ALA Mid-Winter Remarks:

Martin Luther King’s Reflections on the Faith and the Hope of the Enslaved

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January 23, 2017

If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.

Martin Luther King, *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, 1963

**Introduction:**

Good morning. Today is a special day and I am honored to be here. Thank you to the MLK Holiday Task Force and the Black Caucus of the ALA for inviting me to give this lecture. It is indeed a pleasure to have the opportunity to thank you in person for the great service that you all give to our country. You challenge our minds, feed our souls, and ignite our spirits to read and to educate others through words. Thank you.

This morning I would like to begin my remarks the way I start most of my presentations, that is with the voices, thoughts, and feelings of the enslaved. In honor of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., someone who also gained inspiration from former slaves, I open with this telling quote from him.

While he was in a Birmingham jail, he penned a letter that many of us are familiar with. In it he said: “If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.”

King reminds us that slavery did not stop people from fighting for freedom. If enslaved people did not give up on our society, neither should we.

Their desire for freedom was in alignment with the “eternal will of God,” according to King. But what is the faith of the captive? How do the incarcerated look toward a better tomorrow? What strategies did they employ and how can we learn from them?

Speaking about the faith and hope of incarcerated people like King (who served jail time on several occasions), and the four million enslaved people who were freed in

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1865, it seems obvious to me that Martin Luther King Jr. found strength and hope in their survival. So do I.

I write about slavery and I am more interested in the enslaved than the institution that oppressed them. But you cannot understand one without knowing the other.

For most of my career as a historian, people have asked me how I can write about such a distressing topic. My response is simple: I draw upon the faith and the hope of the enslaved—their voices, their stories, and their coping mechanisms inspire me.

Let me explain further by sharing some of their remarkable stories. The first served as the inspiration for my book: It is a poem by an enslaved man named Mingo that I will read in its entirety.

THE SLAVE MINGO'S POEM

Good God! and must I leave them now—
My wife, my children, in their woe?
'Tis mockery to say I'm sold—
But I forget these chains so cold,
Which goad my bleeding limbs, though high
My reason mounts above the sky.
Dear wife, they cannot sell the rose
Of love, that in my bosom glows.
Remember, as your tears may start,
They cannot sell th' immortal part!
Thou sun, which lightest bond and free,
Tell me, I pray, is liberty
The lot of those who noblest feel,
And oftest to Jehovah kneel?
Then I may say, but not with pride,
I feel the rushings of the tide
Of reason and of eloquence,
Which strive and yearn for eminence.

I feel high manhood on me now,
A spirit-glory on my brow;
I feel a thrill of music roll,
Like angel harpings, through my soul,
"While poesy, with rustling wings,
Upon my spirit rests and sings;
He sweeps my heart's deep throbbing lyre.
Who touched Isaiah's lips with fire.
To Plymouth Rock, ye breezes, bear
These words from me, as I would dare,
If I were free: Is not our God
Our common Father? — from the sod
He formed us all; then brothers — yes;
We're brothers all, though some oppress.
And grind their equals in the dust.
O Heaven! tell me, is this just?
'Tis fiendish. No! I will not go,
And leave my children here in woe!
God help me! Out, bright dagger! gleam.
And find the coward's heart, and stream
With fiendish blood! This night, this night,
Or I am free, or it shall smite
The master and his slave, and we
Will seek the heavenly liberty!
There will my master's bloody lash
No longer lacerate

Mingo escaped that night and was killed by the bloodhounds, one of the cruel realities of slavery. His wife later shared a collection of poems he wrote and I like to believe that she received his last.

Just think, this poem was written more than 150 years ago as encouragement from a husband to his wife and kids. “They cannot sell th’ immortal part.” That phrase was the basis of my work for the last decade. For me it is an expression of love, written delicately with specific words and biblical references that were meant to comfort his family. Although Mingo left the physical world, his spirit continues to inspire me. Because of him and many others, I wanted to know how enslaved people constructed hope in the midst of despair. I wanted to know what yearning desire kept them going and why they made certain choices. Mingo provided the answer: enslaved people valued their souls.

Mrs. Henry Bryant:

After a botched sale, Mrs. Henry Bryant, an enslaved woman from Maryland, strategized methods of self-liberation and freedom. You see, her enslaver promised to grant her her freedom if she paid him $270. With that goal in mind, she worked hard to raise the money, something virtually impossible for the enslaved. Even those who were fortunate to hire out their time for modest wages, it often took years for them to acquire $100. So, when Mrs. Bryant had $150, she approached her enslaver (in her words): “I offered him $150 in part payment, -he wouldn’t take that unless I’d pay all. I then asked him, would he take that, and security for $120, payable six months after and give me my papers down. He refused. Then I said to myself, ‘If you won’t take

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that, you shan’t take any.’ I started for Canada and travelled in style, - he couldn’t take me.

What I find remarkable about Mrs. Bryant, beyond her clever response and swift action, is her understanding of the monetary exchange system, and in this case, paying on credit. She spoke to her enslaver in a language he could understand: partial payments with security payable over a short period of time. This uneducated enslaved woman knew the financial language of slave trading. She knew that there were multiple ways to purchase human beings. She also knew to speak in a way that confirmed her commodification. But when she did not agree with the outcome . . . she left for Canada, “in style.”

Martin Luther King traveled in style as well. During countless marches, he suited up, locked arms with Coretta Scott, Ralph Abernathy, John Lewis, Jesse Jackson, and many others. They walked miles on end in search of freedom, dignity, and equal rights. King led a remarkable life of great sacrifice and service. He instructed people to fight with words not fists. His policy of nonviolent direct action forced him to resist blows to his body, his family, his friends, and his people.

In sermons he preached peace and encouraged his parishioners at Ebenezer Baptist (just a few miles from here) to refrain from “hostility toward other people” because such a response in his mind “poisons the soul and scars the personality.”

“We Negroes,” he preached, “have long dreamed of freedom, but still are confined in an oppressive prison of segregation and discrimination.” The prison metaphor was common in many of King’s lessons. He continued encouraging his congregants that the “most fruitful course is to stand firm with courageous determination, move forward nonviolently amid obstacles and setbacks, accept disappointments, and cling to hope.”

Enslaved people clung to hope daily. It served as the cornerstone of their survival. Hope for the enslaved meant that there was a better place, a place of peace, a space where they could rest, and a place where their labor would be acknowledged and compensated. For some like George Ramsey, this meant that he “didn’t feel that anybody had a right” to him. As he aged into his late fifties, he was fed up for having worked hard all of his life, “and got nothing for it.” He responded by running away just after he and his wife were separated via sale.

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5 Ibid., 98.

Rather than focus on the separation, which is indeed very sad, I would ask us to do like Martin Luther King Jr. and find ways learn from enslaved people’s spirit and actions.

Drawing upon what he calls “the secret of survival of our slave foreparents,” King understood the brutalities of slavery, and for him the institution was “a low, dirty and inhuman business.”

Acknowledging the negative and drawing strength from the positive, King told his congregation:

“In spite of inexpressible cruelties, our foreparents survived. When a new morning offered only the same long rows of cotton, sweltering heat, and the rawhide whip of the overseer, these brave and courageous men and women dreamed of the brighter day. They had no alternative except to accept the fact of slavery, but they clung tenaciously to the hope of freedom.”

Enslaved people had various conceptions of freedom: lighter workloads, living with loved ones, practicing religion, and leaving this world. For some like Mrs. Bryant, it meant liberating themselves by running away. The risks involved were extreme and could cost her her life. But for many enslaved people death represented freedom. We know that Mrs. Bryant made it to Canada safely and spent the rest of her life in freedom.

Enslaved people wanted liberty so bad that some left their children behind to achieve it. Historically, this was misunderstood by historians and interpreted as black women being “bad mothers,” a moniker that some could argue continues today, but that was not the case. Slavery was full of difficult choices and even in the midst of leaving children behind, the same mothers showed love and compassion for them.

Mary Younger, a formerly enslaved woman, noted that she had had enough of the brutal violence she witnessed throughout her enslaved life. She described it as “a great deal of barbarity.” One recurring incident that drove her to escape was the mistreatment of her children. She had fond memories of watching them tote water to the fields. “They used to carry the buckets on their heads,” but these buckets wore off their hair, so she lovingly made “pads to protect the sore places where they carried the buckets.” A mother’s love and sacrifice during slavery often went unrewarded. She had reached her limit when she regularly witnessed her children whipped “until the blood ran” and piled at their feet. To make this scene worse, “Then they would call me to see if I looked rumpled about it, and unless I looked please, I know they would whip me.” It is clear that this mother not only was pained by witnessing her children being whipped, but she wanted to spare them the psychological abuse of them witnessing her whipping. But she could no longer sit around and witness their abuse and that of others on the plantation, so she escaped to Canada. Reflecting on this choice, she noted:

“The barbarity of slavery I never want to see again. I have children now who have got
the yoke on them. It almost kills me to think that they are there, and that I can do them
no good.” In spite of this, she offers us hope in freedom: “If those slaveholders were to
come here, I would treat them well, just to shame them by showing that I had
humanity” all along.⁸

Enslaved men like Thomas Likers also wanted people to recognize him with dignity
and respect. “As soon as I came to the age of maturity and could think for myself,” he
shared, “I came to the conclusion that God never meant me for a slave, & that I should
be a fool if I didn’t take my liberty if I got a chance.”⁹

The desire for freedom ran deep into the core of enslaved people’s sense of themselves.
Even those who did not suffer under the lash wanted liberty.

Sarah Allen of Virginia, self-described as someone who did not live under a cruel
enslaver, was thankful to survive slavery. In an interview in 1950 she reflected on her
experience in captivity. “I was birthed in time of bondage. You know, some people are
ashamed to tell it, but I thank God I was ‘lallowed to see them times as well as now…. 
Now I’m ole, de Lord has taken care of me. He put that spirit in people to look after
ole folks and now my chillen look after me.” As an elderly woman who did not have it
as bad as others, she thought about the afterlife of slavery. "After we go to sleep, de
people will know these things, 'cause if freedom hadn' come, it would have been so
miserable.”¹⁰

Returning to King and his ability to draw strength from stories such as these, I want to
encourage us to find hope, faith, love, and freedom in slavery just as he did and
instructed:

“In a seemingly hopeless situation,” enslaved people “fashioned within their souls a
creative optimism that strengthened them. Their bottomless vitality transformed the
darkness of frustration into the light of hope.”¹¹

Let’s take a moment to reflect on MLK’s legacy.

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⁹ Berry, Pound of Flesh, 66.
¹¹ King, A Gift of Love, 99.
We share his words year after year. He is quoted in sermons and speeches, on billboards and social media. I leave you with this today: the foundation of King’s wisdom came from the faith and the hope of the enslaved.

Just as black people in his generation suffered discrimination and physical violence, some enslaved people, like Mingo, lost their lives because of bloodhounds. In King’s day, police dogs tore the clothes and skin off of protesters and innocent bystanders. I imagine that many in this room cannot help but recall vivid images of dogs terrorizing young people fighting for equal rights and justice. And...we will never forget the water cannons that were so strong they ripped skin and tore the bark off of trees.

African captives also fell prey to violent waters and had their skin frayed by the monotonous, constant motion of wooden slave ships. Those who crossed the Atlantic were shaken by the sea, and many went to early graves in those turbulent waters. Some say we can trace the transatlantic slave-trade routes by studying the bones on the floor of the ocean.

But the souls of those people survived and many lived to tell their stories and to share their hopeful thoughts and feelings. MLK was inspired by this history, drew strength from his enslaved ancestors, and used their resilient spirits as beacons of light to guide his path toward civil rights during biracial time. Through his ancestors, King discovered the way to ignite a spirit of hope for a better day and solidified his desire to create a more unified society.

I cannot think of a better time to reflect on our enslaved foremothers and fathers. MLK brings us to these connections, and for this I say, “Thank you, Dr. King.”

Thank you.