



COMING TO THE TABLE

Seeking to acknowledge, understand, and
heal the persistent wounds of the
US institution of slavery

A Collection of Stories

Coming to the Table participants share
some of what their family history
means to them today



Seeking to acknowledge, understand, and
heal the persistent wounds of the US institution of slavery

A Collection of Stories

Coming to the Table participants share
some of what their family history
means to them today

Table of Contents

Introduction	.....	- 3 -
Jeff Fracher	.....	- 4 -
Pat Moncure Thomas	.....	- 6 -
Jim Mustin	.....	- 9 -
Susan Tichy	.....	- 12 -
Shay Banks-Young	.....	- 15 -
Will Hairston	.....	- 17 -
Randy Gamble	.....	- 20 -
Pat Russell	.....	- 22 -
Sylvia Wong Lewis	.....	- 25 -
Art Carter	.....	- 28 -
Caroline Borden	.....	- 31 -
Conclusion	.....	- 33 -
A note about the interview process	.....	- 34 -
Acknowledgements	.....	- 35 -

Introduction

Coming to the Table works with descendants of slaveholders and descendants of people who were enslaved, as well as other individuals, families, and communities in the hope that we can contribute to the transformation and healing of our nation.

We are inspired by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision that one day "the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood," put forth in his historic March on Washington speech.

We welcome all who wish to join us in our mission through our approach:

Uncovering history: researching, acknowledging, and sharing personal, family and community histories of "race" with openness and honesty

Making connections: connecting to others within and across "racial" lines in order to develop and deepen relationships

Working toward healing: exploring how we can heal together through listening, dialogue, reunion, ritual, ceremony, the arts, apology, and other means

Taking action: actively seeking to make systemic and institutional change to end racial inequality and injustice and to support racial reconciliation between individuals, within families, and in communities.

Coming to the Table was founded in 2005 by descendants of both slaveholders and enslaved people in partnership with the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. Through grants provided by the Fetzer Institute and Kellogg Foundation, Coming to the Table has offered events, gatherings and workshops. As a result of these grants, as well as countless volunteer hours, Coming to the Table now provides support for dialogue, education, and connection through Local Affiliate Groups located throughout the United States, social networking, conference calls, and local, regional, and national gatherings.

You, as the readers are invited to learn more about Coming to the Table through the stories, told through interviews, of eleven people who have been a part of this organization in various ways. The interview may be interspersed with a summary from the interviewer. The questions at the end of each interview are there to encourage reflection on the mission of Coming to the Table.

If you are already a participant of Coming to the Table, here is an opportunity to learn about other participants around the country. If you are not a participant, perhaps you will be inspired to ask more about joining.



Jeff Fracher

Jeffrey Fracher is a clinical and forensic psychologist in private practice who is also an assistant professor at the University of Virginia. He is married and has two grown sons. He lives in Charlottesville with his wife, Kay, and two dogs and two cats.

My great-grandfather was born and raised on Linwood Plantation in Louisiana. He dropped out of college when the Civil War started, and joined the Louisiana cavalry. In later years he wrote a book called the "Cavalryman's Reminiscence of the Civil War," which is fairly well-known in the South, describing his experiences.

"I had probably spent the last 15 or 20 years looking for a descendant of any slaves of Linwood and kept hitting dead-ends."

He also wrote something that was never published as a book, called "Plantation Life in the South," about growing up on Linwood and about the slaves. It was just about day-to-day life there. His attitude toward the slaves wasn't one that was particularly hostile. But it was one that was patronizing and romanticized.

He was married twice before he married my great-grandmother because the first two women died, as was not uncommon in those days. His third wife was the daughter of a friend that he fought with in the Civil War. She was 20 some years younger than he so I actually knew her as a child.

My family would travel to Louisiana every year and I would hear stories at my great-grandmother Carter's house. There was a certain amount of bitterness in the family oral history about Reconstruction and about what they had lost after the war when they had to free the slaves. My great-grandfather's wealth dropped significantly. Of course this is what would happen when most of your wealth is in human beings and then you don't own them anymore.

I always had these very opposing images growing up. There was my mother's side of the family. But my father's side of the family was different. My father was a second generation German immigrant who met my mother in New Orleans during World War II when he was there for training as a naval officer. He was an Episcopal minister as a young man. He was very active in the Civil

Rights Movement. And yet my mother was traditionally Old South and racist - benignly racist, if that is possible.

When I was five years old we lived in Danville, Virginia. The town had closed the library rather than let blacks take books out. My father was appalled and he spoke out and wrote letters to the papers. I remember he would get death threats. Of course my mother was furious at him because she thought he was putting us in danger. Those are some of my early memories.

In approximately March of 2010, I was online doing some genealogical research about my family's plantation in Louisiana. We wanted to take my younger son there for a visit. I found a link to a video about Linwood.

I had probably spent the last 15 or 20 years looking for a descendant of any slaves of Linwood and kept hitting dead-ends. I clicked on this link and there was a video of an African-American woman touring Linwood explaining that her ancestors came from there. I started shaking and I thought, "How am I going to get in touch with this person?" I sent her an email explaining who I was and why I was emailing her. Almost immediately I got back an email saying that her prayers had been answered. She had been looking for years for a direct descendant of the plantation owner.*

Jeff tells me about his first and subsequent meetings with Bernadine Anderson, whose great-great grandfather Calvin Stevenson was enslaved by Jeff's great-grandfather. The story of this encounter has been told in the newspaper and in People Magazine. Susan Hutchison, one of the founders of Coming to the Table, called him in the summer of 2010, after hearing about their story. Jeff has been part of Coming to the Table's online community for the past year.

Just being in this community. . . albeit a somewhat virtual community. . . feels supportive. Hearing the kinds of experiences that people have encountered, practically in terms of obstacles, or emotionally from trying to bring some experience of connection out of this horrific institution that existed is very inspiring. I like to think that our story has been inspiring to others, as well.

It is also a place to hear from people who haven't been as fortunate. They have had doors slammed in their face, so to speak, when they reached out. I have given them support and been able to tell them, "Keep going." It's a wonderful community of folks that are all on the same journey. It keeps the importance of this struggle front and center.

Through Bernadine I have realized that racism exists today in ways I didn't realize. A study was done in which companies were sent resumes that were identical, except for the names. One name might have been John Smith and the other name might have been Deandre Jones. Then they gauged the different responses the resumes got. People were clearly making inferences about the names. The white person got twice as many responses as the person that was presumably Black. That's the kind of stuff that makes me nuts.

When Susan Hutchinson, asked me to join the organization, I said, "Absolutely." It was clear it was place where Bernadine and I could not only deepen our connection but also address the larger issues of reconciliation between what we call linked descendants: descendants of enslaved

people and slave holders. I have the belief that there is still racism today and a massive amount of work to be done. That begins my journey with Coming to the Table.

*Coming to the Table would call Jeffery Fracher and Bernadine Anderson “linked descendants;” one’s ancestor enslaved the other’s ancestor, or one’s ancestor was enslaved by the other’s ancestor.

QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean to be “benignly racist”? Where is benign racism seen today? How can this type of racism be addressed?
2. Jeff says that he grew up with two opposing images or points of view, and that he grew to understand his father’s point of view. When you hear opposing point of view, how do you know which point of view to listen to?



Pat Moncure Thomas

Patricia Moncure Thomas was born in Chicago and grew up in Grand Rapids, Michigan. She received her M.Ed. from Wayne State University and her School Administrator Certification from Seattle Pacific University. She is currently the principal at Browns Point Elementary in Tacoma, Washington, and has received numerous awards for her work as an educator and leader. She is recognized as a historian specializing in African American history and genealogy/ research. She is the president of the Black Historical Society of Kitsap County, Washington.

I was born in Chicago in 1947 and I lived there until the third grade, when I moved to Michigan with my family. When I was in Chicago, I knew two uncles who were like keepers of the family. They would bring relatives together who lived all over the city for family reunions. But one died, and a few years later, the other uncle died, and the tradition went way.

“After all, this isn’t just my family story. This is the story of America.”

Years later, the children and grandchildren of these uncles made a plan to have a yearly reunion. We started in 1998 and have gone to a different city every year, although Chicago is a core city that we go back to. Chicago is where a lot of my family from Mississippi migrated. I decided that I would help carry on the legacy of the family by collecting the details of our lineage and also by gathering stories.

My dad left Mississippi when he was about 13 or 14 years old to look for work and he never took his family to visit. He always said, “There’s nothing good in Mississippi,” because of the hardships he left behind.

Mississippi is where the white and black part of my family became linked. I went there for the first time in my life in 2000 when I was 53 years old. When I got out at the airport, I thought, “You must be crazy! What did you do to yourself?”

But a cousin, who I had never met in my life, greeted me at the airport. She grabbed me and hugged like she had known me forever. My relatives took me around and I started interviewing older people. They told us the story of the black woman who had seven babies by the white Moncure man. The interesting and maybe sad thing is that most people I spoke to, who told me things that I would never have known, are now dead.

I learned about Eunice Moncure Martin. She lived in Detroit at the end of her life, and I grew up in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which is about a three hour drive away.

Eunice was born in 1899, and was 100 years old when I drove out to meet her. Her father was one of the seven children of a white Moncure and a black woman. Eunice had blue eyes- what was called “white” eyes. She knew the white Bob Moncure. Bob Moncure visited her dad Oscar Moncure, and they went hunting and fishing together. This relationship as blood kin was “allowed” by the norms of society, but blacks had to follow the unspoken rules and code of contact, or risk getting hurt. It was never openly admitted that Bob and Oscar Moncure were related by blood, even though Bob Moncure visited his own family.

Researching my family history has been an adventure and I keep finding out something new all the time.

Susan Hutchison, one of the founders of Coming to the Table, had read some of the articles about the research of my Moncure family and the connections the research had made to history. She asked me if I might be interested in joining the organization. I joined one of the first gatherings and I have been involved with Coming to the Table since then.

At Browns Point Elementary where I am the principal, I have brought up the topic of race and culture before with my staff in a limited way. But this year we started going deeper.

For example, we talked about a book on cultural competency. But I told my staff, you can't read a book about this when you don't understand what is underneath your own culture. I believe I first have to understand how my thoughts about people who don't look like me have been influenced by my upbringing and through seeing role-models. I can just read about culture or I can dig deeper and ask, "What did my experiences create in me?"

Making assumptions based on our experiences happens with all of us. For example, I was told, "Don't trust white people. They are going to hurt you. They don't care about you."

I grew up believing that, or at least being cautious, and I didn't get into a deeper dialogue. Sometimes you have to dialogue about something before you make a realization. You go, "Ah ha!" or you cry. Or you do anything in between.

I see that happening via Coming to the Table. I think I can have an honest conversation without feeling like I have to tread softly. It has given me the voice to bring up difficult topics with others. I have to be strong enough to be able to do that without being worried about people backing away. After all, this isn't just my family story. This is the story of America.

Patricia Moncure Thomas's website, www.moncure.mysite.com explains more of her family's history.

QUESTIONS

- 1. How might researching your family history be meaningful to you?**
- 2. How can we start to explore answers to the question posed by Patricia: "What did your experiences create in you?"**



Jim Mustin

Jim Mustin lives in Charlottesville, Virginia. He was born in Tuscaloosa, Alabama in 1942. He is currently working on a Restorative Justice program in the public school system in Richmond city.

“I tried to raise my children to not believe lies that other people are inferior. They don’t seem to have the issues that I grew up with but they still have to live in this white world - a society that mostly wants to forget the past and how it affects us today.”

My mother didn’t grow up wealthy, but she lived with her family on what had once been part of a plantation outside of Montgomery, Alabama. They had a crew of black people that worked for them. You didn’t have to be wealthy to be able to pay them because they were very inexpensive to hire.

I was told that at one point the place was a large plantation of 60,000 acres that my family received from the governor of the state, when the state of Alabama was first formed. They had a significant plantation operation with labor coming from slaves. All of that, whatever wealth there was, was lost as a consequence of the defeat of the Confederacy in the Civil War.

My mother’s grandfather would tell her stories. My mother picked up these things – little remarks here and there, that were passed down to me.

For example, I came home from the second grade one day and she asked, “What did you learn in school today?”

I said, “Oh, I learned about the great American presidents.”

She asked, “Who are the great American presidents?”

I said, “George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln.”

She said, “Abraham Lincoln was the devil incarnate.”

I was thinking, “That’s not what they said at school.”

She said, “Well, that is what your great-grandfather always said.”

Things like that were always popping up. I had a sense of the contradiction.

My mother learned how to hire servants and direct them to take care of things, rather than do things herself. When my mother married my father – they had the wedding in the yard of the home where she grew up – one of the women who had been a servant there for a long time was chatting with my father and she said, “There’s one thing you need to understand. Miss Louise is a mighty fine woman, but she don’t know how boil water.”

This was pretty much true. Although my mother was smart, she didn’t learn those things. She did try to raise my older sister herself and this was stressful for my sister.

By the time I was born she had decided to hire somebody to be the nanny and to take care of me. That worked well. But then World War II started. My father went into the Navy and was assigned to a Navy communication school in Cambridge, Massachusetts for six months. Reluctantly, my mother followed him, leaving behind my nanny, who I was bonded to as my mother. I was bonded to this black woman and then suddenly she just disappeared.

We went up to Massachusetts where my mother found that there wasn’t much in the way of a nice apartment, and you couldn’t get good help. The best she could come up with was to find someone to baby-sit for one or two hours in the afternoon, while she ran out to buy groceries. I was bewildered and my mother was bewildered, and this was all before I knew how to put words to anything.

When people would say bad things about black people, something inside me would say it was wrong. It was apparently because they were talking about this person who, deep inside, I felt was my mother.

By the time I got to college and started thinking for myself, I found myself attracted to people that were interested in de-segregation which was happening at the University of Alabama around that time. Some of my friends and I were taking part in small things, but things that seemed to have importance at the time. We were constantly driving the university administration crazy because we would put things in the student newspaper that they didn’t want to have there. For example, Melvin Meyer, the student editor, published that James Meredith had the right to go to law school at the University of Mississippi. This was a horrible taboo at the time.

Later in life, after taking early retirement from the Department of Corrections, I became interested in trauma healing. I had met Howard Zehr and I presented at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU) about working with families of prisoners. For various reasons I found myself crossing paths with EMU. I heard about Coming to the Table and went to one of the early Coming to the Table workshops.

The best experience I had at a workshop was with one person in particular. They had drawn a figure-eight on the floor with all the steps of trauma, showing how people can get stuck in a loop and can’t really grow.

There was a black woman who was very upfront about how she felt about things. I was drawn to her and I asked her to help me. I was describing how I thought the steps of trauma related to Callie, the nanny I was bonded to. She said, “Let’s walk it right now.”

She took me by the arm, and we walked along the figure-eight. She said, “Tell me what you think here.” And “Tell me what you think there.”

Our group had talked about this before but it had been more of an intellectual process. But when I did it arm and arm with a black woman it was very different. It was supportive. It was a

marvelous thing and a generous thing for her to do. There was something really unusual about the way she supported me. It was a great benefit.

When I think about aspirations I think about my children. I hope I can make it easier for my children and others to really deal with these issues instead of getting all the lies I got. I tried to raise my children to not believe lies that other people are inferior. They don't seem to have the issues that I grew up with but they still have to live in this white world - a society that mostly wants to forget the past and how it affects us today.

Questions

- 1. What do we need to know about trauma in order to heal from it?**
- 2. Jim says about his children, "They don't seem to have the issues that I grew up with but they still have to live in this white world - a society that mostly wants to forget the past and how it affects us today."**

What are some helpful ways we can teach children about the past and the past's relationship to the present?



Susan Tichy

Susan Tichy is a poet who has written extensively about war and its human consequences. Her poems and essays have been widely published in the U.S. and U.K., and recognized by numerous awards, including a grant from National Endowment for the Arts. Since 1988 she has taught in the Master of Fine Arts Program at George Mason University. Her most recent books are Gallowglass (an Anglicized form of the Gaelic gal-óglac, a foreign soldier or mercenary), and Bone Pagoda, an extended meditation on Vietnam.

My grandmother's family descended from Scottish prisoners of war who were transported to

Maryland in the middle of the seventeenth century as indentured servants. Clan Gregor— "Clan with a C" as my family would always say in public—was an intensely important part of my upbringing. The MacGregors* were victims of persecution and of genocidal laws designed to obliterate their clan and eradicate their name. We were taught that maintaining a sense of our identity had special importance. The message was, "We have survived despite what was done to us."

"I'm very uncomfortable with pretending I don't know something. If my ancestors were involved in slavery and I didn't pursue finding out about it, I would be pretending it didn't affect me or pretending I had no relationship to it. The more particulars I know, the more real it is to me, and the more the responsibility of it becomes real."

But I realized as I grew up that there was a silence about almost everything between Alexander Magruder, my immigrant ancestor from 300 years ago, and the early Twentieth century. There was mostly silence about anything the family had done other than being prosperous farmers and fighters in the American Revolution.

When I found out about my family's slave-owning history, I wasn't totally surprised, but it was a moment of reckoning. When I read Alexander Magruder's will and the inventory of his property, I discovered he owned four indentured servants and one slave. The inventory lists the names of the four indentured servants, how much longer each had to serve, and the monetary value of that service. Under this information it says, "one man, negro, named Sambo."

I remember closing my eyes, and thinking, “When I open my eyes, it is going to be a different name.” But there it was. At that point I still didn’t know that nearly all of Magruder’s descendents for the next 200 years were slave owners. That is something I discovered more gradually.

I think the silence about slavery was something particular to my family. A Magruder and MacGregor identity was very important to my mother, yet she didn’t want her children to identify with Southern nostalgia for the slave-owning past. She was critical of other Magruders who defended their ancestors and opposed rights for African Americans. Her solution to this conflict was not to talk about slavery, and to constantly remind us that our part of the family was somehow “different.”

This was the 1950s and 1960s, when progress in Civil Rights for African Americans was forcing white Southerners to think about their history and face a new future. Looking back, I think the “difference” she meant had more to do with the present than the past—how her part of the family *thought about* slavery and responded to the idea of equal rights for blacks.

About a year ago, at our annual book festival at George Mason University, I saw the film, *Traces of the Trade*. Tom DeWolf,* one of the guest authors, spoke about his related book, *Inheriting the Trade*. That’s how I found out about *Coming to the Table*. One thing about Tom DeWolf and the film that motivated me to join was the family’s quest for personal discovery.

I posted a short profile on the *Coming to the Table* website and I read the online articles from time to time. I read stories about people who had found the descendants of those who had enslaved their ancestors, or vice-versa, and found the stories moving.

But I didn’t have any significant personal contact with *Coming to the Table*, until I responded to a posting about a gathering in Richmond, Virginia.

The most memorable thing about the meeting for me was listening to the stories people told.

One of my hopes for sharing stories with *Coming to the Table* is connected to personal growth: to be able speak and listen on these issues a little more, to be able to have more experience doing it in different settings with different people. My work as a writer is so incredibly private. I spend hours in archives or at my computer. I have a lot in my head, but I have little experience speaking about it. For those in my professional world, this is just a subject I write about. For me, this always has been something that is very personal.

I’m very uncomfortable with pretending I don’t know something. If my ancestors were involved in slavery and I didn’t pursue finding out about it, I would be pretending it didn’t affect me or pretending I had no relationship to it. The more particulars I know, the more real it is to me, and the more the responsibility of it becomes real.

I’m working on a book that has to do with my family history. In tandem with finishing that book, while researching in the archives, I’m trying to identify African Americans who were enslaved by Magruders in Maryland. I have been able to track some families through several generations, but then the records will almost always dead end. I’m designing a blog, *Magruder’s Landing*, which I hope to launch in 2012, to get that information online in so that people looking for their own genealogy or family stories might be able to find it. That’s a contribution I know I can make, using my own particular skills and interests.

* Highland Scottish names can be confusing. *MacGregor* means “Son of Gregor,” a patronymic that evolved into a surname. *Clan Gregor* means “Children of Gregor” and refers to all who are recognized as members of the clan, regardless of surname. *Magruder* was believed to be a Clan Gregor name.

**Tom DeWolf discovered, midlife, that he is descended from one of the largest slave-trading families in the United States. His distant cousin, Katrina Browne, made a film documenting the family’s journey as they retraced the slave trade route. He participated in the making of the film and wrote about his experiences in the book, *Inheriting the Trade*. Tom DeWolf is a member of Coming to the Table.

Questions

- 1. It seems that many American Magruders did not see a connection between their ancestors being persecuted as MacGregors and their own persecution of African Americans in slavery.**
 - A. How was this possible?**
 - B. How could it have been different?**
- 2. How is Coming to the Table related to personal growth for you, if you are already a member? If you are considering joining, how *might* Coming to the Table be connected to personal growth for you?**
- 3. Susan says that knowing more particulars of history makes it more real.**
 - A. What is an example of when this was the case for you?**
 - B. How might knowledge of history be connected to responsibility for the present and future?**



Shay Banks-Young

Shay Banks-Young lives and works in Columbus, Ohio. She was the first African-American female disc jockey for a gospel program in Columbus, and a long time civil-rights activist. She plans to begin an oral history program for Coming to the Table. It will be called "Generational Harmony; an intergenerational project in a multicultural community." Black and white youth will participate through interviewing older persons of the opposite race.

My family first brought me to Coming to the Table. I'm from the line of Thomas Jefferson and the woman he enslaved, Sally Hemings. Our family, the white side and the black side, has been in contact with each other for a little over twelve years, ever since we met for the first time through the Oprah Winfrey Show.

The white side of the family that we met on the Oprah Winfrey Show are members of the Monticello Association.* This side of family invited us to meet the rest of our extended family at Monticello. There was so much media and speculation between the show and the meeting at Monticello that it turned into a big controversy over the legitimacy of the Jefferson-Hemings descendants. But as the years went by, those of us who wanted to come together in the right way found each other. God makes that happen. There were white Jeffersons who reached out to the black Jeffersons and extended themselves while the black Jeffersons were trying to extend themselves. Over the years we got to know each other and we ended up having family reunions, regularly at Monticello.

"Coming to the Table has been a place for me to get fuel, in a sense. It's a place where I can get more training and be around more people who are doing the same work. It gives me the energy and courage to keep going back out and doing what I've always done."

Families whose ancestors go back to slavery usually have a hidden line of descendants. This was the case in our family. There are descendants of Thomas Jefferson and his wife Martha who are white. There are descendants of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings who are black. Then there is another part of family; descendants of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings who passed into whiteness and kept this a secret for generations.

Sally Hemings had seven children by Thomas Jefferson. Two died. Three passed into whiteness. The two children that remained black were Thomas Woodson and Madison Hemings. I come from the Madison Hemings line.

Thanks to Oprah, I was able to meet descendants of Eston Hemings, one of the children of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings who had passed into whiteness. One of my cousins from that line, Julia Jefferson Westerinen, and I became very close and we started speaking at colleges in 1999. We call it *The Affairs of Race in America: a Conversation in Black and White*. Julia and I have a conversation on stage in front of students, and talk about where we came from and the impact on our lives of growing up white or black in America.

Two of the people who reached out and embraced the Hemings from the white side of the Jefferson family were Susan Hutchison and Prinny Anderson. These two women are part of Coming to the Table and Susan was one of the originators. The idea for Coming to the Table was to embrace Martin Luther King's concept of bringing descendents of slaves and slave owners to the table of brotherhood. When she told me what the group was about, I came to their first meeting. I didn't hesitate.

The main thing that has developed for me out of our Coming to the Table meetings was having an opportunity for the black and white side of the family to come together to work on our differences and ensure a better future for the next generation. A great example of this is the relationship that has developed between me and my cousin David Works. David represents the part of the white side of the Jefferson family who still fights against the Jefferson-Hemings family, saying emphatically that there is no way that we could be related to Thomas Jefferson.

David read a thorough report by the National Genealogical Association, which concluded that Sally Hemings' children most likely had to be fathered by Thomas Jefferson. He then began to accept who we were. But where I really got to know him was through Coming to the Table. This project has truly brought a different dimension of our family together.

Coming to the Table did an event in Tougaloo, Mississippi . The organizers chose some of us to give a brief story about who we were and how we came together. David and I were two of the people who were chosen to speak. Afterwards, it was open to anyone. Someone might have said, I did such-and-such a thing and now I'm really ashamed of it when I think about it. Another person might have said, this happened to me, and it was a terrible thing, and I swore I would never let any white person do this. In the course of this sharing people opened their eyes to find out that all white and all black people in America are not the same.

I think some of the event participants stood up because they heard David and me, and the other Coming to the Table participants first. My cousin Julia and I have been having our conversation for what seems like forever. I know that the two of us have had an impact on others. Now I am doing it with different people from the Coming to the Table project and there are more people on the stage.

Coming to the Table has been a place for me to get fuel, in a sense. It's a place where I can get more training and be around more people who are doing the same work. It gives me the energy and courage to keep going back out and doing what I've always done. My ultimate dream is to have all of America come to the table of brotherhood. Wow! Wouldn't we have a better country if that happened?

*A non-profit organization made up of lineal descendents of Thomas Jefferson

Questions

1. What experiences have you had sharing with a group that have been helpful or eye-opening to you?
2. What made groups you have been a part of a place to “get fuel”?



Photo: Linsay Kolb/ EMU

I considered myself part of Coming to the Table for the first time in 1980 when my father was invited by John Hairston to not only attend the national Hairston clan reunion*, but also to be honored as the keynote speaker. At the time I felt curiosity about what my dad would say. But when I entered the room with 800 African American Hairstons, I felt guilt and a fear of black anger.

We were treated in a ridiculously accepting and loving way. There was a tremendous sense of family, pride, and energy. But I left that amazing experience, and let the guilt take over the better part of me. I didn't have much involvement with the family for 15 years. In 1995, I was working at Eastern Mennonite University and Daryl Hairston came on staff. With the last name, Hairston, I count on there being a historical connection. I called Daryl because I was afraid it might be awkward to meet him without having talked openly first.

Will Hairston

Will Hairston is the Supervisor of Grounds at Eastern Mennonite University. He is the co-founder, along with Susan Hutchison, of Coming to the Table. He serves as one of the vice-presidents of the Hairston Clan, a black family organization.

“Coming to the Table helps open a door. Even if just one side of the family reaches out to the other, it changes both sides of the family forever.”

Through getting to know Daryl, my eyes and heart were opened to the lingering pain from the legacy of slavery. It still hurt, even in 1995, for him to look back at our point of connection, which was the tragic, oppressive system of slavery. He grew up in Martinsville, Virginia, a place that was right in the heart of that history. Seeing his pain made me really appreciate what an amazingly gracious, forgiving and loving thing it was for black Hairstons to reach out to white Hairstons and invite them to the Black Hairston clan reunion back in 1980. I was filled with a desire to connect with the Black Hairstons and I started attending the Hairston clan reunions.

During that time, I went through a period of working through feelings of shame and fear of black anger. Yet, I reveled in the African American legacy of overcoming. I have developed a passion for what I would call justice, MLK style. I believe that Martin Luther King showed us the way to build peace. He didn't just do it in the face of long-ago, lingering pain from one hundred years ago. He did it in the face of extreme violence, literally right at his doorstep. He showed us that through loving your enemies you can redeem and transform them.

Daryl and I talked to racial reconciliation experts and asked about others who were connecting across the history of slavery. The idea is very clear and compelling in the "I Have a Dream" speech that the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners would sit down together at the table of brotherhood. But it seemed shocking to us that 30 years later, no one had ever heard of anyone else following through on this.

That was in 1995 before the internet was readily available. When it was, and you could start googling things, you could find out that, indeed, there were people doing this. And in 1999 I was interviewed for an article in the *Los Angeles Times* about other families that were connecting across this history. Susan Hutchison, from *Coming to the Table* contacted me and said there were people who wanted to get together. We felt like it would be encouraging to us if we could help the movement grow.

With a family that has a history of slavery there is a painful past that continues to cause division and separation today. In a peacebuilding class I took in 1995 called *Race and Conflict*, I did a study on racial reconciliation. One principle I learned is that guilt is the glue that holds racism together. That is a quote from Cherie Brown, the founder of the National Coalition Building Institute.* This is the guilt I felt when I was first invited to the Hairston clan reunion. It was strong enough that it kept me basically living a segregated life, even from people who were reaching out to me with ridiculous love and acceptance.

Coming to the Table helps open a door. Even if just one side of the family reaches out to the other, it changes both sides of the family forever. Maybe there is some hostility or guilt or anger, but if one person reaches out and opens a door that others can walk through, I think it changes the dynamic. Even for those people who don't go through the door, the door is still there. The world is different. There is less guilt and separation and it becomes easier to relate in a more peaceful way.

A lot of people think, "It was a long time ago. Just get over it." But I think about not just how African Americans feel now, but about those who did endure slavery. If their gravestones aren't well marked and their lives continue to go unrecognized, there are new injustices every year. Why isn't their suffering and contribution memorialized? I would like to see the same sort of approach that is used for those who gave their life to the military service. We honor their service. We should honor the service, even if it was involuntary service, of those who contributed to our nation's economies and acknowledge what they suffered and overcame.

There are other potential benefits that Coming to the Table might offer. For example, when we look at immigrants and Hispanics in our country have we really faced history in ourselves? Have we learned everything? I think if we faced history, starting with looking at the treatment of Native Americans, we would have a different view of immigrants today. Who is really the immigrant? There are some future lessons that Coming to the Table could shed light on through looking at historical injustices.

* From a summary of the book about Hairston family called, *An American Family in Black and White*: “With several thousand black and white members, the Hairstons share a complex and compelling history: divided in the time of slavery, they have come to embrace their past as one family” (www.hairstonclan.com)

* The National Coalition Building Institute is an organization “dedicated to the elimination of racism and other forms of oppression.” They have provided trainings to organizations worldwide. (ncbi.org)

Questions

- 1. What lessons could be learned from history about how violence has begun, been perpetuated and been stopped?**
- 2. How should people who were enslaved be remembered?**



Randy Gamble

Randy Gamble grew up in Oakland, California. He retired from the Navy after twenty years of service. He currently lives in Memphis, Tennessee.

At an early age, I came to the realization that I wanted to understand why human beings treat each other so indifferently. I heard of Coming to the Table for the first time at the Gandhi/King Conference in 2007 at Christian Brothers University in Memphis, Tennessee. There, I met Paulette Moore (the producer of a documentary, Wit, Will & Walls*). We had a conversation about race relations and she told me about a session happening the next day.

At the morning session, I was delighted to hear the story of Betty Kilby Fisher. Later that afternoon, I attended a session called "Coming to the Table: Facing America's Legacy of Slavery." I sat next to Betty Kilby and Phoebe Kilby and learned a little about their stories. I was delighted to see God's Amazing Grace which had

brought these two women together on an incredible journey of discovery. I was intrigued and so inquired into what Coming to the Table was all about.

A former director of Coming to the Table, Amy Potter-Czajkowski, was instrumental in getting me connected to the organization. Because of her correspondence, I attended a Coming to the Table workshop that was held in June, 2008, at Eastern Mennonite University, in Harrisonburg, Virginia. It was amazing to be sitting in a room full of descendants of slave owners and enslaved, because in my wildest dreams I couldn't have imagined that this would be happening to me. This is where I met some ordinary people doing extraordinary things to make history anew.

There, a process called Re-Evaluation Counseling, led by Rachel Noble revealed to me that I have had a lot of pain and suffering stored inside me for a good while. One thing that stands out for me is when a fellow participant, Shay Banks-Young, prayed for me, while touching ever so gently on my stomach, along with other participants. Everyone laid their hands on me before I was to travel back to Memphis, Tennessee. I felt something powerful that I couldn't control. I shook and hollered at the same time. Afterwards, I was exhausted and drained of energy. Being ex-military, this experience was unfamiliar, but at the same time quite liberating.

"It's amazing what can happen when you are around a table in a cafeteria over a meal; right then she suggested I send her the names of my ancestors."

I knew at that very moment that I needed more healing to help me get rid of baggage from my past. I left there feeling overjoyed by what took place, because I had felt a real sense of community. At the same time I was sad knowing that I was traveling back to Memphis where I would be separate from a beloved community that I had just become a part of.

I participated in several other Coming to the Table workshops that were held from this time through 2010. One particular encouraging encounter was meeting Karen Branan at a workshop at Tougaloo College in Jackson, Mississippi. I shared with her how I knew very little about my ancestors.

It's amazing what can happen when you are around a table in a cafeteria over a meal; right then she suggested I send her the names of my ancestors. It touched me that someone was truly listening to my story. It was not easy for me to be fully open - my internal sense of racial oppression comes to the surface when speaking to a white person. But the spirit of God said to trust this person.

Karen helped me discover things I didn't know about my great-grandfather, Thornton Jackson through her online research with Ancestry. It felt good to know something about where I came from. I learned that my great grandfather was a Buffalo Soldier and the first Black police officer in Salt Lake City, Utah. Learning this led me on a quest to search for more.

There are many thoughts that come to mind concerning the question, "Where do we go from here?" I remember reading Martin Luther King, Jr.'s speech, "A Look to the Future" that he gave in 1957 at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. What stood out for me powerfully were the words:

"In order to look to the future it is often necessary to get a clear picture of the past. In order to know where we are going it is often necessary to see from whence we have come."

My real hope is taken from the words of King's last speech called "Mountaintop" that he gave in 1968 at the Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee. He said that *"We as a people will get to the Promised Land."* I see this hope as including not only African American people but all different ethnicities of people as they "Stride to Freedom" to Build a Beloved Community.

(written by Randy Gamble)

*The documentary Wit, Will & Walls is the story of Betty Kilby Fisher. She was one of twenty three African American students who, on February 18, 1959 walked into the segregated high school of Warren County in Front Royal, Virginia in order to put to the test the Supreme Court decision of 1954 to end segregation.

Questions

1. What are some ways that you have been able to release or get rid of negative feelings?
2. Describe an experience you have had finding out something new about an ancestor. How did this knowledge affect you?



Pat Russell

Pat Russell, Psy.D. lives in Seattle, Washington. Currently she is an adjunct professor at Cornish College of the Arts, and Antioch University Seattle and a post-doc fellow at Fremont Community Therapy Project. Her past research examined the psychological and behavioral effects of slavery on her own family.

I come from several generations of people who have been activists and educators in the Seattle community. My parents were very involved with civil rights. I call myself the Civil Rights Brat. People used to joke and say that I learned to march before I learned to walk, so I guess it just came naturally.

It is hard to recall my first memory of Civil Rights activism because it felt like it was always there. I think it really hit me when the news showed Bull Connor* siccing dogs on the kids. My parents gathered us around the TV and we just stood there in horror, watching. My parents were stoic people; they didn't cry much at all. That is one of the few times I

“Nobody moves when they are comfortable. It is only discomfort that is going to make us get up and move.”

remember tears from my parents.

Afterwards, my parents talked about how brave these kids were and about how they were willing to sacrifice so much to fix something that was morally and ethically wrong. I can't remember their exact words. I was still stunned by what I saw on TV and their reaction to it. I remember them wanting to move forward - when people are willing to do this much, then you are obligated to do something as well. This is not just about you. This is about something larger.

Today, I am a clinical psychologist. I have done a lot of diversity training and community education in the past. I spent 20 years in grassroots organizations and non-profits, doing program development and training. With Coming to the Table, I co-facilitated a group called Healing Together here in Seattle.

*The New Legacy Puget Sound, a group of six women, affiliated with Coming to the Table offered the course **Healing Together: Addressing Slavery in our Families' Histories**. Pat and Ann Holmes Redding, PhD, co-facilitated this course in the winter of 2011. Pat shares some of her thoughts about the class and future of Coming to the Table:*

Everybody in the Healing Together group was committed to addressing slavery and healing on some level. It was a balanced group, racially. Most people were advanced in doing their genealogical work. They had connections and could help each other move down the path of researching their genealogy. Some had found linked descendents or discovered African American or White relatives.

Some of the commitment from white participants came from having done workshops and trainings in the past. Some of it came from having parents who were actively involved in changing things. And some of it came from doing research and finding a not so bright spot in their family history and wanting to do something about it.

I think some of the commitment was shame driven. Shame and guilt can be used in a positive way. It can propel people forward. I believe that we have these emotions for a reason. When these emotions are tapped into, a person can be pushed to move. Nobody moves when they are comfortable. It is only discomfort that is going to make us get up and move. That is not a bad thing. It's bad when you stay in the shame and wallow in it. But some of these folks were motivated by this ugly piece of their history. They said, "I am ashamed of this. What can I do about it? How can we make amends?"

There are several particular exchanges that were meaningful to me. One of the participants was an African American woman in her 60s who does a lot of diversity work as a trainer. I am paraphrasing this, but she said, "I do this work all the time, but rarely, if ever, do I see white people who get it, and you all get it!"

Elly Hale* was in that group. She started crying and apologized for the part her family played. I'm tearing up thinking about this. You had to be there. It was a powerful reaching across time and space.

I think especially when you do a lot of grassroots work, you get a little cynical, a little jaded after a while. You ask yourself, “Why am I doing this? Is it really making a difference?”

And then one day you get an answer, “Yes, it is.” That is when I really began to believe in the Coming to the Table model. The Healing Together course addressed the legacy of slavery through the approaches of history, connecting, healing and action.

Most recently our Puget Sound group did a training for trainers. We did a training for the folks who were involved in the Healing Together course so that they can go out and start their own group, or incorporate this into work they are already doing.

I hope one day to be able to see Coming to the Table stand on its own two feet. I hope it will come up with more ways to get people thinking in this country about how we can heal. How can we sit down and have a conversation about race, without everybody wanting to run out of the room or deny that we have a problem? That is my hope, that we will be more than anything, a healing agent.

*In 1963, images of the attacks on black children marchers by policemen with dogs and fire hoses, ordered by the Commissioner of Public Safety, Theophilus Eugene “Bull” Conner in Birmingham, Alabama were displayed on televisions around the country. The reaction was outrage against the brutality, including from some who had not previously supported Civil Rights.

*Elly Hale is a descendent of the DeWolf family. The Dewolf family was heavily involved in slave trading, operating out of Rhode Island. She agreed to have this part of her story with CTTT shared here.

Questions

- 1. What is your earliest memory of witnessing a person or group of people standing up for what they believed was right, despite persecution? How did this instance affect you?**
- 2. Pat Russell’s parents communicated to their children that, “This is not about you. This about something larger.” To you, what does “something larger” represent?**



Sylvia Wong Lewis

Sylvia Wong Lewis, president of Narrative Network, a multicultural PR and Marketing firm, is a journalist and genealogist.

Journey to Healing: My Uncle Warren's Lynching

I came to Coming to the Table through a paternal cousin who was already a Coming to the Table member-- Dionne Kurtti. Although we had never met before, we, along with another young cousin, Monique, were researching our paternal family history. I had known about the lynching of my great, great granduncle in Ocean Springs, Mississippi for many years. It was one of many family secrets. Although, my younger cousins had just stumbled upon it, I had learned about the lynching decades ago almost by accident. After seeing photos of the battered, distorted, face of slain Emmett Till in Jet Magazine, I asked my father if anything like that had happened in our family. I was shocked to hear him calmly say "Yes." He said that his grandfather's brother, Warren Stuart was lynched. No discussion. I got the impression that I should not ask any questions. I later learned from relatives that Uncle Warren was a milkman in our family's dairy and animal husbandry business. Relatives described him as "cheerful, kind, hard-working, handsome and strong." They were, by all accounts, a prosperous family, the first generation out of slavery. But some years after the lynching, my family abandoned everything and made their "escape" from the South to Harlem. They never looked back. Unlike most Southern families who returned "home" for summers and holidays, we never went back.

"Even though I have researched the descendants of the accuser and that of the sheriff, judge and some townspeople, I still don't know the whole story."

I tucked away the lynching in the back of my mind for years until I mentioned it to my new young cousins. They sent me some shocking newspaper clippings. It was the first time that I learned details as published in Southern, Midwestern and even Trenton, New Jersey newspapers. I noticed that some of the articles changed my uncle's name spelling and age from Warrant Stuart to Warren Mattews, from 30 to 80 years old! Also the accuser's name and age changed in each re-telling from 13 year-old White girl to 26 year-old woman Ethel or Rosaline Fountaine or Fentian. Re-publishing lynching incidents was very popular back then and served to flaunt White Supremacy and racism and further terrorize and humiliate the entire African American community. The lurid details of my dear Uncle Warren's lynching still sounds as disturbing today as a century ago:

*Negro Fiend Lynched by Mississippi Mob...Orderly Lynching at Ocean Springs.
Negro Brute...was dragged about a mile back to town and hanged. Everything was done in an
orderly, humane manner...before execution.*
--(Alabama newspaper, 1901)

Some papers like the New Orleans Daily urged the public to join in an orgy of vigilante vengeance:

Ocean Springs Citizens Take Swift Vengeance!

*Warren Stuart, a Negro who Attempted to Assault Miss Ethel Fountaine Strung Up. His Body
Riddled with Bullets...Negro Taken from Court Offices by a Mob of about One Hundred and
Fifty Determined Men. Begs Piteously for His Life.*
--(New Orleans Sunday Daily, February 3, 1901).

*The Body of Negro Warren Stuart (Mathews) Taken by Relatives... the Negro who was lynched
last night was found this morning hanging from the broken limb of a persimmon tree beside
the country road...The verdict was that the death was due to strangulation and gunshot
wounds. The body was taken in charge by the man's relatives.*
--(Newspaper, 1901)

One of the persons described as the “man’s relatives,” who took his body home was my great, great grandfather, Alfred Burton Stuart, aka Papau. These events happened over a century ago, and my family never discussed them, not even my magnificent grandmother, Madame Tempy Stuart-Smith who, according to other relatives, was a witness. And while today I imagine the past only through old clippings, photographs and stories, I am haunted nonetheless by Warren Stuart’s pain, his piteous cries for mercy, and my family’s impotence. Without hope of justice my great, great grandfather was forced to carry home and bury his only brother, and keep silent.



Alfred Burton Stuart

Like most of us, I have no direct experience with anything like my uncle’s lynching. Yet the details enraged me to the point that I’ve considered confronting the descendants of Miss Ethel Fontaine, the woman who falsely accused my great granduncle, and anyone else involved. This was a community crime. Even though I have researched the descendants of the accuser and that of the sheriff, judge and some townspeople, I still don’t know the whole story. Maybe Ethel Fontaine was put up to it. Could I overturn the case and clear his name? Seek reparations? What might I gain from it? Probably nothing. But it would be an action to counter the silent fear and shame that is a legacy

of those years. What comforts me is knowing that more and more people in our nation are willing to acknowledge and take responsibility for this unfortunate era of our past by taking positive steps to heal its wounds.

It was because I needed some healing that I came to Coming to the Table. Believe it or not, very few in my family will talk about slavery, lynching, segregation, racism, Jim Crow, Civil Rights and related topics. They said: "Forget the past." Susan Hutchison directed me to a Coming to the Table member (Karen Branan) who assisted me in my search to find out more about the case, people and town. Coming to the Table also plans to establish a dialogue group for members who experienced lynchings in their families—both descendants of lynchers and the lynched. I have offered to help this effort.

As an African American descendant of a slave and enslavers, I felt a healing balm from the White members of Coming to the Table who teach about White Privilege and who believe that they are "accountable." They advocate that schools teach American history and slavery's legacy and aftermath. For me, the strength of Coming to the Table is the open dialogue and ongoing conversations that are daily between White and Black people.

We are forming new self-facilitated dialogue groups that have advantages and limitations for true healing. I believe that we/ Coming to the Table dialogue groups should answer the question for ourselves, "What is the purpose of our dialogues?" On the whole, I believe that Coming to the Table is a catalyst for change in America. I do believe as we work and talk together that Coming to the Table can become a true the platform for a national effort to heal America.

Respectfully yours,
Sylvia Wong Lewis

Questions

1. What does your own experience tell you about what makes facilitated group dialogue successful?
2. A group of people together committed murder against the man Warren Stuart.
 - A. What can be learned about “mob mentality” to prevent it from happening?
 - B. Are there cases where the “mob mentality” did not take over, because of the voice of a few people? What can be learned from these cases?



Photo: Tom Lyons

Art Carter

Art Carter is a retired physician. He lives on the Eastern Shore of Virginia.

I must say I'm very biased towards the Eastern Shore and its people. We locals call where we live, "God's country." I lived the first two years of my life here, and then my family moved to the Deep South, to Macon County, Alabama. But the Eastern Shore was always home, so we would come back here in the summer to visit family.

I remember the first instance of learning about my family's ancestors. I was five or maybe six and my godfather said, "I want you to go across the street and visit this lady."

He gave me a name, which I don't remember now. But I remember the house, because it is still standing, and I drive by it every day. He said, "She is the oldest member of our family and she will tell you all of our history."

There were many things that were striking about this visit. I remember as I think back, that she had vitiligo, which is a condition where the skin is two noticeably different shades. She had pink and brown skin. This was striking to me and perhaps that helped me remember her words.

She told me about part of our family and where the name Carter came from. It came from a man from Guinea of antiquity who was enslaved by the French and then brought to Haiti. This man was used by the French as a navigator and map maker and he was given a European name: Pierre DeCarte.

DeCarte sailed with the French up to the Eastern Shore of Virginia where he met an enslaved African lady. Their relationship left a male son. The mother named him after his father but she did not retain the French name. Rather, she anglicized it to Peter Carter. That began the Carter line.

From 2005 to 2008, I was honored to be chosen as the chair of the Eastern Shore of Virginia's 400th commemoration of the arrival of Africans and Europeans at Jamestown. As part of the program, in 2007, I led monthly presentations about the history of enslavement on the Eastern Shore.

My family has always known who both our African and European ancestors were. But I had not reached out to my local European American cousins, although I knew of our common ancestry. The inaugural Coming to the Table gathering was in January of 2006. I attended the event as an observer.

I guess both of these events – being the chair of the commemoration and observing the Coming to the Table gathering - helped me to find whatever it was I needed to get closer to the point of making first contact.

The first contact was serendipitous. It was with someone who I had known for years. I also knew her family. We were casually talking at our post office about ancestors when she mentioned a name. I repeated the name and asked if they were from a specific farm.

This person said, "Yes!"

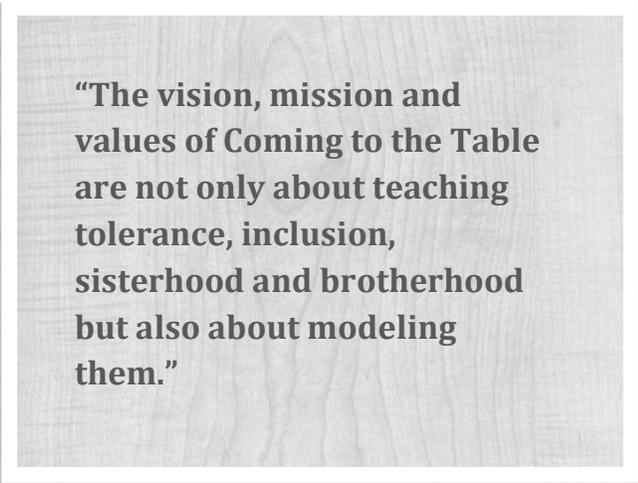
And I said, "Your great-great grandfather is my great-grandfather."

There have been several similar conversations since then with other folks. We're a small community where folks know each other and everyone likes to talk about family.

I was at the automotive parts store, and there was a truck with the Confederate States of America flag on it. The owner was standing nearby, so I commented to the owner, just striking up conversation, "Did African Americans serve in the Confederate Army?"

The gentleman said, "Sure." I had read some books that said that some African Americans had willingly served; so I agreed with him. A short conversation ensued and eventually we got around to chatting about family. We came to find out that we are cousins too.

I think for many of us, racial reconciliation is part of the fabric of how we live our daily lives without even being conscious of it, or of it being related to *work*. It is just how we live. In the 1970's



"The vision, mission and values of Coming to the Table are not only about teaching tolerance, inclusion, sisterhood and brotherhood but also about modeling them."

as a medical student intern and resident, I cared for human beings of all degrees of melanin concentrations, cultures and ethnicities. Suffering has no ethnic label. And my practice here included both African American and European American patients, as did my office staff.

My first racial reconciliation “work” was leading the presentations and discussions during the Jamestown commemoration celebrations. The presentations were held in the lecture hall of our local community college. Six people attended the first lecture - they were all friends of my wife. I think she said, “Please go and see my husband’s lecture.”

I led a little over a third of the monthly lectures and visiting professors and local historians led the rest. By the third or fourth month the hall was packed. I began each presentation by showing the short video of the first Coming to the Table gathering. It set the tone for the presentations and the discussions that followed. The group sharing was priceless because of the African American and European American participation.

The vision, mission and values of Coming to the Table are not only about teaching tolerance, inclusion, sisterhood and brotherhood but also about modeling them. This is most evident in individuals, communities and geographic areas. But systemic and institutional change has to be a part of our goals. Yes, individual change has to happen, and familial and community change is wonderful, but for this to grow and be sustained, there has to be change at a larger level.

Coming to the Table gatherings in towns, counties and regions have to articulate what many people do, including me, unconsciously – address the persistent aftermath of the American institution of enslavement. This is where I see us going now and I hope we have the courage and the fortitude and the wherewithal to sustain us.

Questions

1. How do you feel about the statement that it is harmful to use colors to describe people?

- A. What are examples of language that is hurtful or harmful?**
- B. How can this language be changed?**

2. How can an organization such as Coming to the Table articulate its vision and approach in order to create institutional change?

Caroline E. Borden



Photo: EMU Marketing

Caroline Borden was the collector of interviews for her practicum with Coming to the Table at the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding. She is a lecturer at the Intensive English Program at Eastern Mennonite University.

“The most meaningful part of this project for me was working with the individual people I interviewed.”

I wanted to practice interviewing as part of my practicum for my Master of Conflict Transformation at Eastern Mennonite University (EMU). Jan Jenner, the director of Coming to the Table, said she was interested in having more documentation of the work of Coming to the Table. I asked if I could design an interview project around this goal, and so my practicum began.

I used knowledge from two EMU classes in particular: Research Design and Research as Art and Transformation. “Research” is a loaded word with a mixed history. I define research as a process of inquiry (Shenk & Zehr, 1998). Part of this process includes giving something back to the participants. In the case of working with Coming to the Table my goal was to work with the interviewees to create a written collection of stories to share with others.

I first heard about Coming to the Table as a student at EMU. I did not give it much thought. Part of my lack of interest has to do with my own story. I grew up in a white European American environment. It was white enough that I can distinctly remember the few African American people I met when I was young. Perhaps because of growing up in a basically segregated environment, I did not seek to understand the dynamics of this segregation.

Part of my project began with getting to know what Coming to the Table did. I attended two regional gatherings in Richmond, Virginia –at these meetings people descended from slave owners and/or the enslaved met to share their stories and plan how to address the harms of slavery. Through knowing people at these gatherings, I came to learn about my family history and its connection to slavery.

I once saw a picture of a store my family owned in Southern Maryland, with the sign “Whites Only” in letters big enough to see from the street. This memory was a clue that perhaps my family had owned people as slaves.

I shared the name of my father’s mother, Catherine Offutt, as well as the name of her father, Raphael Offutt with two Coming to the Table members. Through their help and the use of censuses,

I found that, most probably, it was the grandfather of my great-grandfather, Colmore Burgess Offutt, who owned 24 slaves in Southern Maryland.

Someday I would like to make contact with at least one of the descendants of the people that Colmore Burgess Offutt enslaved and talk about our connection and our present lives. I think such a meeting might be eye-opening.

The only one way I could do the tough research necessary to find a clearly linked descendant and also have the support necessary to make contact with a linked descendant would be through the support of an organization such as Coming to the Table.

The most meaningful part of this project was working with the individual people I interviewed. I called Ms. Shay numerous times, and when she did not answer, I was always happy to hear her voice recording, "When you turn to God, you find that He has been facing you all along." This message portrays some of Ms. Shay's reassuring attitude towards life that she shared with me when we talked on the phone.

I also appreciated Randy, whose voice I have not yet heard, except through the lines of his emails. Between the back and forth of working together to edit his interview, he talked with me about our mutual interest in the history of Catholicism and nonviolence. Like Ms. Shay and Randy, all those I interviewed were encouraging and helpful in the process. I will not name each interview participant by name here, but I would like each of them to know that I appreciate the time they spent with me. I feel I have been enriched for having worked with them, and for that I am very grateful.

I did this project with the simple goal of collecting stories that might be published so as to provide encouragement to others. Partly, this goal came from my appreciation of writers who have collected interviews and shared what they learn. These writers are Studs Terkel, Po Bronson, Howard Zehr, Tony Parker and Julie Leibrich. Reading about the lives of people in their books always rekindles my admiration of the human race in its struggle to find answers. I hope that the stories in this collection encourage others to search for answers to life's mysteries and difficult questions.

Conclusion

The hip hop artist Jay Smooth said learning to talk about race is more akin to brushing your teeth daily than having your tonsils removed. It is something you have to attend to regularly. Coming to the Table, according to the stories of participants, is a community that offers the space to do this daily and ongoing work of addressing the legacy of the United States' institution of slavery and its harms that exist today.

This collection of interviews gives voice to the history and lived experiences of those who are doing this work, both in their everyday lives and through Coming to the Table. As part of this community, individuals work to uncover history, make connections, work toward healing and take action:

Uncovering history: One participant said that with knowledge comes responsibility. Participants explore history at different levels; some discover new family connections, and some come to a deeper understanding about the history of their community or of this country. At least two participants are looking at the history of lynching in their families. Knowledge of a shared past, albeit a past filled with both violence and triumphs, makes connections today more real. Knowledge, then, is sometimes the first step in deciding how to respond.

Making connections: Through gatherings, reunions, sharing stories and dialogue participants learn from people who are often on the "other side" of the color line. They find support for entering into a dialogue or for deepening an ongoing dialogue that is taking place in their families or communities. In some cases they revise their thoughts and opinions about a particular group of people. Many have formed friendships and partnerships.

Working towards healing: Participants talked about healing as an ongoing process. Healing from personal and historical harm was aided by participants' acknowledgement of both pain and wrong-doing. Coming to the Table also offered specific means of healing; for example, through learning how to experience release from the past and through taking part in rituals that symbolically revered the past, while looking toward the future. Part of healing may be gaining the courage to speak out – participants spoke about how Coming to the Table helped them to bring up difficult topics in other settings.

Taking action: Coming to the Table offers a starting point for taking action. Coming to the Table participants have used what they have learned in their families, work and community. It is also a place for those already involved in action in their community to find support and resources. One participant said Coming to the Table has to articulate what it is doing to create change on a systemic and institutional level.

Coming to the Table offers a gathering place, as portrayed in the metaphor of a "table" to practice the above responses. The anthropologist, Margaret Mead said, "Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Coming to the Table is such a group of committed individuals.

A note about the interview process

I interviewed Coming to the Table participants and then edited the resulting transcripts to about a page and a half of material. I preserved the original words as much as possible. I occasionally rearranged the order in which sub-stories were told, combined the same story if they were talked about more than once, and occasionally changed word order, grammar, and word choice. I added transitions as well. Two editors worked with me on the draft. I then passed the interview on to the interviewee who reviewed it and made further changes. Two of the Coming to the Table participants chose to write their own interview. We worked on editing together.

I tried to be as true as possible to the intention of what the interviewee wanted to communicate. I apologize for any lapses between the intention and the written words.

I believe that each person has a unique wisdom. Interviewing and editing, allows that wisdom to be distilled into a short and readable format. Sharing this in a written format is one way for others to gain from this wisdom.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Center for Justice and Peacebuilding (CJP) and Eastern Mennonite University (EMU). Thank you especially to my advisors Barry Hart and David Brubaker, also to Howard Zehr and Paulette Moore for insights about research, and to Carl Stauffer and Catherine Barnes for feedback on my proposal. Thank you to Janelle Myers-Benner in the CJP office. Thank you to Kathy Smith and Bill Goldberg at the Practice and Training Institute at EMU, and to the many who helped me through casual conversation about this work. Thank you to Jan Jenner, my practicum supervisor, for making this project possible.

Thank you to Sha Jackson for overall feedback and also to Sha and Emily Hershberger for editing, to Mary Beth Spinelli and Leda Werner for advice and support, and to Leda, J.E. McNeil and especially Jordan Gutierrez-Ramirez for transcribing. Thank you to John Styer, Heidi Muller and Lindsay Kolb in Marketing. Thank you, EMU Information Systems, especially Alison D'Silva and Gregory Sachs.

Thank you very much to Chelsea Eason for doing the design for this booklet. Thank you to John Stephens for design advice and to Raad and Lauren Amer for last minute help.

Many thanks to the people who participating in doing the interviews, including Elly DeWolf Hale, Phoebe Kilby and Karen Branan, whose interviews were not included. Thank you to those at Coming to the Table who helped me with this project, especially Susan Hutchison, Pat Russell, Amy Potter-Czajkowski, and Phoebe Kilby. Thank you to those on the Coming to the Table listserv for keeping the voice of justice alive, and especially to those who gave me encouragement along the way.

Thank you to my co-workers and students at the Intensive English Program at EMU. Thank you to Krissy Bartlett and her family for their support. Thank you to my family, especially to my parents and my little sister for their patience and support.

Thank you to the unnamed person at the training in Baltimore who told me to trust my gut.

Co

Contact CTTT

www.comingtothetable.org

CTTT is a program of RJOY
(Restorative Justice for
Oakland Youth)



Taking America (USA) Beyond the Legacy of Enslavement

COMING TO THE TABLE

