

THIS PECULIAR RELATIONSHIP

The Relationship Between Descendants of Former Slaves and Former Slave Holders

The history of the people we call white or Caucasian has been to subjugate and dominate the world. Some of these people have now come to the awareness that the way of life they have been imposing and propagating upon the world and in our nation is wrong. Is it an awakening by God? After all, it was 430 years before God heeded the cries of the children of Israel while they were in Egypt. It may be that after 401 years, God is hearing the cries of the people of African descent whose forbears were slaves in this country. I pray that it does not take another 29 years for us to become true sisters and brothers.

To quote a great coach, Glenn Anton “Doc” Rivers, “It is amazing why we (the people of African descent whose forbears were slaves) keep loving this country and this country does not love us back”. Does this not seem peculiar, that’s all I am asking?

Let me be clear from the outset; I may use words from other authors without giving them credit. This is not a scholarly paper and is not meant to be. The words that follow come from having lived three-quarters of a century plus and reading most of that time. I am reminded of the words of El Hajj Malik Shabazz, also known as Malcolm Little or Malcolm X:” What does a cracker from Mississippi call a black man with a PhD? “Nigger.” Does this not seem peculiar, that’s all I am asking?

It was not always that way. In 1619 the slave ship San Juan Bautista was on its way to Mexico. The ship was attacked by an English vessel, *The White Lion*. *The White Lion* took sixty of the stolen people aboard to a place called Jamestown. Among these people were a man and a woman, from Angola, who later took the names Anthony and Mary Johnson.

The Johnsons served out their time as “indentured” servants; remember all other indentured people were more or less voluntary. It is thought their indentured servitude lasted fourteen years, after which they were freed. They were able to amass two hundred and fifty acres of land. Their two adult sons had another six hundred acres. Then the misfortunes of farming happened, and all they had was destroyed. According to the records of Northampton County located in the Commonwealth of Virginia, the Johnsons were granted exemption from taxes by the white authorities, for the rest of their natural lives. The true milk of human kindness came pouring forth, by people of European decent. If that is not love then, in the words of Titus Turner, “Grits ain’t groceries, eggs ain’t poultry and Mona Lisa was a man.” We were all seen as equals. These Angolans were of a different hue, but were considered English, as were all people who lived in the Colony. Does this not seem peculiar, that’s all I am asking?

All of the issues of race changed at the time of one John Cotton. Cotton, a Puritan minister of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, drafted the constitution of New England. He brought with him three sets of ideals:

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- The whole Puritan creed of absolute biblical inerrancy
- The belief in “Manifest Destiny”
- Saving the soul of Africans so that their souls would become white

About this same time John Porty, cousin to George Yeardley, the Governor of Virginia, came to Virginia. Porty was the translator of Leo Africanus’ book, *The Geographical History of Africa*. This was a travel book, but it portrayed Africans as barely human (Leo Africanus was an African educated by Europeans). Does this not seem peculiar, that’s all I am asking? Each of these writers held on to one of two theories: blackness was either a curse of geographical location (Africa) or a curse of Noah the Bible’s sons of Ham; or both. In any event, blacks were a cursed people.

This idea was perpetuated by playwrights. Notable examples were two Shakespearean plays: *Titus Andronicus*, featuring Aaron, an over-sexed and evil man; followed by *Othello*, which ends with Othello being scorned for killing the beautiful white Desdemona and being called a black devil. This is a time, after two hundred years of chipping away at the humanity of Africans, that the water is sufficiently poisoned so that blacks are seen as a threat to all that is good, with Othello as a centerpiece.

Puritans had the notion that they were the chosen people. These anti-Baptists had read and believed the writings of Aristotle, but not those of Alcidamas. Cotton was also a student of Ibn Khaldun, who believed people of sub-Sahara Africa were by nature a submissive people, willing to be led by others. Therefore, when Cotton wrote the constitution of New England, the attitude that people of African decent were less than human was deeply imbedded in the minds of the settlers of this country. This idea has never been rooted out of the psychic of this country. Cotton’s grandson, Increase Mather, was influential in spreading the idea that black was inferior to white. He was reading Robert Boyle’s *Of the Nature of Whiteness and Blackness*, and Sir Isaac Newton’s *Opticks*, each of which set forth the preposterous idea that white was superior to black. It is unknown as to why Boyle changed his original position that pigmentation was only skin deep.

The process of dehumanizing Africans was the first step toward keeping them enslaved. At some point the words Negro and Slave were synonymous. It did not matter if you believed the Curse of Ham theory or the climate theory. What was important was that you understood that this was a plan from God that must be accepted and carried forward; that black skin is inferior to white skin; that blacks are to serve whites.

To further protect themselves, whites such as the early 17th Century Italian philosopher Lucilio Vanini put forth a polygenesis theory, which asserted there were at least three Adams: one for whites, one for blacks, and one for people of the original American (Native Americans). This

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idea was to ensure that we could not all come from the same place of origin. If we did not come from the same place, we would not need to be viewed as the same species. Vanini proposed that Ethiopians and apes shared the same Adam. Does this not seem peculiar, that's all I am asking?

We move ahead to the birth of these United States of America 30 enslaved Africans were brought in chains to these shores. Those who formed the United States of America were aware of the evil of slavery, as they left open the path for redemption. When this country was being formed into a democratic republic as opposed to a federation, in 1787, the question of how to account for slaves was on the table. The reasoning was that to count slaves as full human beings would give the South a great advantage in Congress. The great compromise was to count slaves as 3/5 of a person. Does this not seem peculiar, that's all I am asking?

When the Declaration of Independence originally had within in it the accusations or blame for slavery laid to the King of Great Britain and the condemnation of the practice. Hear the word of Thomas Jefferson.

*“He has incited treasonable insurrections in our fellow-subjects, with the allurements of forfeiture & confiscation of our property: he has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life & liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating & carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither. This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of **infidel** powers, is the warfare of the **CHRISTIAN** king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where **MEN** should be bought & sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce: and that this assemblage of horrors might want no fact of distinguished die, he is now exciting those very people to rise in arms among us, and to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, & murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them; thus paying off former crimes committed against the **liberties** of one people, with crimes which he urges them to commit against the **lives** of another.”*

These are Jefferson's original words. However, by this time the value of free labor was so entrenched into the fiber of this country that to root it out seemed nearly impossible. This nod against slavery was not included in the Declaration of Independent.

Jefferson owned slaves, yet when he finished studying law, one of his early cases was a suit to demand the freedom of a slave that had been promised freedom upon the death of slave master. The judge ruled against Jefferson without allowing the defense attorney to speak. Does this not seem peculiar, that's all I am asking?

Also, by this time, some areas of this country had engraved into its laws that anyone black that was brought or born into this country as a slave would so remain the rest of their natural life. At some point in time, the practice of engaging in a sexual relationship with a person of African

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descent was made illegal. (This seems to only have applied to black men and white women.) Later, this law was changed, and it contained language that children born of this union remained enslaved. Perhaps this law was influenced by the potential for profit of more slaves. Easily thirty percent of all American blacks were of mixed race: that is, they had white ancestors by the time the Emancipation Proclamation was signed in 1863.

So long as there was slavery, there would be racist ideas to justify the God-given rights of whites to be superior to blacks. This is a paraphrase from one of the best-known American Abolitionists, Benjamin Rush. Rush and other abolitionists used the writing of Phillis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, Kawsaw Gronniosaw (James Albert) and others to show that Africans were as human and intelligent as were whites. Each of these people were pure African but showed an amazing grasp of languages. Each had to give up a part of themselves to be recognized as “worthy.” Each of them had to dress, speak and act like Europeans. Selina Hastings, a Methodist woman, exhibited the writings and paintings of Africa throughout England. These exhibits came from Africans who had become Christian. This was a notion that was propagated by Cotton Mather: if Blacks were Christianized, their souls would become white and they would be acceptable as “real humans.” Does this not seem peculiar, that’s all I am asking?

It does not matter if people are of that time or this time. It does not matter if they were segregationist or assimilationist. The idea of the superiority of whites is so steeped into the fabric of this country that rooting it out will require conscious and diligent work.

During this time of slavery, the feeling was again a time of super repression and ridicule. Many think of the south as the place that held the most slaves; that is true in part. However, during the middle 18th century New York had more slaves than any other place in the colonies. In 1777, Vermont became the first to outlaw slavery; followed by Pennsylvania. Rhode Island had passed a gradual reduction of slavery that only allowed for 10 years of servitude. While Quaker and the Mennonite came to be the major champions of the abolishment of slavery. However, in the 17th and 18th centuries they also owned slaves.

By now, in spite of the teaching of virtually every history class on the Civil War; most of us know that the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation was to save the Union. Lincoln wrote the following:

As to the policy I "seem to be pursuing" as you say, I have not meant to leave any one in doubt. I would save the Union. I would save it the shortest way under the Constitution. The sooner the national authority can be restored; the nearer the Union will be "the Union as it was." If there be those who would not save the Union, unless they could at the same time *save* slavery, I do not agree with them. If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time *destroy* slavery, I do not agree with them. My paramount object in this struggle *is* to save the Union and is *not* either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could save it by

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freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do *not* believe it would help to save the Union. I shall do *less* whenever I shall believe what I am doing hurts the cause, and I shall do *more* whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause. I shall try to correct errors when shown to be errors; and I shall adopt new views so fast as they shall appear to be true views.

I have here stated my purpose according to my view of *official* duty; and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed *personal* wish that all men everywhere could be free.

**Yours,
A. Lincoln.)**

Yes, there was a growing feeling that the ideal of slavery had outlived its time. BUT THAT IS NOT THE REASON THE WAR WAS FOUGHT: It was fought to preserve the union. African Americans were once again pieces on the Chess Board of life. of South Carolina, on behalf of the Confederacy, decided to perform a preemptive strike because Abraham Lincoln was elected. They had for some time said they would withdraw if the North took the Presidency.

The country had grown tired of the hypocritical value that was being put forth to the world. The sentiment to stop the perpetuation of slavery as expressed by Lincoln in his debates with Douglas.

During this time slaves were doing every kind of work that one could imagine. Slaves wet nurse your children. Slaves were your children's guardians. Slaves were your children's play mates. Slaves cooked your food. Slaves washed your clothing. Slaves washed your bodies. Slaves were your often-unwilling sex companions. Slaves were your entertainment.

During this same period, you would: beat the wet nurse if the baby cried. Punish the guardian if the child were hurt. When your children reached a certain age, they were told they could no longer play with the slave child. Does this not seem peculiar, that's all I am asking?

The narrative about these people who did all this work was "Slaves are lazy. Slaves are thieves. Slaves are dirty, and slaves are treacherous. This indoctrination is still part of the narrative today.

Now we are confronted with the undeniable reality that our beloved country is still, after 401 years, infused with systemic biases and conscious or unconscious racism.

The issue of how we can truly live as sisters and brothers has plagued this country from the very beginning, from 1619 when the first Africans arrived in this new world.

Yes, the myth of white supremacy and racism has been a tool used by whites to maintain power and domination. This issue will continue to plague us until we face it and then deal with it. As James Baldwin said in his debate with William F. Buckley Jr., "**Not everything that is faced can**

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be changed but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” I do hope that now is the time that we fully face the demons of our past, which continue to haunt us all.

Just as God spoke to the children of Israel, God is speaking to the people of African descent whose forbears were slaves. Exodus 3:21-22 says, “God will give the oppressed people favor.” In 1863 President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. This is arguably the second greatest document for the relief of people of African descent in our country. The most important being the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, ratified in December 1865, which abolished slavery in the United States of America. The promise of Exodus 3:21-22 flowered briefly when Lincoln confiscated 20,000 acres of land and the Freedmen’s Bureau began to redistribute that land to the freed slaves. The promise withered when Andrew Johnson became President and restored all such land to the original owners.

It is my firm belief that until we as a country form something like the South African “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” with an eye toward reparations to the descendants of former slaves, we will never heal. The common question facing both the descendants of former slaves and former slaveholders is to what extent do I have responsibility to right a wrong from the past? Does anyone in our current society see that they gain an advantage from the past, or do they have any personal benefit from what happened the past? How can any of the sins of the past which persist be rectified; is a fair redistribution possible? What would be the format? How could any such concept be accomplished equitably?

I do not hold myself out as an expert in such matters, nor do I think what I am putting forth is a complete list of possibilities for the solution. However, it is my opinion that if we (the United States of America) could rebuild Western Europe, as we did, with the Marshall Plan at a cost of \$13 billion (more than \$100 billion in today’s dollars). We also reconstructed the entire social and economic structure of Japan under the MacArthur occupation in the years of 1945 to 1952. The cost of which is unspecified, then this country can surely muster the will to make what is wrong in our own country right. These measures were taken because it was in the best interest of the people and the right thing to do, not because it was owed to the people of Japan or Western Europe. The question is, does this country have the moral fiber to finally do what it should have been done in 1865? Unlike the above example, this is a debt that is owed, That is, to provide to the people of African descent whose forbears were slaves, a fair chance to be on an equal footing with those who were not enslaved.

I do recognize that the changing of people’s hearts is the first work that must be done. We who call ourselves Christians must first honestly face these issues. What are the issues? What is the wrong that has been perpetrated upon people of African descent whose forbears were slaves? They have been and still are excluded from the rights of and acceptance of full citizenship; this is the greatest issue of all.

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The African slaves had everything – language, customs, and family -- stripped from them when they came to these shores. As the five prominent black Washingtonian men that met with President Lincoln explained to him, “this is the only country that we know.” That is to say, the people of African descent whose forbears were slaves in this country are uniquely American. They have no other home. They cannot go back to Africa for there is no country called Africa. *They are a product of these United States of America, and to be clear, are the only people that did not ask to come here.*

There was a book released in the mid-seventies called “Mandingo,” a fiction set in the South around 1832. On the forward page it reads, “When you take all that a man is you must give him something of value to replace it.” I shall not forget how these words made me feel when I read them. I still get a sense of despair when I think of them today. The United States of America has yet to give to the people of African descent whose forbears were slaves anything of value to replace that which was taken from them. The things of value were beaten, cut, stolen, or psychologically removed from people who were then and still are told to be happy.

The time has come for a Marshall Plan for the people of African descent whose forbears were slaves in this country. If we are to have peace in this country, we must give full birth to the descendants of these slaves as full citizens of the United States of America. No, not to be part of a melting pot, but to be uniquely themselves and accepted for who they are!

We as Christians have a special responsibility to God. In Psalm 51:4, King David said, “against thee and thee alone have I sinned.” He misused Bathsheba and Joab and mistreated and killed Uriah. King David’s actions were against people, but his sin was against God. Similarly, white supremacy, white privilege and its manifestations are actions taken against people of African descent whose forbears were slaves in this country, as well as sins against God. This is in direct contradiction to the commandment love God and to love neighbor.

Love is a verb that requires action. Jesus said if your brother has something against you leave your gift at the altar and go and reconcile with your brother (Matthew 5:23). People of African descent whose forbears were slaves in this country, have something against those who have been complicit with white supremacy and racism, by their silence and inaction. Before there can be conciliation, there must be acknowledgement of the sins of the past and correction.

The first step is to fix what is wrong in the places of worship; then you have the moral authority to speak to the world.

People of African descent whose forbears were slaves suffer from a disproportionate amount of the homelessness in this country. They represent 13% of the population but 40% of homelessness.

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People of African descent whose forbears were slaves are disproportionately incarcerated. Of the nearly three million people locked up, again 40% are from this population.

People of African descent whose forbears were slaves suffer stark and persistent racial disparities in health coverage, chronic health conditions, mental health, and mortality.

People of African descent whose forbears were slaves suffer disproportionately from food insecurity. Of the approximately 41 million people in this country facing food insecurity, about 21% are of this group.

People of African descent whose forbears were slaves suffer disproportionately from out-of-school suspensions, as well as from in-school suspensions. They represent about 57% of the population that drop out before graduation. In both college and the building trades, they are grossly under-represented.

There are many scores of examples of such inequality in the United States, from housing and employment discrimination, to life expectancy and the quality of available medical care, to equal treatment by the justice system.

And, as we have been so painfully reminded by the videos of George Floyd, and Ahmaud Arbery people of African descent whose forbears were slaves suffer from a disproportionate amount of the deaths at the hands of law enforcement and citizen vigilantes. It is my contention that they (and many others in the dominant society) see people of African descent as “the other” -- not as full members of the human race.

Where do we go from here?

1. Pray and ask God to change hearts and minds.
2. Advocate for the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation commission first within your houses of worship and then within the structure of the United States Government.
3. Out of the Truth and Reconciliation would come a “Marshall Plan, which would then begin to solve the issues of disparity in wealth, health, homelessness and food insecurity.
4. Work for the reform of the justice system and the law enforcement in our country.
5. Work to establish a group that would work with the United States Department of Housing and Urban development to end homelessness.
6. Work to reduce the number of people that are incarcerated and strive for equal sentencing for people of African descent in this country.

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7. Work toward solving food insecurity among all people, with special attention to people of African descent in this country.
8. Repair the breach in our public education system that currently keeps schools on different tracks.
9. Every person of African descent whose forebears were slaves should receive a cash payment equal to the value of the slave labor in today's dollars; paid by the federal government.

These are a few of my thoughts on the issues of what we can do and where we go from here. Given the amount of pain that has been afflicted upon people of African descent whose forebears were slaves, it is clear that some measure of extraordinary difficulty must be used to repair the breach. It is the right time, and you are the right people, to right the wrong and sins of the past. Thereby, causing this country to live into the greatness of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of these United States of America.