Opening Words

And if thy brother, a Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, be sold unto thee, and serve thee six years; then in the seventh year thou shalt let him go free from thee. And when thou sendest him out free from thee, thou shalt not let him go away empty: thou shalt furnish him liberally out of thy flock, and out of thy floor, and out of thy winepress: of that wherewith the LORD thy God hath blessed thee thou shalt give unto him. And thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the LORD thy God redeemed thee: therefore I command thee this thing today.

— DEUTERONOMY 15: 12–15

Reparations

“If they ask what I did well, tell them I said Yes to Truth.” That is what I am going to try to do here. Tell the truth about the source of America’s power and riches. It is not a pretty story.

Lets start with a simple truth. America would not be the country that it is today without its history of slavery. The early American economy was based in large measure on cotton. Growing cotton, exporting cotton and manufacture using cotton was the foundation of this country. And without slavery none of that would have been possible. Or rather, it might have been possible but the profit margin for white landowners and exporters and manufacturers would have been vastly diminished.
As Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote in his thought provoking article in the Atlantic, "The Case for Reparations, “America begins in black plunder and white democracy, two features that are not contradictory but complementary”

Jamestown was established in 1607 and the first slaves were brought to the colony of Virginia in 1619. Slaves were essential to the development of young America where land was vast, but cheap labor scarce.

For the next 250 years American law and society worked to create two Americas – one for the black people and one for the white. America was not a country of rich and poor, but of black and white. White people, for instance, regardless of wealth or class could carry arms. Blacks could not. In Maryland, a white woman who was bold enough to marry a slave had to live as a slave to her husband’s master. Slaves could be abused with impunity – even dismembered or killed. But in Virginia, a white servant could not be whipped without an order from a justice of the peace. Also in Virginia, if any slave acquired livestock, including a horse, the county could seize it.

White America prospered on the blood, sweat and tears of black slaves. And it wasn’t just the labor of slaves that made America rich, but the value of the slaves themselves. The black body was worth a fortune. The slave trade brought millions of dollars into the American economy.

After I retired, I went on a car trip throughout the deep south. I went to Natchez, MS, now a rundown, depressed area. Its main economy now
seems to consist of tours of antebellum mansions. But before the war it was home to the largest per capita number of millionaires in America. Why? Because it was a center for the trading of slaves.

The worth of slaves and slave labor to America cannot really be calculated, although social scientists have tried. They have estimated that the worth of slaves and slave labor, adjusted for inflation, was between 9.72 billion and 6.4 trillion dollars. And the group that created that wealth reaped nothing. Even worse than nothing.

And while white America prospered, what about black America? First, of course, they were torn from their home and subjected to the agonizing journey of the Middle Passage where about 50% of them died. Then they were placed in chains and sold to the highest bidder and taken far away from anyone that they knew. They were beaten, raped or even murdered at will. Anything they managed to acquire could be taken from them. And, of course, they could be traded like the merchandise they were. Husbands and wives, parents and children could be torn apart at the whim of the slave owner. A slave had a 30% chance of being sold in his or her lifetime. As Coates says the roots of American wealth was the for-profit destruction of the most important asset available to any people – the family.

And suddenly the slaves were freed. Although some people advocated reparations for freed slaves...40 acres and a mule...the only people who were actually provided reparations after emancipation were northern slave holders who were compensated for the value of their lost property.
Federal troops withdrew from the South in 1877 and their absence ushered in an era of domestic terrorism. Many Southern blacks became re-enslaved through the share cropper and penal labor systems. Former slaves who could not find gainful employment were charged with vagrancy and sent to prison where they were forced to work for nothing, many picking cotton. Share croppers were routinely cheated, manipulated and terrorized so they were never out of debt to their white overlords. The share cropper system is portrayed in detail in Isabel Wilkerson’s compelling chronicle of the great black migration The Warmth of Other Suns.

Communities that had the potential to empower blacks were destroyed. Schools and churches were burned to the ground. Jim Crow reigned supreme. Anyone who tried to get past the barrier of Jim Crow segregation ran the risk of having his house burned down or of being jailed or even lynched.

The mid 20th century saw the Great Migration of blacks heading north and west, trying to get away from the institutional poverty, racism and violence of the south. Black folk came to Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit, Boston looking for a fair shake. Or at the very least to live their lives free of the constant fear of offending a white person and the dire consequences that could follow.

Blacks started to prosper. They got jobs, saved money and tried for a piece of the American dream – a house of their own. But a policy of walling off predominantly black neighborhoods called redlining, created and sanctioned by the US government, defeated their dreams and created
disastrous ghettos. Anyone wanting to know more about how redlining functioned can read Coate’s Atlantic article as a starting point.

Even the much praised New Deal excluded many blacks. Social Security, meant to be a safety net from poverty for all, excluded farm workers and domestics. Not a surprise that blacks dominated those fields.

Seeds bear fruit. Blacks continued to be seen as “lesser” and “the other”. The legacy of slavery and Jim Crow led inexorably to new chapters in America’s oppression of black people. Separate but equal was the law of the land for years so blacks received inferior educations, medical treatment, and just about anything else that you can imagine. The war on drugs was waged in large part against young black men. And the consequences were disastrous. Go to prison and you can’t find a job. Go to prison and you can’t vote. White people who use cocaine powder go to prison for years. Black people who use crack cocaine go to prison for decades. That discrepancy was not unintended. The mass incarceration of the black population, especially young black men, is a national disgrace and is directly related to slavery and the social culture and governmental policies that followed emancipation.

Inferior education, lack of job opportunities, inability to build up equity has led to an intractable and pervasive wealth gap between white and black Americans.

Black people have applied to the courts for help. But with rare exceptions, American courts have not embraced the notion that we owe black people
much of anything. After all, the most overt trappings of white supremacy are gone. No more segregated schools or restaurants or rest rooms or water fountains; no more dogs or hoses being turned on little black children; a black president in the white house. But that does not mean our national debt has been wiped clean. To quote Coates:

“Papering over the issue of race makes for bad social theory, bad research, and bad public policy.” To ignore the fact that one of the oldest republics in the world was erected on a foundation of white supremacy, to pretend that the problems of a dual society are the same as the problems of unregulated capitalism, is to cover the sin of national plunder with the sin of national lying. The lie ignores the fact that reducing American poverty and ending white supremacy are not the same. The lie ignores the fact that closing the “achievement gap” will do nothing to close the “injury gap,” in which black college graduates still suffer higher unemployment rates than white college graduates, and black job applicants without criminal records enjoy roughly the same chance of getting hired as white applicants with criminal records.”

We have a national debt and we must own up to it. We need to acknowledge the Truth. “If they ask what I did well, tell them I said “yes” to truth.” But how do we pay back that debt, and why us? Let’s start with the second question first: why us. We didn’t go to Africa and kidnap slaves. We didn’t own slaves. Why do we owe them anything?
Here is the simple explanation. All of us have adopted this country. And when you adopt a country, you adopt all of it – its grandeur, its accomplishments and its debts, too. We enjoy America’s gifts. We owe on its debts. Babies who were born after the WW1 still contributed to Veteran’s benefits. People who had nothing to do with detaining Japanese in WW2 still contributed to reparations to those Japanese Americans who had been detained.

This debt is part of our present day heritage. We can ignore it, but we do so at our spiritual peril. Reparations, according to Coates means the full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences— it is the price we must pay to see ourselves squarely.

When we ignore that debt we are being dishonest with ourselves. And when we are dishonest with ourselves, we cannot be redeemed.

Now for the How.

Scholars have long discussed methods by which America might make reparations to those on whose labor and exclusion the country was built. Wealth attributed to slavery and cheating blacks out of their rightful economic gain has been calculated. The number is staggering, but its not the number that is really important. What is really important is the acknowledgement of the debt and the willingness to start to repay.

The creation of what is called the black-white wealth gap required the cooperation of every aspect of society. Local and federal governments,
civic groups, church groups, school boards, the legal system, the business community all conspired to prevent blacks from full participation. Reparation, meaning full integration into the economic and civic life of the community, will require nothing short of a total commitment from all of those same institutions.

And it’s not impossible. Not for this wealthy nation. Reparations can involve a combination of providing individual monetary grants to descendants of slaves and of endowments to develop the financial strength of the black community. These endowments, managed by members of the black community itself, could provide educational scholarships, or seed money for black businesses. There are a million creative ways that money could be used to improve the financial life of the black community. For instance, German reparation money provided to the State of Israel was used to develop a fleet of commercial ships, and the electrical grid.

In her article in The Huffington Post called We Absolutely Could give Reparations to Black People, Julia Craven wrote the following:

Won’t reparations divide us? Not any more than we are already divided. The wealth gap merely puts a number on something we feel but cannot say—that American prosperity was ill-gotten and selective in its distribution. What is needed is an airing of family secrets, a settling with old ghosts. What is needed is a healing of the American psyche and the banishment of white guilt.

What I’m talking about is more than recompense for past injustices—more than a handout, a payoff, hush money, or a reluctant bribe. What I’m talking about is a national reckoning that would lead to spiritual renewal.”
Every year John Conyers introduces HR 40, a modest bill that would establish a commission to study reparations for black descendants of slaves. This bill involves nothing more than a conversation about who we are as a people, and who we want to be as a people. We can’t change the sins of the past, but we can acknowledge, apologize and atone for them. We can recognize the sins of the present. We can provide for a better future for those to whom we owe so much.

This is a conversation that is necessary for our own spiritual well being and salvation.

To conclude with a quote from Coates:
More important than any single check cut to any African American, the payment of reparations would represent America’s maturation out of the childhood myth of its innocence into a wisdom worthy of its founders.

Closing words:

If they ask what I did well, tell them I said Yes to truth.

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