The Stories We Tell Matter:
On the 100th Anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre
The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg
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The stories we tell matter. The choices we make about *which stories* to teach our children matter. All the stories we tell and retell, year after year matter. Our choices about stories we allow to be neglected or suppressed matter as well. And regarding stories and perspectives most and least prominent in our culture, *who decides* and *who benefits matter.*

I bring all this up because tomorrow and the next day (May 31 and June 1) will mark the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921. Although this event is now recognized as **"the deadliest outbreak of white terrorist violence against a black community in American history," the telling of this history was not only neglected, but downright suppressed for many years** (Krehbiel xi). "Educators did not teach it. Government offices did not record it. Even archival copies of some newspaper accounts were selectively expunged" (The New York Times).

In recent years the tide has started to turn—including the commitment of the Tulsa public school system to finally incorporate this history into their standard curriculum (https://www.tulsaschools.org/tulsaracemassacre). And for the general public, Greenwood Rising, a permanent history center in Tulsa, is opening soon to honor the legacy of all impacted by these events, and to "inspire meaningful, sustainable action" toward a more equitable future.

Notice this prominent quote from James Baldwin at the entrance to the new history center: "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced." Along these lines, last year, Bryan Stevenson's Equal Justice Initiative partnered with the Tulsa Community Remembrance Coalition to place a historical marker that attempts to tell the story in a brief 200 words of what happened one hundred years ago this week:

> On May 31 to June 1, 1921, a white mob attacked the prosperous Black neighborhood of Greenwood in Tulsa, resulting in the deaths of at least 36 Black Tulsans, the destruction of 36 city blocks, and the displacement of over 10,000 Black people. On May 31, Dick Rowland, a 19-year-old Black teenager, was jailed after being accused of assaulting a white woman. Although the charges were dropped, the local Tulsa Tribune newspaper published an inflammatory story that mobilized a white mob to lynch Rowland. In response, members of the Black community stationed themselves at the courthouse to protect him. Reports indicate that **local authorities provided firearms and ammunition to the mob of thousands of white people** who began firing at the Black men trying to protect Rowland. When the men retreated towards Greenwood, the mob, joined by city-appointed deputies, pursued them and began terrorizing the entire community, deliberately shooting Black residents, burning homes and buildings. **When the Oklahoma National Guard was called to intervene, they ignored the mob's rampage and instead arrested hundreds of Black survivors.** Public officials failed to keep records of Black people who were wounded or killed. While the estimated number of deaths is at least 36, witness accounts report more than 300 Black people were killed. No one was held accountable for Greenwood's devastation. Its only surviving foundation now sits under Vernon AME Church (The Historical Marker Database)

which is why this site was chose for the historical marker. Only now, a hundred years later are some of the mass graves being searched for in earnest and in some cases found (National Geographic).

This history is hard to hear, but how much more devastating for those to whom it happened to have awareness of these events neglected and suppressed? As psychologists tell us, whenever we try to *repress* something, it doesn't go away; rather, it tends to come back up in twisted ways. As the saying goes: **"What we resist persists, but what we feel we can heal."** Being increasingly honest about our past as a country is one potential path to healing.

In that spirit, let me say a little more about why it was especially devastating that this particular neighborhood was destroyed at this particular time. Almost a decade prior Booker T. Washington (1856 – 1915) had visited this prosperous Black neighborhood and nicknamed it "Black Wall Street" (5). And, drawing from some incredible, iinteractive research and reconstruction done by The New York Times, I can give you a sense of why.

Keep in mind that we are talking about the early 1900s. Decades before the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans in Tulsa had built a truly remarkable community. Remember that we're talking about "the destruction of 36 city blocks, and the displacement of over 10,000 Black people," who lived in this prosperous Tulsa neighborhood. One central block alone of Black Wall Street contained "more than 70 businesses operated in mostly one-, two- and three-story red brick buildings," and they were almost exclusively owned and operated by Black entrepreneurs.
The 70+ Black-owned businesses on just this block included "four hotels, two newspapers, eight doctors, seven barbers, nine restaurants and a half-dozen professional offices of real estate agents, dentists and lawyers…a cabaret and a cigar shop…too." Greenwood was a thriving community in which Black Americans could circulate freely and safely: "You could shop for groceries, play pool, take in a theater show, eat dinner or get your hair styled — without ever leaving the block."

To introduce you to only a few of the fascinating people who made "Black Wall Street" a reality:

- Loula and John Williams owned a candy shop in the Greenwood neighborhood as well as the beloved Dreamland Theater, which could seat up to 750 people.

- Some of the pathbreaking women who were entrepreneurs in “Black Wall Street,” included Mary Parrish who ran a typing school and Mabel Little, who ran a beauty salon.
- Buck Franklin was a lawyer who, after his office was destroyed, continued to “offer legal services from a tent.”
- James Nails and other members of his family ran a shoe shop, dance hall, and skating rink.
- The Stratford family owned a renowned 54-room luxury hotel. (The New York Times)

Overall, the more I learn about the impressive people and places of Black Wall Street, the more devastating it is to know that it was obliterated in less than twenty-four hours. What a theft of Black life, Black joy, and Black community. “The white mob looted and then set ablaze practically every home and business in the Greenwood District”— more than one dozen churches, five hotels, thirty-one restaurants, four huge stores, eight doctors’ offices, two dozen grocery stores, a public library, and more than one thousand homes—lay in ruin” (Krehbiel xi).

One hundred years later, telling this story is important—to inform and inspire our work in the present, to dismantle White Supremacy Culture, and to commit to building up a diverse multicultural beloved community. Accordingly, I also need to name that there are some important parts of this story that connect it to our own UU history.

Richard Lloyd Jones (1873 – 1963) was the editor and publisher of the *Tulsa Tribune*, the newspaper that published the article that helped incite the white mob. He was a lifelong Unitarian, the son of Jenkin Lloyd Jones (an influential leader in the Unitarian movement), although the son did not carry on the legacy of his father’s more progressive social commitment. And it is important to emphasize that Richard Lloyd Jones was more than just a little bit Unitarian. To name only two major examples, in the early 1940s he served as vice-president of the American Unitarian Association, and he was a major co-founder of All Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, which today is the largest UU congregation in the world, with more than two thousand members (Dictionary of UU Biography).

I’ll share with you just a little of the background behind his role in the Tulsa Race Massacre. Richard Lloyd Jones purchased the *Tulsa Tribune* on December 1, 1919, less than two years before the tragic events on which we've been reflecting. And he immediately began to engage in sensationalistic (and lucrative) "tabloid journalism" to compete with the *Tulsa World*, which had a larger subscriber base. And because multiple conflicting things can both be, in some part, true, we can note that Jones had a number of personal friendships with African Americans over the years, and that Jones regularly exploited racial resentments to sell newspapers. Moreover, "During the next fifty years, his newspaper did not again mention the riot" (Dictionary of UU Biography). Ultimately, it matters much less whether Jones held racial prejudice in his heart against various individuals, and it matters much more that he choose to regularly exploit systemic racism for his own financial advantage.

The stories we tell matter. The choices we make matter about *which stories* to tell and which stories to neglect or suppress. And regarding which stories and perspectives are most and least prominent in our culture, notice *who decides* and *who benefits*?

It matters that Richard Lloyd Jones's reputation as "a generous and devoted Unitarian" did not hold him accountable for his direct role in helping incite "the deadliest outbreak of white terrorist violence against a black community in American history" (Dictionary of UU Biography).

Now, there's a whole lot more to say about all this. And if you are curious to learn more, there are at least three new documentaries being released. The early word is that the History Channel's *Tulsa Burning - The 1921 Race Massacre* is the best one, but PBS's *Tulsa: The Fire and the Forgotten* and National Geographic's *Rise Again: Tulsa and the Red Summer* are also supposed to be well worth watching (NPR).

I should also hasten to add that if you prefer fiction to nonfiction, HBO's remarkable TV series *Watchmen* from a few years ago opens with a powerful montage of the Tulsa Race massacre, and the whole series is an extended reimagining of a world profoundly shaped by that particular moment of radicalized violence—all within the alternative history of Alan Moore's deconstruction of the superhero genre. I have a whole lot more to say about *Watchmen*, but for now suffice it to say that it's one of the most original, subversive, and important shows of recent years.

As I move toward my conclusion, however, it is important to zoom out briefly and consider the even bigger picture. Although this moment of the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre is an auspicious occasion for remembering that particular story, it is also important to recognize that what happened in Tulsa in 1921 was far from an isolated incident: "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 (Krebiel xii). Those stories matter too, and also have reverberations that continue into our present day.

And as I've been sitting with the story of the Tulsa Race Massacre in preparation for this Sunday, one quote that keeps coming to mind is from Robin D.G. Kelley, a distinguished professor of U.S. history at UCLA, who has written that:

> Our country was built on looting—the looting of Indigenous lands and African labor. African-Americans, in fact, have much more experience being looted than looting…. White mobs often backed by the police, not only looted and burned black homes and businesses but also maimed and killed black people. Our bodies were loot. A system of governance that suppressed our wages, relieved us of property and excluded black people from equal schools and public accommodation is a form of looting."

We can add to that list racially-biased mass incarceration, the New Jim Crow, and more (97).

And one of the major unresolved issues on this 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre is reparations for the tremendous loss of life and wealth from the destruction of Black Wall Street (UU World). More broadly, last month, H.R. 40, the "Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act" made it out of committee in the U.S. House of Representatives for the first time, so keep an eye on that bill. Note that it is not about a specific method of reparations; rather, it is intended to appoint a committee to study the issue and develop proposals, such as how best to close the racial wealth gap which we've explored in depth previously ("The Color of Money"). For now, it is significant to have an increasingly honest reckoning with the painful truths in our country's past. That is a crucial step toward the possibility of a more hopeful future.