



COMING TO THE TABLE

When I walked into the chapel at Eastern Mennonite University, I wasn't sure what to expect. I had driven up and over the mountain from my farm home, and I was ready, but this wasn't going to be an easy weekend.

Few things make Americans as nervous as talking about race, yet this past May, 80 people gathered at Eastern Mennonite to do just that. These were not just conversations about the concept of race—about privilege and equality and justice, for example, although those things did come up. The conversations were of a much more personal nature, for most of the people in attendance at the national gathering for Coming to the Table were either the descendants of slave owners or descendants of enslaved people. They—we—came together to listen to and share with one another, knowing this is the only way to heal the wounds.

In 2006, Coming to the Table held its first national gathering, and from there the organization has grown in its mission to “provide leadership, resources, and a supportive environment for all who wish to acknowledge and heal wounds from racism that is rooted in the United States’ history of slavery.”

During our time together, we watched the film *Cracking The Codes: The System of Racial Inequality* by Shakti Butler and discussed identity and the definitions people impose on each other. We had conversations about reparations and white privilege, about historic preservation and genealogy. We sat

in small groups, passing a totem as a signal that an individual had the floor, and shared our reasons for being there—to heal the wounds some of us have carried from generations of enslavement, to unmask the shame some of us carry because of our ancestors’ roles as enslavers, to find a better way forward together.

My interest in Coming to the Table was sparked by the fact that I was raised on a former plantation where many people were at one time enslaved, and in a very real way that land has shaped who I am. I attended hoping that the Coming to the Table folks could teach me how to navigate the very hard conversations I often have—especially since publishing a book on the lives of the people who were slaves on the land I grew up on—about race and the legacy of slavery. That’s the reason I told myself (and others) I had come.

But I had also come because I am the descendant of free people of color—African Americans who had never been enslaved—and the descendant of enslavers—European Americans who had owned other people. My great-great-grandfather, James Henry, had been born a black man to a family of free black people. But at age 7, he moved away into the home of white people and began to pass. When he was older, he married my great-great grandmother, a white woman whose father owned slaves. So I had come to the National Gathering because I did not know how to take that story into

myself, how to let it shape all of me, including my white skin.

At shared meals and in the quiet spaces between formal times, we talked quietly and intensely, heads leaned in close. Laughter echoed through the halls. A lot of us cried. Some shouted. It was a beautiful, hard space.

On our last day together, we gathered in a huge circle, every face visible to every other face. Our teachers reminded us that we had all—every one of us—been harmed by the legacy of slavery in different ways, that our job was not to fix each other but to hear each other, and that the good intentions that had brought us together were to be honored in that space. It was, I believe, the truest description of community I had ever experienced.

So I spent the last hour in that space trying to listen, trying not to answer (even silently to myself) but just listening, honoring the feelings, the experience, the pain, and the growth of every person there. Sometimes I slipped into my own mind—my justifications, my defensiveness—but mostly, I just sat, safe and open. When it came time for me to speak, when the totem of the microphone passed into my hands, I simply said, “I am grateful and hopeful.”

For that’s what Coming to the Table gives—a profound sense of gratitude for the people who are willing to enter into these hard conversations, for the

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safe space to speak honestly of pain that so many feel is false or unreasonable, and a deep, deep hope that as long as we keep talking, as long as we keep gathering together at the table, we will find our way through it all.

Learn more at ComingToTheTable.org.



*Andrea Cumbo-Floyd (AndiLit.com) is a writer, editor, and writing teacher whose book *The Slaves Have Names* tells the story of the people enslaved on the plantation where she was raised. She and her husband live on God’s Whisper Farm in Virginia’s Blue Ridge Mountains.*