Rothko Chapel
Beyond the Rhetoric
Dear Friends,

Since the Rothko Chapel first opened in 1971, it has diligently honored its original purpose to be a "focal point for people to gather and explore spiritual bonds common to all, to discuss problems of world-wide interest, and share a spiritual experience...respectful of the beliefs of others" (Rothko Chapel Articles of Incorporation). Through community gatherings at times of crisis, through concerts, meditations, lectures, symposia, and human rights awards, the Chapel has engaged critical moral and social issues that challenge our sense of being at the deepest levels. While the issues addressed have been diverse and wide ranging, the synergy between contemplation and action continues to connect all we do, reminding us that we are all part of the same human community and are stronger and more effective when we work together.

Keeping with this commitment, in conjunction with the Chapel’s 50th Anniversary, we presented a two-part series titled “Beyond the Rhetoric: Civil Rights and Our Shared Responsibility,” examining different understandings of and approaches to furthering human rights and civil liberties in the United States.

The questions that we set out to address included: How have civil rights historically been understood and applied in this country? Who benefits from current civil rights, and who has been left out? Which civil rights and liberties are particularly at-risk today? How can we become more effective advocates and activists as we work to address injustice and create an equitable society? How can we rethink our approaches to the concept of rights, responsibilities, and civil liberties? And how can we sustain our passion for social justice and long-haul activism?

The series began in the fall of 2021 with four virtual lectures and panels, concluding with a two-day virtual symposium March 31 to April 1, 2022. The fall lectures explored both the historical contexts and contemporary conditions surrounding LGBTQA+ rights, Indigenous perspectives on the concepts of human rights, immigrants’ rights, and economic and racial justice in America. The virtual symposium then examined how individuals, grassroots initiatives, and policy makers can work together to create a more equitable future, and covered the following topics: freedom of speech, the future of civil rights, public health and civil rights, reimagining policing and prisons, sustaining activism, voting rights, and organizing for change.

This report is a summary of those programs and experiences, highlighting each of the events presented, ideas and concepts explored, and reflections and actions to consider to further civil rights from the perspectives of the presenters. If you did not have the opportunity to attend these events, we invite you to watch the recordings on the Chapel’s website and Vimeo page, and share them with your friends, family, and colleagues.

Sincerely,

David Leslie
Rothko Chapel Executive Director

Ashley Clemmer
Director of Programs and Community Engagement

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Beyond the Rhetoric: Civil Rights & Our Shared Responsibility
2021 Lecture Series

Our Moral Obligation: Ensuring the Dignity of All
July 22, 2021

Opening the lecture series with an overview of the state of civil rights issues in the US, Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II, President & Senior Lecturer of Repairers of the Breach and Co-Chair of the Poor People’s Campaign, shared his perspectives through a moral and faith-based lens. Rev. Dr. Barber described historical and contemporary experiences in mobilizing communities across the country to address issues of racial and social justice and discussed the work of coalitions to create lasting, systemic change.

Rev. Dr. Barber’s remarks were followed by a moderated Q&A session led by Rev. Laura Mayo, Senior Pastor at Covenant Church in Houston, TX, and Rothko Chapel Board Member. Rev. Barber shared specific pieces of legislation aimed to lift people out of poverty and ensure a healthy democracy, and he provided examples of how organizers with the Poor People’s Campaign are holding elected representatives accountable to their most vulnerable constituents. He reported statistics on the numbers of low-income, uninsured/underinsured, minimum wage workers in Texas and across the nation, and showed how the COVID-19 pandemic has exponentially increased these numbers, exacerbating the challenges faced by the most marginalized communities among us. Rev. Dr. Barber concluded by encouraging participants to join the Poor People’s Campaign movement in the struggle to bolster one’s spirituality with others to further love and justice.

View the lecture at vimeo.com/565772294

Reflection Questions

• Rev. Dr. Barber reflected on how “bad public policy kills,” noting the alarming number of people in poverty who die each year from lack of access to healthcare and a living wage. How does the injustice and violence experienced under capitalism intersect with today’s most urgent civil rights issues?
• Does our current legal system prioritize the rights of corporations and wealthy people over the rights of working class and low-income people? What are some examples that come to mind for you?
• How does your voice and your community’s moral or spiritual-based perspectives impact your actions toward building equity?

Action Items

• Read We Are Called to Be a Movement by Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II
• Learn more about and join the Poor People’s Campaign to support intersectional issues such as voting rights, immigrants’ rights, healthcare access, and raising the minimum wage.
• Show up to vote in every election, especially local elections. Research and hold your elected officials accountable for their work while they are in office.

The Struggle for Equality: LGBTQIA+ Rights
September 8, 2021

LGBTQIA+ rights, particularly rights for transgender people, are under attack in the US and Texas, as restrictions on bodily autonomy and healthcare access are at the forefront of current legislative rollbacks. This conversation began with JoDee Winterhof, Senior VP for Policy & Political Affairs at Human Rights Campaign, noting recent policy successes including marriage equality, greater representation of LGBTQIA+ people in public office, and increasing support for the Equality Act, which would provide legal protections to all Americans in employment, housing, and education regardless of sex, sexual orientation, or gender identity. Winterhof also identified areas of backlash, highlighting the consistent rise in murders of Black and Brown transgender women, and the relentless introduction of anti-trans bills across the country.

Adri Perez, Policy & Advocacy Strategist at ACLU of Texas, shared their work in Texas legislative advocacy, noting the overwhelming rise in anti-LGBTQIA+ and anti-trans bills from 2015 to 2021 statewide. Perez detailed ways in which Texas legislators dehumanize trans youth with violent rhetoric, threatening trans youth’s access to healthcare, bathrooms, parental care and participation in sports. Acknowledging the measurable effects of these attacks on trans people’s health, Perez also celebrated the courage of transgender children and the organizations, medical professionals, families, and coaches who share their stories to testify against these discriminatory bills.

In conversation with Rev. Troy Treash, Senior Pastor at Houston’s Resurrection Metropolitan Community Church, panelists discussed strategies for protecting the rights of LGBTQIA+ people, including prioritizing the passage of federal, state, and local protections based on sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Winterhof and Perez discussed the work to be done across LGBTQIA+ movements to ensure diverse representation and leadership. The program ended with presenters offering hope and visions for our communities that share responsibility for respecting and uplifting all our identities and experiences.

View the conversation at vimeo.com/580836994

Reflection Questions

• How do you show direct support for trans youth and trans women of color and denounce violence against these communities?
• Do LGBTQIA+ individuals in your life and community feel supported by you?
• How do legislative restrictions on bodily autonomy impact everyone, regardless of sex, gender identity or sexual orientation?

Action Items

• Respect and use LGBTQIA+ people’s names and pronouns.
• Watch Disclosure to learn about the history of disparaging portrayals of trans people in the media.
• Watch Changing the Game which profiles 3 transgender student athletes telling their stories of struggles and joy.
• Learn more about and support: Transgender Education Network of Texas (TENT), Equality Texas, Texas Freedom Network, and Lambda Legal.

American Indian Worldview & the Concept of Rights
September 30, 2021

While western frameworks focus on individual rights within a strict legal system, for American Indians the idea of rights encompasses collective, broader community inter-Tribal interests, including Tribal nations and lands. Suzanne Benally (Navajo and Santa Clara Tribe), Executive Director of the Swift Foundation, set context for the conversation by explaining the problematic character and limitations of discussing rights within a Euro-Christian legalist, individualistic, property-focused framework. She illuminated the distinct differences between this framework and Indigenous worldviews that prioritize relationships, reciprocity, and balance among all beings, including the land and animals.

Dina Gilio-Whitaker (Colville Confederated Tribes), American Indian Studies Lecturer at California State University San Marcos, shared a brief historical overview of how European Christian colonizers developed the legal framework that still undergirds contemporary approaches to civil rights in the United States, including the role of the Doctrine of Discovery as justification for the taking of Indigenous peoples’ lands and reconstructing them into property. Dr. Tink Tinker

(Osage Nation/Wazhazhe), Professor Emeritus of American Indian Cultures & Religious Traditions at Iliff School of Theology, offered perspectives on language and rights, highlighting noun-focused Euro-Christian languages in comparison to verb-based American Indian languages, and discussed how these differences reflect the disparities in our legal system, relationships with the natural world and commoditization of the land.

The conversation addressed continuing assaults on Indigenous peoples’ histories, cultures, spiritual practices, languages, education, food systems, and access to lands and a healthy environment, and showed the need to think beyond the limitation of a legalistic, individualist framework focused on property rights. The panelists closed with questions about allyship, encouraging participants to learn more about the lands we live on, the Indigenous populations in our areas, and how we create relationships that prioritize collective responsibility for US history and lands.

View the conversation at vimeo.com/60777919
Reflection Questions
• How does it feel to prioritize collectivity, relationships, reciprocity and balance over individualism, transactions, extraction, and excess? What does this look like in our day-to-day lives? How could these revised priorities help us address current crises more effectively?
• How does the legal concept of the protection of private property impact our collective relationship and responsibility to the land? Do you think these protections privilege corporations and the wealthy, and if so what are some examples?
• What are the consequences of America’s history of stolen land and genocide of Indigenous peoples, and do you and your communities benefit from this history? If so, how?

Defending & Advancing the Rights of Immigrants
October 13, 2021
at the Texas-Mexico border, as violence and racism against asylum-seekers continues to escalate. This conversation focused on immigrants’ rights nationally and in Texas, considered the ways in which immigrants’ rights have been historically understood and have changed over time, and discussed current policy decisions that drive today’s immigration issues. Charles Kamasaki, Senior Cabinet Advisor of UnidosUS, reviewed the history of immigration in the United States and highlighted major disparities in how policies have been applied to different geographic regions and people from Europe, Asia, Africa and more recently, Central America. He further elaborated on the structural racism that continues to inform current attitudes and practices in the US immigration system, and the need to advance immigrant rights in the US.
Sister Norma Pimentel, Executive Director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley implored citizens not to get caught up in the ideological political rhetoric on immigration, but to focus on the urgent situation of families and people in need of care, comparison, and support. Frances Valdez, Executive Director of Houston in Action, facilitated a continued conversation that examined productive ways to address immigration from both legal and humanitarian perspectives. Panelists discussed ideas for establishing new immigration policies, viewing the issue through lenses of both international and domestic relations, and urged viewers to talk with their communities and contact their elected representatives to support immigrants’ rights.

Reflection Questions
• Are you ensuring that your news sources are factual and fair? How do we protect freedom of expression without emboldening racist and divisive rhetoric?
• How can educators be protected to ensure that their creativity in teaching is still valued?

Reflection Questions
• How do we prioritize collectivity, relationships, reciprocity and balance over individualism, transactions, extraction, and excess? What does this look like in our day-to-day lives? How could these revised priorities help us address current crises more effectively?
• How does the legal concept of the protection of private property impact our collective relationship and responsibility to the land? Do you think these protections privilege corporations and the wealthy, and if so what are some examples?
• What are the consequences of America’s history of stolen land and genocide of Indigenous peoples, and do you and your communities benefit from this history? If so, how?
Reimagining Systems: Policing, Criminal Justice & the Prison Industrial Complex

George Floyd’s murder in 2020 by Minneapolis police revived challenging conversations on civil rights issues within the country’s criminal legal system, prompting debates about the structure and effectiveness of policing and prisons. This discussion on reimagining the criminal legal system opened with remarks from lawyer, writer and organizer Derecka Purnell, who shared her visions for ending police and prison violence. By addressing the root causes of interpersonal and community violence through abstaining from the punitive systems of policing and prisons that further harm, Purnell reflected on capitalism, militarism, colonialism, and patriarchy as underlying structural issues in our country that lead to crimes such as murder and sexual violence. She closed with a call to use our imaginations to fight for long-term structural solutions over piecemeal reforms of a purposely ineffective system.

Moderator Jay Jenkins, attorney for the Texas Center for Justice and Equity, followed these remarks with a facilitated panel discussion including Keri Blakinger, the first formerly incarcerated reporter for The Marshall Project, and José Garza, Travis County District Attorney. The panel discussed the inhumane conditions faced by people in prisons both in Texas and nationally, noting the human rights violations experienced by those currently incarcerated. Conversations also focused on elements related to a broader understanding of public safety, including access to good jobs, affordable healthcare, and education, instead of relying on policing and prisons to “keep us safe.” Panelists also shared organizing efforts led by incarcerated people in alliance with those on the outside to address these injustices.

Reflection Questions
• What lessons did we learn from the pandemic to better address inequalities?
• What is the best approach for working with elected officials to ensure that they address health and economic inequities as a top priority?
• What actions can we take as individuals and what systems can we put in place as organizations to ensure that the access to healthcare is equitable, fair, and just?

Action Items
• Connect with HOME Coalition to volunteer in Houston
• Read more about “The Houston Arrow,” the geographical shape of Houston’s inequities in reports from One Bread Partnerhip (onebreadpartnership.org/houston-arrow)

Dignity, Equity & Access in the COVID Era

April 1, 2022

This multi-sector panel explored inequities and endemic challenges related to access to healthcare, nutrition, affordable housing and living-wage jobs, all of which have been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Panelists discussed successful cross-sector efforts to address these problems to further equity for all.

Juanita Rasmus, Co-Pastor of St. John’s United Methodist Church, opened the session with a guided meditation aimed to help attendees remain present in the moment, and to remind us of the importance of self-care and restoration as we engage with social justice issues in our work.

Katy Alkis, Principal at Impetus Houston, moderated and framed the conversation by examining the correlation between health disparities and zip codes, particularly among minority communities, and showed how the pandemic worsened these inequities. Dr. Umar Shah, Secretary of Health at Washington State Department of Health, discussed the need to invest in a public health infrastructure, to dispel health misinformation, and to adopt transformational objectives and strategies. Randi Weingarten, President at American Federation of Teachers, talked about the biases inherent in the education and healthcare industries, the continuing battle to teach history accurately, and the systemic underfunding of city, tribal and rural schools. Chrisehle Palay, Director of Houston Organizing Movement for Equity (HOME) Coalition, walked attendees through the process by which communities of color navigate disaster, often through mutual aid, and how local organizations respond, recover, organize, and advocate on behalf of these communities.

View the panel discussion at vimeo.com/674439294

Reflection Questions
• What do you think the media upholds carceral systems of oppression and violence within the United States?
• How do you think the media upholds carceral systems of oppression and violence within the United States?
• What are the historical origins of policing and incarceration in the US?

Action Items
• Learn more about & support grassroots organizers: Study and Struggle, Black & Pink, National Council for Incarcerated and Formerly Incarcerated Women and Girls
• Read Becoming Abolitionists: Police, Protests and the Pursuit of Freedom by Derecka Purnell
• Read Corrections in Ink: A Memoir by Keri Blakinger

View the panel discussion at vimeo.com/674440258
Activism & Spirituality: Sustaining the Activist Spirit

With so much to be done on the civil rights front, how can we sustain the passion, creativity and energy needed for long-term social justice activism? In the interaction of the Rethinking Chaplaincy Spirituality and Social Justice Cohort, funded by The Henry Luce Foundation, facilitated small-group breakout sessions to allow symposium participants to meet and discuss strategies and tactics to cultivate, engage and sustain effective activism as individuals and communities.

Facilitators included Suzanne Benally, Executive Director, Swift Foundation; Sean Fitzpatrick, Executive Director, Jung Center of Houston; Matthew Russell, Co-Managing Director; Curate; Caron Tabb, artist; and John Vaughn, Executive Pastor, Ebenezer Baptist Church. Attendees shared stories about the current challenges they are facing and how they sustain themselves spiritually in their social justice work. Facilitators invited moments for silence, drawing and journaling, movement and stretching, and breathwork.

A Threat to All: Redistricting, Gerrymandering & the Attack on Voting Rights

With voting rights legislation rolled back and stalled in the aftermath of the 2020 election and ongoing disempowerment of voters through restricting and gerrymandering, this session focused on the critical importance of voting rights and protections within civil rights frameworks. Looking toward the 2022 and 2024 elections, advocates at the local, state, and national levels discussed the challenges and opportunities related to free, fair, and accessible elections, including efforts to ensure that each person’s vote is counted, and to support everyone’s active role in the democratic process.

Moderator Mimi Marziani, President of the Texas Civil Rights Project, articulated this moment as a turning point for democracy, and expounded on three overlapping trends: the introduction of new legislation that makes voting more difficult for certain individuals, a concerted effort to pass laws that subvert free and fair elections, and an uptick in political violence. Nina Perales, Vice President of Litigation at the Mexican American Legal Defense & Educational Fund (MALDEF), centered the voting process in Texas. She described how the state of Texas has developed systematic tactics to purge voter rolls, devise de facto poll taxes, and create and maintain white-majority districts that lessen the impact of votes by people of color. She also discussed the ways in which Texas legislators work strategically to develop new tactics to undermine voting rights. Christopher Hollins, former County Clerk of Harris County & Principal Attorney at Hollins Law Group, discussed his experience as the Harris County Clerk in 2020, navigating an election during the pandemic, including the implementation of 24-hour and drive-through voting. Hollins related the challenges faced in Texas, known for historically low voter turnout, and national threats to voter equality. The panel also discussed the role of the media in furthering division and partisanship around voting, and the need for a realistic lens and practical strategies to address these issues in our fragile democracy.

Reflection Questions

• What are tangible ways you can prioritize hope, joy, and radical imagination in organizational work, and highlighted the critical role that artists and youth play in reimagining and visioning equitable futures.
• Panelists shared stories to create safe spaces for learning and relationship-building between youth and elders, and panelists encouraged communities to develop strategies that center and align with the needs of our most vulnerable.

Action Items

• Incorporate rest, self-care, and joy in the process of dismantling oppressive systems, both individually and as a community.
• Invest in grassroots organizing led by those most directly impacted, for example: NDN Radical Imagination Grant, Landback, U, United We Dream, The Rising Majority, and The Frontline.
• Read Why David Sometimes Wins: Leadership, Organization, and Strategy in the California Farm Worker Movement by Marshall Ganz

Movement Building & Organizing for Change

Building and sustaining civil rights and equity for all requires intersectional movements focused on individual and collective engagement. In this concluding session, seasoned organizer and lecturer at Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, Marshall Ganz offered perspectives on the role of movements in building power and change, including the dire challenges we face today with assaults on our democracy and wellbeing led by white nationalist authoritarians, and the importance of building relational leadership skills as we organize in ways that align with our shared values. Ganz joined grassroots leaders and organizers in conversation about their work and struggles as they shared insights into effective organizing strategies.

Greisa Martinez Rosas, Executive Director of United We Dream, shared her inspiring and energizing experiences organizing and working with young, undocumented, queer youth in the US, including the creation of a network of 12 million members who are unafraid and unashamed to fight for security and inclusion. Krystal Two Bulls, LANDBACK Campaign Director with NDN Collective, discussed how her Northern Cheyenne and Ogíala family had to mobilize for community health against extractive industries in Montana, and how her experience as an anti-militarist veteran helped her lead at Standing Rock and with the Landback movement. Thanu Yakupitiyage, U.S. Communications-Digital Director at 350.org, highlighted the importance of intersectionality in the climate justice movement, pointing to inequities in how communities contribute to and are impacted by climate change, and emphasized the importance of storytelling to shift cultural narratives.

Panelists continued to converse on the power of hope, joy, and radical imagination in organizational work, and highlighted the critical role that artists and youth play in reimagining and visioning equitable futures. Panelists also shared stories to create safe spaces for learning and relationship-building between youth and elders, and panelists encouraged communities to develop strategies that center and align with the needs of our most vulnerable.

View the panel discussion at vimeo.com/692349994

Reflection Questions

• How are your communities centering, listening to and supporting the most vulnerable and marginalized among us?
• What is your perception on the term white supremacy? Do you see a culture of it within your community? If so, what is your experience?
• How are you sharing your unique skills, resources, perspectives, and courage to affect societal change working in solidarity with others?
• What is the role of collectivity in social change movements?
• What are tangible ways you can prioritize hope, joy, and imagination in collaboration with your communities to build equity?

Action Items

• Invest in rest, self-care, and joy in the process of dismantling oppressive systems, both individually and as a community.
• Invest in grassroots organizing led by those most directly impacted, for example: NDN Radical Imagination Grant, Landback, U, United We Dream, The Rising Majority, and The Frontline.
• Read Why David Sometimes Wins: Leadership, Organization, and Strategy in the California Farm Worker Movement by Marshall Ganz
Thank you to our Underwriters, Sponsors and Promotional Partners

Additional underwriting support for the Rothko Chapel’s 2021-2022 Program Season was provided by Gayle and Mike DeGeurin, Cristy and Michael Jadick, C.C. Lee, Sonja Earthman Novo, Christina and Troy Porter, Elsa Ross, Robin and Andrew Schirmeister, and Sarita Tennant.

Thank you to our Promotional Partners

Houston Coalition Against Hate, Compassionate Houston, The Jung Center of Houston, Project Curate, Chapelwood United Methodist Church, Ebenezer Baptist Church, Covenant Church Houston in Action, Texas Civil Rights Project, Texas Center for Justice & Equity, Houston Organizing Movement for Equity, AFT - A Union of Professionals, Washington State Department of Health, TravisCountyTX, National Coalition Against Censorship and Mexican American Legal Defense, Educational Fund, 90.1 KFPT/Open Journal, 350.org and American Federation of Teachers.

The Rothko Chapel is a 501(c)(3) tax-deductible organization. The Rothko Chapel is funded in part by The Brown Foundation, Inc., Dudley T. Dougherty Foundation, The Ford Foundation, The George and Mary Josephine Hamman Foundation, Houston Endowment, John P. McGovern Foundation, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, Texas Commission on the Arts, Jacob and Terese Hershey Foundation, and a grant from the City of Houston through the Houston Arts Alliance, and many generous individuals.

“Beyond the Rhetoric” is part of a multi-year effort to further the Rothko Chapel’s programming and community engagement around the topic of social justice, while honoring the Chapel’s history both as a landmark of modern sacred art and as a celebrated site for transformative and inspirational experiences.

The Chapel will conclude this series with our 2023 Rothko Chapel Óscar Romero Award by recognizing individuals and organizations exercising courageous, grassroots, human rights advocacy to future civil rights in the United States. Learn more about this and other future programs, as well as how to get involved at rothkochapel.org.

Thank you for your continued support of the Rothko Chapel.

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