Beloved Glimpses: A Unitarian Universalist Theology of the Beloved Community and Implications for Our Shared World

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ABSTRACT

Alex Jensen: Beloved Glimpses: A Unitarian Universalist Theology of the Beloved Community and Implications for Our Shared World

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Theology of the Beloved Community has become mainstream in many discussions across Unitarian Universalism. As a powerful concept that emerged out of the works of Dr. Josiah Royce and popularized by the 1960s US Civil Rights Movement, it grew to cast a prophetic vision of equity and justice for all people, in a radically relational community. In the present moment, Unitarian Universalist institutional leaders have placed a call for doing theology in our faith. This thesis attempts to piece together a modern Unitarian Universalist theology of Beloved Community, as well as the “beloved glimpses” we actively work toward and have available to us in the here and now of the world we seek to create. Likewise, this work examines how this theology of doing Beloved Community might help us to revisit our Seven Principles with renewed depths and commitments; I explore this as Beloved Community theology meets the Sixth Principle, with our goal of world community with justice, peace, and liberty. Ultimately, I argue that Unitarian Universalists actively do a shared theology of creating the Beloved Community that is only implied in our Principles, and that we need a richer articulation of our theology and what we find sacred to our faith and our commitments toward building a more multicultural, anti-racist faith and world.

Keywords: Beloved Community, Unitarian Universalism, Ministry, World Community, Sixth Principle, Theology
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INTRODUCTION

Theology for Unitarian Universalists is important. As a minister, I find that within this great tradition we don’t often understand what it is we mean by theology. Some discount the possibility of its usage in Unitarian Universalism because we aren’t all theists; the argument is that we all need to believe in Theos in order that we practice a theology. Likewise, some would make the argument that there is no actual overarching theology for Unitarian Universalists at all, given the expansiveness that each one of us has withapproaching our spiritual paths for truth and meaning. And some would simply point to our Principles, naming those as the root of our faith rather than a theology itself (or even maintaining that the Principles are the theology). I enter this conversation on theology in a complex field. This is precisely why I find it all the more necessary to explain why I see theology as an indispensable part of our faith and how we live and breathe it into the world. More specifically, I find it necessary to sketch this theology of glimpses of living into Beloved Community that I’ve witnessed in Unitarian Universalism.

What could the word “theology” mean for Unitarian Universalists? How should we claim to use this word in any helpful or reasonable way if we lack a shared sense of faith in God? Dr. Michael Hogue, Professor of Theology, Ethics, and Philosophy of Religion at Meadville Lombard Theological School, posits the following definition of theology, which I find applicable to Unitarian Universalists:

[Theology is] the pragmatic formation, critique, and reconstruction of the symbols, practices, ideals, and institutions that format life-orienting religious meanings, purposes, and desires… [T]heology is something one does more than something one has…. Instead, its objects are those diverse constellations of symbols, practices, ideals, and institutions that orient us ultimately by… shaping and interconnecting… the religious meanings, purposes, and desires through which human communities negotiate the hazards and graces of vulnerable life in an ambiguous world.2

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1 For information on the Seven Principles of the UUA, visit https://www.uua.org/beliefs/what-we-believe/principles.
In this same sense—theology is something one does rather than what one has—I believe Unitarian Universalists are oriented with a liberatory theology of creating Beloved Community. This theology causes us to be critical of our practices, institutions, and ideals, and it calls us to be more than just what we say we believe. Unitarian Universalists do not need a shared faith in God in order to do theology. In fact, with the above definition, we do theology just by virtue of negotiating the “hazards and graces of vulnerable life” in a challenging world and by glimpsing at what yet could still be possible.

“Theology” in this Present Moment

In this particular moment in our world and our wider movement as Unitarian Universalists, I attempt to answer calls of theologizing within our faith. We are facing an uncertain world and future: a recovery from a global pandemic; a continued reckoning with racism and white supremacy; increased violence against Black and Indigenous peoples worldwide. We find ourselves in dismal times that cause us to thirst for making meaning of these daunting trials. Not all is lost, however. Likewise, we are seeing the possibility in our midst. We find ourselves catching glimpses of hope in the wake of so much pain, sorrow, and tragedy. These glimpses help us to not lose sight of the larger projects of this faith and our movement. They help us to address both what we witness today and what we prophetically envision for tomorrow, in the attempts to create a world worthy of future generations; one that lives more fully into the values and promises of our faith of democracy, inclusion, human worth and dignity, and compassion. This theology of glimpses of Beloved Community that are available to us in the here and now is what I posit we actively do and strive to live out as Unitarian Universalists.

In answering this specific call to do theology in Unitarian Universalism, I am primarily answering two greater calls to action. Firstly, I am responding to the UUA’s Commission on
Institutional Change’s 2020 report “Widening the Circle of Concern”. The Commission’s primary role is to examine white privilege and structures of power operating within Unitarian Universalism, especially with how structural racism and white supremacy culture persist in the UUA.\(^3\) In this report, it names how Unitarian Universalism has historically “not been invested enough in theology”.\(^4\) The Commission posits how doing theology together might help us to form stronger, cohesive communities through common understandings beyond bonds that are simply formed “through antipathy toward rejected beliefs”\(^5\). In fact, doing and living out theology could be a reclamation of our theological inheritance as Unitarian Universalists, in ways that revive both the potency of our faith and best capture the good news we have to share with others.

The Rev. Dr. Sofía Betancourt, in her 2018 sermon at the Service of the Living Tradition at General Assembly, named our Unitarian Universalists theology as a great inheritance: “We are the theological inheritors of teachings on universal salvation. There is no winnowing out of the supposedly unworthy that can be named sacred among us.”\(^6\) This theology of universal salvation that Betancourt speaks of is a thread also found in a theology of Beloved Community. It is evident in how we understand *salvation* in this life, an idea of collective liberation in which we leave no person behind. She writes, “A Universalist theology of liberation in the present day centers our capacity to be sanctuaries of radical truth telling and abundant compassion… the all-embracing love at the center of our tradition can serve to make all of us more whole.”\(^7\) In answering this call,

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\(^5\) Ibid.
I spell out a theology that also inherits from a theology of universalism and universal salvation. The very process of doing theology as a community is an enterprise in communal salvation.

The second call to do theology comes explicitly from the Rev. William G. Sinkford, who served as President of the UUA from 2001 until 2009. In a sermon in 2002 he gave in Fort Worth Texas, Sinkford preached about our need for religious and theological language as a faith. His emphasis was that Unitarian Universalism was at a juncture point; that our faith needed to find its relationship with a “language of reverence” in order to spark dialogue both within our faith and beyond. In his words, “My growing belief is that, as a religious community and as individuals, we may be secure enough, mature enough to find a language of reverence, a language that can acknowledge the presence of the holy in our lives”.8 In Sinkford’s view, using theological language helps us to name that which we experience as holy. It draws us into community with something larger than ourselves and with one another, when we’re able to have a shared language with what it is we believe. This thesis, then, is one attempt at answering that call for more language around our doing of theology and how this active process helps us to see what’s possible.

There are many in our faith tradition who are revisiting what it means to put new language to our theology. As the Rev. Jeanne H. Nieuwejaar—a retired Unitarian Universalist minister—writes in her book Fluent in Faith: A Unitarian Universalist Embrace of Religious Language, “Before we can talk of our faith we must feel sure of what we stand for, both individually and collectively. Yes, as Unitarian Universalists, we are always in process, always evolving…”9 However, for Nieuwejaar, this doesn’t mean we don’t have something core to our faith worth sharing. “If we are to live out a determination to share our theology…. Perhaps the first of these is

the elemental task of articulating, first to ourselves, and then in ways that are accessible to others, just what that theology is”. ¹⁰ For this reason, I hope this thesis serves as one way of articulating our active and unfurling theology to ourselves so that we might do this beloved theology in relationship with others and future generations of our faith. Our beloved faith does something that is core to its roots that is too precious to be locked up in our own inability to name it.

**Beloved World Community**

In our increasingly global world, we must find ways to share Unitarian Universalism beyond its exclusivity to the United States. As the pandemic has shown, we are interconnected as a world in a larger web. I’m moved with how Unitarian Universalism might grow in its relationship to the world and other countries; save for a handful of congregations abroad, the majority of Unitarian Universalist congregations remain in the United States. A question I pose for our faith is this: Is this reflective of the world we seek to create? Or is there more that our theology as Unitarian Universalists calls us to become? I believe our current expressions of Unitarian Universalism as a faith in the United States is limited; it doesn’t live up to the faith our values call us to manifest. It also isn’t true to our theology of creating Beloved Community, which isn’t reflected in a world that remains divided by white supremacy, privilege, militarism, and class.

As a faith, we hold rich language about our ethical and philosophical commitments, especially as these are expressed across the Principles.¹¹ We affirm the view that each and every person’s life holds value and dignity.¹² We name the important role that conscience plays in our lives, as well as the role of spiritual growth and discernment on our journeys of life and faith.¹³

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¹⁰ Ibid.
¹² Ibid.
¹³ Ibid.
We understand the realities of our interconnectedness in a web of all existence just as we also understand the need to treat one another with compassion, equity, and justice in our relationships.\(^{14}\) And yet, we are lacking in how we name this theologically. Our Principles, though rich in meaning and content, don’t reflect the fullness of our theological vision. In other words, our Principles are not our theology. Our theology is more than what we have or hold. They miss out on the active parts of doing theology in our faith. They are sorely lacking in a language of reverence with stating clearly what it is that we hold sacred, as well as what comforts us in our times of trial.

I believe our Principles are substantive and important. Certainly—as a Unitarian Universalist—I find them essential to thinking about how our faith is lived out. I see the Principles as naming more about how to live our faith rather than describing the what and why of theology and belief. It is in naming the what where I find myself after as a minister. In describing the what, I am attempting to name a portion of that which is unnamable. What you will witness in these pages is a faithful, heartfelt attempt to put into words what I see as the active and sacred process of doing theology as Unitarian Universalists. Likewise, it is a personal articulation of my own theology of ministry and Unitarian Universalism that I’ll invite you to glimpse.

I believe it’s time that we re-examined our relationship as Unitarian Universalists to our Principles. This isn’t to say that we should be rid of our Principles, or that they should hold less meaning. I argue the opposite. As a faith, we must be brave in revisiting the Principles, in taking them more seriously and ensuring that our theology—the meeting point of who we are and what we do together to make meaning and act in this hurting world—is reflected in them. To explore this, I examine the Sixth Principle in light of this theology of creating Beloved Community in the here and now while finding glimpses of the world to come already within our midst. Ultimately, I

\(^{14}\) Ibid.
argue that Unitarian Universalists actively do a shared theology of creating the Beloved Community that is only implied in our Principles. Because it is only implied, we need a richer articulation of doing theology and what we know to be sacred to our faith and our commitments toward building a more multicultural, anti-racist faith and world.

Roadmap for the Following Pages

In this work, I articulate a Unitarian Universalist theology as it meets these calls for more active theologizing and language for what we know to be sacred. I structure this thesis in a way that I hope honors where we have been as a faith, who we are now, and where we are headed with our visions for our future. Firstly, I will discuss this theology of glimpse moments as experienced in my ministry as a Unitarian Universalist minister. I will also define what Beloved Community means in this context, as well as exploring its roots in history and why this is a compelling theology at the core of who we are as a faith. Next, I’ll explore the Sixth Principle through glimpses of both what we do well as Unitarian Universalists and how things might be different with how we are to bring about more liberty, justice, and peace for all people through Beloved Community. This process of doing theology is what calls us toward Beloved Community in our midst and on the horizon of what we know to be possible.

Glimping the Sacred

As I previously named, I invoke a Unitarian Universalist theology of glimpse moments at the Beloved Community to come that are available to us in the here and now. These glimpses help us to hold hope in the face of immense tragedy, pain, and fear. They help us not only to envision our future but also to address the present. They are not a naïve attempt at escaping the horrors of this world. Neither are these glimpses everything; we cannot envision possibilities for our future with a complete contentment with the present. Instead, Beloved Community is real to us both as
something to strive toward and something we can see, touch, taste, smell, hear, and witness in our day-to-day lives. We are bound up in one common humanity and destiny. These peeks at abundance and joy help us to have faith in what’s possible.

There are others than myself who have nodded to this active theology of glimpsing the sacred. The abolitionist Frederick Douglass, for example, articulated this idea of glimpsing what he would name as “God”. Abandoning his early calling as a licensed preacher in the African Methodist Episcopal church shortly after his joining the ranks of abolitionists, Douglass expressed his sense of faith at a celebration following the Fifteenth Amendment’s passing in 1870. While so many participants in the celebration named their gratitude to God rather than humanity’s role in bringing about its passage, Douglass said something quite poignant:

I have no sort of sympathy with that kind of religion that expresses its devotion to God by neglect of their fellows. . . . I want to express my love to God and gratitude to God, by thanking those faithful [people], who have devoted the great energies of their souls to the welfare of [humanity]. It is only through [them] that I can get any glimpses of God anywhere.  

Douglass articulated a theology that “glimpses of God” came reflected in the hearts and souls of human beings who dedicated their lives to serving others. For Douglass, thanking God without acknowledging the role of humanity in bringing about social change and transformation was hollow. It neglected to name our marked positions as human beings with a sense of duty to one another to care for each other toward a better world. In his view, glimpses of God could not be removed from the way he encountered these glimpses in relationship with others. Douglass glimpsed God by actively doing theology in the process, finding God amongst his fellow activists.

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Another leaning toward this direction of “glimpses” for the world to come is found in the Rev. Theodore Parker’s theological expression of the “arc of the moral universe”. Parker was a Unitarian minister in the 19th Century who played a pivotal role in moving Unitarianism toward social activism.16 His quote from an 1853 sermon inspired many theologians in this vein, namely the Unitarian minister the Rev. John Haynes Holmes who simplified his language into more concise terms.17 The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would even paraphrase this by his familiar words: “The Arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice”; these words would become a familiar echo throughout the 1960s Civil Rights Movement.18 In this vision from Parker, the fuller version of his quote hints at glimpse aspects that I find relevant to this discussion. He discusses how he doesn’t understand the moral universe with what little his eyes can see. Instead, he fathoms the arc of the universe by conscience, an active process of engagement. There are ways that Parker has witnessed the arc bending. Parker glimpses at how this arc must bend, even if he can’t see the fullest picture; even though he might not see his labors for justice come to fruition in his lifetime. Parker was convicted with his understanding of the arc in saying “I am sure it bends towards justice”.19 Parker does theology by providing an invitation to witness how the arc of the universe bends in our own lives, showing us how we might do this through theologizing ourselves.

It is in this vein that I situate this process of doing of theology. Like Parker’s quote, it is something we cannot fully see. Our eyes “[reach] but little ways”.20 We see the many ways in which things are wrong in this world, farther from the peace, liberty, and justice we covenant to

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20 Ibid.
pursue for each one of us. Some of us struggle to see the Beloved Community as a practical goal altogether, pessimistically claiming that we’ll never get there, and that there’s no way we might actually reach such a world. And some of us have been scorched by injustice too often toward ourselves and others that we doubt if the universe does bend toward justice. In many ways, Parker’s description of an arc that we can do little but glimpse at seems accurate. There is almost too much evidence to the contrary. Even in the wake of this, there is something at work in our active lives that we’re invited to experience in vivid glimpses.

Our faith as Unitarian Universalists is that it’s up to us to be the “glimpses of God” that so many of us struggle to find in the world. The Rev. Elizabeth Nguyen, the Leadership Development Associate for Youth and Young Adults of Color at the UUA, speaks beautifully to this tension:

> We do not know if this arc bends toward justice…. Our faith teaches us two truths: That we are always enough; that the great circle of love casts no one out. And that we are responsible for bending our small piece of the arc, for finding our own racial justice front lines. When we find our front lines, we find not only our hope, but we also find our most effective action.21

We don’t and can’t know if it really bends. But our faith teaches us that we are responsible for bending that arc anyway, no matter how small our impact. More profoundly, Nguyen speaks here to being on the front lines of racial justice while also finding hope. While we don’t know if the universe does bend toward justice, we have a theology that teaches us to be involved in the doing. Our theology speaks to us with gentle, firm words: *It’s on us, but if you look closely, you can catch glimpses that show us that our labor is not in vain.*

This complexity is something that Unitarian Universalism can withstand. As Nguyen so powerfully puts it, “Unitarian Universalism is for those who have seen the arc bend toward justice and those who doubt it will ever bend but know we have to organize as if our lives depend on it

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anyway”. Our theology and faith in realizing the Beloved Community is potent in that it calls us to the task regardless. Even in a world in which there is no promise that justice will prevail, still we must show up anyway. At the core of our Unitarian Universalist faith, we see how each one of us depends on the actions of another. Our collective action toward that vision on the horizon is visible here and now, should we simply take the time to see it.

In my own life and ministry, I’ve wrestled with this. I’ve struggled to hold glimpses of hope in times of trial. I’ve felt shaken to the core of my being, left asking myself what it is that I have to grasp when the ground beneath me feels shaky. I’ve felt unable to do enough on my own to transform the world on a grander scale. I’ve been challenged to discern what it is that sustains me in this faith. In my experience, these glimpses at life’s goodness have brought me back to my center over again. They’ve reminded me of who I am and what stake I can play in my own small bending of the arc. They’ve been like reinforced steel within me, a sort of rock that I’ve clung to when the realities of life feel hard to bear. I believe these moments help us to view what is possible while also teaching us what is real to us in any single moment. We need not daunt ourselves with the task of building up the Beloved Community on our own. Instead, this is our collective endeavor. We might find a river of hope leading to a wider ocean of faith showing us that we aren’t alone in the doing, and that we are still up to the task of making things better despite all the odds.

One particular glimpse at doing theology like this would transform my understanding of ministry. In the summer of 2020 I served as a CPE chaplain in the hospital during the COVID-19 crisis. As the on-call chaplain, I was paged to show-up for a patient—a Catholic woman in her fifties—who was undergoing rigorous chemotherapy treatments for an advanced stage of cancer. Approaching this situation, I was uncertain of how I might be a minister to her, with our vastly

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differing religious understandings. As I put on my gown, gloves, facemask, and eye shield, I ran through things I might say in my head. Knocking on her room’s door, the internal voice within me quieted once I started to listen. As I listened, she explained that she had two young-adult children in their twenties that she was afraid to leave behind, after their father had died the year before. Our hearts broke open together as tears welled-up behind both of our masked faces. In this moment, I realized what was important was not having the perfect thing to say. It wasn’t about being fully prepared to unpack Catholic theology. It was about bearing witness to the reality of what is. It was about glimpsing at hope through what little we could see of one another through our masks. It was about doing theology together in the face of hard truths. We didn’t need to have a shared theology in order to do the theological work of glimpsing Beloved Community.

Following our visit, the medical staff would tell me that she was comforted in a way that they hadn’t seen in her for a long time. Through this pastoral encounter, we formed together a glimpse at life’s goodness through processing her pain and anguish. While this encounter had so much with it that pointed to sorrow, this moment of spiritual sustenance would help her to keep going and to trust in her faith. She would find comfort knowing that God’s presence was with her, my role as her chaplain being to help incarnate that presence through an active theological process. In how I understand this, I was able to bring her into connection with Beloved Community by welcoming her to do theology with me and wrestle with life. Moments like this in ministry have convinced me that these glimpses at hope in the face of despair are everything. They remind us of our connections to one another and to the sacred, no matter how far we may feel from these.

My hope is that you’ve glimpsed what’s at the heart of this theology of doing Beloved Community. In this next portion, I’ll define more explicitly what Beloved Community means in this framework beyond what you’ve gleaned from my descriptions thus far. As one of the core
components to my theology and the theology we actively do as Unitarian Universalists, I’ll start with explaining Beloved Community’s theological and historical roots.

The Roots of Beloved Community: Josiah Royce

Historically speaking, the phrase “Beloved Community” emerged first out of the writings of Dr. Josiah Royce. Royce was a Harvard professor, philosopher, and proponent of Idealism in the United States. Royce believed heavily that all of reality was united through a universal consciousness. Language of “Beloved Community” described “one beloved and united community of all [humanity] whose religious value we have defended”. Royce’s understanding of building this beloved, universal community maintained that this was the good news of religion: that Jesus was simply a figurehead of Christianity, and that the real substance of faith was this sacred trajectory toward wholeness. While faiths remained well-intentioned in this goal, Royce found that they kept falling short of affirming the full worth of one another in community. Organized religion seemed to always stop short of the radical societal reform it preached. Beloved Community became a call toward a process of active engagement with all of humanity.

Royce wrote extensively in the name of a universal, Beloved Community of all of humanity. From his book War and Insurance, he reflected on the uniqueness of human community to hold such a great capacity for love: “In such a community [of human society] love can indeed readily assume its more stable forms, and can turn into a more ideal loyalty”. Royce believed it was possible for humanity to be tight-knit in its relationships if we kept a sense of loyalty to community. In other words, human beings understand their strong bonds to one another by virtue

24 Ibid.
of feeling responsible for those bonds. In community with each other, we have a chance at practicing this to the benefit of one another. Royce’s theories around loyalty to community heavily informed his use of Beloved Community as a way to name this vision for the world he felt was possible through humanity’s active, engaged struggle.

Beloved Community, for Royce, was much like an ongoing conversation rather than a utopic, ideal society. In fleshing out this ongoing conversation in *The Hope of the Great Community*, he wrote to the necessity of “salvation through loyalty, salvation through the willing service of a community” as what offers hope and salvation to people.27 In this perspective, Royce believed that many of the world’s traditions agreed: “The lesson… which both Buddhism and Christianity agree, is the lesson that for the detached individual there is no salvation”.28 Salvation couldn’t be a solo enterprise. In reality, a person detached from a collective would find it impossible to cling to both individualism and a sense of salvation. The antidote was remaining in the conversation, so that “the consciously united community” might bring a collective sense of salvation. This is what Royce believed that being in Beloved Community was all about. Salvation was a process of doing. It involved living out the theology so many traditions professed in community with one another.

**Social Gospel Roots of Beloved Community: Skinner and Holmes**

More dimensions to Beloved Community came about through earlier Social Gospel glimpses. Universalist minister the Rev. Clarence Skinner29 wrote emphatically in support of social reforms in his time. Skinner was a Christian in his theology, but emphasized Jesus’ teachings on

28 Ibid.
29 Both Skinner and Holmes were known supporters of eugenics, which is in great contrast to the values of our Unitarian Universalist faith. I include them to trace their theological understandings in our movement and to reclaim this theological inheritance toward Beloved Community. More can be read in *Elite* by Mark W. Harris.
love, cooperation, and siblinghood; his theology took on a more mystical flavor, with there being a force at the core of the whole universe that would lead humanity to “transform this old earth into the Kingdom of Heaven”. For Skinner, salvation didn’t refer to salvation in the next life; instead, salvation was about what humanity did for one another in this life. Skinner’s theology and ministry would shape Universalism’s emphasis on Social Gospel in the early 19th Century, transforming the faith into one of “the unities and the universals” instead of only speaking toward an eternal sense of salvation.

Skinner would understand glimpse moments of Beloved Community in other popular terms of his time. In his book *The Social Implications of Universalism*, Skinner emphasized what he named as the “transforming power of Brotherhood” that he believed was growing in the world. With this spirit, he believed it was possible for humanity to overcome its tendency toward materialism, as well as its casual considerations for those at the margins. Skinner believed that Universalism was on the cusp of something great and powerful that he saw growing in humanity across nations and cultures. “Brotherhood has become our passion, our bread and meat, our shining faith. We follow its gleam through the sorrow and misery of this life to the radiant sun-lit hills of hope.” There was a new theology of doing that was in the process of formation for Universalists, and Skinner believed that this new theology must have its roots in siblinghood with each other.

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34 Ibid.
Like Skinner, I believe a practiced theology of ultimate siblinghood—the Beloved Community both to come and in our midst—has power to sustain us. I believe nurturing this theology at the core of our faith is powerful soul work we must undertake in the face of today’s challenges. Skinner, too, believed strongly in the power of cultivating hope to face social and economic injustice. Skinner’s 1924 poem “In Times of Disillusionment” emphasizes his ultimate faith that moments of prophetic vision could sustain humanity:

I'll still proclaim the "Vision Splendid,"
’Till it strikes God-fire
In old and broken hearts, and urges on
The world to consummate its dream.
God's unsurrendered! SO AM I! Therefore
I will live communicate with hope. I light
The candle and—I DREAM.”

I believe Skinner’s poem speaks to glimpses of hope found in realizing the Beloved Community and finally accomplishing the Social Gospel message of reforming society. That potent God-fire that could stir our spirits and move our shattered hearts to do better by our neighbors is something I argue we still do now. This is our great inheritance as a faith; that we are aligned in a tradition that teaches that this world is still savable, and that we know we are the ones to do it.

To bring a Unitarian Social Gospel theologian into view, the Rev. John Haynes Holmes dreamed of broad reforms for Protestant churches in the United States, in order that they meet the urgent needs of society. As a co-founder of both the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Holmes believed Unitarianism in the United States had to grow to be more socially conscious from its elite and prominent roots in

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society. In scathing critiques of the standing-order Unitarian churches, he believed many churches had failed to live up to their charge. In his words, “The men who are the creators of the conditions which constitute our modern social problems… are often the men who sit in the pews of the churches and pay the salaries of the ministers”.  

Holmes felt that instead of transforming society, the churches had grown stagnant; they occupied positions of privilege and power that often contributed to society’s problems rather than working against these social ills.

Holmes shared a vision of creating Beloved Community by actively working to upturn the social order. In his 1918 sermon “On The Future of This Church,” Holmes spoke to transformations of society he hoped the church would one day realize. Appealing to people who had grown tired and frustrated with the standing-order churches, Holmes spoke to those who “have waited long for the new church of the morrow”. He sketched out glimpses of a brighter future for the role of the church: “Our vision may be dim… but we are trying for something higher and better than man has ever known…. We need your love—our hearts must falter if we have it not.”

Holmes believed the churches of his time had to contribute to solving social challenges; he saw it as their duty, rather than looking backward at former glory or preserving status. For Holmes, the “new church of the morrow” was one that understood its place in creating a new society and a new way that humanity could join in meeting its every need.

As I’ve shown in my explorations of writings from both Skinner and Holmes, Universalists and Unitarians from the Social Gospel era clung to a hope for a radical reordering of society. Their growing frustrations with the established powers met with the real and urgent needs they saw of

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40 Ibid.
41 Ibid, 216.
their time. They believed that doing theology was a way to carry this vision for a new future. Even in the midst of the horror and pain that humanity had witnessed, glimpses of hope were still present. Glimpses of the new Community to come were what humanity could grasp and even do through the long night. In this way, Universalist and Unitarian theologians of this time, like Royce, emphasized this vision of creating Beloved Community in its purest sense.

**Beloved Community and the US Civil Rights Movement**

Royce’s writings inspired many organizers, activists, and thinkers in the 1950s and 1960s national movement for Civil Rights. One of the more prominent activists to popularize Beloved Community was the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. King preached often of Beloved Community, drawing inspirations from Royce and Holmes to clarify this vision. From his 1957 sermon “The Birth of a New Nation,” King preached about his hopes for nonviolence to bring about radical change. “The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community…. This is the thing I’m concerned about. Let us fight passionately and unrelentingly for the goals of justice and peace.” King felt that fighting hatred and division with love and compassion would one day bring down the crumbling walls of segregation and the siblinghood of humanity. King believed that this path would be difficult. Overall, he maintained that “the forces of the universe are on the side of justice,” reinforcing that same theological arc of justice from Parker.


43 King, Martin Luther, and Coretta Scott King. *Strength to Love*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2019, x.

In terms of a philosophy and theology, King emphasized in his preaching that barriers to realizing Beloved Community happened with three evils: poverty, racism, and militarism.\(^{45}\) In essence, the creation of Beloved Community involves fighting these evils. It is realized in removing barriers that separate us from one another in society. Holding this with an understanding of Royce’s Beloved Community, we cannot hope to bring about salvation if any one of us is removed from this experience of greater community. If any of us faces oppression and evil, we fail to live up to a collective salvation. King thought this was imperative, that racism, poverty, and militarism not only be dismantled in the United States but also on the international scale.

The Beloved Community, for King, involved a “great revolution,” as described in his last Sunday sermon at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC.\(^{46}\) In this sermon, “Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution,” King spoke to a “triple revolution” that was taking place in the world. He argued there was “a technological revolution, with the impact of automation and cybernation… a revolution of weaponry, with the emergence of atomic and nuclear weapon of warfare… a human rights revolution, with the freedom explosion that is taking place all over the world”.\(^{47}\) This three-fold revolution would bring a radical societal shift and upheaval of the status quo. Things couldn’t remain the same while some folks remained at the margins. Living out a faith that the Beloved Community was possible, King believed that humanity was “able to hew out of the mountain of despair the stone of hope” and that we could “transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood”.\(^{48}\) This symphony of the siblinghood of

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\(^{47}\) Ibid.

\(^{48}\) Ibid.
humanity across our nation and world invoked a need to change how we were in community with one another and how we were failing to live up to these commitments.

Theological Rebirth and Renewal: James Luther Adams

The Rev. James Luther Adams is another theologian that discusses the role of active theology in bringing about Beloved Community. As one of the most influential 20th century Unitarian Universalist theologians, especially around and after the time of the consolidation in 1961, his writings are especially potent toward visions for the Unitarian Universalist faith and religion at large.49 A minister who studied with leading theologians in Germany in his time, Adams witnessed the disturbing reality that churches in Germany had not effectively resisted the rise of Nazism.50 Adams, moved by the inaction he witnessed of leaders and communities of faith, would go about envisioning and architecting a new Unitarian Universalism; one that would take itself seriously in responding to the social concerns and issues facing humanity.

Adams believed heavily in a covenant of social responsibility, which he believed all humans were called to uphold. He praised covenants as “one of the great conceptual inventions of our ancient forbears for defining identity,” believing that identity came authentically formed only through relationships to institutions and history.51 In his words, “The covenant of social responsibility… is one that is rooted in a historical conception of the meaning of human existence… Personal religion… gains adequate meaning only in relationship to the larger context of existence”.52 Our very identity is bound up in our social responsibility to one another, as well as the historical, social, and institutional contexts we navigate. This “prophetic covenant” demands

52 Ibid.
that we remain invested in the ongoing conversation. We cannot avoid a sense of social responsibility in faith without considering the ways we are interdependent on one another.

In a more overt description, Adams described a theology of Beloved Community in his essay “Guiding Principles for a Free Faith”. In this essay, especially discussing what he coined as the “Five Smooth Stones of Liberal Religion,” Adams named an eventual goal of human community that he believed was subject to this transformative, creative power he called God. He described Beloved Community in a way that not only imagines what he hoped would become reality, but also grounded beyond the abstract. Calling it the “community of justice and love,” he maintained that this sort of community “is not an ethereal fellowship that is above the conflicts and turmoils of the world”. Instead, it is shaped by both history and nature. In order for the community to hold any authenticity, we must understand it in the wake of context and shape it ourselves. Spirituality that failed to understand its active and ongoing role in bringing about this great community was “sham” and “the great enemy of religion”. Creating Beloved Community was a spiritual and theological imperative for faith.

**Contemporary Theologies of the Beloved Community**

In this portion, I’d like to bring into conversation contemporary theologies of Beloved Community from a range of theological perspectives within Unitarian Universalism. Realizing Beloved Community is nowadays an active discussion, especially with the rising popularity of the proposed Eighth Principle of Unitarian Universalism that articulates a commitment to Beloved Community. Additionally, this Principle names an active journey toward spiritual wholeness that

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53 Adams’ notion of God as this “community-forming power” is a definition I find especially meaningful to Beloved Community as a way of living theology in community. See https://www.meadville.edu/files/resources/james-luther-adams-and-the-transformation-of-liber.pdf.


55 Ibid.

is met by building up inclusive, multicultural communities through concrete actions. These actions are also accountable to dismantling racism and oppression in wider systems and our own lives. I’ll showcase theologies that enrich our glimpsing of Beloved Community from Pagan, earth-centered, Christian, and liberation theology perspectives. My hope is that this will exhibit the range to which we understand our own commitments as Unitarian Universalists to living out Beloved Community in doing theology. Likewise, I believe it will showcase common threads that are evident in this glimpse-moment theology that reveal to us who we are, as a faith of doers.

To start, I’ll first invoke words from ecofeminist and neopagan theologian Starhawk, also known as Miriam Simos. The author and contributor to thirteen books, her writings have grown influential in modern earth-based spirituality and pagan movements.\(^{57}\) As an influential activist and writer, Starhawk was pivotal in advocating for the Unitarian Universalist Association to include earth-centered traditions and spiritualities as one of our Six Sources, from which we draw meaning and inspiration.\(^{58}\) Her work through the Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans, an interest group of the Unitarian Universalist Association, would widen Unitarian Universalism’s spiritual understandings to include ecology and other underrepresented traditions within our fold.

In a piece that I find both moving and exceptionally on-point with Beloved Community, Starhawk does active theology in this poignant passage, adapted to use through the UUA’s WorshipWeb titled “Community Means Strength,”\(^{59}\) from her 1982 book *Dreaming the Dark*:

> We are all longing to go home to some place we have never been—a place half-remembered and half-envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time. Community…. Community means strength

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that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done.
Arms to hold us when we falter.
A circle of healing.
A circle of friends.
Someplace where we can be free.60

It’s almost uncanny with how Starhawk’s description of community meets with the discussion on Beloved Community and our theology. What’s beautiful is her phrase, “we can only catch glimpses of [it] from time to time”. It’s both a place we have only imagined and yet are profoundly embraced within at once. We are met with sustenance for the journey ahead, though we know just how far off we still are from the destination. Doing theology in Starhawk’s case involves engaging with this sort of community that we have only caught glimpses of at times. Starhawk’s articulation of this community through an earth-centered Pagan lens is valuable in showcasing the tight-knit circles and communities in which we find ourselves, which is a perspective richly informed in earth-based and Pagan spirituality.

Another such earth-based passage—my personal favorite exposition of Beloved Community—is included in the anthology Justice on Earth. The Rev. Jennifer Nordstrom, Senior Minister of the First Unitarian Society of Milwaukee and founder of Unitarian Universalist Young Adults for Climate Justice, “believes Unitarian Universalism can help build the Beloved Community”.61 She describes the Beloved Community through her following prophetic vision:

I hold a vision of Beloved Community beyond the horizon of my own knowing. In this community of human and nonhuman beings, we live in integrity with each other and the Earth. We work together to nourish and sustain life. We eat well, but do not take more than we need... We have diverse, flourishing cultures that cooperate with, respect, and learn from one another without prejudice or hierarchy. We live free from violence or coercion. We celebrate every day, and appreciate the joys of living. We dance and sing. We laugh…. We create art and music. We tell

stories. We live in tune with the rhythms of the Earth; the seasons, day and night. We live in tune with each other… with the rhythms of our own hearts.\(^6\)

This gorgeous description of what it is that we’re working toward gives us more than a glimpse at that Beloved Community beyond the horizon of our knowing. From the lens of ecological justice, we see a dream for a world in which we curb our greed and take only what is needed. We live in a sacred and protected balance with creation. Our human lives are enriched through the ways we dwell with one another in compassion, free from caste or bigotry. Our process of doing theology by living into Beloved Community is living integrally with one another and the Earth’s systems, which we work to nurture and steward.

Nordstrom evokes this vision through use of metaphors we know well already. We can glimpse this far-off world through the wonder we’ve experienced through music and art. We know the deep value of human stories, as well as the richness in deeply listening to one another. We imagine a world without prejudice by way of knowing spaces in which we have felt liberated to be our fullest selves. We know the same “joys of living” through song and dance, through sharing meals with one another, and meeting our needs while taking only what we require. Nordstrom offers us a vivid glimpse of Beloved Community by pointing to the magic of what we already know we can do that will sustains us. This vision is not abstract; we know Beloved Community because we have lived through precious moments where we’ve tasted it. This passage speaks to the Beloved Community both on our horizon and already in our midst, should we just reach for it.

From a Christian and liberation theology perspective, Methodist–Unitarian Universalist minister the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker shows us another glimpse of what it takes for active creation of Beloved Community. In *Blessing the World*, co-authored with the Rev. Dr. Robert Hardies, Parker speaks about how we must “Choose to Bless the World”:

\(^6\) Ibid, 154-5.
Your gifts… can be used to bless or curse the world. The mind’s power, the strength of the hands… Any of these can serve to feed the hungry, bind up wounds, welcome the stranger… Any of these can draw down the prison door, hoard bread, abandon the poor… comply with injustice or withhold love. You must answer this question: What will you do with your gifts? Choose to bless the world. The choice to bless the world is…. a grateful acknowledgment that in the midst of a broken world unspeakable beauty, grace and mystery abide… And while there is injustice, anesthetization, or evil there moves a holy disturbance… protesting, urging, insisting that which is sacred will not be defiled…. None of us alone can save the world. Together—that is another possibility, waiting.\(^63\)

Parker’s description of the unspeakable beauty in our midst, though there is so much evil and injustice at work in our hurting world, captures what we already know to be true of life. We can know joy while in the midst of pain. We can find solace in experiencing a love larger than ourselves, greater even than our supportive community. This is best summed up in which Parker writes: “Assuredly, we are in a world in which the struggle continues. However, it is also true that we already live on holy ground.”\(^64\) The “holy ground” we aim to cultivate is living into this theology of doing Beloved Community with our fellow sacred human beings.

Parker’s articulated theology invokes a theistic understanding in which we are at work in this universe as accomplices to “a holy disturbance” that refuses to let injustice have the final word. She sketches a profound theology in which each one of us is responsible for choosing how we will bless this hurting world with our lives. I believe Parker is speaking to Beloved Community when she describes a force urging that “that which is sacred will not be defiled”. Though we might see things as hopeless, Parker gives us a concrete look at what we might do to better serve this world and one another. In fact, it’s our duty to bless the world and to find our own ways in which we might move toward the Kingdom of God, both present now and still far off.

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Finally, I want to showcase other theologies of liberation within Unitarian Universalism that speak to Beloved Community. Liberation theology hasn’t always been appreciated by mainstream Unitarian Universalism for its contributions to our movement. In articulating what our goal is for Beloved Community, the organizing collective Black Lives of UU defines in clear terms what it is we’re working toward. Beloved Community, in how they see it, results when “people of diverse racial, ethnic, educational, class, gender, sexual orientation backgrounds/identities come together in an interdependent relationship of love, mutual respect, and care that seeks to realize justice within the community and in the broader world”.

As one of the proponents of the Eighth Principle, Black Lives of UU believes that Unitarian Universalism needs to make more explicit commitments to anti-racism and dismantling white supremacy efforts beyond our current Principles. Additionally, they lift up Beloved Community as a theology that describes our destination of journeying toward spiritual wholeness in multicultural community. It’s not enough that we articulate well-stated, lofty ethical values. Our faith demands an articulated commitment that’s backed by action, a possibility we have available through affirming the Eighth Principle.

The Rev. Dr. Sofía Betancourt, Associate Professor of Unitarian Universalist Theologies and Ethics at Starr King School for the Ministry, writes from a Unitarian Universalist liberation theology perspective on Beloved Community. From her 2018 sermon “The Missing Remnant,” delivered at the Service of the Living Tradition at General Assembly, Betancourt preached about reforming Unitarian Universalism toward this liberationist, anti-racist vision:

We are called, collectively, to this great experiment in communal salvation. Whether we arrived in this faith by birth or by choice, our everyday expression of our values in the world matters…. I believe in the power of our callings. I believe in saving the soul of our nation and that we cannot show up authentically for that

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struggle if we ignore the one right here, right in this community of faith. I am asking
you to love us even when we don’t deserve you. Collective and communal salvation are theological inheritances from our Universalist forbears. Our faith is an experiment in living our lives toward radical Beloved Community and welcome. Rather than ignore the struggle toward multiculturalism, anti-racism, and anti-oppression, Betancourt calls us to turn toward it. She invites us to dig our heels in with being invested in this community of faith; to stay, even when it’s hard and when we find that our faith isn’t deserving. Communal liberation is only possible by working toward a sense of our interwoven salvation. We cannot hope to glimpse Beloved Community without wrestling with these hard truths and callings.

After sharing glimpses of Beloved Community in contemporary theologies, I now want to bring the conversation toward the Sixth Principle. Ultimately, this is where I share my concern that Unitarian Universalism must consider its affirmed Principles in light of Beloved Community. The goal of world community is a prophetic affirmation of our faith. And yet, like with Beloved Community, we see how far we are from realizing liberty, peace, and justice for all. In this next portion, I invite you to join me in wrestling with some uncomfortable aspects of our present faith: with the United States-centered phenomenon of Unitarian Universalism and how this might be different; with the tensions in holding peace with liberty and justice and how these values are in conversation with one another. Additionally, I invite you to glimpse what active living into Beloved Community theology looks like on the international scale, through the beautiful, ongoing work of Unitarian Universalists. By this exploration, we might glimpse new, profound evidence of this faith in Beloved Community as it moves in the world and in one another.

The Goal of World Community: The Sixth Principle

The 6th Principle affirmed by the Unitarian Universalist Association names a covenant of our congregations toward “world community with peace, liberty and justice for all”.68 This Principle lifts up the value of building world community as a goal for our living tradition, in which peace, liberty, and justice is cultivated for each one of us. In terms of theology, this is perhaps one such image of Beloved Community on our horizon: a world in which we dwell together as peoples and nations, where each one of us lives in blessed international community with the securities of peace, justice, and liberty. Such an image holds the dreams of so many of the theologians I’ve invoked, namely Royce, King, Betancourt, and Nordstrom. This great hope of international community, cooperation, and alleviation of poverty is real, and we need one another to get there.

The Sixth Principle remains a bit sticky in Unitarian Universalism. The tension in how to secure peace while also securing liberty and justice seems challenging. How can there be peace when there remain people and places that live without liberty and justice? Likewise, this evokes uncomfortable questions for Unitarian Universalists: What is our place in “enforcing” liberty and justice in the world? How should Unitarian Universalists—with our privileged statuses—be in community with the rest of the world, when our own nation has caused so much harm? This also calls to mind the very reality that Unitarian Universalism remains a movement that is fairly United States-centric, even with international communities around the world that would identify with our faith. The present state of our world is that nations and peoples remain fractured, living with varying rights and privileges. This shows us a harsh reality of how a radical theology of Beloved Community isn’t yet actualized on the global scale.

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Through the Sixth Principle, I believe that holding Beloved Community as a theological lens provides a glimpse in how the world might be different. Embedded in this Principle is what I detect as an implied sense of Beloved Community, where countries and their borders are fluid, where people live free from oppression in ongoing relationship with each other. This implied sense is strengthened when we assume Beloved Community to be the ultimate goal of our faith, the project of generations. Even with how uncomfortable these questions are, we Unitarian Universalists must be willing to stay engaged. In fact, our very doing of theology depends on it. Hard questions like these deserve heartfelt, dedicated attempts to answer them. If we say we believe in building Beloved Community, the only way we can ever hope to get there is through wrestling with these tensions on how to live our theology in the world.

Peace, liberty, and justice seem in particular tension with one another. Peace itself cannot exist without the guarantees of liberty and justice. Peace without these is but peace for some, while life for others remains limited by oppression. Our oppressions are linked, and a world with peace but no shared sense of liberty and justice for all people is but an illusion. To name a Principle of peace, liberty, and justice together marks this implied, though evident, theology of Beloved Community. We aspire to have peaceful communities in which people live free from injustice. In this world, peace is secured by our way of feeding every need, living as people without want. Our cup overflows with blessings as we bless one another and the world. Unitarian Universalists cultivate this great hope for world community. To pursue world community with Beloved Community requires that our leaders and people of faith measure our actions and impact with this greater goal. It creates an opportunity to reckon with who we are on the international scale.

Therefore, I now would like to offer glimpses of the world that could be; what a Unitarian Universalism might and does look like as it pursues Beloved Community as it works toward world
community. I’d like to posit what must change while showcasing also what we are doing well. Through this, we might glimpse hope for a brighter international scene and future and notice how Unitarian Universalists are already rising to the task.

**The Beloved Community on the International Scale**

In the first of these glimpses, we might envision a world in which the United States isn’t a dominating superpower, and Unitarian Universalism itself isn’t a faith imbued with privilege. Instead, we might readily share our abundance with one another so that Unitarian Universalism doesn’t remain a religion steeped in affluence. In order to get there, Unitarian Universalists in the United States must be willing to give up their privileged status in the world. As theologians like Holmes have been critical, our churches remain glimpses of privileged swaths of society. Our movement must grow to include congregational membership and voting rights to Unitarian Universalist communities across the globe. Without this, we risk not being in world community; we might remain a privileged voting majority that calls the shots on its own terms, informed largely by those of us living in the United States. We cannot achieve being in authentic community with others around the world unless we are willing to give up this position and empower others to confront injustice and shift dominant power structures on their terms.

A glimpse at authentic international Beloved Community can be seen in the work of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. The UUSC aspires to create grassroots partnerships with local organizations and movements across the country and world working toward justice. Through these partnerships, they hope to “[advance] human rights and social justice around the world, partnering with those who confront unjust power structures and mobilizing to challenge oppressive policies.” 69 Their work is grounded in a faithful position that every person has inherent

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worth and dignity, per the First Principle. For the UUSC, self-determination for international peoples and groups is essential. They actively work against a mindset in which they provide aid and service on a hierarchical playing field. Instead, they strive for relationships that are “eye-to-eye,” supporting those at the margins to be the determinants of their own future.

One such glimpse of this “eye-to-eye” partnership is the UUSC’s ongoing work in Burma. Since 1996, the organization ALTSEAN—the Alternative Association of Southeast Asian Nations Network on Burma—has been strengthening networks of activists in Burma and across Southeast Asia.\(^{70}\) Their network includes ten countries: Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Singapore, Laos, Cambodia, Brunei, and Burma/Myanmar. Through their advocacy for human rights, atrocity prevention, and democratic processes, the UUSC has partnered with people in those regions to build inter-community solidarity on their own terms. This radical work is evident in their cohort of young-women activists working across religious and ethnic differences toward peacebuilding. The UUSC’s role in bolstering this grassroots work showcases living into a theology of Beloved Community. The inherent worth and dignity of people living abroad is taken seriously by empowering them to do the work of justice in their own nations and communities.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., also had visions for what this beloved world community might look like. Believing firmly in the international scale and dimension of the Beloved Community, King highlighted a “great revolution” he felt the world was on the brink of, with regard to alleviating discrimination, injustice, and suffering. From a speech he gave to the New York State Convention of Universalists in 1956, “Now this determination… to struggle, until segregation and discrimination have passed away, springs from the same longing for human dignity that motivates oppressed peoples all over the world. This is not… a nation in transition,

but… a world in transition.” King held an ultimate faith that humanity could understand “the creation of a beloved community” through extending the struggle against injustice to include the world, not just the United States. Unitarian Universalists, too, might understand ourselves as a faith in transition. Our theology is one of ongoing transition toward Beloved Community. We might be accomplices to the same great revolution in opening up continuing conversations on the world stage through authentic relationships. We might grow past our present US-centered faith and welcome marginalized voices in international communities into decision-making processes, as well as creating space for them to establish relief and resilience on their community’s terms.

Another Unitarian Universalist program that gives us glimpses of authentic international relationships is that of the Unitarian Universalist College of Social Justice. Through immersion-learning, the UUCSJ hopes to help people cross boundaries in their visioning for a better world by direct volunteer opportunities. These immersion journeys and justice-training programs bring to fruition a collaboration between the UUA and the UUSC with international partners; they provide dimensions in working toward international Beloved Community through opportunities that engage volunteers in service with marginalized groups. Similar to the goals of the UUSC, the UUCSJ hopes to create truly horizontal relationships, free from hierarchy and cognizant of relationships of power. They believe that activism must be spiritually grounded in pursuits toward justice, upholding this vision that the Sixth Principle evokes of a just world community.

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A powerful site for one of their immersion journeys, the US–Mexico border program “BorderLinks” shows the realities of our present crises at the border.\(^7\) Through this immersion experience, they don’t wish to insulate or sugarcoat the harshness. Instead, they cultivate a sense of hope through relationship-building across difference. Guided by an active theology of Beloved Community, BorderLinks is a program that puts the Sixth Principle into practice by living it out in the present. Their work involves working beyond just an imagined alternative and better future. It’s also creating glimpses at Beloved Community through these journeys toward understanding and wholeness. Unitarian Universalists involved in this program are able to recognize Beloved Community in real-life experience, though the harshness of the present border crisis remains critical. We can witness another program that lives out this theology by growing and nourishing sustainable activism in the present toward a just future.

Doing Beloved Community as theology, for Unitarian Universalists, means creating these sorts of horizontal relationships that are as free from a sense of hierarchy and coercion as possible. In this same horizontal dynamic, there’s a balance with how we live in tune with the rhythms of one another and the Earth, which is something BorderLinks does by its radical truth-telling at the border. This is Beloved Community theology in action in a way that supports this goal of world community that our Sixth Principle evokes. We can witness how a journey toward wholeness calls us to be more whole with our connections to one another, especially those in other parts of the world. There is great power in seeing how this theology is backed-up with action in this program. It demonstrates that we can join in the process of \textit{doing} this theology, too, in ways that are horizontal and avoid exploitation. The promise of Beloved Community is glimpsed in international connections like these, with truly balanced, immersive relationships.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this theology is a mix of things. It’s not meant to be self-congratulatory for Unitarian Universalism. It is both an affirmation and an indictment. It’s an invitation toward reverence and joy into witnessing how we best live into our shared values. Likewise, it is a call to action demanding that we back our values with “deeds, not creeds”. Our theology is something beyond just our written Principles and prophetic words. It’s a living and unfurling process toward Beloved Community and wholeness. While Unitarian Universalism remains today largely centered around the United States, there is hope to be found in how we see organizations and activists rising to the task. We can glimpse the beauty found in our concrete actions, met with our visions toward a revolutionary future. This is how we as Unitarian Universalists see and understand our theology.

Unitarian Universalism itself must unite behind this vision of a beloved world community as a centerpiece of our theology. While I emphasize re-examining the Sixth Principle in light of this theology, all of our Principles and wider faith would benefit from holding this theology closer to our hearts. We must choose to affirm who it is exactly that we want to be at this juncture. We cannot maintain a Unitarian Universalist exceptionalism or national identity. Our unfurling theology of Beloved Community holds no room for this. Likewise, we must decide if multiculturalism, anti-racism, and greater inclusion truly matter to this faith. If so, we must decide how this meshes with Beloved Community both on national and international fronts. We must be able to spot the difference and work concretely toward transformation by our deeds. It’s time we’ve transformed this beautiful faith of ours. There is so much potential for creativity and transformation. The time is now to answer the call of our theology to bring the Beloved Community into the here and now, as something that is real beyond just an abstract vision. Beloved

Community is present when we choose to incarnate it through our work toward justice, as well as recognizing how it already exists and persists in our midst through the harshest of times.

In turning toward Beloved Community, Unitarian Universalism must grow beyond its current reach. With a theology of the Beloved Community at our core, we must measure living our values with ensuring agency and representation go beyond just those who are privileged. We must envision a way forward in giving up our privileged positions by welcoming others into radical and ongoing dialogue and community on their own terms. As Betancourt reminds us, “The journey toward redemption is about truth telling, lamentation, and owning our wrongs, while at the same time claiming the profound possibility that calls us forward.”\(^76\) Unitarian Universalism must own up to its wrongs and be willing to pursue right relationship. We must own the multitude of ways we have failed to live out the calls of this theology. It is only in opening ourselves up to this hard look at ourselves and at one another that we can hope to develop as a faith and take the necessary steps toward transformation.

I believe a powerful vision of the Beloved Community is in our international consciousness. My prayer for this world is that we might be ready to serve one another and build this world we desperately long to create; the Beloved Community that resides in the now and in our bending of the arc toward justice. There remains so much work ahead of us. We see how much more we have to do to accomplish what our ancestors have already begun. This longing for such a world is one that is waking up, only awaiting our activation. Unitarian Universalism is strong and powerful enough to carry out this vision. After all, this theology is in our very bones. We are ready to answer the call. May we be brave to go out and do it. May we be humble to see how we fall short. May we make Beloved Community both our present and future by how we do theology.

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