape of the
America I've known,
painting it, stretching
its boundaries
to become

boundary-less,
placing in new
characters that have
long been forgotten,
remembering
those who went
before who told us
exactly who we are,
and holding space
for the next artist
to come along,
a child reaching out
for the paintbrush
in my hand.
I will offer it
to them freely,
and they will
continue the work,
the artists of our time,
the prophets of our future,
teaching us again and again
the pain and beauty
we've come from
and the steady possibilities
of who we can
one day become.

- Kaitlin Curtice

Alie(n)ation, Hospitality and Belonging: An Asian American Taoist/Confucian/Christian Perspective on American Racism

Russell Jeung

Customer began screaming at me for no reason while in line and correctly distanced at six feet. I am mostly Chinese and my family has been in San Luis Obispo since the 1860s. I am fourth-generation in San Luis Obispo, but guess I will never be an American.

(71-year-old, San Luis Obispo, CA)

Like this elder who reported to Stop AAPI Hate (SAH), a reporting center that tracks racism against the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, I am a fourth-generation Chinese American whose family has been in California since the 1860s. And like him and eight out of ten Asian Americans,⁷ I too feel like I don't belong in the United States.

My family has now been in this nation for a century and a half, and we still are not considered real Americans. The recent surge in anti-Asian hate during the pandemic revealed this exclusion, as at least one in five Asian Americans directly experienced discrimination — over five million cases of hate! As other reports to Stop AAPI Hate attest, Americans pushed and shoved Asian American elders and bullied our kids. Across the nation, time and time again, they spat on us, screaming, “Go back to China, you f--king Chink!” While my wife ran along a trail, someone blocked her path and coughed directly into her face.

The viral usage of the term “Chinese virus” made a clear distinction about who belongs and who does not in the United States, about who is a threat and spreads the disease and who is not. This us-versus-them dynamic has long been institutionalized by our racialized laws under the binary of alien and citizen. Employing similar ideologies used to deny sovereignty to Indigenous persons and freedom and naturalization to African Americans, Congress declared Asians as “aliens ineligible for citizenship” in 1882. Since then, we have been considered and institutionalized as perpetual foreigners, included only when economically useful to the nation. Even though exclusionary immigration laws have been revoked, Asians remain the Yellow Peril or Dusky Peril, threats to American national security, health and morality.⁸ Today, over thirty states have passed or proposed alien land laws that bar foreigners from purchasing property and make this nation more inhospitable to Asians.⁹

Xenophobia, the fear of strangers, is one source of the racism against Asian Americans and of the racial binaries that underwrite our othering. As I have wrestled with my family's centuries of exclusion and with the racial trauma of COVID-19 discrimination, I've recognized that America's fear of Asians as alien threats

7 Asian American Foundation, “Annual Survey Reveals 1 in 2 Asian Americans Feel Unsafe; Nearly 80% Do Not Fully Feel They Belong and Are Accepted in the U.S.,” May 2, 2023, via PR Newswire, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/annual-survey-reveals-1-in-2-asian-americans-feel-unsafe-nearly-80-do-not-fully-feel-they-belong-and-are-accepted-in-the-us-301812698.html>.

8 The Yellow Peril is historic fear of Asians, specifically Japanese and Chinese, invading and dominating the West. The Dusky Peril, a corresponding threat, is the notion that South Asians would invade and take jobs from white workers.

9 Russell Jeung, “Banning foreign ownership of land doesn't protect US. It just scapegoats Asian Americans.” *USA Today*, Opinion, July 4, 2023, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2023/07/04/land-ownership-bans-china-racist-us-history-repeats/70352009007/>.

has long been embedded in its racial subconscious. To uproot it, we need to develop xenophilia, which is directly translated as love of the stranger and is the opposite of xenophobia. In the Bible, this word is often cited as hospitality, and one way to rewrite this particularly American narrative of racism is to reclaim this ancient virtue. The hospitality I've experienced from Taiwanese persons, containing aspects of Confucian empathy, reciprocity and family responsibilities, offers one hopeful model.

While Asians and immigrants have received a hostile welcome to the United States, I felt warmly received when my family spent a semester in Taiwan. Even though we clearly did not fit in as non-Taiwanese or merit any belonging — I got yelled at for not wearing Speedos at a hot spring, my wife didn't know how to put out the garbage, and my son had to be taught how to hold utensils correctly — our Taiwanese hosts treated us as family.

During our stay, my wife lost her tooth filling and we contacted a dentist's office, run by the cousin of my friend's mom. Even though we had never met, Aunt Mei-Li warmly greeted us at the subway exit and walked us to the office. Along the way, she asked about how we enjoyed Taiwan, and we shared the sites we hoped to visit and some of the difficulties we encountered, such as not knowing it would be so cold. While my wife had her procedure, Aunt gleefully took us shopping and insisted on purchasing a winter jacket for our four-year-old. When the dentist finished filling the tooth, they were adamant that we not pay. And upon hearing that we wanted to tour Taroko Gorge, she replied, "Oh, we have a guest house there! I'll give you the keys and you can spend the weekend. And you can use our scooters, too."

A few weekends later, Aunt Mei-Li welcomed us at the train station and handed me a helmet. "I'll take you first to the apartment, and then we'll use two scooters to escort the rest of your family." I will never forget speeding through the city traffic on the back of this tiny scooter, clutching a sixty-year-old Taiwanese aunty for dear life, and trying to understand her cheerful chatter in an incomprehensible tongue.

When I asked why her aunt was so generous and hospitable, my friend replied that Aunt Mei-Li saw us as family. As the friend of her favorite cousin's daughter — quite a few degrees of separation from my American point of view — I joined her inner circle of belonging, and she was responsible to meet all my needs and more. My friend shared that Aunt Mei-Li loved her deceased grandmother dearly, and taking care of anyone connected to her cousin was a way of respecting and repaying her ancestor. Further, my friend's family took care of Aunt Mei-Li's son when in the United States, so she expressed her gratitude by reciprocating when visitors came to Taiwan.

As strangers to a new land, my family and I were overwhelmed to be blessed beneficiaries of this family's intergenerational love, ties of interdependence and reciprocity, and generous hospitality.

The Olson-Hongs of my New Hope Covenant Church in Oakland exemplify Taiwanese hospitality, too. Albert's parents migrated to the United States in the early 1970s. Although his father obtained a doctorate and held professional positions, Albert observed that his father didn't seem to belong in the United States: "He was never comfortable, ever. His English wasn't perfect; his humor didn't translate. This was not his home." In stark contrast, when he returned to Taiwan, "He was a totally different person: he was in his element. He was funny; he would hold court and share stories."

Albert continued to share his Taiwanese deep sense of family belonging: "I always felt in the Taiwanese community, everyone was related to me. I didn't know who my real uncle and real aunt were because everyone was uncle and aunt. My parents gave me a sense that I belonged to a family bigger than my family."

Like Aunt Mei-Li, Albert's father gathered and took care of anyone from Taiwan, perhaps more so if they were strangers. "People would come in and out of our lives with a sense that we were connected with them," reminisced Albert. "My dad would always be hosting someone — students, other immigrants from Taiwan — over at our house, having dinner, singing Taiwanese folk songs. There was a sense of a bigger family, even if we were not blood family."

Albert and his wife, Shauna, moved into their Oakland low-income, Latinx neighborhood and maintained their sense of being part of “a bigger family.” When their children attended local public schools and teachers were laid off, they fundraised tens of thousands of dollars from the broader Taiwanese American community to prevent the elimination of a teaching position at a school where the great majority were Latinx.

As they worked with parents of this school, the Olson-Hongs became close with Lupe, whose daughter was a long-time friend with their daughter starting from kindergarten.¹⁰ One year, Lupe needed to find new housing. Unfortunately, even while working multiple jobs, this undocumented, single mom couldn’t afford the expensive housing in the Bay Area.

At about the same time, the Olson-Hongs themselves were also house hunting. They received funds from a family house transfer and developed the spiritual conviction that their newfound financial resources weren’t meant to be reserved only for themselves. Instead, they sought to share with other people whom they considered family, especially those in need.

So the Olson-Hongs didn’t just open their home for Lupe temporarily. They made her a home so that she could be at home with them. Finding a house with enough space, they expanded their downstairs by converting the garage into a new, three-bedroom unit where Lupe and her three children now reside. Whenever she gets the opportunity, Lupe brings home-cooked meals to share with the Olson-Hongs and can be called upon whenever they need extra food ingredients or temporary childcare. Likewise, the Olson-Hongs are always available for Lupe’s family when they need rides to school, help applying for financial aid, or tools to borrow.

The Olson-Hongs’ generosity, similar to Aunt Mei-Li’s, stems from the intergenerational support they’ve received, their commitment to reciprocal relations, and their deep concern for justice and equity. Following the role models of their parents, they assumed the responsibilities to make sure that people in their orbit were properly cared for: nourished with food, warmed by shelter, and encircled with belonging.¹¹

The Taiwanese hospitality of Aunt Mei-Li and the Olson-Hongs are concrete expressions of the core Confucian virtue of *ren*, roughly translated as humaneness, benevolence and love. The character, *ren*, includes two components: the ideograms for a “person” and for “two.” The person who embodies *ren*, therefore, is a person of deep empathy, who thinks, feels, and acts for not just oneself but for the other as well. According to Confucius, the person of *ren* is one who “wishing to establish his own character, he also establishes the character of others, and wishing to be prominent himself, also helps others to be prominent” (Analects, 6:27).¹²

Consequently, East Asians from Confucian backgrounds often develop a sense of self as embedded in a larger network of social relations, especially as they cultivate the virtue of *ren* and adopt its ethic of putting others first. Chinese Catholic scholar Mary May-yin Yuen elaborates,

*Thus, a person is always a person situated in a social context, a self-in-relation. Reciprocal obligations in social relations are conditions for human flourishing. A human person with the virtue of ren can best exemplify the concept of a fully human life in terms of relationship to others and in the related set of duties to realize the self.*¹³

Aunt Mei-Li and Albert’s father typify this sense of self-in-relation and empathetic *ren*, as they appreciated the gifts given by their ancestors and carried out family obligations gladly. They repaid their elders by assuming and meeting the needs of any family member, even to the extent of adopting strangers into their

10 Lupe’s name is a pseudonym to maintain her anonymity and confidentiality.

11 Christine Pohl writes that these three practices of hospitality were the hallmarks of early Christians. See Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*, Eerdmans, 1999.

12 Confucius, *The Analects*, trans. Chichung Huang, Oxford University Press. The same edition is used for all quotes in from the Analects in this essay.

13 Mary May-yin Yuen, *Solidarity and Reciprocity with Migrants in Asia: Catholic and Confucian Ethics in Dialogue*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 132.

family. In fulfilling these roles, they came to be fully at home, just as Albert's father found belonging at church where he could sing Taiwanese folk songs and hold court with mirth.

Indeed, simply by giving a foreigner a scooter ride or providing a home-cooked meal to one's neighbor, Aunt Mei-Li and Lupe also illustrate the Confucian virtue of reciprocity, or *shu*. Confucius' Golden Rule, "What you do not desire for yourself, do not do to others" (Analects 15.24) instructs us to apply *shu* in considering others' needs and treating them with fairness and dignity. If a nation earnestly took on this responsibility, then everyone's material needs would be met through our mutual interdependence and caretaking. These reciprocal relations can also counter our feelings of alienation as we practice self-giving and become more enmeshed in our social and spiritual interrelatedness.

The "related set of duties to realize the self" demanded by *ren* and *shu* particularly applies to Chinese filial piety and family responsibilities, where an individual first learns of how to relate to others. In Analects 1:6, Confucius says that a "young man should be filial when at home and respectful to their elders when away from home. They should be earnest and faithful. They should love all extensively and be intimate with men of humanity." Aunt Mei-Li took on her caretaking responsibilities heartily, and hosted far-off relatives often, extending this love even to my own family. The Olson-Hongs, too, expanded their family boundaries as they treated Lupe and her family with the same affection that they held for their own family, with caring devotion and willing sacrifice. As Albert concluded, "In our Taiwanese church, we were told we were God's children. You're part of a family bigger than your family. It follows that if a member of our family is not doing well, we would take care of them."

Certainly, Confucianism and its promotion of hierarchical relationships and duty have been used to reinforce oppressive states and misogynistic families. Its emphasis on honor and face may result in ritualistic shows of hospitality that feel obligatory and hypocritical. And for some, the focus on the family can lead to insularity and apathy towards others, resulting in reduced compassion for the marginalized and lessened civic engagement. Nevertheless, the model of Taiwanese hospitality, rooted in Chinese religious traditions, can help to disrupt the alien/citizen and insider/outsider binaries used to enforce racial boundaries in the US.

By re-appropriating Taoist yin/yang and Confucian *ren* teachings for this time and space, we can overcome racial binaries that have long been America's original sin of white supremacy. These static and fixed, either/or binaries justify particular oppressions of different groups; indigenous/frontier settler; Oriental/Occidental; female/male; black/white; alien/citizen; queer/straight. Taoism acknowledges dualities in life but also recognizes the whole by employing a both/and perspective: everyone can be both an insider and outsider at times, or feel both alienated and belonging at points. For example, we can see that Asians who are often represented as outsiders can paradoxically also be model minority insiders who hold to anti-Blackness. Through recognizing that we can be both victims and perpetrators, hosts and guests, we can develop a more critical, holistic view of ourselves and our national family.

My family and I do not fully belong in the United States, but that's fine with me. I do not want to belong to a nation of mass incarceration, mass deportation, mass family separation and mass shootings. Instead, I want to belong to a more virtuous American society that incorporates Taiwanese hospitality with a broadened view of family. In that national family, we see and treat each other with deep *ren* empathy and assume others' wants before our own. Within this space, we are not competing over our individual interests to protect our rights, but we live interdependently and reciprocate each others' good will and actions. With *shu* reciprocity, we revere our ancestors by paying it forward and thereby recognize both our collective neediness and our wealth. And as we act hospitably, we make a home for each other as family in both our personal lives and in our national policies. That's where I will find belonging, as this outsider welcomes other outsiders as my family.

Reparations NOW: For The Healing of This Nation

Ekemini Uwan

“When we talk about reparations, what we are doing is repairing the world. We are not just repairing ourselves. We are repairing those who have oppressed us because if we don’t repair those who have oppressed us at the same time that we repair ourselves...we won’t have a planet.”

— Dr. Julius Garvey, son of pan-Africanist Marcus Garvey

I was stunned into silence when I heard Dr. Julius Garvey make this prophetic declaration last year at The State of The Black World Conference V in Baltimore. This conference exists to discuss the political, economic, health and mental state of Black people around the globe. It is a rare privilege to be in community with fellow pan-Africanists who not only dream of an America where reparations are the antidote for centuries of anti-Black oppression but also the cure for the soul-sickness of this nation. When one broaches the subject of the soul, they enter the spiritual domain. Often, people cannot perceive the spiritual implications that correlate with the call for reparations. As a reparations activist, I enter into this advocacy work as a public theologian because, at its core, I view the fight for reparations as fundamentally countering a spiritual violation in addition to the economic, sociological, psychological and physiological harms of white supremacy.

I experienced profound resonance with Dr. Garvey’s words, for it is rare to hear my beloved comrades frame the fight for reparations on spiritual terms. For as long as I can remember, I have always carried within my constitution — my mind and my soul — these intrusive questions: Who are my people? Where are my people? To whom do I belong? These queries have been dancing an existential tango within my soul for most of my life. I have discovered that this line of questioning parallels the experience of adoptees who intuit that something in their life is “off,” or that there is a piece missing from their life, before receiving confirmation of their adoption. This sense that there is a “missing piece” has been a constant undercurrent in my life. Unlike a foghorn warning of danger ahead, this persistent trio of questions is more akin to a dull roar: not too loud to cause a distraction, but loud enough to beckon me into further exploration.

I suspect that I’m not alone in this, for West Africans and African Diasporans hear the dull roar at varying decibels within their consciousness, too. When my mind did not have the language for the never-ending questions, my body knew full well and continued to pose the questions: Who are my people? Where are my people? And to whom do I belong?

What does the persistence of these unanswered existential questions do to the psyche and physical well-being of Africans and African Diasporans? What are the wages of this manufactured mystery the global project of white supremacy has left us to contend with? Within neuropsychology, epigenetics is the study of how our environment and behaviors can impact how our genes function.¹⁴ These genetic changes are reversible, but one implication is that trauma can be passed down to the next generation even when they do not experience it firsthand. The body knows.

¹⁴ For an overview of epigenetics, see the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s webpage “What Is Epigenetics?” at <https://www.cdc.gov/genomics/disease/epigenetics.htm>. 4

In my early adolescence, my mind received language for what my body knew innately. I am the American-born daughter of Nigerian immigrants who emigrated to the United States in the early 1970s. More specifically, I am the descendent of the Ibibio people, an ancient ethnic group in the Delta region of Southeastern Nigeria, where over one million Ibibio people, among other ethnic groups, were stolen and trafficked in the transatlantic slave trade.¹⁵ Not only were my people enslaved: they were also colonized.

Reparatory justice is personal. I am a Black woman, an African-American woman, an African woman, a Nigerian woman, and an Ibibio woman. Therefore, when I speak about reparations for slavery, colonialism, neo-colonialism, systemic racism, intergenerational trauma, and its progeny, I am not an outside observer. I'm a survivor. Some ten percent of the 12.5 million Africans stolen during the transatlantic slave trade were taken from the Cross and Niger Rivers in the eighteenth century.¹⁶ My people, the Ibibio people, are a significant portion of that number.

Africans rarely speak of this dark history due to the attendant pain and shame. This traumatic history causes West Africans to suppress what they would prefer to forget—but what is not revealed cannot be healed. The legacy of slavery lives on and echoes in our lives, Africans and African Diasporans alike. As a young girl, I remember fragmented oral histories my parents shared with me about relatives stolen in the Transatlantic Slave Trade. In the Ibibio language, my parents used to say, “*Mbubid owo ke America edo ndito ete nyin*,” meaning, “Black people in America are our cousins.” To this day, I thank God that my parents had a level of racial consciousness that overrode their colonial education, which had concealed and erased the history of the transatlantic slave trade. If you are privy to the insidious and deceptive nature of colonial education, then you understand what a miracle it was for my African parents to not only lay hold of this critical oral history but also to pass it on to me.

To understand why my passion burns for this issue, you need a glimpse into how I was raised. My parents were keenly aware that they were raising American children, and although I am bi-cultural, they did succeed in raising American kids. Our little apartment in California was a microcosm of two worlds: Nigeria and Black America. My mom would cook *atama* soup for herself and my dad, then make spaghetti for my siblings and me. She'd make *egusi* soup for her and Dad and then baked barbecue chicken for us kids. My dad was an avid reader, so our home library ranged from the Holy Bible to Alex Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X* to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.

As much as my father loved books, he loved music even more. His JBL record player belted out Stevie Wonder, Isaac Hayes, Fela Kuti, Bob Marley & The Wailers, Jimmy Cliff, Evelyn Champagne King, Marvin Gaye, Victor Uwaifo and Rick James, to name a few. Every Saturday, my mom would thread my hair at noon when Soul Train came on, finishing up by the time Solid Gold Dancers with Dionne Warwick ended. Knowing that I picked up my Dad's love for music, she must have known that the Soul Train line would blunt some of my writhing, whining and wincing from the pain of the metal comb vibrating off my kinky 4c hair.

Saturdays were not to be trifled with in the Uwan household. When nightfall came, my Dad's epic house parties would commence, and our two-bedroom and one-bathroom apartment would magically morph into a Soul Train dance floor nearly every week. Our little apartment became a dancehall of the African Diaspora as my parents' African, African American and Caribbean friends would eat, drink and dance until they dropped, literally.

This is how I was raised. This is how I was shaped. My parents taught me that there was never any differentiation between us as Nigerians and African Americans or Caribbeans. We lived in the same neighborhood and slept at each other's houses. They were our play aunties, uncles and cousins: although we

15 Randy J. Sparks, “Two Princes of Calabar: An Atlantic Odyssey from Slavery to Freedom,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (July 2002): 555, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3491465>.

16 Ibid.

were not connected by blood, we were connected by love. They married into our family, and we have married into theirs. We were not taught to think of ourselves differently, not only because of our family history but because they knew that race and racism are the American way of life. We were raised to believe that African Americans and Caribbeans are our cousins because they are.

For far too long, we have been told the lie that we are disconnected from one another, culturally and historically. That is a lie from the pit of hell that many of our people on the continent and within the African Diaspora have unwittingly believed. Yet, the inimitable poet Gwendolyn Brooks reminds us that “We are each other's magnitude and bond.”

We all — West Africans, African-Americans and Caribbeans within the African diaspora — enter into the sordid history of slavery at different points. Nevertheless, our various entry points cannot negate the fact that this is our history, collectively. It is time that Africans begin to speak into this history, giving voice to the shame, the pain, the loss, the resistance, the resilience, the trauma, the grim legacy and the cataclysmic impact that continues to haunt continental West Africans and African Diasporans in the United States to this day.

Contrary to popular belief, West Africans have not forgotten what happened to us, West Africans, Caribbeans and African Americans alike. How can we forget those foreboding British, American and Portuguese ships of terror docking on the sanguine shores of Elem Kalabari (New Calabar), Old Calabar and Iboni (Bonny)? How can we forget how white traders recruited Efiks to travel the labyrinth of Delta waterways, using war canoes to raid villages in the hinterland to capture Ibibio people and sell them aboard the ships of terror on the coast? How can we forget the pain and the intracommunal shame that renders some Africans silent? How can we forget, after centuries of our people, our kin and our relatives stolen, bred, beaten, raped, maimed and trafficked, never to be seen by us again? We can never forget what happened to us.

Yet it seems that America would much rather forget the violence visited upon enslaved Africans and African descendants ever since our people were trafficked to its shores and sold as chattel. Carefully constructed myths devise that forgetfulness. Mythmaking comes in various forms: book bans, misinformation and outright denial of racism are some of the vehicles by which this manufactured amnesia is enacted.

My working definition of reparations informed by the Christian gospel is this: a gracious invitation to confess, repent and repair egregious sins from the past and present that have had a deleterious impact on the lives of Black people with a commitment to never commit such heinous acts again. One of the greatest myths America continues to cling to is this: “America is a Christian Nation.” If this claim were valid, America would have paid reparations to African Americans who filed reparations claims during the colonial period because confession of harm done to another person, renouncing that harm, and repairing said harm is central to the Christian faith. Alas, to America's shame, that did not happen.

In fact, enslavers were given reparations for the emancipation of enslaved Africans. Dr. Tera W. Hunter explains, “On April 16, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed a bill emancipating enslaved people in Washington, the end of a long struggle. But to ease slaveowners' pain, the District of Columbia Emancipation Act paid those loyal to the Union up to \$300 for every enslaved person freed.”¹⁷

In her book, *Reparations for Slavery and the Slave Trade: A Transnational and Comparative History*, Dr. Ana Lucia Araujo defines the term: “Historically, the term reparation has been employed to convey the idea of making amendments for past wrongs.” Regarding the two dimensions of reparations, she says: “The first is moral or symbolic, and usually consists of apologies and actions to help those who were victims of wrongdoing. The second one carries a financial and material scope. In other words, the victim of past wrongs also obtains money or other possessions, such as land, as payment for the misconduct inflicted.”¹⁸

17 Tera W. Hunter, “When Slaveowners Got Reparations,” *New York Times*, April 16, 2019, Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/16/opinion/when-slaveowners-got-reparations.html>.

18 Ana Lucia Araujo, *Reparations for Slavery and the Slave Trade: A Transnational and Comparative History*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2017, 2.

According to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights,¹⁹ reparations must also meet the following requirements:

- a. Restitution: Survivors must be restored to how their lives were before the harm took place.
- b. Compensation: Survivors must be compensated in proportional weight to the harm.
- c. Rehabilitation: Survivors' medical and psychological care, plus legal and social services, must be compensated.
- d. Satisfaction: Violations must cease, truth-seeking and related measures must occur, and survivors must receive an apology for the harmful acts.

When it comes to reparations, particular harms, injustices and abuses must be repaired particularly. I am grieved by the sinister roles the Catholic and Protestant churches played in the transatlantic slave trade and chattel slavery. It is a shameful and horrific fact of history that the church's significant contribution to these ills was a counterfeit version of Christianity that marred the historical roots of the true Christian faith, whose God is Jesus Christ, the sacrificial servant who is the antithesis of empire, conquest and imperialism.

This covenantal God has promised, "I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people."²⁰ The Christian faith is a covenantal faith. We are not saved to be gathered unto ourselves. Rather, we are called and gathered unto God and into a glorious covenant community. We are covenantally bound to each other, meaning we belong to one another. Even those outside the covenant who have not placed their faith in Jesus still benefit from this covenant because they too are made in the image of God. When Christians live in alignment with the covenant, believers and "not yet believers"²¹ benefit and contribute because our collective well-being and flourishing are bound in a web of mutuality.

As a result, we have covenantal obligations to God and each other, which is why Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."²² When we come to faith in Jesus Christ, it is no longer about rugged individualism. Moreover, the myth of "pulling yourself up by your bootstraps" has no place in the Christian faith. An individual's sin within the community impacts the whole community and even those outside of the covenant community.

Therefore, the call for reparations serves as a covenant lawsuit due to countless sinful covenantal violations: the transatlantic slave trade, U.S. chattel slavery, Jim Crow, colonialism, imperialism, neo-colonialism, systemic racism, environmental racism, police violence, racial trauma, and the ideology of white supremacy and its subsequent atrocities, which are byproducts of the brutal legacy of slavery that looms over us all. A covenant lawsuit is legal imagery invoked in the Old Testament and even in the New Testament against God's covenant people for breaking the covenant with God and with one another by violating the laws of the covenant. Examples of covenant lawsuits are found in Deuteronomy 32, Ezekiel 16; Micah 6, and Revelation 1-3, to name a few passages. The pattern usually begins with an imperative command to listen or hear. Witnesses are called forth, God's loving-kindness and acts of faithfulness to His people are recounted, the indictment or accusation is stated, the sentence is given, and then a promise of restoration and mercy for the repentant is given.

19 "Reparations: OHCHR and transitional justice," Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United Nations, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/transitional-justice/reparations>. Accessed May 9, 2024.

20 Leviticus 26:12 (New International Version)

21 I.e., non-Christians.

22 Matthew 22:37 (NIV)

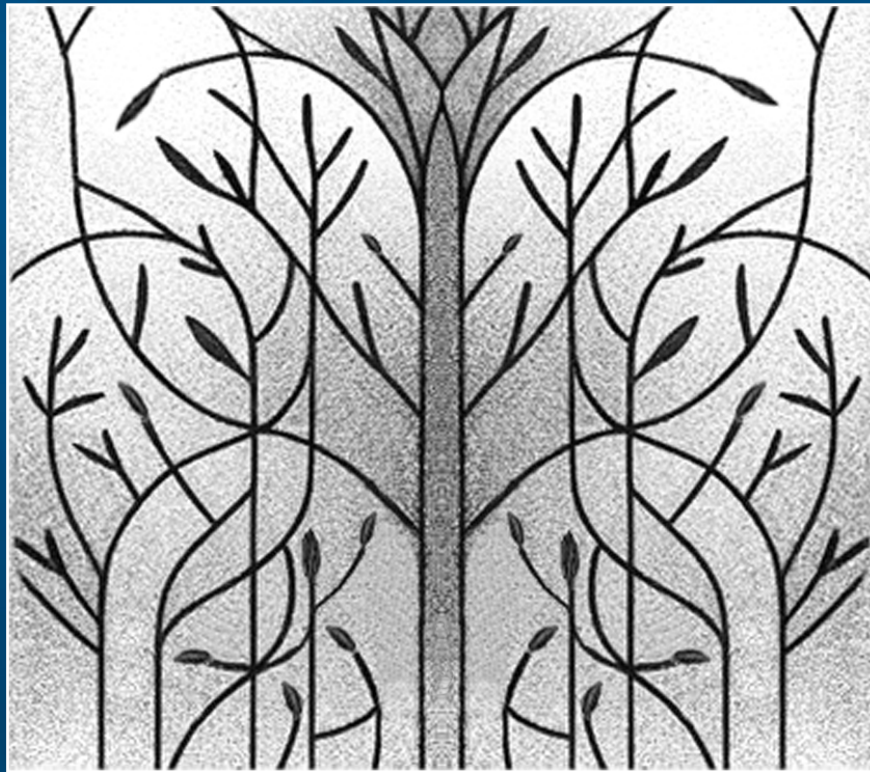
In the Greek New Testament, “metanoia” is the Greek word for repentance. *Meta* means to “shift” or “change,” and *noia* means mind in Greek. Thus, metanoia means to shift or to change one’s mind about sins committed either by omission or by commission. The debased ideology of white supremacy holds that white people are superior to Black people, which undergirds the spiritual manipulation used to justify stealing Africans and trafficking them from their homeland to a foreign land. By selling them as chattel, treating them inhumanely (to put it mildly), then gaslighting them by prattling off myths of Black irresponsibility — “Slavery was a long time ago!” “Slavery wasn’t that bad!” “Just pull yourselves up your bootstraps!” — White Americans leave African descendants to grapple with the ongoing impact of that heinous institution on our minds and bodies.

The repentance of this nation via federal reparations would lift a generational, psychological and physiological weight from African descendants and a spiritual stranglehold off this land. Reparations would facilitate healing unlike anything we have seen in this nation. Healing for African descendants who have been oppressed by the wages of that sinister institution, and as Dr. Garvey said, it would also foster healing for the oppressors and their progeny. For no one can bear the weight of believing themselves to be superior demigods, if you will, without decaying the soul. During Jesus’ earthly ministry, He would often encounter those who were spiritually, emotionally, physically or psychologically immobilized — unable to move forward healthily and holistically with their lives. He asked a piercing question that could usher in their healing: “Do you want to be well?” Now I ask you, America: Do you want to be healed?

PART II

Braiding the Strands Together

What are the potentialities that our religious diversity offers to our future and our world?



All Are Divine: A Sikh Perspective On Non-Discrimination

Simran Jeet Singh

If racism wasn't so damaging, and if it didn't cause us so much pain, I might look at it from a distance and laugh. *What sense does any of this make? How could color and pigmentation indicate human value?*

I understand how racism has developed and adapted historically. I also understand how people used race and racism to ascertain power for their own purposes. As illogical as it might feel, these are logics that we can follow.

What I wonder, though, is what our world would look like if we did not take racism for granted. How would someone who was not socialized in a racist culture understand the diversity of humanity all around them? I ask these questions in service of a larger question: How might we reimagine and redesign our society in a way that helps us realize the founding ideals of the United States of America, such as liberty and justice for all?

We are steeped in our cultural milieu, which means it can be hard to imagine ways of thinking beyond it. I have found that sometimes, when I am too close to something, the best way to innovate is to try and step outside of it. This is why, in my aim to develop a new vision for the US, I turn to the religious tradition that informs my worldview, Sikhi, which I would describe as anti-racist, anti-sexist, and perhaps most generally, anti-hierarchy. At a time when we struggle to deal with the differences among us and all around us, Sikhi offers a model for creating a more open, inclusive and loving culture.

The Sikh philosophical system is built on the idea of oneness and connection. The first term in the Sikh scripture is *ik oankar*, which refers to the oneness of all creation. As Bhagat Kabir writes, if all humans come from the same light, how can we call someone good or bad?²³

Bhagat Kabir's reflection is a commentary on judgment. It is not our role to judge people or place value on their lives. His reflection is also a reminder of our shared divinity. All people are equally divine.

Bhagat Namdev has a beautiful composition that echoes Bhagat Kabir's: "*Sabh gobind hai sabh gobind hai gobind bin nahi koi* (All is divine, all is divine, there is nothing without divinity)."²⁴

These quotations demonstrate such a different way of looking at the world from what we know typically. We worry about discerning the good from the bad and judging people as good or evil. This discernment often depends on how we see ourselves: those who are more like us deserve our respect, and those who are different from us do not. What if we approached human diversity like Bhagat Namdev, understanding that the starting point is our shared divinity? Would that not change how we treat everything and everyone around us?

23 ਅਵਲਿਅਲਹ ਨੂਰੁ ਉਪਾਇਆ ਕੁਦਰਤਿ ਕੇ ਸਭ ਬੰਦੇ ॥ [Translation my own]. Rag Prabhati, p. 1349, Guru Granth Sahib

24 ਸਭੁ ਗੋਬਿੰਦੁ ਹੈ ਸਭੁ ਗੋਬਿੰਦੁ ਹੈ ਗੋਬਿੰਦੁ ਬਨਿ ਨਹੀ ਕੋਈ ॥ [Translation my own]. Rag Asa, p. 485, Guru Granth Sahib

This idea can be easy in theory, but it can be hard to imagine what it looks like practically. This is why I appreciate that Bhagat Namdev follows his idea with a metaphor to help us envision what divinity looks like: “Like a single thread that holds together hundreds and thousands of beads; that is how divinity is woven into the creation.”²⁵

The image has helped me see human diversity in a new light. While we all have distinct identities from one another, and while we are each beads with our own unique characteristics, we are bound together by the same divine string. This is what ties us all together.

Bhagat Namdev then offers us another metaphor for envisioning the diverse forms of our world: “The waves, the foam, and the bubbles; none of these are distinct from the water itself.”²⁶ Through this example, we can imagine ourselves to each be different manifestations of water. We each have our own discrete forms, but we are also challenged to recognize that ultimately we are all part of something greater than ourselves.

This way of looking at ourselves and the diversity around us feels sharply different from how we think about these questions in the United States today. Here, we see ourselves as independent from one another, but we do not see ourselves as interconnected with one another. I believe that the Sikh philosophy on oneness offers us a way forward, particularly at a time when we are struggling to change the paradigm but having difficulty with imagining a new one.

At the end of the composition, Bhagat Namdev gives us practical advice that we can each apply in our own lives. I’ve taken it to heart and have tried to embody it, and it has transformed me. I think this idea can help transform our American narrative, too. “Namdev states: Look at the divine creation and reflect on it in your heart. In each and every heart, deep within us, it is purely divine.”²⁷

I take two practices from this couplet to share with you. First, to learn to look at the creation and to see it as divine. This is easy in certain contexts, especially when we are close to natural beauty: a forest, an ocean, a mountain. We look at the beauty of our world and marvel at divinity. It is more difficult for me to recognize divinity in the more mundane aspects of our world. This is the challenge that Bhagat Namdev puts before us. Can we learn to see the divinity in everything we see? We can learn to do this through daily practice, perhaps beginning with aspects of the world that already feel sacred, and then moving to those that feel more profane.

The second practice has to do with the second part of the couplet. If divinity is within each and every heart, can we learn to see the divine in everyone we meet? This is easier to do with certain people in our lives, and harder with others. We can begin with people we already love and admire, where it is easier to see and feel their divinity. But we cannot stop there. The teaching is that divinity is within everyone, and it is our responsibility to learn how to see that.

If we are truly interested in transforming ourselves and transforming our shared narrative, we have to challenge ourselves to see divinity in all people, even when difficult, and even when they do not see ours. An incremental approach has been most effective for me, and even then it can be hard sometimes with certain people whose ideas or behaviors I find abhorrent. In those cases, I try to remind myself what I teach my kids: “People are not bad or evil. Their behaviors might be, but people are ultimately good.” Separating the person from the behavior helps me to still see people as deserving of my dignity and protects me from falling into a supremacist mindset.

25 ਸੂਤੁ ਏਕੁ ਮਣਿ ਸਤ ਸਹੰਸ ਜੈਸੇ ਓਤਿ ਪੋਤਿ ਪ੍ਰਭੁ ਸੋਈ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥ [Translation my own]. Ibid.

26 ਜਲ ਤਰੰਗ ਅਰੁ ਫੋਨ ਬੁਦਬੁਦਾ ਜਲ ਤੇ ਭਨਿ ਨ ਹੋਈ ॥ [Translation my own]. Ibid.

27 ਕਹਤ ਨਾਮਦੇਉ ਹਰੀ ਕੀ ਰਚਨਾ ਦੇਖਹੁ ਰਦੈ ਬੀਚਾਰੀ ॥ ਘਟ ਘਟ ਅੰਤਰੀ ਸਰਬ ਨਰਿੰਤਰੀ ਕੇਵਲ ਏਕ ਮੁਰਾਰੀ ॥੪॥੧॥ [Translation my own]. Ibid.

Bhagat Namdev lays out the promise of this approach in his composition as well. He writes, “In the one and many, the divine is pervading. Wherever I look, that’s all I see.”²⁸

Think for a moment about how differently we would experience the world if we had this perspective. We look at the diversity all around us, and instead of feeling threatened or fearful, we feel happy and joyful. This is a lens of oneness, where everything and everyone is enmeshed within divinity. We could have that same perspective, too.

It is a beautiful vision and one that we could all learn from. It starts with a simple shift in our thinking, followed by an intuitive shift in our behaviors — and these together will lead to a shift in our shared culture. As we endeavor to remake our world as one where all people have an equal opportunity for joy and happiness, I encourage us to see Bhagat Namdev’s wisdom as a powerful starting point.

Sabh gobind hai sabh gobind hai gobind bin nahi koi

All is divine, all is divine, there’s nothing without divinity.

28 ਏਕ ਅਨੇਕ ਬਿਆਪਕ ਪੂਰਕ ਜਤ ਦੇਖਉ ਤਤ ਸੋਈ ॥ [Translation my own]. Ibid.

Memory and Imagination: Ancestors and Descendants Create the Narrative

Yolanda Narva-Savage

Memory

“All water has a perfect memory and is forever trying to get back to where it was.”

— Toni Morrison²⁹

I am a human whose genes carry the epigenetic trauma of being a descendant of a people violently stolen from their homeland, enslaved and placed on a land that had been brutally stolen by massacre and displacement of the Indigenous peoples. It is with this blueprint I entered the world, a place called Turtle Island by its Indigenous peoples (present-day United States of America, named after the explorer Amerigo Vespucci), inheriting an internal battle for survival from the pain and trauma of the past, while entering an external battle with an inequitable, unjust world. This world presents more questions than answers, more obstacles than opportunities and more stereotypes than successes for people who look like me.

During human history, most Indigenous peoples have lived under colonization, war, enslavement and attempted genocide. Destabilization has immediate and long-term impacts on us all. I can only imagine the kind of trauma a person experiences who is proximate to the pain, violence and suffering of these horrific acts, as they affect every part of their lives: when they go to sleep at night, when they wake up in the morning, and all times in between. These horrific acts have long-term consequences for those both directly and indirectly impacted. The trauma of those directly impacted is passed epigenetically to their descendants. More generally, that trauma precipitates an imbalance in the universe that allows people to become desensitized to suffering, normalizing violence as a part of everyday existence. This internalized trauma can be seen in today's generation.

Alternatively, I know that we also carry an immense amount of joy, love, resilience, truth, holy boldness, compassion, justice, and dignity underlined by the commitment to shared humanity in our DNA as well. There are numerous examples of people throughout history who demonstrate a deeper level of consciousness and concern for those suffering at the hands of others. These acts of shared humanity and holy boldness have saved nations of people, ensuring our world is full of diverse, unique individuals. As our nation and our world struggle to put shared humanity above commerce, to honor the dignity in every human being, how do we tap into the power of our memories and the promise of our imagination to create a world for our descendants that begins to leave a different imprint in the DNA we will pass along? What role do religion and spirituality play in building a foundation that starts a healing process, making each one of us whole again?

On Turtle Island and many places around the world, we are living on lands that have been taken away from its Indigenous people. We are enjoying buildings, structures and inventions built and created by people who

29 Toni Morrison, *The Site of Memory*, as excerpted in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser (Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 99.

were enslaved. And all around us we are constantly reminded of the evils of the past, such as genocides and the Holocaust, as we continue to see glimpses of the possibility of these atrocities and we fear history repeating itself.

To my ancestors who survived these journeys, I remember. To my ancestors who fought back, I am resilient. To my ancestors who began to thrive, I am in awe, and I am grateful. I am keenly aware that I am not walking this journey alone. My ancestors — those who I knew as well as those I did not, those who are direct relations and those who are not — have given me the power of memory as a tool of knowledge, understanding and navigation for the journey ahead and imagination as a tool for change and envisioning what is possible.

It was a blessing to know and meet my four grandparents: Estelle, Freddie, Ruby and Walter. They passed on lessons to me while they lived, and through the blood pulsing through my body, gave me my DNA as well.

Estelle, my maternal grandmother and the first to leave Turtle Island when she was 53 years old, is the grandparent with whom I spent the most time. She worked the early shift as a dietitian in a hospital in Natchez, Mississippi; her shift ended early enough to allow her to pick my aunt (her youngest child who was a year younger than me) and me up every day after school. Much of what I learned from Estelle happened through sheer observation. She always treated people with an extraordinary amount of kindness. She had a gentle, calming spirit. She also taught me how to crochet.

Freddie, my paternal grandfather, would be the next one of the four to leave Turtle Island. Freddie is the grandparent I knew the least about. My memory of him is that he was a proud man despite living during a time when opportunities were mirages that dried up when he would reach for them. He made big mistakes during his life, but despite these he held his head up high and tried to right his wrongs. He taught me that everyone deserves a chance at restorative justice.

Ruby, my paternal grandmother, left Turtle Island when I was an adult. She was 86 years old. Ruby raised ten children (9 boys and one girl) by herself. We visited her every summer on her farm in Arkansas when I was growing up. Ruby was very resourceful. She and her partner, whom she married much later in life, owned a farm with a garden that provided food throughout the year: eggs, vegetables and fruit. Ruby was a fighter in her own way. She taught me what it meant to be strong and resilient no matter the circumstances.

And finally, Walter, my paternal grandfather left Turtle Island when he was 95 years old, only two years ago. Though I was fortunate to have a lot of time with Walter, I wish I had taken advantage of opportunities to be with him even more than I had. Walter had a beautiful, fun spirit. He loved life. He got so much joy out of the simple things, like watching my husband and son eat during Thanksgiving. He taught me to find my inner *Drishti*, a focal point or place of focus used in yoga practices, which allowed me to tune the noise out and focus on what is important. He got all that he could out of life; it was a joy to witness his life.

Every one of them walks with me daily. Their blood flows through my veins and the memories of them are forever etched in my soul. I can hear them whispering in my ear: *It is your turn. Write your story. Be the ancestor you want to be.* I can feel the drumbeats of the rhythms they danced to forever etched in my memory. If you listen closely, you can hear your ancestors. Feel their presence! They are keeping you safe, challenging you and sending you the support you need during tough times.

Imagination

*“Imagination is more important than knowledge.
For knowledge is limited, whereas imagination embraces the entire world, stimulating progress,
giving birth to evolution.”*

— Albert Einstein³⁰

I have been given a clean sheet of paper and asked to write the script of the world, 20 years from now. What do I see? I have tapped into the memory of my ancestors, gathering strength, resiliency and imagination from them. What is next? What is the story? My story is that there are no people living in poverty in our world. It means that everyone has the dignity of a living wage. It means that everyone can bring who they fully are to any table and be embraced. It means that our young people are learning about history and the real world around them, which includes learning what really happened to enslaved Africans, about the Holocaust and the beautiful tapestry of gender identity. It means that we have managed to slow down the destruction of our planet, and it means, when I say, “My body,” I can also say, “My choice.”

My vision for the future is one of wholeness and spirituality. To make memory and imagination real, I believe we must make our way back to seeing each human *b'tzelem Elohim* (“in the image of the Divine”). We do this by meeting people where they are along their journeys, understanding that as human beings we all experience joy and pain, and no one person’s suffering is greater or less than the other. We do this by respecting and embracing difference, celebrating the fact that diversity of thought and experiences make up the beautiful tapestry of humanity. And we see each other *b'tzelem Elohim* by acknowledging that everyone has a story and that those stories are powerful, and they shape who we are and how we navigate our individual and collective existence. We must seize the opportunity to dismantle the structures that have created hierarchies, strife and conflict and instead create a movement of restorative justice through the foundation of religion and spirituality, which will lead to peace, love and harmony in our country and in our world.

Most movements for justice in America have been rooted in religion and spirituality, most famously the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s. It is my hope that through a spiritual and religious journey through Judaism and Musar I can begin a movement of memory and imagination of belonging to help us reunite our world. The Musar movement is a mystical part of Judaism that relates ethics to justice and tolerance. The tenet of Musar is focused on developing your own character through “soul traits,” so you can heal the world from the inside out. There are many soul traits, but I believe some of them to be essential in creating a world that is better for everyone. They are holy boldness (*azut d'kedosha*), dignity (*kavod*), compassion (*rachamin*), love (*ahava*), truth (*emet*), joy (*simcha*), justice (*tzedek*), return (*teshuvah*), resiliency and strength (*gevurah*) and shared humanity (*leshatef enoshut*).

Holy boldness will give us the courage to be bold like a lion when it comes to the sacred and the divine. We will stand up for what is right for the sake of human dignity, no matter if it makes us uncomfortable or unpopular. It is what is needed to change the trajectory of human suffering to joy.

Dignity for us and others is imperative. We must have dignity for ourselves to see it in others.

Compassion allows me to feel and not just wonder. When I can empathize with someone else, it allows me to have a deeper understanding of what they are going through.

Love is the human project. It is the fuel needed to move humanity toward justice and liberation for all people. It is how we will heal our world.

Truth is the beginning and the end of the conversation. When we realize the connection to truth and trust, we will begin to seek it for deeper knowledge of human experiences. It is how we will come to terms with the things we need to repair.

30 Albert Einstein, “What Life Means to Einstein: An Interview,” by George Sylvester Viereck, *Saturday Evening Post*, October 26, 1929, 117.

Joy can only be created within. We must work hard to create the conditions of lovingkindness for one another and for ourselves. It is how we will survive in a country and a world that is currently on fire.

Justice is overdue. We must seek it, even for people who are no longer on this earth. Justice must be served to set the balance in the universe in order. A sense of justice will help us pave a path to dismantle systems of injustice in America and our world.

Return again and again. We have opportunities to make it right, to fail and return to try again another day. To be human is to be flawed. Return again and again.

Resiliency keeps us connected to the journey. We will fall and we will fail, but we must get up; we cannot give up. It is how we will finally accomplish something sustainable for generations to come.

Shared humanity reminds us that we are all beautiful and flawed. We must find ways to celebrate our beauty and love regardless of our flaws. It is how we will learn to forgive and move forward together knowing that our safety is found in our solidarity.

As a future ancestor, understanding the influence of the memory of my own ancestors is powerful. This influence is what has encouraged me to find a spiritual foundation for cultivating memory and exploring imagination. I also feel liberated by being accountable to the ecosystem of the world by doing my part to give positive energy to the collective. I hope that this contribution to the human ecosystem leads to systemic, institutional and structural changes that have a positive, spiritual impact on all people.

In Judaism, our sacred texts teach us about humanity, restorative justice and equity. In the Talmud, we learn that all people are descendants of a single person so that no person can say, "My ancestor is greater than yours."³¹ "God created humanity from the four corners of the earth: yellow clay and white sand, black loam and red soil. Therefore, the earth can declare to no part of humanity that it does not belong there, that this soil is not their rightful home."³²

As we work to build a better American and global society, what would be different if we put the above text into practice? We would imagine the unimaginable! We would move two particularly important initiatives forward with the goal of healing our country from the inside out. First, we would look back at the history of our country and acknowledge the lasting harm caused by a series of horrific events that happened on our soil. We would create a national truth and reconciliation council that would provide recommendations for how we can begin to right the wrongs that happened and take the first step in a long journey of healing. Second, the federal government, through our education system and other methods, would create a national unlearning, relearning and learning campaign, one that provided the real history of this country, and a plan for healing and one of prevention, so these things never happen again.

We would do this all through the lens of radical, restorative and resilient justice. If we do our work through the lens of radical, restorative and resilient justice, we will bring every human being with us on this journey, leaving no one behind. Everyone will be seen *b'tzelem Elohim* and the beautiful tapestry of diverse humanity will be embraced and celebrated.

31 Talmud (Gemara) 37a

32 De Rabbi Eliezer. Pirkei 11:5-6

Come In: A Kairos Moment for the American Soul

James Samimi Farr

I want to invite you over; I want to welcome you in. Come in. This is a small house. There are young children running around. They are like joyful moons orbiting an old planet. Hello. I am 34 years old. I am a Bahá'í. Welcome to my project. What are we doing here? What time is it? This is South Minneapolis. We're trying to begin a conversation — to articulate something that seems to sit on the tip of our tongues. In late 2021, in response to the pandemic, mortgage interest rates dropped to a historic low and my wife and I dove through the swiftly closing door of the middle class. After the events of the previous two years, the isolation and the uprisings, it occasionally felt that we were living in the wet ashes of the American Dream. Joyce once wrote that history was a nightmare from which he was trying to awaken. Not all dreams are nightmares but all nightmares are dreams. What is the American Dream? And what might be the content of a new dream, a new narrative, that could compel us to awaken from it?

My home sits between two great symbols of what America is, what has been and what could be. One symbol is old; the other is new. About a mile east of the house lies the Mississippi River. Its source lies some hours north in Minnesota. I was married on its banks. It runs through the country from North to South like a life-vein, terminating in the Gulf of Mexico in Louisiana, where my dad's people come from. Seventy million years old, the river has been revered by every culture that has touched it. While its meaning has different tributaries, it culminates in a shared figurative meaning: it is the essence of shared American vitality.

But two miles from me lies another symbol. If I take a right on 38th Street instead of a left, I'll hit 38th and Chicago, where George Floyd was murdered in 2020. I drive by the square every week on my way to the Bahá'í Center, where I serve as a member of the Bahá'í community's Local Spiritual Assembly. It never fails to give me pause. Floyd's death rippled out across the world because it was emblematic of the American sham — it rebuked a naive self-conception of our country as an unmitigated land of opportunity with the starkest of reminders that this image is the property of the few, and even for most of these few its ownership is precarious, if not a mirage.

* * *

“We don't call it a riot here; we call it a rebellion.”

November, 2018. I am in Detroit, walking through the Heidelberg Project with some friends. My guide is filling me in on the history of the city, over which the 1967 uprisings loom like a large and ominous dolmen. I nod, and we keep walking.

The Project is a series of houses, some uninhabited, repurposed as public art. They are brightly painted, their lawns crammed with junkyard installations, their exterior walls adorned with found objects. Precise meanings elude the casual visitor, but against the backdrop of a majority-Black city that has been largely abandoned by industry, traumatized by corrupt government, and scarred by urban blight, the Project stands unmistakably as an act of joyful rebellion. I am lucky that day: Tyree Guyton, the artist behind the Project, is there, taking questions. It is unexpectedly cold, and my small party huddles around him, shivering and curious.

My eyes scan the street that Tyree grew up on and later transformed, bringing out a latent beauty that not all could see. Notably, there are painted clocks everywhere. Their hands all point in different directions like a group of worshippers frozen in time.

“What’s the significance of the clocks?” I ask.

Tyree gives me a searching glance and responds obliquely, quoting Plato.

“Time is a moving image of reality,” he says.

Plato’s Greek has two different words for time. The most common, *kronos*, is our everyday meaning of time. The other, *kairos*, carries a qualitative definition. It means “the timely time” or, more simply, “the right time.”

After the tour, my party and I pile back into our guide’s old sedan, and he drives us back to the Boggs Center where he gives his time as a community organizer. The center is named after Jimmy and Grace Lee Boggs, philosophers and visionaries who saw in the hardships faced by Detroit an opportunity to build something new and better. In activist circles, Detroit is sometimes seen as a hub for visionary organizing: what can communities build in a place where institutions have essentially failed? Grassroots agricultural projects and community-owned internet technology cooperatives are just two examples. My guide and I are warming up on the second floor of the center. I’m surrounded by books and pamphlets, and a chalkboard is inscribed with various upcoming plans, actions and strategies.

“What is your conception of history?” the guide asks us.

* * *

“Consider the past.”

This is one of the first sentences of the *Kitab-i-Iqan*, a momentous treatise written by Baha’u’llah, the founder of the Bahá’í Faith. In it, he delineates a pattern in religious history: great divine figures come to humanity to bring forward a new way of being — and are almost always denounced, rejected, persecuted or ignored. The very thing that people long for is often the very thing that they reject once it is in front of them. Things are not always as they appear, and with the Divine lies an unavoidable element of surprise. There are currents of history coursing through and among us that we lack the ability to fully identify or know.

This is comforting. Wherever we look, we can find arguments for who we are or who we might be. But despite their claims to authority, or comprehensiveness, those arguments often feel helplessly incomplete. Have you also had the jarring and alienating experience of peering into what we are told America is, and not recognizing what is reflected back? Who are we? The longer the American experiment wears on, the more overwhelming this question seems to become, as its premises strain beneath the weight of what they have allowed to follow from them.

Religious perspectives on this question often come with a sense of direction: If there is a story of America, there is an Author behind it. Often, however, this sense of authorship has been conflated with exclusivity — here we might think of the doctrine of Manifest Destiny. Morally repugnant, this way of capturing America’s narrative is also bad storytelling. If our story has an Author, how could it be possible for us to fully know the Author’s intent?

My community-building work inspired by Bahá’í teachings has allowed me to imagine new ways of being an American. In whatever community they reside, Bahá’ís have been charged with building, shoulder-to-shoulder with their neighbors, patterns of community life based on the creative elaboration of spiritual principles. This finds expression in several discrete activities: children’s classes, spiritual empowerment programs for younger youth, study circles and devotional gatherings — none of which are tethered to a single religious truth, all of which demand elucidating what a shared moral framework might look like to remake tighter community bonds.

Several times a week, I welcome small groups of friends, some Bahá'í, some not, into my home to have conversations, reflect on service and plan. We have exploratory conversations about sacred writings, current events and social change. We often disagree. But slowly, the more we gather, we feel a shared sense of purpose begin to bubble up among us — one that feels distinctly contrapuntal to the forces of division, polarization and hatred that have come to characterize so much of our public discourse. Week by week, my friends and I come to our conversation bearing the weight of what we have been told America might be, accounts that have all the heft and inspiration of a paperweight. While we do not put these accounts aside during our conversations — indeed, they inform our conversations to a great extent — there is a sense of keeping them somewhat at a distance, as we dream together of what a better future might look like.

Over the course of these gatherings, a most liberating possibility has struck me: It is not for me on my own to define the content of a constructive American narrative. But through a process of opening my home to my neighbors and friends and beginning to articulate a collective vision, I can begin to see the outline of a sentence that we might contribute to that story. It's as though, at the horizon of our conversation, the ghost of an answer is starting to take shape to the question of who we might be. Maybe this is at the heart of my community-building efforts: not to redeem a Dream, but to redream it.

But that dream, that answer, is not the property of any one of us. It is something so large and so grand that each of us can only see a small piece of it, as though we were children peering out at our parents through a keyhole. Through serving our communities together, we broaden the keyhole, expanding our visions as we fuse our hearts and fortunes together. I wonder: should enough people take up this kind of work and these kinds of conversations, could a new story of America emerge?

* * *

“What time is it on the clock of the world?”

In 1974, seven years after fires lit up Detroit, in their book *Revolution and Evolution in the 20th Century*, Jimmy and Grace Lee Boggs posed this question for the first time. It would obsess them for the rest of their lives, fueling much of their efforts to build a new America.

Like the Heidelberg Project, it's a creative prompt without precise significance. But one way to answer it today is that we are in a *kairos* moment for the American soul. Time is a moving image of reality, and American history is a wheel, spinning over and over again on an axis that has yet to be defined.

Who are we? What time is it on the clock of the world?

Tick-tock.

The Relational Is Transformational

Elizabeth Conde-Frazier

It's About Our Identities

In a phone conversation with my sister, she displayed an enormous amount of energy and passion around being bothered over the issues of vaccination for COVID-19. This led to our talking about issues of immigration, morality and abortion, and we realized how different we were. Even when we held the same positions, we came to them for different reasons. I hadn't realized that we had become so different from one another. It caught me off-guard and caused me at first to leap into my position, taking a stand for it like a soldier defending territory. This was not about the issues we were discussing but about our identities. Our positions defined who we are and therefore we were unable to see them logically. This meant that much more was at stake. We couldn't make a judgment simply by making an objective analysis and evaluation. We needed to understand how the issue configured into the other's journey of life.

Perspective transformation has a psychological dimension. This is about how we come into our understanding of ourselves. The understanding of herself had informed our belief systems and consequently her lifestyle decisions. Our physical distance had not allowed opportunities to converse about our life journeys. We shared much in common, and our early experiences had been the same; still, the lack of conviviality had created gaps in knowing one another. The shared parts of our lives had created a foundation of trust between us. This made it possible for us to strategize to maintain the relationship while not needing to agree on everything. This is relational work which we deemed important enough to be able to accomplish other common goals.

Allow me to pause now to look at what was taking place in this vignette. We came to the discussion with assumptions of what was right and wrong and found that we were on opposite ends of the spectrum. We made a conscious decision not to demonize each other's positions because these were connected to our sense of self-identity. We were able to make this decision because trust already existed between us. We thought it important to maintain the relationship to accomplish greater things by way of the relationship. To come to this decision, we had to realize that the relationship was not just about emotional matters or a family affair. We could make things happen in the communities we belonged to, and we would need one another's knowledge and perspectives for this.

Citizens in a democratic society

Building relations across different world views and ideas about our society is not only important to us as individuals but also necessary for a democratic society. Citizens need to participate actively to help society advance, and the institutions of society need to protect and serve citizens and be responsive to them. Currently, this is not what we have in American society. There are many groups who feel disenfranchised, exploited and oppressed by the institutions of society. Public discourse — as seen, for example, in political debates — tends to antagonize further rather than helping people come to shared pathways forward. In this context, my experience with my sister highlighted for me some of the dynamics of moving forward in conversation despite our differences, and thereby understanding each other better and connecting more deeply.

Humanizing each other

How can we return to humanizing rather than dehumanizing each other when garnering support for a particular position or cause? Dehumanization begins by labeling the person and involves stigmatizing them. To stigmatize you, I identify you in connection with a negative characteristic. For example, immigrants are identified as criminals, persons who sell drugs and rape. Previously incarcerated persons are identified as unredeemable. Stigmatizing leads to stereotyping, thus distancing the group from the rest of society, i.e., marginalization. The process creates an ideology that rationalizes that the group is undeserving of the privileges of others. This process becomes a weapon against critical thinking because it creates a myth that we come to believe, and we thus see no need to research the issue further. Instead, when we hear the news that relates to someone of that group, in our minds, we figure, “Yes, they are like that, and yes, they deserve this unequal treatment.” In short, dehumanizing attitudes and behaviors are detrimental to social cohesion and can contribute to prejudice, discrimination and human rights abuses.

On the other hand, humanization refers to the process of recognizing, acknowledging and affirming the inherent dignity, worth and humanity of individuals or groups. Recognizing the humanity in others is a fundamental aspect of promoting equality, justice and positive social interactions that strengthen a democratic society.

To strengthen and sustain a democratic society we must become more than recipients of rights. It is necessary to become active contributors to the ongoing development and improvement of our communities and the broader society. How can we foster empathy, understanding and respect for the inherent value of every person, regardless of their background, identity, or circumstances?

World Religions: Sources of common values

This is where we turn to the resources of religions. World religions all have values which challenge us as persons beyond the tendency of creating identity by contrasting oneself with the other, thus creating an “us vs. them” mentality. Religious teachings direct us toward greater purpose and connection to one another. In this way, religion can contribute to social cohesion by providing a sense of community and shared values. Religious beliefs provide moral and ethical guidelines that influence individual and societal behavior and help us to imagine embracing others differently. I am not speaking of the particularities that define one religion or another but about the values or vision that a religion has that can provide alternative narratives to the society’s conflictive polarities. Some of these values are life, charity, solidarity, hospitality and humility, to name a few.

For example, in the Christian tradition we understand that at the core, God’s work is reconciliation (Colossians 1:19-20; II Corinthians 5: 18-20). It is amid human conflict and the violence of the cross that God’s love and forgiveness take place. While “Jesus was quite willing to provoke decision through his prophetic words and actions,” he did not seek to create destructive polarization but consistently invited his followers into loving solidarity.³³

Pope Francis’ encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, urges us to seek “a better kind of politics, one truly at the service of the common good” (no.154). Theologian Brian Robinette explains that the pope is “referring to those activities through which we can bring the light of our faith to the public square in order to further integrate human development, solidarity, justice and the common good.”³⁴ This makes critical examination of our positions and listening to each other’s different perspectives even more important, as much is at stake beyond our personal interests and identities. This means that conversation rather than debate is an important part of the process. It is through conversation that we face conflict as part of coming to reconciliation by open,

33 Brian D. Robinette, “Meeting Polarization with Loving Solidarity,” *C21 Resources*, Fall 2023, 2, <https://www.bc.edu/content/bc-web/centers/church21/publications/c21-resources/issues/journeyming-in-faith-amid-polarization.html>.

34 Ibid., 4.

honest and patient negotiation in a space where we are creating community, moving away from contempt, and looking to the humanization of all.

For example, immigration disrupts those moving their lives in pursuit of life's resources as well as to those who need to find ways to integrate newcomers into their perhaps already difficult and complicated lives. The humanization of all has the capacity to move us away from knee-jerk reactions to the creation of processes and integration that are proactive instead of reactionary. Where are these spaces for dialogue and critical examination?

Such spaces are where we might already come to exercise, rooting together for a local team, facilitating the growth of our children, teaching others our different cultures, talking about the everyday and simply being with one another. These spaces of conviviality are becoming less available. Local newspapers were a space where we learned about each other's schools, teams, deaths, marriages and local politics. Another example is broadcasts that provide different perspectives. In 1987, the Federal Communications Commission's fairness doctrine was ended. Under this doctrine, to keep their licenses, radio and television broadcasters had to give airtime for contrasting views to be heard on issues of national importance. When this was ended, the rise of news networks with opposing views emerged over and against each other such as Fox News and CNN. More currently, social media creates groups of common interests that result in the perpetuation of sectarianism.

Creating Community

This climate begs us to become intentional in creating spaces for strengthening community. This work begins with hospitality, in which we invite each other into a common space to simply be ourselves, to share at table, to share music, dance, play, to feel comfortable in each other's presence. Hospitality is where we are connected to one another and we offer attentive listening and a mutual sharing of lives and life stories which allow us to see from each other's eyes.

I have recently moved from New Jersey to Michigan, which has a culture and history very different from any other place I have lived in before. I was befriended by a woman at church, and we began to meet to have tea and conversation. As caregivers there were tips, advice and information that we could share, as well as stories of how this experience has changed and challenged us and how our faith is a source of strength. One day, as we shared about how we brought up our children, she confided that as they became teenagers, her children had become involved in things she did not approve of. She simply let go of control and allowed the experiences around them to shape them back into the values she wished.

That immediately created a sense of discomfort in me, and I knew that I would never have acted in a similar fashion. But why? As I quietly listened, I sought my soul for the source of my discomfort. When she finished sharing, we sipped our tea in silence for a bit. I looked at her and explained that, as a mother of brown children, I would never have done such a thing. When we let go of the control of our children, the state takes over, labeling them juveniles, and it is my continued supervision that protects them from forces I cannot trust in society. I saw her eyes widen as I said these things and after some silence she finally said, "I never thought of that."

Without condemning her, I realized that because of our experiences as women of different races in this society we had lived different realities. We carefully asked questions and shared what those different realities have meant. From hospitality we have grown to meaningful engagement. We have internalized each other and the different experiences of our lives. These differences inform our vote on local issues. I can ask her about the history of the issue, and she asks me how it will affect me. If we multiply this exchange by having a block party or a church town meeting, the results can be exponential.

Creating such space is important because when we get to see the differences in each other's worlds it can provide transforming moments. These encapsulate convictional experiences that disrupt our previous

assumptive world and disclose dimensions of being not previously attended to.³⁵ It allows us to “re-ground and realign our ways of seeing and being.”³⁶ They can potentially re-story us. As we increase the frequency of our encounters, the far away realities of others become more present and “the faceless, surface others whom we did not know are revealed to us so that we are able to make connections between the everyday lives of our neighbors and ours.”³⁷ This allows the historical events of our time to enter our lives with new meaning. Our stories become intertwined, and we begin to internalize each other. From strangers we have become neighbors. We are growing into a neighbor consciousness.

Now it is possible to move to a sense of solidarity instead of polarity. This does not mean that we totally agree with one another but that we can connect with each other in society, and we are aware that there are others who are affected beyond our views and realities. Something in us seeks out other voices before we come to conclusions.

This may take place serendipitously as we find incidences that may affect us differently, disrupting the ability of one or both to thrive. We ask questions, investigate the issue at hand, use our connections and sources of information and influence, we bring others whom we believe can be helpful in problem-solving or who also are affected into the conversation, and we find our souls deepening and our imaginations expanding together. This is no longer the problem of one but of many together, for we realize, as we examine it, that it affects all. Differences of opinion take place, yet the ties we have formed throughout this process allow us to be open with one another because the thread of the fabric of our community is strong enough to sustain the tension of differences. The differences become resources, points of understanding and respect even if they are not points of agreement.

Conflict and Solidarity

Conflict is undoubtedly a part of this process. I find the insights of David Augsburger on conflict and mediation helpful.³⁸ He focuses on cooperative problem-solving rather than competition because the latter places emphasis on a victory, fueling the argument with misconceptions and faulty communication. For example, it focuses on either/or attitudes and what will bring victory to one and defeat to the other. Power is enhanced for one and minimized for the other. This opens the way for hostility, suspicion and defensiveness. “Cooperation on the other hand, focuses on trust, open communication, perceived similarity, concern for the other and an emphasis on mutual interests.”³⁹ We keep moving together toward the solution of a common problem and toward understanding how one direction or another can affect each one.

This is the slow forming of solidarity, of caring that helps to develop empathy which is based on our ability to grasp the experience of another. “Empathy allows us to step back from our own feelings, while not disavowing them, to put ourselves in the place of another by vicariously grasping that person’s emotional experience.”⁴⁰ Now we can confront or contradict misinformation or injustice because we are seeking the well-being of our neighbor based on our capacity to grasp his or her experience. Humility is the lens through which we see this. Humility is the capacity to see ourselves with sober judgment. We are not self-abasing but self-accepting. We do not see ourselves as greater than others nor do we see others according to the social and economic statuses of our cultures but according to our true human worth.⁴¹ We can then partner with

35 See James E. Loder, *Transforming Moment: Understanding Convictional Experiences*, Harper and Row, 1981.

36 Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, S. Steve Kang and Gary Parrett, *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation*, Baker Academic, 2004, 177. For further reading see Chapter 8.

37 Ibid.

38 David W. Augsburger, *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992.

39 Ibid., p. 50.

40 Leonard M. Hummel, “Heinz Kohut and Empathy: A Perspective from a Theology of the Cross.” *Word and World: Theology for Christian Ministry*, Winter 2001, 64-67.

41 *A Many Colored Kingdom*, 195.

one another by complementing each other's gifts and our goal turns toward interdependence, humanization and the thriving of all. This creates social trust. The continued practice of solidarity and respect nurtures charity, and charity can heal polarization.

The Relational is Transformational

Once we confessed to one another that we needed to do more relational work, my sister and I began to have more conversation around one issue that we both were passionate about- abortion. We set rules for listening to one another, we brought information from a variety of different sources and did the hard work of checking these for correctness, we vowed to seek common ground for the purpose of partnering around the best way to bring justice to those most affected.

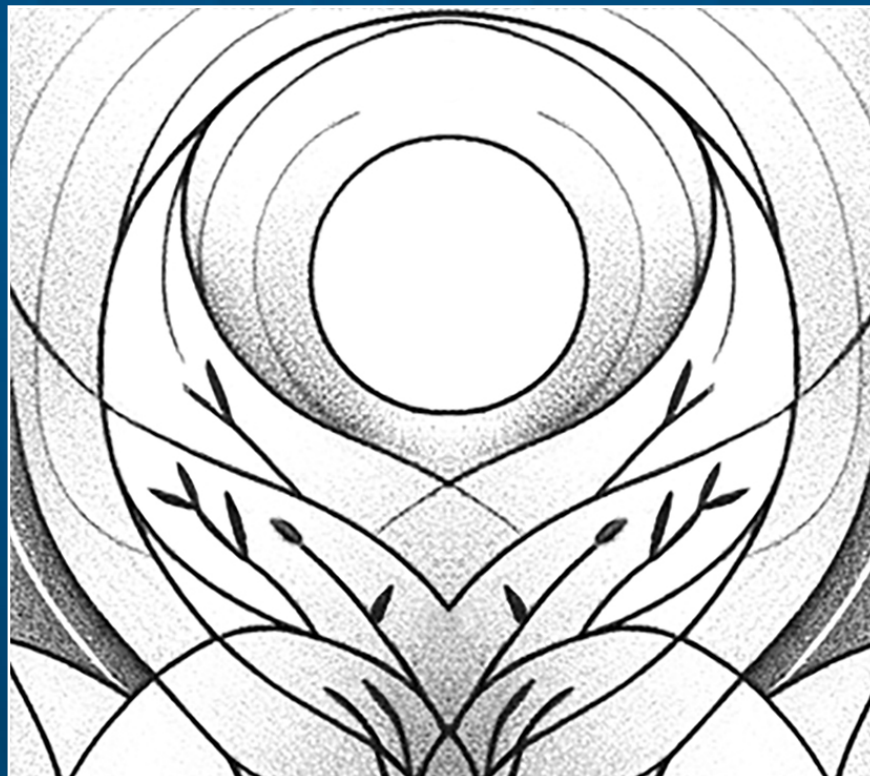
I continue to believe in a woman's right to decide about her body, and she continues to believe that this is too open a view because another life is at stake. However, she concedes that doctors still need to be able to fully explore and carry out the best options for the life of a mother without hindrances of the law. She works with her community to support women who find that having a child is an economic strain or strain on other goals in their lives. She understands with greater empathy when someone makes a choice to abort. I have come to agree with her on the sanctity of life, and she has come to expand her understanding of the sanctity of life to include fair wages, health care, quality education, adequate housing and childcare. The relational work helped us to listen, to negotiate conflict and to accept being transformed in our ways to express our views as citizens.

Moving away from polarizations involves relational work that builds community by having sustained conversation until we become neighbors to one another so that we can define and hold common values and goals for the betterment of our communities: locally, nationally, and eventually globally. We can seek resources for community building among our religious values. The ways of charity — hospitality, engagement, conversation, solidarity, empathy, humility, and collaboration — are some of the ways to rebuild the social trust that has eroded. The relational is transformational for the healing of our polarizations.

PART III

Forward-Looking Imaginings

Exploring narratives that could render the American experience as meaningful, inclusive, and forward-looking.



Narrative Of America: Ain't I A Muslim Woman?

Rahmah A. Abdulaleem

What does it mean to be an American? As I was leaving a country in the Middle East recently, the customs agents looked between me and my passport with confusion. My Muslim name does not follow the Arab tradition of a first or given name, the father's first name as the middle name and then the family name. Their puzzlement faded when they realized that I must not be Arab and thus not know or understand the Arab tradition.

But my puzzlement began again when I came back from an overseas trip and the US customs officer, after looking at my American passport — which clearly indicates I was born in New York! — still asked what country I was from. When I responded that I am American, then they asked, “How about your parents or grandparents? Where are they from?” Was this a day I was going to pretend to be oblivious to the microaggression that comes along with being a woman with a Muslim name and a head covering and must thus be foreign? Or is this a day to respond, “My people came over on slave ships,” so that the customs officer will know that I am African American?

This is the inner monologue that plays as you decide how to respond to those types of inquiries. Just like everyone else, you are exhausted from your travels but you still need to jump over this last hurdle: the hurdle of proving that you are American enough.

The imagery of running a race with multiple hurdles is an apt analogy of how one feels as a Muslim woman with a head covering whose skin coloring is just light enough to give the impression that maybe you are not African American. This experience, though, is not a sprint hurdles race. This is more like the steeplechase race where there are hurdles and water obstacles through which you have to power.

Imagine the discomfort of standing at the terminal getting additional questioning — questioning of who you are — when all of your non-Muslim friends with non-Muslim names can breeze right through customs with a smile and a welcome home. Your African American Muslim friends who do not have Muslim last names who somehow are looked at with the same head covering as just Afro-centric African American women instead of as a scary foreign Muslim woman. You are standing, jet-lagged, trying to determine how much to explain about your family history. Is this a day you have to explain that, yes, you were born in New York, and your mother was born in New York, and your grandmother was born in New York.

If these types of experiences were just limited to non-Muslims it would already be too much, but when it happens even more often in your small religious community it becomes at times overwhelming. Muslims are a minority in the United States that too many Americans assume are all immigrants or children or grandchildren of immigrants. But that is nowhere near the full story of Muslims in America. Muslims have been in America from the very beginning including, depending on the source, a significant number of them enslaved Africans. Writing on this under-appreciated fact, Precious Rasheeda Muhammad says that “people of Muslim heritage would come to number an estimated 15 to 30 percent of the American slave population over the course of slavery in colonial America and the United States.”⁴² But in the American Muslim community, African American Muslims are often viewed as not Muslim enough. It is something that I have been battling my entire life. In non-Muslim circles, I am easily accepted as a Muslim; but in Muslim circles, I have to fight to prove my Muslim identity. I find this to be unacceptable.

42 Precious Rasheeda Muhammad, *Muslims and The Making of America*, Muslim Public Affairs Council, 2013, 9.

Chapter 49, verse 13 of Islam’s sacred scripture, the Quran, declares: “O humankind! We have made you... into nations and tribes, so that you may get to know one another. The noblest of you in God’s sight is the one who is most righteous.”⁴³ The Muslim community around the world is so diverse, and that diversity is reflected in the Muslim community in America. Muslims are instructed by our holy book to get to know other people from different parts of the world. In his final sermon, Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessing be upon him) stated what is clearly an anti-racism message when he mentioned no Muslim is better than another based on their tribe or nationality or ethnicity or race. This was a powerful message for the early Muslims who were very tribal. The verse from the Quran along with the message by Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessing be upon him) serves as a powerful message for me as a Muslim and what I want to see here in America. The Quran in chapter 17, verse 70 declares: “We have given dignity to the Children of Adam.” For me, dignity is the sum of how we should treat each other as human beings — not barely tolerated but respected.

We as an American society often speak using the Judeo-Christian commandment of “Love your neighbor,” but have we really ever fully wanted to love them? Too often we otherize groups of people who do not look like us or speak like us or dress like us. I would love for America to live up to its equal rights for everyone. I want it to be a place where immigrants are welcomed and not dehumanized or ridiculed. We are all unique as human beings and as Americans we need to really start treating each other better. I believe that America’s history of religious pluralism can be a guide of what we can be. The founding fathers had influences from various religions when they put together the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. For example, at the Library of Congress there is a copy of Thomas Jefferson’s Quran. I, like so many others, can see aspects of my faith in our founding documents. Instead of focusing on our differences, our society should focus on what we have in common. This poem is my personal reflection of the tension I have experienced as an African American Muslim woman here in America that touches on both my African American and Muslim identities.

Ain’t I a Muslim woman?

Yes, I am.

Ain’t I a Muslim woman?

Yes, I am an African American Muslim descended from the enslaved Africans brought to this country.

Ain’t I a Muslim woman?

Yes, I understand how important lineage is in Islam but unfortunately as an African American I can only go back so far because of slavery.

Ain’t I a Muslim woman?

Yes, I have a full Muslim name as my parents changed the family name to a Muslim name when I was younger.

Ain’t I a Muslim woman?

No, I am not a recent convert. My parents converted or as we like to say reverted to Islam before I was born.

Ain’t I a Muslim woman?

No, I don’t need your help learning the basics of being a Muslim such as how to pray as I have been a Muslim all my life.

Ain’t I a Muslim woman?

⁴³ This translation and others in the essay were taken from Quran.com in the first half of 2024.

No, I don't need you to tell me the correct pronunciation of my Arabic name. My parents gave me this name and this pronunciation.

Ain't I a Muslim woman?

No, I don't need you to tell me how to cover as an African American Muslim woman.

Ain't I a Muslim woman?

Yes, I am expressing my identity as an African American in how I choose to dress modestly.

Ain't I a Muslim woman?

Yes, we have special foods from our Muslim community too. Let me share my bean soup and bean pie.

Ain't I a Muslim woman?

Take me seriously when I tell you about who African American Muslims are and stop listening to stereotypes about African Americans and African American Muslims that you have learned from the media and other communities to judge us.

Ain't I a Muslim woman?

Yes, I was born for the Mission. My community elders told all the children that as we were growing up.

Ain't I a Muslim woman?

Yes, after years of struggle I have finally found my mission which is to empower the African American Muslim community.

Ain't I a Muslim woman?

Yes, I am a leader in my American Muslim community and I am an African American Muslim Woman.

New Birth of Freedom: Examining Alternative Intersections of Abortion and Religious Liberty

Lindsey Danziger

In June 2022, Lisa Sobel, an ordinary Jewish mother from Louisville, did something she never thought she would do. She filed a lawsuit — along with two other local Jewish moms, Sarah Baron and Jessica Kalb — suing the state of Kentucky for violating her religious freedom. Lisa’s spiritual and religious beliefs supported her desire to have more children using in-vitro fertilization and to not put her life on the line with a high-risk pregnancy. With the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, several unenforced Kentucky laws went into effect, complicating the IVF process and banning almost all abortions. The three Jewish mothers dreamed of expanding their families safely and thoughtfully, in consultation with their partners, doctors, and spiritual beliefs. But the new laws, grounded in a theological belief held by some Christian sects that life begins at conception, would make it impossible for the women to receive therapeutic lifesaving abortions if complications arose in their high-risk pregnancies. Furthermore, since IVF usually produces more embryos than are implanted, Kentucky law required the women to pay indefinitely to freeze them or transgress the state’s fetal homicide law by disposing of them. “As a mom, as a woman, this directly affects me, it affects my health care,” Lisa Sobel told the *Louisville Courier-Journal*.⁴⁴ She told the Associated Press, “And then it’s a personal affront to my personal religious views, on top of it. As somebody who is a person of faith, that’s just wrong to me.”⁴⁵

Like Lisa’s story, the book of Exodus also tells the story of what happens when Jewish women are deprived of reproductive freedom. Pharaoh instructs the Hebrew midwives, Shifrah and Puah, to kill every male Israelite baby delivered. Instead of bowing their heads and going along with the law of the land, the midwives bravely defy Pharaoh. They tell him that the Hebrew women are more vigorous than Egyptians: that by the time the midwives arrive, the women have already given birth and what happens to the baby is out of their hands.⁴⁶ They played upon Pharaoh’s bigotry, his fear of the other, his willingness to believe that the Israelites were of different stock and animalistic, in order to save Hebrew baby boys. The bravery of Shifrah and Puah calls modern American Jews to employ our status as different — part of society in many ways, yet set apart in others — to fight for reproductive freedom where it is denied.

One hundred and forty years before Lisa Sobel sued Kentucky for the right to practice her religion, a different Jewish woman penned the words, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.”⁴⁷ The fact that Emma Lazarus’ words were chosen to adorn the Statue of Liberty, the symbol of the American Dream, represents the deep connection the Jewish community felt to the possibilities of this country. Its promise of escaping persecution to a land where acceptance and equality were law became the goal for many Jews. Likewise, the American Jewish community are often cited as the poster children of

44 Joe Sonka, “Jewish Women Sue to Block Kentucky Abortion Ban, Say It Violates Religious Freedom,” *Louisville Courier-Journal*, October 6, 2022, <https://www.courier-journal.com/story/news/politics/2022/10/06/jewish-women-sue-kentucky-abortion-ban-defying-religious-rights-halakhah/69536309007/>.

45 Bruce Schreiner, “Jewish Women Cite Faith in Contesting Kentucky Abortion Ban,” *Associated Press*, October 6, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/abortion-2022-midterm-elections-health-kentucky-legislature-26ecd225013231ee8766248633d289a3>.

46 Exodus 1:19, TANAKH: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text, Jewish Publication Society, 1985.

47 Emma Lazarus, *The New Colossus*, 1883, inscription carving, Statue of Liberty, New York, New York.

American self-made success. Since its founding, Jewish Americans have been part of the American story. From the earliest American Jews, fleeing Spanish expulsion in the 1490s⁴⁸ through the Jewish emigration from Soviet Russia in the 1980s,⁴⁹ the American Dream was the progress towards more safety and upward mobility for roughly half of world Jewry. In fact, the United States was the first country in the world to grant Jews equal rights by law.⁵⁰

Like other immigrants and ethnic and religious minorities, Jews had to strive for the legal equality on the books to become common practice. The early Reform Jews sought acceptance in American society by changing their religious practice to be more like that of their decorous Christian neighbors: removing choreography from worship, reciting prayers in English instead of Hebrew, and even moving their prayer service to Sunday instead of Saturday to match the rhythm of church-going communities. During the twentieth century, Jews were gradually granted admittance into the markers of society that had shut them out: elite universities, attractive employers, well-to-do neighborhoods and social clubs. Even so, an underlying conditionality of their acceptance into society lingered, stoked by prominent antisemites like Henry Ford and the populist movement. Today, many American Jews see themselves as an integral part of the fabric of American society, but conditional acceptance still lurks below the surface. In state legislatures across the country there is a growing trend of allowing conservative interpretations of Christian beliefs to bleed into the laws that deeply impact individuals' lives. From who can marry⁵¹ or what type of counseling students receive in public schools,⁵² to when life begins and is therefore protected by law, American Jews are seeing a surge of legislation transgressing their religious freedom and legally imposing another belief system upon them.

Sociologist Philip Gorski of Yale University defines White Christian Nationalism as “the idea that America was founded by Christians who modeled its laws and institutions after Protestant ideals with a mission to spread the religion and those ideals in the face of threats from non-whites, non-Christians and immigrants.” He continues, “the phenomenon bubbles up during periods when white Christians feel threatened by outside forces — amplified by war, heightened immigration, or periods of economic instability.”⁵³ The spread of reproductive healthcare bans rooted in Christian religion is an example of this trend.

In state legislatures and courtrooms across the country, despite our nation's avowed commitment to religious freedom, one can see conservative Christian religious beliefs imposed on all citizens. With regards to abortion, the Missouri Legal Code reads, “In recognition that Almighty God is the author of life, that all men and women are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life... it is the intention of the General Assembly of the state of Missouri to defend the right to life of all humans, born and unborn.” In *Preterm-Cleveland v. Dave Yost*, the 2022 Ohio case about the legality of that state's six-week abortion ban, the state called Dr. Dennis Sullivan, a professor at a Christian college to the witness stand. Sullivan testified that humans' “intrinsic value” begins at conception, and that that idea “is crucial to the most prominent Christian understanding of human dignity.”⁵⁴ In addition to the painful interference in their private medical lives, it is no wonder that Lisa Sobel and her co-plaintiffs also saw their state's laws explicitly transgressing their religious freedom.

48 For more information on the expulsion of Jews from Spain, see Haim Beinart and Jeffrey M. Green, *The Expulsion of the Jews from Spain*, Liverpool University Press, 2002.

49 For more information on Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union, see Robert B. Cullen, “Soviet Jewry,” *Foreign Affairs* 65, no.2 (Winter 1986), 252–266, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20042977>.

50 Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy*, Harper Collins, 2008, 438.

51 Kimberlee Kruesi, “Explainer: Anti-LGBTQ Marriage Bill Sparks Criticism,” Associated Press, April 10, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/us-supreme-court-tennessee-marriage-lifestyle-couples-0cd64047dbf15682f7f3ddf2d06d6a89>.

52 Melissa Manno, “Some Texas School Boards Love Chaplains — but Read the Fine Print,” San Antonio Express-News, February 4, 2024, <https://www.expressnews.com/news/education/article/texas-school-boards-love-chaplains-read-fine-18635138.php>.

53 Yale Institution for Social and Policy Studies, “Understanding White Christian Nationalism,” <https://isps.yale.edu/news/blog/2022/10/understanding-white-christian-nationalism>.

54 Madeline Fening, “Ohio Jewish Rabbis React to State Expert Offering 'Christian Understanding' of Abortion Law,” *CityBeat*, Cincinnati News, October 25, 2022, <https://www.citybeat.com/news/ohio-jewish-rabbis-react-to-state-expert-offering-christian-understanding-of-abortion-law-14029771>.

Jewish tradition teaches that life begins and ends with breath⁵⁵. The Hebrew word for breath, *nefesh*, is also the word for “soul.” In stark contrast, many state legislatures define life as cardiac activity in line with one Christian interpretation. The resulting “heartbeat bills” ban abortions at around six weeks, before many people know they are pregnant. In one Torah portion the status of the fetus is explicitly spelled out. The Torah instructs that if a pregnant woman herself is injured, then it is a criminal matter and the offender is punished accordingly. But, if just the fetus is harmed and not the woman, it rises only to a mere civil matter, and her family is owed monetary compensation rather than punishment.⁵⁶ So aware is the Jewish community that their tradition stands at odds with contemporary abortion laws that the Sabbath when this Torah portion is read has been dubbed “Repro Shabbat” by the National Council of Jewish Women and Jewish communities across the country observe it with education and activism.⁵⁷

The Jewish reproductive rights activists of today are following a longstanding tradition whose blueprints were laid by their forebears. In the 1960s, before Roe, a group of Protestant ministers and Reform rabbis formed the Clergy Consultation Service to identify safe and affordable abortion sources and connect women to this vital resource. Arlene Carmen, a Jewish woman, served as the organization’s administrator, posing as a pregnant patient to vet clinics and healthcare providers, then connecting thousands of women to the care they needed.⁵⁸ The Clergy Consultation Service proudly used the word “abortion” to destigmatize the procedure and brazenly advertised in major newspaper outlets across the country as their network grew. The rabbis who joined this fight often did so openly and with the support of their congregations.

The story of the Exodus starts with Shifrah and Puah outsmarting Pharaoh, but it ends marching toward the future and writing down their vision of a lawful, faithful and interdependent society. Scripture states that when the Israelites left Egypt, they did not go alone but were accompanied by a “mixed multitude.”⁵⁹ Traditional Jewish commentary concurs that this mixed multitude included Egyptians and members of other nationalities who joined in solidarity with the Israelite slaves. They were present during the Exodus from Egypt and they ultimately stood together with the Israelites at Sinai to enter into a sacred covenant with the Eternal. The lesson is clear: we cannot deliver ourselves from bondage alone. We must employ our faith and partner with those from the majority racial background and from minority backgrounds. Our safety and deliverance to true freedom lie in our unity and solidarity. This has been proven time and again during episodes of violent antisemitism and racial and religious discrimination against multiple groups. This is the path by which the Jewish community is seeking to restore religious and reproductive freedom to those in need of vital healthcare. It must be done in broad coalition, across diverse lines of difference, even alongside groups who do not agree on everything but can unite on this crucial topic. The result will be a society rooted in mutual respect and mutual freedom.

Today, Jewish communities across the country stand behind those in need of abortion because they have lived the dire consequences of abortion bans and because their own religious freedoms are on the line. In the summer of 2022 when Roe was overturned, several states immediately lost access to abortion and other forms of reproductive healthcare due to so-called “trigger laws.” In Ohio, like other states, abortion providers scrambled to figure out how to serve their patients in dire need of care. One route was seeking to freeze and overturn the bans through the courts. In Ohio, as the American Civil Liberties Union and a diverse coalition of those impacted worked to file suit on behalf of the providers, an obvious ally was the Jewish community, whose religious freedoms were suddenly threatened. Rabbis and cantors, who had often taken for granted the ability to pastor and advise congregants according to Jewish values, were suddenly faced with deciding between their religious convictions and the law of the land. As they saw states like Texas enact policies

55 Genesis 2:7; Mishnah Arakhin 1:4

56 Exodus 21:22-25

57 See, for example, “Repro Shabbat 2024,” Jews for Abortion Access, <https://www.jewsforabortionaccess.org/repro-shabbat-2024>.

58 Dennis S. Ross, “The Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion and the Legacy of Two Courageous Reform Rabbis and Religious Leaders Pre-Roe v. Wade,” *RavBlog*, May 18, 2022, <https://ravblog.ccamet.org/2022/05/clergy-consultation-service-on-abortion-rabbis/>.

59 Exodus 12:38

targeting anyone who aids in obtaining illegal abortions,⁶⁰ they wondered where the line was drawn. Could advising a congregant to get a lifesaving abortion lead to jail time? It seemed plausible.

As a result, the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism's Ohio chapter convened several dozen Jewish clergy members to help draft an *amicus curiae* brief in *Preterm-Cleveland v. Yost*, a lawsuit to halt enforcement of Ohio's abortion ban. The rabbis and cantors came together and worked with pro bono attorneys to craft a brief that showed how abortion was compatible with the Talmud, the Jewish legal statutes that evolved over generations of practice, as recorded by the greatest rabbis of our tradition. "Judaism focuses on the pregnant person's life," the brief states. "The focus of Jewish law is the saving of a soulful life (a person) defined by the word nefesh. A fetus is not defined as a nefesh. Rather, the Talmud recognizes that the fetus is a part of the woman's soulful personhood, rather than its own soulful being."⁶¹ Therefore, under Jewish law, the pregnant woman's life, health and well-being take precedence over the fetus."⁶² The brief articulated how in trying to push a minority religious conception on all citizens, Ohio's ban violates the First Amendment and the Establishment Clause, and was endorsed by 29 Jewish clergy and 10 other individuals, as well as several faith organizations.

The lawsuit was successful and the abortion ban was eventually temporarily frozen until it was overturned by constitutional amendment in 2023. That amendment was placed on the ballot and passed with the help of the Jewish community who rallied once again in support of reproductive and religious freedom. In synagogues and in the streets, in public and covertly, in accordance with their tradition and in the footsteps of their forebears, Jewish Americans, in deep and lasting partnership with other communities, will continue to fight for abortion access for all people. As descendants of a tradition birthed from a mixed multitude standing as one and pledging their belief in shared values, Jewish Americans must once again enact this vision for all Americans to access the healthcare they need and the religious freedom they deserve.

This example brings with it the hopeful truth that we can come to solidarity even with those who have different opinions on this topic. No one religion is monolithic, and those from backgrounds with seemingly different beliefs about when life begins and when it can end still bring with them various interpretations and lived experiences. Individuals are complex and contain inside them, multitudes. Although Catholicism is a religion perceived to take a hard line on abortion, Catholics for Choice is an organization fighting for reproductive freedom with the claim that the majority of Catholics in America actually believe there should be the freedom of choice. "Conscience, social justice and religious freedom are the three principles that have sustained our work for nearly 50 years," says the organization. "They are deeply rooted in the Catholic tradition and will continue to shape the way pro-choice Catholics and our co-conspirators will advocate for reproductive dignity for all."⁶³ They provide references to their tradition's rulings and founding theologians to back up their interpretation. Across the political spectrum it is also true that people do not fall neatly into camps and party lines on this issue. In a country where one in four women will have an abortion in her lifetime and few regret it,⁶⁴ people of all faiths and parties are intimately connected to someone impacted by this issue. Life experience and relationships overcome tribalism. The same voters in Ohio who voted for politicians who espouse anti-abortion rhetoric and policies, among other things, voted to pass reproductive freedom. It could not have passed without them.

On Rosh Hashanah 2023, a holy day celebrating the Jewish New Year, Rabbi Elle Muhlbaum of Fairmount Temple in Cleveland gave a sermon about abortion rights, access and dignity. She concluded her remarks

60 Emma Bowman, "As States Ban Abortion, the Texas Bounty Law Offers a Way to Survive Legal Challenges," NPR, July 11, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/11/1107741175/texas-abortion-bounty-law>.

61 (BT Chullin 58a; Responsa Torat Hesed (e.g. Rabbi Schneur Zalman Fradkin) Even ha-Ezer (EH) 42:7.) 6

62 Brief for Rabbi Jonathan Cohen et al. as *Amici Curiae* in *Preterm-Cleveland et al. v. Dave Yost et al.*, Case No. 2022-0803 in the Supreme Court of Ohio, available at https://www.supremecourt.ohio.gov/pdf_viewer/pdf_viewer.aspx?pdf=927775.pdf&subdirectory=2022-0803%5CDocketItems&source=DL_Clerk.

63 Catholics for Choice, "Three Principles of Pro-Choice Catholicism," <https://www.catholicsforchoice.org/three-principles>.

64 Margot Sanger-Katz, Claire Cain Miller and Quoc Trung Bui, "Who Gets Abortions in America?", *The Upshot*, *New York Times*, December 14, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/12/14/upshot/who-gets-abortions-in-america.html>.

by hearkening back to the brave Hebrew midwives, Shifrah and Puah. “Shifrahs and Puahs are medical professionals, clinic escorts, abortion fund volunteers and full-spectrum doulas,” she said. “These folks are the miracle workers of liberation who provide care every step of the way so that people can intentionally decide if, how and when they may choose to become parents.” Her congregation erupted in applause and gave her words a standing ovation.

Bearing Witness: Truth, Reclamation and Meaning-Making in Contested American Narratives

Nicole Pressley

America has an identity crisis. From the kitchen table to the pundits' table, we are grappling with a fundamental question that permeates our current political climate: who are we? Our nation is entangled in debates over critical issues such as gun control, police violence, abortion and climate change. The essence of these debates can be summarized as “Who has the right to live, and who is expendable?” or “Who has autonomy over their bodies, and whose bodies are subject to state control?” Legislation across various issues reflects a society where some individuals are valued while others are deemed disposable. This challenge in these questions is not merely political, but deeply spiritual. Our navigation of this political moment demands practices that address our spiritual and social incapacity to acknowledge our shared humanity, paving the way for a society that can truly uphold this sacred truth.

Our identity is intricately woven with the narratives that circumscribe our culture — its systems, institutions, politics and values. Narrative serves as a vital conduit through which we transmit culture and make sense of our existence in the world. Thus, narratives shaping an American identity rooted in histories of injustice and dominance are, at best, incomplete and, at worst, perpetuate the cultural norms that breed such injustices. Concepts such as American exceptionalism, the Nation of Immigrants, the Doctrine of Discovery, Make America Great Again and America First all contribute to shaping the material and existential conditions of our present reality through narratives that either distort or uphold historical truths.

“So what can we really do for each other except — just love each other and be each other’s witness? And haven’t we got the right to hope — for more? So that we can really stretch into whoever we really are?”

— James Baldwin⁶⁵

To get at the root of these issues, we need a process to grapple collectively with the histories and narratives that have produced our current condition. As James Baldwin suggests, the radical act that may offer a lasting solution to this crisis is deeply rooted in religious practice: bearing witness. In Baldwin’s perspective, bearing witness entails loving one another by recognizing our shared humanity. It requires opening ourselves to truths and stories that have been overlooked or manipulated and bravely forging new relationships grounded in a mandate of loving mutuality and care. America, collectively, must bear witness to the truth of its history and current political tension in order to craft a more honest and just narrative of our identity.

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

— Jesus⁶⁶

“Bearing witness” necessitates both acknowledging truth and taking public, often political, action. For example, Jesus’ defiance of the status quo posed a threat to the Roman Empire, ultimately leading to his

65 James Baldwin, *Another Country*, Dial Press, 1962.

66 Matthew 16:15 (New International Version)

execution. Being a follower of Jesus thus meant embracing risk and challenging power, as exemplified in the story of Peter's denial. Peter privately acknowledged Jesus' true identity but, when faced with the consequences of public alignment, denied him. This illustrates that true witness requires us to go beyond knowing the truth or declaring it only when it is politically expedient.

It is not enough to know the truth nor is it sufficient to declare the truth only when it is politically expedient. Bearing witness requires us to act with integrity and resist being complicit in the oppression of others. It may call on us to confront Senators proposing legislation that denies healthcare to those in need. It may call on us to withdraw our financial support from businesses that violate environmental policy. It may require welcoming our neighbors across borders, repatriation of land, and redistributing resources. There is always risk when speaking truth to power, yet this very radical act is essential to coauthoring a story that can liberate us all. Bearing witness binds us together; it moves us into an understanding of our interdependence without forsaking our values or our neighbors.

The question of who we are — and the risks we are willing or unwilling to take to be who we say we are — has been the primary preoccupation of our current political context. The Narrative Initiative, born out of the deepening political divides following the 2016 elections, supports social change ecosystems by equipping movements with narrative techniques to connect and mobilize people across differences and at the level of values. Their Waves model posits narrative as a bridge between the stories we tell about ourselves and our world, and the values we hold.⁶⁷ It gives us a method to critically engage our current social and political condition through bridging our values and context in ways that generate stories capable of guiding our actions into better alignment with our most liberatory values.

Witnessing serves as a potent narrative and spiritual intervention in these perilous times. While rooted in religious practice, it has played a pivotal role in social movements challenging narratives that perpetuate oppression. For instance, the civil rights movement, largely organized by people of faith, utilized messaging anchored in Christian and popularly named American values of justice and equality to effect change. By tapping into shared values and employing strategic narrative interventions, these movements succeeded in altering public perceptions and catalyzing societal transformation.

Narratives shape our understanding of social issues, such as poverty. Some narratives portray poverty as a deserved condition resulting from personal failure, while others frame it as a consequence of systemic injustice. If it is a deserved condition, we are then free to levy punitive solutions for poverty: work requirements for SNAP, criminalizing tent cities, or poor-quality public housing. If it is a result of systemic injustice, we are implicated in that system through action or inaction. Each narrative reflects different value systems, influencing our attitudes and policy responses. By reframing poverty as a product of systemic inequality, we are compelled to acknowledge our collective responsibility and seek transformative solutions.

Witnessing is a scalable strategy that leverages individual and communal values. It does not always necessitate mass mobilization but can be enacted on a community and individual level to effect change. For instance, in defeating a proposed amendment to define marriage as solely between a man and a woman, the Vote No campaign in Minnesota utilized "deep canvassing" to engage voters in values-based conversations to foster a broader coalition with different political affiliations but shared values. Before volunteers knocked on doors or joined a phone bank, they participated in storytelling training. They learned to connect with voters around shared values of equality, human dignity and freedom that not only changed the voters' political behavior, but also how they understood themselves as Minnesotans and Americans. It did not transform all voters into gay rights activists, but it created a broad coalition that refused to inscribe some religious beliefs into law.

Challenging dominant narratives alone is insufficient to sustain social movements. Prophetic truth-telling is essential to expose the falsehoods and injustices perpetuated by prevailing narratives. As exemplified by

⁶⁷ For an introduction to the Waves model, see the Narratives Initiative's blog entry on their work: "Waves: A Model for Deep Narrative Change," Narrative Initiative, July 8, 2020, <https://narrativeinitiative.org/blog/waves-a-model-for-deep-narrative-change/>.

the civil rights movement and the Vote No campaign, affirming the humanity and dignity of marginalized communities while fostering solidarity and care within one's own community fortifies resistance to dehumanization. It affirms and heals in a world that enlists the oppressed to adopt the very narrative that attempts to rob them of their agency and humanity.

“In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh.”

— Toni Morrison⁶⁸

Healing is spiritually and politically radical. In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the character Baby Suggs delivers a sermon in the clearing to formerly enslaved Black people. It does not center the oppressors “yonder.” Indeed, there is no discourse between those figured as oppressor and oppressed. Instead, Baby Suggs invites them to witness to one another, to shed dehumanizing narratives created by their oppressor and reclaim themselves as humans who laugh, cry, dance and have bodies deserving of love, care and rest.

Here, we can understand how the Black church and religious praxis have been a powerful force in so many of our most robust social movements. The Black church created a space where Black people could be addressed as sir and ma'am or brother and sister, and could sing and testify about their lived experience in a profound reclamation of their humanity. Under political institutions like American chattel slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration, this community witness provides the community validation and affirmation for sustained resistance to dehumanization. We find this in the “I Am a Man” signs at the Memphis Sanitation Strike, Sojourner Truth's “Ain't I a Woman” speech, and today's Black Lives Matter movement. Each resists dehumanization in ways that do not merely beg for recognition from their oppressors, but engages self-affirmation to create hope and a long vision of justice.

Witnessing as a collective spiritual and political practice is a radical and transformative act. When we move closer to a shared story, we become aware of and can dismantle the systems and institutions that no longer validate our worldview. It begins the process of creating a new story that is both substance and evidence of the new world we are calling into being.

68 Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, Knopf, 1987.

The Stories of Our Names

Nina Marie Fernando

What is the story of your name? Is it a family name passed down through generations, a character from a sacred text, a pop culture reference or something else? Is your name considered easy or hard? Long or short? Boring or weird? Common or uncommon? Has your name been a source of tension because it led to experiences of bullying, discrimination or stereotyping? Perhaps your birth name brought about shame or disassociation and you have now chosen a new name for yourself that feels more aligned with who you are. Maybe you love your name and feel a sense of pride and joy hearing it spoken aloud. We all have to fill out something on the “Name” line. We all have stories.

Back in 2021, through my role at the Shoulder to Shoulder Campaign: Standing with American Muslims, Advancing American Ideals, I worked with the Muslim Youth of North America (MYNA) on a social media storytelling project, #AboutMyName, to encourage more listening and sharing of the stories of our names. From this project emerged deep discussions about how, depending on the context and circumstance, some names are prioritized and centered and some are disregarded or deemed suspect. We also spoke about how our names often evoke faith and family in ways that ground us within a larger story that spans across generations.

The stories of our names are part of a rich tapestry of American narratives. They are about the reality of our history and how we make meaning in the broader project of creating a pluralist society where no matter someone’s name, no matter their religious or ethnic background, they can be treated with dignity and respect. If we can learn one another’s name, what it means, how to pronounce it and how it relates to our own stories, perhaps we can also learn to truly care for one another across barriers that have traditionally separated us.

Here are some of my family stories:

Nimal Wistan Fernando

“My name is animal, without the ‘a.’” With a charming grin, my *Thathi* (“Dad” in Sinhala) tells his dad-joke to the person struggling to pronounce his first name.

Sri Lanka, the island where my parents were born and raised, was colonized by the British, Portuguese and Dutch before gaining independence in 1948. Nimal is a common Sri Lankan name. His middle name, Wistan, was influenced by the British, and Fernando was derived from Portuguese. *Thathi*’s birth father and his adopted father were both surnamed Fernando, though there was no family relation between them; Fernando is a common last name in Sri Lanka. There are so many stories to share about *Thathi*, like how his family was directly impacted by an armed insurrection in 1971, or how he took an internship in Holland that unexpectedly led to his sister falling in love with his Dutch colleague resulting in the creation of a whole Dutch contingent of our family, Dutch names and all. The Sri Lankan diaspora is far and wide.

Pauline Josephine Ramani Gunewardena

My *Ammi* (“Mother”) was given two Catholic names to pair with her Sri Lankan ones: one name for G-d, one after a family member, one for the island, with their family name at the end. Her six siblings were given the same pattern.

The Gunewardenas first immigrated to the United States from Sri Lanka after the 1965 Immigration Act, which opened the doors to more diversity in U.S. immigration. The U.S. Civil Rights Movement was in full swing, and as the only South Asians in a mostly Black and Latino neighborhood in Los Angeles, no one could quite place them.

Almost twenty years later, with many stories in between, Ammi found herself living back in Sri Lanka and unexpectedly met the man who would become my Thathi. They met at a dance in March of 1983. That same summer, a series of orchestrated acts of violence in the capital city, Colombo, targeted Tamil homes, like the one Ammi was living in, and Tamil businesses, like the one where Thathi worked. My parents told us stories of the awful things they witnessed, like how Thathi hurried to pick up Ammi from work on his motorcycle as buildings burned and violent mobs roamed the streets, even threatening to empty Thathi's motorcycle gas tank to fuel the violence. The horrors they witnessed, now known as Black July, marked the beginning of a brutal civil war that lasted over a quarter-century. My parents and their families made their way through the life-threatening circumstances, and ultimately my parents married in September of that same year and moved to start their own family in Southern California, where my sister and I were born and raised.

Nina Marie Fernando

My parents decided not to give us Sri Lankan names to make it easier for us to fit into American culture, as they understood it; they chose names that they simply liked the sound of. My sister, Lara, was named after hearing "Lara's Theme" from the film *Doctor Zhivago*. I was named Nina, after a lesser-known song from Swedish pop group ABBA, with the lyrics "Nina pretty ballerina / she is the queen of the dancing floor / she is the one you've been waiting for."

My middle name, Marie, is dedicated to Jesus's mother, Mary. Ammi had health issues and struggled to have children, and as a practicing Catholic, she prayed the rosary regularly with hopes of one day having children of her own. The rosary, in my own words, is a meditative prayer using prayer beads that channel the strong motherhood energy of Mary, mother of Jesus, as a foundation for prayers to G-d. Ammi believes that we are her prayers answered. My sister was a miracle baby (truly: she was in the newspapers being born prematurely) and I followed along shortly after, equally miraculous in their eyes. We both have the middle name Marie to honor my mother's promise to dedicate her miracle children to Mary as a tribute.

As noted above, my last name, Fernando, has many historic connotations from the time of Portuguese colonization in Sri Lanka. I am very used to explaining this because people often ask. I only later learned that "There was something in the air that night / the stars were bright, Fernando" are lyrics from yet another ABBA song.

Growing up in Southern California with my name, people often assumed that I was Latina, and by the look of our family, people often assumed we were Indian. Now, when people see me, a brown-skinned South Asian woman working for the Shoulder to Shoulder Campaign, a national multifaith organization countering anti-Muslim discrimination, they often assume I am Muslim. I think of it as an honor and a gift to be culturally, ethnically and even religiously ambiguous, to find a way to fit in anywhere, just a little and nowhere wholly. Being on the margins offers unique perspectives.

Noel Lane Andersen

By chance, fate or luck, I met Noel. From the first day, we had an insatiable curiosity about each other's stories and perspectives. With sky-high chemistry, an aligned sense of humor, shared values and a long list of other things, choosing Noel as a life partner was easy when that time eventually arrived.

Noel is of Northern European descent and a fourth-generation pastor whose name is a play on his great-grandfather's name, Knolton. Given that he grew up in small towns among new immigrant and Latino communities, eventually leading to his work in immigration, refugee advocacy and faith organizing, Noel answers without pause to both "Knowll" and "No-el." His grandfather's middle name, Lane, is shared among a few family members as a tradition in Noel's family. Regarding his last name, when I chose Noel to be my life partner, I knew I was signing up for a lifetime of getting annoyed for him for all the times I would have to correct people with, "It's spelled Andersen, with an '-en' not an '-on.'"

A few times, I've overheard my mother chatting with Sri Lankan relations, sharing, "Nina's married to an American." Once, I waited for her to hang up the phone and lovingly responded, "My American husband is also married to an American. And FYI, Ammi, you are American too."

Aiyan Abram Fernando-Andersen & Ashani Marie Fernando-Andersen

When Noel and I decided to grow our family, we put a lot of intention into naming our children. We imagined that others would perceive our kids as culturally, ethnically and even religiously ambiguous. Maybe they'll feel a little in-between like I did and often still do.

Aiyan means "gift of G-d," and Ashani means "thunder and lightning." We found these names and their meanings and fell in love. We wanted their names to have Sri Lankan and South Asian roots because it mattered that our babies feel a sense of pride and ownership toward that part of them and to be curious about the stories of their names. Noel's family has a tradition of naming children after family members, so Abram was for Noel's brother and Marie was for my sister and me. Both Aiyan and Ashani carry the hyphenated last name, Fernando-Andersen, as an ode to both of their lineages and all the stories within them. We hope their names will serve as a foundation for their understanding of who they are as they grow and become who they want to be.

Becoming a mother and a parent has been awe-inspiring, hope-filling and challenging. Because of Aiyan and Ashani, I want to become a better person. Their growth is an opportunity for mine. I am more motivated to do my small part to make this country and this world better for and with them.

United States of America

The name "America" is a nod to Italian explorer Amerigo Vespucci, who initiated the notion that the lands Columbus sailed to were part of a separate continent. While it is unclear who first came up with the full name "United States of America" (as opposed to the "United Colonies" or "American States"), Thomas Jefferson is credited as the first to use it while drafting the Declaration of Independence.

The United States of America means different things to different people. For my parents, it meant a place of hope and new beginnings. For me, while I am grateful for the freedoms and privileges this name represents, I struggle with aspects of it. I often interpret patriotism to translate to a kind of haughty exceptionalism and individualism — that the U.S. must always be at the top, our nation's needs met first; that it is okay for us to destroy the land, purge resources, go to war and devastate others' economies if it will benefit us; that we must secure our borders from the same people whose nations we have impacted.

The notion that European explorers "discovered" and claimed the Americas without regard or respect for the peoples who inhabited this land set a culture into formation where we are told explicitly and implicitly that some people are worth more than others. White Christians are too often portrayed as the ideal American, perhaps even as more American than others. These exclusivist norms are what allowed for the destruction of Indigenous peoples, for slavery and segregation, for the exploitation of immigrant laborers, and for other forms of hate and discrimination to take root. This is what deems certain names as "other" or compels my Ammi to say things like, "Nina is married to an American boy," knowing fully well that she and I are both American.

Yet, here we are. We find ourselves in the middle of this great American experiment, which in many ways is a revolutionary one. The notion that a country could be led by elected leaders rather than a monarchy inspired movements throughout the globe. Although the foundation of this country is flawed, it set a governmental system in motion that allows for continued evolution and progress that keeps our hope for true equity and pluralism alive. This country and its founding documents named a vision for being a land of freedom and equality, justice and liberty, a vision that is still unfolding and not yet fully realized.

In that same spirit, years ago, during one of our nation's many transitional moments, Sikh American civil rights leader Valarie Kaur so beautifully articulated this point:

So the mother in me asks what if? What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb but the darkness of the womb? What if our America is not dead but a country that is waiting to be born? What if the story of America is one long labor? What if all of our grandfathers and grandmothers are standing behind now, those who survived occupation and genocide, slavery and Jim Crow, detentions and political assault? What if they are whispering in our ears “You are brave”? What if this is our nation’s greatest transition?

What does the midwife tell us to do? Breathe. And then? Push. Because if we don’t push, we will die. If we don’t push, our nation will die. Tonight we will breathe. Tomorrow we will labor in love through love and your revolutionary love is the magic we will show our children.⁶⁹

Our Shared Names

I have always been drawn to the study of religion and culture, interreligious and intercultural engagement, because at its essence this work is about meaning-making: who are we in relation to others and even to that which is sacred? This is why the Shoulder to Shoulder Campaign’s multifaith approach to countering and preventing anti-Muslim discrimination in the USA is just one of many coordinated efforts I am compelled by. The name Shoulder to Shoulder Campaign comes not only from an illustration of how Muslims pray in community, but also an image of active solidarity across differences. It was founded on the notion that anti-Muslim discrimination is not just an issue that affects Muslims, but a problem that impacts us all; and that we each must do our part in making positive changes to build a nation that is truly inclusive and pluralistic.

Not everyone in our network agrees on everything and we believe that is our challenge, our strength and our opportunity. In the leadup to the 10th anniversary, Shoulder to Shoulder’s leadership decided to change the latter part of the organization’s tagline from “Upholding American Values” to “Advancing American Ideals.” This was to acknowledge that we cannot “uphold” injustice and racism and that our work is aspirational, that we have not yet reached our goal, our dream, our greater vision for American society.

How might we continually make meaning of our own stories, including the stories of our names, in relation to others’ stories? How can we redefine the stories and meanings of our shared names, our shared country, that is more inclusive of its rich diversity? Should we change our name altogether? Or perhaps there is a way to reclaim our name by unearthing and uplifting the multitude of stories of the many people who call this place home, perhaps even through tools like sharing the stories of our names.

There are countless efforts designed to uplift our many names and stories here in the United States of America, such as offering land acknowledgments, renaming National Parks after their Indigenous names, or saying the names (#SayTheirNames) of the Black lives killed unjustly. These efforts can result in concrete policy changes, cultural shifts, the creation of museums dedicated to memorializing and amplifying these stories, and to other forms of social change.

I have come to love my name and continue to make meaning of the stories behind them. Though colonization and violence are part of those stories, so are themes of resilience, faith, freedom and unconditional love. In a similar thread, I am continually tasked with making meaning of the United States of America, this unfinished project filled with stories that have yet to be heard and yet to be written. Knowing that our children are some small part of this meaning-making fills me with hope.

The simple act of sharing and listening to the stories of our names reminds me of our shared human dignity and creates new paths of understanding that build community and connection. It can deepen our empathy and compassion for one another across differences. It can ground and empower us to process and explore our individual and shared histories and identities. It can invite us to be curious about one another rather than fearful. It is our invitation.

What are the stories of your name? What are our shared stories?

⁶⁹ Valarie Kaur, "Watch Night Speech: Breathe and Push," Valarie Kaur's official website, January 8, 2017, <https://valariekaur.com/2017/01/watch-night-speech-breathe-push/>.

Editors

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Contributors

Rahmah A. Abdulaleem is the inaugural Chief Executive Officer of Soulful Muslims, a nonprofit organization thinking globally and acting locally to address challenges facing African American Muslim communities. Ms. Abdulaleem has coordinated and presented at educational and civil rights programs around the world and is an adjunct professor at the University of the District of Columbia's David A. Clarke School of Law. Ms. Abdulaleem graduated from Duke University with a double major in religion and sociology and a certificate in markets & management studies. She obtained her J.D. from the University of Michigan Law School. Ms. Abdulaleem is a cadette troop leader for a Muslim Girl Scouts troop in Maryland and is actively involved in the National Association of Muslim Lawyers, serving as president this year.

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James Samimi Farr is a writer, community-builder and Bahá'í living in Minneapolis. He previously followed the discourse on the role of media in society for the U.S. Bahá'í Office of Public Affairs. In this role, he worked closely with journalists to understand the norms of American media and evolve them to be more just, inclusive and unifying. James held a regular roundtable with writers and editors from such outlets as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Atlantic*, *HuffPost*, *Mother Jones* and others. His own op-eds have been published in the Religion News Service. He holds a master's degree from the Max Bell School of Public Policy at McGill University. He likes thinking about American community life and having people over for dinner.

Nina M. Fernando serves as Executive Director of the Shoulder to Shoulder Campaign: Standing with American Muslims, Advancing American Ideals, a multifaith coalition of religious denominations and faith-based organizations committed to countering and preventing anti-Muslim discrimination and violence in the United States by building a society where all are treated with dignity and respect.

Nina previously worked as a LankaCorps Fellow through the Asia Foundation in Sri Lanka, researching interreligious and intercultural conflict and coexistence. She has also worked as a faith-rooted organizer at Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice in Southern California. Her intersectional identities have informed her work as a multifaith community organizer, activist, vocalist and songwriter.

Nina holds an M.A. in interreligious and cultural studies from Claremont School of Theology and a B.A. in social change from the University of Redlands. Nina lives in Southern California with her spouse, Rev. Noel Andersen, and their children, Aiyana and Ashani.

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In March 2020, Dr. Jeung co-founded Stop AAPI Hate, a coalition that was awarded the 2021 Webby Award for social movement of the year. Dr. Jeung was named as one of the *TIME* 100 Most Influential Persons in 2021.

Nicole Pressley serves as the Organizing Strategy Director at the Unitarian Universalist Association, where she spearheads the Side With Love and UU the Vote initiatives. A Black, queer organizer and seasoned communications strategist, Nicole has committed her career to grassroots mobilization and capacity enhancement in areas such as labor, economic justice, and reproductive rights. In 2020, the Center for American Progress recognized her as one of the "Faith Leaders to Watch." Nicole earned a B.A. in African American Studies from Northwestern University and resides on the West side of Chicago.

Yolanda Savage-Narva (she/her) is the Vice President of Racial Equity, Diversity and Inclusion and Communities of Belonging for the Union for Reform Judaism and the Religious Action Center. She is currently a member of the boards of directors for the Jewish Federation of Greater Washington, Capital Jewish Museum, Leading Edge, American Jewish World Services and the Historic Sixth and I Synagogue in Washington. Yolanda is a member of the Aspen Institute's Racial Justice and Religion Collective and of Delta Sigma Theta, an international Black sorority dedicated to community service and education. Yolanda has made appearances on NBC's *Soul of a Nation* and ABC's *IMPACT x Nightline* and recently spoke at the March on Washington 60. Yolanda lives in Washington with her husband, Dr. Andrew Narva, and her son, Miles.

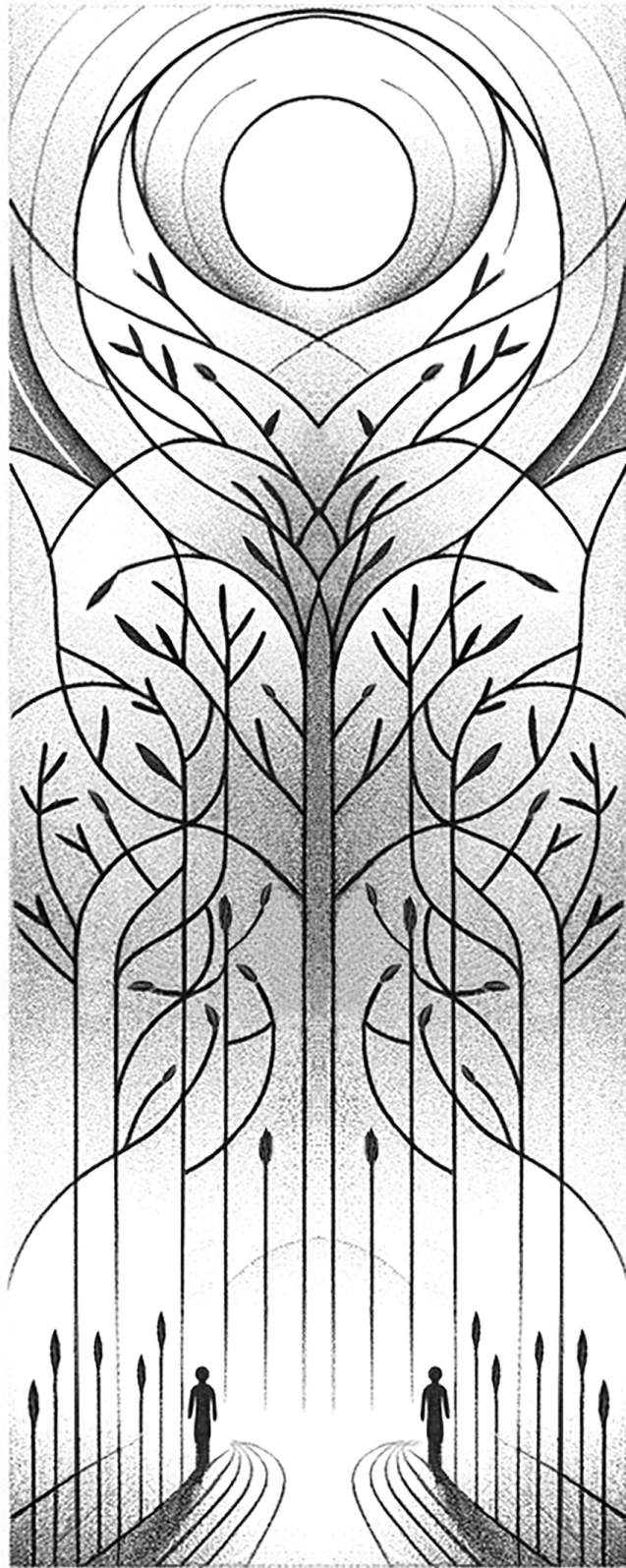
Simran Jeet Singh, Ph.D., is the author of the national bestseller *The Light We Give: How Sikh Wisdom Can Transform Your Life* (2022).

Simran's thought leadership on bias, empathy, wisdom and justice extends across corporate, educational and government settings. He holds fellowships with Columbia University, the Nelson Mandela Foundation and the Open Society Foundations. In 2020, *TIME* recognized him as one of sixteen people fighting for a more equal America.

Simran earned graduate degrees from Harvard University and Columbia University and he writes regularly for major outlets, including *Harvard Business Review*, *TIME*, and *Religion News Service*. Simran also authored the award-winning children's book *Fauja Singh Keeps Going* (2020).

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