

A TIME FOR CHANGE

August 2020

My reading has turned heavy over the last few months. It began with the purchase of David W. Blight's massive biography entitled "Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom." Then it was three books I owned but had not read: "Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl" by Harriet Jacobs, "Twelve Years a Slave" by Solomon Northrup, and "Uncle Tom's Cabin" by Harriet Beecher Stowe. Finally, it was "White Fragility" by Robin DiAngelo. I have, as they say, gotten an education.

The first three books are the epic stories of three persons who escaped from enslavement. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" is thought by many to have galvanized the disgust toward the practice of enslavement, leading to calls for abolition and ultimately the US Civil War. "White Fragility" is a forceful exposure of the way white behavior protects the systems of racial inequality. For me the reading has been eye-opening, heartbreaking, and disgusting. Coming as it has during the vast and overdue Black Lives Matter Movement, I am convinced now more than ever that the time for change is long overdue.

I've been to several Civil War battle sites and they unnerved me. I've read enough Civil War literature to realize that it was the struggle for the soul of the United States. But it was not until I read the accounts written by persons who had been enslaved, and had escaped, that I was forced to come to terms with the degradation and evil of the systems of enslavement. There was nothing benign about it. The value of the labor of the enslaved was stolen. The legal system enforced that. The churches were complicit. National heroes trafficked in the enslaved. Confederates rebelled, abandoned the Union, and fought to preserve enslavement. When they were defeated, their sympathizers erected monuments to the lost cause. And to this day the foul residue has survived as the result of Jim Crow laws and segregation. The lives of the enslaved did not matter even to the fifth generation of their children and their children's children.

Enough! It's time for change!

Every generation of the enslaved, their ancestors, their children, their children's children, long to be free. Why should that be so hard in "the land of the free and the home of the brave?" James Weldon Johnson told the truth when he wrote: "Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod, felt in the days when hope unborn had died; yet with a steady beat, have not our weary feet come to the place for which our fathers sighed? We have come over a way that with tears have been watered; we have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered, out from the gloomy past, till now we stand at last where the white gleam of our bright star is cast." Indeed!

None of us are free until all of us are free. None of us are safe until all of us are safe. None of us can breathe until all of us can breathe. Emma Lazarus spoke for and spoke to the nation when she wrote the words emblazoned on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty.

"Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand

A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
'Keep ancient lands, your storied pomp!' cries she
With silent lips. 'Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!'"

"Yearning to breathe free!" Indeed! Either these words are meant for all or they are meant for no one!
At the moment America is not fully living up to the vision these words embody. It is time for change!