

# Since You Cannot Find It, Create It<sup>1</sup>: Beloved Community Organizing

Beth G. Raps, Ph.D., Independent Scholar



## INTRODUCTION

I often feel I have to be able to see a future to think it possible. But very often, I have been granted a future I could not have imagined. All I could see was "I want that." And the desire itself would pull me. *Yes. I will follow where it leads.* I will know signposts along the way but often ahead will be in darkness. (Excerpt from my Working Racially, Claiming Grandeur project journal, 9/4/14)

I use philosophy "generatively":

- of inspiration to keep sojourning;
- of prickly obstacles to bad ideas;
- and "to attend to those forces or fault lines within the present that, developed or prised open in particular ways, might induce [a] condition to surpass itself into a future."<sup>2</sup>

## PART I: Inspiration (7 minutes; 5 minutes for discussion = 12 minutes)

What does it even mean to use philosophy "generatively"? Is that like Chomskyan

linguistics? Fortunately, no.

But I like this term "generative" philosophy. It's useful. Generativity itself means (to me) that we know we are deliberately create something that is *useful*. Philosophy itself is always generative. For example, I am not a fan of analytic philosophy, but it too creates. I happen not to be inspired to use what it creates or in fact to find what it creates very useful outside a narrow range of applications. But I am interested in peace, and I use philosophy to create conditions for peace.

To philosophers who work in English, it may sound strange to use philosophy in such a way--to use it deliberately to create *anything*. I learned this purpose for philosophy from my mentor, the Belgian philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers. And her way of using it, her vision, inspired me to think of philosophy this way because she's an irenist. I'm an irenist; I use philosophy to create peace. Specifically, I use it to construct robust conditions for peace, robust meaning that will survive in a very wide range of applications, well outside the "lab" as I might metaphorize her ecology of practices and her other works on science concepts and practices. I work as she does, from the assumption that philosophy should not simply include the question; it should also specify a moment, an occasion, circumstances, landscapes, and people in them, the conditions and unknowns of the question.<sup>3</sup>

I'm specifically interested in creating the conditions for what I see as both an outcome and a mode of peacemaking I call the Beloved Community. This is definitely completely in synch with Dr. King's "Beloved Community," whose creation he explicitly equated with reconciliation, redemption, nonviolence, and "a truly brotherly society." "It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of men." His vision is that "when the battle's over, a new relationship comes into being between the oppressed and the oppressor."<sup>4</sup>

This means that if we use philosophy "generatively" of inspiration to organize the Beloved Community, we can go to King's inspiration, Josiah Royce, who is referenced as the creator of the concept on the King Center's website, where I got those quotes, making them about as mainstream and vetted a definition as we can get of King's Beloved

Community.

Dr. King's Beloved Community sounds especially promising, especially good--especially beloved. But besides being a philosopher, I'm a community organizer, so I ask: how does it work? How do we get there?

I find that Dr. King mostly answers *with his life*. He answers me with visions redemptive of the ills organizers battle daily with "actions," campaigns, and annual plans as well as long-term engaged struggles over decades like Gandhi's, like the US civil rights movement. King gives organizers of Beloved Community an *inspirational* model. Few of us can or could use it generatively. If we cannot be King, Royce's Beloved Community is *generative*. Using *The Problem of Christianity* generatively inspires us to organize a Beloved Community that is

- enfleshed rather than saintly or martyred
- torn apart by betrayal yet rebuilt stronger by Roycean "atonement"--so important it takes the third part of this paper
- self-sustaining and self-inspiring, rather than extrinsically inspired and exhausting.

Royce helps a Beloved Community organizer answer "How does it work?" with some very brass-tacks advice. His advice may have been missed because its Christianity is both mystical and applied. But **love works**. The mystical-sounding "miracles in the hearts of men" King says love works to build the Beloved Community are described by Royce in sufficient detail for builders of Beloved Community to apply them--brilliantly, perceptively, creatively, and exactly.

We'll go on in the next Part to how Royce provides prickly obstacles to bad faith and then in Part III how Royce's "atonement" gives us "fault lines to prise into a future" but first, for five minutes: questions and discussion about what I've proposed so far..

**BREAK til 12 minutes after we began.**

**PART II: Obstacles to Bad Faith** (3 minutes; 5 minutes for discussion = 8 minutes)

What does it mean to use philosophy "generatively" of prickly obstacles to bad ideas? In building the Beloved Community, let's look first at what counts as a "bad idea," and how *The Problem of Christianity* builds in obstacles to them.

The most obvious candidate for a bad idea in Royce's Beloved Community is what Royce calls "betrayal." In King's Beloved Community, love works the miracle of "a new relationship [that] comes into being between the oppressed and the oppressor." Integrating Royce and King, as I think we must if we are serious about organizing the Beloved Community in post-King America, betrayal = oppression.

"Betrayal" in Royce without reference to King can be read as dissing your buddy in the gentleman's club. But love works its miracles *through us*. If we read *The Problem of Christianity* as organizers of the Beloved Community, we apply what we may have seen before as high-minded mysticism that only a Jesus or a King could fulfill. But the Kingdom of God--the Beloved Community--is within us. Royce was trying to find answers to problems, and he finds right within the baddest idea of betrayal the perfect prickly obstacle.

Notice that Royce pretty much *assumes* betrayal. He doesn't spend nearly so much time describing it as he does the community itself, and loyalty. This is surely because of the facts of his own life, but it is also the fruit of reflection on experience: betrayal happens.

Leaving betrayal to our experience of it naturalistically is one way Royce builds in a prickly obstacle to a bad idea: he doesn't give us enough rope to hang ourselves defining betrayal. He knows we know what it feels like.

Second, Royce is mostly too polite to equate us (his readers) with his betrayers, but the gap here also speaks loudly: just as he assumes we know what betrayal feels like, he might well assume we know what *betraying* feels like. We are both betrayers and healers of Beloved Community. We suffer--and we are those who are suffered. We seek that new relationship King holds out to us as both oppressor and oppressed. Being oppressed is not what tears the Beloved Community apart. Oppression is what tears loyalty apart.

It becomes much more active and creative to read betrayal as something we atone for as well as something *we ourselves do*. When we understand betrayal in this way, we are getting close to home, and that is where I mean this paper to take us.

Racism offers multiple, constant betrayals. *As Beloved Community organizers, we can choose to experience the fullness of whom and what racism betrays.* Betrayal comes from within. It hurts within. It tears us apart from within. We heal racism through atonement *from within* for betrayals *from within* the Beloved Community.

**BREAK til 20 minutes after we began.**

### **PART III: Fault Lines to Prise Open** (10 minutes)

Philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers' *Cosmopolitiques* responded in the 1990s to the science wars with an irenist "ecology of practices" eschewing cross-disciplinary comparisons that inevitably disqualify some on magisterial grounds that favor others, constructing a more peaceful way of relating across the academy emphasizing each community's knowledge-making practices and own "demands imposed on questions, and obligations which correspond to them."<sup>5</sup> Stengers calls these a community's "internal stakes" which become its "vectors of invention and not sources of self-limitation."<sup>6</sup>

For Royce, the Beloved Community's "vectors of invention" also lie within. He lays out the situation unequivocally:

The community cannot undo the traitor's deed....Penalty, even if called for, annuls nothing....Repentance does not turn backwards the flow of time....human confidence in the traitor's good intentions regarding..future deeds, is not true reconciliation. Forgiveness does not wash out a word of the record....The love of the...community...for the...traitor...is a love that has forever lost...its treasure; its once faithful member who, until his deed of treason came, had been wholly its own member. And it has lost the ties and the union which he destroyed by his deed. Who shall give to it its own again?<sup>7</sup>

Notice: this is a snapshot, a still photograph in the movie of the universal Beloved Community. We are all of us traitors, over and over. We are all of us community members, betrayed over and over. The ubiquity of betrayal and the ubiquity of membership are the movie. Royce slows the movie down long enough to allow us to observe closely one frame that answers his question: "Who shall give to it its own again?"

Notice his question. His question is *not* how shall the community's betrayal be made right. There is no scapegoat in this picture. His question is not how shall we receive our due when we have been betrayed. There are, arguably, no justice, no recompense and no reparations in this vision. The absence of a scapegoat and of reparations and certainly of justice are each hard to take for different ones of us.

Royce's question is *how can we be reunited with our betrayer?*

This is a pretty outrageous question. But its outrageousness is what provides such an outrageously creative, fertile, promising answer that gives us “not simply...the question; [but]...a moment, an occasion, circumstances, landscapes, and people in them, the conditions and unknowns of the question.”

Let's slow the movie down even more. Let's look at those “landscapes, and people in them, the conditions and unknowns of the question.” What kind of people, when betrayed, burn most to know how to be reconciled with their betrayer? What kind of people most mourn “the ties and the union destroyed by the deed” more than the deed? Can we recognize ourselves?

What landscape is this? Do we recognize it? Restorative justice looks like this. Prison abolition looks like this. Truth and reconciliation commissions look like this. Despair and empowerment work looks like this. Nuclear guardianship looks like this. Apology from and to governments, veterans, and civilian populations torn by war look something like this.

The primary feature of this landscape is *where* the treasure is buried: in the community's “once faithful member who, until his deed of treason came, had been wholly its own member.” Royce also shows us where “the vectors of invention” are to find the treasure. They lie within the community itself:

The community...can...*find* no reconciliation. But can it *create* one? At the worst, it is the traitor, and it is not the community, that has done this deed. *New deeds remain to be done [emphasis mine].*<sup>8</sup>

Royce says this happens every day: betrayal is “daily faced...by the noblest of mankind” and “daily solved.” It's not some impossible thing, he makes clear: “[g]reat calamities are...great opportunities.”<sup>9</sup>

Royce gives us the treasure map. He spells out “the conditions...of the question”:  
First, this creative work shall include a deed, or various deeds, for which only just this treason furnishes the opportunities...the new deed...is so ingeniously devised, so concretely practical in the good which it accomplishes, that, when you look down upon the human world after the new creative deed has been done in it, you say, first, “This deed was made possible by that treason; and secondly, *The world, as transformed by this creative deed, is better than it would have been had all else remained the same, but had that deed of treason not been done at all.*”<sup>10</sup>

Royce's metaphors show him calling us to something quite as noble as it is ordinary: suggesting we “look down upon the human world” and, in the next passage, giving us the image of “the suffering servant, on behalf of his community, [who] breaks open, as it were the tomb of the dead and treacherous past, and comes forth as the life and the expression of the creative and reconciling will.”<sup>11</sup>

Stakes we accept as worthy can never imposed from without. They must be taken on by those who see themselves as stakeholders. We can take words, acts, and structures of racism as fault lines to prise open to strengthen the Beloved Community. We don't have to wait for someone else to atone for their racism. In fact, for Royce, it's not the betrayer who *can* atone for the betrayal. It's those who are “not stained” by it.

And we don't have to worry that our atonement is too small to be significant. The map doesn't specify parity but creativity, ingenuity, practicality, and a unique “condition and unknown of the question: the act is only atonement if it was *made possible* by the betrayal.

Not only the betrayer is stained by betrayal: insofar as our suffering stains us, we are incapable of atonement. But one of the secrets of satyagraha and Kingian nonviolence is the magic acts they perform on the sufferer: they are stain-removers. This is also true of former victims' movements when they become survivors' and then wounded healers' movements. When we no longer identify ourselves first and foremost with our wounding we are freed to identify with our nobility. As we have seen civil rights movement participants demonstrate, *the betrayed can be the ones who atone for the betrayal*--however paradoxical this sounds. Sufferers of violence can and do become powerful instruments of

atonement reweaving the community fabric.

Royce offers us betrayal as "a source whence a spring of good flows."<sup>12</sup> The least we can do is take him up on it.

### References

1. Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968 [1918]), 200, lightly paraphrased.
2. Terry Eagleton, "Nationalism: Irony and Commitment," in *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature*, by Terry Eagleton, Fredric Jameson and Edward W. Said (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 25.
3. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce Que la Philosophie?* [what is philosophy?] (Paris: Eds. de Minuit, 1991), 8. Found in Stengers, *La Guerre des Sciences* [war among the sciences], *Cosmopolitiques*, v. I (Paris: Eds. La Decouverte), 132. Translation mine.
4. "The King Philosophy: The Beloved Community," The King Center, accessed 5/22/14, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy#sub4>.
5. Isabelle Stengers, *La Guerre des Sciences*, vol. 1 of *Cosmopolitiques* (Paris: Editions La Decouverte, 1996), 8. Translation mine.
6. Isabelle Stengers, *L'Invention des Sciences Modernes* (Paris: Flammarion, [1993] 1995), 148. Translation mine.
7. Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity*, 178.
8. Royce, loc. cit.
9. Royce, op. cit., 179.
10. Royce, op. cit., 180.
11. Royce, loc. cit., 205.

**Photo credit:** Joy Jinks, Beloved Community organizer, of her own back yard in Colquitt, Georgia. Used with permission.