

# “Reparations, Reverse Discrimination, and Reconstruction 3.0”

February 27, 2022

Led by Marge Fisher

## Reading

Our reading this morning is *Praise Song for the Day*. This poem was written by Elizabeth Alexander on the occasion of Barack Obama’s Presidential Inauguration.

Each day we go about our business,  
walking past each other, catching each other’s  
eyes or not, about to speak or speaking.

All about us is noise. All about us is  
noise and bramble, thorn and din, each  
one of our ancestors on our tongues.

Someone is stitching up a hem, darning  
a hole in a uniform, patching a tire,  
repairing the things in need of repair.

Someone is trying to make music somewhere,  
with a pair of wooden spoons on an oil drum,  
with cello, boom box, harmonica, voice.

A woman and her son wait for the bus.  
A farmer considers the changing sky.  
A teacher says, Take out your pencils. Begin.

We encounter each other in words, words  
spiny or smooth, whispered or declaimed,  
words to consider, reconsider.

We cross dirt roads and highways that mark  
the will of some one and then others, who said

I need to see what's on the other side.

I know there's something better down the road.  
We need to find a place where we are safe.  
We walk into that which we cannot yet see.  
Say it plain: that many have died for this day.  
Sing the names of the dead who brought us here,  
who laid the train tracks, raised the bridges,

picked the cotton and the lettuce, built  
brick by brick the glittering edifices  
they would then keep clean and work inside of.

Praise song for struggle, praise song for the day.  
Praise song for every hand-lettered sign,  
the figuring-it-out at kitchen tables.

Some live by love thy neighbor as thyself,  
others by first do no harm or take no more  
than you need. What if the mightiest word is love?

Love beyond marital, filial, national,  
love that casts a widening pool of light,  
love with no need to pre-empt grievance.

In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air,  
any thing can be made, any sentence begun.  
On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,

praise song for walking forward in that light.

### **Reflection by Marge Fisher**

Reparations: what does that word even mean? A dry, 4-syllable word, often inflammatory, a fighting word. Or maybe it's a word that could just possibly offer a tiny whiff of hope, a path forward. My reflection today is to parse the possibility of

moving in the direction of hope, making it yet more than a word. I invite us to think of it as an action item.

It means simply “to repair,” to make amends to another, to make them whole. Unfortunately, it does, more often than not, connote cash money to be handed to “them,” our Black sisters and brothers, America’s perennial lowest caste. To change it from a fighting word to one of repair and reconciliation will require action – from all of us – as individuals, yes, but most especially through concerted action at every level – of government, of our educational institutions, our corporate commitments, through the arts, and through the media. Try to imagine Facebook, Google, and all the other “webs” 2.0 & 3.0 throwing their energy and expertise into algorithms that “push” the truth! What a concept!! Is pushing online discord that much more lucrative than pushing real historical truth? We Americans have never lacked for imagination. Could we not possibly imagine such a paradigm shift?! Could we muster the will, the gut-wrenching fortitude to attempt it?! Do we have the stamina to see the process through?

Why reparations now? Well, who among us would deny we as a nation are splintering in ways that simply beggar belief. The truth about almost anything now exists on a sliding scale from righteous well-documented truth (the facts of the matter) to “truthiness” to half-truth to untruth (AKA the ever-popular “alternative facts.”)

From the earliest days when the Virginia Slave Codes split poor white and Black indentured servants who had joined in common cause during Bacon’s Rebellion, planter elites feared such alliances and worked to create the White race. Those of us lucky enough to be born into this artificially constructed racial category have benefited from that mindset ever since, benefited on the labor and exploitation of the people enslaved – no matter that slavery was ended more than 150 years ago. Those benefits still accrue...

Our path was set: the Constitution legitimized slavery; and the White backlash to the subsequent Civil War Amendments, the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, and 15<sup>th</sup>, squelched Reconstruction – inspiring terror, lynching, and Jim Crow laws. We have continued stumbling our way through this quagmire ever since.

Briefly: Consider General Sherman's January 1865 Special Order providing 40 acres of confiscated confederate lands to newly freed Black men. Four months later, w/ Lincoln's assassination, the Johnson administration rescinded it and returned the lands to the defeated confederates. The formerly enslaved were left w/ nothing – 4 million people bereft.

1934: The Federal Housing Authority was established to address a housing shortage by increasing America's housing stock. The FHA refused to insure mortgages in or near African American neighborhoods (the infamous practice of "redlining"). At the same time, it was subsidizing builders who were mass-producing whole subdivisions for whites which would then institute the requirement that none of the homes be sold to Blacks. In the FHA Underwriting Manual, it explicitly stated: "incompatible racial groups should not be permitted to live in the same communities."

1935: The Social Security Act was passed to address the problems of old-age pensions for workers, unemployment insurance, and certain other financial benefits. Groups specifically excluded from these categories of coverage were agricultural and domestic workers. There is disagreement as to whether this was necessary because of administrative difficulty involving tax-collection procedures for these workers or whether it was done to expressly exclude Blacks; however, the truth of the matter is virtually moot, because its practical effect was to exclude them – 65% of all Blacks throughout the country worked in these jobs. It was not until 1950 when the exclusions were repealed, but significant widening of the wealth gap had become excruciatingly well established by that time.

1944: The Serviceman's Readjustment Act – the GI Bill. It was intended to show gratitude and to provide a substantial economic benefit to our returning war heroes. It offered mortgages, college tuition, and business loans to these men. It is one of the largest investments America has ever made in its millions of veterans. The Veterans Administration, however, left it to the states to administer. (Sadly, when the federal govt turns things over to the states, it is more often than not as a sop to white supremacy.) The mortgage loans were mediated by local financial institutions – already well-versed in the practice of redlining. The number of Black veterans who obtained mortgages was miniscule: for example: only 100 of 67,000

mortgages granted in New Jersey went to Black residents. In seeking tuition assistance, they were actively discouraged from looking toward 4-year colleges. Sgt Joseph Maddox was accepted to Harvard, but because he was Black, his request for tuition benefits was denied outright. In general, Blacks were pointed toward vocational training programs. While the Bill did not explicitly exclude Black veterans, its implementation most certainly did. The historian Ira Katznelson has said: “[There was] no greater instrument for widening an already huge racial gap in postwar America than the GI Bill.”

In that Home ownership and Educational achievement are the two most important factors in building wealth, federal laws and policies, again, all too often left to be administered by the states, have created segregation both in fact and in law, leading to an intolerable wealth gap. Blacks in America exist with one-tenth the wealth that white Americans possess. We have rigged the game, we have baked this into our psyches and likely into our DNA. Please know that no progress – I repeat, no progress, has been made in the past 70 years toward improving this inequity.

Yes, America went through what has been called the 2<sup>nd</sup> Reconstruction in the civil rights era w/ the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibiting discrimination; the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. Affirmative Action in employment and education also came about during the Johnson administration largely through Executive Orders. These all signaled signs of hope for real progress, and there was some.

However, our national propensity for backlash has never been educated out of us, and the notion of Affirmative Action based on race, firmly cemented the idea of reverse discrimination against whites into our heads. However, in 1978, the Supreme Court did uphold the use of race in college admissions, but as only one criterion among many to be considered. That same decision also ruled that racial quotas – holding slots open for a specified number of minority applicants – was unconstitutional. (Univ of Calif v Bakke). In sum, Affirmative Action has helped any number of individuals obtain a college education, but it has not lifted significant swaths of the Black population to higher attainment. It is one form of reparation, but a narrow one to be sure.

It is so painful to realize that progress has stalled and in so many ways. In fact we are now regressing: with the gutting of voting rights, the increasing numbers of murdered black men and women, the highest incarceration rate of any country in the world, the rise of authoritarianism, book bannings, rampant misinformation on too many fronts - makes one want to weep, figuratively if not literally.

So how might we proceed? I believe we need to get to a Reconstruction 3.0: restore the patchwork of civil rights laws now so tattered, and proceed with a serious, concerted effort to effect a program of reparations. It would necessarily begin with a serious, sincere apology to our Black sisters and brothers from the highest levels of government – for the enslavement and exploitation of their ancestors and for the legacies of inequality that remain. It would acknowledge how they had been wronged and would take responsibility for those wrongs.

The conversation around these acknowledgements would have to continue, no doubt for a long time: in churches, in communities, in schools, in businesses. Mainstream media would work to educate us as a nation, enlarging the conversation. Re-education about our history and our civic responsibilities must be an “all hands on deck” effort. And like the modern model of South Africa, we would need some version of an official Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to determine what makes the most sense to bridge the gap between the status quo and what real justice requires. I might posit that our Constitution could benefit by a rewrite or at least a good editor as part of that process! Calls are already being made...in the Boston Globe as recently as December!

South Africa did rewrite its constitution in 1996 as part of their TRC process. They began it with these words: “We, the people of South Africa, Recognise the injustices of our past; Honour those who suffered for justice and freedom in our land; Respect those who have worked to build and develop our country; and Believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.” Right up there on top, they acknowledge their past sins, their suffering, and their common purpose. Never again can their history be denied.

The efforts of their TRC were by no means neat and tidy. No such recasting of a country’s underpinnings could be. But they were televised, transparent, and they

were all-inclusive. The whole country watched the proceedings, the whole country learned together. It can be done.

America has made the effort in the past; we have had a little practice. Under the Reagan administration, reparations were made to the surviving Japanese American internees who were placed in what were essentially concentration camps during WW2. After several years of effort, in 1988 Congress voted to apologize to the 60,000 detainees still living (out of 120,000), and to give each \$20,000 – a total of \$1.2 billion dollars.

No less a man than actor & activist George Takei (Mr Sulu of Star Wars fame) was one recipient of this payment. In fact, he had addressed Congress in the early 1980's in support of these reparations. He now presses for reparations for Black Americans. He said, "For us, it was four horrific years. For African Americans, it's [been] four torturous centuries."

I believe the cash payment in this instance was deemed acceptable from our white perspective because it was a relatively small group of readily identifiable survivors to whom reparations were due. How do we even think about the descendants of 4 million enslaved, "freed" over 150 years ago? There are those who have attempted to tally wages owed to those enslaved and the figures range between \$6 trillion if for 12hr/day/7days/week up to \$14 trillion for 24/7. Remember, the slave was never free – not even in sleep. But even that leaves out all the equity their descendants were never able to accrue, not to mention the pain, suffering, and cost of continued discrimination. It boggles the mind!

No, I don't foresee much in the way of cash payments *per se*, but everything we now refer to as "entitlements" (a fighting word in itself) we recast as perhaps guaranteed, or universal basic income (UBI) programs; add to that universal health care for good measure. There are countries in the world that actually do this. And such programs are already being tested in at least 20 cities across the US; including a pilot in Chelsea, MA, in 2020. We've all seen how the Covid Child Tax Credit program made significant changes in improving the child poverty level in the US. Research shows universal basic incomes work. It is demonstrably far more

effective to put a financial floor under the population than to depend upon enough “trickling down” from our corporate elites or from government.

There is so much very hard work to be done, but we can’t afford to ignore or erase our nation’s past. It will continue to consume us to no good end. Racism impoverishes us all...in real dollars. Economists are now working to estimate the economic harm to us as a nation. Shunting talented African Americans into lower paying jobs...who might have flourished as doctors, teachers, scientists...over the past 50 years has cost the economy up to 40 percent of our aggregate productivity.

So is there energy for reparations in this country now? Is there an appetite for a Reconstruction 3.0? I believe there is, but it won’t be easily accomplished. Since 1989, Rep John Conyers filed HR 40: The “Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African Americans Act.” The designation HR 40 harks directly to Gen’l Sherman’s Special Field Order as mentioned previously.

Conyers left Congress in 2017 and died in 2019, but the bill has been refiled by Rep Sheila Jackson Lee. In April 2021, for the first time (in 30 years) it passed out of the Judiciary Committee for a floor vote. Call your Rep in Congress, please, to let them know your thoughts on this bill! Additionally, Rep Barbara Lee has filed H Con Res 19 to establish a US “Commission on Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation.”

The Boston City Council is right now calling for a special panel to study how Boston can formally apologize for its role in the slave trade, how city laws and policies continue to impact African Americans, and how those injuries can be reversed.

Maryland has established the Maryland Lynching, Truth, and Reconciliation Commission as is the state of California.

My representative in Congress, Jim McGovern is asking me to let him know that I support the “African American History Act.” These are just some of the many changes entering the reparations pipeline at this moment.



What can you do? Contact your Representatives and Senators in both the state legislature and in Congress to see what they are doing re reparations and let them know what your thoughts are.

Join the ACLU. Or the Southern Poverty Law Center. Be bold, join the NAACP! Be radical, join the Black Lives Matter Movement! Learn what your contributions can do. Learn what these organizations are doing in your “neighborhood!” Jump in however you can.

Indeed, “a change **IS** a’comin’!

*February 27, 2022; mf*

## **Prayer and Meditation**

Oh, My Shepherd: A Psalm for White People Working against White Supremacy by Amanda Udis-Kessler

Oh, my Shepherd, lead me, guide me.  
Haunt me, push me, move my heart.  
When I ache for stiller waters, keep me on my feet.  
Bring me to the street. Help me not retreat.

Lead me in the path of justice.  
Send me to resist the violence.  
Tempted as I am to silence,  
Comfort me and raise my voice.  
Help me make the harder choice.

Oh, my Shepherd, I have walked through  
Whitest valleys far too long,  
Fearing what I thought was evil,  
Causing harm and doing wrong.  
Help me sing a different song.  
Where I stumble, make me strong.

I have lingered at the table,  
Safe and sated, unaware,  
Failing in my joy to notice  
All the ones who weren't there,  
All the ways the world's unfair,  
All the times I didn't care.

Oh, my Shepherd, fill my cup with heartbreak so it overflows.  
Pour the oil of deep compassion down upon me till I know  
How to face the devastation, how to work to heal the nation,  
How to strive for reparation.

Amen