

## Racial Justice and Healing through Love: Lessons from My Ancestors

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*This essay describes the author’s framework for pursuing racial justice and healing in the United States through love. The author applies principles from Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed to examine lessons of love and faith from her family and enslaved great-great grandparents whose internal work of resistance through love is offered as a strategy for resisting hate on the path to freedom and liberation. These lessons are embedded within an analysis of Freire’s thesis regarding the role of the oppressed in restoring humanity.*

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### Ancestral Love

Before I knew a word of scripture, I experienced the love of God through the unconditional love of my parents. I was born into a legacy of faith that enveloped me before I possessed the capacity to explain it. We are descendants of Africans who were enslaved in the southern region of the United States. Both of my parents, like their parents, grew up in the Christian faith. They attended the same Baptist church in Baltimore, Maryland. My mother, who took me and my sister to church every Sunday, is the architect of the faith that formed in me. She models her intimate relationship with God through her strong faith in Jesus Christ, which she has lived out through her many years of service in education, her dedicated church work, and her formidable prayer life. Both my mother and my father love me in a way that nurtures my soul and spirit. Their nourishing love connects me to the love of my ancestors passed down in our family for generations. This ancestral love<sup>1</sup> stabilizes me and is a love, which, like most of my family members, I know through Christ, and is the foundation of my life and my racial justice work. The following essay applies Paulo Freire’s theoretical framework for fighting oppression to illuminate my ancestors’ internal method of racial justice and healing through love. This lens amplifies the spiritual dimension of racial justice and healing and frames it as a spiritual discipline. My paternal great-great-grandparents, Susan and Moses Wood, who were enslaved on a plantation in Virginia, the first state where Africans were enslaved 400 years ago in 1619,<sup>2</sup> will be utilized as examples of this early racial justice activism deployed through love-centered nonviolent resistance.

### Freire: Don’t Take on the Oppressor’s Ways

In his seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, first published in 1968, Paulo Freire contends that it is the role of the oppressed to liberate themselves and their oppressor through the “power

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<sup>1</sup> Ancestral love is inspired by Ta-Nehisi Coates’s notion of “ancestral fear” in his book *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 87.

<sup>2</sup> Deborah Gray White, Mia Bay, and Waldo E. Martin Jr., *Freedom on My Mind: A History of African Americans with Documents* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2013).

that springs from the weakness of the oppressed.”<sup>3</sup> He outlines the following prescription for dismantling oppression:

Because it is a distortion of being more fully human, sooner or later being less human leads the oppressed to struggle against those who made them so. In order for this struggle to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both.<sup>4</sup>

Based on what I have learned from my ninety-eight-year-old paternal grandfather, Rev. Marcus Garvey Wood, I believe Susan and Moses embodied Freire’s creed. They loved Jesus and each other. They have become two of my greatest teachers of love. They were not perfect, but their legacy of love endures and demonstrates that they tried to live the way of love through Jesus. Even though they were enslaved, they did not teach their family to hate their oppressor. My grandfather wrote about them in his book, first published in 1998, chronicling his fifty years in ministry entitled *And Grace Will Lead Me Home: The Ministry of Rev. Marcus Garvey Wood*. Moses died before my grandfather was born, but Susan kept the memory of Moses’ love alive through her stories. My grandfather describes how as a little boy he would sit at grandma Susan’s knee as she rocked in her rocker and joyfully sang spirituals. She would share memories of her childhood enslaved, forced to labor ten to twelve hours a day picking soybeans and corn. He would listen to her sing spirituals as she shared stories about her hard times: “O happy day . . . O happy day . . . When Jesus washed my sins away!”<sup>5</sup> Despite being enslaved most of her life and still living in the midst of struggle, she kept a song in her heart. She proudly described her dear Moses as the “light of her life.”<sup>6</sup> She expressed how her love for her husband helped her to know God’s love intimately. She described Moses as being a living expression of “God’s love for all on this earth.”<sup>7</sup> My grandfather explains how he absorbed his grandmother’s faith and love:

I’d sit at her knee, feeling the power of her faith, the warmth of her kindness, and already beginning to understand something about the love of God that’s reflected in each one of us, and that makes this great old world go around and around.<sup>8</sup>

His grandmother’s love for God drew him closer to God and sheltered him from receiving the full impact of a hard life two generations removed from slavery in the South. He and his six brothers lived with their parents in a modest farmhouse in Virginia without electricity or running water, not far from where Susan and Moses had been enslaved.<sup>9</sup> The faith and love that his parents and grandparents passed down to him provided the foundation for his own personal relationship with God. He continued to build on this foundation as he excelled in studying the Bible informally as a child, which prepared him for his seminary training at Crozer Theological Seminary where he trained with Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., who was affectionately known as

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<sup>3</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012), 44.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Marcus Garvey Wood, *And Grace Will Lead Me Home: The Ministry of Rev. Marcus Garvey Wood* (Baltimore, MD: Gateway Press, 2004), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

“Mike” King at that time.<sup>10</sup> My grandfather’s strong relationship with God sustained him throughout his nearly seventy years as a Baptist minister. He was my pastor, and I grew up listening to him preach and teach Jesus’ gospel message of love, a message that was nurtured in him at his grandmother’s knee.

### **Nonviolent Resistance: Rejecting the Hate**

My great-great-grandparents were born into slavery in this country and were formed within a system of racial oppression that could have consumed them. They were people who were born free, but not into freedom. Even though they loved God, I know their love for God did not extinguish their desire to be liberated from enslavement. Their form of racial justice work, and the work of so many others like them, entailed the psychological labor of refusing to internalize the poisonous messages from the slave owners who labeled them nonhuman property.<sup>11</sup> The whole system was designed to establish an internal framework that would lead enslaved Africans to see themselves as inferior to their white oppressors and to value white lives over their own.<sup>12</sup>

I know that my grandparents, like so many other enslaved Africans, worked hard to resist internalizing the messages of hate from their oppressors. One of the sources of their strength to resist was their relationship with Jesus. Even though they grew up and developed within a society that treated them as property and denied their humanity, they cultivated intimacy with God and each other through God’s love. They mitigated the “ancestral fear”<sup>13</sup> that had undoubtedly been passed down to them through generations by remaining in God’s love. They passed on the message and the memory of the love that came before them down to their children and to their children’s children, and not a message of hate. They demonstrated that hate cannot flourish internally within us in the presence of love. The love of God my great-great-grandparents embodied prevented them from fully disconnecting themselves from God and their own humanity and from the humanity of their oppressor. They knew, as Freire knew, that the oppressed must fight hard to hold on to the truth of who they are<sup>14</sup> as fully free human beings and resist the temptation to internalize the characteristics and distortions of the oppressor in any form.<sup>15</sup> This is not an attempt to minimize their experience as people forced to endure the relentless trauma of being owned by other human beings. There is no way we could possibly ever fully comprehend the full extent of the brutality the enslaved endured. My grandfather did not write about the horrors of slavery. It is likely that grandma Susan, like many Africans who survived slavery, did not share explicit details about her life enslaved.

### **Resistance Through Love Today**

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>11</sup> Tamba-Kuui M. Bailey, Wendi S. Williams, and Brian Favors, “Internalized Racial Oppression in the African American Community,” in *Internalized Oppression: The Psychology of Marginalized Groups*, ed. E. J. R. David (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2014), 137–62.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Coates, *Between the World and Me*, 87.

<sup>14</sup> Drawn from Coates’s statement to his son: “The entire narrative of this country argues against the truth of who you are” (*Between the World and Me*, 99).

<sup>15</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

During the summer of 2014, I interviewed my grandfather to learn more about Moses Wood, who was also a Christian minister. He was what was known as a “chair back” preacher. He was not a formal minister but would get up during the Sunday religious gatherings of the enslaved and stand behind his chair and preach when a message came from the Lord. I was curious about the theology of faith and forgiveness of an enslaved man. My grandfather shared a powerful message from Moses that Susan had told him as a child. She explained Moses’ perspective on slavery. According to Susan, this is what Moses said about slavery: “Don’t you worry about slavery. God’s going to handle slavery, in His own time, and in His own way.”<sup>16</sup> This is aligned with Freire’s directive: liberate yourself from your oppressor’s hold without slipping into his shoes, so that you can walk away completely unbound.<sup>17</sup> Moses’ belief revealed his consciousness about freedom. He knew that liberation is not just about freedom of the body. It also involves freeing one’s spirit. Moses’ message conveys that his spirit was unbound and that no man could capture it. He, and Susan, like so many other enslaved people, were able to liberate themselves and spiritually transcend the confines of enslavement through their love relationship with God and each other. Moses knew that if he preached a message of revenge or violence, he would be tainting his way of being in the world by adopting the ways of his oppressors; the ones who deemed him to be nonhuman property. Doing so would have compromised his capacity to become one of the “restorers of the humanity of both.”<sup>18</sup>

The lesson I learned from Moses through my grandfather that summer fortified my spirit later in the summer when Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, Missouri, and when the officer who killed him was not indicted. As I wrestled with deep pain and anger, I continued to feel and hear Moses’ message: Don’t you worry about slavery, God’s going to handle slavery in His own time and in His own way. This encouraged me then, and continues to sustain me now and enables me to resist the temptation to let my heart harden through anger and hate. If my enslaved great-great-grandparents were able to resist hating their oppressors, even for a moment, I can do the same through the same resource they used. I can allow the powerful love and Spirit of Christ that we share, and that keeps them alive in me, to transform my anger into fire that keeps me focused on the pursuit of racial justice and healing through love.

Susan and Moses’ commitment to love insulated our family from adopting the oppressor’s way of hate. My parents taught me and my sister not to hate. We were explicitly instructed that hate was a bad word, and we were prohibited from saying it. I can still hear my father’s response to one of us saying we hated something trivial like vegetables. He would say, “You don’t *hate* anything.” I have taught this lesson to my own child. The love my ancestors passed down to us has helped to ensure that the rage and anger we also inherited from them, which is kept alive through enduring racial oppression, does not evolve into hate. My great-great-grandparents’ love ethic is the ideal, but I know that they did not always maintain it. While I do not have a written record of their deep sorrows and their interior struggles, I know they existed. I feel the force of their grief, their pain, and their resistance, just as strongly as I feel their love. All of it resides in my soul and spirit.

### **The Way Forward: Birthing Freedom**

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<sup>16</sup> Personal communication, summer 2014.

<sup>17</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

This way of being in the world is about restoring humanity.<sup>19</sup> It cannot be accomplished through human strength alone. This work is spirituality at its highest function. Moses’ message reinforces my understanding that the work requires a belief in the power of God to eliminate forces that animate the oppressor. My great-great-grandparents knew that even though they were legally owned by man, God was still in control. No earthly power could alter their status as free human spirits. Moses’ message also reminds me of what so many of us know, that although laws regarding that form of slavery have changed, the freedom work is not done. The spiritual transformation required to eradicate the spirit behind man’s laws<sup>20</sup> is yet to be fulfilled and can only be accomplished through the power of God’s love. Eliminating the oppressor’s laws is not the key to our liberation on earth; transforming his ways of thinking, knowing, and being, which compelled him to devise oppressive systems like chattel slavery, is required.<sup>21</sup> This will take us to the root cause of the dehumanization that Freire contends has produced the oppressor and the oppressed.<sup>22</sup> Then the true liberation he describes can occur. He asserts, “Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one. The man or woman who emerges is a new person, viable only as the oppressor–oppressed contradiction is superseded by the humanization of all people.”<sup>23</sup> Freire explains that new humans who are neither oppressed or oppressors are birthed in this “process of achieving freedom.”<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

The birthing Freire describes is a powerful and very difficult form of resistance. It is ongoing. It involves making the decision to regularly resist letting your heart harden and to decide to see your oppressor through love instead of fear and hate after each tragedy that challenges this ethic (Walter Scott, Eric Garner, Freddie Gray, Sandra Bland, Mother Emmanuel Church). This love work is what enables us to embrace Freire’s radical response to oppression in the midst of our birthing: compassion and connection.<sup>25</sup> He highlights the need for the oppressed to embody freedom in a way that ensures they remember that their oppressor’s humanity remains embedded in theirs so that the process of restoration and liberation emerges from this shared space.<sup>26</sup> Revenge and violence destroy this pathway forward. Every time we choose to hate, we cultivate inner violence, and we diminish our capacity to give birth to full human restoration.<sup>27</sup> This is the foundation of racial justice and healing: the rebuilding of human connections and creating a shared pathway to a restored humanity.<sup>28</sup> As this process manifests healing and wholeness in each of us, new policies and laws will emerge that will help to correct the current racial inequalities that exist throughout our society.

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<sup>19</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage* (New York: Scribner, 1990).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

Healing from the internal effects of racism is foundational to transforming external systems and structures in order to build a just society. A site for healing that must be prioritized and examined is our interior selves. Racism can cause us to hate ourselves and each other as it moves us away from love. It tries to convince us to hate and to disconnect. The only way my great-great-grandparents were able to remain rooted in love, even for a moment, and not be overwhelmed by hate, was through their connection to God and each other. In our pursuit for racial justice, we must remain in love and connected to each other and heal from within to ensure that our transformed society emerges from a foundation of love. This is the substance that will reconnect us as a human family, and it is not easy. It requires surrendering to the power beyond our humanness.

Susan and Moses remind us that the first step in the process toward racial justice and healing in our society is to turn within. We must have the courage to engage with our own selves and to cultivate a path toward inner freedom through love. They did this through their love relationship with God and each other. Whether you call on God or not, I believe love is the way for both the oppressor and the oppressed to break free from the racism that has blocked our way to freedom for too long. My great-great-grandparents' love framework for racial justice and healing calls us to a higher place. What they and Freire help us to see is that the place of freedom is occupied by both the oppressed and the oppressor, and emerges through their collective rebirth.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.