

“See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Do No Evil”
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Harriet Jacobs was a young 19th-century African American woman. In her autobiography, she writes:

When I entered my 15th year, my master began to whisper foul words in my ear. Young as I was, I could not remain ignorant of their import. I tried to treat them with indifference or contempt. The master’s age, my extreme youth, and the fear that his conduct would be reported to my grandmother, made me bear this treatment for many months...He tried his utmost to corrupt the pure principles my grandmother had instilled. He peopled my mind with unclean images, such as only a vile monster could think of. I turned from him with disgust and hatred. But he was my master.

James Norcom, the slave owner of whom Harriet writes, was a physician and prominent citizen in the community. He was also a serial rapist. He had raped at least 11 women, and was determined to rape Harriet Jacobs as well. It was only because Mrs. Norcom discovered her husband’s interest that he was prevented from raping Harriet, as well.

As a serial rapist, Dr. Norcom should have received the most severe punishment; yet, he was protected by law and custom from any consequences of his evil deeds.

Harriet falls in love with a free-born carpenter, and asks Dr. Norcom for permission to marry, but he rejects her request with a stream of verbal abuse, and says to her, “Do you know that I have a right to do as I like with you --that I can kill you if I please?”

Taking a great risk, Harriet retorts, “You have tried to kill me, and I wish you had, but you have no right to do as you like with me.”

She writes:

O virtuous reader? You never knew what it is to be a slave; to be entirely unprotected by law or custom; to have the laws reduce you to the condition of chattel, entirely subject to the will of another. You never exhausted your ingenuity in avoiding the snares, and eluding the power of a hated tyrant;

you never shuddered at the sound of his footsteps, and trembled within hearing of his voice.

Resistance was always risky, but somehow this young woman had the critical consciousness to enable her to stand against evil. When Harriet is courted by a white lawyer named Mr. Sands, she is flattered, and she sees a way out of her situation with Dr. Norcom. Three motives converge to mold her resistance: first, she hopes to be sold to Mr. Sands and to eventually win freedom for her future children; second, she would prefer to choose her sexual partner, and third, she wants to spite her master.

After the liaison is consummated, Harriet Jacobs becomes pregnant with Mr. Sands' child. She writes:

I know I did wrong. No one can feel it more sensibly than I do. The painful and humiliating memory will haunt me to my dying day. Still, in looking back, calmly, on the events of my life, I feel that the slave woman ought not be judged by the same standard as others.

What a painful spiritual conflict. Slavery created the kind of oppression that meant Harriet's resistance against rape, abuse and harassment required her to violate her own moral standards. When she reveals to her grandmother that she is pregnant, Harriet's grandmother sends her away and tells her that she never wants to see her again. Harriet is crushed.

For the grandmother's part, her worst fears have come true and in her upset, she blames Harriet. Harriet writes, "The mother of slaves is very watchful. She knows there is no security for her children. After they have entered their teens she lives in daily expectation of trouble." In a few days, the two are reconciled. Her grandmother lays her hand gently on Harriet's head and murmurs, "Poor child. Poor child."

Harriet Jacobs remains enslaved by Dr. Norcom, who decides it would be proper for a man of his position to join the Episcopal Church. "When I was told that Dr. [Norcom] had joined the Episcopal Church, I was much surprised," she writes. "I supposed that religion had a purifying effect on the character of men; but the worst persecutions I endured from him were after he became a communicant."

When she confronted him with his hypocrisy, he became enraged. “How dare you preach to me about your infernal Bible? What right have you, who are my negro, to talk to me about what you would like and what you wouldn’t like? I am your master, and you shall obey me.”

Dr. Norcom used his power to rape, assault, abuse and control the lives of his slaves; yet, he was also a respected citizen, a successful doctor and businessman, and a Christian. The system of slavery that existed in America for 350 years was an evil created and maintained because individual, social and religious attitudes and justifications allowed it to be so.

Slavery in the new world began as a trickle born of opportunism. A number of Portuguese and Spanish sailors had already discovered that there was money to be made in kidnapping, bringing home and selling Africans to growers of a new cash crop --sugar cane. As Europeans began to settle in the Caribbean and North America, many with hopes of making money growing crops, the slave traders followed close behind with their glittering offers of free labor in the form of African men, women and children (for a price, of course).

No one person or group masterminded a plan to establish an institution of Negro slavery. It was simple economic supply and demand. So, you want to make a lot of money and here’s a way to make it happen.

For anyone who had any qualms about this new type of chattel slavery – namely, lifetime servitude based on color that was passed from generation to generation – they could take comfort in accepted European prejudices, which defined Africans and others as heathens, savages and beasts. They could also put their minds at ease with the teachings of ministers like Cotton Mather. As early as 1689, he advocated Christianizing the Africans, but also supported slavery, since he himself was a slaveholder. He told slaveholders they need not fear losing their slaves on account of baptism, since Christianity did not forbid slavery. Mather urged slaveholders to teach their slaves “that it is God who has caused them to be servants, and that they serve Jesus Christ, while they are at work for their masters.” Ideas such as Mather’s were common among many other Christian denominations, both in the North and in the South.

The institution of slavery was fueled by economic forces, and I think that’s an important point to bear in mind. Cotton, tobacco, rice, indigo and other crops raised all over the South with slave labor created wealth for both the North and

the South. And that's another point. Slavery did not only benefit white slaveholders in the South.

So where was the moral discussion of slavery? Was everyone so entrenched in the system that no one questioned it? No; actually, there was a lot of debate.

In the history of the slave debates in the late 18th and early 19th century, Thomas Jefferson has come to assume a prominent place. He expressed views typical of many southern slaveholders of the time. He was troubled by slavery and was concerned about the moral compromises white people made because of racism, and he also feared a violent revolt of African Americans. He was in a bind, because on the one hand, he had a sincere commitment to equal rights for all "men," most clearly seen in the Declaration of Independence, which he helped author.

Yet, on the other hand, he opposed assimilation of "Negroes," believing that "inmixture of blood" would destroy the country.

Intellectually, Jefferson's understanding was that rights belong to men as biological beings, that "all men are created equal" and "from that equal creation they derive rights inherent and inalienable." Historian Winthrop Jordan identifies the central fact that caused Jefferson's internal conflict. It was "creation." He says, "The Creator, whose primary attribute was tidiness, would scarcely have been so careless as to create a single species with more than one set of rights."

But, as a slave owner, Jefferson treated his slaves in ways that appear to contradict his writings. He was capable of punishing his slaves with great cruelty. "He was troubled by his own violence, but he tended to blame the institution of slavery for corrupting him rather than take responsibility for his own behavior," says James Newton Poling, author of Deliver Us From Evil, from which I read earlier.

Under the guise of ending slavery, Jefferson endorsed the idea of setting up a separate colony for freed slaves. Poling says, "In his support of colonization, Jefferson demonstrated his wish for the Negro problem to just go away and for the United States to be homogeneously white and European."

Jefferson was also unapologetically a believer of the supremacy of the white race. He was far from alone in his view. Northern abolitionists also shared the

assumption that European Americans were superior and that the United States was meant to be a pure, white nation. Our own religious forebear, Theodore Parker, a liberal Unitarian minister from Boston and a militant abolitionist, concluded that Anglo-Saxons were “a good hardy stock for national welfare to grow on...I look with great pride on this Anglo-Saxon people. It has many faults, but I think it is the best specimen of mankind which has ever attained great power in the world.”

Parker and Jefferson were part of a group of white men who believed that the Negro was biologically inferior. George M. Frederickson, in his book, The Black Image in the White Mind, says, “The biological school saw the Negro as a pathetically inept creature who was a slave to his emotions, incapable of progressive development and self-government because he lacked the white man’s enterprise and intellect.”

Northern abolitionists tended toward a romanticized view of the supposedly “inferior, primitive peoples of the world.” (Poling) They developed the “child” stereotype as an antidote to the “savage” stereotype in the South. Poling comments, “That these two stereotypes actually worked together to reinforce the belief in white supremacy was apparently beyond the awareness of many intellectuals at the time.”

To be fair, we have the advantage of hindsight and sets of ideas and critical tools that were not available to these leaders. The moral consequences of their ideas for oppressed peoples were profound, but they were caught in the limitations of their times, just as we are caught in the limitations of ours.

The legacy of slavery and the continuing racism in our society are difficult to talk about without locating ourselves somewhere in the story. With whom do we identify? The oppressed or the oppressor? Some of us have biological ancestors who were among the oppressed or the oppressors. There are some slave holders in my own family tree. I also have reason to believe that I may have African American cousins descended from one or more of those slave holders. So I also place myself among the relatives of the oppressed.

Even if you have no family connection to slavery, as an American or even as a resident or a visitor here, you have a place in the story of slavery, because you are affected by the racism that was constructed as an integral part of the institution of slavery.

As religious and spiritual people, one important reason to analyze and try to better understand this part of our history is to be able to see how persons, institutions and ideas work together to construct certain realities that benefit some people over others. It is easier to see racism at work in white men of 150 years ago than it is to see racism and other forms of evil at work in our own lives. Our goal is to be able to improve our ability to see the truth of evil in our own time.

(Reread Poling's definition of evil, from reading)

Our spiritual work is to enhance our perception and judgment about justice in the world around us, to uncover evil in its many hidden forms and to identify our own roles in systemic evil.

May we be brave enough to abandon our myths of personal innocence. May we have the faith and the courage to acknowledge the sometimes ambiguous good and evil within ourselves. May we have the vision to see the truth and the nerve to do what is right.