“Whatever Happened to Greenwood?”
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of South County
February 8, 2025
Rev. Denis Paul and Lee Cowan

Blurb

In its heyday, the Greenwood Neighborhood of Tulsa, Oklahoma was called “Black Wall Street,” an exemplar of what a thriving community could be. But that all changed. And today, something different is rising.

Script

Chiming the Bowl Rev Denis

Welcome and Announcements Rev Denis
Welcome to the worship service of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of South County. I am Rev Denis Paul and I have the honor of serving this congregation as minister.

Funny isn’t it? The last few years winters have been mild — practically without any snow at all. We seem to have forgotten that storms like this can force us to change plans.

For this morning we had planned to again kick off our sidekicks program, in which we’ll pair you up with someone to connect with. All the children and youth were coming to be involved. It was a cast of thousands.

It would be a shame to cancel that service, so we are rescheduling it for March 2, and bringing to you this morning another service appropriate for this month, Black History Month, when our theme is inclusion.

[Pause. Breathe a second]

Whether you’re one of the few folks here with us here in the sanctuary, or you’re joining us via Zoom, thank you for being in this congregation of

like-hearted individuals, dedicated to welcoming, loving, growing spiritually, and seeking justice.

Together, we celebrate joys and sit in sadness in our fullness of being. However you express your values, your identity and your affections, you are welcome to journey with us.

I'd like to invite this morning's congregational greeters to rise so that everyone can see who you are.

Do we have any newcomers in the sanctuary this morning?
[If there are newcomers]

Please fill out the yellow Welcome Card in your hymnal, and put it in the collection basket during the offering. Or, you may want to give it to one of these wonderful greeters before you leave. They can answer any questions you have.

If you're so inclined, feel free to introduce yourself during the part of the service we call Joys and Concerns.

Newcomers on Zoom, I'd like to invite you to introduce yourself to other participants, especially our fabulous virtual usher, Adria Evans.

Opening Song Lee

Opening Words Rev. Denis Paul
Now that you have been welcomed into this space where your presence is valued, I would like to call you to WORSHIP.

Worship.

That's a big, kind of scary word, isn't it? Especially for those of us who grew up in religions whose doctrines left us feeling like we didn't belong. Or worse, like we didn't matter.

In Unitarian Universalism, we have a more ancient, and more inclusive meaning for the word. You see, "worship" comes from the Old English word "*weorþscipe*" which means "worthy ship," paying homage to that which is worth paying homage to!

For us, that is life, love, community, and the force of creation and destruction in the universe, the marriage between the earth and the sun which brings forth all life.

Chalice Lighting Lee

And so we gather this morning, in this small group spread out all over, to honor it all. The Great All.

_____, would you light a flame in our chalice, as a symbol of our passion for justice protected and nurtured by our commitment?

We light this chalice with the hope that we may find a container
for all of who we are.
A holy chalice
able to hold our courage and our fear,
our gifts and our flaws,
our joy as well as our pain.
May we glimpse again what it means to be whole.
May we find that peace of knowing that no part of us needs to hide.

Reciting the Covenant Together Rev Denis
Love is the spirit of this congregation, and service is its prayer.
This is our great covenant:
To dwell together in peace

To seek the truth in love
And to help one another.

[Move Camera]

Joys and Concerns Lee
Let's take some time now to snuggle down, wherever we are, and and really play attention to our physical beings, present during this storm that has kept most of us apart.

I'd like to invite you to just settle in wherever you are. get comfortable.

Imagine the blood coursing through your body. Reaching every extremity. Your fingers, your toes. You could see it as the whole body, especially the circulatory system, working as one well-balanced, efficient machine. Or you could look at as a community of cells working together to create something vibrant and healthy. You.
And you could see yourself as separate from everyone else with your own systems...
But every cell in your body, every molecule, was forged in the furnace of the sun, a result of the Big Bang that created all life.
You share DNA with gorillas, slugs and bananas.
Your blood is one of only four different types of blood — 8 if you want to count the neg and pos of each.
You are connected.

And we all are reminded of our connections each Sunday, when we gather in person and online, and share our joys and concerns.

Folks in the sanctuary, please come up and share your joys and concerns. Please start with your name and end by placing a stone into the bowl of water on our altar ot the elements. At home you can share through the chat function, which I will read aloud. And everyone, please honor the

sacredness of theirs time by refraining from announcements, speaking for yourself only, and keeping it brief.

[Everyone shares. Read chat.]

In the week ending Friday, there were 5 mass showings in the United States, resulting in 17 injuries and 6 deaths:
Molly Cassidy, 28
Ivan Dian Jr, 32
Kyle Vader, 38
Shekhar Chapagai, 30
and two adult males whose names have not been made public.

We remember the 10 people killed in the Alaska plane crash yesterday, the second plane crash in the United States since January 20.

May all who grieve these and other tragedies be blessed by the comfort of community. may our faith in humanity give us all the strength to continue.

This final stone is for all the joys and concerns that remain in the quiet places of our hearts and minds.

Prayer Rev Denis
This is a prayer from Rilke's Book of Hours (I,i)

The hour is striking so close above me,
So clear and sharp,
That all my senses ring with it.
I feel power now: there's power in me
To grasp and give shape to the world.

I know that nothing has ever been real
Without my beholding it.
All becoming has needed me.
My looking ripens things

And they come toward me, to meet and be met.

[Move Camera]

Offering Rev Denis
Our house is old. It was built just after the civil war, and stayed in the same family until 20 years ago, always home to multiple generations. Although a lot of it has been updated, the insulation in the walls is a little patchy. My mother-in-law, Michelle, lives with us and is always freezing, especially on days like today. I tell her, “the Gowards lived here for 130 years. We can survive, too.”

Recently, Michelle met the last Goward to grow up in our house, and asked her “how did your parents and grandparents tolerate winters in that house?”

”Every winter,” she said, “for five months they went to Florida.”

The thing is, somebody stayed behind. Somebody stuck around and kept the household going, kept it from freezing and falling apart. The way here, as so many of us go away for parts of the winter, the rest of us keep services going online and in the sanctuary. We keep our doors and our hearts open for each other and for anyone who needs the warmth, space, human companionship and sometimes life-saving message we offer.

Your donation keeps us engaged in our mission. No matter how cold and snowy winters get.

Song Lee

Gratitude Rev Denis
For everything that you do, and all the ways in which you give, thank you.
Thank you for trusting us to use your resources wisely.

Reading Lee

This morning's reading is from *Tulsa 1921,* by Randy Krehbiel

MAY 30, 1921

The parade went on despite the rain.

It formed up just before 9: 00 A.M., even as dark, low clouds moved in from the west. The day's forecast was for heavy showers, and, sure enough, Tulsa would get them. But it was Memorial Day, and Tulsa would have a parade and a damn big one come hell or high water. This was a city that bought $ 33 million worth of war bonds, sent thousands of young men into military service, and prided itself on not just its patriotism but its Americanism. It even observed an Americanism Day. And when the 1920 U.S. census concluded that Oklahoma had the nation's highest percentage of native-born citizens, Tulsa celebrated that, too. "Oklahoma comes nearest to being a pure American state of any in the union," editorialized the Tulsa World. "We are tremendously proud of that classification."

During the war, Tulsa had demonstrated its vigilance against foreigners, slackers, and reds, the more zealous going so far as to mete out beatings and hot tar to the local membership of the Industrial Workers of the World. Others deemed insufficiently loyal to the cause were "made to see the light." A few were packed off to "insane asylums." Now, two and a half years after the war's end, the fervor had scarcely waned. Despite the threat of rain, Tulsans lined downtown streets as motorcycle cops roared up Cincinnati Avenue from Fifth Street to Seventh, then west to Main and north through the heart of downtown. A seventy-piece band drawn from the local musicians' union followed.

And then came the veterans, scores of them, from the Grand Army of the Republic and the Confederacy through the recent war to end all wars—walking or conveyed by various means through the fat raindrops splattering down on the town that called itself the Magic City. Written accounts are silent on whether Tulsa's black veterans, and there were

many of them, were included in the procession, but it does not seem likely. Quite a few white Tulsans thought putting black Americans in uniform had been a mistake in the first place; soon, they would consider their opinions grimly vindicated.

Sermon “Whatever Happened to Greenwood?” Rev. Denis Letourneau Paul

“Vibrant” has to be one of the most overused words in the English language these days.

We talk about vibrancy all the time among folks who lead congregations as ministers or laypeople. For a while there, ”buzz” was the favorite word. That makes sense when you consider that both Buzz and Vibrant are literally about vibration, a kind of energy that spreads, even if it is barely perceptible.

It’s a sense of excitement, characterized by a desire to bask in that energy.

In Urban planning, neighborhoods are called vibrant when they are destinations, places that have the kind of center that is dense. Vibrant neighborhoods have shops and restaurants that people want to patronize, and do. Barber shops, salons, galleries, and restaurants where people hang out together interacting. Seeing and being seen. Vibrant neighborhoods have stores that people need for their everyday lives.

In a really vibrant neighborhood, you can get breakfast with a friend, hit the post office and the bank, get your hair done while you share all the latest news, meet another friend for coffee, and take in a movie afterward, before visiting the butcher for dinner’s main course. All without ever getting in your car.

These days, that kind of neighborhood is kind of a rarity. Such a rarity that there’s been a system devised to score the vibrancy of a neighborhood.

It's called a Walk Score, and the rating is determined by the amount of things you can get done without ever having to get in motor vehicle. Brooklyn NY scores a 98. Peace Dale scores a 68. The town where I live scores 8. It's grim. You have to drive everywhere. Nobody knows anyone anymore.

The thing is that back in the early part of the 20th century, before the car changed everything, most neighborhoods and towns were vibrant. They lived in close proximity to one another on small lots, with all the amenities nearby. They lived alongside the people they worked and prayed and played with, including the people who owned the shops and the services and the businesses.

And every City in the United States was segregated. Even in the North. There were not just black neighborhoods and white neighborhoods, there were Polish neighborhoods and German neighborhoods and even French neighborhoods. In Hartford CT, where I was born in 1966, we lived in Frog Hollow. (For those who don't know, "frog" is a derisive word for French speaking people.)

Every neighborhood, for the most part, was a reflection of the social and economic status of the residents.

You could see wealth in the storefronts. Places like Park Avenue in New York City or Bellevue Avenue in Newport let you know who lived there, and the resources they had. And in just about every city, the black neighborhoods were modest. Usually in the very modest to rundown range. There just wasn't a lot of wealth there for folks who relied on employment outside of their neighborhoods.

Those neighborhoods were functional. There was energy because people lived there and relied on the businesses because they had no other choices. Not necessarily because they wanted "to be a part of it," so to speak.

But Tulsa Oklahoma was as serrated as every other city in the nation, but in one way it was exceptional. The thing that set it apart was its black neighborhood, Greenwood.

Greenwood was teeming with businesses, restaurants, merchants, brokers, bankers, salons, galleries, all black-owned and operated, and all the kinds of enterprises that still create vibrancy in neighborhoods.

And it was vibrant. Photographs of the place show how alive it was, and reveal the economic diversity of the people there. People who were proud to live there, and participate in a self-sustaining and mutually beneficial local economy. I'm sure it would have gotten a walk score of 98, if that kind of thing existed back then.

Until May 30, 1921. Memorial Day. The day of the Parade in the reading we just shared.

Dick Rowland was, in the parlance of the day, a "delivery boy," a legal adult, though a young one. He lived with his family in Greenwood, and had a good job that took him all over the city.

Sarah Page, meanwhile, was a white 17 year old elevator operator in an office building in downtown Tulsa.

Something happened in an elevator that afternoon. I've read several different accounts. Some say the two were dating and met up there for a tryst and were discovered unexpectedly in the building they thought would be empty. Others say it was an innocent contact, that he accidentally brushed up against her to the horror of another rider of the elevator.

The story is inconsistent.

What is consistent in the story is that the next morning he was arrested, and the newspapers immediately started calling him "Diamond Dick,"

implying that he was too slick to be trustworthy. And she was portrayed as an innocent girl, an orphan working her way through business college.

The newspaper coverage started that afternoon. The late edition of the Tulsa Tribune came out at 3pm. Above the fold of the front page was the headline: “Nab Negro for Attacked Girl in Elevator.”

Even though the article wasn’t nearly as incendiary as you’d think, the headline did a lot of damage. It wasn’t just a statement, it was a directive. The message was:

This smarmy “boy” attacked this innocent girl, and if you want to do her justice, and protect all white women everywhere, it’s your duty to “nab a negro.”

Everyone knew what that meant: Take out a Black man. Any Black man.

There are some accounts that elsewhere in the paper that afternoon there was an editorial that made the directive more explicit, but nobody knows for sure. No copies exist.

What we do know is that by 4 pm, authorities were on alert that a lynch mob was forming, and by sunset, hundreds of angry men with guns and torches were gathered in front of the courthouse.

Dr. Karlos K. Hill, chair of the department of African and African-American Studies at the University of Oklahoma wrote in the Preface of Tulsa 1921

The Tulsa Massacre is the deadliest outbreak of white terrorist violence against a black community in American history. ... Some black Tulsans fled for safety while others banded together to defend their lives and property. In the end, black resistance was futile. The white mob looted and then set ablaze practically every home and business in the Greenwood District. All told, in less than twenty-four hours, the thirty-five square blocks that constituted the Greenwood District—more than one dozen churches, five

hotels, thirty-one restaurants, four drug stores, eight doctors' offices, two dozen grocery stores, a public library, and more than one thousand homes—lay in ruin.

The scale of destruction and loss of life unleashed upon Tulsa's black community was unprecedented in American history; however, it is important to note that the Tulsa Massacre was not an exceptional event. Over the course of American history, more than 250 episodes of collective white violence against black communities have occurred. Just two years prior to the Tulsa Massacre, similar large-scale outbreaks of white terrorist violence against black communities occurred in Dewey, Oklahoma, Elaine, Arkansas, Washington, D.C., and Chicago, Illinois.

Walter Francis White was on the staff of the NAACP, and later went on to be the organization's executive secretary. At the time, he estimated that 150-200 Black folks died, and 50 white. Though authorities reported only 36 deaths: 26 black and 10 white

For generations, people would pass a particular area just outside of the city and whisper things like "that's where they are buried." But it was rarely spoken about.

The whole thing was too scary, and a repeat of the event seemed too likely. History, we all know, is written by the victors, so it shouldn't surprise anyone to learn that the massacre was barely mentioned in textbooks, warranting little more than an occasional sentence.

In 1996, a bipartisan group of Oklahoma legislators authorized the formation of the state's commission to study what was then called the "Tulsa Race Riot of 1921," leading to new research and investigations.

As a result, among other findings, new DNA evidence of the soil of the area rumored for nearly a hundred years to be a mass grave ... are proving to be true. The new death toll is estimated to be more than 300.

In 1999, journalist Randy Krehbiel was assigned by the Tulsa World to cover the work of the commission. His job was to research and compile an archive for his use and for the use of the newspaper. What he found was that no records were kept, at least not systematically. (I should point out Krehbiel acknowledges that it wasn't odd that records were destroyed. It wasn't until the 1940's that it became *de rigeur* for publications to archive all of its content for future reference.)

The Commission began a new conversation about the massacre. People were willing to talk, to share the stories of their own experiences, or more likely, because so much time had passed, the stories that were handed down through generations. And those stories were handed down quietly. They had to be.

Everyone was terrified that if they talked about it openly, if they exposed the ugly truth behind the disappearance of the most vibrant black community in the nation, there would be repercussions. If they ever doubted their own fears all they had to do was look to what happened in Dewey, Elaine, Washington and Chicago for a reminder.

Greenwood is a great example of how entire communities can suffer from a collective form of post traumatic stress disorder. Their individual hurts and fears reinforce each other, and even inform how their children and their children's children view not only the traumatic event, but also their entire world view.

There's also a UU connection to the Greenwood Massacre. The Tribune, the newspaper that directed white residents to "nab a negro," was founded and owned by Richard Lloyd Jones, and a silent partner in the endeavor was his father, Jenkin Lloyd Jones, the director of the Western Unitarian Conference. Architect Frank Lloyd Wright was Jenkin's nephew and Richard's cousin. Frank and Richard grew up together.

There's speculation that the inflammatory editorial was written by Richard Lloyd Jones himself. And Richard was not only a member of All Souls

Unitarian church in Tulsa, he was also one of the founding financiers of it, which makes sense considering it was the job of his father to plant new churches all through the westward expansion of the late 19th century, many of them served by Universalist women ministers.

It's a shocking and embarrassing bit of Unitarian Universalist History, isn't it? That one of our most prominent members may have incited what is probably the most devastating race riot in American History.

In 1921 The World, the other newspaper in Tulsa, was the bitter enemy of the Tribune. Each paper wanted the other gone, and so the World jumped at the opportunity, daily, to blame the riot and massacre on the Tribune. Solely. The narrative of blame continued even after the two papers merged production in 1949, and didn't really end until the Tribune finally closed in 1992.

According to Krehbiel, the reporting was atrocious, inaccurate, and unapologetically biased. On both sides. Terrible reporting. Fake news and disinformation in the service of the wealthy holders of power.

Sounds like today.

You know, in times like these, the kinds of times that create fear and trauma that can last decades, it actually serves us all better to not just tear down every opinion that challenges our pre-existing worldview. We all owe it to each other to ask questions.
Who is served by this reportage? Who benefits? Who loses?
Whose voice is left out?

What was happening in this place I've never been to before?
What were the social dynamics at play? Who had power? How did they get it? Who didn't have power? And who benefited from restricting their power?
And how will this all be viewed by future generations?

Are we — am I — behaving in a way that I can be proud of when I speak about those who come after me?
And what responsibility do we — and I — have to right the wrongs?

Two people who were constantly asking themselves those questions are Rev. Marlin Lavanhar and Bishop Carlton Pearson. Both were ministers at All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa. The same church that was founded by Richard Lloyd Jones. The same church that is today by far the single largest congregation in our entire national association of congregations.

Bishop Pearson, who is black, was the very charismatic minister of an enormous intentionally multiracial Pentecostal church in Tulsa, whose mission was to be a force of healing in a segregated community. But then he had a personal conversion to Universalism. And started talking about it from the pulpit, at first as a kind of personal spiritual reflection about the nature of salvation, then more emphatically as a theological statement of conscience.

His message was so distasteful that most of the congregants just left. the seats were practically empty. Rev. Pearson couldn't pay the bills. After he lost his congregation and his livelihood, his Pentecostal peers declared him a heretic of the faith. He was destitute.

That's when Rev. Lavanhar reached out to him.

All Souls was already a big church. After all, it's in one of those places with lots of financial resources and a strong public expectation that everyone goes to church. No exceptions. It's one of only two theologically liberal churches in the entire region.

Rev. invited Bishop Pearson to come to All Souls, to use the space for worship in his own community, so they would have a chance to feel safe, to regroup and possibly grow again.

It turned into something pretty amazing. They aren't two separate churches anymore. They are one, served by no fewer than four ministers, worshiping in different styles with a diversity of theologies and practices that make them stronger. engagementLavanhar is deeper. Commitments are greater. More needs are being met, more lives saved. There's more vibrancy. More Buzz.

They are constantly asking the tough questions about power and history and responsibility. Telling the stories of the place that must not be forgotten.

It's never easy, especially because especially early on, some people want to paint Rev. Lavanhar and the mostly white UUs as saviors — which is just hurtful and wrong. Rev Pearson died of cancer in 2023. There have been disagreements along the way, *and* they are still doing the work of racial healing in a way that very, very few communities are doing anywhere in the world.

The work of All Souls in Tulsa is a reminder that we didn't live the history. We may not have been there when people were killed or otherwise oppressed, but we have a responsibility to question how those events shape who we are now, and the advantages we benefit from, so that we can change things for the better.

I always try to imagine what it's like for people who live in places like Greenwood. Or Detroit. Or South Providence. Places that were destroyed by attacks from outside or uprising within. Every day, residents live with the physical reminders of a brutal and oppressive history. It may not be manifest in quiet tales confirmed by DNA tests of soil, but it likely is evident in the blocks of vacant lots in formerly bustling shopping districts.

That's the legacy of a history I had no part in. But it's also a legacy that affects me deeply. A legacy I have a responsibility to heal.

I try to always be mindful of this complex history of oppression. Especially during Black History Month. It makes me want to act better. To do more. In

community. Next Sunday, I'll be sharing a bit about the history of a local congregation, a neighbor of ours, uncovered while they did some research with school children, and what we can do to help learn more.

I hope you'll join us.

Reading in Two voices

Lee: For remaining silent when a single voice would have made a difference...
Rev Denis: We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.

For each time that our fears have made us rigid and inaccessible...
We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.

For each time we have struck out in anger without just cause...
We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.

For each time our greed had blinded us to the needs of others...
We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.

For the selfishness that sets us apart and alone...
We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.

For falling short of the admonition of the spirit...
We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.

For losing sight of our unity...
We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.

For those and for so many acts both evident and subtle which have fueled the illusion of separateness...
We forgive ourselves and each other. We begin again in love.

Extinguishing the Chalice Lee
We extinguish this chalice, but not its light that we take with us, out into the world, sharing it with those we encounter on our journey.

Closing Song Lee
Carry the flame of peace and love, until we meet again (3x)