



January 12, 2024

I imagine you've heard of "Beloved Community," a term popularized by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the man whose life and legacy we are celebrating today. But perhaps you aren't familiar with the details of what a Beloved Community is.

I'll start by talking about what it is not. Beloved Community is not a place where everyone is exactly the same, creating a utopia because everyone agrees.

Beloved Community, a term first coined in the early days of the 20th Century by philosopher and theologian Josiah Royce, refers to a society of people committed to nonviolence and to listening to each other, even amid disagreement.

I believe it's achievable if we begin by listening to each other's stories and learning from each other's experiences to solve the problems that face our communities.

This makes me think about a story from my own childhood, about someone we will call Mrs. W.

Mrs. W was an impoverished white woman who considered my mother her best friend. Most days, she would come and sit with my mother, shell the peas and butter beans, and shuck the corn my siblings and I had picked. They'd talk and eat and watch "The Stories" on our small black and white television. For those who may not know, "The Stories" are daytime soap operas.

Around 3 p.m., when we arrived home from school or work, we would walk Mrs. W back down the dusty rock road to her small A-frame house, carrying her new bushel of food.

One morning, in about the year 1972, I remember seeing Mrs. W at my mother's table, crying. I was 6 years old.

Why was she crying? Because her son was going to have to ride the school bus with Black children. Instead of allowing such a thing, she kept her child at home.

I remember my mother giving Mrs. W a few choice words. I also remember that, a few months later, Mrs. W was back at our table, shelling peas and butter beans, shucking corn, talking, eating, and watching "The Stories" with my mother.

I resented the relationship. My siblings resented it. How could my mother be friends with this person?

It was only later in life that I realized this was all part of the vision my parents had for us. They believed in forgiveness, reconciliation, listening, and community. They didn't approve of Mrs. W's behavior, but they accepted her and didn't shut her out. They kept communication open in the hopes Mrs. W might learn and grow, and that we might learn and grow, too. Mrs. W was part of our community.

My parents believed in the Beloved Community, and they modeled that for us.

We all know that we live in an increasingly divided world. But we can attempt to overcome these divisions and create a better world for ourselves and future generations by coming together as a community—a Beloved Community.

The Beloved Community is not just a place; it's a state of mind. People are valued for who they are, not what they look like or where they come from. But achieving the beloved community is not easy. It requires hard work, dedication, and a willingness to listen to others, even when their words offend. It's the American promise: your right to speech...permits my right to freedom of speech. We must put aside our differences and work together towards a common goal.

So, let us work together to build a world where everyone is treated with dignity and respect and can live up to their full potential. On this Martin Luther King Jr. Day, let's listen to each other, find common ground, and continue to create a Beloved Community at USC Upstate — and Reach Greater Heights together.

Spartans, let's have a great year!