

A Legacy of Slavery

A sermon by Rev. Fred Small

First Parish in Cambridge, Unitarian Universalist

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Last October 11, I spent the night in the slave dwelling of the Royall House & Slave Quarters in Medford.

Just three miles from here, up the hill from the Tufts campus, it's the only surviving slave dwelling in the northern United States. In the 18th century, the Royalls enslaved more African-Americans than any other family in Massachusetts.

The slave quarters is a small, spare building of brick and wood. To me, it is holy ground.

I spent the night there to bear witness, to pay homage to the souls who toiled there without compensation, without liberty, without autonomy, without dignity except for their self-respect, their endurance, their courage.

I spent the night there because my people were complicit in the theft of the labor and humanity of the people who lived there and people like them.

Growing up in New Jersey, with most of my family in New England, I learned that northerners were the good guys in the great conflict over slavery. In the War of the Rebellion, my ancestors fought to free the slaves. They had always opposed the evil of slavery and tried to abolish it.

That was a lie.

Among my ancestors were enslavers. Some lived in the North. Some lived in Boston.

I can't remember exactly when I first heard the story. I know I was an adult.

On August 7, 1781, my great-great-great-grandfather Julius Deming married Dorothy Champion in Westchester, Connecticut. The bride's father, Colonel Henry Champion, had been Julius's commanding officer in George Washington's army. As a wedding gift, Colonel Champion presented the groom with two enslaved girls, who accompanied the newlyweds home to Litchfield, Connecticut.

One of the girls, named Elvira, was emancipated when she became an adult—presumably under the gradual-abolition act passed by Connecticut in 1784. She moved to New York City and opened a successful restaurant in the theater district.

The fate and even the name of the other enslaved girl are unknown.

My reaction to this story was curious.

The first feeling I recall was embarrassment for my ancestor Julius. Human beings as wedding presents—how awkward! Rather than offend his new father-in-law, Julius had accepted these gifts, legal at the time, had kept them just a few years, and then set them free.

Morally unacceptable certainly by today's standards, but not horrendous.

More curious still, over time my memory injected into the tale the fantasy that the bride's family was southern, which explained the story while relieving me of any inquiry into the pervasiveness of New England slavery in the colonial era and well beyond.

I didn't dare view these events through the eyes of the two girls. My concern was my conscience, not their suffering.

I also made the facile assumption that this story was an anomaly in my ancestry.

It was not.

Colonel Henry Champion, who was also of course my direct ancestor, owned at least eight human beings as chattel property.

In his 1789 will, the Colonel wrote: “[A]s I am not an advocate of slavery it is my desire that all be set free at twenty-six years of age in case they respectively behave well till they arrive at that period. With regard to Felix, he having forfeited his liberty even if had been born free by misdemeanor and crimes of a criminal nature, therefore I give him to my son Henry to dispose of as he shall choose.”

In other words, if the Colonel's human possessions were sufficiently submissive, they could earn their freedom at age 26. If not, they could be enslaved indefinitely.

This from a Connecticut Yankee who did not advocate slavery.

He was not the first enslaver in my family.

A family reminiscence records that Julius Deming's grandmother Mary Bridgham, born in 1675, “had been brought up very delicately in Boston, and though she resided not more than forty rods from her school had a negro to draw her there and back in a hand coach.” (Forty rods is about two hundred yards.)

And then, more inconvenient still, there's the southern branch of my family.

My father's uncle was the Missouri-born artist Thomas Hart Benton, hailed by President Harry Truman as “the best damn painter in America” and certainly one of the most successful of the early twentieth century.

His nineteenth-century namesake, the United States Senator from Missouri Thomas Hart Benton, was memorialized in John F. Kennedy's classic *Profiles in Courage* for sacrificing his political career in opposition to the extension of slavery in the territories.

But Senator Benton was himself an enslaver who never emancipated his own human property.

It was a Benton family tradition.

Senator Benton was not my direct ancestor. I descend instead from his brother Nathaniel, also an enslaver. How many human beings he held in bondage I don't know. His will, which would have tallied his human chattel as part of his estate, was lost in a fire.

I know that my great-great-great-great-great grandfather Samuel Benton emigrated from England and settled in Oxford, North Carolina, where he amassed considerable wealth in land and enslaved Africans. His 1770 will indicates four in number. Tax lists reveal he owned at least eight more during his lifetime.

Samuel's son Jesse, my great-great-great-great grandfather, owned two plantations near Hillsborough, North Carolina. When Jesse died in 1791, his will left three enslaved African Americans to his widow Ann, the rest to be divided among his children when they reached majority.

In 1802, Ann sold off sixteen enslaved workers to settle a debt.

When the division of Jesse's estate finally occurred in 1811, six enslaved African Americans were apportioned by lot among his adult children. Thomas, the future Senator, drew a man called Old Tom and his wife Dorcas, both so elderly they were valued together at one cent. Nathaniel, my great-great-great grandfather, drew the younger and more valuable Judith, and so had to pay his brother Thomas \$360 in compensation.

In 1825, Nathaniel's wife Dorothy gave birth to a son, my great-great grandfather. They named him Thomas Hart Benton after his illustrious uncle.

Nearly two hundred years later, in the spring of 2014, I sat in a classroom at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, at a workshop led by African-American genealogist Sharon Morgan. We were both there for the national conference of Coming to the Table, an organization that supports those seeking to acknowledge and heal the wounds of racism rooted in slavery.

When Sharon explained how to access online the 1850 United States Census Slave Schedules, I immediately located the link and searched for my ancestor Thomas Hart Benton.

I found him in Dyer County, Tennessee, age 25. On the Slave Schedule by his name there was a single entry:

M for male. B for black. Age: 14.

No name.

The United States Census Slave Schedules listed no names.

Of all the human beings enslaved by my ancestors, this one haunts me most.

A kid.

14 years old.

Alone.

Where was his family?

Did he have relatives or even friends nearby?

What was his life like?

By the end of the Civil War, he would have been 29 years old.

Did he live that long?

What happened to him?

I don't even know his name.

But my grandmother's grandfather owned him—could treat him as kindly or as brutally as he wished, could dispose of him as he wished, controlled his movements, consumed his liberty, profited from his uncompensated labor.

It wasn't my fault. I wasn't there.

But whatever financial and social gain accrued to my ancestors from their ownership of human chattel, some of it descended to me.

Any white person—every white person—benefits from white privilege.

But for me, as a descendant of enslavers, it's personal.

Last October, before we crawled into our sleeping bags at the Royall House & Slave Quarters, artist Ifé Franklin led us in the pouring of the libation. Striking her staff on the floor, she spoke in Yoruba to summon the ancestors.

When Ifé invited us to name our ancestors, I spoke the names of my father and my grandparents. I wanted to speak the names, as well, of those my ancestors enslaved. But the few names I knew I couldn't remember.

I'm going to name them now—the twenty-five I have uncovered so far.

I will speak the names their owners used to identify them. Whether they used these names themselves I don't know. But these names are all I have.

As I speak their names and invite the bell, please hold them, their families, and their descendants in prayer.

Elvira [Bell sounds.]

Jack [Bell sounds.]

Milley [Bell sounds.]

Rose [Bell sounds.]

Tom [Bell sounds.]

Dorcas [Bell sounds.]

Judith [Bell sounds.]

Chloe [Bell sounds.]

Mitchell [Bell sounds.]

Sam [Bell sounds.]

Sambo [Bell sounds.]

Gabriel [Bell sounds.]

Sarah [Bell sounds.]

Linda [Bell sounds.]

Paul [Bell sounds.]

Squire [Bell sounds.]

Moll [Bell sounds.]

Patt [Bell sounds.]

Samson [Bell sounds.]

Cato [Bell sounds.]

Joel [Bell sounds.]

Cibel [Bell sounds.]

Asher [Bell sounds.]

Rose [Bell sounds.]

Felix [Bell sounds.]

Sleeping overnight in the slave dwelling was for me a rite of atonement.

It was certainly inadequate. It was perhaps ridiculous.

But it symbolized my grief, my anguish, my shame at what my ancestors did, what my nation has done, what we continue to avoid responsibility for.

This summer I'll be in New York City for a few days. I'll see if I can find any record of Elvira's restaurant and of her descendants. It could lead to an interesting and awkward and potentially transformative conversation, if they're willing to have it.

"Old wounds need fresh air to heal," says my colleague the Reverend David Pettee, also the descendant of enslavers, "to release the accumulated toxins that come with a lingering infection. . . . [T]ruth-telling and repentance can be an antidote to the abuse of power that was institutionalized in the practice of slavery. The elements of our history that are shameful and horrific must be named and remembered."

There are some here this morning whose ancestors were enslaved. There are some whose ancestors were enslavers, whether you know it or not. There may be some with both enslavers and enslaved among their ancestors.

Centuries ago there were enslavers in this congregation, including some of the ministers. I'll explore this history, and the prevalence of slavery in New England, in another sermon.

Our legacy of slavery is not over. It continues in racial profiling, in mass incarceration, in vast racial divides in wealth and education and opportunity. It continues in Ferguson and Baltimore and Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Before reconciliation, there must be truth.

Feeling guilty doesn't help anybody.

What helps is working for justice, equity, compassion, and understanding.

In memory of my enslaver ancestors, in memory of those they enslaved, I dedicate myself anew to building the Beloved Community of love and justice in which every human being is cherished.

My friends, let us build it together.

Amen, Aché, and Blessed Be.

Prayer

Spirit of Life, infinite Mystery
Essence and breath of all that is
We inherit a legacy of oppression
Of fearing the stranger
Of using power without principle
Of escaping from persecution only to persecute others
Help us to face the past with courage and candor
To confront the present with clarity and wisdom
To cultivate compassion toward others
and no less ourselves
And to bend the arc of the moral universe
unceasingly toward justice
Amen, Aché, and Blessed Be

In the sermon originally preached in 2015, the terms "slaveholder" and "slaveholding" were used. These have been replaced in this text by "enslaver" and "enslaving."