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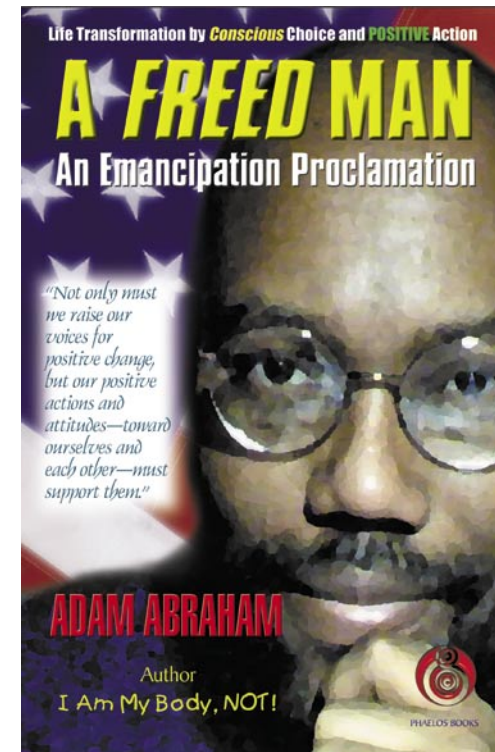
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ADAM ABRAHAM

READING CHAPTER

“TRANSCENDING THE SLAVERY MINDSET”

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FROM FORTHCOMING BOOK
A FREED MAN

AN EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION

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Transcending the 'Slavery' Mindset

'Oppressor' Free Thy Self

"Pessimism
both tilts and
greases the
'slippery slope'
to despair;
a sad irony
because these
days it is
so 'in' to be
pessimistic."

History was never high on the list of subjects that held my attention or captured my imagination when I was in school. In the intervening years I've discovered that it is rich with clues as to the rewards and consequences of our choices and behavior. Autobiographies are a special kind of historical chronicle, as we are spared having to wade through someone else's interpretation or spin of the events in question. One autobiography that has both held my attention and captured my imagination is *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: an American Slave*, by Frederick Douglass (1818-1895). Within this book, which was published in 1845, are many keen, vital insights into what the slavery experience really was, and what freedom really is. This is a great distinction to know and appreciate because it becomes easy to see that one can indeed be "free," and yet, a "slave."

In *Narrative*, Frederick Douglass chronicled his inner journey to *freedom*, and his subsequent experiential journey to freedom from slavery. He gave detailed accounts of the first and most important of pilgrimages; freeing his heart and mind from the slavery *mentality* or mindset. Only then could the journey to actual freedom from slavery become possible and then be chronicled.

Of greatest interest to me is in knowing (1) when we have become *freed*, (2) what constitutes freedom, and (3) what constitutes a “slavery” mind state. Here we’ll examine the subject of slavery, and hear some of the insights of a man who freed himself, and then became *free*.

The first fundamental question to ask is “what is slavery?” In practice, slavery was a social system that was supported by a *group* superiority/inferiority mentality and mindset. It had its own thinking conventions and associated behaviors. In order to make it work, group role-playing was required. One group had to “play” the “upper” position (the “masters”, slaveholders, or slave traders), and another group assumed the “lower” one (the slaves). In America, beginning in the early 17th Century until it was abolished in 1865, whites held the role of masters and slaveholders, while millions of men and woman who were brought to this country in slave ships (predominantly from various nations in Africa), held the role of slaves.

Being a social dynamic, the groups that play the roles are interchangeable. Slavery has been practiced among groups of the same color or cultural background throughout history, on virtually every continent, including Africa. One group subjugates—by intimidation, force, or extortion—the will of another, and systemically *maintains* the subjugation. One way that slave owners subjugated the will of American slaves was by taking extreme efforts to keep them intellectually “in the dark”; unable to interpret the symbologies of their oppressors (reading, writing, and mathematics). Thusly separated from knowledge, their ability to function on the same experiential plane as their oppressors was greatly impaired.

“I have found that, to make a contented slave, it is necessary to make a thoughtless one. It is necessary to darken his moral and mental vision, and, as far as possible, to annihilate the power of reason.”

This passage describes the prevailing mindset in many sections of our country, not just “the inner city.” This passage does not uniformly describe what is perceived as “the black community.” *Everyone* who holds on to a just moral and optimistic mental vision, will likewise retain his or her power of rational reason.

Pessimism both tilts and greases the “slippery slope” to despair; a sad irony because these days it is so “in” to be pessimistic. Freed individuals must learn to process disappointing information without “flavoring” it with pessimism, lest it leave a bitter impression upon our minds and legacy on our hearts.

“He must be able to detect no inconsistencies in slavery; he must be made to feel that slavery is right; and he can be brought to that only when he ceases to be a man.”

Again, this is not exclusively a “black” issue. It was, and is a social one. Not only were the African-descended slave men and women not allowed to be *men* and *women*, their masters were neither “men” nor “women” either. Slaves were treated like chattel, grouped, for the purpose of valuations with the horses, cows, pigs, and other livestock. However, the real charade of slavery was that the slave owners did not treat slaves as kindly or *humanely* as they did the livestock. Slave owners *knew* that the slaves were indeed human and with the same opportunity, were capable of great human achievements. In order to subjugate the spirit of achievement that is natural to all humans, the slave owners—both men and women—became inhuman, or perhaps *sub*-human themselves.

I have tended to resist using the words “oppressor” and “oppression” in discussing human dynamics today, for volition plays a large part in our unfolding experience. But in the times of slavery, it certainly applied. Slavery could not continue to exist if the slaves were privy to, had unobstructed access to, and availed themselves of the same body of information and knowledge as the slaveholders. Grant-

ing such access did not serve the slave owners' belief that they were superior to slaves, and that said superiority was God-given. They couldn't dare risk their theory being questioned, as Jesse Owens caused questions to Adolph Hitler's notions of Aryan superiority. The problem today is that many Americans, who may have been descendants of former slaves, act as though they believe the slave holders may have been right.

A 'Superior' Vision Blurred

For Hitler, the 1936 summer Olympic Games—which were held in Berlin, Germany—would be the perfect venue to showcase Aryan superiority to the world. However, much to *der Führer's* dismay, Owens won gold medals in four head-to-head events against Germany's best. His achievement also rallied the national spirit of a still socially immature and racially stratified America. It happened a scant seventy-one years after slavery was officially abolished, during a time when such practices and postbellum policies as Jim Crow, Black Codes, and convict leasing made life *worse* for some black people after slavery.

With all of these factors still a reality in America, Jesse Owens' demonstration of competitive excellence against the world's best athletes, plus character and grace in *victory*, put a major damper on Hitler's, and America's notions of Aryan superiority (antisemitism lived in *both* countries). It is sobering to imagine what might have happened if Owens had pulled a hamstring, or if the German sprinters had actually beat the Americans. What if Owens himself believed he couldn't compete? A loss wouldn't have made Hitler's beliefs true, or meaningful. But if Owens had not won with such ease and *grace*, it is likely that a very *dangerous* slavery mindset might have been fortified.

In the following quote, Frederick Douglass reflects on the kind of mind conditioning that his master, who was also his father, engaged in. The practice was typical of slave owners because, in order for slavery to continue to exist, the *slaves* themselves had to continue to agree that they had no better options than (1) the slave owner, and (2) slavery itself.

One way to maintain dependency on the slave owner was to prevent any *hope* of a slave gaining an education, by prohibiting all access to useful information, books and knowledge. This was done by discouraging any development of intellectual abilities or skills beyond what the "*massal*" needed the slave to know. That is the essence of oppression.

"He exhorted me to content myself, and be obedient. He told me, if I would be happy, I must lay out no plans for the future. He said, if I behaved myself properly, he would take care of me. Indeed, he advised me to complete thoughtlessness of the future, and taught me to depend solely upon him for happiness. He seemed to see fully the pressing necessity of setting aside my intellectual nature, in order to (maintain) contentment in slavery."

When I read this passage it struck me how in the intervening years, the "form" of slavery has changed while the underlying dynamic has remained the same. Slavery is no longer an accepted form of social behavior in America, but it still lives as a mindset. Today, even the most ardent race-hater would be unlikely to want slaves, even if they were members of the hated "race." Slavery is now a way of *thinking* whose "signature" is still easy to recognize. Instead of a venom-spewing, Bible-wielding, God-fearing, ass-whipping disciplinarian demanding the slave to give him total obedience or surrender their life, today we are asked for it with a smile by a wide array of applicants, with our government standing at the head of the line.

Another change... the "slaves" of today aren't predominantly black any more. A slave can, and will likely be anyone who makes no plans for the future who, while mentally and physically capable of caring for him or herself, depends primarily on others for care and sustenance, leaving their innately intelligent and imaginative nature under-exercised and expressed.

Slaves come in all shapes and sizes, colors and ethnicity, for they are encouraged, often by their peers, to subjugate their highest expression of individuality and dissuaded from achievement that involves straying from an accepted behavioral “norms” of their identifying group. Those who buck the group’s norms, buck the slavery mentality. However, they may pay the price of criticism or ridicule; not necessarily by government, but by other group members who think they have been slighted, left behind, or owed something in light of one’s choice to join the ranks of the freed.

Slavery’s Long Legacy

The social system of slavery in the United States was officially abolished in 1865 with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. There remains social dynamic that could be called a slave mindset today, but it is largely maintained by volition. Government does not try to enslave anyone, but a subliminal attempt is afoot to keep us indentured to serving it when in truth, government is indentured to serve us.

I’m not suggesting conspiracies here. Yet, politics thrive on maintaining what we might call a “healthy level of divisiveness” where in truth, there is no such animal.

Businesses are not trying to enslave anyone, yet countless millions of dollars will be spent in order to (1) get your attention, (2) gain your favor, (3) influence your behavior, and (4) to keep you coming back for more, once steps 1-3 have been accomplished. Whether what businesses offer you for consumption is actually *beneficial* is of secondary importance if enough people have developed a taste for the product or service.

Religions are not trying to enslave anyone, but there is likewise an attempt made to inculcate certain beliefs into “the flock’s” mind, that they avoid proscribed behavioral and ritualistic practices, some of which are steeped in the culture of their history, and not by *divine fiat*. I am not suggesting that this is all wrong or even

that much of it is. However, when we judge ourselves as unable to manifest our own reasonable vision and wait for someone else to make it possible (or blame them for standing in our way), then by default, we turn ourselves into current-day slaves.

“Yessuh ‘Mr. Bill,’ Glad to Havya”

After causing quite an uproar over the cost prohibitive facilities in Manhattan that he chose for his offices when he left public office, former President Bill Clinton elected to open an office in Harlem. As though deaf and blind to the unethical, opportunistic, disgraceful, self-centered caste Mr. Clinton put on the presidency during his tenure, he was greeted by the people of Harlem as though he was a savior.

The former president’s arrival in Harlem was seen as a boon that would improve the prestige of the area. This reaction ignored the fact that Wonderful Dreamers—developers, bankers, contractors, and entrepreneurs—had already been hard at work turning Harlem into a respectable and vibrant business community once again.

Given the ethical numbness that his presidency left upon the national psyche, *Mr. Clinton* was the one who actually needed the “boost” in prestige. He first tried to get it by choosing an opulent Manhattan address. He had no regard for costs, since they would be borne by *the People of the United States*. A negative reaction to his extravagance, along with some very questionable pardons that he issued on his last day in office, prompted him to quickly switch to an alternate, “face-saving” plan. Harlem was just the right ticket: very populist.

Mr. Clinton’s choosing to go there was seen as a way of legitimizing Harlem when in truth, it was a way to legitimize, meaning deflect some of the heat of public dissatisfaction away from, the former president. A larger preponderance of inspired, self-empowered people might have taken more exception to the opportunism, since his interests were expedient and political; not

genuine. I suspect that Frederick Douglass would not have been fooled by this blatantly disingenuous move.

There was nothing disingenuous about Frederick Douglass' freedom, which was realized while he was still a slave. He gained freedom from *fear*, of failure, of leaving his familiar though wretched surroundings behind, and of possible retribution, meaning being sold to another slave owner, or being put to death.

He came to this realization after witnessing how his own demeanor changed when he *thought* (meaning visualized) about being free, versus when he simply stopped dreaming. It affected both his mental and physical health. He gained spiritual sustenance and physical strength only when he had an active connection with his soul's longings. He sometimes languished in a zombie-like stupor when he did not. Do we not have many people amongst us who exhibit such a stupor today, even when there is nothing to stand in the way of change but the "inertia" of their own stasis?

Frederick Douglass realized that "whites" were not his problem, but *slavery* was. This is a key point to consider in analyzing race relations today. Too many blacks believe that whites are "the problem" with respect to race relations and bringing racism to an end. Many perplexed whites believe that blacks are their own problem.

I would suggest blacks that believe whites are "*the* problem" are indeed their own problem. Blacks who don't subscribe to the blame mindset are generally silent on the issue. They have productive lives to live and responsibilities to attend to.

It is as disheartening for a "white" person to be assumed a racist by a black person on face value, as it is for a black person to be assumed "inferior" by someone white. We need to understand that the assumption of inferiority *or* superiority is wrong, *irrespective* of the skin coloring of the one making the assumption.

Like slavery, racism is a mindset: one that can be "worn" by individuals of any color or ethnicity and without need for social complicity.

Until we are willing to call black racists to task for their divisive rhetoric and faulty logic as quickly as we are willing to call white racists to task, there will be racism. Until we are ready to take action against inhumanity by and against persons of any color, we will continue to have fear and apathy, which the slavery mindset needs in order to live. Until we are willing to seek the proverbial fountain of knowledge and drink from it, and until we are willing to see love, truth, and wisdom as our personal liberators, we won't be freed.

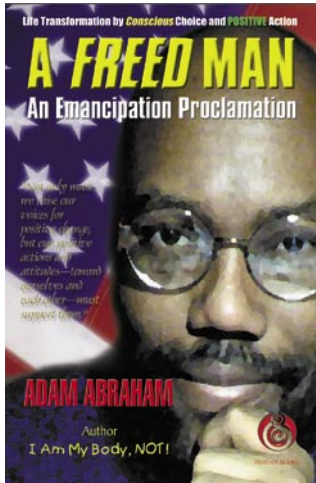
In Frederick Douglass' day, the most deceived group in the slavery dynamic was the slaveholders. Slaves *knew* they were slaves. When the misery was over, it could indeed be over, *if* they were free from the need for personal vengeance. The slaveholders did not know how profoundly their superstition, ignorance, greed, and fear had been master over them. I hope we are all beginning to appreciate the real dynamic that colors human tragedies; that of fear.

Ponder these words from Mr. Douglass:

"Until the public schools shall cease to be caste schools... until the colored man's pathway to the ballot box... shall be as smooth and as safe as the same is for the white citizen... until the courts of the country shall grant the colored man a fair trial and a just verdict... until color shall cease to be a bar to equal participation in the offices and honors of the country...until the trade unions, and the workshops of the country shall cease to proscribe the colored man...until the American peoples shall make character, and not color, the criterion of respectability."

The last point is yet unrealized, but we're almost there. On their own, neither slavery nor racism are "the oppressors" any more, unless by our hatred of former oppressions and oppressors, we unwittingly "oppress" each other, and ourselves. We have a ways to go socially, but the real pathway to freedom is walked *within*.

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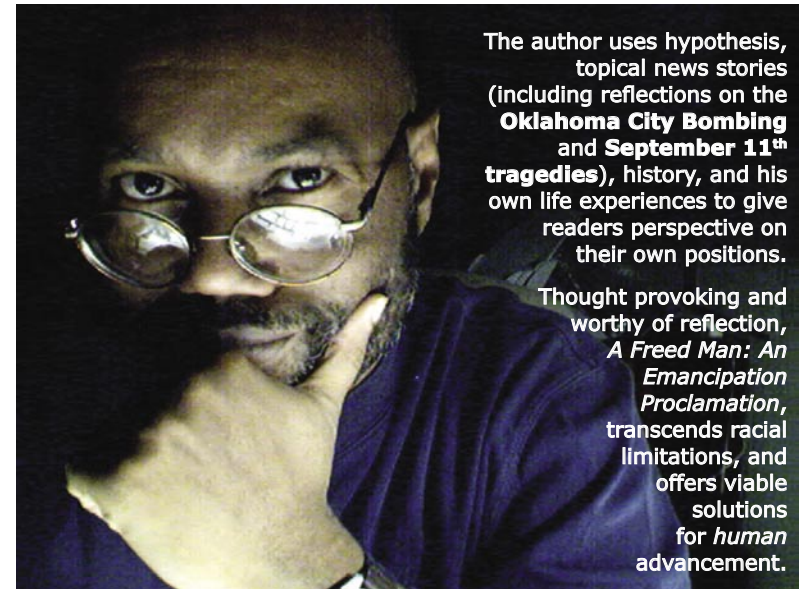
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