

Response to the 2019 Berry Street Essay
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Every time I go to see Alvin Ailey I know that my heart will break open, that I will be called back into my body, and that the truths of my living will be returned to me. This is a priceless gift that my parents gave me. I don't know if it was my love of dance, or their ability to witness how my heart returned to its rightful rhythm in those seats at City Center, but I saw more Alvin Ailey performances as child growing up in New York City than anything else.

This saved my life.

There is a particular disconnect that happens when you are the first generation child of immigrants on both sides of your family. My ancestors certainly knew unspeakable suffering, and there is intergenerational trauma in my family that expresses itself in complicated ways. My parents are Chilean and Panamanian, though some of you know my bloods and lineages are richer and more complex than that. Suffice it to say that U.S. imperialism and ideological violence play a strong role in my understanding of myself.

I offer you this snapshot so that you can know a bit of the worldview that buoys my theoethical sensibilities. You will hear me use that word – theoethical, because I believe that our theologies and our ethics, our beliefs and our values, are intricately intertwined. Contrary to what is often taught in mainline traditions, I do not believe that theology comes first, and ethics second. Yes our beliefs should provide a foundation for our values, and, our values must provide an intentional accountability check for our beliefs. If either strand cannot support the other, we have work that we need to do.

Pause

This past April I found myself sitting with my beloved housemate Shannon in Zellerbach hall in Berkeley. We were there to see Alvin Ailey perform a piece I had never seen before: Lazarus. Lazarus is the final part of a trilogy that honors the life and legacy of Alvin Ailey himself, whose vision and creative genius gave us the first dance company centered on African American culture in the United States. The theater lights went down, the curtain rose, and almost immediately my heart broke *entirely* open. I thought I was ready. I thought a company whose wisdom and witness has pushed me to new understandings for most of my lifetime was a worshipful space with an embodied theology whose movements I already knew. I wasn't ready.

Lazarus begins with choreography that reviewers have described as nightmarish. The company's movements are slow at first, and they remain slow for a long time.

Several reviewers describe the work as arcing not only through Ailey's lifetime but also through a history of black movement and dance, where the early expressions of life and living are laced through with traumatic experiences. Where *they* described nightmares, I saw common themes of living. I saw my community and my people. Generations of brutalization, generations of parents' wailing at the loss of their children to violence, generations of making a way out of no way.

And just as I thought I could not bear any more depictions of pain, just as I was beginning to ask myself why the company and hip-hop choreographer Rennie Harris felt they had the *right* to show us that much pain (more on that in a minute), we got to a moment of dance that flung my soul forward in time to this moment. To Juneteeth. To the Berry Street essay and our beloved colleague's brilliance.

There are a few moments in Lazarus where a single dancer walks across the stage in a spotlight. And all around them and especially in their wake are about fourteen other dancers, lying on the ground rolling. There is no movement in the walking that does not seem to be driven by the rolling of bodies on the ground.

Some of you have heard me say that we have made measurable progress on racial justice in particular in Unitarian Universalism, and that such progress is too often made at the expense of the bodies that we leave in our wake. Leaders, lauded for a time, expected to do the impossible, and left behind as we make incremental progress seemingly one body at a time. I know this is true for more than the just the colleagues of color among us.

I have no idea what Rennie Harris was trying to teach us in this moment because I lost my place in the dance for a while. But when I returned to my heart broken open with grieving determination, resounding with faithfulness of all things, I remembered that I had just been wondering why these prophets in motion felt they had the right to show us so much pain.

Beloveds when I tell you I wasn't ready for Lazarus, it is because Lazarus showed me in a way I couldn't escape how accustomed I have become to sanitizing the reality of pain in this space. And to any of you whom I have harmed by choosing words that I considered "hearable," I am truly sorry.

Pause

And of course this piece was created for Ailey's 60th anniversary and Rennie Harris choreographed Ailey's first ever ballet in *two* acts and so I had to sit through the longest intermission of my life. I didn't even leave my seat. What the company offered in act two was a level of survival, resilience, praise, and resurrection of a people that could barely be contained by the incredibly fast dancing that still contained notes of the movements and dance styles that earlier held such grief. One reviewer described this ballet as being composed of isolated shards that can still be recognized in the exhilarating complexity of the remainder of the piece.

This, to me, is liberation theology.

Pause

Leslie has beautifully offered us a road map to the realities of the work that lies before us as religious leaders in these days. We must delve into the inherited legacies that complicate our relationship with truth. We must become trauma informed as part of everyday *competence* in ministry, to say nothing of excellence. And we must not only offer opportunities for transformation, we must empower others and ourselves with *tools* for transformation, lest the possibilities in our movement be limited by our current imagination.

As Leslie says, “the truth has been smashed to pieces all around us.” Thank God. Some of us likely feel as if we have been scrambling after the shards for a while now. I want to boldly name the religious progressivism that insists that God has ordained us to continually improve upon humanity, as a site of inherited trauma. Please don’t misunderstand me. The idea that it is ours to live a faith-filled life that increases justice and amplifies mercy is a beautiful catalyst to some of our best service in the world. But taken to extremes, taken to the place that only one truth can prevail, only one culture can define moral correctness, only one people can be ordained to be in control... here is where the true nightmare of domination, oppression, and systemic violence thrives.

I know we wrestle with seeing ourselves in the long cultural history that creates what environmental philosopher Val Plumwood defines as a master narrative of domination. Every false binary that pits one identity over another, is an historic site of violence through the working of domination. I think it is truly fair to say that Unitarian Universalists in the present day *recoil* from domination itself. And this reality makes it hard for us to see ourselves in the inherited legacies of white supremacy and institutionalized violence that impact so very many of our lives. The problem for me, is that we *are* deeply invested in a master narrative of control.

It matters a lot to us who gets to define our priorities, how we should be with one another, where authority lies in our movement, and how to best utilize our resources to say nothing of leadership opportunities, access to information, who gets to tell their truth, and whether or not that truth is ever shared with the broader community. Control and Domination are siblings on the White Supremacy family tree and we do not get to absolve ourselves of responsibility by silencing those among us who would do the sacrificial emotional labor of reflecting back to us the impact of systematic harm.

The dominant social location can no longer be a placeholder for what we believe.

Beloveds, you have the right to express your pain. And you have the right to journey faithfully with that pain to a place of transformation without anyone consuming your story for their own benefit.

Every religious leader in this room has a professional obligation to empower our community to do the work of transformation. This means we must shake the last remnants of dust from our feet and leave our fear of theology and our fear of faith formation behind for good. There is a reason why people seek religious community to live lives that more closely reflect their values in the world. If we were all good at it, we wouldn't need to support one another through it. The irony is that most of us are really practiced at recognizing a master narrative of control when it comes in theological form. Maybe that ability can center us in a practice of embracing multiple truths without undermining how we make meaning together.

Ada María Isasi-Díaz, whom we were blessed to have on our board at Starr King before she died, was a Catholic theologian who gifted us with her work on Mujerista theology. This labor, drawn in relationship with womanist theologians yet centered on Latinidad, is explicit in its insistence on multiple truths. Her feminist response to a deeply creedal tradition still models for us what it means to put the lived experiences of those who offer the wisdom of a survival faith at the center of the theological task. Isasi-Díaz wrote about *el proyecto histórico*, which in her words means the “hopes and expectations of Hispanic women as grounded in reality and aimed at historical fruition.”¹ Essentially her work centered the lived experiences of women whom she called grassroots theologians to shape a vision of a collective future of wholeness, faith, and justice for all. This is just one example of the kind of liberation theology that we should be engaging as we work to understand the “power of we.”

I invite us to re-engage our theoethics, to revitalize this tradition that we love, by exchanging our obsession with control for faith in a collective future. Then, like Lazarus, we might rise again and continue the sacred work.

Thank you.

¹ Ada María Isasi-Díaz, “Defining Our ‘Proyecto Histórico’: ‘Mujerista’ Strategies for Liberation,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* Vol. 9, No. 1/2 (Spring - Fall, 1993), pp. 17-28, 17.