

# Los Angeles Times

## Op-Ed: Reparations: Yes or no? My family's dilemma

By Judy Belk  
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How much is justice worth?

My large extended African American family is about to find out. My roots are in Alexandria, Va., going back five generations or more. I was raised in the predominantly Black Fort Ward/Seminary area of town, adjacent to the prestigious Virginia Theological Seminary and Episcopal High School, an exclusive boarding school which throughout its history attracted children of elites across the country, including the late Sen. John McCain.

Growing up, I didn't know much about the prestige or alumni of either institution. They were only mysterious buildings hidden behind large overgrown trees, stately brick walls and acres of rolling grassy lawns, which were great for sledding on snow days.

On weekends, we would catch a glimpse of the Episcopal "boys" (girls were admitted much later) who would venture out in their required white shirts and dark blazers to visit local stores and take in a movie at the whites-only theater. They always seemed a little dorky, loaded up on soda, ice cream and bags of candy as they headed back up the hill and behind the mysterious gates.

We were invisible to them. Literally part of the hired help. Generations of my elders worked as cooks, chefs, cleaning staff and in the laundry for both the seminary and the high school. They worked long hours, many for most of their lives until either retiring or dying. It was steady work.

There was also a dark side. Recently, the Episcopal Church, in reckoning with its racist past, has publicly acknowledged that it owned slaves on the seminary campus. Apparently, several of those stately buildings were built with slave labor. The seminary has admitted that even after Emancipation and continuing through the Jim Crow era it exploited its African American workforce through deplorable working conditions, mistreatment and substandard wages.

Now the seminary wants to pay up. Over the last three years, it has held community meetings as well as hired a diverse team of genealogists and historians to track down descendants of the workers it exploited for years to apologize and provide financial reparations. Several of my ancestors are on the list ... my great-grandfather John Wesley Casey, Uncle Charlie, Uncle George and many more.

In the end, the real gift of this messy effort might very well be shining light on not just the atrocities but the richness of the family connections and the resilience of my ancestors, all of which have surfaced as the research team uncovered my American story and others.

Blurry dots have been connected; stories passed down for generations have been debunked or affirmed. I discovered one of my best high school friends is a cousin; that my lineage goes back to a freed slave named Lett who gained her freedom from her owner in 1797; and that I would have been the third generation of Casey women to carry the name Ada Virginia instead of Judy Virginia, if my Grandma Ada hadn't nixed that idea. (Thank you, Grandma!)

And, most important, the benevolence that I had always credited to the Episcopal Church was just plain wrong. Land in the Seminary neighborhood that was held for generations by my ancestors and others was not granted by the church, as I had assumed, but was offered for sale by the Union Army to Black people who fought to save the Union and who, after the war, settled in the Fort Ward/Seminary area.

For many years, that land, due to racist policies of public disinvestment, was home to dilapidated housing and limited water and sewage facilities, but there was always a pride of landownership that continues to this day.

In the late 1960s that pride fueled a community revolt when the city tried to take the land by eminent domain to build a new high school named in honor of segregationist former schools Supt. T.C. Williams. (I had a personal beef with Williams, who in the early '60s blocked my sister, other Black students and me from attending our all-white neighborhood school, claiming we were mentally deficient. My mother and other parents [filed a landmark court case](#) to overturn his decision.)

The Seminary neighborhood won a victory and got to keep most of its land and secured public investment to help build a tract of new homes, which today are still in the hands of most of the original Black landowners. My sister just repurchased our original family home to ensure it stays in the family for a few more generations. In a real show that times are changing, the Alexandria school board in November [voted to strip](#) the high school of its racist namesake.

So, my old 'hood, with its rich history of pain, injustice and resilience, in partnership with an apologetic institution of faith, is actually doing what the rest of America seems to be debating and talking about a lot these days, including here in California, where the state just launched [a new task force on reparations](#): wrestling with the idea of giving and receiving money to address a legacy of racial injustice.

Money is beginning to flow in Seminary. As family ties are documented and descendants tracked down, annual [checks of \\$2,100](#) are being distributed to the first round of recipients. It's a measly amount for the injustices our elders suffered, but for many families it's a significant payout as they continue to cope with a legacy of huge racial wealth inequities. And the response has been varied. The researchers discovered a family whose ancestors were on "the list" but for years have been passing as white. Oops.

Some, like one of my family members, have called it blood money and want no part of it; others want more. Most view it as a long overdue debt and agree with a family friend and community spokesperson, [Gerald Wanzer](#), who sums it up quite simply, "Show me the money."

As a proxy for my elders, I hardly see this as a fair transaction for forgiveness or justice. And, as I listen to the leaders of the Virginia Theological Seminary explain their rationale to the national press, I suspect they know that, too.

They are trying to do what they believe is the right thing while holding on to their wealth, power and privilege, which was built in part by the inhumane treatment of my grandfather, uncles and other relatives.

So how do you put a price on justice? You can't.

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