

MAKING PEACE WITH THE PAST

By Sharon Leslie Morgan and Thomas Norman DeWolf

A “healing journey” to confront the issues of race and prejudice

“The past is our definition. We may strive, with good reason, to escape it, or to escape what is bad in it, but we will escape it only by adding something better to it.” —WENDELL BERRY, author of *The Hidden Wound*

To speak honestly about America’s past is to open a virtual Pandora’s Box of historic malfeasance. Our nation has a long history of egregious behavior. It began with the genocide and forced removal of indigenous peoples and evolved through an economy built upon the enslavement of Africans. There have been continuous, deliberate debasements: waves of terror, eugenic cleansings, lynching, riots, internments, and many other forms of oppression and discrimination. Inequity and mistrust along racial lines remains systemic in our society. The scars are deep, leading thoughtful people to wonder, *Can we ever succeed in “adding something better” to our past? Can we heal and find peace?*

It is against this backdrop that we decided to drag one of America’s skeletons out of the closet and confront it. Our goal was to address the historic wound inflicted by slavery and racism, a “scab” Americans pick at but have never committed to fully heal. In May 2011, we set out on a road trip as part of a larger “healing journey”—a black woman and a white man; a descendant of slaves and a descendant of slave traders. Together, we traveled more than six thousand miles, through twenty-one states, over four weeks. Our objective was to explore historic American sites through a specific lens: to learn how we each feel about race, how it has affected our lives and the American narrative; to understand the view from “the other side”; and to ponder how we can move beyond the legacy of slavery.

Many have claimed that the United States is a “melting pot” of diverse cultures, melded and merged into one big, integrated family—a narrative that paints an idyllic picture but ignores reality. Most people don’t have firsthand experience with the transformative historical events that inform the society in which we live today. They were neither slaves nor slaveholders. They do not grasp the magnitude of horror associated with that economic system. They were not beaten during civil rights marches and thus may not fully appreciate the value of voting rights, much less their right to sit anywhere on a bus or train, to drink water from a fountain that isn’t labeled “white” or “colored.” They can go anywhere and do anything they please, whenever they please.

In spite of these achieved equalities, racism is alive and well. Schools, neighborhoods, and churches are as segregated as ever. Health disparities along racial lines remain significant. African American people are over-represented in prisons and under-represented in colleges and corporate boardrooms. Even with an African American president in the White House, equanimity remains illusive.

Oklahoma was one of the states we visited on our circuitous itinerary. Sharon’s ancestor, Owen Gavin, lived here in the early twentieth century. Born into

slavery in Mississippi in 1859, Owen packed up his family sometime around 1902 and trundled them off to Oklahoma where he undoubtedly had hopes of a better life. At that time, Oklahoma was viewed as a mecca for black people. From 1865 to 1920, African Americans established more than fifty settlements and towns—more than any other state. Owen Gavin responded to that call of self-determination. In 1910, the U.S. Census recorded his living in Bales Township, Pottawatomie County, with his wife, Julia, and several of their children. A peaceful man, his highest ambition was to be left alone to farm and raise his family.

By 1912, a destitute Owen was in Iowa—dead. After receiving a notice from the overseer of the poor that ordered him to leave the county, he shared his last dollar with his children and then blew his brains out with a shotgun. What the newspaper obituary does not detail is the horror Owen and his family were subjected to in Oklahoma. One of his daughters told of repeated attacks by “Night Riders,” during one of which her sister was violated with her father and brothers forced to watch at gunpoint.

Over the course of his fifty-three-year lifetime, Owen endured the indignities of being enslaved, terrorized, and uprooted, all because he was black and poor. His children scattered, most of them passing for either white or Native American in order to avoid a similar fate. His is but one story that illustrates the legacy of slavery and racism in America.

On our journey, we encountered many similar stories, historical records, landmarks, and other evidence of terror and oppression committed against



Sharon Morgan and Thomas DeWolf are the authors of *Gather at the Table: The Healing Journey of a Daughter of Slavery and a Son of the Slave Trade* forthcoming from Beacon Press, October 2012. DeWolf is also the author of *Inheriting the Trade: A Northern Family Confronts Its Legacy as the Largest Slave-Trading Dynasty in U.S. History* (Beacon Press, 2008).

—Kristin Little



Owen Gavin Family in Oklahoma.
Courtesy Sharon Morgan

people because of their race. In Tulsa, we walked along the streets of the Greenwood District, site of the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, perhaps the single worst incident of racial violence in American history. Standing in the area once known as “Black Wall Street,” we felt the weight of history that has not been healed: On May 30, 1921, a black man named Dick Rowland entered an elevator in the Drexel Building operated by a white woman, Sarah Page. What happened next is known only to Rowland and Page. One version is that the elevator jerked and they stumbled into each other; another is that Rowland stepped on Page’s foot, she lost her balance, and Rowland reached out to prevent her from falling. What *is* known is that Page screamed. Rowland ran out of the elevator and was accused of a sexual attack. White people wanted to lynch him. Black people prepared to defend him. In less than twenty-four hours, rampaging whites burned the entire black section of town to the ground, killing hundreds and leaving thousands homeless.

As we walked along Greenwood Avenue, we stopped to read the bronze markers embedded in the sidewalks which identify every building that was destroyed during the riot. Inside the Greenwood Cultural Center, we stood before a wall of photos of survivors and read quotes of their memories of that devastating day. In the face of so much injustice and inequity, what does reconciliation entail?

For three quarters of a century, the story of the Tulsa riot was buried, left out of history books, classrooms, and community conversations. It wasn’t until 1997 that the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Race Riot of 1921 was formed. The John Hope Franklin Center for Reconciliation was established in 2007 to fulfill the Commission’s recommendations to build a memorial. The JHF Center expanded the idea of a memorial and has since opened John Hope Franklin Reconciliation Park and initiated an annual symposium, bringing scholars and community partners from across the country to reflect on issues of race and justice and to foster the work of reconciliation. We were honored to participate in the Center’s second annual “Reconciliation in America” symposium.

Our journey together is one in which we committed to “live” a healing model developed at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. EMU is a world leader in conflict resolution with programs like: the Summer Peacebuilding Institute, attended by many people from war-ravaged countries; Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR), which addresses harm by seeking to understand how trauma is passed from generation to generation; and Coming to the Table, which examines

the legacies of slavery and ongoing racism by helping descendants of slaves and slaveholders to meet and come to terms with their shared history. These programs operate on the premise that, by choosing to break out of destructive cycles of violence—of victimhood and aggression—people can build healthier relationships and communities.

A major component of EMU programming is “restorative justice,” a peace-building approach that involves dialogue, accountability, and cooperation. Slavery and racism are violations. Violations create obligations. The central obligation is to repair harm and relationships. As applied within Coming to the Table, the goal is to begin a healing process that takes into account the harms of slavery. The process starts with understanding how this legacy has impacted us all. The biggest challenge, frankly, is finding ways for white people to understand and acknowledge this reality.

We all live within the shadow of racism. It has been passed down organically from parents, teachers, politicians, and others who cling to a distorted image of American history—one informed by, and articulated from, a worldview rooted in white privilege. These biases and prejudices are so hard-wired that most of us have no idea how automatically they kick in and how enduring they are. The only way we will ever come to terms with the truth is for people of all ages to be more fully educated in the history and legacies of our nation and its institutions.

Making peace with the past is a huge challenge—yet it is something we all must do. Transformation begins in the hearts and minds of individuals but cannot end there. It must radiate outward until it permeates the institutions and systems that have kept racism embedded in our culture.

The Tulsa YWCA is an institution that is making strides in its organization and activities. The group is dedicated to eliminating racism through two programs: “Witnessing Whiteness” for white people and “Mosaic” for people of color. Both programs bring people together to talk openly and honestly about issues of race. Why two separate groups? Facilitators found that, to work in meaningful ways, participants needed to deal with individual baggage when confronting racial issues. Meeting first in “affinity” groups elicits the most meaningful participation. Once the program is completed, participants are more willing to cross the racial divide and work together. According to Mana Tahei, Director of Racial Justice, “We’re having conversations that we never would have had before. We’ve given ourselves permission to go into things that no workplace encourages and it’s changing the way we operate . . . There are difficult moments when we realize, *It’s hard getting here*, but it’s worth it.”

Our journey showed us just how hard—and worthwhile—such efforts can be. We had moments of discomfort and fear, but found that the unopened closet is scarier than any skeleton lurking behind the door. We began to understand just how deeply imbedded our own personal prejudices are and what a huge act of will it takes to break out of entrenched mindsets. Our belief is that change starts in small ways—within ourselves—and then ripples outward, like a pebble tossed into a pond.

If we aspire to live in an enlightened society that serves the needs of all, we must confront the past, understand its impact on our lives today, and employ its lessons so that the systemic infection of racism can finally and truly be healed. ☺