Reparations For Slavery
by Cyndi Simpson

Today, I am here to invite you, individually and collectively. This invitation is for you to begin to consider, thoughtfully and carefully, the idea of making reparations to the African-American people of the United States for the crime of slavery that was committed against them. I particularly call you to thoughtfulness and carefulness, because there has been a great deal written on this subject that is non-rational, intemperate, and uninformative. It is a difficult part of a very large and difficult subject – the subject of the history and present status of race relations in the U.S.

Speaking of race, whenever I speak of race or racial issues, it is very important to remember that the concept of “race”, as we understand it, has no scientific validity. “Race” is not a term from any discipline or branch of modern biological science. It IS a scientific term, but from the 18th century, where lie the origins of such terms as “Caucasoid”, "Negroid” and “Mongoloid”. And just as we no longer turn to the Phlogiston Theory of the 17th century to understand the physics and chemistry of combustion, we should not turn to 18th-century ideas to understand the physical and other variations within the human species.

It is interesting that on the issue of human variation, many of us, including the authors of my high school biology text used in the 1970s, have clung to outdated science to describe ANYTHING about humans! However, while “race” is not a scientific term and has no biological meaning, it has a great deal of historical, social, and cultural meanings – and it is those meanings with which we wrestle in any discussion of race.

I want to begin a conversation with you on the subject of reparations that will be just that – an introduction to the idea, addressing first the case for reparations for slavery – why would we even consider such an idea, what is its basis and rationale? Secondly, I want to address what is meant by the concept of reparations – what kinds of compensation or rectification are being proposed and for whom?

Before engaging with the concept of what is meant by “reparations for slavery”, I want to establish a convention of referring to those who are proponents or supporters of the idea of reparations as “reparationists” for short. I’m just making that word up for ease of communication – can you follow me there? Thank you.

So, when we talk about “reparations for slavery” – what is it that we mean? Let’s look at the concept of “slavery” first. When reparationists use the word “slavery,” it is shorthand for something larger than slavery alone. They are not only referring to the time of slavery in the United States itself, which lasted 246 years, from 1619 until 1865, but also to the 100+ years of apartheid or segregation, known as the Jim Crow Era, that followed the ending of legal slavery. And, they are referring not only to the actual conditions of slavery and segregation, but to their consequences, as well.

The case for reparations, simply put, is that for over 346 years of slavery and its aftermath, continuing to the present day, African-American people have been subject to ongoing systemic violence, oppression and exploitation perpetrated by the dominant society, while the dominant society has benefited, with little compensation, from the contributions of African-American labor and creativity. This systemic violence, oppression, and exploitation of the African-American people has had. It continues to have a direct and devastating effect on their lives, not only because of the direct pain and losses inflicted, but also because of the consequences of being denied fair access and opportunities in the areas of education, law, housing, criminal justice, politics, employment and health care.

Before continuing to discuss these consequences, I want to briefly remind you of some of those direct pain and losses inflicted by slavery and its aftermath. African people were taken from their homes, forcibly and against their will, and brought to this country in conditions so horrible that many deaths occurred during the journey. Here they were sold as chattel into servitude, not allowed to speak their languages, practice their religions, or engage in any of their other cultural traditions. They were often not allowed to marry or form and maintain families, and their children were often taken from them to be put into slavery elsewhere. At the end of the international slave trade in 1807, they were bred like livestock to ensure slavery's continuation. They were beaten, tortured and killed, often with impunity.

After slavery ended in 1865, African-Americans were denied civil rights and assimilation into the broader society; segregation was developed and enforced in all areas of public life – voting, housing, education, health care, transportation and all public spheres, institutions and agencies. About 5,000 African-American men, women and children were lynched, in the vast majority of cases for crimes they did not commit. Many thousands more were killed and imprisoned unjustly with the complicity of the corrupt legal system – what may be called "legal lynchings". Between the Civil War and the 1930's, over 25 African-American communities were attacked and partially or completely destroyed. Thousands of homes and businesses were razed to the ground, and thousands of African-Americans were killed. I'm speaking of Wilmington, NC in 1898, Tulsa, OK in 1921, and Rosewood, FL in 1925.

The consequences of slavery and its aftermath for African-Americans include unemployment and underemployment, less education, less representation in political systems and structures, shorter life spans, more ill health, greater poverty and disproportionate incarceration, among many others. These negative consequences of slavery and Jim Crow are amply documented and indisputable. They are not the result of any inherent flaw or lack in African-American people, in spite of the promotion of lies to that effect, but the direct result of their treatment and history in this country. Even if it were true, as many people incorrectly believe, that African-American people now have equal opportunity and a level playing field in all areas of American life, and therefore that future benefits to African-Americans can and should accrue to them only in proportion to their efforts, this does not address their present unequal condition from which those efforts would have to spring, for which societal injustice is responsible.

There's a story here that I think can be useful in understanding the notion of the cumulative consequences of slavery and its aftermath – a story of a poker game. Imagine the history of black-white relations in the US as a poker game between two men, one black and one white. As they sit down to play poker, the African-American man has been forced to come to the table, is ill and wounded from being forced to the table, and does not speak the language of the game nor know its rules at first. While the game is in progress, the white person uses every means, fair and foul, to win – including all the forms of cheating and intimidation you can imagine. The white person also controls the rules of the game, changing them at will. After some time of play, in spite of their essentially similar intelligence and abilities, it is no surprise that most of the chips are on the white person's side of the table. Then, both of these men die, and their two grandsons sit down to continue the game. "Well," says the white man, from behind his giant pile of chips, "From here on out, we'll play by the rules!"

It is also important to note that the crimes against African-American's, while always committed by individuals, were supported completely by the entire array of government, legal, and other systems at the local, state,e and national level. Those individuals were often acting in systemic roles and at the system's behest – people such as elected officials, teachers and law enforcement officers. Our current government and systems of society are the direct continuations of the government and systems operating when the crimes of slavery and Jim Crow were committed. We cannot disassociate ourselves from them. Once we acknowledge this, reparationists argue, we are bound by our commitment to justice and fairness to repair the injustice. As Unitarian Universalists, I think we are particularly called to right the wrongs against African-Americans by our Principles, particularly the First, the Second and the Sixth – that we affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person, that we affirm and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations and that we affirm and promote the goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.

As a denomination, we are also taking a special role in a unique reparational process taking place in Tulsa, OK, whose African-American community of Greenwood was completely destroyed by a mob of whites in 1921. The mob was largely incited by a false report in the Tulsa paper that a crime had been committed by an African-American against a European-American and that, also falsely, a group was going to gather to respond to the situation. By making the false report of the gathering, the newspaper ensured its happening. The publisher of that newspaper was a Unitarian, and his descendants are members today of the Tulsa church. The UUA has created a fund to provide reparations to the living individuals who had their homes, businesses, and lives destroyed.

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

There have been many different kinds of reparations discussed – mostly about monetary compensation to African-American individuals. It is this notion of direct monetary compensation to individuals that has aroused most of the negative reaction from the non-African-American members of US society. This notion of reparations has also gotten most of the publicity and media attention, to the point where everyone assumes that this is the only form that reparations could take. However, some prominent reparationists argue that this is not a viable or useful approach.

As our UUA President, Bill Sinkford said to a small group of us when he visited Richmond in February of 2002 – "The minute the discussion focuses on compensation to individuals, we have lost the moral high ground". This idea of reparations to individuals is problematic for several reasons, first because of the impracticality of identifying all individuals affected by slavery and its aftermath and deciding who is eligible for reparations and who isn't. But a greater problem is in framing the issue as a purely economic one – as if any sum of money given to individuals could effectively compensate for wrongs given and received collectively. Most problematic, there is a concern that once the checks are written, society will wash its hands of the ongoing problems of racism and say "We're done with that – we paid – and we don't need to do anything more".

What, then, are approaches to reparations that could achieve better results? The concept that seems to work well for many reparationists is that of restorative justice. Restorative justice is a systematic response to wrongdoing that emphasizes healing the wounds of those wronged, of the offenders, and of the communities caused or revealed by the criminal behavior. Practices and programs reflecting restorative purposes respond to injustice by identifying and taking steps to repair harm, involving all stakeholders, and transforming the traditional relationship between individuals, communities, and their governments in responding to injustice. A key concept within restorative justice is that we have ALL suffered from racism and the crimes of slavery and its aftermath – that this is not a problem for African-Americans alone, but for all of us.

Of course, European-Americans have not suffered from slavery in the same ways that African-American people have, but we have suffered nonetheless. I attribute to Paul Kivel, the author of Uprooting Racism, this discussion of the suffering that slavery has brought to European-Americans to Paul Kivel, the author of Uprooting Racism. As Kivel notes, we have been given a distorted and inaccurate picture of history and politics because the truth about slavery and its aftermath has been distorted, denied, and downplayed; the contributions of African-Americans have been denied and suppressed,d and the role of European-Americans has been portrayed in a sanitized and noncritical manner. We have lost the genuine presence of African-Americans in our communities, schools and relationships, for the most part. We have been given a false sense of superiority, and our experiences are distorted, limited, and less rich the more they are exclusively or mostly European-American. WE may have lost family members, friends, and other relationships because of disagreements, fights,s and tensions over race. At the same time, we may have lost relationships with African-American people because the consequences of slavery and its aftermath make those relationships difficult to sustain.

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

A restorative justice approach to reparations would begin with acknowledging the fact of slavery and all its consequences to the present day. This is about affirming the reality of the injustice that has been denied for so long. A useful second step would be an apology from our national government for slavery and its consequences. This is about taking collective responsibility for injustice. Another step recommended by reparationists is public education that ensures that all people understand the character of African-Americans as slaves and since slavery. Much of the conventional wisdom about the nature, history, and character of African-Americans as slaves and afterward is false and distorted and was developed to justify slavery and segregation.

Finally, there could be a set of steps to ensure that the continuing aftermath of slavery is limited as rapidly as possible. These could be major initiatives benefiting African-Americans generally in education, employment, housing, and other areas of public life, of which efforts like Affirmative Action are only the tip of the iceberg. We are an intelligent and resourceful nation,n and I’m sure we can figure this out. We helped rebuild entire nations after World War II; we have almost unlimited resources at all levels – there is nothing we cannot do if we set our minds and hearts to it.

A helpful model for these types of steps comes not from the compensation given to Japanese-Americans because of their internment and loss of property and opportunity during World War II, nor from reparations made to Jews surviving the European Holocaust. In those cases, individuals could be and were identified who directly suffered from the crimes committed, and this type of approach would be almost impossible and potentially very unfair for African-Americans.

However, three other countries, Canada, Australia, and South Africa, are making significant steps towards reparations to their indigenous populations that could assist us in our efforts. In all these cases, there has been an acknowledgment of ongoing oppression of groups of people that, though mitigated by current improvements in laws and opportunities, cannot be negated entirely by them because of the cumulative effects of injustice. And each nation has made significant progress in creating and implementing reparations to further restorative justice. We can look to them to inform, inspire, and support our progress on this issue.

As noted in our most recent edition of the UU World magazine, a book on forgiveness and reparations has been recently published, titled A Human Being Died That Night: A South African Story of Forgiveness by Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, a clinical psychologist who served on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Speaking from the viewpoint of one who has suffered oppression directly, she raises a critical question for countries such as the US, which have systematically oppressed entire segments of their population:

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

As well, for those who have experienced oppression, this question cannot be ignored by those who have benefited from oppression. I suggest to you that making reparations to African-American people for slavery and its consequences is one way to begin to transcend the hatred of which Dr. Gobodo-Mandikizela speaks. I urge you to begin a careful and thoughtful examination of the case for reparations, whose barest outline I have given you here. I am convinced that reparations are an essential part of healing the wounds of slavery left by racism in our nation and also that as Unitarian Universalists, our faith calls us to engage in this work. This work is not work of the head alone, but also of the heart – the heart that cries for mercy, the heart that breaks for injustices given, the heart that is willing to know the pain of the past and the present.

Amen and blessed be.