

Gather at the Table: *The Healing Journey of a Daughter of Slavery and a Son of the Slave Trade*

Thomas Norman DeWolf and Sharon Leslie Morgan

Two people from diverse backgrounds — a black woman and a white man — embarked upon a three-year “healing journey” to attempt to overcome the trauma of historic harms brought on by America’s legacy of slavery and the lingering effects of present-day racism. Illustrated through the stories of their lives—and those of their ancestors — *Gather at the Table* is informed by trauma healing, restorative justice, and peacebuilding skills the authors learned through their work at Eastern Mennonite University and its STAR (Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience) and Coming to the Table programs. EMU is an acclaimed resource for peacebuilding, having introduced their healing models in war-ravaged countries around the world. Coming to the Table began as an initiative focused on linking descendants of enslaved people with the descendants of those by whom they were enslaved. Morgan and DeWolf decided to “live” the Coming to the Table model together. The legacy of slavery remains a horrendous and unhealed wound, a disease that must be diagnosed, treated, and cured. The approach shared in *Gather at the Table* may just make it possible to heal. This is the story of two people who decided to try.

The Recalcitrant Bat

Tom bolts straight upright in bed, startled from sleep by the screeching of a bird. The shriek is unlike any he’s ever heard. He glances at the luminous clock in the pitch-dark room. The red numbers glow 3:39. All the windows are open, which makes it easy to hear the chirps, crows, and tweets of a wide variety of other, less-noisy feathered creatures. The natural symphony is further punctuated by the loud rattle of ancient, single-paned windows bombarded by forceful tropical winds. Tom glances at his wife Lindi, who continues to sleep peacefully next to him. This is the only time, he thinks, when her hearing disability is a blessing. The curtain across the room from the foot of their bed flaps violently outside its open portal. Tom slips through the opening in the mosquito netting that cocoons Lindi and him. He pulls the curtain back inside and closes the window. He takes a deep breath and climbs back under the covers.

Tom’s heart rate slows back to normal as he finds his bearings on this first night in a strange room in a foreign country, more than four thousand miles from home. The hypnotic sounds and steady roaring of the wind soon lull him back to sleep, as deep and restful as before.

Then, a few moments after 7:30, the storm outside reaches new heights of fury. Rain pours relentlessly from the sky. The sash that previously held one curtain in place in the sitting room next to the bedroom is gone, blown to some un-

known destination outside. But it isn’t the storm that awakens Tom this time. It is another crashing sound, coming from within the house.

Wham! Wham! Wham!

With sleep still in her eyes, Sharon emerges from the bedroom across the entry hall from Tom and Lindi’s to find their host, Professor Lynch, in his pajamas, wielding a broom. He is beating it against the rafters. Tom joins Sharon in the great hall to witness the spectacle of a man on a mission. Lindi mercifully continues her slumber.

“Sorry for the racket,” the professor announces between swings, “I must dislodge this recalcitrant bat!”

Wham! Wham!

“You see him way up there?”

They look up to see the small brown creature, snug in the uppermost corner of the ceiling’s peak.

“Usually, I can dislodge them with a few whacks from the broom, but this little fellow is a stubborn one.” Wham! The professor is determined to roust the bat and send it on its way. “If it becomes comfortable, not only will it likely return again but it might well start nesting,” Wham! “. . . with companions!”

“Being nocturnal,” he further explains, “they hunt for food outside during the night. With the rising of the sun, they seek dark, little corners in which to sleep.”

With six bedrooms, attached sitting rooms, a massive kitchen, lounge, and dining hall—most with high, pitched ceilings of dark wood—there are many such corners in this great house. When Hollis Lynch entered for the first time as its owner, bats were ensconced, thousands deep, in the dark recesses of this room. Their caustic guano has marred the rich mahogany floor. He has been fending them off ever since.

The contest ends in victory, the bat vanquished by Pro-

Correspondence should be directed to: Thomas Norman DeWolf (dewolf@bendbroadband.com) and Sharon Leslie Morgan (morganoba@gmail.com). This piece is excerpted from *Gather at the Table*, which will be published by Beacon Press in October 2012.

fessor Lynch's invincible will. Though he tries to scare the small creature toward a window, the bat refuses to leave of its own accord. The professor ultimately smacks it with the broom and catches the stunned creature in a dustpan. Tossed outside from a balcony to the walkway some ten feet below, the bat trembles a few times, draws one last breath, and expires before our eyes.

As we gaze upon the dying creature, it dawns on both of us that this little bat appeared at a fortuitous moment. It becomes a metaphor for racism and why we have come so far, to this particular island in the Caribbean.

The seeds for this journey were planted long before we arrived. Sharon says they were sown by ancestral spirits who call us to our healing work.

Coming to Terms

Will Hairston is a white man who descends from one of the largest slaveholding empires in the Old South. The story of his family's complex web of relationships over many generations, from being slave owners through the recent past, is told in Henry Wiencek's book *The Hairstons: An American Family in Black and White*.

When he was eighteen years old, Will attended the annual family reunion of the "Hairston Clan," an eight-hundred-person-strong gathering of an African American family with roots in the South and a direct connection to Will. The Hairstons have been convening family reunions since 1931. In 1980, they invited Waller Staples Hairston, Will's father, to join them as their guest speaker at the Hyatt Regency Hotel in Washington, DC. Will accompanied his father.

Seventy-nine-year-old Jester Hairston, the noted composer, songwriter, and actor, was there. He led the singing of his song, "Amen," made famous in the 1963 film *Lilies of the Field*. Will was transformed. The experience of the reunion, of being with the descendants of people his ancestors had once enslaved, of being welcomed and accepted there, changed his life. He witnessed the power of song, of coming together, and of a connection with a family much larger than he had ever known.

And then there is Susan Hutchison. Susan is the six-times-great-granddaughter of President Thomas Jefferson and his wife, Martha. In 2003, after exploring her family history—and its deep connection to slavery—she attended an unlikely family reunion as well. Hers was with the descendants of Jefferson and Sally Hemings, the woman he enslaved on his Monticello plantation and who bore several of his children. At the reunion, Susan met Henry Wiencek. Having experienced the power of reunion, she told him she wanted to meet other white descendants of families who had enslaved people.

Henry introduced Susan to Will. Together, they came up with the idea of a family reunion that was vastly different from what most people are accustomed to. It would not be a meeting of just one family. It would be a reunion that involved multiple families from both sides of the racial construct: a reunion of black and white—the descendants of people who were slaveholders with the descendants of those

whom they had enslaved.

Their idea was based on one key acknowledgment: Be they black, white or mixed, families are families. America's legacy of slavery ripped apart untold numbers of family bonds. Not only were African American families broken; white families were estranged as well. Since the time of slavery, black and white generations lived and died together. They often had children together. But there was profound alienation on both sides of the racial divide. Far too many white Americans were in denial, believing that the wounds of the past had been healed by the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

To begin understanding the impact of slavery, one must consider F. George Kay's words in his book *The Shameful Trade*: "The purchase or capture of some fifty million human beings month in and month out [over] a period of four centuries was perhaps the greatest crime against humanity ever perpetrated by Christendom, not least because those responsible for the most part saw no moral evil in treating men, women, and children as merchandise."

Susan and Will saw building relationships with the "other side" as a path toward a future where the deep wounds engendered by slavery could be confronted and potentially reconciled. They were inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s words, spoken from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963: "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood."

Fired with resolve, Will and Susan invited their cousins to share another observation made by Dr. King: "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." Under their leadership, black and white Jeffersons and Hairstons began planning a revolution. A group now known as Coming to the Table was born.

An experience was planned in which black and white descendants of ancestors linked by a slave/slave-owner relationship, a blood connection, or both could explore the history of slavery—its legacy and impact on their lives. They had a longer-term goal to create a model of healing to guide individuals and groups that continue to struggle with racism in the United States and throughout the world.

Forty-two years after Dr. King shared his dream, two dozen descendants from both sides of the system of enslavement gathered at the table. That first small retreat took place in January 2006 at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) in Harrisonburg, Virginia, where Will works. Through sharing stories and building relationships, the participants embraced King's dream: They began to envision a more connected and truthful society that would be eager to address the unresolved and persistent effects of the institution of slavery.

From the beginning, EMU supported the work of Coming to the Table. It fit well with the university's peacebuilding mission. It adopted the program, designated a manager, and sought funding. Two and a half years later, the university's Center for Justice and Peacebuilding offered an official week-long Coming to the Table course of study as part of the Summer Peacebuilding Institute. We both attended. It opened the

doorway to our collaboration and profoundly affected both our lives.

Tom's Story

In the middle of a cold, snowy winter in January 2011, my wife and I fly to New York. Sharon, Lindi, and I will travel together from there to Tobago. I've been listening to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* on my iPod. Sharon had mentioned that Tobago was the island Defoe envisioned when he wrote his novel three hundred years ago. I had seen a movie version decades ago but never read the book. *Robinson Crusoe* is one of those tales that Mark Twain described as a classic: one that people praise but haven't read.

I was surprised to learn that the character Crusoe was an English slave-trader, even though he himself had been enslaved for a time in North Africa. He later owned a plantation and enslaved people in Brazil. After a few prosperous years there, Crusoe's knowledge of Africa and the slave trade led a group of businessmen to ask him to accompany them on a voyage to the Guinea coast to buy more Africans. Crusoe agreed. Shortly after they left Brazil, they encountered a ferocious storm that sank their ship. All but one perished: Robinson Crusoe, the sole survivor, made it ashore where he spent most of the next twenty-eight years alone. He was joined for the final few years by the person who became his servant; the man he called Friday. Many of the filmed versions of Defoe's novel make no mention of Crusoe's involvement with slavery and the slave trade. As scholars have done with many history books, screenwriters and directors chose to hide the more unsavory aspects of Defoe's story.

A Caribbean Idyll

The first breath one takes upon disembarking from the plane is the memorable one. The warm, tropical air provides enchanting relief after the recycled oxygen of a five-hour flight. It instantly banishes the chill of the Oregon and New York we left behind. It is magical and healing. We spread our arms to expand our lung capacity and breathe in deeply.

The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago comprises the two southernmost islands in the Caribbean archipelago, 1,520 miles south of Bermuda, the northernmost. The first permanent settlers, who established themselves thousands of years before Europeans arrived, were Amerindians from the South American continent. Much of Tobago still looks as it did in 1498, when Columbus named it *Bellaforma* without ever setting foot on its beaches.

The primary reason we are coming to Tobago is to have extended, focused writing time together, away from the business of our everyday lives. A sojourn here will enable us to revisit a significant "scene of the crime" in the transatlantic slave trade. Another draw was the ambience of life on a Caribbean island.

Sharon's son is married to the daughter of our host, the owner of Richmond Great House, which will be our home for the next two weeks. We can write unimpeded, with the added benefit of an African history scholar in residence.

The man who built Richmond House was Walter Pringle, who received a land grant from the British Crown around 1760. His mission was to carve out a successful sugar plantation at a time when the value of sugar rivaled that of gold. His efforts were supported by every resource within the purview of the British Empire.

Our drive from the airport takes about half an hour along twisting, narrow Windward Road. As we approach our destination, the driver turns left at a sign that reads "Richmond Great House." Across the road, another metal sign swings in the breeze. It advertises Carib, the local beer. The quarter-mile driveway winds up a steep incline to the house. We park in front of the grand entryway, a curved dual-sided stone staircase.

Professor Lynch emerges from the double doors at the top of the stairs and descends down the right side to greet us.

"Welcome! Welcome!" he announces, in his proper English accent.

We lug our bags upstairs. Room assignments are established. Food is unpacked into cupboards, the refrigerator, and freezer. Unscreened windows are open throughout the house. The crosscurrent of breezes is cool and refreshing.

Richmond Great House is situated atop a hill with a panoramic view of the Atlantic Ocean. Built sometime around 1766, it is a marvel, from the peaked roof to the hardwood floors. The roof overhang prevents the most aggressive rain or direct sunlight from intruding into the house. The all-around windows often remain open to the elements day and night, negating the need for air-conditioning.

One of the few surviving plantation houses on Tobago, it is the oldest by at least a century. The plantation once manufactured sugar, molasses, and rum until the industry collapsed in the late nineteenth century. The owners at that time diversified into cocoa and coconuts. Cadbury Schweppes, the British confectioner, was at one time a joint venture partner.

The original estate that encompassed Richmond House—some five hundred acres—was one of more than eighty similar landholdings. Together they comprised an intricate plantation system that continued to thrive into the mid-twentieth century, long after slavery ended. Henry Iles Woodcock's *A History of Tobago* tells us that, when the land commissioner sold the first plots, it was stipulated that "for every one hundred acres of land cleared the purchaser should keep one white man or two white women . . ." in residence. The average sale price per acre was slightly more than two pounds sterling. The death knell of the plantation system wasn't heard until 1963, when Hurricane Flora wiped out most of the great houses, along with their crops.

Hollis Lynch bought Richmond Great House in 1973. The previous owners had decided to sell after an unsuccessful attempt to restore the estate after Flora's rampage. Dr. Lynch, a native of Tobago and, at that time, a professor of African History at Columbia University in New York City, heard about the sale and, almost on a lark, decided to buy it. He arranged financing through a bank in Tobago with which he had done business for many years.

"But the owner would never sell to me," says the professor. "He did all he could to block the sale. My bank called

and the forthcoming financing was canceled.” Fortunately, the obdurate owner had lost control of the property. A different white man, the representative from Cadbury, was in charge. He consummated the sale of the colonial house with six acres of land to Professor Lynch. “The Cadbury man had no connection to the old colonial system and its network of people here. He didn’t care that I was black, only that I had the financial wherewithal to complete the purchase.”

Over the next three decades, the professor refurbished and improved the house and the property, carefully preserving its character and historical features. Richmond Great House is now an established historic landmark. It is filled with antique furnishings and African artifacts the professor has acquired in his international travels.

The resistant European owner and his wife continued to live elsewhere on Tobago for the rest of the man’s life. “I’ve met his children,” says Professor Lynch. “His grandson came here one day to show his girlfriend around. Surprise! She was a black girl! Young people today, you see, have very little problem with race.”

In light of our reason for being here, his comment feels ironic. We marvel at the poignancy of being in a former slave plantation—a black woman and a white man trying to make sense of the journey we have undertaken.

Our laptops rest on one of four tables in the main hall. Piles of books, from among the thousands in the professor’s library, surround us. We have the luxury of an incredible assortment of rare volumes. It is a perfect place for research

and reflection.

Our large rooms are located at the front of the house, with separate sitting rooms in each. Antique four-poster beds dominate the bedrooms. They are so tall we need step stools to climb into them. Before tucking in for the night, we hang the mosquito nets we brought with us from New York. The arduous journey has left us tired but expectant about what lies ahead. We fall asleep easily, lulled by intoxicating night winds. The moon is almost full; shining bright in the clear, dark sky, accompanied by more stars than these three foreigners ever see in brightly lit American cities.

The next morning, after the ordeal with the bat, we both lean back in our chairs and stare at the pitched ceiling above our heads where the creature attempted to perch. It occurs to us that racism and the legacy of slavery share certain characteristics with the little bat. They are both ubiquitous and persistent. They hide from the light of day. They thrive in packs of like-minded creatures. They drop guano everywhere. Racism is a remarkably tenacious and resilient plague that seldom departs on its own. Those who seek to heal must pursue their goal as relentlessly as the professor pursued his prey.

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