

A Painful Legacy

to be confronted

Racism | Slavery | Reckoning

In this painful, personal journey through the eras of America's shameful racial past, Br. David Vryhof guides us through his moral reckoning with insight and humility. He urges us toward a similar confrontation.

In late November 2022, Br. Curtis Almquist and I undertook a nine-day pilgrimage to the South to visit sites related to the Civil Rights Movement in the United States during the 1950s and '60s and beyond. Among the places we visited were the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, which trace the legacy of slavery in this country from the early 1600s to the present day by examining four eras: (1) the Era of Slavery in America, (2) the Era of Racial Terror, (3) the Era of "Segregation Forever," and (4) the Era of Mass Incarceration. In what follows, I would like to record some of what I learned, share some powerful imagery of what we saw, and name some of my reactions to the experience.



What follows is an excerpt. For Br. David's complete reflection, check out the online version of this piece in the digital issue of Cowley: SSJE.org/cowley

The Era of Slavery in America

We are standing before a large screen in the first room of the Legacy Museum, watching the terrifying waves of the Atlantic Ocean rise and crash before us. The scene prompts us to imagine the terrors of an ocean crossing in a wooden boat, a journey made by millions of African people who were kidnapped, enslaved, and shipped across the Atlantic to the Americas in cramped vessels under horrific conditions. It also calls to mind the nearly two million people who died at sea during the agonizing journey.

I had, of course, read about and studied America's history of slavery over the course of my life. But I was still shocked and stunned by what I encountered at the Legacy Museum. I realized that I had not thought deeply about the daily life experience of enslaved Africans in this country or come close to comprehending the full extent of their misery. "Slavery is the next thing to hell," wrote Harriet Tubman, and the museum helped open my eyes to its appalling realities. I tried to imagine what it would be like to be kidnapped and taken away from one's homeland, from all that was familiar and loved, to face the terrifying passage across the seas, to be treated as property to be bought and sold at will without any regard to one's needs or wishes or basic human rights. I learned about the vulnerability of enslaved peoples who could be subjected to abuse, physical torture, and violence at any time with absolutely no recourse. Any protest or cry for justice was futile and was bound to go unheeded by agents of law enforcement or criminal justice. There was no hope of a fair decision in a court of law, and enslaved people soon learned that they would always be faulted for whatever befell them. An enslaved person could be raped by a slave owner at will or lent out to his friends for their pleasure; burned or whipped for any perceived offence, no matter how slight; deliberately separated from children or spouse or family at any time; subjected to the cruelest working conditions - always working under the threat of violence - from dawn to nightfall; and never receive a single paycheck, the chance to get an education, enjoy a family, or purchase land, a home, or a business. I could only try to imagine the despair of living with conditions like these as one's daily reality.

But the most shocking thing for me was the revelation of how racism continued to shape lives even after slavery supposedly came to an end with the Emancipation Proclamation of 1865. At every juncture when there was a moment of hope, some new form of racial oppression emerged to replace the previous forms. The Civil Rights Act of 1866 and the 14th Amendment in 1868 gave African Americans full citizenship and equal rights and led to a brief period in which newly freed Black Americans began to hope for real political and economic opportunity. But this hope was crushed in 1877 when federal soldiers were prematurely withdrawn from the South and control of Southern state governments was returned to former Confederates. The result was that the narrative of racial inferiority was restored to justify the continued dehumanization of Black people. As W.E.B. DuBois put it, ***"The slave went free; stood a brief moment in the sun; then moved back again toward slavery."***

The Era of Racial Terror

The truth is that slavery did not end. It evolved.

What followed the Emancipation Proclamation and the brief period of Reconstruction were a series of practices that kept African Americans in a state of subjection. The rights of Black people were widely violated, and the laws that protected them were rarely enforced. They were denied land ownership and economic advancement, and forced into sharecropping, where they worked on White-owned land and were dependent for food and shelter, with tools and seed advanced by the landowners, all of which trapped them in cycles of debt and poverty that lasted generations. Denied the right to vote through law and violence, the formerly enslaved were governed by all-White legislatures that passed "Black Codes" and authorized "convict leasing." African Americans were criminalized, imprisoned, or fined, and then sold to private citizens or companies to work off their "debts" for state profit. Thousands of prisoners were re-enslaved in mines, on farms, and on plantations, where conditions were horrific, where they once again lived without rights, unable to protest the injustices committed against them. Many lived and died in these appalling conditions.

How had I, growing up in America, learned so little about the oppressive practices of sharecropping and convict leasing? How had I failed to see that these practices perpetuated the unjust conditions established in the era of slavery and were simply new expressions of racial exploitation and oppression? I realized how much I had yet to learn.

Racial violence aimed at re-establishing White supremacy was widespread throughout the former Confederate states following Emancipation. In the eight decades between the end of the Civil War and the end of World War II, White people publicly tortured and killed thousands of African Americans in "racial terror lynchings" designed to terrorize and intimidate the Black community.

Black communities forced to witness brutal killings of friends or relatives by bold, undisguised White mobs were warned that the same fate awaited them if they protested, sought justice, or even openly discussed lynchings. It was an era characterized by fear and silence, and the trauma of it endured for generations.

The Era of "Segregation Forever"

The Legacy Museum recounts the bravery of many Black (and White) people who fought for the civil rights of African Americans in this country in the 1950s and '60s. It tells the stories of "freedom riders" and lunch-counter protesters, of organized resistance in boycotts and demonstrations, of speeches and actions that had international impact.

As civil rights victories mounted, violent opposition became more frequent and deadly. In 1963, four young Black girls were killed when a bomb exploded in the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. In the same year, Medgar Evers, a military veteran and NAACP field organizer, was shot and killed in his own Jackson, Mississippi, driveway. The criminal justice system emerged as an effective tool for suppressing efforts to gain civil rights as activists regularly faced arrest and prosecution. Between his emergence as a leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 and his assassination in 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was arrested more than a dozen times for leading nonviolent civil rights demonstrations, repeatedly threatened with violence and hanged in effigy, and covertly targeted by FBI officials who labeled him "the most dangerous and effective Negro leader in the country."

Against overwhelming odds, the Civil Rights Movement successfully disrupted the legal structures that had sustained Jim Crow, but the narrative of White supremacy that fueled segregation and White opposition to racial equality persisted.

It is easy to romanticize the Civil Rights Movement and sentimentalize figures like Dr. King and Rosa Parks, but the reality is that the challenges they faced persist to this day. No doubt they would have disturbing things to say to us today, and ***it is questionable whether we would heed their voices any more readily than their contemporaries did.***

The Era of Mass Incarceration

Slavery's "legacy" continues to plague us to the present day. Its latest manifestation is in the mass incarceration of African Americans and other people of color.

At the close of the civil rights era (and continuing to the present day), politicians seized on "law and order" as a winning campaign platform and used thinly veiled racial appeals to win elections. Since the start of President Nixon's racially biased war on drugs in 1971, the American prison population has increased from 300,000 to more than 2.3 million. The overwhelming majority of prisoners are people of color. (President Nixon's domestic policy chief, John Erlichman, later admitted, "Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.")

Even after serving their prison sentences, thousands of American citizens face significant collateral consequences that bar them from voting and serving on juries; restrict their access to public housing, food stamps, and other social services; subject them to discrimination in the search for employment; and impact nearly every facet of daily life.

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It's not easy to confront the legacy of slavery woven into our country's history and narrative. I often felt overwhelmed by the horror and misery we witnessed in display after display at the museum. Each day on our pilgrimage, we stumbled away, asking ourselves: How could such horrific treatment of human beings have happened and how and why has it persisted to the present day? How could these atrocities have gone unchallenged by so many, including people of integrity working in legal, political, and religious institutions? What dulled their consciences? How did they come to believe the narrative that said this was how things were supposed to be? Why did they settle for the *status quo*? How did Christians specifically learn to turn away from the appalling injustices that were so blatantly apparent for all to see, to participate in and benefit from the system?

Then, there was the realization that this legacy continues to the present day. I had not recognized this strong connection before, and it came as a shock to me. It raised more difficult questions, such as "**What are we to do about ongoing racial injustice?**" We like to think that if we had lived during the era of slavery, we would have been staunch abolitionists. We like to think that had we lived in the era of racial terror, we would have spoken up and tried to stop the lynchings. We like to think that, had it been possible for us, we would have joined in the civil rights demonstrations of the 1950s and '60s and fought against the ensuing racist backlash that continued to deny Black Americans equality under the law. But the truth, I suspect, is that most of us would have remained silent. Most of us would have seen the problem as too big, too complicated, too multifaceted to even begin to address, and would have settled into the *status quo*, particularly if we were its beneficiaries rather than its victims.

Visiting the Legacy Museum and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice leads to a necessary soul-searching. **How have I been complacent in the face of injustice? How have I benefited from racially biased systems? How have I lived with the knowledge that racial injustice continues in our day? What**

have I done, what could I do, what must I do, in response to the awareness I have been given? What will I say about the mass incarceration of people of color? What will I do about the fact that African Americans lag behind White Americans in every measurable area: education, housing, employment, annual income, personal wealth, and more? Whom can I influence, what can I do, that will lead to a better future?

I try to take some small steps. I now correspond regularly with a prisoner, a small thing that hopefully impacts at least one life. I support the work of the Equal Justice Initiative and other justice-oriented efforts. I write and preach about injustice, hoping to awaken and stir the consciences of others, as mine has been stirred. I pay attention to the racism that I recognize within me and around me, and work to change it. Visiting these museums was for me a first step, an opportunity to learn from the lived experience of generations of Black folk in this country. But it is only a first step. There is much more to learn and so much more to do.

Jesus taught us to pray and to work that God's kingdom might come "on earth as it is in heaven." ***For Christians, this is a gospel summons that has clear implications for us living still in an era of racial inequality.***

HOW YOU CAN TAKE ACTION

1. **Provide Support:** Help others stand up for racial justice. Pitch in, lend a hand, stand by a friend, or cheer them on!
2. **Raise Your Voice:** Bring visibility to problems of racial injustice. Make a sign, amplify your voices, attend a rally!
3. **Change the System:** Change unjust rules and policies at school or in your community. Start a petition, talk to leaders, or promote the VOTE!
4. **Share Your Vision:** Work with others to create a community that's just for all. Create a vision board. Enlist others. Start small and keep going!
5. **Share the Truth:** Use words, art, music, and dance to share the truth about injustice.

For resources on how to be a changemaker, visit:
www.emmittilllexhibit.org

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Books:

- Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010, 2012).
- Nikole Hannah-Jones, *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story* (New York: The New York Times Company, 2021). [This profound collection of essays won the Pulitzer Prize.]
- Lee Sentell, *The Official United States Civil Rights Trail: What Happened Here Changed the World* (Birmingham: The Alabama Media Group, 2021).
- Bryan Stevenson, *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2014).

Websites:

- The Equal Justice Initiative (Montgomery, AL)
www.eji.org
- The Legacy Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration (Montgomery, AL), and The National Memorial for Peace and Justice (Montgomery, AL)
www.museumandmemorial.eji.org
- Birmingham Civil Rights Institute (Birmingham, AL)
www.bcri.org

Video:

Bryan Stevenson TED Talk: "We Need to Talk About an Injustice"

https://www.ted.com/talks/bryan_stevenson_we_need_to_talk_about_an_injustice

For Further Reflection

How have you been complacent in the face of injustice? How have you benefited from racially biased systems?

What have you done, what could you do, what must you do, in response to the awareness you have been given?

What are we going to do about racial injustice?

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