

Wesley Theological Seminary

**Decolonizing Our Bodies, Minds and Spirits:  
Resiliency and Spiritual Practices Among  
Unitarian Universalist Religious Professionals of Color**

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### **Abstract**

This project focuses on the resilience of Unitarian Universalist religious professionals of color and indigenous people through spiritual practices as a way towards liberation and intersectional justice. The author recruited thirty-six UU religious professionals for a six-week structured program of learning and reflection that helped identify spiritual disconnects between religious and spiritual beliefs and everyday lived experience. As evidenced by beginning and post-project surveys and periodic narrative prompts, the participants affirmed the positive results of the program which led to a deeper spiritual integration and wholeness.

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## Acknowledgements

To my ancestors, who came to this country as both enslaved people and immigrants. May my life be a testament to their highest ideals.

To the Beloved of My Heart, Source of Peace, Holy Mystery. I am eternally grateful to be blessed with a heart of faith that loves and serves God.

To my children, Genevieve and Thane - my teachers now and my joyous hope for the future.

To my esteemed colleagues, the Unitarian Universalist religious professionals of Color who honored me with their time, energy and poignant wisdom.

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To Rev. Dr. Lorena Parrish, the faculty and staff of Wesley Seminary for the abundance of gifts and wisdom you have graciously bestowed upon me.

To you, dear reader of this project paper. Thank you for taking the time to read my work. May it spark something in your soul and ministry through the glory of God, for the good of our planet and all people.

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## INTRODUCTION

“I am living a life I don’t regret  
A life that will resonate with my ancestors,  
And with as many generations forward as I can imagine.  
I am attending to the crises of my time with my best self.  
I am of communities that are doing our collective best  
To honor our ancestors and all humans to come.”  
~adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy*<sup>1</sup>

### The Crisis of Our Time

The foundation of this project acknowledges the reality that the way humans are living is destroying our planet, while maintaining systemic injustice and white supremacy culture and domination in our communities and around the world. While the crisis is overwhelming and the impact on our lives is truly so entrenched we hardly can begin to tease it out, the focus of this exploration is upon our individual choices and ability to perceive the ways in which we participate in perpetuating suffering, injustice and harm to ourselves, others and the planet. The space between observing our calamitous reality and our own way of being and choices in the world is a spiritual one. My intent is to explore and deepen our perception of that spiritual space in order to invest in our own resiliency, reduce our participation in suffering and serve as prophetic witnesses to a more holistic way of living. The specific focus therefore is on consumption: what we consume, how and from what sources as a spiritual practice aligned with our Unitarian Universalist principles and call to help heal the world. A parallel motivation for me is to invest in my community, specifically my fellow Unitarian Universalist ministers of color

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<sup>1</sup> adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy*, (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017), 55.

who are called to lead and serve in these tumultuous waters, while healing our spirits to continue on in the work. Therefore, my project has a narrow focus on consumption of suffering, with an invitation to my POCI colleagues to survey, reflect and adjust their consumption as a spiritual practice, towards a greater resiliency.

While the theological treatise of this project includes conversations with liberation and eco-feminist/womanist theology, the conceptual framework is markedly grounded in Womanist theology. As the hegemonic white, male dominated field of theology was overturned and expanded with the revolutionary thought of Black liberation theology and feminist theology in the 1960's, Womanist theology emerged in response to the reality that not all Blacks are men, and not all women are white. Theologian Emilie Townes elucidates these intersectional voids further, stating: "Black theology early demonstrated an unwillingness to deal with sexism and classism. Feminist theology often reduces the variety of women's experiences to those of white middle-class women, which, womanist theologians point out, does not address racism or classism. Womanist theology also addresses conscious and unconscious homophobia in theological discourse."<sup>2</sup> Thus the foci of Womanist theology is the religious and moral perspectives of Black women, and "Issues of class, gender (including sex, sexism, sexuality and sexual exploitation), and race are seen as theological problems."<sup>3</sup>

As womanist theologian Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas writes in the book she edited, *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*: "Womanism is revolutionary. Womanism

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<sup>2</sup> Emilie M. Townes, "Womanist Theology," in *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*. Rosemary Skinner Keller, rosemary Radford Ruether, eds. Indiana U. Press, 2006. 1165.

<sup>3</sup> Emilie M. Townes, "Womanist Theology", 1165.

is a paradigm shift wherein Black women no longer look to others for their liberation, but instead look to themselves. The revolutionaries are Black women scholars, who have armed themselves with pen and paper, not simply to dismantle the master's house, but to do the more important work of building a house of their own.”<sup>4</sup> As such, the scholarship that has emerged from the first, second, third generations and now beyond from Womanist theologians and thinkers, radically reimagines the epistemological engagement of the intersection of theology and lived experience.

The four tenets of Womanism, i.e. radical subjectivity, traditional communalism, redemptive self-love and critical engagement, serve as the foundations for what Floyd-Thomas refers to as the “Intracommunal task” where “womanism for our time is rather a praxis of solidarity and of building relationships and allies.”<sup>5</sup> This project was birthed from a place of seeking to awaken within me and others this intracommunal task.

With this intracommunal task in mind, this project emerged with the confluence of both inner and outer realities. Internally, I've been observing within myself the ways in which ministry requires a profound level of introspection around how clergy show up in the world. We are called to be observers of the world around us, then internalize those observations and push forth our synthesis of prophetic witness and pastoral messages. We are called to afflict the comfortable, comfort the afflicted, while also organizing towards the greater good and offering spaces of transformation. I often conceptualize this as observing the multitude of stars in the sky and drawing the constellations of meaning for my congregation. It is the requirement of staying connected with the world around me, and reading the daily news and opinion pieces through the

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<sup>4</sup> Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism In Religion and Society* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Stacey M. Floyd- Thomas, 11.

lens of spiritual and theological truths. Ministry also requires me to reflect deeply upon how well and how much our daily choices and interactions align with our spiritual and theological beliefs. Spiritual teacher Parker Palmer talks about how full integration comes when our soul (spiritual values and theological principles) align deeply with our role (how we function and are called to be in the world)<sup>6</sup>. As such, matching our ministry walk with our theological talk is a matter of spiritual integrity. When spiritual integrity falters, the ability to serve with a robust, fully integrated faith diminishes.

What brought this home for me was a series of encounters that gave me pause. First was a project by activist and artist Rob Greenfield, when in 2017 he kept and carried around with him all of the trash he produced for 30 days and presented his experience in a TEDTalk<sup>7</sup>. The visual created by what we casually toss away, even with robust recycling efforts, forced me to reconsider the ways in which I foolishly consume and perpetuate waste in the world. By the end of the project, Rob Greenfield wore 135 pounds of trash, which was a breathtaking testament to the mindless consumption of our privileged culture. Second was a deep dive into documentaries such as “Get Vegucated”<sup>8</sup>, which challenged three average American diet eating people to adopt a vegan lifestyle for six weeks. The film explores the health and environmental impact of the meat and dairy industry, while requiring the participants to take a hard look at their lifestyles and

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<sup>6</sup> Parker Palmer, “An Undivided Life: Seeking Wholeness in Ourselves, Our Work and Our World,” Narrated by Parker Palmer, Sounds True, 2009. Audiobook.

<sup>7</sup> Rob Greenfield, “Be The Change in a Messed Up World,” filmed May 20, 2017 in Paris, France, TED Video, 18:00, <http://robgreenfield.tv/tedxbethechange>.

<sup>8</sup> Wolfson, Marisa Miller, Demetrius Bagley, Frank Mataska, and Dave Fischhoff. *Vegucated*. DVD. Directed by Marisa Miller Wolfson. 2010.

daily choices. Observing how these people surveyed their food choices and consumption that evoked a deeper compassion and self-awareness inspired me to adjust my own way of being.

Externally, I bear witness to the continued destruction of our planet, and the rapid onset of climate collapse around us. Extinction Rebellion activists in Britain promote the great reckoning of our time with the deleterious impact this generation has on the flourishing of future generations. John Bird, House of Lords, recently wrote in *The Guardian*: “Exploitative capitalism has sacrificed our well-being – and much of the planet’s resources – on the altar of unlimited growth, binding the hands of those yet to be born.”<sup>9</sup> This sacrifice on the altar of unbounded expansion begs the question of each and every person’s complicity in the widespread destruction.

All the while black, brown and indigenous communities suffer the brunt of the impact of global climate change through adverse health conditions, economic instability and systemic disenfranchisement. Through intentional study, I absorbed this recognition that climate change is a race issue. Activists Patrisse Cullors and Nyeusi Nguvu explore in a 2017 article in *The Guardian* just how endemic racism and global inequality produce more violence and systemic injustice to black, brown and poor people around the world. They note that adverse weather emergencies hastened by climate change hit black, brown and poor communities harder, with fewer resources and infrastructure to rebound in its wake: “The scale and impact of the destruction cannot be fully understood without reference to the racism that underpins climate change and state responses to it.”<sup>10</sup> This exploration led me to reflect on the ways in which

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<sup>9</sup> Bird, John. “Protecting the Planet for Future Generations.” *The Guardian*. October 14, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/oct/14/conserving-the-planet-for-future-generations>.

<sup>10</sup> Patrisse Cullors and Nyeusi Nguvu, “From Africa to the US to Haiti, Climate Change Is a Race Issue,” *The Guardian*, September 14, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/sep/14/africa-us-haiti-climate-change-black-lives-matter>.

colonialism and the enslavement of people from Africa who were brought to the “New World” to tend to land stolen from decimated indigenous populations has fractured the ways in which our POCI ancestors lived before the violent encounters with European and white American cultures and norms.

Further, I have observed the ways in which my colleagues, the Unitarian Universalist POCI (people of color and indigenous) religious professionals are struggling to participate with authenticity and courage in a system that causes harm by continuing to center whiteness, while proclaiming to have a justice minded heart. As such, this project centers on what is within my power: to invest in my colleagues’ resilience through reflection and curiosity in order to lessen the suffering we consume and therefore bring more good into the world. In the words of Adrienne Rich, “My heart is moved by all I cannot save: so much has been destroyed I have to cast my lot with those who age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world.”<sup>11</sup> Therefore I designed my project as a labor of love, with an invitation to my POCI UU religious professional colleagues to observe, reflect and adjust their consumption habits as a spiritual practice in order to extract themselves from their participation in an oppressive system, fraught with inequities and suffering on other humans, nonhumans and the earth herself. I propose that realigning spiritual practices with justice ideals leads to a greater, deeper spiritual freedom and connects us with our ancestors. This great turning away from systemic injustice and a turning towards wholeness in turn serves both my POCI colleagues and the whole of Unitarian Universalism.

This project is broken up into an introduction, three main parts and a benediction:

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<sup>11</sup> Adrienne Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977* (New York, NY: WW NORTON & CO, 2013) 67.

Introduction: The Crisis of Our Time

Chapter 1: The Scope of the Crisis

Chapter 2: The Theological Grounding in Addressing the Scope and Sustaining Structure of the Crisis: Liberation, Womanist and Ecofeminist Theology

Chapter 3: Intersectionality of Getting Free: Detoxifying from White Supremacy Culture and Climate Injustice Through Reflection and Personal Empowerment

Chapter 4: Benediction – Conclusions and Recommendations.

## CHAPTER 1: The Scope of the Crisis

“God, Grant me the patience to accept the systems I cannot change today, the courage to strategically enact progress when I know I can, and the wisdom to know that despite structural oppression I still can make a difference.”

~The Public Defender’s Serenity Prayer”<sup>12</sup>

I was raised as the oldest daughter of an interracial couple in an upper middle-class majority white Unitarian Universalist community. My father is Black and my mother is white. Growing up, the values of education, excellence and conformity were tantamount to my expected success. I swam in the waters of white supremacy culture and became fluent in passing, at the cost of nurturing my awareness and identity as a person of color. As a child and young person, liberal religious values did give me a level of freedom in personal, spiritual exploration and understanding the world from a role as one who is called to serve and work towards social and racial justice and transformation. As a young adult, I was commissioned as a chaplain in the military and served one overseas tour in Afghanistan. My service as a chaplain embodied my faith, as I brought what the chaplain corps refers to as “God to the Soldiers and Soldiers to God”, as I led and cared for service members through trauma and suffering and admittedly, the outside civilian world felt distant and disconnected from my world as a military chaplain. What has followed in the decades since my first years as a chaplain has been an explosion in both the Unitarian Universalist world and American society for dismantling white supremacy culture from ourselves and our institutions. I take this work to heart, bringing my experience and training as a military chaplain to this work, as a person of faith and a leader of a religious community.

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<sup>12</sup> TheKetoLawyer, “The Public Defender’s Serenity Prayer,” Facebook, September 20, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/ReimaginingRecovery/posts/529926814497519>.

What has arisen in UU spaces in the wake of waking up to the vital need to dismantle white supremacy culture and norms is a microcosm of what is happening worldwide. In my denomination, we, POCI religious professionals, are living and serving in a majority white denomination that professes decentering whiteness as a spiritual principle, while not living up to the call time and again. POCI religious professionals bear the brunt of having to live and work in majority white spaces and are routinely subjected to microaggressions, professional slander, systematic disempowerment and all out hostility. White fragility has become weaponized at the cost of my colleagues' jobs, careers and their emotional, mental and spiritual health and well-being.

After a recent high-profile instance of the systematic disempowerment of POCI religious professional leadership and with the onslaught of racialized politics in the US, the denomination as a whole took steps to address head on the dismantling of white supremacy culture and norms within our congregations and our institution. In 2017, the Unitarian Universalist Board of Trustees appointed the Commission on Institutional Change, "charged with the long-term cultural and institutional change that redeems the essential promise and ideals of Unitarian Universalism". While the promises and ideals of UUism center embracing spiritual wholeness, valuing and promoting diversity and working towards justice as an embodiment of the Beloved Community, the norms, practices and internal cultures of UU spaces remain majority white and middle class. While we espouse to live our values, the requisite transformation lacks intentional energy and focus through prophetic preaching, multigenerational teach ins and education through praxis. As such, the five people of the Commission, grounded in theological reflection, endeavor to oversee the audit of racism within the UUA, make recommendations for anti-oppressive

strategies, collect the testimonies of those who have been harmed, document and examine the critical events and practices related to anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and multicultural (AROMC) work, and identify practices to invest in religious leadership which reflects an ecclesiology of an inclusive faith.

Since 2017, the Commission on Institutional Change has produced volumes of insights and intersectional analysis through blog posts, reports from the annual gathering of Unitarian Universalists at General Assembly (GA), panel presentations and small group engagement. From their first report to GA in 2018, among the list of preliminary findings, the COIC reported that:

Assumptions growing out of ignorance of racial bias and white supremacy culture led to conclusions that harm people of color, those who work every day within it and those who would attempt to find a spiritual home within Unitarian Universalism. The skills and perspectives of religious professionals of color are not valued within the culture of our institutions, especially our congregations. A fear of open conflict and assumption of “good intentions” increased the damage done by institutional racism and other forms of oppression within our Association.

The impact of the pervasive harm on POCI religious professionals has been severe and persistent over decades. The current state of the treatment of POCI religious professionals in a majority white denomination did not come about in a vacuum. UU minister and author Mark Morrison Reed documents the failures of the majority white culture to acknowledge, embrace and support Black and POCI religious professionals, lay leaders and members. In *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*, Morrison Reed recounts the legacies of early black UU ministers and the onslaught of institutional and societal racism and prejudice that inhibited and derailed their careers as religious professionals. Morrison Reed also outlines the work of the denomination and the seeds of a great reckoning of the disconnect between creed and deed. Unitarians and

Universalists have a long, storied history of public and private acts of revolutionary and counterculture witness and embrace. Relevant to this undertaking, at a time when the world was embroiled in war and the majority of American lives were led in segregated spaces and communities, the Unitarians were on the forefront of civil rights. In May of 1942, the American Unitarian Association passed a Resolution on Race Relations at their annual meeting:

RESOLVED: That the American Unitarian Association assembled in its 117th annual meeting again voices with solemn emphasis and profound conviction its faith in the universal Brotherhood of Man, and in the complete equality of all men before God and the Law; and be it further resolved that the Association call upon all its member churches and affiliated organizations to implement this declaration of principle by effective action in promoting inter-faith and interracial solidarity.

In 1952, the Unitarian Association's board of directors convened a Commission on Unitarian Intergroup Relations, which surveyed congregations with the goal of gathering information about congregational attitudes and practices regarding integration. The 1954 report published in the Christian Register stated, "Ideally the liberal church is a family of families where men of every walk of life, every cultural and religious background, know they belong and are wanted... Within its walls the individual should be able to find both the security and comfort of warm intimate friendship and the sense of participation in a microcosm of the world community, the adventure of universal brotherhood undivided by nation, race or creed." The Commission surveyed all of the active Unitarian congregations and roughly one third or 170 congregations responded to the request for information. Of the 170 congregations responding, only 52 reported having "Negro voting members", with only 6 of the 19 congregations in the South. The majority of congregations (108) strongly supported integration of non-whites, 4 openly opposed integration and a staggering 58 congregations were neither clearly in favor or clearly opposed to integration.

Only 13 congregations reported having five or more legal voting “Negro members”.<sup>13</sup> The Commission reported that in “too many of the communications we have received, there are clear evidences that Unitarians are not brought to a test of their interracial idealism” and went on to outline the cruxes of the disconnect in many of the congregations, which has echoes that continue to this day. The Commission outlined the following problems, stated as questions for consideration: “Are the ethnic and racial minority members in our churches tokens or beginnings? If they are beginning, they are beginnings of what? Are we content merely to talk or will we also act?” These are questions that persist to the modern state of POCI religious professionals and lay leaders to this day. The Commission boldly concluded:

One can draw no other conclusion from the studies of this Commission than that the majority of our churches have ignored the human relations aspect of religion. While paying lip service to the religious ideals of brotherhood, they have sanctioned, often simply in indifference, a pattern of social organization which dooms men to a life in which full dignity and creative growth are virtually impossible. This is a particularly disturbing indictment of a church committed to freedom in all its various aspects.<sup>14</sup>

Morrison Reed writes: “The Unitarian Church was not integrated because it chose not to be. The church housed ordinary people with grand ideas about themselves, and the denomination was run by men who were no different...They were captives of the American caste system. Paternalistic in their racism, Unitarian leaders at the beginning of the twentieth century did not respect the black man.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> “How ‘Open’ is the Unitarian Door?” Report of the Commission on Unitarian Intergroup Relations, *Christian Register*, April 1954, 11.

<sup>14</sup> “How ‘Open’ is the Unitarian Door?” Report of the Commission on Unitarian Intergroup Relations, *Christian Register*, April 1954, 18.

<sup>15</sup> Mark Morrison-Reed, *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984), 147.

Understanding the backdrop of the disconnect between espoused UU theology and the lived experience of UU religious professionals of color provides the context of the generations of harm to POCI religious professionals and lay people, and for the need of spiritual practices that build greater resiliency. Resiliency for the purposes of this project emanate from an understanding that resiliency is buoyed and strengthened through liberation. A spiritual and physical liberation that comes from mindfully limiting the investment in corporations and consumption habits that continue to destroy the planet, negatively impact marginalized communities and have deleterious impacts on physical health.

#### MORAL INJURY:

As a candidate for the Doctor of Ministry program in the Military Chaplaincy track, I had the opportunity to complete the course, “The Chaplain’s Role in Healing Moral Injury”. The required texts included *Killing From the Inside Out: Moral Injury and Just War*, *Afterwar: Healing the Moral Wounds of our Soldiers*, *Warrior’s Return: Restoring the Soul after War*, and *What Have We Done: The Moral Injury of Our Longest Wars*.<sup>16</sup> From this course, I gained a deep appreciation of the resulting impact of the moral ambiguity, the institutional harming and onslaught of death and violence has on service members and the warrior ethos in general. Admittedly, the lens through which I perceive the well-being of my POCI religious professionals remains as a combat veteran and military chaplain. As such, the required text *God Is Not Here: A*

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<sup>16</sup> See Robert Emmet Meagher, *Killing from the Inside Out: Moral Injury and Just War*, Cascade Press, 2014. Also see Nancy Sherman’s *Afterwar: Healing the Moral Wounds of our Soldiers*, Oxford University Press, 2015; Edward Tick’s *Warrior’s Return: Restoring the Soul after War*, Sounds True, 2014; and David Wood, *What Have We Done: The Moral Injury of Our Longest Wars*, Little, Brown & Co, 2016.

*Soldier's Struggle with Torture, Trauma and the Moral Injuries of War* brought me an insightful corollary in understanding the current state of POCI religious professionals. In *God Is Not Here*, the author, Lieutenant Colonel Bill Russel Edmonds, provides a detailed account of his harrowing tour as a military trainer in an Iraqi prison, his descent into his psychological unraveling and his subsequent road to recovery. Edmonds went into that Iraqi prison with the assumption that his training and preparation would be sufficient to face and overcome every personal and professional challenge. What Edmonds found was a severe mismatch between what the military was teaching and expecting versus the lived experience and subsequent psychic trauma. Edmonds' account of his own moral injury is a corollary analogy for POCI religious professionals. Religious professionals receive education and training regarding best practices in worship, theological engagement, professional development, self-care and so on. Seminaries and internships provide educational environments that foster growth through academic and real-world engagements, expect deep reflection, and offer feedback. I find that we fail to devote time and energy to acknowledging the honest and truthful reality that serving as a POCI in a majority white denomination can, at times, expose the inherent, unacknowledged prejudice in the institution and congregations, which in turn often has an adverse impact on the careers, health and well-being of POCI religious professionals.

Rev. Traci Blackmon, the Executive Minister of Justice and Local Church Ministries for the United Church of Christ, conveyed a similar finding in her 2015 presentation and essay, "Where is God? How Enduring Centuries of Racism Leads to Moral Injury". After the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, Blackmon reflects on the pain and trauma left in the wake of the tragic death of yet another unarmed, young black man. Blackmon identifies and offers

repentance for the ways in which she's fallen short of working in solidarity with those impacted by injustice, and the level of harm felt by those who resist oppression. She writes, "When those who are responsible for the common welfare work to reassert white supremacy, they betray us. Such betrayal is acute when we are betrayed by those who claim to care - people who benefit from oppression and do nothing to stop it."<sup>17</sup> Blackmon posits that not the humanity of justice seekers remains at risk, but their/our divinity, the "recognition of the Imago Dei" in everyone, including ourselves.

#### MORAL INJURY AND RESILIENCE:

I came to the intersection of moral injury and resilience from my training and experience as a military chaplain. Both my military and civilian service as a clergyperson involve people and communities impacted by suffering, trauma and marginalization. Where military personnel are reticent to receive mental health counseling and support for life and mental struggles, civilian personnel face similar hurdles. Where military personnel bring the totality of the lives to their combat exposure, civilians, most notably here POCI religious professionals, also bring their identities and historical oppression to majority white communities where systemic injustice prevails. Service members experience moral injury for the acts they are forced to commit which go against their moral, ethical and religious beliefs, and from the institution at large failing to adequately prepare, sustain and care for them. POCI religious professionals experience moral injury when our identities and lived experience becomes intolerable or uncomfortable for our majority white congregations that espouse racial justice as tantamount to our faith. As noted previously, the focus on resiliency is just one tool in dismantling white supremacy culture and

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<sup>17</sup> Traci Blackmon, "Where is God? How Enduring Centuries of Racism Leads to Moral Injury," *Volunteers of America*, accessed September 2, 2019, <https://www.voa.org/moral-injury-stories/where-is-god>.

norms and reducing harm. Moral injury is an institutional and personal struggle, and one powerful way to mitigate moral injury is through resilience as I have learned as a military chaplain.

In 2001, the US Department of Defense began tracking self-inflicted deaths of service members. In the subsequent years, with combat troops deployed in Iraq, Afghanistan and all over the world, the rate of self-inflicted deaths continues to rise every year. When I commissioned as a chaplain in 2003, much of our training focused on resilience and suicide prevention and it was not unusual over the course of my career to address suicide ideation and behaviors on a routine basis. In 2017, the Department of Defense reported that the suicide-mortality rate across all branches of service was 21.9 deaths per 100,000, with the civilian equivalent for the same year was 13 deaths per 100,000.<sup>18</sup> With operational tempo only increasing with more service members serving multiple combat tours, the US military has invested ample time and money into studying, addressing and actively providing resources to mitigate systemic failures. With multiple years of gathered data, the Department of Defense identified that the most consistent common stressors for service members that died from suicide are relationships, family issues, legal or administrative problems, work and financial difficulties, and abuse victimization or perpetration. Strikingly, of those who died by suicide, only half of the service members served one or more combat tours.<sup>19</sup> With these risk factors in mind, the Department of Defense embraced resilience as a part of overall health as a preventative measure, as reflected in this internal memo from a 2008 meeting led by then General George Casey, Jr., US Army Chief of Staff: “To equip our

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<sup>18</sup> Larry D. Pruitt et al, *Department of Defense Suicide Event Report 2017* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2017), 18.

<sup>19</sup> Pruitt et al, 48.

Warriors in advance, we believe it is our responsibility to ‘immunize’ every service member prior to increasing their exposure to trauma so that they will more likely be a rebounder instead of a PTSD patient. This cornerstone for resiliency should be set in the hearts and minds of all service-members as a part of Officer and Basic training...In essence we should consider including this resiliency training as ‘standard issue’ in basic training.”<sup>20</sup>

As such, the military now trains chaplains, behavioral health specialists and senior non-commissioned officers in resilience to then in turn train all service members, with the goal of increasing the innate ability of service members to withstand and/or overcome the resulting trauma, interpersonal challenges and institutional rigmarole that comes with military service. In short, by focusing on resilience the intended outcome is to have better prepared, more well-rounded service members to face the human complexity that arises and thereby reduce the potential for moral injury.

#### SPIRITUAL PRACTICES AND RESILIENCE:

As part of the military chaplaincy track in the DMIN program, often the emphasis returned to how military chaplains can lead and foster resilience through spiritual leadership. Volumes of study from psychologists, religious professionals, sociologists and others have documented the role of religion, spirituality and spiritual practices on well-being and positive functioning. Of note, in a 2004 meta-analysis of forty-nine relevant studies to “examine the relationship between religious coping and psychological adjustment to stress” found that

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<sup>20</sup> General George Casey, Jr. papers, 2008. National Defense University Archive. Washington, DC. <https://thewarhorse.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/2.-Strategy-for-CJCS-converted.pdf>

religious coping had an overall positive impact of adjustment to stress, i.e. fostered resilience.<sup>21</sup> Fast forward to the influx of money and resources from the Department of Defense towards the goal of increasing resilience, DOD partnered with the RAND corporation to publish, “Spiritual Fitness and Resilience: A Review of Relevant Constructs, Measures and Links to Well-Being” in 2013 which found positive correlations consistent across a multitude of studies linking spiritual fitness and resilience. Service members that possessed a spiritual worldview and personal religious or spiritual practices and rituals exhibited higher levels of well-being and overall resiliency.<sup>22</sup> Overall, the positive correlations between a robust spiritual and religious orientation and resilience demonstrate the requisite inroad necessary for actively investing in POCI religious professionals. To deepen spiritual and religious integrity results in broader resilience, to withstand the trauma, pressures and systemic challenges of both serving in a majority white denomination, and our society as well.

#### SPIRITUAL PRACTICES:

For the purposes of this project, the focus centers more narrowly on spiritual practices, rather than religious identity, where the assumption remains that POCI religious professionals come to their service with their spiritual and religious beliefs as a core part of their identity. As such, spiritual practices are the outward expressions of those spiritual and religious beliefs.

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<sup>21</sup> Gene G. Ano and Erin B. Vasconcelles, “Religious Coping and Psychological Adjustment to Stress: A Meta-analysis,” *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 61 (October 2004), 461.

<sup>22</sup> Douglas Yeung and Margret T. Martin, “Spiritual Fitness and Resilience: A Review of Relevant Constructs, Measures, and Links to Well-Being,” (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 2013), 15.

The third shared UU principle states, “We covenant to affirm and promote the acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.” As such, each UU congregation, clergy person and layperson takes on the responsibility and privilege to determine for themselves collectively and individually their trajectory(-ies) for spiritual growth. UU minister and religious education curriculum writer Erik Walker Wilkstrom outlines in “Spirit in Practice: Ten Workshops for Unitarian Universalist Adults”, the eight spheres of spiritual growth: personal, communal worship, spiritual partnerships, mind, body, soul, life and justice practices. Personal spiritual practices include prayer, journaling, meditation and others that involve personal and often daily, intentional focused spiritual practices. Communal worship practices include large and small gatherings led by religious professionals and lay leaders, and reflect collective spiritual growth. Spiritual partnerships include intentional conversations and relationships with small groups, other lay people, clergy and spiritual directors. Mind practices include the intellectual engagement of spiritual growth through religious education classes, book and film discussions, sacred writing study groups, and other personal and communal religious education offerings. Body practices involve the physical engagement of spiritual growth through yoga, tai chi, and other undertakings that “keep us in touch with the miracle of our physical selves”.<sup>23</sup> Soul practices include creative and artistic expressions, e.g. music, poetry, painting, drawing. Life practices include the outward expressions of theological beliefs in how we relate and treat those in and around our lives. Life practices create continuity from religious beliefs to spiritual practices through the quality and depths of our relationships. Justice practices include

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<sup>23</sup> Spiritual practices Erik Walker Whikstrom, 20.

faithful witness to the injustices in the world that encourage personal, communal and institutional transformation, e.g. protests, petitions, statements of conscience.<sup>24</sup>

Spiritual practices emanate from a place of yearning to express our religious beliefs and principles in our daily lives. Spiritual practices remind us through intentional acts of our highest values, and connect us with ideals greater than ourselves and our immediate needs. UU minister and author Kathleen McTigue identifies five motivations to engage in spiritual practices:

Spiritual practices ground us in something bigger than ourselves.

Spiritual practices help us stay in the present moment.

Spiritual practices cultivate the qualities we most want to bring forward.

Spiritual practices remind us that the things we want to change in the world also exist in our selves.

Spiritual practices help sustain us through confusion and despair.<sup>25</sup>

#### BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER:

Theologian Professor Beverly Wildung Harrison published, *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics* in 1985, making inroads into the connections between feminism and ethics in social policy, church culture and theology. In her essay, “Theological Reflection in the Struggle for Liberation”, Harrison outlines the various stages of human liberation, beginning with what she calls, “the entry point of conscientization”.<sup>26</sup> This theological and ethical entry point emphasizes the power of naming the historical and current experience of oppression or subjugation. For the purposes of this project, the entry point of conscientization is the harm and

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<sup>24</sup> Erik Walker Wikstrom, *Spirit of Practice* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2008), 20.

<sup>25</sup> Kathleen McTigue, “Drawing on Deep Waters: Contemplative Practice in Justice-Making,” in *Justice on Earth: People of Faith Working at the Intersections of Race, Class, and the Environment*, ed. Manish Mishra-Marzetti and Jennifer Nordstrom (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2018), 74.

<sup>26</sup> Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Making The Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1985), 249.

suffering caused by white supremacy norms and culture, evident globally in the current calamitous state of climate destruction, our dislocation and fractured relationship with the earth and the perpetuation and furthering of systemic inequalities, and the income gap through exploitation of marginalized communities. The entry point of conscientization for the participants of the project, Unitarian Universalist POCI religious professionals, readily acknowledges the harm and suffering caused by living and serving amongst white supremacy norms and culture, which is evident through informal reporting of their personal experiences.

#### LIBERATION AND SPIRITUAL PRACTICES:

Fresh off of active military service, I came to serve my congregation as one of their ministers in 2013. For over sixty years, the growth and impact of the congregation in people's lives and the community has been significant. Generations of ministers and lay leaders led justice movements, devoted and invested in religious education for children and youth, and expanded their embrace of upholding our shared UU principles. I have been blessed by their embrace that is grounded in respect and love, and in return I hold extensive respect and love for them. What has been breathtaking for me is witnessing and receiving the testimonies from my POCI religious professional colleagues of their experiences in their congregations and treatment by other religious professionals. As evidenced by the work of the Commission on Institutional Change (COIC), the need for institutional, interpersonal and personal transformation is tantamount to the overall health and well-being of the denomination. In the face of systemic injustice amongst and outside of our communities, the emphasis must be placed on personal agency and investment in resiliency as a way to nourish and sustain POCI religious professionals in their work and lives.

Thus personal agency for the purposes of this project focus on deep alignment of religious values and beliefs with spiritual practices and outward expressions of faith, with intentional investment or divestment into systems, institutions and practices that continue to cause harm and suffering to ourselves, others and our world.

Transformation is liberation and vice versa. Prophetic author adrienne maree brown outlines her transformative vision in her book, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, where we change the world by first changing ourselves: “to see our own lives and work and relationships as a first place we can practice justice, liberation and alignment with each other and the planet.”<sup>27</sup> Utilizing the biological model of fractals, where the smallest structure repeats to create a larger structure ad infinitum, brown harnesses the importance of ourselves as a microcosm of the whole: “In a fractal conception, I am a cell-sized unit of the human organism, and I have to use my life to leverage a shift in the system by how I am, as much as with the things I do...Each day should be lived on purpose.”<sup>28</sup> This intentionality of living every day on purpose is the essence of liberation and alignment.

Liberation and alignment also relate to how much we invest or divest from systems of harm and suffering. Harper outlines the various ways that the industries that create and promote meat, dairy, sugar, caffeine and nicotine-based products are a continuation of addictive materialism at the cost of the health of our bodies and the earth. Academic scholar A. Breeze Harper writes:

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<sup>27</sup> adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017), 53.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

American society is a continuum of colonialism and imperialism driven by the collective addiction of material acquisition. These materials are usually stolen then extracted from the land as natural resource, then drastically altered into a controlled, artificial and addiction product perpetuating a life-killing imperial ideology we call civilization ...Ultimately, we must deeply consider, do our addiction and other forms of consumption contradict our antiracist and antipoverty social justice beliefs?<sup>29</sup>

To explore liberation and alignment further, I point to my observations and service as a military chaplain. Since I was commissioned in 2003, I noticed over the years that when senior service members retired, those with the fewest outside interests, spiritual and religious beliefs and deep connections had the hardest time transitioning from military service. I continued to hear from recently separated veterans for years when their transition was particularly difficult and they often felt cast adrift and forgotten. Some crept to a point of despair and professional intervention was required to keep them safe from harm. One exhorted me to never leave military service because the civilian world to this veteran in particular was empty and too painful to bear. As a chaplain, it is neither unusual nor irregular for pastoral relationships to last for years and decades past my relationship with service members while in active service. Many of these relationships are formed under extreme duress and circumstances and we often become “trauma bonded”, with a deep trust and high regard that extends far into the future.

When veterans move to civilian life, the totality of their military experience, training and trauma may not be well understood or accepted by their families, peers and community. While the far extreme of the spectrum, the challenges in transitioning to civilian life is evident in the high rate of death by suicide for veterans. It has been well documented that suicide ideation and

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<sup>29</sup> A Breeze Harper, “Social Justice Beliefs and Addiction to Uncompassionate Consumption” in *Sistah Vegan: Black Female Vegans Speak on Food, Identity, Health and Society*. ed. A. Breeze Harper (Brooklyn, NY: 2010), 32.

death by suicide for veterans continues to be of cause for alarm. A recent report from the Veterans Administration found that veterans 55-74 years old comprised the highest number of suicides in 2017, with only half of those veterans having a diagnosis of mental health or substance use disorder.<sup>30</sup> Separation from military service can fragment a veteran's orientation in the world, diffuse their sense of purpose and shrink their community and relationships, which often can lead to interpersonal challenges, substance abuse and overall despair. On the other end of the spectrum, when veterans have robust relationships, a well-formed identity with a spiritual and religious connection, meaning, and purpose unrelated to their military service, I have noticed those veterans often have a smoother transition to civilian life and are able to thrive. The connection between a veteran's spiritual and religious identity and practices with a positive transition to civilian life dramatically increases this likelihood. Research notes that veterans with a higher level of religious beliefs have an 87% chance of an easy reentry experience, versus veterans lacking religious beliefs at 43%.<sup>31</sup> As one of the determining factors of a smooth transition to civilian life, religious beliefs can be considered a form of liberation. Veterans who actively disengage from the all-encompassing world of the military have, in fact, invested in a form of liberation, where their current circumstances do not dictate fully their meaning and purpose in the world, nor impact their ability to sustain relationships with others and communities that are life giving. The overall impact of a well formed religious and spiritual

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<sup>30</sup> 2019 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report: Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, (Washington, DC: US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2019), 14.

<sup>31</sup> Rich Morin, "The Difficult Transition from Military to Civilian Life," *Pew Research Center* (2011): 7, accessed December 20, 2019, <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/12/08/the-difficult-transition-from-military-to-civilian-life/>.

identity, with regular spiritual practices stands as an active investment in resilience as evidenced in the parallel model of transitioning service members.

## ALIGNMENT AND INTERSECTIONAL JUSTICE

With a grounding in transformation as key towards the goal of further liberation, I turn to the framework of this project: intersectional justice, which comprises racial, economic, gender and climate justice, with the lens of fractal reimagining as a guide. There is little need to emphasize the calamitous state of global climate change with the far-reaching impacts of modern industrialization, global clamor for goods on demand, and the increasing income gap across many countries. A recent report released from the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs on “Climate Change and Social Inequality” found that three effects of inequality disproportionately lead to loss of assets and income and thus greater inequality for disadvantaged groups: greater exposure to climate hazards, greater susceptibility to damages caused by climate hazards, and less ability to cope with and recover from the damages caused by climate hazards.<sup>32</sup> Further disadvantaged populations worldwide face greater exposure to floods, erosion, salinity, mudslides, drought, heatwaves, and water scarcity, which in turn leads to greater inequality when their ability to cope and recover prior to a natural disaster is already insufficient.<sup>33</sup>

As UU author Paula Cole Jones explores in her essay, “The Formation of the Environmental Justice Movement”, it has been almost 50 years since the first Earth Day, which

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<sup>32</sup> S. Nazrul Islam and John Winkel, “Climate Change and Social Inequality” Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, October 2017, 7. [https://www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/2017/wp152\\_2017.pdf](https://www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/2017/wp152_2017.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> Islam and Winkel, UN Report, 16.

led to the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1970, the passing of the Clean Air Act of 1970, and the improvement of the Clear Water Act in 1972.<sup>34</sup> It is heartbreaking to note that in the intervening years, the state of global climate change has only increased at such a rapid clip, scientists continue to adjust how long people have until humanity reaches a breaking point at the earth's expense with rising seas, higher CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and erratic weather patterns, all caused or influenced by human behavior.<sup>35</sup>

These formative beginnings while powerful, “had not addressed the entrenched racial inequality in the United States. It took specific organizing by people of color to provide that their communities were treated differently than white ones, leading to disproportionate health, environmental and economic risks.”<sup>36</sup> The climate justice of today and for tomorrow acknowledges the complex, intersectional and systemic impact on the health and ability to thrive for marginalized communities. As Jones notes, “For people of color, environmental justice is about cultural, spiritual and physical well-being. In some cases, it is a matter of survival.”<sup>37</sup> As POCI religious professionals then, our survival is reliant in part on how effectively we engage environmental justice in our own lives, with a humble consideration that our survival is bound up more broadly in the survival of the most marginalized in our world. Further, we honor our ancestors who survived long and well enough to ensure that generations followed them by ensuring a better future for generations to come.

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<sup>34</sup> Paula Cole Jones, “The Formation of the Environmental Justice Movement,” in *Justice on Earth*, 15.

<sup>35</sup> Stephen Leahy, “Climate Change Driving Entire Planet to Dangerous ‘Tipping Point’”, National Geographic, November 27, 2019. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2019/11/earth-tipping-point/>

<sup>36</sup> Paula Cole Jones, 15.

<sup>37</sup> Paula Cole Jones, 19.

As UU theologian and POCI minister Sofia Betancourt states: “How we hold true to our highest ideals directly impacts the justice we pursue as a blessing to the world.”<sup>38</sup> Betancourt draws the bright line between praxis and the end result of justice as a spiritual principle. As people of faith, we resist the urge to denigrate people into categories of “good” and “bad”, as we are all human making choices, born of circumstances that either facilitate or impair our survival. We bear witness to our highest ideals through both quiet resistance and active divestment from institutions and companies with love and care at the center of our lives in the context of relationships and as an act of solidarity. As such, as UU theologian Sheri Prud’Homme writes, our faith asks us “...as Unitarian Universalists to face the ways in which we are all implicated in the systems of exploitation, oppression and destruction that we work to dismantle in our environmental justice efforts... It also calls us to the ongoing spiritual practice of attending to the complex web of relationships in which we have our being, doing our best to live ‘rightly with one another and the Earth’.”<sup>39</sup>

As previously mentioned, I keep to a mostly vegan diet and have been either vegetarian or vegan since I was a teenager as an expression of my faith and spiritual practice. Ample research demonstrates how a vegan or limited meat and dairy diet has the smallest global carbon footprint, divests from industries that continue to cause harm to marginalized communities and the earth, and is sustainable for larger numbers of people, given the fewer resources required to fuel a vegan or limited meat and dairy diet (where a diet that includes meat and dairy requires land and resources to feed animals and dispose of their byproducts and waste). Recent research

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<sup>38</sup> Sofia Betancourt, “Ethical Implications of Environmental Justice,” in *Justice on Earth*, 37.

<sup>39</sup> Sheri Prud’Homme, 32-33.

finds that a vegan diet reduces a person's carbon footprint by 73%.<sup>40</sup> Further a vegan diet consumes the least suffering, whether that be nonhuman suffering through slaughter, human suffering through hazardous living and working conditions or the suffering of the Earth through continued exploitation and unsustainable use of natural resources and destruction to the fragile ecosystem that sustains life.

The book, entitled, *Protest Kitchen: Fight Injustice, Save the Planet, and Fuel Your Resistance One Meal at a Time* by Carol J. Adams and Virginia Messina provided a spark of inspiration for this project with this discussion in mind. Adams and Messina “show how simple changes to your diet can have a real effect on the environment, but also how food choices celebrate diversity, challenge patriarchy and encourage a culture of acceptance, integrity and honesty.”<sup>41</sup> While the authors advocate and explore a vegan diet specifically, the framing of food choices as acts of resistance and investment into well-being relates to the core principles of this project. “Moving towards a more plant-based diet is also a way of voicing our resistance to a political system that denies human contributions to climate change and refuses to address it - something that challenges our standing in the world community.”<sup>42</sup> The embrace of resistance through intentional consumption or the passive slide into pervasive and destructive norms are at the spiritual heart of choice for everyone. Author Adama Maweh explores in her piece, “The Fulfillment of the Movement”, the pervasive sickness, disease, dysfunction and premature death

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<sup>40</sup> Joseph Poore and T. Nemecek, “Reducing Food’s Environmental Impacts Through Producers and Consumers”, *Science*, Volume 360: Issue 6392, June 1, 2018, 987.

<sup>41</sup> Carol J. Adams and Virginia Messina, *Protest Kitchen: Fight Injustice, Save the Planet and Fuel Your Resistance One Meal at a Time* (Newburyport, MA: Conari Press, 2018), 2.

<sup>42</sup> Adams and Messina, 38.

are the results of not living harmoniously with the “elements and forces of life”, admonishing: “There are far reaching consequences to changing our lifestyle, diet and habits that include better health, more clarity, potency, power and peace; and greater ethical and moral consistency, as well as the redistribution of the wealth that we make and receive.”<sup>43</sup>

#### THE ULTIMATE CONFLUENCE:

The condition that this project intends to explore is the confluence of the following factors: the historic legacy of POCI religious professionals in a majority white denomination; the enduring legacy of white supremacy culture and colonialism on POCI and marginalized communities; the spiritual disconnect between espoused UU values and the treatment of POCI religious professionals and resulting moral injury; the need for active investment in POCI religious professionals; the life affirming qualities of spiritual practices and how spiritual practices provide sustenance for resiliency; and the omnipresent expectation of mindless consumption that cause suffering on a multitude of levels and furthers the deterioration of the interdependent web of all existence. Thus, the project question is: What impact can reflection as a deep spiritual practice around the intersection of food, justice and spirituality have on resiliency for Unitarian Universalist religious professionals of color?

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<sup>43</sup> Adama Mawaja, “The Fulfillment of the Movement,” in *Sistah Vegan: Black Female Vegans Speak on Food, Identity, Health and Society*, A. Breeze Harper, ed. (Brooklyn, NY: 2010), 135.

## **CHAPTER 2: The Theological Grounding in Addressing the Scope and Sustaining Structure of the Crisis: Liberation, Womanist and Ecofeminist Theology**

The text I selected for this project is Genesis 1:26-31. Many of the systemic ills that pervade and fuel both climate crisis and global inequality are rooted in the patriarchal, white supremacist<sup>44</sup>, colonialist domination that serves to “other” through commodification and dehumanization of women, indigenous people, people of color and marginalized people. Theologically, this is consistent with traditional, dualistic reading of God’s granting dominion of the people over creation, whereby power structures and nations have thrived on exploitation and domination of those people and nonhumans deemed worthy only of full utilization. A transformative and liberative hermeneutic of the text is called for in this new era of dismantling white supremacy norms and culture, as worldwide we are called to serve the highest good in order to preserve creation for future generations. One pathway to this transformation and liberation lies within an exploration of sacred stewardship of the earth and self through reducing violence and suffering through dietary and consumption choices, such as a plant based diet.

Genesis 1:26-31 “26 Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created

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<sup>44</sup> Throughout this project, “white supremacy” is defined by the intersections of systemic injustices and oppressions. This definition concurs with how legal scholar, Francis Lee Ansley, describes white supremacy: “a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions, and social settings.” See David Gillborn’s article, “Rethinking White Supremacy: Who Counts in 'WhiteWorld',” *Ethnicities* 2006, 6 (3): 318-340.

them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth. God said, ‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.’ And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.”

The framework of my approach to the intersection of climate and systemic injustice is a theological treatise of “dominion” as extended in the book of Genesis, through the lens of liberation, womanist and ecofeminist theologies. This text has long provided the ways in which we understand our relationship with God, and between people, animals and the land. To digest that God gave dominion to people over creation continues to be an oft referenced argument for a range of spiritual approaches from ecologically minded creation care to divine permission for environmental exploitation and decimation, as a God-given, human right.

A traditional, western understanding of dominion as a social and theological construct led to dualistic and hierarchical thinking and institutional structures. God created humans to have dominion over nonhumans, God created men to have dominion over women, God created masters to have dominion over servants. The imperative of dominion as a justification of rigid sexism, colonialism and slavery can be traced back to Aristotle. In his work, “Politics”, Aristotle outlines the roles and functions across society for the well-being of the citizenry. This ideal society as codified by Aristotle served as foundational to the establishment and flourishing of

Western civilization, where innate hierarchies existed in creation. Aristotle posits that some humans are born for subjugation: "For that some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule." And more specifically, Aristotle points to the subjugation of women: "The relation of male to female is by nature a relation of superior to inferior and ruler to ruled".<sup>45</sup>

This hierarchy of birth extended to nonhumans as well, where those who were born to rule and master over other humans also were given nonhumans to tend to their daily needs: "And indeed the use made of slaves and of tame animals is not very different; for both with their bodies minister to the needs of life." While slavery and subjugation of foreign enemies endured as a social norm during Aristotle's time, the persistence of Aristotle's teachings across the Western world for centuries served as justification for its perpetuation as seen in Aristotle's influence on Thomas Aquinas.

Thomas Aquinas, with heavy influence from Aristotle, promoted the Christian ideal of a natural world order, where there was a clear separation from those deserving of autonomy and agency, while others do not. "Therefore, all human beings who differ from others as much as the soul does from the body, and as human beings do from irrational animals, are, because of the eminence of reason in them and the deficiency in others, by nature masters of the others. In this regard, Solomon also says in Proverbs 11:29: 'The stupid will serve the wise.'" Aquinas wrote extensively about the natural order consisting of men over women, masters over slaves and humans over nonhumans. In Aquinas' worldview, his teachings on natural order reinforced dualistic thinking and the othering of those deemed not worthy of full personhood or agency.

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<sup>45</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885), 21.

Broadly, dominion was considered justifiable by white European men and colonial powers and legally codified because women, people of color and indigenous people, and (more plainly) animals because they were considered inferior and unable to care for themselves, as demonstrated through the construction of societies, belief systems and cultural expressions that were considered subpar to European society and norms, and largely supported by racist pseudo-scientific publications. Kipling wrote in 1898 of the “White Man’s Burden”, which bemoaned the imperative of bringing civilization to non-whites: “To seek another’s profit And work another’s gain. Take up the White Man’s burden— And reap his old reward: The blame of those ye better. The hate of those ye guard— The cry of hosts ye humour (Ah slowly) to the light.”<sup>46</sup>

In 1850, Dr. Josiah Nott published “The Natural History of Mankind”:

“deep-rooted intellectual and physical differences seen around us, in the White, Red, and Black Races, are too obvious and too important in their bearings, to be longer overlooked”.<sup>47</sup>

Rationalizations and justifications for the domination and colonizing across Africa found expression in every sphere of public life from theology, literature, science and governing documents. As scholar J.D. Fage wrote in *A History of Africa*, “Mid-and late-nineteenth-century Europeans were generally convinced that their Christian, scientific and industrial society was intrinsically far superior to anything that Africa had produced”.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Rudyard Kipling, “The White Man’s Burden: The United States & The Philippine Islands, 1899.” Rudyard Kipling’s Verse: Definitive Edition. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1929), 11.

<sup>47</sup> Josiah C. Nott, M.D., “An Essay on the Natural History of Mankind: viewed in connection with Negro Slavery: delivered before the Southern Rights Association, 14th December, 1850.” (Mobile, Alabama: Dade, Thompson & Co. Printers, 1850), 3.

<sup>48</sup> John D. Fage and William Tordoff, *A History of Africa* (London: Routledge, 2008), 42.

In 1967, historian Dr. Lynn White wrote “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis”, and scholars credit White as opening the door to re-envision humanity’s relationship with an understanding of creation by admonishing the overemphasis on the distinctions between humans and nonhumans. “God planned all of this explicitly for man’s benefit and further: no item in the physical creation had any purpose save to serve man’s purposes. And, although man’s body is made of clay, he is not simply part of nature: he is made in God’s image... Man shares, in great measure, God’s transcendence of nature. Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia’s religions, not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper end.”<sup>49</sup> White identifies this exploitation of nature for human benefit as rooted in the theological dualism and anthropocentric values found in Western traditions.

White is credited with planting the seeds of ecological hermeneutics, with a radical pivot to infusing contemporary Christian attitudes towards the earth and creation with more non-dualistic thinking and less anthropocentric values. White points to the teachings of Saint Francis of Assisi as a theological model for Christian beliefs and relationship to nature, where there exists a God ordained equality between humans and creation and a “spiritual autonomy of all parts of nature”<sup>50</sup>. In essence, White points to a reading of “dominion” that deepens the interdependence of all of creation, as humans, nonhumans and the earth share a divine spark of life. White’s foundational article not only traced the long arc of how dualistic thinking has

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<sup>49</sup> Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (March 10, 1967): 1203-1207.

<sup>50</sup> White, 1207.

hastened the demise of the earth, he also lobbed a dire warning: “we shall continue to have a worsening ecologic crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man.”<sup>51</sup>

Two entrances into rejecting the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve humanity comes through a Womanist and Unitarian Universalist lenses. In womanist theologian M. Shawn Copeland’s chapter “A Thinking Margin: A Womanist Movement as a Critical Cognitive Praxis”,<sup>52</sup> Copeland explores the wisdom of marginalized people at the edges of the hegemonic white supremacy culture, where outsider status gives rise to a mode of a critical self-consciousness. Copeland writes, “black women’s cognitive praxis emphasizes the dialectic between oppression, conscious reflection on experience of that oppression and action to resist and eliminate it...Womanist analysis originates in asking and answering serious questions, in grappling with human existence confronted by the mix of greed, cruelty and desire in struggle for life and love.”<sup>53</sup> The serious question at hand is the durability and longevity of the duality of humans and nature, for the good of all people and the sake of our planet. To acknowledge that this deeply flawed foundational principle that the good of nature is only to serve humanity is to recognize the far-reaching impact of the overutilization of finite resources and a delicately balanced ecosystem and the exploitation of marginalized people. It is, as Copeland outlines, to embrace the dialectic of oppressions between marginalized people and

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<sup>51</sup> White, 1207.

<sup>52</sup> M. Shawn Copeland, “A Thinking Margin: A Womanist Movement as a Critical Cognitive Praxis,” in *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006), 226.

<sup>53</sup> M. Shawn Copeland, 229.

the destruction of the planet. It is to bear witness to the mix of greed, cruelty and desire in struggle for life and love that has informed the stratification of societies, the exploitation of indigenous and colonized peoples and the desensitization to suffering that perpetuates injustice to people and nonhumans alike. Copeland continues, “Womanist critical cognitive praxis slices open the brutal oppressions of sexism, racism, classism and heterosexism in order to advance being human and human flourishing.”<sup>54</sup> These brutal oppressions were born in part from dualistic thinking and values, which inhibit the understanding and embracing of intersectionality as a human species. In short, the Christian axiom of creation’s purpose to serve humanity alone has led to the further fracturing of the full personhood of marginalized peoples, nonhumans and all of our natural resources. A Womanist lens slices open the dualistic framework of a presumed world order to give rise to an intersectional and diverse understanding of the embodiment of God’s creation.

The second entrance into rejecting the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve humanity comes through a Unitarian Universalist lens. As a UU religious professional, I first turn to my own religious tradition to explore where the concept of dominion lands for me personally. Unitarian Universalism is a non-creedal faith and we instead covenant with one another to affirm and promote our shared seven principles: (1) The inherent worth and dignity of all people; (2) Justice, equity and compassion in human relations; (3) Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations; (4) A free and responsible search for truth and meaning; (5) The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large; (6) The goal of world

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<sup>54</sup> Copeland, 230.

community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; and (7) Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.<sup>55</sup>

To engage dominion through UU principles places the emphasis on our seventh principle: “We covenant to affirm and promote the Interdependent web of life of which we are all a part”. As discussed in this chapter, God as the creator of all life gives dominion to the people of said creation. Unitarian Universalist principles expands creation with the characterization of interdependence: the vitality and survivability of the people is entwined with the vitality and survivability of the earth and all its inhabitants. People cannot live fully in and honor the covenant with God if we are out of covenant with the earth. God is in and amongst the people and all of creation, across the sacred interdependence of which we are all a part, human and nonhuman alike.

Therefore, dominion is better understood as divine endorsed or sacred stewardship to reify the interdependent web of all of creation. Where a traditional reading of dominion emphasizes subjecting dominance and an “authority over” mindset, stewardship as a sacred principle emphasizes interdependence and a collectivist mindset. To promote stewardship is to both honor the gifts we have been given by our ancestors’ care of the interdependent web of all life, as well as keeping sacred the well-being of our progeny in the generations to come. To honor that sacred stewardship by living in covenant interdependently with the earth is at the heart of practicing my UU faith. Stewardship of the earth as a theological grounding acknowledges the fleeting reality of our temporary care, as a part of a long chain that began before us and, God willing, will extend far beyond our time on earth. Black UU minister Rev. Lewis A. McGee

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<sup>55</sup> Unitarian Universalist Association, *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: UU Association, 1994), 1.

points to this sacred stewardship of the interdependence of all creation: “Life is a precious gift of nature, to be lived at its best, to be enjoyed and wisely used. There is a structure to life related to the natural universe, whose laws cannot be violated with impunity - a structure related to other life around us.”<sup>56</sup>

More broadly, the focus on the interdependent web of all existence additionally points to the intersectionality of climate justice and system injustice. UU theologian Rev. Dr. Sofia Betancourt writes, “Unitarian Universalists today are engaged with the work of environmental justice that seeks to repair environmental devastation while at the same time addressing gross injustices within the human family...Our work towards environmental justice can be drawn from an intimate relationship with nature that includes, but is not limited to, the everyday interactions of our diverse human communities with nonhuman nature, one that takes seriously the unequal impacts of environmental devastation levied upon our most marginalized groups.”<sup>57</sup> Sacred stewardship, as understood within the context of the interdependent web, calls for a consideration of not simply climate justice for the sake of the earth. It also requires (or calls for) serious consideration of the very lives of the most marginalized and systematically disenfranchised who are disproportionately impacted. Interdependence can be best understood as intersectionality, where no one single justice issue stands divorced from other forms of oppression and where collective liberation is the greatest good. Therefore, human behavior and choices that operate from a limited scope stand out of covenant with the sacred stewardship that

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<sup>56</sup> Lewis McGee, “XX” in *Been in the Storm so Long*, ed. Mark Morrison Reed and James, Jacqui (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 1991), 42.

<sup>57</sup> Manish Mishra-Marzetti, ed., *Justice on Earth: People of Faith Working at the Intersections of Race, Class, and the Environment* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2018), 41-42.

we have been given with our very lives. To live out of covenant as a UU is to further consume the suffering levied against others by our thoughtless actions and presumptions that cause suffering in other people and creation.

To revision dominion as sacred stewardship is a subversive theological treatise, which is at the very heart of Liberation, Womanist and Eco-/feminist theologies. With a nod to deep ecology – a philosophical movement that promotes the moral imperative of other species of plants and animals to have “an intrinsic right to exist, a biocentric egalitarianism”<sup>58</sup> – the exploration of sacred stewardship expands to acknowledge and embrace a fuller inclusion of nonhumans and the well-being of the earth across the interdependent web of all creation.

Dr. James Cone revolutionized Christian theology and empowered generations of theologians with his introduction of Black liberation theology in 1969 with his book, *Black Theology and Black Power*. With a focus on blackness first and Christian second, Dr. Cone synthesized the messages of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and black civil rights with Malcolm X in black power, emphasizing that the liberation message of the Gospel points to a God who sides with the poor and the oppressed. Cone writes: “Christian theology is a theology of liberation...This means that its sole reason for existence is to put into ordered speech the meaning of God's activity in the world, so that the community of the oppressed will recognize that its inner thrust for liberation is not only consistent with the gospel but is the gospel of Jesus Christ. There can be no Christian theology that is not identified unreservedly with those who are humiliated and abused. In fact, theology ceases to be a theology of the gospel when it fails to

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<sup>58</sup> Lorentzen, L. (2006). Religion and violence against nature. *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis*, 19, 242-255. <https://doi.org/10.30674/scripta.67311>

arise out of the community of the oppressed.”<sup>59</sup> Liberation theology speaks to the re-envisioning of the relationship between humans and nonhumans, and further creation. The calamitous state of global climate disaster and the furthering of social and racial inequities both speak to the state of the oppressed in our day and time as being the very earth herself and her most marginalized inhabitants.

Where liberation theology conveys the privileging one group’s survival and dominance over another’s, a liberation theology read of ecotheology expands the oppressed group to be all of creation. Alfred J. Henley argues beyond the anthropocentric scope of liberation theology to extend beyond the poor and the oppressed to all of creation, by stating: “since the created order is an ‘other’ with whom we have a relationship, this relationship is part of the common good, and non-human creation is certainly one of the aims of human rights”.<sup>60</sup> Liberation theology influences many justice movements in contemporary times by giving voice and presence to those who have been oppressed, abused and marginalized by systemic injustice. A liberation theology read of the concept of dominion conveys the critical state of the interdependent web of all existence, where oppression and subjugation of nonhumans and the earth herself with the greatest impact levied on marginalized people has led us to our current dire state.

Dr. Carolyn Merchant wrote in her foundational ecofeminist text about the gradual shift from female centered, nurturing and organic societies, to ones where the image of “the earth as a living organism and nurturing mother served as a cultural restraint on the actions of human

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<sup>59</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 2007), 6.

<sup>60</sup> Hennelly, Alfred T., SJ. “Saving and Cultivating Creation: An Ecotheology of Liberation,” in *Liberation Theologies: The Global Pursuit of Justice* (Mystic, Conn.: Twenty-Third Publications, 1995), 265-299.

beings.”<sup>61</sup> Merchant argues that with the model of earth as a living Mother, wanton destruction of creation served as a breach of ethical behavior for humans. Instead, evidence of earth worship and the sacredness of gathering and utilizing the gifts of the earth framed the harmony humans imbued with creation. Merchant goes on to recognize the Scientific and Industrial Revolution as the profound shift of consciousness, where humans, nature and machine become intermixed and interchangeable, and thus the death of nature and the further intrenchment of dualistic thinking. According to ecofeminism, dualistic thinking serves to legitimize and systematize the exploitation of the environment, women, and indigenous people with intersecting binaries of: heaven/earth, God/human, male/female, rational/emotional, European/indigenous, and civilized/uncivilized.<sup>62</sup>

To return to values and practices that rebalance the interconnectedness of all of creation reflects a marked shift from the devastating impact that the Industrial Revolution run amok has played. The heart of ecofeminism acknowledges the basic axioms of an ecological interpretation to include the following: All forms of life exist in interdependent relationships; organisms are sustained by reciprocity and mutuality; Nature is dynamic rather than static. <sup>63</sup>

One expression of the sacred stewardship of creation is the theological grounding of vegetarianism. Vegetarianism, consuming limited animal products or an exclusively plant based

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<sup>61</sup> Caroline Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins Publishers, 1980).

<sup>62</sup> Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation, Walker-Jones, Arthur. "Ecological Biblical Criticism." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.) <https://www-oxfordreference-com.wesleyseminarylibrary.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref:obso/9780199832262.001.0001/acref-9780199832262-e-14>

<sup>63</sup> Logan, James C., et al. "Ecology." *New Catholic Encyclopedia Supplement 2012-2013: Ethics and Philosophy*, edited by Robert L. Fastiggi, vol. 2, Gale, 2013, pp. 411-417. Gale Ebooks, <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX2762500164/GVRL?u=wash50085&sid=GVRL&xid=56165e96> Accessed 10 Oct. 2019.

(or vegan) diet actively reduces both the human carbon footprint<sup>64</sup> and the amount of violence and suffering consumed by people, which is at the liberatory core of this project. A plant-based diet as the spiritual practice of sacred stewardship further deepens the alignment of internalizing our interdependence with all of creation and subverts the dominant narrative of maintaining the status quo of mindless animal product consumption that adversely impacts POCI lives and communities. UU theologian Rev. Dr. Sheri Pru’Homme writes that ecotheology undergirds the understanding that the “radical interdependence of all existence and the accompanying mandate to view humankind as embedded in a complex web of relationships with other organisms that have intrinsic value.”<sup>65</sup> To live in such a way that respects and values the worth of nonhumans and all of creation is an expression of sacred stewardship and thereby reduces the perpetuation of violence in our world. Dexter Scott King, son of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, wrote: “Veganism has given me a higher level of awareness and spirituality, primary because the energy associated with eating has shifted to other areas. If you’re violent to yourself by putting harmful things into your body that violate its spirit, it will be difficult not to perpetuate that violence onto someone else.”<sup>66</sup> Black, brown and indigenous bodies have been objectified and commodified, subjected to systemic injustice, violence and domination. Liberating ourselves through intentional consumption and engagement of creation serves as a way to ebb centuries of marginalization and violence, while honoring our ancestors’ ability to survive to give us life today. We honor our

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<sup>64</sup> Climate Change and Land 2019, an IPCC special report on climate change, desertification, land degradation, sustainable land management, food security, and greenhouse gas fluxes in terrestrial ecosystems. [https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2019/08/4.-SPM\\_Approved\\_Microsite\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2019/08/4.-SPM_Approved_Microsite_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>65</sup> *Justice on Earth*, 24.

<sup>66</sup> “A King Among Men,” interview with Jill Howard Church in *Vegetarian Times*, October 1995, Issue 218, p. 128

ancestors by choosing to not perpetuate violence and suffering, remembering as Maya Angelou wrote in her poem, “Our Grandmothers”, that “I go forth along, and stand as ten thousand.”<sup>67</sup>

Biblical scholar Ryan Patrick McLaughlin explores this in his work, “A Meatless Dominion: Genesis 1 and the Ideal of Vegetarianism”, where he challenges the human centrality of biblical interpretation and promotes an animal-friendly hermeneutic while advocating for the “ideal relationship between humans and nonhumans is one of non-violence”<sup>68</sup>. McLaughlin begins his argument by exploring why he selected the Priestly account in Genesis: the routine reading of the text through an anthropocentric lens exclusively by prominent theologians and the very same text also holds a decidedly anti-anthropocentric hermeneutic. As previously mentioned, McLaughlin cites Thomas Aquinas, with an affirmation of Aristotle’s “hierarchy of souls”, where in *Summa Theologia*, Aquinas asserts the divinely granted human right to hunt and consume nonhumans, as a part of the natural order: “In describing man's production, Scripture uses a special way of speaking, to show that other things were made for man's sake”.<sup>69</sup> The rest of McLaughlin’s piece focuses on exploring the rejection of reading the Priestly account in Genesis through an anthropocentric lens.

McLaughlin builds his argument first by exploring the theological anthropology in Genesis of humans being created in the image of God [Genesis 1:26-28], where the essential similarities between God and humans are differentiated from the essential dissimilarities between humanity and the rest of creation which scholars refer to as “substantive interpretation”; in short,

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<sup>67</sup> Maya Angelou, “Our Grandmothers,” in *And Still I Rise: A Book of Poems*. New York: Random House (1978).

<sup>68</sup> McLaughlin, Ryan Patrick. “A Meatless Dominion: Genesis 1 and the Ideal of Vegetarianism.” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 47, no. 3 (August 2017): 144–54. doi:10.1177/0146107917715587.

<sup>69</sup> McLaughlin, 146.

reason and free will.<sup>70</sup> With the doctrine of made in the image of God (*Imago Dei*), the emphasis that humans are more like God and less like nonhumans became central to the assertions that humans exist over nonhumans where over implies better, loftier, and nobler.

McLaughlin continues by teasing out the differences between substantive interpretation and the functional role of humans in God's creation, where dominion over God's creation lies central to the purpose of humanity. Another important insight comes from the cultural milieu of the times, where humans that bore the image of God served a divine purpose on earth. From these arguments, McLaughlin points to the key questions for discernment: "how should humans fulfill this role as the image of God? What should exercising the dominion implied by the image of God look like?"<sup>71</sup> In order to address these questions for discernment, McLaughlin broadens the scope of consideration to an earlier dominant creation story, the Babylonian creation story found in the *Eluma Elish*, "The Seven Tablets of Creation", which dates back to 1750 BCE and scholars claim served as the inspiration for the Hebrew scribes in writing Genesis 1. <sup>72</sup> Both the *Eluma Elish* and Genesis 1 portray a supreme divine being that brings order from the void and chaos, and in turn humans pay homage to the divine gift of creation through service. The *Eluma Elish* further ordains humans as co-creators with the divine in order to "maintain the gift of creation and keep the forces of chaos at bay."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> McLaughlin, *ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> McLaughlin, 147.

<sup>72</sup> Mark, Joshua J. "Enuma Elish - The Babylonian Epic of Creation - Full Text." *Ancient History Encyclopedia*. Last modified May 04, 2018. <https://www.ancient.eu/article/225/>.

<sup>73</sup> Enuma Elish, *ibid.*

The key difference cited by McLaughlin in these creation stories remains the backdrop of violence or lack thereof. In the *Eluma Elish*, Marduk, the supreme being, creates order over chaos through the violent murder of other lesser deities, forms the earth from one of the slain deity's corpse and gives life to human from the other's blood. In Genesis 1, the Priestly account portrays a God creating order over chaos through a simple, peaceful reordering by giving space to creation and letting be and become. These notable dissimilarities convey meaning for humans created in the image of God, where humans and nonhumans exist in God's peaceful kingdom without the requirement of violence. To elaborate on this point, McLaughlin moves to a closer reading of Gen. 1:28-30: "And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.' God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.'" And it was so." A closer reading of this text affirms the image of God that humans were created in as inherently non-violent and tends towards consumption of green plants by humans and nonhumans for food, where dominion in the Priestly account stands as a part of God creating humans as a part of a peaceful world order. To this end, McLaughlin differentiates between "subdue" (*kadash*) and "dominion" (*radah*) in Gen. 1:28, where both indicate an ordering of the world with God present in creation, free from a violent connotation found in other scriptural passages. David Cotter writes: "As God is to the entire universe—the One who creates a good, blessed, nonviolent place where life is possible and order reigns—so

Humanity is to be to the world. We live up to this responsibility when we make the world good, live in just nonviolence, and render the blessed life possible here.”<sup>74</sup> Therefore, non-violent and peaceful co-existence reflect the nature and image of God to serve as humanity’s highest function on earth.

To further the understanding of the peaceful co-existence in context, McLaughlin contrasts Gen. 1 with the reordering of creation after the flood as told to Noah in Gen. 9 where God dictates that humans shall rest fear and dread on nonhumans, “every living thing shall be as food for you” (Gen. 9:3). Dominion (*radah*) does not appear in Gen. 9, instead the more sinister attributes of fear and dread become a part of the world order. McLaughlin posits that while peaceful dominion with/over nonhumans remains the ideal, its notable absence in the reordering implies that a shift has occurred between God and humanity and now humans require an outlet for their violence. While meat consumption then becomes permissible in Gen. 9, the ideal endures as portrayed in Gen 1. McLaughlin writes of the permission to hunt and kill as: “It appears as a concession of God to a violent world, not as a benevolent design for the well-being of the human creature.” To circle back to dominion (*radah*) with nonhumans, to actively choose to not hunt and kill aligns with the Priestly account and the image of God as creator of a peaceful and nonviolent world order as ordained in Gen. 1 and actively rejects the post-flood concessions to the human proclivity towards violence in Gen. 9. As such a vegetarian or plant based (vegan) diet emerges as the highest ideal to embody dominion with God’s creation.

A womanist perspective aligns with this strand of reading the Gen 1 text, where embracing nonviolence and peaceful dominion remains the ideal and Gen. 9 reflects a more

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<sup>74</sup> David W. Cotter. *Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry: Genesis* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2003).

fraught human and nonhuman communion. With a womanist reading, I am drawing a line between the Gen. 9 concession of God towards humanity's proclivity towards violence and resting fear and dread upon nonhumans as a form of oppression and perpetuating evil and suffering in a post Flood world. This oppression translates to evil and suffering to both nonhumans and humans alike, as humans are the actors of said oppression, internalizing and supporting a system that makes the suffering permissible. A womanist overlay on the divine ideal points to actively subverting the post Flood order of creation as a way to counteract and undermine the concession of humanity's violent nature.

Womanist theologian, Rosita deAnn Mathews provides an alternative theological model for survival in systems in her work, "Using Power from the Periphery".<sup>75</sup> In examining the many paradoxes that Jesus taught (e.g.: in order to gain life, one must lose it; in order to be great we must be a servant), an alternate approach to understanding Jesus' intent emerges in the reading of Matthew 5:39 where, as Mathews notes, "Jesus says that we are not to resist our enemies."<sup>76</sup> Mathews acknowledges that this text implies self-negation through passivity and conformity to the enemy, and permits evil and suffering to persist and thereby implicates our complicity in such a system. She also posits that a range of responses are possible between violent resistance and passive acceptance, to include confronting evil but not on evil's terms: "Do not use the weapons of the oppressor to counteract the oppressor's systems. Do not use evil to fight evil."<sup>77</sup> Mathews refers to this way of resisting evil as using power from the periphery, in order to maintain our

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<sup>75</sup> Rosita DeAnn Mathews, "Using Power from the Periphery: An Alternative Theological Model for...", in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*. Emilie Maureen Townes, editor. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), 92-106.

<sup>76</sup> *A Troubling In My Soul*, 92.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* 93.

own ethical and moral standards in the face of an oppressor. While encouraging agency in a corporate climate, Mathews notes “we retain our dignity by resisting the efforts of those who wish to reinvent us in their image instead of God’s.”<sup>78</sup> Such could be said of subverting the non-ideal relationship between humans and nonhumans, and more broadly our care of all of creation.

While Mathews explores the corporate, political and ecclesiastical systems as institutionalized discrimination and oppression, the same holds true to expand the systems more broadly to the overarching white supremacy and colonialist culture and norms around the world: “Evil is housed in systems, be they corporate, denominational or congregational. This evil is the type that dehumanizes the individual, perpetuates profits at any cost, reinforces unethical behavior as policy, and demands total allegiance.”<sup>79</sup> Mathews postulates that the dehumanization and profiting off of POCI and communities within systemic injustice ebbs in that demand of total allegiance when power is used from the periphery. Mathews argues that when specifically black women work and live within the system and yet refuse to conform to the unethical norms and further oppression of others, their power exists on the periphery. To operate from the periphery means that inclusion does not mean participation in the perpetuation of evil and suffering. Mathews extols that utilization of power from the periphery “is choosing to operate within an ethical framework and to nurture personal spirituality.”<sup>80</sup> Mathews points to the ways in which we are to extract ourselves from a dominant system in order to gain strength and ultimately erode

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<sup>78</sup> *A Troubling in My Soul*, 93.

<sup>79</sup> *A Troubling in My Soul*, 91

<sup>80</sup> *A Troubling in My Soul*, 94.

the power structures that bind the oppressed. Womanist theology encourages “the necessity of retaining one’s sense of dignity despite the system’s advances and demands.”<sup>81</sup>

Dignity for self and others begins recalling our sacred stewardship within an interdependent web of all existence. Dominion as a dualism between human and nonhuman/ powerful and those lacking power as promoted through a traditional reading of the Priestly account in Genesis cannot endure as cultural norms. Sacred stewardship involves a rebalancing of how we participate in the suffering around us and whether we side with the oppressor or the oppressed through daily interactions and consumption of the environment around us. The system demands participation in a global economy where ease in access and copious amounts of what most privileged Westerners consume regularly continues to diminish the earth’s resources and overall health, at the cost of the quality of life for those most marginalized. Genesis 1 points to the highest ideal of living within God’s peaceful realm through reducing or eliminating the slaughter and suffering of nonhumans. This highest ideal of a shift towards a plant-based diet (or mostly vegetarian/vegan) as a spiritual, faithful practice further reduces the global impact on marginalized and disenfranchised communities, which will be explored further in the next chapter.

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<sup>81</sup>*A Troubling In My Soul*, 105.

## CHAPTER 3: Intersectionality of Getting Free: Detoxifying from White Supremacy

### Culture and Climate Injustice through Reflection and Personal Empowerment

“Looking Within: The very purpose of religion is to control yourself, not to criticize others, rather, we must criticize ourselves. How much am I doing about my anger? About my attachment, about my hatred, about my pride, my jealousy? These are the things which we must check in daily life. Taking your own body and mind as the laboratory, engage in some thorough going research on your own mental functioning, and examine the possibility of making some positive changes within yourself.”

~Dalai Lama<sup>82</sup>

When life and the complex injustices of the world feel overwhelming, I find small ways to look within and return to a grounding place of security. I know that by checking myself, taking my own body and mind as the laboratory, and just doing the next right thing begins the process towards spiritual wholeness. In bearing witness to the creeping global climate change, I find ways to lessen my carbon footprint and embrace a more simple existence. In bearing witness to systemic injustice, I embrace the spiritual practice of justice making through speaking out, showing up and leading change. In witnessing the travesties that are left in the wake of the weaponized lashing out of white supremacy culture and norms, the un-entrenching of ourselves from ways and spaces that are causing ourselves and our communities harm emerges as the next right thing. For the purposes of this project, the next right thing involves actively investing in the well-being and resiliency of my POCI colleagues, as a labor of love and witness to their wisdom and ministries. While institutional leaders engage in systemic change, and white allies address dismantling white supremacy within themselves and our communities, this project focuses on the

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<sup>82</sup> Dalai Lama, *A Policy of Kindness* (Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1990), 87.

personal transformation of decolonizing our bodies, minds and spirits in order to continue on in our ministries and service as POCI religious professionals as an expression of sacred stewardship of ourselves and our world.

Often, I return to POCI spaces in order to ground my spirit in love and support that only comes from others who face similar life circumstances. A high degree of trust and warm regard exists amongst UU religious professionals of color. As such, I turned to my colleagues in good faith that they would embrace my endeavor. The project began with posting my request for participants on social media in POCI religious professional closed discussion groups with the following as the project's intent:

*My Unitarian Universalist religious professional colleagues of color are serving in majority white, progressive UU congregations while being engaged in the work of dismantling white supremacy in our communities, institutions and in our own personal lives. The work can feel overwhelming and points of personal empowerment are needed to sustain the deeper work of spiritual engagement. The intersection of justice, spiritual practices and how/what we eat each day is one way to build and sustain personal empowerment and to detox from white supremacy and colonialist culture. As someone who is deeply committed to my denomination and the resilience of my religious professional colleagues of color, I am motivated to find ways to sustain and uplift us. Grounded in the spiritual UU principle of the interconnected web of all existence, aligning food & consumption choices with racial and environmental justice ideals is a restorative spiritual practice to continue on in our work as clergy. I will recruit volunteers for this project through my collegial network. I will survey participants before, during and after regarding their own experiences of systemic injustice/oppression and their beliefs and practices*

*around food, faith and justice. I will create a 6-week guided practice for people of color, with a spiritual engagement tool, a justice primer and invite them to eat vegetarian/vegan as they feel so moved.*

*In short, this project is about detoxifying from white supremacy and colonization in our bodies, minds and souls through an invitation to the spiritual practice of aligning our deepest principles with our choices around consumption.*

*This is NOT a shame based or judge-y or indoctrination project... this is MY LOVE LETTER to my colleagues, as an invitation to a spiritual practice and time of reflection. I'm directing my DMIN time and heart to my beloved colleagues, because I believe in US and want to invest in our present and future.*

I developed this project intent with holding the importance of relationships and honoring/meeting people where they are at the heart of this work. I believe fully in creating experiences, programs and spaces where people are able to enter and engage on their own terms and in a way that respects their time, various commitments and life experience. As such, the invitation to participate in this project conveys my honest warmth and care, as these are my dear colleagues and my ministry is bound up in theirs, and vice versa. I know the challenges of full-time ministry and parish/community life. There are ample bids for our time and not always do we have the luxury of taking on one more project or commitment. Therefore, I was careful to extend a generous and open welcome, for my colleagues to participate as much as they were able to, as Spirit moved.

Each June, my denomination holds an annual gathering for all Unitarian Universalists (General Assembly) for a week of denominational business, workshops, worship and fellowship.

In June 2019, I attended GA in Portland, Oregon and took the opportunity to promote this DMIN project to my POCI colleagues directly, informally in social settings and more formally in gatherings for POCI religious professionals. I created cards with the above project intent statement, as well as sign-up sheets to collect the contact information for those who were interested. Over the course of the week, I shared with many colleagues and received a positive, affirming reception.

Thirty-six UU POCI religious professionals responded to my call to participate in this six week journey and signed the informed consent forms. With the informed consent form, I conveyed that since this project focuses on personal reflection and transformation, none of the participants will be referred to by name in this project out of respect for their privacy and an investment in their professional standing. Also, with the consent form, I survey their preferred professional identification, POCI identity and gender. Of the 36 participants, sixty percent are ordained UU ministers, fifteen percent are religious educators, ten percent are religious professionals (i.e. ordained ministers serving in non-parish settings), ten percent are ordained with a DMIN and five percent are seminarians/interns. The participants listed their POCI identity and gender as:

- Indigenous/Two-Spirit/Latinx
- Mixed/Multi-racial/ethnic, He/her pronouns
- African American Cis-female
- Cisgender Latina
- Chilena/Indigenous/Latinx
- Black (no gender identifier)
- Arab/Black

While neither the UU Association nor any UU religious professional organization has collected data regarding the number of UU ministers that are POCI, from informal polling 36 POCI

religious professionals is roughly 30% of the total number. I was pleased with this number for the purposes of this project.

### WEEK ONE: NOTICING

To begin the engagement of the participants, I decided to start with an easy, accessible baseline. I created a three minute welcome video welcoming the participants to the project and inviting them to first take the week to just take note of their current lives, asking who and what is showing up in their professional, personal and living spaces.<sup>83</sup> (It was important to me that the participants see me and receive the initial welcome as personally as possible.) The intent with this beginning was to encourage a spiritual pause, in order to survey how much of our values, ancestors, cultural expressions are or are not present in our daily lives. This initial invitation echoes a similar exercise I utilize in ARAOMC workshops (the UU acronym for Anti-Racist, Anti-Oppression, Multicultural work) where I ask participants to survey their congregational space with the question with the lens of who is being represented and invited in by the structure, physical accessibility, art, literature, pictures, legacy items, etc. Both of these exercises of intentional noticing originate from adrienne maree brown's idea of fractals, where the small reflects the large. By taking note of what and who is present in our current framings, the invitation then becomes how do we better instill our religious values, beliefs and ancestors to our daily lived experience as physical manifestations of our faith. Further, the noticing also welcomes and encourages taking note of where the disconnects may be: who or what is no longer ours to hold in our spaces (e.g. pictures of people and places that don't touch our souls,

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<sup>83</sup> Transcript from the video available in the Appendix.

mementoes that are meant to project a polished image of us that don't ring true to our experience, products and items that come from corporations and institutions that don't reflect our values and spiritual core). The baseline for this project involves surveying one's own body, space and spiritual practices with this new awareness. I emailed the video to all of the participants (via blind carbon copy, to preserve their privacy, even from each other) with no further expectations, outside of observation.

## WEEK TWO: BEGINNING SURVEY

For Week 2, the goal was to marry the participants' observations with a beginning survey. I decided that the survey should follow the initial observation to have a more grounded approach into the reflection, with the mindset that observation informs insights. Throughout the project, it was important to me to include the framing intent as a reminder of the intersectional focus of the reflection. For the beginning survey of week 2, the top of the survey included:

*This DMIN project is to explore the impact on resilience of reflection and engagement around the intersection of racial justice and environmental justice as a spiritual practice and expression of our UU faith. This project is intended as an invitation to detox from white supremacy culture and colonialism as a spiritual practice; liberating our bodies, spirits and minds. (\*I'm asking for your email to log your confidential responses throughout the project.)*

As this project is with my colleagues and I am committed to their care, my first few questions on the survey were personal: "How are you? How's your heart? How's your faith?", followed by "What's bringing you joy these days?". This warm opening was my way to signal to the entirety of their personhood, as an acknowledgment that everyone comes to spiritual and transformative

work through their own daily lives which at times can be distracting and/or overwhelming. The honest and profound responses were varied, from tired to energized, while many focused on the importance of their (our) faith. Some acknowledged that they are struggling to find and keep hope. One participant affirmed the tenuous standing of many POCI religious professionals: “My private faith nourishes me ... but my public faith and the micro/macro aggressions of others in public UU places/spaces makes me feel weary.” In response to the joy question, many participants shared their joy in children, family time and their homes.

After the open-ended question prompts, I moved to a series of rated question prompts. The first rated response gauged the participants spiritual practices, with the statement: “I engage in spiritual practices” and the option to respond: “many times a day”, “daily”, “a few times a week” or “weekly”. As religious professionals, spiritual practices ground our faith, work and service. Each religious professional freely determines for themselves what practices frame their spiritual life, as discussed previously in the section regarding the eight spheres of spiritual practices: personal, mind, soul, body, communal worship, justice, spiritual partnerships, and life practices. Not surprisingly, 72% of the participants reported that they engage in spiritual practices either “many times a day” or “daily”.

Next with the intention of drawing connections between climate and racial justice, consumption, and spiritual practices, I offered a set of statements that participants responded with “Agree Strongly”, “Agree”, “Neutral”, “Disagree” or “Disagree Strongly”.

	Strongly Agree or Agree	Neutral
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I am mindful of the impact my consumption and food choices have upon climate and racial justice.	69%	
I believe that climate justice is linked to consumption and food choices.	100%	
I believe that dismantling white supremacy is linked to climate justice.	92%	
I am mindful of the quality of the lives of those who produce my food	61%	21%
I believe that my food choices are a spiritual practice.	62%	23%
Where/how I shop for food reflects my faith.	46%	38%
I feel connected to my ancestors through my food and consumption choices.	38%	46%

Admittedly, by asking a question, a seed is planted in a participant’s consciousness and perhaps fosters deeper reflection and potential curiosity. Throughout this project, reminders of the broader justice minded context of the questions and readings focused on our complicity in a system that causes harm to people, nonhumans, communities and the planet.

**WEEK THREE: “EVERY PURCHASE, EVERY BITE, EVERY CHOICE IS A VOTE AND INVESTMENT FOR OR AGAINST A SYSTEM THAT MAY BE CAUSING SUFFERING AND/OR WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE AND NORMS”**

Thus far to week 3, I have asked participants to consciously survey their physical spaces and consider how their faith is reflected in their daily lives and choices. As such, the framing for week 3 is to name the core values statement: *“Every purchase, every bite, every choice is a vote and investment for or against a system that may be causing suffering and/or white supremacy culture and norms.”* With this core values statement, the narrative questions that follow are

“What did you consume? Where did your food/products come from? Who is benefitting from your \$\$ and who is adversely impacted?, what spiritual beliefs and UU principles inform your theology? Where are your spiritual values and daily living practices matching? Where are there opportunities for growth?” As the Dalai Lama wrote, “The most important thing is practice in daily life; then you can know gradually the true value of religion. Doctrine is not meant for mere knowledge but for the improvement of our minds.”<sup>84</sup> As the core values statement reflects, the task at hand is overwhelming and encompasses a great deal of our beings. Thus, as the Dalai Lama reminds us, the focus becomes daily life and practice, where perfection is elusive and impractical. Thus, we practice and return again to our principles and spiritual beliefs to return to wholeness.

In the service of reflection and towards spiritual wholeness, I also included two key attachments: the Food Justice Manifesto and an article on “Environmental Racism”<sup>85</sup>. The Food Justice Manifesto arose from a gathering of 22 multiracial people from 11 states and sovereign Native American lands with the aim of a collective visioning process towards principles and practices of intersectional justice. With sweeping ideals, the collective named and outlined the disenfranchisement and systemic injustice inherit in the global economy; noting that every person has the innate right to have access to healthy food and that all forms of oppression must be opposed to work toward the liberation of all people and halt the commodification of nonhumans. The collective asserted: “We are committed to self-awareness and to recognize our

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<sup>84</sup> Dalai Lama, 87.

<sup>85</sup> Bina Ahmad “Environmental Racism” Food Empowerment Project, 2017, Retrieved August 1, 2019 <https://foodispower.org/environmental-and-global/environmental-racism/>

own capacity to reproduce the very problems we are opposing now. We will seek to create equitable relations in all of our work, doing our best to not reproduce relations of exploitation and oppression.”<sup>86</sup> The Food Justice Manifesto serves to provide a vision of our highest ideals, as embraced with a prophetic group of diverse people as an expression of their faith, as well as a humble reminder of the ways in which we are complicit in destructive ways of living and being.

The article on environmental racism from the Food Empowerment Project details the connection between meat and dairy production centers and low-income communities which are home to mostly black and brown families, and how their continual spewing of industrial and animal waste and byproducts have had a significantly negative impact on the health of these communities for generations. People living in marginalized communities lack the resources to find affordable housing and job opportunities in areas not impacted by environmental hazards. Further, marginalized communities often lack the political power and influence to change health and environmental standards and policies to improve their lives, thus they are often stuck with choosing the best living options available, to the detriment of their health. The author in conclusion asserts that “Our daily meals offers us the chance to vote with our dollars and stand in solidarity with communities against environmental racism.”

I opted to include both of these attachments with this week’s prompts for reflection as a means for the participants to go deeper into the exploration of how consistent their beliefs and practices are lived out in their everyday lives. I was mindful of the level of challenge assumed in the questions, as they spoke to a more intentional engagement of time, energy and resources. I was mindful that by asking the questions, I was again planting a seed leading towards spiritual

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<sup>86</sup> Joshua Sbicca, *Food Justice Now! Deepening the Roots of Social Struggle* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 10.

integration and consistency, without blame or shame. As such, I did not ask for responses or collect data in order for the participants to reflect within themselves and have whatever findings may arise take their own expression to avoid the appearance of rating or gauging how anyone may be living their lives. I was surprised when many of my colleagues took it upon themselves to share their insights back with me, to include one colleague who wrote an entire sermon based on that week's questions. The sermon wove a theme based off a favored kitchen towel that says, "Heal the World, Make Dinner Tonight" with the concluding paragraph emphasizing:

My theology of liberation via the kitchen table challenges me and thus I will challenge you to heal the world. Find the moments in your life where you are already creating and start doing them more intentionally. Create in community. Create with ritual and reverence. Create to liberate yourself, create to heal yourself. Create to talk to your ancestors and to nourish your future. In each act of creation, you are in conversation with God. The Spirit of Life. The Divine.

Another participant was inspired to write a poem:

I'm angry about chocolate.  
What I'm really angry about is slavery.  
Slavery isn't sweet and delicious.  
It doesn't melt in your mouth  
or cause you to moan in ecstasy,  
relieved from a hard day at work  
where you make a living wage  
to pay for chocolate slavery.

I'm angry about sacrifice.  
I used to roll my eyes at people  
who gave up chocolate for forty days  
during Lent because it didn't feel like  
a sacrifice at all. And now I see  
the sacrifice is human  
and so much greater  
than I am willing to make.  
No one should die  
so that I can have chocolate.

I'm angry about silence.  
Is this history of violence  
really as silent and hidden  
as I want to believe? Have I  
been betrayed or have I simply  
been willfully ignorant?  
"Your silence will not protect you."  
Lorde, have mercy on us all!  
Silence protects no one.

*"We are a gentle angry people,  
and we are singing,  
singing for our lives."<sup>87</sup>*

At this point in the project, I was surprised and delighted that the participants, my esteemed colleagues, were engaging process with truly profound reflections and insights. For religious professionals, the expression of their internal wrestlings were personal to each of them and influenced by their faith journeys thus far. Since the majority of participants actively serve congregations, I heard from many that their reflections and responses to the questions thus far had given them a fresh perspective on their ministry and justice work.

#### WEEK FOUR: THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING

With week 4, the process then shifts to incorporating the important consideration of a theology of suffering. The intent with linking suffering here as part of the process relies on compassion as spiritual practice to inform daily life and choices. When a greater awareness and recognition of suffering emerges, a deeper consistency and integration of values and practices becomes possible. I came to this part of the project through my reading of moral injury, as

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<sup>87</sup> The participant included text from the hymn, #170 "We Are A Gentle, Angry People" which is found in "Singing the Living Tradition" (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993), 170.

discussed previously, in particular the assigned text, *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War* by Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabriella Lettini. Brock and Lettini collect and weave through the stories of dozens of combat veterans, detailing their service, struggles with moral injury and other combat related traumas, and their road towards recovery or not. Many reported that cultivating compassion and reclaiming agency were key to rebuilding their lives and souls. One story in particular from a combat veteran named Camilo demonstrated this point: “My eyes are open and I no longer view the suffering of others as alien to my own experience...Moral injury is painful, yes, but it has also returned a sense of humanity that had been missing from my life for longer than I can remember.”<sup>88</sup> With this week’s focus on a theology of suffering, I also included three attachments: a reflection on ecofeminism and ecowomanism, a native community’s food traditions and a “Decolonizing myself with each bite”.

The blog post, “The Interconnectness of Ecofeminism and Ecowomanism”, by TM Washington provides a brief personal reflection on the intersections of ecojustice, feminism and womanism. Washington asserts, “Not only has the body of a black woman been devalued by white suppressors, their environmental connection and spiritual connection to the earth has also been thwarted and abused, with systems of patriarchy and white supremacy.”<sup>89</sup> I elected to include this to provide a poignant insight into the fractured relationship that continues to exist between women, women of color and the earth. This author reflects a core tenant of

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<sup>88</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock and Gabrielle Lettini, *Soul Repair: Recovering from Moral Injury after War* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012), 89.

<sup>89</sup> TM Washington, “The Interconnectness of Ecofeminism and Ecowomanism,” Introduction to Environmental Studies and Sustainability (blog), Charleston University, April 9, 2018. <http://blogs.cofc.edu/envt-200-03/2018/04/09/the-interconnectness-of-ecofeminism-and-ecowomanism/>.

Ecowomanism, as defined by Dr. Melanie Harris: “Ecowomanism exposes the impact of structural racism and systemic oppression assumed in many traditional paths in the environmental movement, and articulates a corrective that shows the connection between social injustice and environmental injustice.”<sup>90</sup>

The article, “A Native Community Preserves Its Food Traditions: Members of the Tolowa Dee-Ni’ Nation are Keeping Traditional Foodways alive in the Face of Climate Change and Human Impact” by Allie Hostler is part of a series called “Civil Eats”, documenting the movement for Native American Food Sovereignty.<sup>91</sup> Hostler chronicles part of the history of the West coast based Tolowa Dee-Ni’ people and the systematic destruction of their culture through mass slaughter, land grabs and denial of access to natural resources that are often related to faith practices. Hostler also includes how climate change has influenced the people’s spiritual connection to the earth through disruption in the fish and animal populations, and how the people are seeking justice in the courts to reinstate and preserve their way of life. I included this article to highlight how one disenfranchised community is actively fighting against the total annihilation of their culture and how embracing and passing on ancient ways is a source of strength.

The blog post “Decolonizing Myself with Each Bite” by Daniel Cano reflected on his ongoing learning and reconnecting with his ancestors as a source of strength and resilience. Cano notes that the introduction of oil, sugar, white flour and meat through Spanish colonization of

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<sup>90</sup> Melanie L. Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2017), 43.

<sup>91</sup> Allie Hoster, “A Native Community Preserves Its Food Traditions: Members of the Tolowa Dee-Ni’ Nation are Keeping Traditional Foodways Alive in the Face of Climate Change and Human Impact,” Civil Eats (series), Intercontinental Cry, A Project of the Center for World Indigenous Studies, November 24, 2017. <https://intercontinentalcry.org/native-community-preserves-food-traditions/>.

Mesoamerica radically changed the indigenous communities eating, farming practices and overall health, all to their detriment. Cano ends his blog asserting, “We must rethink food and our food system. My journey to a sustainable future starts with exploring what my ancestors ate. Through cooking, I keep their knowledge and spirits alive. Food is our medicine for creativity and liberation. By decolonizing our food, communities of color further tap into our ancestral resilience”.<sup>92</sup>

I included these three attachments to offer a broad entrance into considering suffering. With the ecowomanism and ecofeminism blog, the emphasis is upon the suffering of black women and the connection between violence to women and violence to the earth. With the blog about decolonizing our bodies, the emphasis is on the insidious legacy of colonialism which not only led to the deaths of millions of people, fast forward to today, the European influence has led to a reduction of health, the rapid deforestation and destruction of many resource rich areas and systemic and growing income/wealth gap. The article on preserving Native traditions highlights the history of a people once persecuted and slaughtered, now clawing back to life through honoring their ancestor’s way of life. As the participants represent diverse backgrounds, it was important to me to include a variety of narratives that elucidate the experience of suffering on a communal scale.

To explore the weighty topic of suffering, I opted to direct the participants with open ended questions that prompted some reflection. The survey questions included:

- What is your theology of Suffering? Where is God/the God of your understanding/the sacred in Suffering?
- Who or what do you remember or call upon in the midst of Suffering?

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<sup>92</sup> Daniel Cano, “Decolonizing Myself With Each Bite,” Health Equity (blog), Greenlining, December 15, 2016, <https://greenlining.org/blog-category/2016/decolonizing-myself-with-each-bite/>.

- Linking last week's pondering of linking white supremacy culture and consumption choices - where is suffering held?
- What is NOT yours to carry any longer?

In response to the questions regarding a theology of suffering and where is the sacred, participants waxed eloquently across a spectrum of understanding. One participant noted, “Suffering just is. The sacred has no role in it.”, emphasizing that the sacred emerges in us and our responses to suffering within us or those around us. Another noted that they didn’t connect with a theology of suffering because it seemed not sufficient for salvation. Many others reflected that suffering was necessary in appreciating and honoring joy and the good in life, with enduring lessons to be harvested after the time of suffering has passed. The necessity of suffering links to other insights that suffering is an inevitable and universal part of life, when we are “mortal and imperfect beings” or as another participant connected the inevitability of suffering to the Buddhist teachings where suffering arises from attachment and expectations. Others noted that God is present with us in our suffering, and the task of humanity is to live life “to the fullest, figuring all this out.” Just as suffering is universal and inevitable, others noted that we bear suffering best through prayer and spirituality connects the sufferer to something greater than themselves which is just as universally present.

In response to the question, “who or what do you remember or call upon in the midst of suffering?”, participants responded with affirmations of their connections to God, their ancestors and reminders of the passage of time. One participant reflected, “In the midst of suffering I call on those close to me and on the understanding that suffering is part of life. It is my response that affects my ability to move through it.” Many of the participants noted how their response shaped and impacted the intensity of their suffering, emphasizing the need to claim agency towards

healing. “I pray that I be granted the endurance and wherewithal to make it through. I remember that I have been to this rodeo before and it did not kill me.”

Admittedly, the framing of the questions were intended to lead towards certain insights of linking choices as investment in white supremacy culture and norms, with the overarching goal of decolonizing our minds, bodies and spirits. As such, the next question, “Linking last week’s pondering of linking white supremacy culture and consumption choices, where is suffering held?” reflected this aim. Many participants identified that white supremacy culture fragments and fosters disconnection with ourselves, our community, identity, ancestors and the suffering of the earth. One participant made this powerful statement:

White supremacy culture is born out of disconnect from one’s self and therefore you surrender to fear - fearful that others will do to you what do and did to them; fearful of death; fearful of looking in the mirror and seeing the monster whose people enslaved others and wreaked havoc around the world, fearful to acknowledge the truth and to take responsibility to change and undo what others of your kind have done. Their suffering is held in their physical being.

Other participants shared that this project thus far had increased their awareness of how white supremacy culture has conditioned many of their consumption choices and with more and growing awareness now, they are working towards simplifying and reducing their footprint on the planet. This growing awareness connects with the foundational premise that integrating beliefs and life choices are a spiritual practice, where perfection is not the goal, but a deepened connection with God and more comprehensive self-awareness. “I acknowledge the integration of my values and actions is a work in progress, one with self-compassion and perseverance when I miss the mark.”

Other participants related suffering to the life experiences of their ancestors, some of which the participants feel as if they carry in their own lives as well: “We hold our ancestors’ suffering...suffering [is] literally held in our genes.” This sentiment reflects the commonplace reality of generational trauma for POCI people, where the systemic injustice, the trauma of racism, and physical violence influence how people parent and influence their children by passing along the adaptive and maladaptive coping mechanisms, giving rise to the enduring impacts of trauma regardless if the children and subsequent generations have experienced the same trauma.<sup>93</sup> It is interesting to note that spiritual and religious forms of interventions have been found helpful in mitigating the harmful consequences of severe trauma in the lives of trauma survivors and its generational effects in the lives of their offspring.<sup>94</sup>

The last question prompt, “What is not yours to carry any longer?”, was intended to bring insights as to personal agency around values and norms that lead to wholeness and spiritual integration. Ongoing spiritual discernment and growth requires identifying both sources of nourishment and spiritual encouragement, as well as letting go of those beliefs, values and habits that counter religious values in service of liberation. This question also speaks to the power of agency, in choosing to not bear the burden of others' expectations, hopes and demands on our time, energy and resources, whether that be interpersonal or institutional.

As POCI religious professionals, many of the responses focused on their ministry in majority white communities. As such, one participant noted, they no longer carry “the feelings,

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<sup>93</sup>Jill Salberg and Sue Grand, eds. *Wounds of History: Repair and Resilience in the Trans-Generational Transmission of Trauma* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), 2.

<sup>94</sup> Marilyn Doucet and Martin Rovers, “Generational Trauma, Attachment, and Spiritual/Religious Interventions”, *Journal of Loss and Trauma*, 15:2, 93. March 9, 2010.

thoughts and needs of white women above my own” and another, “It is no longer my burden to carry the weight of those who refuse to take responsibility for their lives. Ignorance is not an excuse. There are so many tools of enlightenment that no one has an excuse. At some point we have to recognize when others do not want to be awake.” Others spoke to the power of self-reliance in the face of oppression: “I wake up and the power of my life affirming thoughts present positive visions of possibility and my sense of gratitude is so intense. I am no longer at the mercy of others because I know I create my own reality...I am living my life because I took back my life.” These sentiments reflect an embrace of healthy self-differentiation.

One participant spoke of the delicate balance between gratitude and grief in the face of the enormity of the task ahead:

I grow my own food and belong to a CSA around the corner of my house in the growing season. I belong to a livestock CSA through the winter, so that I know who produces my meats and how. I preserve my own foods (canning, freezing) as much as possible. These allow me to be connected to this place and to my family heritage/tradition. Like many people, I find being as mindful of people impacts as I am of environmental impacts to be difficult...if every meal is a recounting of how others suffer so that I eat, it is difficult to eat! And, of course, this is why I grow food and source food from people I know and feel good about supporting. I strive, as much as I can, to eat in ways that let me be grateful rather than grieving.

What is striking about this participant’s reflection offers a window into intentional spiritual wholeness that comes through sacred stewardship. While not perfect, which is an impossible and elusive goal, this participant speaks to spiritual maturity and resilience through their intentional consumption habits as a spiritual practice. Overall, to this point in the project, many participants shared deeply of their reflections and engaged the process with thoughtful and honest care.

## WEEK FIVE: ONE INSIGHT

As a religious professional, I am mindful that everyone comes to their process in their own ways and time. For week 5, I elected to offer an open-ended prompt to encourage reflection with the question, “What insight would you like to share?” I was not surprised to receive profound insights from the participants. Participants noted how oppression has impacted and shaped their lives: “What I have noticed is that I spend a good bit of time in survival mode. This process of reflection in a safe POCI environment has been helpful for me to unpack how internalized oppression is taking its toll.”

Another participant connected with a greater appreciation of the interconnectedness of oppressions in justice work, as related to daily living:

Having your questions put forth regarding our way of being in the world in ways that support and sustain it from positive actions has led me to reflect on just how integral "justice" making is woven into the fabric of life without naming it, but it just is. That way of being becomes like oxygen to the lungs, and involuntary breathing. Once that happens no other way is a consideration.

Another participant noted, “I am thinking deeply about how class impacts food choice and how that can lead to shame.”

With the week 5 prompt to share one insight gleaned from the project thus far, I also invited participants to a one-on-one conversation with me to check in as to their process, resulting in eight conversations via video or phone chat. It was important to me that our conversations included the ability to be able to see each other when possible. With each conversation, as participants shared their routine habits and how they live out their callings, we also identified how they are actually living more fully into their faith by framing everyday

activities as spiritual practices. For example, one participant shared their connection to their grandmother through cooking and food. As a family, the participant made meal preparation time also an opportunity to share stories of their people and history, which I affirmed as a spiritual practice. Other participants shared how overwhelming the project and its intended goal seemed in light of the intention and attention required. We discussed how this overwhelming dynamic is not only a characteristic of white supremacy culture (focus on perfectionism), while also inhibits grace and spiritual growth. We discussed how a life of faith is a continued practice, to return to our principles and spiritual beliefs again and again with renewed appreciation of the ways in which our spiritual integrity is either bored out or not. Overall, the conversations were warm and encouraging, most decidedly pastoral in nature going both ways as a mutual blessing.

#### WEEK SIX: NARRATIVE RESPONSES OF SPIRITUAL INTEGRATION

I designed this project to span a six-week period, with enough time for growing insights through direct observation, engaging in conversation and reading related materials intended to further thoughts and expand consciousness. I decided to offer a series of open-ended prompts with the questions:

- Where do you feel stronger, more integrated?
- Where is there energy for more reflection?
- What is your understanding of the intersection of white supremacy culture and norms, climate justice and racial justice?
- What does liberation mean to you?

The first question relates to the project question regarding resilience. While not necessarily practical to ask directly of participants if they feel more resilient after engaging this project,

asking where they feel stronger and more integrated provides a window into comparative strengths. Some highlights include:

Connected to the earth. Looking for ways to decrease my footprint.

I been working on greater self-care and boundaries. Although a work in progress I find that creating time to get away has allowed me to return re-energized and recharged and less anxious to all the things I "have to do" which as I reflect are more choices than "have to".

I wish I could point to a single place, but the truth of the matter is that this project has helped me reconnect holistically with my experience. I have started working less, and spending more time with family. I started engaging "headspace" and am practicing some mindful eating. I am crafting more and breathing more deeply overall.

I think I would have to say in my connection with some of my friends.

I continue to feel more and more "moved-in" to my own body so that I can be in full relationship with food and consumption with gratitude and reverence.

The second question, "Where is there energy for more reflection?" intended to offer an opportunity to reflect, along with the opportunities for further curiosity and improvement, towards the goal of fostering integration and spiritual liberation. In short, I am asking, "What comes next for you?" in bringing alignment between words and deeds. Harkening back to the Dalai Lama, where our bodies and minds are the laboratories for exploration and growth, the possibility for future processing endures as readily available. Participants shared that they intend to reflect more on their overall consumption habits, support of the meat and dairy industry, and how the ways in which they spend their money does or does not align with their values. Other participants noted that this project highlighted their need for more time for personal devotions and spiritual reflection.

One of the enduring blessings of ministry and being in community are the ways in which inspiration can emanate out, creating more possibilities and having significant impacts farther than the primary relationship. Religious professionals, leaders, influencers, and other care providers often are not privy to just how far their impact in people's lives can go. While I cannot fully take credit, through the grace of God, I acknowledge that perhaps this project will continue on in the lives and communities of the participants, for the betterment of many. One participant shared, "When it comes to food waste, composting, and even recycling, I am not diligent. I am relying less on plastic than I used to, but I'm nowhere near integrated or strong. There is a community garden in my apartment complex, but no compost that I can see. I intend to begin this effort and perhaps try to build community among the other gardeners in the spring." This participant demonstrates how personal liberation and transformation creates cascading circles in their communities, where their own insights now bring the possibility of creating community and nurturing the earth at the same time.

The next weighty question challenges the participants' understanding of intersectional justice with the prompt: "What is your understanding of the intersection of white supremacy culture and norms, climate justice and racial justice?" Some participants came to the recognition of what they have lost through internalizing white supremacy norms and culture:

White supremacy seeks to disconnect us from ourselves, each other, our ancestors and the earth. It also prizes perfectionism and a sense of urgency. I personally fight against these two things daily or at least try to notice them in my own embodiment. I am noticing how much I have lost due to white supremacy.

Others spoke to how climate and racial justice are limited and ultimately ineffective when marginalized voices are not involved and/or considered when drafting policy and shaping future

opportunities. Participants identified a lack of acknowledging and honoring the humanity of POCI people in systemic injustice, and the pervasive, insidious entanglement of white supremacy norms and culture as related to climate and racial justice:

Climate justice and racial justice happen in the messiness of connection when marginalized voices and ways of being are heard and their/our ideas are acted upon. They are all interconnected because the decisions that impact the environment and people's lives are created from a stance of white superiority with disregards the humanity and needs of those deemed other.

I feel like our societal norms are all based on white supremacy and when we look at climate justice and racial justice, it is usually through that lens. So I feel white supremacy dictates how we view these things even when we are not wanting to. I also feel like some of the goals tend to me "like what white people have". Meaning I want to be treated equally just means I want to be treated like the white people. I'm trying to push myself and think about how I might see those things if I didn't have the white culture narrative.

For me, this idea of having "Dominion over" the earth versus "Stewardship of" the earth, is very much at the crux of how White Supremacy Culture, particularly white, cis-hetero, Christo -patriarchy is damaging our planet. The Bible, Manifest Destiny Documents, etc. are all examples of ways in which the dominant culture seems to give itself power over any group, resource or living being (including the planet) that does not fill its coffers or ego. This perceived "dominion" is driving humanity to extinction and those that are most affected by this destructive culture are BIPOC people. White, upper and middle-class people are the least affected and continue to support policy through direct or indirect action that moves the dominant culture's agenda forward.

It's all wrapped up together like a damn rat king! We dump our trash in the poorest minority communities in the nation and let the toxins runoff into the drinking water. Pollution is a visible sign of our sins against humanity and all of creation, rising like smoke in an attempt to signal our accomplishments to the Heavens. The Heavens rain our sin back on us.

The final question for this week, "What does liberation mean to you?" provided an opportunity for participants to discern for themselves their journey towards wholeness and resilience. Some participants noted that liberation relates to living a life free from oppression: "Being able to be

seen as [me]. Just [me]. Not the disabled woman or the black chick or the single mother or the short label but just who I am completely and not just different aspects of myself. Also, not being afraid to go places or do things because of one of those qualifiers.” “To me . . . not letting the oppression that we all have to deal with interfere with me being able to live my best life, as I understand it to be.”

Across the participants, the theme of connection and collective liberation arose, echoing a statement from author bell hooks, “It is crucial for the future of the Black liberation struggle that we remain ever mindful that ours is a shared struggle, that we are each other’s fate.”<sup>95</sup> Liberation for these participants entails:

Collectively we can live fully as our most enlightened, healthy and creative selves.

Liberation means the freedom and opportunity to choose how I will live my life to its potential given the gifts/talents I have inherited or the skills I have acquired throughout my life. That liberation is tied with the liberation of others because we live in an interconnected world and I exist in relation to others. Alone, I am nothing. It is the love of and intimacy with family, friends and nature that gives my life meaning.

Liberation for me is accountability in community. It arises through the relational activities of working in community so that we can all live well and live fully.

Toni Morrison's words echo with resonance and a direct call; the work of liberation is never fully done: “I tell my students, ‘When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else.”

## **POST-PROJECT SURVEY**

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<sup>95</sup> bell hooks and Cornel West, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017), 9.

After the guided six-week series, I sent out one last post-project survey to allow for the participants to digest some of their experiences and gauge the enduring impacts for themselves. The responses reflect a few notable shifts. In response to the statement, “I engage in my spiritual practices”, 82% reported either “many times a day” or “daily”, which is up from 72% at the beginning of the project. In fact, the vast majority of responses recorded upwards shifts in perception to either “Agree Strongly” or “Agree”:

	Beginning Survey: “Agree Strongly” and “Agree”:	Post Survey: “Agree Strongly” and “Agree”:
I am mindful of the impact my consumption and food choices have upon climate and racial justice.	69%	73%
I believe that climate justice is linked to consumption and food choices.	100%	100%
I believe that dismantling white supremacy is linked to climate justice.	92%	100%
I am mindful of the quality of the lives of those who produce my food.	61%	91%
I believe that my food choices are a spiritual practice.	61%	100%
Where/how I shop for food reflects my faith.	46%	91%
I feel connected to my ancestors through my food and consumption choices.	39%	91%

Out of all of the statements, the most significant shift came in response to the statement, “I believe that my food choices are a spiritual practice”, where participants selected either “Agree Strongly” or “Agree” 39% more than with the beginning survey.

### **What else would you like to share?**

In response to the open ended question of “What else would you like to share?”, many participants took the opportunity to affirm sentiments along the lines of my initial core values statement “Every purchase, every bite, every choice is a vote and investment for or against a system that may be causing suffering and/or white supremacy culture and norms.” One participant put it best, “Food and how you consume is the best exemplar for what you believe and how you want to conduct your life” and another affirmed, “This project has helped me be more aware of my food choices. I have made small changes based on the reflection I did during this project.”

At the conclusion of the project, I hosted a group video chat where I opened the conversation to the participants to share their experiences over the course of an hour. Most of us on the video chat actually knew each other and have strong, warm connections, and thus our conversation was deep and thoughtful. A few themes emerged from the various participants. First, some expressed that they were quite angry and annoyed with me at first for asking hard questions and prompting honest reflection. They felt inadequate, ashamed and overwhelmed by what they were learning of themselves and the pervasive impact of white supremacy culture and colonialism in their lives, to the detriment of all. I appreciate this honest feedback and am honored that regardless of their reactions to the process, they stayed with the project and

continued to chew through the readings, prompts and reflections. To my delight and surprise, a few reported that they were changing their diet and consumption patterns with a complete overhaul, with two reporting that they are now keeping a vegan diet and lifestyle. Second, many shared that they recognize anew their need for community and the benefits of spiritual growth through relationship building. Participants were encouraged that they were not alone in this pursuit and calling to a greater spiritual integrity and wholeness. They expressed gratitude for the opportunity to engage others and for being the recipients of my project, as a labor of love for them. Third, many reported that they now felt more grounded in their faith and possessed a greater strength to differentiate between what pressures, expectations and needs are truly their own as religious professionals, and what is not theirs to assume responsibility for others. One participant shared that a layer of grief and anxiety had been lifted from their spirits and that they were newly liberated from a painful legacy that was now not holding them back in their life and work as a religious professional. Overall, the conversation exemplified the blessings that follow conversations, shared honest reflections, and warm trust in the process.

## CHAPTER FOUR: BENEDICTION – CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This project began as a labor of love and a testament to my commitment and love for my POCI religious professional colleagues. I came to this project with the hopes of feeding insights, fueling transformation, and encouraging connections across our community. From the onset, the state of affairs in politics, global climate change, and the growing disparities in economic equality all speak to the spiritual crisis of our time. As individual religious professionals, we only can do so much. As individuals in connection with a larger movement and as influencers and leaders of spiritual communities, there is much we can do to incite transformation with our spirits buoyed for the work. We are a part of the interdependent web of all of creation, charged with sacred stewardship of ourselves, our communities and our world. Our ability to lean in to sacred stewardship in a manner which is consistent with our religious beliefs and spiritual values on the small, individual level has the potential to replicate and spread to a larger footprint, much as adrienne maree brown posits with her metaphor of fractals.

With the consent form, I included a low-level warning that this project could be somewhat uncomfortable for the participants. As with any intentional reflection and inward-looking journey, some discomfort arises when confronted with internal inconsistencies and disconnects. As religious professionals charged with the care and nurture of the souls of others, these places can feel tender, or more pointedly, as a failure to live up and move through the world with our highest ideals and faith as our guides. As author and social activists Andrew Boyd notes:

Compassion hurts. When you feel connected to everything, you also feel responsible for everything. And you cannot turn away. Your destiny is bound with the destinies of others. You

must either learn to carry the Universe or be crushed by it. You must grow strong enough to love the world, yet empty enough to sit down at the same table with its worst horrors.<sup>96</sup>

From both the profound narrative responses to the results of the beginning and post project surveys, ample evidence emerged that speak to the power of intentional reflection towards transformation. I identify that the most significant result of this project endures in the continued impacts in the participants' lives, as demonstrated through a change in consumption habits and identifying more strongly that their food and consumption choices are spiritual practices.

I would make the following recommendations to anyone attempting to lead this project or a process similar to the one I created. First, I recognize the power of connection and interpersonal relationships to broaden insights and deepen the engagement of the process. This project would be best conducted in an environment where people are able to interact regularly, such as in an academic setting, communal or family living, faith-based community or regularly scheduled small groups. When I was speaking or interacting with participants one on one, our conversations yielded more insights and inspiration for further reflection each time. Just as communal worship reminds us of the lived experience of others as the people of God and our highest ideals as people of faith, communal learning fosters growth and further solidifies and provides spaces for transformation. Second, I would recommend that this process culminates in the creation of a personal covenant. As Unitarian Universalists, we often create covenants or agreements as to how we are to conduct our work and service together that are grounded in our principles. For the purposes of this project, a personal covenant that details how the participants

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<sup>96</sup> Andrew Boyd, *Daily Afflictions: The Agony of Being Connected to Everything in the Universe* (New York, NY: WW Norton & Company, 2002), 27.

intend to move forward in their lives given the insights they have gained would provide a framework for sacred commitment. A covenant could follow a model similar to this:

*Because I believe in the holy interdependent web of all creation of which we are a part,*

*Because I believe that sacred stewardship is the highest expression of my faith,*

*Because I affirm the inherent worth and dignity of all people and nonhumans, as the embodiment of God's creation in the world,*

*Because I believe the Earth is sacred and I am responsible for its care and restoration,*

*I hereby covenant to the following as spiritual practices:*

*To continue to witness against the destruction of the planet, its fragile ecosystem and the people most impacted by climate change,*

*To refuse to buy single-use plastic items, carry reusable bags at all times, and commit to recycling, reusing and reducing my consumption overall,*

*To research and invest in companies and institutions that actively invest in marginalized communities and the Earth, with a preference for POCI owned businesses and people,*

*To honor the God given gift of my health and body, by reducing (or eliminating) my meat and dairy intake,*

*To continue to learn about ways to deepen my spiritual alignment and share with others what I have learned,*

*To pray daily for wisdom, strength and courage to be a good steward of all that I have been given.*

Third, I would encourage this project to also include the expectation of check-ins with the participants, at the six-month, year and eighteen-month marks. Continuing the conversations and

instilling ongoing engagement yields greater benefits long term, while also supporting relationships and collective liberation through accountability.

It is only through reimagining what is possible through our intention and attention to intersectional justice, can collective liberation become real in small and grand ways in our life time. As adrienne maree brown writes, “We are creating a world we have never seen.”<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 163.

## **APPENDIX**

Transcript of 3-minute welcome video

Project Participant Consent Form

Week 2: Beginning Survey

Week 2: Survey Data

Week 3: Participant Email

Week 4: Survey on Suffering

Week 4: Participant Email

Week 5: Participant Email

Week 5: One Insight Survey

Week 6: Participant Email

Week 6: Participant Open Ended Question Survey

Post Project Survey

## Transcript of the 3 Minute Welcome Video

Hello lovely people. This is such a joy for me to share with you. And thank you again for being willing to share your time and energy and profound reflections around this curiosity I have in the world. As you've seen in my descriptions, it's an invitation to reflect deeply on our current climate crisis, which is related to racial, economic injustice, systemic injustice, the destruction of the environment, and the overlay that I have chosen to focus on is how spiritual practices can build our resiliency by decolonizing and detoxifying our minds, our spirits and our souls in order to continue on in the work as POCI religious professionals in a majority white denomination. Got that? (laughing) It is something I am really passionate about; it aligns deeply with my values and that's why I wanted to do this project and invite you into a conversation. Because I know I am better for our conversations and the ways in which we reflect. So, I am inviting you first to curiosity. This is not indoctrination; I am not going to convince you to mindfully consume or live your life in a certain way. You are ministers, you are religious professionals. You know how to maintain your soul best in order to continue on in the work.

So first we'll begin by just noticing. Just noticing. Look at your space, look at your office, look at your kitchen, bed room, living rooms. Look at the books on your shelves. Notice who and what is showing up in your space and notice what feels like it deeply connects to where your heart is right now. Where do you hold struggle? Where do you hold challenge? Where do you hold grief? Where do you hold memory? Take a look around and just notice.

Today is Sunday, and you have all week to consider deeply around this noticing who and what is in your space. That is the first invitation of this project and I will send you some ways that we can reflect back and an invitation to join a closed/secret Facebook group where we can have conversations about different reflections that may be coming up for you over the course of this project. This is not intended to be "a read, study, reflect" project, this is an invitation to however this is helpful to you and whatever best serves your heart, your ministry, your work and your life. However, you are in the world... because I believe in you and I believe in this faith. So, thank you again, my beloveds. I am truly thankful to be on this journey with you and I look forward to all the ways that we are going to interact over the next six weeks. Bless you, bless your ministries, bless your heart, your soul, your bones.

Warm greetings dear colleagues,

Thank you for affirming that you would like to participate in my DMIN study - I am honored and thrilled! My apologies for the delay, I was just assigned my DMIN reader from the Wesley Faculty. To start, here is the [Consent Form](#).

Again, please remember this is a teeny, tiny project that is about curiosity and reflection. Not a lot of heavy lifting and another time suck. This is to be of service to you, your spiritual journey and thus, the resilience and heart of our POI community as UU Religious Professionals.

With profound gratitude,  
Rebekah

**Rev. Rebekah A. Savage**

Associate Minister

Pronouns: *she/her/hers* [Here's Why](#)

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## DMIN Participant Consent Form

My name is Rev. Rebekah A. Savage, and I am a Doctoral of Ministry student at Wesley Theological Seminary conducting a study for my final project. My telephone number is 240-543-7481. My Supervising Professor is Dr. Lorena Parish; email : [lparrish@wesleyseminary.edu](mailto:lparrish@wesleyseminary.edu)

You may contact either of us at any time if you have questions about this study.

Purpose: The purpose of this research is to respond to the project question: "What impact can reflection around the intersection of food, justice and spirituality have on resiliency for Unitarian Universalist religious professionals of color?"

Procedure: If you consent, you will be asked to participate in a time of spiritual reflection.

Time Required: A 1 hour preproject group conversation, an initial and post 15 minutes inventory, 5-10 minute spiritual reflection and personal notes (time varies).

Voluntary participation: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may still refuse to answer any question that you do not wish to answer. You may also withdraw from the study at any time.

Risks: There are not known risks associated with this study. However, it is possible that you may feel challenged or uncomfortable over the course of this spiritual practice. If this happens, please contact me immediately.

Benefits: While there is no guaranteed benefit, it is possible that you will enjoy sharing your experience with our colleagues and/or your congregation. Participants are encouraged to share of their journey only and required to maintain the confidentiality of anyone else participating in this project. This project is intended to serve as a deepening experience.

Confidentiality/Anonymity: Your name and all professional identifying information will be kept confidential in all the reporting and/or writing related to this project.

Sharing the Results/Publication: I plan to explore the project question and reflecting theologically based on your experience and research. The project will be submitted in January of 2020. I also plan on presenting the results to the UUMA POCI chapter and local POCI UU colleagues. The final project will also be posted and archived at Wesley Seminary and available to the public.

Before you sign, you are agreeing to participate in this research study. Be sure that any questions you may have are answered to your satisfaction. If you agree to participate in this study, a copy of this document will be provided to you.

\* Required

### 1. Email address \*

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### 2. I affirm that I would like to enroll in this DMIN project. \*

*Check all that apply.*

YES

No

**3. I would like to be identified professionally as: \***

*Mark only one oval.*

- Rev.
- Religious Educator
- Seminarian/Intern
- Religious Professional
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**4. I would like my POCI identity and gender to be listed as (or not):**

\_\_\_\_\_

**5. I affirm to honor the confidentiality of other participants. \***

*Check all that apply.*

- Yes
- No
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**6. I would like to interact & reflect with other participants, while honoring confidentiality, in a closed and secret FB group. Here is my FB name:**

\_\_\_\_\_



## DMIN Project Survey

This DMIN project is to explore the impact on resilience of reflection and engagement around the intersection of racial justice and environmental justice as a spiritual practice and expression of our UU faith. This project is intended as an invitation to detox from white supremacy culture and colonialism as a spiritual practice; liberating our bodies, spirits and minds. (\*I'm asking for your email to log your confidential responses throughout the project.)

1. **Email address \***

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2. **How are you doing? How's your heart? Your faith?**

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3. **What is bringing you joy these days?**

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4. **How would you reflect on your beliefs and practices regarding the intersection of our first principle (the inherent worth and dignity of all people) and our seventh principle (the interdependent web of all existence)?**

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5. **I engage my spiritual practices:**

*Mark only one oval.*

- Once a week
- A few times a week
- Daily
- Many times a day

**Please reflect and rate each of these statements: 5 - Agree Strongly, 3 - Neutral, 1 - Disagree Strongly**

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(7 Questions)

**6. I am mindful of the impact my consumption and food choices have upon climate and racial justice.**

*Mark only one oval.*

1      2      3      4      5

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**7. I believe that climate justice is linked to consumption and food choices.**

*Mark only one oval.*

1      2      3      4      5

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**8. I believe that dismantling white supremacy is linked to climate justice:**

*Mark only one oval.*

1      2      3      4      5

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**9. I am mindful of the quality of the lives of those who produce my food:**

*Mark only one oval.*

1      2      3      4      5

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**10. I believe that my food choices are a spiritual practice:**

*Mark only one oval.*

1      2      3      4      5

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**11. Where/how I shop for food reflects my faith.**

*Mark only one oval.*

1      2      3      4      5

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**12. I feel connected to my ancestors through my food and consumption choices.**

*Mark only one oval.*

1      2      3      4      5

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13. What else would you like to share?

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14. You are gifting me with your time, how may I pray for you?

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From our beloved Kin... I \*See\* You! With Gratitude, Rebekah

“  
The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen. Together, our vision widens and strength is renewed.



Mark Morrison-Reed  
more on [Quotes.net](https://www.Quotes.net)

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*“I engage in my spiritual practices”*

27.3% Many times a day 45.5% Daily 18.2% A few times a week 9.1% Once a week

**Please reflect and rate each of these statements: 5 - Agree Strongly, 3 - Neutral, 1 - Disagree Strongly**

*I am mindful of the impact my consumption and food choices have upon climate and racial justice.*

46.2% Agree Strongly 23.1% Agree 23.1% Neutral 7.7% Disagree

*I believe that climate justice is linked to consumption and food choices.*

76.9% Agree Strongly 23.1% Agree

*I believe that dismantling white supremacy is linked to climate justice.*

84.6% Agree Strongly 7.7% Agree 7.7% Neutral

*I am mindful of the quality of the lives of those who produce my food:*

38.5% Agree Strongly 23.1% Agree 30.8% Neutral 7.7% Disagree

*I believe that my food choices are a spiritual practice.*

30.8% Agree Strongly 30.8% Agree 23.1% Neutral 15.4% Disagree Strongly

*Where/how I shop for food reflects my faith.*

15.4% Agree Strongly 30.8% Agree 38.5% Neutral 15.4% Disagree

*I feel connected to my ancestors through my food and consumption choices.*

7.7% Agree Strongly 30.8% Agree 46.2% Neutral 15.4% Disagree

Week 3: Participant Email

Beloveds! This week we are moving to deeper reflection.

Take one day (or portion) to take note and reflect on your consumption habits:

What did you consume? Where did your food/products come from? Who is benefitting from your \$\$ and who is adversely impacted?

Consider this: **every purchase, every bite, every choice is a vote and investment for or against a system that may be causing suffering and/or leveraging white supremacy norms and cultures.**

What spiritual beliefs and UU principles inform your theology?

Where are your spiritual values and daily living practices matching? Where are there opportunities for growth?

Answer any or all of these queries in a way that serves your process. I'll also post in our closed, secret FB group if you'd like to connect with others. (If you'd like to be added, [please email me back your FB name](#). Thanks!)

And BONUS! Check out the attached Food Justice Manifesto & the [Food Empowerment Project](#) for inspiration.

With expansive gratitude for what may arise in your heart this week!

Rebekah

**Rev. Rebekah A. Savage**

Associate Minister

Pronouns: *she/her/hers* [Here's Why](#)

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## Week 4 DMIN Project

(email address is to link your responses - NOT to identify you publicly)

1. **Email address \***

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2. **What is your theology of Suffering? Where is God/the God of your understanding/the sacred in Suffering?**

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3. **Who or what do you remember or call upon in the midst of Suffering?**

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4. **Linking last week's pondering of linking white supremacy culture and consumption choices - where is suffering held?**

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5. **What is NOT yours to carry any longer?**

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6. Are you gifting ME with your time and energy, how may I pray for you?

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**Thank you beloved - may Wisdom and Strength surround you on your path! May we Get Free together!!**

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Good evening Cherished Colleagues!

Thank you for all the ways you have engaged thus far. I have heard from so many of you via email, text and FB about what is coming up in your thoughts and spirits. ALL of it is for the good - our good - our resiliency in the midst of a lot of challenges. Witnessing your journey and honoring where you are.

This week, I ask you to consider a [few questions about Suffering](#). Respond however you are called to - one or all questions, with a few words, sentences or quotes. This is For YOU - so engage in whatever way invites Spirit! Draw a pic, write a poem, sing a song - whatever, I love it and welcome it all!

(Bonus Food for Thought: A powerful post about [Ecofeminism & Ecowomanism](#), "[Decolonizing Myself with Each Bite](#)" and an article about [Native Community's Food Traditions](#))

You are each a treasured blessing to me, thank you. I SEE you... and I am here to be seen.

With heart,  
Rebekah

**Rev. Rebekah A. Savage**

Associate Minister

Pronouns: *she/her/hers* [Here's Why](#)

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The Mission & Vision of UUCR is to *Practice Courageous Love*.

## WEEK 5: Participant Email

Thank you and Thank you for the bountiful gifts of your wisdom and thoughtful, soulful reflections thus far.

AND thank you to those who have named that "it's too much!" for you right now ... and are just participating as you feel moved. **That is ALL Good too.** Spirit moves even with raising and naming questions and curiosities. I am faithful to this always.

So this week... I ask you to [share one insight](#) that has arisen for you since we started. Even if it's small - any insight is powerful. Insight leads to action, which leads to change & collaboration, which leads to liberation, which leads to collective liberation.

AND I would \*LOVE\* to connect with you individually and hear your thoughts. [Here is a link to schedule](#) a 15 minute chat.

With heart,  
Rebekah

### **Rev. Rebekah A. Savage**

Associate Minister

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## WEEK 5: One Insight Survey

### DMIN Week 5

(emails are collected \*only\* to link your responses, NOT to identify you. Thank you!)

1. Email address \*

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2. What insight would you like to share?

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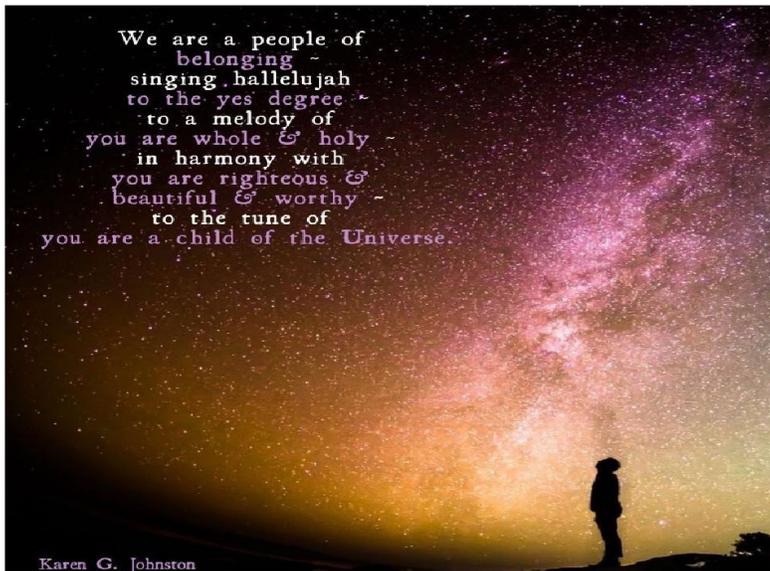
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3. How's your heart Beloved?

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## WEEK 6: Participant Email

Good day beautiful souls!

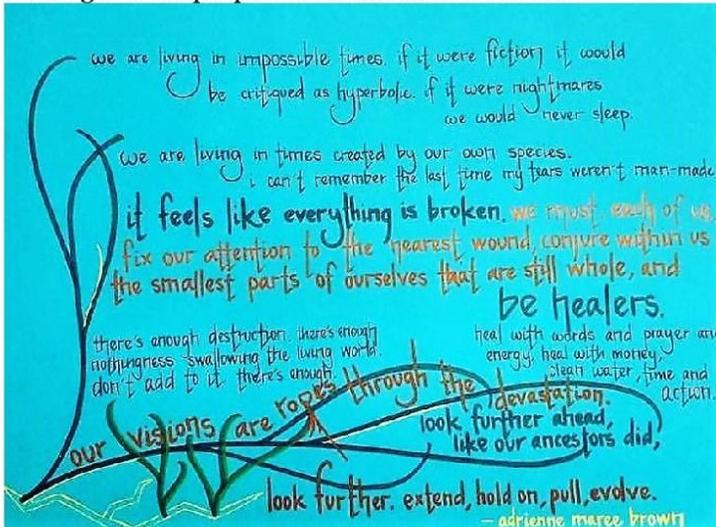
I have thoroughly enjoyed and been blessed by the conversations I have had with many of you. I am honored by your wisdom and honest shares. So I took a wee bit more time to think through this next part.

This will be my last week of sending a project request:

I ask you to survey your experience thus far. Share your thoughts (even just a phrase or two) [HERE](#)

\*I will host a Zoom conversation on **MONDAY 16 December at Noon (EST)**. (Zoom invite to follow). As well as share with you my final project. Feel free to contact me with any questions or additional thoughts AnyTime.

And a gift from prophet adrienne maree brown:



Blessings upon your ministry, your faith journey & bountiful heart. May we Arise Together!

WEEK 6: Participant Survey

**DMIN Week 6ish**

(emails are collected only to link your responses- no identifying information will be shared)

1. **Email address \***

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2. **Where do you feel stronger, more integrated?**

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3. **Where is there energy for more reflection?**

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4. **What is your understanding of the intersection of white supremacy culture & norms, climate justice and racial justice?**

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5. **What does liberation mean to you?**

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6. You have blessed me with your time and journey, how may I pray for you?

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POST-PROJECT SURVEY:

## DMIN Project Survey

This DMIN project is to explore the impact on resilience of reflection and engagement around the intersection of racial justice and environmental justice as a spiritual practice and expression of our UU faith. This project is intended as an invitation to detox from white supremacy culture and colonialism as a spiritual practice; liberating our bodies, spirits and minds. (\*I'm asking for your email to log your confidential responses throughout the project.)

1. **Email address \***

---

2. **How are you doing? How's your heart? Your faith?**

---

3. **I engage my spiritual practices:**

*Mark only one oval.*

- Once a week
- A few times a week
- Daily
- Many times a day

**Please reflect and rate each of these statements: 5 - Agree Strongly, 3 - Neutral, 1 - Disagree Strongly**

---

(7 Questions)

4. **I am mindful of the impact my consumption and food choices have upon climate and racial justice.**

*Mark only one oval.*

1	2	3	4	5
<input type="radio"/>				

5. **I believe that climate justice is linked to consumption and food choices.**

*Mark only one oval.*

1	2	3	4	5
<input type="radio"/>				

6. I believe that dismantling white supremacy is linked to climate justice:

*Mark only one oval.*

1	2	3	4	5
<input type="radio"/>				

7. I am mindful of the quality of the lives of those who produce my food and/or support my way of life:

*Mark only one oval.*

1	2	3	4	5
<input type="radio"/>				

8. I believe that my food and consumption/shopping habits are a spiritual practice:

*Mark only one oval.*

1	2	3	4	5
<input type="radio"/>				

9. Where/how I shop and shop for food reflects my faith.

*Mark only one oval.*

1	2	3	4	5
<input type="radio"/>				

10. I feel connected to my ancestors through my way of life.

*Mark only one oval.*

1	2	3	4	5
<input type="radio"/>				

11. What else would you like to share?

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12. You are gifting me with your time, how may I pray for you?

---

**From our beloved Kin... I \*See\* You! With Gratitude, Rebekah**

“  
The religious community is  
essential, for alone our  
vision is too narrow to see  
all that must be seen.  
Together, our vision widens  
and strength is renewed.

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Mark Morrison-Reed  
[more on Quotes.net](#)

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