

Slavery and Our Duty to Work for Freedom

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Tomorrow is the birthday of Abraham Lincoln, “the Great Emancipator.”

Tuesday is the birthday of Frederick Douglass. He was born a slave. He freed and educated himself. He became the most prominent abolitionist. His biographer called him “the most influential African-American of the nineteenth century.”

And I have a personal connection to Douglass. I will tell you about that later.

This month is Black History Month, chosen because both Lincoln and Douglass were born in February.

This week, and for the last few weeks, we have been reading in the Torah the original freedom narrative, the freeing of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. That story was an inspiration to the slaves brought here in chains from Africa.

Slavery officially ended in this country in 1865 with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. The amendment states:

Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.

But now, 152 years later, the effects of our long history of slavery are still powerfully alive and require our urgent attention.

Three current movies that have been nominated for Oscars tell the story far better than I am able. They expose the pain and persistence of the racial prejudice against African-Americans that has bedeviled this country since before we were a country.

The first Oscar nominee is a movie titled “13TH.” The review in the Times calls it “Powerful, infuriating and at times overwhelming. It shakes you

up, but it also challenges your ideas about the intersection of race, justice and mass incarceration in the United States.”

The movie hinges on the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, as the title indicates.

The point of this movie is that slavery was abolished for everyone except criminals.

That same point is made in a 2010 book by Michelle Alexander titled “The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness.” Alexander is interviewed in this movie. She argues that mass incarceration exists on a continuum with slavery and Jim Crow. She says that, as one of “the three major racialized systems of control adopted in the United States to date,” mass incarceration ensures “the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race.”

Under the old Jim Crow, state laws instituted different rules for blacks and whites, segregating them under the doctrine of separate but equal. Now the United States has just five percent of the world’s population but 25 percent of the world’s prisoners. A disproportionate number of them are black. Mass , incarceration has become “metaphorically, the new Jim Crow.”

The second Oscar-nominated movie about racial prejudice, but also about so much more, is called “Hidden Figures.”

The movie takes us back to 1961, when racial segregation and workplace sexism were widely accepted facts of life. The heroes of the movie are three African-American women who work at NASA headquarters in Hampton, Virginia. Although initially assigned to data entry jobs, and denied recognition or promotion, they persisted in their work at NASA and played crucial roles in the success of the American space program.

The three women depicted are not fictional. They existed, and they accomplished the achievements that the movie shows us. They are Katherine Goble (later Johnson), Dorothy Vaughan and Mary Jackson. Their struggles at NASA happened as the agency was trying to send an astronaut into orbit.

Katherine Goble is the central “hidden figure.” She is a mathematical prodigy, already attending math classes in high school at age 13. NASA assigned her to a team calculating the launch coordinates and trajectory for an Atlas rocket. All the other members of the team were white men. She received a cold welcome. She suffered the indignities facing a black woman in a racially segregated, gender-stratified workplace. The only bathroom she could use was the bathroom marked “Colored” in a distant building. She horrified her new

co-workers when she helped herself to a cup of coffee from the common coffee pot.

Dorothy Vaughan and Mary Jackson also faced discrimination. Vaughan was in charge of several dozen women who were using adding machines to do the calculations now done by machines we call “computers.” In that time, the women themselves were called “computers.” NASA repeatedly denied Vaughan promotion to the title and pay of “supervisor” even though she was doing the work of a supervisor. Her immediate boss treated her with condescension.

The Polish-born engineer with whom Jackson worked was more enlightened, but she ran into the brick wall of Virginia’s Jim Crow laws when she tried to take graduate-level engineering courses.

“Hidden Figures” effectively conveys the poisonous normalcy of white supremacy. It also shows us the determination of the main characters to pursue their ambitions despite that prejudice and to live normal lives in its shadow. They faced racism, and the racism was systemic; it did not depend on the viciousness or virtue of individual white people.

The movie mainly does not treat the white characters as heroes for deciding, at long last, to behave decently. Two of them, however, are singled out for commendation: John Glenn, portrayed as a natural democrat with no time for racial hierarchies; and Al Harrison, the head of Katherine’s group, for whom the success of the mission is more important than color. He desegregates the NASA bathrooms with a sledgehammer and stands up for Katherine in quieter but no less emphatic ways when her qualifications are challenged.

The third Oscar-nominated film on this topic is titled “I Am Not Your Negro.” The Times review says of this film that it will make you rethink race.

This documentary about James Baldwin is an introduction to his work and an advanced seminar in racial politics.

The review continues:

Whatever you think about the past and future of what used to be called “race relations” [in plainer English, white supremacy and the resistance to it], this movie will make you think again, and may even change your mind. You could not find a movie that speaks to the present moment with greater clarity and force. The movie insists on uncomfortable truths, drawing stark lessons from the shadows of history.

“I Am Not Your Negro” is a kind of posthumous collaboration, a thrilling communion between the filmmaker and his subject. The voice-

over narration is drawn from Baldwin's work. Much of it comes from notes and letters written in the mid-1970s. Baldwin was then sketching out a book about the lives and deaths of three men he knew personally: Medgar Evers, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.

Reflections on those men and their legacies are interspersed with passages from other Baldwin books and essays. His words are some of the most powerful and penetrating ever assembled on the tortured subject of American identity. They accompany images from old talk shows and news reports, from classic movies and from our own present, a time that is not at all "post-racial."

Baldwin died in 1987. He did not know about Ferguson and Black Lives Matter, about the presidency of Barack Obama and the resurgence of white nationalism in its wake, but in a sense he explained it all in advance. He understood the deep, contradictory patterns of our history. He articulated the psychological dimensions of racial conflict. These include:

- the suppression of black humanity under slavery and Jim Crow;
- the dialectic of guilt and rage, forgiveness and denial that distorts relations between black and white citizens in the North as well as the South; and
- the lengths that white people will go to wash themselves clean of their complicity in oppression.

Movies are, in the end, only movies. Our task in life is to stand up to racial oppression and raise our voices and act on behalf of equal justice.

This brings me back to Frederick Douglass and my family [remember – I promised to tell you that story]:

When my grandmother was a little girl, eight years old, she sat on the lap of Frederick Douglass. That great man, who raised himself from slavery to freedom and from enforced illiteracy to become the most famous abolitionist in America, was a friend of my family.

In the summer of 1892, Douglass spoke in the Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis where my grandmother's grandparents were members. Their names were Horatio Phillips Van Cleve and his wife, Charlotte Ouisconsin Clark Van Cleve.

After the service, they invited Douglass to their home. My grandmother was then a little girl, eight years old. Douglass invited her to sit on his lap while he chatted with her family.

I have known the basic facts of this event since I was a child and my grandmother told me about it. But as I've said before, during and after the recent presidential election, we have a duty to be sure that stories are factual and not just stories. So, I looked up the papers of Frederick Douglass collected and digitized at the Library of Congress and searchable online. There I found two letters, one to Douglass and one to his wife, from Charlotte and from her brother Seymour. These letters verify this well-told family story.

My grandmother's connection to Douglass shows me that we are separated by only one degree of separation from slavery in America. Slavery is not only the ancient story of Egypt and the Israelites. Slavery is a phenomenon of our time in our country.

And the friendship with Douglass is not the end of the inspirational role his work played in the life of my family.

I've told you before about my grandmother living for many decades as a missionary in Lebanon to help the people who needed her help. You may recall her frequent assistance and visits to an inmate she in effect "adopted" in the prison in upstate New York near her home after she retired from her official missionary work.

You may also remember my stories about my mother inviting dark-skinned Puerto Rican children from New York City into our home in Darien, Connecticut, when I was a child, to live with us for a couple of weeks in the summer in the Fresh Air program, to the dismay of our prejudiced neighbors. And her participation in 1963 in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, where Dr. King spoke so eloquently of his dream for America.

Let us be inspired by the examples of Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, whose birthdays we celebrate this week, and the many other fighters for equality in our history and today, to work with them to bring us closer to the ideals on which our country was founded.