

Summary Report of the Beloved Community Gathering

Seasons Retreat Center Fetzer Institute, Kalamazoo, Michigan September 30 - October 3, 2004

Over the course of three bright fall days at the Seasons Retreat Center in the woods of Kalamazoo, Michigan, a multiracial group of educators, activists, religious leaders, artists, and facilitators, met to collectively explore the concept of "Beloved Community." The term had been articulated and given particular meaning by Martin Luther King, Jr. and the southern freedom movement of the 1960s. Participants in our gathering examined the concept in the historical context of the movement experience as well as in terms of current possibilities and meanings for our own lives and work.

The twenty-four women and men who took part in the retreat were jointly convened by the Institute for Democratic Renewal and Project Change. In our conversations, participants found significant common concern for the revitalization of social justice work in our nation, as well as important differences in cultural, political and cosmological approaches to that work.

Among the most striking characteristics of the gathering was its intention and desire to explore the role of spirituality and religion as resources for social justice activism. The retreat was an encounter among people of various religious faiths - including Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Indigenous North American and African Diasporan traditions . It was also a meaningful exchange between people who embrace spiritual grounding and religious identities and others who consider themselves deeply humanitarian but not necessarily religious. Discussions about the importance of ancestral energies and recognition of the transformative power of natural forces, such as water, were important moments in which the Christian underpinnings of the twentieth century "Beloved Community" concept were challenged, and the discussion of its meaning, complicated, in stimulating and helpful ways.

The gathering featured a wide age-range among participants. The youngest were Kevin Ramirez and Dan Edwards, two African American men in their mid-to-late twenties, one of whom works as a counselor for the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors in Philadelphia. The other is an organizer and trainer with the Center for Contemplative Mind in

Society in Northampton, Massachusetts. (The young men were also accomplished rap musicians who produced lyrics and music in creative response to the collective discussions of the retreat.) Our oldest participants were Grace Lee Boggs, an eighty-nine year old Chinese American woman who has been a committed community activist - in African American, Environmental, Worker's Rights and Economic Justice movements - for over sixty years; Vincent Harding, a noted black historian and social justice activist who is seventy-three; and John Maguire, one of the gathering's conveners, who is a seventy-two year old native white southerner and former university president and has been deeply influenced for many years by the work, life and philosophy of Martin Luther King, Jr.

A highlight of the gathering came on Friday afternoon when the three eldest members of the group shared recollections and insights from their experiences with King and the freedom movement. Their comments about King's radical, transformative vision of social justice, and his critique of militarism, materialism and racism as a foundational triumvirate of American injustice, were especially revealing and inspiring to the gathered community.

At various points in the conversation process, participants were asked to imagine and envision together some of the central constitutive elements of Beloved Community. Looking particularly at how Beloved Community might be nurtured and manifested in internal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural interactions, a number of key components emerged in small-group discussions, as well as in the larger collective deliberations. These included:

- * Hospitality and traditions of welcoming
- * Dynamic, respectful intergenerational engagement
- * Storytelling
- * Acknowledging fears and encouraging awareness of personal and collective power
- * Acceptance of change and vicissitudes
- * Physical and emotional safety
- * Deep concern for well-being of youth and elders
- * Recognizing and adapting to complexity
- * Structural responses to MLK's critique of materialism, racism and militarism

Some of the most profound sharing around meanings, experiences and possibilities of Beloved Community (as well as potential challenges to its development) emerged in moments when the group deviated from the intended facilitation model of Appreciative Inquiry. In those instances,

participants were able to assist each other in approaching some of the deeper strata of historical and collective trauma (of racial, gender and economic injustice) and think together about the role of ritual, spirituality and religion in addressing those deep disjunctions in the lives of individual people and communities.

Kathy Wan Povi Sanchez, a founder of Tewa Women United, (a health and social justice initiative of the northern New Mexico Pueblo communities), consistently urged the group to recognize that Beloved Community is already deeply and fundamentally present in our experience of the world. The interconnectedness we are -- with other human beings; with natural elements such as light, water and energy; with ancestral forces -- is our primary and most vital reality and already exists. Beloved Community, in that sense, is not something we have to "create", rather our responsibility is to recognize it and live it more authentically.

As we were preparing to leave each other on Sunday morning, October 3, the group was clearly committed to finding ways to stay linked to each other's lives and work and was interested in developing more sustaining connections - to further explore meanings of Beloved Community and as a way to embody it. Among the ideas expressed for further development were:

- * A deeper examination of the terminology "Beloved Community" and its roots in US, Christian, social justice movement-based ideology of a specific historical moment. Might there be other ways to articulate the desire for just, compassionate community that arise more fully from the spiritual/cultural diversity and political commitments of the current moment?

- * The need for greater participation of Muslims, Indigenous people and youth under the age of twenty-five. Also, recognition that the presence of working-class and poor people is absolutely essential to developing a meaningful conversation about Beloved Community in the United States.

- * Encouragement of networks of mutual support among participants for creative modeling of Beloved Community.

- * More extensive exploration of the arts, spirituality and work with youth (perhaps in combination) as ways to sharpen our own understandings of Beloved Community and as models for collaborative work that might be shared with other organizations and gatherings.

- * Integrating spirituality and religion more fully into the work of the gathering and its participants.

Given the significant ideological, racial and cultural distinctions among our group, there were, understandably, many moments of disagreement,

tension and challenge. Even more significant is the fact that in the richness of our diversity there ran a deep strain of shared concern for the well-being of our national and global community, and a strong conviction that some meaning of Beloved Community (carefully interrogated and perhaps somewhat differently termed) offered an important impetus for addressing that concern. As one participant mused in the days following the gathering, "Love trumps ideology or theology every time."

The encouragement that all of the participants felt - for their individual lives as well as for the ongoing work of social justice to which they are deeply committed - was a strong component of the desire to continue working together. As we struggle together through the difficult places, we are, it seems, giving one another a more lucid perception of the structures of healing and reparation that love can create.

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