

The Middle Passage Out of Diversity, We Become Whole

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As Waldorf teachers and Anthroposophists, we have before us the opportunity to formulate new thoughts that may bring us closer to understanding the nature of our diverse culture, a culture that struggles continuously to realize its ideals and know its true identity. By working together with the challenging questions of race and diversity, we will develop new capacities that will contribute to the reality and wholeness of the American spirit.

In March 1996, during AWSNA's Eastern Regional Conference, Norman Davidson gave a talk describing aspects of the American Spirit. He characterized the contribution of the Native American People as being intimately connected to the natural world. He suggested that the souls of their ancestors live on in the rocks, trees, forest, plains, deserts, rivers, lakes and sky adding their formative forces onto the present through the spiritual forces in nature.

The Europeans who came to settle on this continent came seeking the opportunity to better their lives and found a land of vast potential. Norman suggested that once on this continent, the Europeans no longer identified with their previous nationality, but became Americans in the way they walked, talked and thought. They were faithful in their efforts to develop the material resources of this new land. They penetrated its material wealth and created a new world order.

During the plenum following Norman's lecture, the question came, "What does it mean that some people came to this country of their own free will, looking for a new life, promise, opportunity and individual freedom, while others were brought here as slaves?" As the only African-American participant in the conference, I remember my feelings at that moment. Where can I hide? Was everyone going to turn around and look at the expression on my face? I could almost sense the strain in every participant's neck as they consciously refrained from doing so. It had been such a wonderful talk, a wonderful conference, why did we have to bring up "the problem?" Why do I have to be "a problem?" W.E.B. DuBois, an African-American who was born in Great Barrington, Massachusetts in 1868, wrote in his book *The Souls of Black Folk* about the moment he first recognized that he was "a problem."

It is in the early days of rollicking boyhood that the revelation first bursts upon one, all in a day, as it were. I remember well when the shadow swept across me. I, as a little thing, away up in the hills of New England, where the dark Housatonic winds blew between Hoosac and Taghkanic to the sea. In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boy' and girls' heads to buy gorgeous visiting-cards, and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card. Refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil. (DuBois, 1989).

Two questions emanate from this passage: What is the nature of that veil? What is its origin? To consider these questions, let us look at historical accounts and images of Africans and their European Slavers when first bound to America's future.

There is a painting in the Library of Congress depicting George Washington on his Virginia Plantation. Washington stands to the right-hand side of the painting looking directly at a white man holding a long rake. The focus of their gaze excludes anything else in the painting. The man appears to be in charge of the work that is being done in the fields directly behind President Washington. Washington stands holding the reins of his horse in his right hand and a strong looking crop in his left hand pointed

downward and gesturing slightly toward the scene in the field. On the left-hand side of the painting, two white children sit in the grass, one combing the other's hair. Central and yet clear in the background, is a group of field slaves cutting hay and putting it onto a wagon. One of the slaves is serving water to two thirsty workers. They appear to be well-dressed, healthy, and able to toss hay to the top of a wagon without any apparent effort. They make eye contact with each other, but they do not look at George Washington or any of the other white people in the painting. George Washington, the slave-master, has his head turned away from those who toil to realize the bountiful potential of his fields and those of the new nation. The veil that lies between George Washington and his slaves is the same veil that fell between W.E.B. Dubois and his classmate.

As Europeans settled in this country, it became apparent that there needed to be a large, inexpensive work force. Besides indentured servants, slaves were brought here to work in the fields and mines of European land owners. Some historians estimate that over 50 million Africans were stolen from their homes to be sold as slaves during a period of about 200 years. Many did not make it. An estimated 6 to 7 million were lost through cruelty, disease, starvation, suicide and drowning before they reached America. This movement of Africans from their homes to the New World has been called the Middle Passage.

The system of slavery was key to the possibility of this country standing on its own. It has also left this country with a legacy of division that has yet to be healed. As Americans we can become embittered about slavery. We can feel guilty and shameful about the conditions during this enforced movement of the great peoples of Africa. We may even feel despair about the possibility of ever making up for this great crime against humanity. However, if we give our attention to the stories of some individuals who lived during that time, we can push through the threshold of our pain and despair to an objective characterization of the relationship of Europeans and Africans as it has existed on this continent. We must regard this land that was new, unfamiliar and formative to both slave and slave-master, and consider the circumstances that fostered the thought that one human being could own another.

Abd al-Rahman Ibrahima was born in 1762 in Fouta Djallon, a part of what is now Guinea. He was a member of the powerful Fula people and a son of one of the chieftains. Ibrahima, like his people, was tall with a light complexion and silky hair that he wore long. He was raised as a Muslim and sent to Timbuktu to study where he learned to recite from the Koran and read it in Arabic. In 1781, after he had returned to Fouta Djallon, a white man named John Coates Cox came to his village. He was a ship surgeon who had injured his leg and was nearly dead from infection. The Fula chief decided to help Cox. Dr. Cox came to know Ibrahima during his recuperation and spoke to him in the Fula language. Dr. Cox left the Fula impressed with Ibrahima's learning. Filled with gratitude for their help, Cox warned them not to go too close to the ships docked nearby, off the coast of Guinea.

Ibrahima married, had several children and became the leader of the cavalry in a war against the Mandingo. The Fula fought nobly with spears, bows, slings, and swords. They were courageous and successful until during one of the battles, the Fula were led into a trap. Surrounded by their enemy, they heard rifles. Ibrahima was among those who survived the attack and was taken prisoner. His clothes and sandals were stripped from him and he was forced to march in file to the sea. Ibrahima was tied to other men, with ropes around their necks. The journey took weeks. When they reached the sea, they remained bound hand and foot. Ibrahima, among people from many different groups speaking many languages, was taken on board the ship and placed in the darkness of the hold with the other captives. They had little air to breathe, irons on their legs and only the smallest space in which to lie. At the age of twenty-six, Ibrahima reached Mississippi. Thomas Foster, a tobacco grower bought him with another young man for \$930. Ibrahima tried to find someone who could explain to his owner that he was the son of a chief. Foster, perhaps, came to understand that Ibrahima was claiming to be an important person, but he would not consider freeing him. Foster named him Prince and forced him to cut his long hair, the last symbol of

his people. His efforts to resist his situation were met with the whip. Finally, broken, defeated, he submitted to the will of Thomas Foster.

At the age of forty-five, Ibrahima was no longer as useful to Foster. He was allowed to grow his own vegetables and sell them in town. On one of his visits, Ibrahima saw a white man who looked familiar. The man walked slowly and with a limp. Ibrahima walked up to him and called him by name. It was Dr. Cox. They shared their stories.

Dr. Cox went to Foster and explained how he knew Ibrahima and asked Foster to free him. No amount of pleading would make Foster change his mind. However, Dr. Cox told many people about Ibrahima's situation and a man named Andrew Marschalk became interested and advised Ibrahima to write a letter to his people to ask them to ransom him. Ibrahima finally did write such a letter. However, one country in Africa was the same as the next to Marschalk and he sent the letter to Morocco instead of Fouta Djallon. The Government of Morocco recognized that Ibrahima was a Muslim and therefore wrote a letter to President James Monroe pleading for his release. It took a number of letters from the Secretary of State, Henry Clay, to convince Foster that he should release Ibrahima. In the end he did so only after it was agreed that Ibrahima would leave the country and return to Fouta Djallon. In 1829, Ibrahima and his wife sailed for Africa. He landed in Liberia, but never made it back to his people, for he died several months later.

Why was one man, Dr. Cox, able to perceive the nobility and humanity of Ibrahima and the other man Thomas Foster, not able to see who Ibrahima was? Why was Foster so unwilling to release the slave even after he ceased to be useful on his plantation?

Perhaps it was merciful that Ibrahima never reached Futa Djallon, for in 1827, Captain Theodore Canot wrote about visiting the Fula's, who by that time had become very familiar with white visitors and the slave trade. Canot was welcomed among them because he was considered to be a rich trader who had penetrated to the heart of Africa to purchase slaves for "most liberal prices."

The Fula's, like so many other Africans, became involved in the slave trade for their own protection and benefit. Canot brought "several packages of blue and white calicoes, ten yards of brilliant scarlet cloth, six kegs of powder, three hundred pounds of tobacco, two strings of amber beads and six muskets as well as a gilded sword and a package of cantharides for the king (Canot, 1928)." The Fula's provided Canot with 45 slaves.

Captain Canot was born and raised in Florence, Italy. His widowed mother provided him with a good education until at the age of twelve it was time for him to choose a profession. He became a cabin boy on a ship, where he soon became the scapegoat of every accident and misdemeanor. He was friendless and unable to communicate with his shipmates for he had commissioned with the American ship, the *Gelatea*. The only crew member who showed him any compassion was, in Canot's words, "a fat, lubberly Negro cook, whom I could not endure. He was the first African my eye ever fell on, and he was the only friend I possessed during my early adventures (Canot, 1928)." Canot relates the story of how he was intentionally thrown overboard by the jealous chief mate. Canot was able to struggle back aboard the ship, but the cook was nearly lost after he jumped into the sea in an attempt to save Theodore. In the end the cook was commended for his bravery and Canot became a valued member of the ship.

Canot served on many ships for many different countries. His involvement in the slave trade was one of opportunism and happenstance. The last legal slave ship sailed from England in 1807. Yet, the trade continued in an atmosphere of danger and adventure due to the economic rewards and, for some, the promise of risky adventure and notoriety. Canot found himself in the midst of this culture.

He eagerly accepted the commission of the ship, La Fortuna, a Spanish slaver and worked hard to manage the transactions for a successful venture. At the appointed day, La Fortuna sailed with 220 human beings packed in her hold. Three months afterwards, I received advice that she safely landed 217 in the bay of Matanzas, and that their sale yielded a clear profit on the voyage of forty-one thousand four hundred and thirty-eight dollars (Canot, 1928).

His account of the way in which the human cargo was handled follows this announcement of success. The heads of every male and female were neatly shaved. If the “cargo” belonged to several owners, the slaves were branded with pieces of silver wire, or small irons fashioned into the merchants initials, heated in order to blister the skin. Before the Africans were boarded, they were fed well. After the meal, they were taken to the ship on canoes. Once on deck, they were entirely stripped and immediately placed below the deck. The slaves were packed in so tightly that they were laid on their sides, spoon-fashion or, on some vessels they could not even lie down. They spent the voyage sitting in each other’s laps. Canot was proud of his ship as an example of cleanliness and orderliness. He regarded his treatment of the “cargo” as being humane and practical.

Captain Canot played a role in the great violation of the peoples of Africa. In 1847, he was arrested by an American cruiser for shipping a cargo of slaves. By 1853, he was a ruined man. What greater consequences were there for these deeds?

Let us consider the movement of Africans to America in the dark cramped conditions of the ship. The story of Joseph, Son of Israel, is familiar to many. The Bible relates how Joseph’s brothers, deeply envious of Joseph because of the love their father bestowed on him, plotted to kill him. Instead one of his brothers, Reuben, threw Joseph into a pit, and persuaded the others to sell him to some traders. Joseph was carried off to Egypt in a caravan and later sold as a slave. Such a passage has the characteristics of an initiation and we can imagine what capacities were developed through such a path and reflect upon what evolutionary steps were taken for the Israelites, for humanity, as a result of Joseph’s sojourn in Egypt. Can we ask similar questions about the African experience? Was the Middle Passage a path of spiritual initiation for a race and ultimately for humanity?

The African, treated as cargo, physically bound, placed in subhuman conditions, and sold as cattle were dehumanized. Further, when Ibrahima tried, out of his anger and rage, to resist and escape his conditions, he lived as if a hunted animal until his despair forced him to resubmit his body back into bondage. But were the slave traders and owners free? Physically and materially, they were free. However, why is it that Foster could not perceive Ibrahima? Why is it that Theodore Canot could not see the inhumanity of his slave ships?

In the *History of Mary Prince, a West Indian Slave*, Mary gives an account of the circumstances of her life. She and her siblings were sold away from their mother to raise money for her master’s wedding. She describes the cruelties of her new master in the following way.

Though we worked from morning till night, there was no satisfying Mr. D-. I hoped, when I left Capt. I-, that I should have been better off, but I found it was but going from one butcher to another. There was this difference between them: my former master used to beat me while raging and foaming with passion; Mr. D-was usually quite calm. He would stand by and give orders for a slave to be cruelly whipped, and assist in the punishment, without moving a muscle of his face; walking about and taking snuff with the greatest composure. Nothing could touch his hard heart - neither sighs, not tears, nor prayers, nor streaming blood; he was deaf to our cries and careless of our sufferings (Gates, 1988).

From this account we can almost imagine iron shackles around the heart of this slave owner. How can we overcome the overwhelming sense of grief for the pain and suffering inflicted on these Africans? Can we accept the consequences of these deeds? The foundations of this country were built upon a legacy of slavery. The legacy of slavery is racism. Racism is the veil that separates us, disappoints us, angers us and frightens us. It is an illness, perhaps a terminal illness that threatens our future. Is there any hope of healing this illness? Can our ideals and actions ever become as one, forging the true spirit of America?

The experience of slavery however is also an experience of freedom. The slaves came to know that part of their being that could not be owned by another. They sang of the freedom of the human soul and spirit in what we know of as Spirituals or Sorrow songs. There are many accounts of slaves who gained their freedom and what that moment of realization was like for them. The story of Lucy A. Delaney is one such account in which she gained her freedom through the courts.

Her narrative is entitled *From the Darkness Cometh the Light or Struggles for Freedom*. Her mother, Polly, was born and raised in the free State of Illinois. She was kidnapped, carried across the Mississippi River and sold as a slave. During her captivity, she married, and had two daughters, Nancy and Lucy. Lucy's father was sold away from the family bringing much anguish to them. Polly raised her daughters with the idea that they were not to remain slaves their whole lives. She successfully encouraged her older daughter to run away to Canada while on a trip to Niagara Falls with her mistress.

Polly was then sold, but ran away, only to resubmit herself to her mistress out of fear as to how Lucy would be treated. She then employed a lawyer and gained her freedom through the courts based on evidence that she had been a free woman, was kidnapped and sold into slavery.

Lucy grew to become ever more resistant to her situation. She rebelled against brutal treatment. Her mistress was so distressed that she coaxed her husband to sell Lucy far from her mother and friends. Lucy hid from them and ran away to her mother's house and later to the house of a sympathetic friend. The next day, Polly sued for the possession of her daughter and Lucy was taken to the jail where she remained for seventeen months awaiting the disposition of the suit.

Edward Bates, a Quaker, lawyer and statesman, argued the case for Lucy with this statement:

Gentlemen of the jury, I am a slave-holder myself, but, thanks to the Almighty God, I am above the base principle of holding anybody a slave that has as good right to her freedom as this girl has been proven to have; she was free before she was born; her mother was free, but kidnapped in her youth and sacrificed to the greed of Negro traders, and no free woman can give birth to a slave child, as it is in direct violation of the laws of God and man! (Gates, 1988).

After her release from the prison, Lucy met her mother sand hand in hand we gazed into each others eyes and saw the light of freedom there, and we felt in our hearts that we could with one accord cry out: "Glory to God in the highest, and peace and good will towards men."

At this profound moment, the light of freedom is perceived in the eyes of the other and the words spoken were the same words spoken to the simple shepherds watching over their sheep at the moment of Christ's birth. What capacities were developed within the souls of these women through this experience? Lucy Delaney and her mother expressed in that moment what DuBois characterized as "the hope of all who were in bondage, that one divine event might end all doubt and disappointment (DuBois, 1989)."

What has been the African-American experience in America since the Emancipation Proclamation? In the words of W.E.B. Dubois,

To (the African-American) so far as he thought and dreamed, slavery was indeed the sum of all villainies, the cause of all sorrow, the root of all prejudice; Emancipation was the key to a promised land of sweeter beauty than ever stretched before the eyes of wearied Israelites...

...The Nation has not yet found peace from its sins; the freedman has not yet found in freedom his promised land. Whatever of good may have come in these years of change, the shadow of a deep disappointment rests upon the Negro people,... (DuBois, 1989).

The Israelites were the shadow-reflection of the Egyptians. The Pharaoh, thought to be a deity in the Egyptian culture, was confronted repeatedly with the people of one God. Each challenge presented by Moses was a message to Pharaoh that a new relationship with the divine was ready to take hold of the human spirit. The old wisdom, in spite of its monuments and glittering presence, was dying. The Pharaoh and indeed the people of Israel must recognize God the father as the Lord of All. Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go in to Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, that I may show these signs of mine among them, and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and your son's son how I have made sport of the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them; that you may know that I am the Lord." (May & Metzger, 1973).

The Pharaoh is humbled before the Lord and releases the people of Israel when his heart is broken as the first-born in all the land of Egypt, both man and beast were slain. Further, God tells Moses that he will pass judgment on all the Gods of Egypt. How were the Israelites protected from the avenging hand of God? The Israelites were protected from this fate by the blood of a Passover lamb spread on the lintel and door posts with a bunch of hyssop. The sacrificial lamb, symbol of events to come saved them and they were freed.

The moment of liberation, of freedom, is one of divine intervention and recognition of our true connection with the Christ Being. In the first lecture by Rudolf Steiner of the series titled *The Search for the new Isis the Divine Sophia* he said, speaking of the Christmas event:

As we look upon this Jesus-child we must say to ourselves: 'Only through the fact that this Being came down amongst men in the course of human evolution does it first become possible for man to be truly man in the full sense of the word, that is, to connect what he receives through birth with what he can experience above and beyond him as a result of a feeling of devoted love towards that Being Who descended from spiritual heights that He might, through great sacrifice, unite Himself with human existence . . . And how was Christ Jesus announced to the simple shepherds of the field? With the soul's eye they saw the light of the Angel ...' They heard the deepest words which for them signified the future meaning of earth life: "The Divine is revealed in the heights and there shall be peace among men on earth who can be of good will . . ." As men we must pass through the being forsaken by God in order-in this forsakenness and loneliness-to find freedom. But we must find our way back to a union with that which on the one side was the highest wisdom of the Magi of the East, and on the other side was announced to the shepherds through a deepened insight of the heart (Steiner, 1983).

Lucy and her mother experienced this "deepened insight" at the moment of Lucy's liberation. As slaves they recognized the unreality of their situation. They were then able to make a connection with the true inner experience of the message given to the simple shepherds in Bethlehem.

Our experiences in our classrooms and in life teach us that the old ways of relating to one another only lead us further down the disastrous path of bigotry and separation. Yet, in meeting the challenges of diversity, we are given the opportunity to ask the question anew, “What ails the American spirit?”

Norman Davidson suggested in his lecture that Anthroposophy is the best that Europe has to offer. By committing ourselves to examining the paths of development of the groups of people who have come to this continent in the light of spiritual science, we may come to understand the significance of our relationship and tasks together. If we take the time to study their origins, circumstances and gifts, we may begin to perceive how each contributes to the fabric of the whole.

In the words of W.E.B. Dubois:

Work, culture, liberty-all these we need, not singly but together, not successively but together, each growing and aiding each, and all striving toward that vaster ideal that swims before the Negro people, the ideal of human brotherhood, gained through the unifying ideal of Race; the ideal of fostering and developing the traits and talents of the Negro, not in opposition to or contempt for other races, but rather in large conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic, in order that some day on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack (DuBois, 1988).

Struggling to understand the relationship between master and slave, African and European is only part of the American experience. We will not become whole until we have struggled to deepen our understanding and appreciation for the gifts offered by the full spectrum of races, cultures, languages, religions and destinies of all Americans by asking ourselves: What can we learn from the early relationship among Native Americans, Europeans and African Americans? What challenges and questions do we need to face to understand the Asian and Latin-American contributions to the spirit of this continent? In what ways can we work together to narrow the gap between the ideals of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” and the daily reality for millions of human beings in this country who experience themselves as “the problem,” who feel shut out from the world by a vast veil.

Our history has given us a legacy of racial strife. Yet, with it comes the opportunity to create a new human reality, the American spirit out of our diversity, out of a loving regard for one another. W.E.B. Dubois asks, “Would our America have been America without her Negro People?” We can ask that question over and over again, each time placing a name of one of the many peoples who contribute to the wholeness of the American Spirit. The answer will always resound one and the same: No.

By our differences Ye become whole, ourselves, America.

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