

**A Tiny Room Under the Eaves**  
**Sunday, November 17, 2019**  
*Thoughts to ponder at the beginning:*

The care of so many necessitated much work and anxiety on our part,  
but we assumed the burden of our own will and bore it cheerfully.  
– Levi Coffin

“When we talk about slavery and spiritual decimation, we often talk about black folks.  
But something has happened to white folks in this whole process.  
– Juanita Brown, producer of *Traces of the Trade: A Story from the Deep North*.

**Opening Words and Chalice Lighting**

Words of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

Our world, so worn and weary,  
Needs music, pure and strong,  
To hush the jangle and discords  
Of sorrow, pain and wrong.  
Music to soothe all its sorrow,  
Till wrong and crime shall cease;  
And heart of all grow tender  
To light the world to peace.

**Reading** from the Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed

We need a black Haggadah that begins: “We were stolen from Africa and enslaved in America, the land of liberty ...” And we need a time set aside when families gather for a meal and retell the tale, using a newer, truer narrative.

Black history is America’s history. Being a slave is as American as George Washington and apple pie. The Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, the Great Migration, and the civil rights movement are more central to the American story than the embellished tale of the Pilgrims elevated to an all-American feast day.

The Afro-American journey from slavery to freedom is the saga of the unfinished revolution, the unfolding story of America’s history. This experience is one of the defining characteristics of

American culture, and neither exists apart from the other. They are interdependent, and this is what integration means: to bring together the parts to form an authentic whole.

If every family in America gathered yearly to celebrate the black struggle, which is the quintessential American struggle to be free, black self-esteem might well flower, and the American psyche might be transformed. For in celebrating that experience all of us would be honestly acknowledging our identity as a people.

Afro-American slavery however...remains a festering wound—a trans-generational trauma— which the years have yet to change into a redeeming narrative that transforms our slavery from a cause for shame into a source of strength.

**Sermon**

“A Tiny Room under the Eaves”

(c) Rev. Sylvia A. Stocker

In June, I traveled to Richmond, Indiana, to help my son move to Maine. Over the years, I have visited there many times, and I have gotten to know the area a bit. Richmond is an economically depressed city that has lost its shine. But it has an interesting history. Musically, Richmond has influenced our nation. In the 1920's Richmond's Gennett Recording studios recorded the jazz, country, and blues musicians of the day, producing music that the larger recording companies did not record. Artists like Louis Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, and Hoagie Carmichael rode the train to Richmond to record their legendary music.

But, what I found most interesting was the region's connection with the Underground Railroad. Some years ago I discovered an amazing historical landmark just north of Richmond: the house Levi and Catherine Coffin<sup>1</sup> built in 1824 in what is now Fountain City, Indiana. I have now visited it three times over the years. This past June, I made one more pilgrimage there, because I consider the Coffin house to be holy ground.

I had never heard of the Coffins until I discovered their historical landmark house. Once I learned their story, I wondered why it wasn't more commonly known. As it turns out, Levi Coffin was considered the unofficial president of the Underground Railroad. In his lifetime, Levi with his wife Catherine, conducted over 3000 freedom seekers to freedom. Many of them stayed at their house there in Indiana. All of their underground railroad passengers ultimately made it safely to freedom.

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1 Brunswick's Robert P. T. Coffin and Levi Coffin are distant cousins, related to the same Coffin family that settled on Nantucket Island in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The Coffins constructed the house themselves, taking care to include a clever hiding place. Three times over the last few years I have stood in the upstairs children's bedroom where, there under the eaves, a door in the knee wall leads to a secret chamber. Freedom seekers could hide inside, and the doorway could be completely obscured by sliding a bed or dresser in front of it. Three times I have stood in the parlor where Catherine and her sewing circle stitched new clothes to replace the tatters the freedom seekers often arrived wearing. Three times I have explored the carriage shed, which holds a wagon with a false bottom floor under which slaves could hide. The slaves would climb inside. Hay or bags of grain would piled high on top. The risk of encountering slave catchers was always all too real. Slave catchers, hoping to root out freedom seekers, would drive pitchforks into the wagon loads. Soft hay or grain would absorb the blows, and the hidden compartment would keep the people safe.

The history I learned in school didn't tell the truth – that our country was built on the backs of enslaved people. America's rise to a vibrant nation was made possible because of slave labor. America relied on unpaid labor to keep costs down to make American products attractive. As Mark Morrison-Reed says, *Being a slave is as American as George Washington and apple pie... The Afro-American journey from slavery to freedom is the saga of the unfinished revolution, the unfolding story of America's history.*

The wounds of that unfinished revolution still fester, resulting in a haunting spiritual malaise. Even now, in every measure – from health to wealth to safety – people of color have it much worse off than people whose skin looks like mine. The solutions to the inequities are myriad and complicated. I believe the stories we tell about our country can help bring healing.

In a week and a half, much of America will gather around the festive board to celebrate the Thanksgiving myth – a story that is both untrue and hurtful to our first nations siblings. What if we told a different story, as Mark Morrison-Reed suggests? Wouldn't the bravery, perseverance, and creativity of African Americans be a good story, an *amazing* story, to tell? Wouldn't telling the still unfolding story of the long walk to freedom provide inspiration for our country?

A couple of weeks ago, I watched the movie, *Harriet*. Although the movie altered the facts of Harriet Tubman's life in typical Hollywood style, I was delighted to see her story gain prominence. Hers is an excellent story to tell. Likewise the story of the Coffins, Harriet's counterparts in freedom work, is an excellent story to tell.

So who were Levi and Catherine Coffin? They were fully committed to ending the blight of slavery. They supported themselves as merchants – keeping a store featuring goods made only by the labor of free workers. Slavery was so thoroughly woven into the fabric of American commerce that it was a challenge to find free-labor goods to sell. Furthermore, goods produced by enslaved people were

usually cheaper and often of better quality. The Coffins sacrificed profits in favor of conscience (Imagine!)

The Coffins' efforts never made them rich in body, but I think they both moved through life and eventually died very rich in soul. I think Levi and Catherine Coffin provide wonderful role models. Their example offers us some tools for navigating troubling times.

First, the Coffins had spiritual guidance. Levi and Catherine were lifelong Quakers. Their Quaker heritage gave them a system of ethics, spirituality, and support. Many Quakers actively opposed slavery and worked towards its eradication. The Coffins didn't work alone. Their Quaker community offered sustenance to help see them through the challenges, dangers, and fears they must have felt sometimes.

Second, their experiences inspired their work. They grew up in North Carolina, where they were well acquainted with slavery's evils. In his autobiography, Levi wrote of one particular early experience that marked his heart and soul forever:

*I date my conversion to Abolitionism from an incident which occurred when I was about seven years old. It made a deep and lasting impression on my mind, and created that horror of the cruelties of slavery which has been the motive of so many actions of my life...*

*Virginia and Maryland were the principal slave-rearing States, and to a great extent supplied the Southern market. Free negroes in Pennsylvania were frequently kidnapped or decoyed into these States, then hurried away to Georgia, Alabama, or Louisiana, and sold. The gangs were handcuffed and chained together, and driven by a man on horseback, who flourished a long whip, such as is used in driving cattle, and goaded the reluctant and weary when their feet lagged on the long journey.*

*One day I was by the roadside where my father was chopping wood, when I saw such a gang approaching ... The coffle of slaves came first, chained in couples on each side of a long chain which extended between them; the driver was some distance behind, with the wagon of supplies. My father addressed the slaves pleasantly, and then asked: "Well, boys, why do they chain you?"*

*One of the men ... replied: "They have taken us away from our wives and children, and they chain us lest we should make our escape and go back to them."*

*My childish sympathy and interest were aroused, and when the dejected procession had passed on, I turned to my father and asked many questions ... In simple words, suited to my comprehension, my father explained to me the meaning of slavery, and, as I listened, the thought arose in my mind, "How*

*terribly we should feel if father were taken away from us.” (Coffin, 2-3)*

That experience and others like it inspired Levi to assist freedom seekers who made it to the woods surrounding the Coffin farm. He often worked with his cousin, Vestal, who is credited with organizing the Underground Railroad in North Carolina. (Yanessa, 3)

So even before Levi reached adulthood, his commitment to the work was firm. Which brings me to the third point about the Coffins’ lives: *They had opportunities to act.*

In the 1820s, as North Carolina became more repressive of abolitionists, Levi and his new wife Catherine decided to move to Indiana, where the Quaker community was strong and growing. (Yanessa, 11) They lived there for 20 years, then moved to Cincinnati, where they continued their work. Both Indiana and Ohio were free states contiguous with the slave states of Kentucky and Virginia. That put the Coffins right on the route freedom seekers typically traveled – a perfect location to do the work that was so important to them.

So the Coffins had three tools: spiritual guidance, experiences that inspired action, and opportunities to act. Might we use those tools to continue to heal the wounds our nation’s shameful history has left festering?

**First**, part of our mission is to be a spiritual community – one that holds us as we grow hearts and souls. No one of us has to generate all the love, courage, or forbearance to do the hard work. That is something we do together. To me that means I can share in the collective spirit of our community – surely more fertile than what I can muster alone. When I feel tired or discouraged, I can also lean on that larger spirit, however I define it, whether I call it God or the source of love or the highest of human aspirations. Being part a spiritual community can help to lead me in the directions of enlightenment, reconciliation, and peace, and also give me a source of sustenance for my work.

**Second**, experience is an ongoing thing – opening eyes, minds, and hearts provides moments of illumination. That is true even though this isn’t North Carolina or Indiana during slave times. We are witnesses and participants in our times. Every one of us has some connection to the stain of racism; we have stories to tell and hearts to unburden. For me, and perhaps for you, too, that means continually examining my own experience to uncover the privilege I carry just by virtue of being born white. It means listening to the experiences of others – especially those people who do not share the undeserved privileges my culture grants to me. And it means recognizing my own heart and spirit have been broken by the legacy of slavery. The wounds fester not only in the south and in the hearts and souls of black people, but in the north and in my heart, too.

Sometimes I hear white folks around here lament that they don't know any black people. But, at the very least, most of us can read, and we can seek out first hand accounts of people's lives. Also, not everyone living in Maine is white. So, maybe white people should question *why* they don't know black people.

Over the years, this congregation has provided a variety of experiences meant to part the clouds and shine some light on the racism and white supremacy. With community book reads, speakers, and films, we have brought marginalized black voices into our midst. Collaborating with Portland's Abyssinian Meeting House, we have lifted up black history, focusing on Maine's rich, though largely invisible, black history. With several Ysaye Barnwell *Building a Vocal Community* workshops, we have used music to retell our nation's story. And the work continues. That's just here. If we want experiences, we can find them.

*Finally*, opportunity to act. We may not find ourselves involved in something as dramatic as the Underground Railroad, but we have minds, hearts, and voices. Here are some thoughts. We can work to address climate change and environmental degradation, which adversely affect the poor – and thus, people of color – in higher proportions than they affect white people. We can shine a much needed light on the conservative war on voting rights in this country – something aimed largely at black populations. We can explore ways to assist some of the poorer schools in our region.

And, of course, we can change our story – exposing false narratives and telling history as it was, and finding the narratives that will reveal our country's truth. Because when we center the histories of people of color, we find stories – not just of horror and shame – but of incredible bravery, dignity, creativity, and honor. Maybe we can start now, telling Harriet Tubman's or the Coffins' stories at our Thanksgiving gatherings.

Levi and Catherine Coffin dedicated their lives as best they could in their times. The Coffins continued their work during the Civil War – and even afterwards, when they helped former slaves find education and work. Levi and Catherine lived into old age. They saw the end of the Civil War and the addition of the fifteenth Amendment to the U. S. Constitution. I imagine at the end of their lives they could feel they had been partners in their nation's history instead of passive recipients of that history.

These are our times. Our healing work awaits. Let us begin, that someday our nation might truly be set free.

**Benediction**

Words of Paul Robeson

Sorrow will one day turn to joy. All that breaks the heart and oppresses the soul will one day give place to peace and understanding and everyone will be free.

**Sources:**

Mary Ann Yannessa, 2001. *Levi Coffin, Quaker: Breaking the Bonds of Slavery in Ohio and Indiana* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press.)

Levi Coffin, 1876. *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin*. (Republished by Richard Buchko in 2014. 109 5<sup>th</sup> Street #5, Calumet MI 49913. 906-369-4047. historyandhobby@yahoo.com)