

Beloved Communities: Deepening our Activism and Healing our Communities

By Michelle Lin

By the rivers of Babylon

Where we sat down

And there we wept

When we remembered Zion

–“Rivers of Babylon,” Black spiritual

As an activist, I’ve heard and sang plenty of “freedom songs” in marches and rallies. But the first time I actually felt a Black spiritual was last month at a Beloved Communities Initiative gathering, when I was listening to the voice of Bernice Johnson Reagon, civil rights activist and founder of the legendary Sweet Honey in the Rock (from which she has since retired) at recent gathering of the Beloved Communities Initiative. As Bernice sang, other voices joined in and harmony filled the room. When I closed my eyes I could feel the room’s energy resonate inside me.

The feeling it produced was familiar to me, as a Chinese/Taiwanese Buddhist and my experiences in Sangha, the community of Buddhist practitioners. Both song and Sangha have an indescribable capacity to provide clarity, connection and renewal. The historical use of spirituals, however, is unique to the Black community and in its transcendent ability to bring together a community of people towards collective struggle and hope. For the gathering I was attending, it opened us to even deeper reflection on the state of our communities.

This gathering took place at Haley Farm in Knoxville, Tennessee (as in Alex Haley, author of “The Autobiography of Malcolm X” and “Roots”). My friend Jonathan Cunningham and I had traveled with Grace Lee Boggs and Shea Howell, longtime movement activists in Detroit, to attend this gathering and represent the community-based work we were doing in Detroit. The gathering was part of the Beloved Communities Initiative which began in October 2004, consisting of a series of ongoing conversations to explore and encourage the emergence of “beloved communities” across the country, where people are “committed to and practicing the profound pursuit of justice, radical inclusivity, democratic governance, health and wholeness, and social/individual transformation” (see www.belovedcommunitiesnet.org for more information).

The gathering had an impressive roster of veteran civil rights activists, freedom fighters and community organizers from around the country, as well as one remarkable individual from Salvador, Brazil. All of us had been invited by the initiative’s organizers, through the Institute for Democratic Renewal/Project Change, to engage in deep reflection and conversations about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s call for the “Beloved Community.”

The weekend opened with a series of questions put forth by organizers of the gathering. What are the characteristics of a beloved community? How are some communities actualizing the vision for a beloved community in their locales? What makes the understanding of a beloved community important to the work we are doing now? How do we bring together a network of beloved communities to an actual movement that will transform our society?

To begin this exploration, we shared our respective work, and discussed how it is helping to manifest beloved community. We learned about the impact of civic truth-telling from Reverend Nelson, Joyce Johnson and Demetria Ledbetter, who recounted the truth and reconciliation process used to bring restorative justice to their Greensboro community following the violent confrontation between the Klan and anti-Klan demonstrators in 1979. Through the power of telling stories, Dr. Vincent Harding, who worked closely with Dr. King and is now based in Denver, Colorado, shared with us his work on the Veterans of Hope Project, in preserving the stories of elders and activists as an intergenerational tool to promote positive social change. We witnessed the powerful impact Kathy Sanchez and her daughter, Corrine, are making through Tewa Women United to address the wounds of sexual and domestic violence, by reconnecting with Mother Earth and reclaiming the leadership of indigenous women in their communities in New Mexico. We also learned about the unique and interactive interfaith work that Nobuko Miyamoto of Los Angeles is doing to build community through the sharing of Buddhist and Muslim practices. Jonathan and I shared our experiences with Detroit Summer, a multi-racial, youth-oriented collective, in engaging with young people and artists to address the city's educational and drop-out crisis. We facilitated the creation of a group poem on the issue of education.

At first glance, these efforts appear divergent in their composition, approaches and goals. However, themes emerged as we examined these as expressions of beloved communities. For example, many of these efforts brought together communities with strong connections to elders and ancestors, where members of the community are able to look upon their histories to draw lessons, guidance, and purpose.

In our discussions, the phrase "hidden wholeness" came up several times, as an underlying value and aspect of the beloved community. This phrase describes the universality of all our particular experiences; no matter what identities we experience (race, ethnicity, class, ability, gender, sexuality, etc.). Because the dominant society fragments our identities, communities and histories, one role a beloved community can serve is to affirm these particularities while strengthening our connectedness by uncovering the hidden wholeness. We spoke of how traumatizing our society can be to individuals and communities, bringing out an urgent need for healing through spiritual connection or

practice. I saw that this process of healing could begin from the telling of our stories and speaking our truths, in the presence of a beloved community.

Many organizing conferences or events that I've attended mostly encourage folks to discuss the issues or strategize on how to take power from a political structure. Very few of these events challenge us to speak as ourselves and share our stories as a way to live out the transformation and change that we seek. The opportunity for me to attend this gathering supported my personal search for spiritual growth, particularly as a young community activist. It has been challenging for me to retell the story of that weekend in Tennessee to my family and community. As an organizer, I'm eager to share fruits of my experiences with others, but I came across such unfamiliarity, or perhaps fear, with talking about the role of spirituality in our activist work. Some readers may even feel I'm coming across too abstractly, or may wonder whether I had some funny out-of-body experience with my head still in the clouds.

I'm not necessarily trying to send the masses to church or join some other form of organized religion. But I do believe that many young people have a hunger for spirituality and life-affirming relationships because of the way that the dominant culture damages and silences our ability to live out our fullest potentials. This is why so many of us are drawn to the transformative politics of organizations like Detroit Summer, the Boggs Center, Veterans of Hope and Tewa Women United. They are the places we go to affirm ourselves and heal our anger and losses, while planting in us new seeds of validation and hope. The beloved community is not going to suddenly appear after the "revolution" is over. Instead, we can work today to live the beloved community in our every waking moment, and in our every breath.