

The Journey to Beloved Community  
(People Get Ready)

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As we all know, the Living tradition we share draws from many sources, including Jewish and Christian teachings and wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us. As we also know, our services are varied and unpredictable, which often means an eclectic mix of music. People, get ready! Curtis Mayfield's song is not reflective of Unitarian Universalism's theology, what with all the talk about "sinner" and "lord" and such, but it comes out of the then-called "Negro Spiritual" tradition which is worthy of respect as an expression of two of our sources. I hope you open your hearts and minds to the message and not get stuck on the language. It's an optimistic song; one that calls for a journey together to Beloved Community; and that is a long and winding road indeed.

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Anyone who's heard me speak up here before knows that I like to drop some knowledge on you to put things in perspective. Well, I have good news and bad news for us here in Loveland. First the good news: I really enjoy watching 9News Next with Kyle Clark, and I learned something the other day that I was anxious to share with you. One of the segments on the show is called "What do YOU say?" People suggest names of streets, towns, and areas that are pronounced in different

ways, and the news program contacts a trusted source for the “official” pronunciation. One evening recently, they contacted the Principal of Namaqua Elementary School here in Loveland to ask about the name. He told them “Nah-mah-quah” and went on to explain that contrary to what some believe, it’s not a Native American name. The area West of Loveland was named Namaqua because a number of Nama immigrants were buried in a cemetery there. It’s the first area in Colorado named after an area in Africa: Namaqualand, a beautiful and arid region of Namibia in South Africa.

You’d think with such an auspicious start, the City of Loveland would be a bastion of racial harmony. You’d be wrong.

So here’s the bad news: Who’s heard about “Sundown Towns”? Basically, there were all-white cities/towns/areas that proudly displayed signs at the city limits that read, “Ni . . . .s, don’t let the sun go down on you in this town”, or “Whites only after dark”. Blacks were allowed in town during the day to work for the white folks, cooking, cleaning, and raising the little white kids; whatever the white folks didn’t want to do. They were not allowed to stay in town past sundown. African Americans faced harassment, violence, or even death if they were caught walking around in town after dark.

According to an article on **ThyBlackMan.com**, these “Sundown Towns” have been around since 1890, and, much as we’d like to think they were only in the

Deep South, the fact is that they've been almost exclusively in the North and Midwest. With the end of slavery, Africans and African-Americans moved north in search of good jobs, and were promptly sequestered in undesirable neighborhoods. The article goes on to present research by James W. Loewen, a sociologist and best-selling author. His books include the American Book Award-winning *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your High School History Textbook Got Wrong* and *Sundown Towns: A Hidden Dimension of American Racism*. He is a member of All Souls Church, Unitarian, in Washington, D.C.

“Loewen’s research suggests that the “modern” sundown town can be a neighborhood or a suburb that is all-white. . . . The idea that “Blacks simply don’t live” in certain places exists, historically, because they were banned from and threatened in those very places. What we see today as a conspicuously white neighborhood very likely has a “sundown” history or angle”. Loewen himself says, “To my astonishment, I have found 500 sundown towns in Illinois alone—and now estimate that, by **1970**, their peak, **10,000 existed in the United States**”. How many African-Americans live in Loveland? Any guesses? Last I heard, it was around 2%. Any guesses why? Bingo! Loveland was a “Sundown Town”, and still not a place where African-Americans *feel* comfortable. We apparently escaped notoriety somehow, because in my internet research, we didn’t show up,

but I've been told by more than one reliable source that we were, and the claim rings true.

Probably the worst part about a "Sundown Town" is that it's not just a geographic area, but a pervasive mentality, and it's not just about where people live, but about economic and educational opportunity. White folks think of tenements, slums, and projects when they think of where black folks live; undesirable. I've given you the statistics before about how white neighborhoods have more and better hospitals, banks and schools than black neighborhoods. Confined to separate neighborhoods, blacks have less access to those things that could give them economic and educational parity with whites.

I've also told you before that I was raised in the projects where I was most often the only white girl around. We all rented – that's what the projects were – and I never saw a difference between myself and my friends except that I tried to tan. Later, in my 20's, married to a man with a dependable income and pregnant with our second child, I bought a new home while it was still under construction. It was the first house on the court.

Loewen's research also points out that Blacks are considered to "not have the discipline to own homes." Wait. What? As the second house was being built – larger and nicer than mine, a black family bought it. Again, I didn't see anything strange about that, and they were great neighbors.

I never thought of Vallejo, California being segregated, and I would have told you that it wasn't. As I look back, dagnabbit, I see that at least unofficially, it was.

The elementary schools were neighborhood schools, so if it was a black neighborhood, it had a black school. White/white. The law said you had to go to your neighborhood school. If you wanted to go to a different school, you had to move. There were 3 junior high schools into which all the elementary schools fed, and 2 high schools into which the jr. highs fed. By virtue of several neighborhoods blending into few, the jr. high and high school populations were more blended. Not completely blended, mind you. The schools on the East side of town were more white, and the west side more black. Guess where I was? Yeah. In my senior year at Vallejo High School, Homecoming was cancelled; we had no prom or other celebrations because we had race riots. It was my black friends who protected me and made sure I got home safely before it got really bad.

Also, there was a subdivision on the west side called "Country Club Crest" where black folk bought houses. White people did NOT buy houses there, and were actually afraid to go there.

Has anyone seen the movie, "Green Book"? I have to say that I haven't, and had no idea why the movie was called that. I thought maybe it was the pianist's notebook. I didn't know. As I was researching sundown towns, I found that "The

Travelers' Green Book" was a "Negro Motorist Guide" that listed restaurants, auto repair facilities, hotels, tourist homes and vacation resorts that were "Negro friendly". At first I was naively shocked that such a thing would be necessary; but on second thought, it made sense, and was a great idea. I actually got the 1963-64 edition on Amazon. I checked to see how Colorado fared. SIX hotels, ONE lodge and ONE café. There were no auto repair shops or gas stations listed. In the whole state.

When I talk about White Privilege, I'm not placing blame or trying to shame anyone; I personally feel that grief, not guilt, is the proper response. White Privilege is the water in which we swim, and we're as unaware of it as a fish is unaware of the ocean. This is the perfect example: You and I never think about this. All our lives, we didn't have to think about this. If we want to take a road trip, we jump in our vehicle and go. We may or may not make hotel reservations along the route. We never even THINK about whether we'll be allowed in or not. We might just drive till we're tired and grab the first hotel we come to. Allowed? Are you KIDDDING me??? *Never thought of it.*

Now this is interesting: I was told that one African-American person remarked that her car had to be big enough and comfortable enough to be a restaurant and a hotel just in case she couldn't find a place to eat or sleep on her journey. She planned for it. *I never thought of it.*

White privilege is so insidious that we really don't notice even when it's blatantly set before us. Imagine this commercial: A **black** woman goes into an Xfinity store. She's wearing pajamas, carrying a pillow and blanket. She parks herself in front of a tv, gets cozy and starts speaking into the remote, "Show me baby sloth videos on YouTube". The white salesman asks politely if she'll please give other people a turn. She says, "Oh yeah; I have made myself pretty comfortable here." A delivery guy brings in a pizza for her and the salesman pays for it.

WHAAAT??? UNBELIEVABLE! You'll never see this, because if it were a black woman, she'd have been arrested before she could even sit down! Only sweet little white Amy Pohler could get away with this; and we sit there watching, unaware, thinking it's cute.

Along with Foothills Unitarian, Namaqua recently had a series of workshops called "Beloved Conversations," where we got together and studied and discussed race relations and how to be better allies to people of color. As much as I thought I knew, I learned a lot and became more aware of and "woke" to Microaggressions and preconceptions, and how frustrating and maddening these things can be.

Microaggressions are those little things that we well-intentioned people sometimes say, do, or even think loudly that inadvertently have a negative effect on others.

We might say to a person of color, "Where are you from?" or "What's your

ancestry?” We don’t mean any harm; we’re just curious, but it may be taken as an offense. We’re pointing out that they’re “different”. In the same way, “You don’t LOOK Mexican”, or “You speak English so well!!!” giving the impression that you’re shocked that a person from another race would look like us, or one with a different complexion or different facial features wouldn’t speak with some sort of unintelligible accent, and they should take it as a compliment because looking Mexican or speaking with an accent is bad.

Martin Luther King dreamed of a Beloved Community; one in which obvious differences were no more remarkable than whether we like mac’n’cheese or lime jell-o. Yes, our ancestry is a big part of who we are, and it’s fine and normal to notice. Being colorblind isn’t the answer. Being convinced that no group of people is superior or inferior is the answer. In my family and circle of friends, “ism’s” just don’t exist. I have three granddaughters, and they all have boyfriends. One is white, one is black, and one is Mexican. Whenever they come over, they’re all gathered in and treated like grandsons. We laugh and joke, and one of them will say, “That’s so white!” and he’ll teach us something we never knew. Beloved conversations happen a lot in my family, and they enrich us all.

Here’s the bottom line: If we are ever to create Beloved Community, we have to gather everyone in. Learn from each other and embrace our commonalities as well



as our differences. It's up to us to be the change. My hope is that everyone will get on board. People get ready! May it be so.