

**Words of Inspiration**  
**American Empire: Racism and Power**  
**Unitarian Universalist Church of the Restoration**  
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In *A Testament of Hope*, an essay published posthumously in 1968, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King wrote:

Today's problems are so acute because the tragic evasions and defaults of several centuries have accumulated to disaster proportions . . . . Confronted now with the interrelated problems of war, inflation, urban decay, white backlash and a climate of violence, it is now *forced* to address itself to race relations and poverty, and it is tragically unprepared. What might once have been a series of separate problems now merge into a social crisis of almost stupefying complexity. . . .

Why is the issue of equality still so far from solution in America, a nation that professes itself to be democratic, inventive, hospitable to new ideas, rich, productive and awesomely powerful? The problem is so tenacious because, despite its virtues and attributes, America is deeply racist and its democracy is flawed both economically and socially. . . .

It is forcing America to face all its interrelated flaws – racism, poverty, militarism and materialism. It is exposing evils that are rooted deeply in the whole structure of our society. It reveals systemic rather than superficial flaws and suggests that radical reconstruction of society itself is the real issue to be faced.<sup>i</sup>

Almost 50 years later, his words still ring true. Some things have changed. Racism has morphed. Overt, violent Jim Crow racism is not acceptable, but the racism/classism in our social structures is still strong and still powerful. Affluent, educated African Americans are in powerful, influential positions, but Barack Obama's presidency hardly signifies a "post-racial" society. Poor African-American boys are sent to prison and kept in second-class status in astounding numbers.

I've been reading a lot of political and economic history and analysis over the past month. I have felt especially impacted by *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America*. Colin Woodard's 2011 book gave me a new perspective on North American history and our current cultural, political and religious divisions.

My husband isn't always pleased when I say I've been strongly impacted by a book because I tend to talk about the ideas and to make associations between the ideas and whatever is current in our lives sometimes for years. It's as if I wanted to tell the whole of the book's content as well as my thoughts and reactions. So you may hear me talking about this book in the future.

And I wish I could give you all of what I read. That is not only impossible, but it also wouldn't actually make much of a sermon. I want to say too much for our time and too much for our worship experience.

So, here are the main things I want to say. None of it is new, but I think it is important to repeat.

No one is born a racist. It has to be taught.

American racism is not now and never has been accidental. It is an intentional strategy on the part of wealthy white elites. As bell hooks put it in our reading this morning, "it is part of the culture of domination, the dominator culture."<sup>ii</sup>

And for some, racism is for the purpose of seeking Empire. These folks believe that the United States is Exceptional and deserves to control the world and to control the world economy.

Racism is both a tool and an excuse.

In the face of overwhelming power, we are not powerless. bell hooks called us to decolonize our minds so that we are not perpetuating dominator culture and to build Beloved Community which is what we aspire to do in this spiritual community.

In his foreword to Michelle Alexander's book, *The New Jim Crow*, Cornell West reminded us that Dr. King did not call us to be color-blind, but rather to be lovestruck with each other:

To be lovestruck is to care, to have deep compassion, and to be concerned for each and every individual, including the poor and vulnerable. The social movement fanned and fueled by this historic book is a democratic awakening that says we do care, that the racial caste system must be dismantled, that we need a revolution in our warped priorities, a transfer of power from oligarchs to the people<sup>iii</sup>

West uses the word oligarchs. Oligarchy is the rule by a small elite. In his 2011 book *Oligarchy*, Jeffrey A. Winters defines oligarchy as "the politics of wealth defense by materially endowed actors." In Winters' definition, the possession of massive wealth is the decisive factor in identifying oligarchs. But some oligarchs,

according to Winters' analysis, do not *directly* govern the societies they inhabit; they thus can rule directly or through an intermediary.<sup>iv</sup>

I believe and contend that in many ways now the United States of America is not a democracy but rather an oligarchy. That takes me back to that book, *American Nations*, which gave me a new look at American cultures and systemic racism. It helped me to see how some American cultures have from the beginning pushed us towards oligarchy and toward empire. Those aristocratic cultures intentionally used racism and violence as primary tools.

Colin Woodard's hypothesis is that North America is composed of eleven "nations," regional cultures that don't follow state or national boundaries.

To understand violence (racism) or practically any other divisive issue, you need to understand historical settlement patterns and the lasting cultural fissures they established.

The original North American colonies were settled by people from distinct regions of the British Isles—and from France, the Netherlands, and Spain—each with its own religious, political, and ethnographic traits. For generations, these Euro-American cultures developed in isolation from one another, consolidating their cherished religious and political principles and fundamental values, . . .

Throughout the colonial period and the Early Republic, they saw themselves as competitors . . . and even as enemies . . . Our continent's famed mobility has been reinforcing, not dissolving, regional differences, as people increasingly sort themselves into like-minded communities, . . .

Even waves of immigrants did not fundamentally alter these nations, because the children and grandchildren of immigrants assimilated into whichever culture surrounded them. Because of slavery, the African American experience has been different from that of other settlers and immigrants, but it too has varied by nation, as black people confronted the dominant cultural and institutional norms of each. . . .

The same handful of nations show up again and again at the top and the bottom of state-level figures on deadly violence, capital punishment, and promotion of gun ownership. . . . The three deadliest states—Louisiana, Mississippi, and Alabama, where the rate of killings topped 10 per 100,000—were all in Deep South territory. Meanwhile, the three safest states—New Hampshire, Maine, and Minnesota, with rates of about 2 killings per 100,000—were all part of Yankeedom. . . .

Among the eleven regional cultures, there are two superpowers, nations with the identity, mission, and numbers to shape continental debate:

Yankeedom and Deep South. For more than two hundred years, they've fought for control of the federal government and, in a sense, the nation's soul.

Over the decades, Deep South has become strongly allied with Greater Appalachia and Tidewater, and more tenuously with the Far West. Their combined agenda—to slash taxes, regulations, social services, and federal powers.<sup>v</sup>

Woodard's description of the formation of the Deep South showed me one of the main origins of our systemic racism and some Americans lust for Empire. The primary Deep South culture is the dominator culture. It is not the only source of racism, greed, lust for power and control, but it is the primary source.

The founding fathers of the Deep South . . . were the sons and grandsons of the founders of an older English colony: Barbados, the richest and most-horrifying society in the English-speaking world . . . a place notorious even then for its inhumanity . . .

From the outset, Deep South culture was based on radical disparities in wealth and power, with a tiny elite commanding total obedience and enforcing it with state-sponsored terror . . .<sup>vi</sup>

And it was an aggressive, expansionist culture, ever seeking more land, more wealth and more power.

"We are a country of gentry," one resident (of South Carolina) proclaimed in 1773; "we have no such thing as Common People among us." . . . To the great planters, everyone else was of little consequence. Indeed, this elite firmly believed the Deep South's government and people existed solely to support their own needs and aspirations.

These planter aristocracies claimed relationship with English royalty.

The low country's wealth depend entirely on a massive army of enslaved blacks who outnumbered whites nine to one in some areas. To keep this supermajority under control, the planters imported Barbados brutal slave code almost word for word.

It declared Africans to be inhuman and requiring tight control, violent punishment. Laws specified severe punishments. More from Woodard:

Masters who failed to mete out the required punishments were fined and anyone – white or black – who helped runaways was subject to fines, whipping or even death.

Deep South culture was militarized, caste- structured and aggressively expansionist. . . . (They claimed) The Southern Gentry were superior to northerners because they had a “nobility to cultivate some of the higher and more ennobling traits of humanity,” (They thought of themselves as a) “race of statesmen, orators, military leaders and gentlemen of equal and probably superior to any now existing on this or any other continent.” .

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(One pre-civil war writer wrote) “Aristocracy is the only safe guard of liberty . . .”

In the 1850s, Deep Southerners became fixated on annexing their tropical neighbors . . . Cuba, Mexico, Central America . . .

In 2000, the Dixie Bloc established simultaneous control over the White House, Senate and House for the first time in 46 years. The White House was led by a Deep Southern president . . . George W. Bush

The (country’s) foreign policy took an immediate and radical departure from previous norms . . . The new plan was to enhance the United States’ position as the world’s only superpower through military force . . .

The Dixie bloc –martial and honor-bound – has generally aimed to dominate the world and has traditionally controlled (the country’s) Armed Services Committee.

The goal of the Deep Southern oligarchy has been consistent for over four centuries: to control and maintain a one-party state with a colonial style economy based on large-scale agriculture and the extraction of primary resources by a compliant, poorly educated, low wage work force with as few labor, workplace safety, health care, and environmental regulations as possible.

(George W. Bush’s) domestic policy priorities were those of the Deep Southern oligarchy: cut taxes for the wealthy, privatize social security, deregulate energy (etc.)

By the end of his presidency – the sixteen year run of Dixie dominance in Washington – income inequality and the concentration of wealth (in the United States had reached the highest levels in (our) history exceeding even the gilded age . . .

That’s a lot from Woodard and a lot from history to support what I quoted from Dr. King at the beginning of my words:

What might once have been a series of separate problems now merge into a social crisis of almost stupefying complexity . . . America is deeply racist and its democracy is flawed both economically and socially. . . .

The use of racism, fear and violence has been intentional from the origins of our country. Michelle Alexander demonstrates clearly the racist use of the “war on drugs.” The depth of this sick system, the length of its history, and the ability of the oligarchs to lie and distort and switch the forms of racism: all of this can be daunting and discouraging

But I say: be not afraid. We know that we are all worthy and equal in value. We act on that depth belief in this community and when we are out in the world. Here in spiritual community we listen to one another, we learn from one another and we strengthen one another. Be not deceived by others’ attempts to frighten and to divide us. Our strength comes from our connections, from our community, from our love.

*Our goal is to create a beloved community and  
this will require a qualitative change in our souls  
as well as a quantitative change in our lives.  
~ Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.*

Dr. King told us, “Love is creative and redemptive. Love builds up and unites.” We are not perfect; we make mistakes with each other and in community. When we face those mistakes, stay in community and learn, we are growing spiritually. That growth matters. Building Beloved Community matters. It changes the world. Our love matters. Let us live lovestruck lives. **We** are the ones we’ve been waiting for.

Amen. Ashe. Blessed Be.

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<sup>i</sup> King, Martin Luther, Jr. “A Testament of Hope” in James M. Washington (Ed.). *The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* pp. 313-315.

<sup>ii</sup> Hooks, bell. “Talking Race and Racism” in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

<sup>iii</sup> West, Cornell. “Foreword” in Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*. New York: The New Press, 2012, e book location 141.

<sup>iv</sup> Wikipedia. “Oligarchy” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oligarchy>

<sup>v</sup> Woodard, Colin. *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Regional Rival Cultures of North America*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2011.

<sup>vi</sup> Woodard