

**Opening Words:** I am inclined to believe that most people suffer from some sort of post traumatic stress disorder. Human life beats everyone up at some point. It is only the magnitude that varies. I learned late in his life that my dad, a wonderful but troubled man, saw everyone in his naval work group killed and torn to pieces right in front of him by a kamikaze pilot. You don't shake something like that off.

Malignant PTSD follow across the generations. Some of my challenges in life are directly connected to the day in Okinawa that my dad's spirit was permanently damaged by watching his comrades be mutilated. My hunch is that my sons have suffered from the hangover of that horrifying event through me.

It occurred to me recently that cultures can suffer from PTSD just like individuals. And what could create a cultural PTSD more thoroughly than the horrifying scourge of slavery and racism? It isn't just individuals and families that were and are crushed, I believe they have permanently damaged our culture, American culture. Slavery and racism are still working their insidious magic on us all.

I'd like to start today's service with a portion of Martin Luther King's famous Letter from a Birmingham Jail, one of the defining documents of the civil rights movement. King had been criticized by other religious leaders for moving too fast in his battle against institutionalized racism, a fight that had landed him in a jail in Birmingham, Alabama, and led him to write his letter.

"We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God given rights. Other nations are moving with jet like speed toward gaining political independence, but we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brothers and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six

year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that it is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five year old son who is asking: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"

### **Reading 1:** Noel Rae - Time Magazine

[Civil war era] Presbyterian Bishop Stephen Elliott, of Georgia, knew how to look on the bright side. Critics of slavery should, *and here I quote the Bishop* "consider whether, by their interference with this institution, they may not be checking and impeding a work which is manifestly Providential. For nearly a hundred years the English and American Churches have been striving to civilize and Christianize Western Africans, and with what result? Around Sierra Leone, and in the neighborhood of Cape Palmas, a few natives have been made Christians, and some nations have been partially civilized; but what a small number in comparison with the thousands, nay, I may say millions, who have learned the way to Heaven and who have been made to know their Savior through the means of African slavery! At this very moment there are from three to four millions of Africans, educating for earth and for Heaven in the so vilified Southern States—learning the very best lessons for a semi-barbarous people—lessons of self-control, of obedience, of perseverance, of adaptation of means to ends; learning, above all, where their weakness lies, and how they may acquire strength for the battle of life. These considerations satisfy me with their condition, and assure me that it is the best relation they can, for the present, be made to occupy."

### **Reading 2:** Frederick Douglass

Here is what Frederick Douglass, the great abolitionist who started life as a slave, had to say about his owner, after that man was born again at a religious revival: "I indulged a faint hope that his conversion would lead him to emancipate his slaves, and that, if he did not do this, it would, at any rate, make him more kind and humane," Douglass

writes. "I was disappointed in both these respects. It neither made him to be humane to his slaves, nor to emancipate them. If it had any effect on his character, it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways; for I believe him to have been a much worse man after his conversion than before. Prior to his conversion, he relied upon his own depravity to shield and sustain him in his savage barbarity; but after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slave holding cruelty . . . I assert most unhesitatingly that the religion of the South is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes, a justifier of the most horrid barbarity."

### **Sermon:** Cultural PTSD

This summer I drove from Chicago to Montgomery Alabama. It was a vacation of sorts, my first in many years. The drive reminded me that the deep south is a long way from Chicago. After countless hours behind the wheel, I stopped to get gas in Birmingham Alabama and heard the wonderful accents of the clerks and customers, an accent connected to a casual civility so absent in the north. I was reminded of how different the culture there is from my own. Leaving Birmingham, I was less than an hour away from Montgomery and I began to anticipate arriving at my destination. Before I got there however, along the interstate highway, on a gigantic flagpole, I saw the largest flag I have ever seen. It wasn't the American flag, or even the Alabama flag. It was the battle flag of the confederate states of America. If the intent behind the flag was to puzzle and infuriate travelers from the north, it's mission was accomplished. The folks that spent a large amount of money to display that flag along the interstate apparently didn't consider what a black person might feel when they see a flag that represents the torture and enslavement and destruction of their family. I did. People are different that way.

I grew up in a very small town in west central Illinois. It had less than 3,000 people, most of whom my family was acquainted with. A tiny place indeed. When I was a child it seemed like the entire universe. But it was a universe with one important thing missing. There were no people of color. None. Every single person in town was white.

In the long ago Civil War, the citizens of my hometown enlisted in the Union Army. Over 600,000 Union soldiers died in that civil war, the war to end slavery. 600,000 people died for an idea, the idea that slavery was an evil abomination that must be eradicated from the face of the earth. Our local cemetery has an entire section for townspeople who died fighting to save the Union, died fighting to eliminate slavery from our nation. The famous drummer boy of Shiloh was from my hometown. Edward Hager was killed at age 14 in the battle of Shiloh and is buried in the local cemetery. Abraham Lincoln, the man who wrote the emancipation proclamation, came through my hometown many times doing his circuit of county courthouses.

In spite of our town's history of giving the ultimate sacrifice to defeat human bondage, when I was a kid those ideals often seemed far away. It was not uncommon to hear racial slurs in this town whose ancestors fought against slavery. So I was exposed regularly to the word those of us in polite society now call the N word. I've often wondered about my response to hearing these slurs. I had no experience to base an opinion regarding people of color, since they were an abstraction to me. But I knew in my gut that it was wrong to consider someone lesser than you because of their color. I knew that the N word was a terrible slur. This reaction was not taught to me, it just seemed morally wrong to use racial slurs. Why does a kid like me have that response and another kid enthusiastically joins in the racist name calling?

I don't know. I wish I did. If we knew we might be able to fix it. I'm thankful that my gut instinct was to reject racist nonsense. Many people in my home town did not.

I beat myself up over my silence when a slur was expressed. I tried to come up with a response that would not be confrontational, but rather would encourage those I heard speak the slur to stop. Eventually, so I could look in a mirror, I started saying the following when someone used a racial slur around me. Sadly, I still have to use it on occasion. "It surprises me that you'd say that." I remark. "You're better than that." It almost always seems to stir some thought. They get quiet. Perhaps it appeals to their better angels in some fashion.

It is apparent to me, given that people with no experience with people of color could demean and demonize them, that something has gone haywire in our culture. Racism is obviously learned behavior. How is a such a lesson learned? It's handed down through the generations, rigging our society against people of color. This is a truth. My destination in Montgomery provides countless items of proof of this truth. Slavery is our nation's original sin and we continue to pay a price for it's biblical horror.

The civil war was six short generations ago. Slavery existed six short generations ago. When I was a child there were people still alive who lived during slavery and the civil war. My family is still affected by a plane crash three generations ago. Imagine how forcefully malignant experiences like say, the tortuous, spirit crushing 400 years of slavery linger on. The distant past can and will reach into the present with unsettling ease. Ask any African American.

If you would ask the people who put the flag up along the interstate what led to the civil war they would say it was the struggle for state's rights. That would be an lie. There is still a plaque on the grounds of the Texas state capital commemorating this lie. This I know. I know it because of all the historical scholarship that proves it. The civil war was fought because southern landowner's wealth was rooted in slave labor. The war was fought over arguably the worst horror in human history, human slavery, not state's right. A critical mass of northerners wanted it to end. Wealthy southerners wanted to maintain the status quo and their wealth. Part of the southern strategy was convincing poor white southerners that black people were no better than animals, that black people were murderous fiends, the enemy of good christian whites, their mortal enemy. It is a black hearted lie that got poor whites to fight to continue slavery, a lie that continues to work it's magic today in alt-right circles today.

I used to visit the deep south regularly when I was younger. On a trip south in my mid 20's I visited Oxford, Mississippi with some German friends who were obsessed with William Faulkner. In the course of the trip I met a large group of college educated young people also in their 20's. We hung out together and I became quite taken with one of the group, a lovely young lady from a prosperous family in Oxford. She was a graduate of the University of Mississippi. Listening to her beautiful accent and

engaging story telling I found myself becoming smitten. Until she dropped a string of N words with stunning casualness. I was crestfallen. I had never heard a college graduate or a woman speak like that. The casual use of racist hate speech was revolting to me. I was too shocked to use my standard admonition. I wasn't sure how it would play in the south. So much for my brief infatuation. I had seen beyond the veneer of civility. That was my last trip to the deep south for many years.

But this summer I was drawn back to the South. It wasn't that I wanted to go south. It's that I had to. I watched TV one evening and there on the screen were children in cages. In America. The United States. No white children mind you. They all were brown children. This was no accident. And they didn't get there by some obscene screw up. They were forcibly taken from their parents and put in cages by choice. The choice of the current executive branch. I have never been more revolted by the actions of my country in my entire life. I've lived through Vietnam, Nixon, Cheney, the dishonest and deadly Iraqi invasion. To me, a lifelong educator, a former school counselor, a father who loves my kids more than life itself, putting innocent children in cages short circuited my brain. It was like a nightmarish dream, the stuff of totalitarian regimes. No matter the reason for their incarceration, these children are scarred for life. It is child abuse. Several months later there are still children that haven't been returned to their parents.

I could not process it. What kind of human beings sign off on this? Short of voting the scoundrels out, what could I do? The fourth of July was approaching. I would not be waving flags this year. The elections were too far away to give solace. I saw an article about a new museum and monument. The article gave me chills. I quickly decided that all I could do for the time being was to bear witness. I decided I must make a pilgrimage to Montgomery Alabama. A pilgrimage to bear witness to the fact our president allowed innocent children of color to be sacrificed as pawns of white supremacist xenophobes and their demented racist agenda.

So on July 3rd, off to Montgomery I went.

As I said, on the way down I saw a giant Confederate flag waving along the Interstate highway. I started to wonder what awaited me in Montgomery. On one long ago trip to the south I was confronted by southern rednecks that took exception to my long hair. They scared me senseless. I'm old and conservative looking now so that's not a problem anymore. But could a racist redneck look onto my eyes and know I was a Yankee liberal? I got a motel room outside of Montgomery and small talked with the white desk clerk. She told me that she had lived there her whole life and loved it, she would never move. She told me that it's so safe that me she never locks her front door. Why just last night she said, her husband forgot and left the windows down on his pickup truck and this morning his Smith and Wesson was still layin' on the seat.

Dennis, I thought, you are not in Kansas anymore.

The next morning I drove to downtown Montgomery at 7 am to give myself some time to explore before the Memorial and museum opened at 9 am. The downtown was deserted, it was like a ghost town. I had my bike with me and set out on the empty streets. It was the 4th of July but it still surprised me how empty it was. Very quickly I realized that the downtown contained an astonishing history lesson. I was there to see a museum and memorial that told the history of slavery and lynching and mass incarceration. But I quickly learned that the downtown was thick with vitally important American history. Over there was the square that was the location of one of the busiest slave auctions in the world. A block away was the bus stop where Rosa Parks refused to go to the back of the bus. A couple of blocks away the old greyhound bus station, now the freedom riders museum. A couple of blocks the other way is a beautiful minor league ball park built out of old buildings that held cotton and slaves and Union prisoners of war. Many of the prisoners died from malnutrition and diseases on the spot that families now come to watch baseball on sunny afternoons. The prisoners in the Montgomery Civil War prison were from the battle of Shiloh, the battle that the young men from my home town fought and died and were taken captive. Small world.

Just up the street from the slave market is the capital building of Alabama, a building that served as the first capital of the Confederacy. Across the street from the first

capital building of the confederacy is the home of Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy. Just a few steps back down the street from Davis' house and the capital of the confederacy is one of the most beautiful brick churches you will ever see. The Dexter Avenue Baptist Church. That church was Martin Luther King's church, the church from which he began organizing the civil rights movement.

I was moved to tears by the things I saw, by the compressed history in this one modest downtown. Some of the most important things in American history happened within a 5 minute bike ride around places in Montgomery Alabama. Somehow I had it all to myself. It had a twilight zone feel to it all. I wondered if there would be people at the memorial and museum on this national holiday. I finally ran into another human being, a New York transplant who was a docent at the Jefferson Davis museum. He told me the signs marking events in the history of the civil rights movements were recent additions to downtown. No signs had communicated to visitors the remarkable events of the civil rights movement occurring right there until recently. The confederate commemoration signs had been there for decades.

It was finally time to go to and complete my pilgrimage, to bear witness for the long continuum of racism that led from slavery to brown children in cages. Montgomery is now home to a memorial, The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, and a museum, The Legacy Museum, from Enslavement to Mass Incarceration, better known by it's nickname, the Lynching museum. They are what brought me to Montgomery.

The memorial covers a full block on a rise in a residential neighborhood of Montgomery. I parked near the memorial and my breath was taken away. I had seen pictures but they don't do the memorial justice. It is a spectacular work of art. A world class work of art. Going through it is like visiting a huge, open church. It is quiet and solemn. Eight hundred steel boxes hang from the ceiling of a huge rectangular space with an open center. They hang from the ceiling, mimicking the hanging of human beings. Some boxes are hanging just above the ground, others high above your head. It was only near the end of my visit that I realized the boxes were the size of coffins. At the center of the memorial is an open square, a metaphorical reminder that the murderous act being referenced often happened in public squares, surrounded by socializing locals and their children, smiling at the camera as a broken and dead

body hangs above them. Each of the 800 boxes represents a state and a county in that state, and each box has the names of the African Americans who were murdered by lynching in that county. The power of the setting is overwhelming. It is simultaneously beautiful and horrifying. The number of names on the boxes is mind numbing.

A reminder. What were the sins of those whose lynchings were being noted in steel metaphorical coffins?

They were tortured and killed for being humans who were black. Humans with a little more melatonin than their neighbors.

Outside of the memorial are 800 duplicate boxes lying prone, side by side, all the states and counties, and victim's names replicated in steel. It was there that I realized they represented caskets. These duplicate boxes, monuments to brutal murders, are there so that any of the 800 counties where lynchings have taken place can send a representative to pick up the box and put in on display in their county to bear witness to the horrors perpetrated in the name of white supremacy.

Not a single county has taken their box back home for display.

The Legacy Museum: from Enslavement to Mass Incarceration is in a separate building downtown. It requires a reservation. If you do not enter that building one person and leave as another person I would have to wonder about your makeup. It is impossible to share all of the lessons and information and heartache contained in that building so I hope you will visit on your own. You must. Just a couple of observations. I thought I knew the story of slavery. I did not. Did you know that slave families for the most part stayed together and the slavery was not a major part of the deep south's economy until Congress abolished the African Slave ships in 1807? Around the same time the cotton gin made cotton processing profitable, with slave labor. Only about 30,000 slave were in Alabama when slave ships were banned. 50 years later, at the start of the civil war, over 400,00 slaves were in Alabama. After slave ships were banned a forced exodus of slaves from the border states to the deep south occurred,

families were torn apart, and slaves became quite valuable to cotton plantation owners, more valuable than they were to the north. A lot of opportunistic slave owners became extraordinarily wealthy after the abolishment of slave ships.

Part of the genius of the museum is that it isn't just about slavery but about the ways that the power structure in the south engineered laws after slavery was abolished in order to control and incarcerate blacks. To this day one in three black men end up in prison or jail during their lifetimes. Here is a remarkable fact. In 1890, long after traditional slavery was abolished, 73% of the Alabama state budget came from the profits of leasing black inmates to do work for land owners. Still today, the laws against marijuana and the judicial system that enforces those laws slap white teenagers on the wrist and puts young black men in jail. The rigged system continues over 150 years after slavery was outlawed.

The museum overwhelms you with data that reveals the cold, dark heart of institutionalized racism.

I cannot effectively put into words the certainty I have regarding the connection between slavery and the strain of white supremacy we see in conservative politics today. I've rarely been so sure of anything in my life. The museum will educate you regarding this connective tissue. You must visit Montgomery and connect the dots on your own.

I hope you get to visit the memorial. And after you see what you see there, consider if slavery and lynching and mass incarceration have been horror enough to create cultural PTSD. I assure you that the answer is yes.

I better connected the dots between slavery and Charlottesville and putting brown children in cages. I thought the cages were unhinged madness. The reality is that children in cages is mad to folks like us, but to our adversaries it is merely an acknowledgement of "the Other", a way of keeping people divided and uncritical of their real enemies, a strategy that scoundrels have used since the beginning of time.

In the wake of visiting the museum, my exercise in bearing witness, my pilgrimage to Montgomery seemed like one of the most important experiences I'd ever had. On the drive back home to Illinois, I was a different person. A more informed person. A more enlightened person. I was also a person without a computer. When I was a couple of hours into my 12 hour drive back north, I realized I had left my computer somewhere after my museum visit. My whole creative world is on that computer. I raced back to Montgomery in a panic. As it turned out, folks at a restaurant making minimum wage had found my expensive computer and saved it for me. I recall the incident to remind you that we are surrounded by lovely, compassionate people no matter where we are, and that scoundrels are a minority. But just like cancer, a few malignant cells can kill the entire organism. That malignancy is a threat that must be acknowledged and brought under control. The museum and memorial in Montgomery are beautiful examples of disease control.

News flash. My little hometown now has people of color. People of color are there now because, in a bid to bring a few jobs to a economically ravaged area of the state, the city fathers lobbied for, and received, a minimum security prison facility. My lily white small home town now is home to The Greene County Impact Incarceration Program. The Incarceration program is almost wholly inhabited by young black men from Chicago.

Black men in prisons.

Brown children in cages.

We are better than this.

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**Closing Words:**

One of the things that crossed my mind at the Memorial and museum in Montgomery was how in the world they could have come to be there. It is miraculous that they exist to inspire and inform people about slavery, lynching and mass incarceration in the heart of the deep south. Many people are responsible for bringing these institutions to fruition, but they would not be there without the work and passion of one man in particular. BRYAN STEVENSON is the founder and Executive Director of the Equal Justice Initiative in Montgomery, Alabama, the organization behind the Memorial and Museum. He is also a Professor of Law at the New York University School of Law. He has initiated major new anti-poverty and anti-discrimination efforts that challenge the legacy of racial inequality in America, including major projects to educate communities about slavery, lynching and racial segregation. He was the driving force behind the Memorial for Peace and Justice as well as the Legacy Museum: From Slavery to Mass Incarceration.

This man is a national treasure. Please go visit the memorial and museum that he helped make happen.