

Healing Our Wounds

A local activist considers the civil rights movement, white privilege and reparations.

Ruth Koenig grew up in Scotia, New York and came to Eugene in 1966. Now retired, she has worked in Eugene as a teacher, community education coordinator and developer of the Eugene Stream Team. She is involved with a variety of local organizations, including Central Presbyterian Church and a range of community health, environmental and multi-cultural groups.

What's your history with the civil rights movement?

The critical point for me was the Birmingham bombing of September '63, when four little girls died because someone put a bomb in their church. I thought, How can someone willfully do that? That's what propelled me to join the Mississippi Freedom Summer in July of '64, when I was 23. It wasn't that I thought I was going to make a difference or be in any kind of leadership position. I just wanted to understand better and help in any way I could.

What happened during the Mississippi Freedom Summer?

Young black folks were the organizers, and there were three prongs to their idea: Freedom Schools to help kids of color understand their history and culture, voter registration drives and community centers. It was really questionable as to whether or not they were going to encourage whites to participate in this massive effort at voter registration. They made the decision to bring whites in because they felt that until and unless Northern whites truly understood what was going on in the South, they couldn't expect substantial change.

There's something to be said for reaching out to people who wouldn't necessarily care about injustice until it touches their lives directly.

Exactly. That's where we get to reparations. When will we ever acknowledge what we did in Vietnam? Ask how many people died in Vietnam and people will go "Uh, 58,000." *Americans*. How many people died? Several million. And children are still being

born with brains outside their skulls because of what we did there.

Was there complete solidarity between the whites and blacks involved in Freedom Summer, or was it tense?

The only people we could trust that summer were local black people. Any time I've talked about the Freedom Summer, I've said that white people think it's a really neat thing that we did. But the people who took the greatest risk were those black folks in Mississippi who were risking their lives all the time. They were shot at, arrested, beaten. If they rented a place, they could be kicked out. If they owned a place, it could be burned down. If they had a job, they could lose it. And they could be killed. But when you stood with other people involved in this project, and you crossed arms and stood in stifling heat with everyone perspiring profusely, and you sang "We Shall Overcome," there was something there that was far greater than the individuals involved, and I never quite felt that way again.

How does your faith play into your commitment to civil rights?

When I was a very little child in Sunday school, an image was presented to me of the

life of Christ and what that meant: that people should be with and for one another throughout the world. That faith has driven my work for social justice in the United States, Nicaragua and South Africa.

What are your hopes and concerns for the social justice movement today?

Every age calls for examination and discernment. Today, we're talking about reparations. How does healing happen? If you have a wound that heals over with an infection in there, that infection will probably get worse. There has to be some way in which we acknowledge our history and lay it open, some concrete form of apology, and then some sort of reparation. An apology alone can be a hol-

low thing, and it doesn't address all of the problems that have occurred in the wake of history.

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What kinds of reparations do you envision?

I wouldn't be the person to have that vision, but I can tell you what I've read and heard. I know there are folks who feel that money should be given to individuals. In 1988, Congress gave Japanese Americans who were interned during World War II \$20,000 each. How do you ever say that that compensated people for what was taken from them, whether it was their homes, businesses or dignity? With regard to the African American community, if you want to see some truth about our history, watch the film *Rosewood*. It's about a massacre in Florida in 1923. A white woman accused a black man of rape, and the white population of that small community just erupted and burned and hung

and mutilated the African American folks. Seventy years later, reparations were paid to victims still living and relatives of those killed.

What are some non-monetary forms of reparations?

I've read about reparations to provide access to educational, cultural and economic opportunities, health care services and loans for housing, land and preservation of sacred sites. Reparations might also include acknowledgments, apologies and "truth and reconciliation" sessions. Some local activities are interesting examples. At Lane Community College there is a program, "Rites of Passage Summer Academy," for African American, Asian American, Latino and Native American students in grades 6 through 12. The various culture clubs offered within schools, local cultural centers and festivals could receive support through reparations. Another local example is the Northwest

Indian Language Institute, based in Eugene. It seems particularly appropriate that government funds be provided for this, since it was government policies that took Native children from their families and forbade the use of Native languages in the boarding schools.

It seems to me that if the U.S. government were to offer reparations, it would have to offer them to just about every citizen of color in the nation. Would that be possible, given the current debt and the money we're pouring into bombs?

That's exactly where I'd go. If we have money to go to the moon, if we have money to go and kill hundreds of thousands of people in Iraq, but we don't have money to right the wrongs of our history, what do we stand for as a people? **EW**



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