

The Underground Railroad: A Model of Collaboration, Liberation and Education

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Abstract. This paper examines the interworking of the Underground Railroad (UGRR), the nation's first civil rights movement, where multi-racial, multi-generational persons risked great harm to themselves and their families to free an estimated 100,000 persons from constitutionally and religiously sanctioned racial oppression during the era of U.S. chattel slavery. The collaborative and liberatory nature of the UGRR provides an example that Christian Educators may use to address the various -isms of our generation. Using the analytical framework of critical race theory, this work presents a model of Christian Education based upon the three roles/functions of the UGRR process (1) fugitive slave/freedom seeker, (2) station keeper/aide, and (3) conductor. The model, like this movement, also acknowledges the individual and institutional nature of injustice, helps persons take authority/responsibility for their beliefs and subsequent behavior in the public square and teaches that such intervening work on behalf of others is an act of theosis.

The Mandate

We live in a socially constructed world defined, described and divided by difference. We are identified as white/persons-of-color, male/female, gay/straight, rich/poor, Muslim/Jewish/Christian/spiritual/agnostic/atheist, etc. Certain identifying characteristics or labels, particularly our race, ethnicity, religion, gender, income, sexual orientation and citizenship status are attributes of demarcation that can reflect privilege, access, inclusion, exclusion, suspicion, and discrimination in mainstream U.S. society. As Mary Ann Tolbert once observed, hegemonic North American cultural values privilege one who is male, white, educated, middle- to upper-class, heterosexual, married, healthy, and Christian/Protestant.¹

This tendency to privilege some persons and not others led to the development of various liberation movements (e.g., feminist, black, womanist, queer) that rightly advocate for the inclusion of politically and economically disenfranchised people. Sometimes,

¹ Mary Ann Tolbert. "Reading for Liberation." In *Reading From This Place. Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States. Volume I* edited by Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995, 263.

however, these movements have prioritized their interest or concern over and against another similarly disenfranchised group. According to Kelly Brown Douglas, for example, black and feminist theologies,

“Both emerged as a part of liberation movements that were primarily concerned with one dimension of social oppression. In adopting the one-dimensional focus of these movements, both theologies failed to adequately address Black women’s multidimensional oppression. Consequently, both have developed understandings of Christ that do not necessarily reflect Black women’s experience.”²

Lenny Flank describes such oppositional posturing between oppressed groups as “alienating social relationships,” which serve to safeguard the position of the privilege, bourgeois hegemony, and to defend against any attempts of the oppressed to change them.³ The hegemony, by definition, assumes a “cultural, moral and ideological leadership over allied and subordinate groups,”⁴ initially by coercion and later by subaltern consent. Since hegemonic groups have the wherewithal to enforce prejudicial opinions, they maintain privilege, power and control. Flank calls upon the various social dissident movements to carry on their own struggles, but also to grow together to form a cohesive movement with complementary goals.⁵ Flank’s proposal is both admirable and reasonable, but not one likely to be achieved without some educational intervention. His call, moreover, requires what John Cobb Jr. suggests is lacking in the church and in theological discourse – the ability to take personal responsibility for our own theology, which he attributes to the professionalization of theology. The call and the observation of these two scholars mandate that Christian educators address this vacuum by creating a liberatory pedagogy that addresses the socially constructed division and counter hegemony. Such a method should

² Kelly Brown Douglas. *The Black Christ*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005, 96.

³ Lenny Flank. *Hegemony and Counter-Hegemony*. St. Petersburg: Red and Black Publishers, 2007, 168.

⁴ David Forgacs. *The Antonio Gramsci Reader*. New York: New York Press, 2000, 423.

⁵ Flank, 171.

allow for critical examination of difficult, even controversial subjects, (2) encourage personal autonomy/authority in matters of the faith and personal intervention in matters of individual and institutional injustice by questioning both assumptions that undergird and ecclesial authority that inform our beliefs, and (3) re-vision salvation as participatory, rather than passive. The Underground Railroad (UGRR), the nation's first liberation movement, provides a model by which we can achieve these educational objectives, and thereby collaboratively work towards liberty and justice for all.

The Movement

The UGRR was the first civil rights movement in the U.S. Raymond Bial reports that the UGRR was well established by 1830 and was most active in the 60 years before the Civil War, having about 3,200 workers.⁶ Also, according to Bial, in 1786, George Washington complained that a Society of Quakers (the first group to help runaway slaves) had attempted to liberate one of his slaves.⁷ In 1793, congress passed the Fugitive Slave Law making it a crime to help a fugitive slave, which suggests that the UGRR was operational soon after this country declared independence from England in 1776.

This UGRR was a network of black and white people from all walks of life working collaboratively to secure the freedom of fugitive slaves. There was no one leader and no one method. Participants, however, fell into three primary roles or categories:

- *Conductors*, who navigated and led the way north to freedom,
- *Station keepers*, who provided aide – housing, clothing, food, money, legal defense, maps, medicine, wound care, etc., and
- *Fugitive slave or freedom seeker*, who left the chains of bondage and often returned to free family and friends, and/or became station keepers assisting other escapees.

⁶ Raymond Bial. *The Underground Railroad*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995, 8.

⁷ Bial, 17.

This movement operated covertly with conductors like Harriet Tubman privately travelling into slave-holding areas to lead many blacks north to free states and territories, and also operated overtly with abolitionists like Frederick Douglass publicly advocating for black freedom. Participant narratives suggest a shared belief in the humanity of enslaved black bodies and their divine right to be free from physical bondage and life long servitude. This opinion stood in stark contrast to the prevailing constitutional, societal and religious sanctioning of black bodies as God-ordained chattel (curse of Ham) to be bought and sold, and thus, clearly demonstrates counter-hegemonic thinking.

The Model

The model proposed is based upon the three primary roles of the UGRR: the conductor, station keeper (or aide) and the fugitive slave/freedom seeker. These roles offer parallels to the parts played by students and teachers in the classroom. We know from Paulo Freire that whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning.⁸ Therefore, these roles are not static. Sometimes we are the conductor leading others to a better/different understanding; sometimes we are the station keeper, the aide helping others gain a better/different understanding; and sometimes we are the freedom seeker, the one enslaved to unhealthy or one-dimensional thought patterns needing, even desiring, escape to a better/different understanding.

This model, nevertheless, presumes that the instructor or facilitator is the conductor. He/she plays the role of navigator, having the responsibility for leading students to a better/different understanding, to a free/freer mental/emotional/religious space. Much like the conductors taught escaping slaves to survey the land (e.g. North Star, tree bark),

⁸ Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of Freedom. Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001, 31.

instructors must teach students how to read the often unexamined social terrain and to do so differently than tradition or societal norms or external authority may dictate. In this way, instructors surreptitiously lead to a place of freedom, mindful that the journey may need to be repeated. Harriet Tubman, for example, made 19 trips to free 300 people. Conductors are mindful that the destination is not a place of comfort or complacency, but rather of responsibility, where one feels compelled to help others reach the same state of free-thinking. Instructors must design course readings, written assignments and classroom discussions such that they question assumptions and allow for reflection on cultural context and personal application. Moreover, instructors must emphasize that evidence of successful travel (or grasp of the material) is not demonstrated by the mere regurgitation of course content, but rather is evidenced by critical engagement and appropriate application of the material, including an articulation of his/her rationale for a belief. In this place of freedom/responsibility, it is imperative that the student traveler also understands the contextual influence upon readings and personal reflections, and upon application of content in the public square. Conductor/instructors must emphasize that as the social landscape changes, new shifts in thinking/being/believing and behavior may likewise be required. Of course, being a conductor requires that instructors have moved to one of the three later or more mature stages of faith development described by James Fowler,⁹ namely

- *Individuative-Reflective*, where persons examine and make critical choices about the defining elements of their identity and faith,
- *Conjunctive*, where truth becomes more nuanced than dualistic, either-or thinking, where persons develop a genuine openness to the truths of other traditions, and where unexamined convictions and beliefs have become matters of more explicit commitment and accountability, or

⁹ James W. Fowler. *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian. Adult Development & Christian Faith*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2000, 49-57.

- *Universalizing*, where persons are able to live in paradox and tension and are able to see the world through the eyes and experiences of persons, classes, nationalities and faiths quite different from their own.

Spiritual maturity and a heightened sense of self-awareness are essential because, as Parker Palmer suggest, “we teach who we are.”¹⁰ If conductors are not intentional and attentive to the teaching/learning process and to our evolving personhood, then we too can teach out of our fears, insecurities and unexamined assumptions, thereby passing along the same to our students. Finally, being a conductor necessitates that we see teaching/leading as a divine call, fulfillment of divine purpose; and like Moses of the Old Testament and of the UGRR (Tubman), we are leading God’s people out of bondage, and thereby, become active participants with God and the students in the salvation as liberation process.

The fellow students are the station keepers, the aides who help the seekers along the way to freedom by sharing from their life’s experiences and by providing comfort and reassurance that this place of freedom/responsibility is worth the struggle of grappling with both the material and the process. In other words, the benefits of freedom/responsibility and personal autonomy are worth the risk of reflection. These are students who have shifted from what Sharon Parks calls external to internalize authority, or from *authority-bound knowing* where authority is oriented outside one’s self (pastor, parent, societal norm) to at least what she identifies as the *unqualified relativism*, if not beyond. In the former state of knowing (authority-bound), persons believe what others have taught them. Here they may or may not be able to say what they believe, but they cannot articulate the rationale for their belief. What a person ultimately trusts, knows, and believes is based on some authority figure such as a parent, teacher, or religious leader.¹¹ In authority-bound

¹⁰ Parker Palmer. *The Courage to Teach*. San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2007, 2.

¹¹ Sharon Parks. *Big Questions. Worthy Dreams*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000, 54.

knowing, media, culture and customs can inform or affirm our uncritically examined opinions, and thus necessitates close examination according to this proposed model. In this immature stage of knowing, authority figures function in an all powerful manner such that ambiguity cannot be tolerated and dualistic, either or thinking results. “In this form of knowing, even the inner self is primarily composed by others.”¹² By comparison, in *unqualified relativism* stage of knowing, persons realize that all knowledge is shaped by and is thus relative to the context and relationship within which said knowledge is composed.¹³ This latter stage is particularly important since context has been the central argument of contemporary liberation scholars who challenge traditional or classical biblical and theological discourse by emphasizing how context shapes the theological questions as well as the theological response; and more importantly, how classical or traditional theology that has been based primarily upon a privilege standing, “Western-oriented, Eurocentric perspective,”¹⁴ and thus is not universally applicable to persons who do not share the same cultural history or economic and political privilege. This recognition of context, moreover, is critical to applying course content to the vicissitudes of life as well as for the understanding of and participating in advocacy movements that may not affect you directly. This recognition is also helpful to aid those who have not yet realized the need for a shift in thinking/being/believing that assumes full responsibility for one’s faith convictions and corresponding behavior in the public square.

The freedom seeking student is the fugitive slave, and like the fugitive slave has, in some respects, already moved to what Parks calls *commitment in relativism* or *convictional*

¹² Parks, 55.

¹³ Parks, 55.

¹⁴ V. Fabella & R. S. Sugirtharajah (eds) *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2000, xxi.

commitment. In the commitment to relativism stage of knowing, persons begin to take responsibility for their own thinking and knowing. In other words, he/she has recognized that mental chains, unhealthy ways of believing and behaving are holding them captive to an unfulfilling way of life for self and others, and therefore, demand escape. Here, according to Parks, students look for a place to stand in an uncertain world.¹⁵ They are still aware of the relative nature of all opinions, but this awareness reflects the great shift that makes intellectual reflection possible and thus serves as the threshold into the life of the mind.¹⁶ While remaining cognizant of the finite nature of all judgments, they begin to consider what is adequate, what is worthy, and what is valuable.¹⁷ They conclude, like the enslaved participants of the UGRR, they are worthy of the privileges and access enjoyed by those who deny them the same, and thus they plan their escape. Fugitive/freedom seeking persons might also exhibit what Parks identifies as *convictional commitment*. In this place of knowing, one has examined their beliefs, can articulate those beliefs, can hear other opinions, consider the merits of the other opinions, and yet hold onto their fundamental belief, unthreatened by the other's perspective. According to Parks, this way of knowing represents a deepened capacity to hear the truth of another or even many others without abandoning the centered authority of the self and a disciplined fidelity to truth.¹⁸ Participants in the UGRR, were able to hear the rhetoric of the hegemony that sanctioned black enslavement, but they were nevertheless able to reject that which contradicted their understanding of the key elements of the faith – Jesus, humanity, the church (community). Parks suggests that persons with a convictional commitment can embrace paradox, which

¹⁵ Parks, 59.

¹⁶ Parks, 59.

¹⁷ Parks, 59.

¹⁸ Parks, 60.

is especially important since paradox is where most of us live in relation to our statement of faith. For example, despite the liberating and self-affirming advocacy of black and womanist theologies, Katie Cannon has observed,

“The Black woman and her family continue to be enslaved to hunger, disease, and the highest rate of unemployment since the Depression of the 1930s. Advances in education, housing, health care, and other necessities that came about during the mid- and late 1960s are deteriorating faster now than ever before.”¹⁹

Black statistics regarding unemployment, health, education, incarceration, etc. still support Cannon’s 2003 observation. In 2009, for example, black unemployment, in general, was 10.0% as compared to 5.2% for whites, and was 8.9% for black women as compared to 4.9% for white females.²⁰ Statistics such as these, and the culture that produces them, are particularly relevant in this proposed model of education, which uses Critical Race Theory (CRT) for analysis.

Like black liberation scholars, CRT scholars examine the relationship between race and power and note the statistically significant disparities between whites and people of color in this country in regard to access, opportunities and privilege. CR theorists use many of the same sources (black experience) and techniques (narrative) to challenge constructions of race as other black liberation scholars. CR theorists contend that racism is fundamental to U.S. society, woven into the very fabric of this nation, embedded in the political, legal and educational structures of society, and reinforced through stereotypic media depictions. In fact, Derrick Bell founder and father of CRT, says racism is a permanent component of American life.²¹ Although the discipline acknowledges that

¹⁹ Cannon, K. G. *Katie’s Canon. Womanism and the soul of the Black Community*. New York: Continuum, 2003, 55-56.

²⁰ Ana Orozco and Robert Tomarelli. “2009 Equality Index.” In *The State of Black America 2009* edited by Stephanie J. Jones. New York City: National Urban League, 2009, 26.

²¹ Derrick A. Bell, Jr. *Faces at the Bottom of the Well. The Permanence of Racism*. New York: Basic Books, 1992, 13.

individual acts of racism exist, the primary focus of CRT is the systemic, historical and contemporary conventions and customs that perpetuate and maintain status quo hegemonic, oppressive group relationships.

CRT methodology is relevant in education because it embraces the subjectivity of perspective, openly acknowledging that perceptions of truth, fairness and justice reflect the mindset of the knower,²² recognizes the social construction of our identities, gives credence to our experiences, and acknowledges our individual, communal and cultural contexts and experiences. Taken altogether, these characterizations enable us to find common ground for collaboration and to spotlight previously unexamined assumptions. In particular, CRT's use of story is appealing because it provides opportunity for dialogue, which some have argued, helps participants make meaning, examine assumptions and beliefs and put experiences in a larger world view. Paulo Freire, for example, says, "Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world."²³ According to bell hooks, it is through dialogue that we best struggle for clearer understanding of dominator culture and the particular dynamics of race, gender, class, and sexuality which emerge....and ensure a link between theory and practice.²⁴ For Jane Vella, dialogue is preferable to the hierarchical relationships inherited from medieval state and church and subsequently shaped into systems of human interaction and dominance. In fact, according to Vella, adult learning is best achieved in dialogue because adults have enough life experience to be in dialogue with any teacher about any subject and will thereby learn

²² Edward Taylor. "The Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education: An Introduction." In *Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education* edited by Edward Taylor, David Gillborn, and Gloria Ladson-Billings. New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2009, 8

²³ Paulo Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 2006, 88.

²⁴ bell hooks. *Teaching Critical Thinking Practical Wisdom*. New York: Routledge, 2010, 38.

new knowledge, attitudes, or skills best in relation to that life experience.²⁵ Similarly, Jack Mezirow says that the dialogic method approximates the ideal conditions of critical discourse of free and full participation by all because the situation allows learners to become separated from their assumptions.²⁶ Finally, dialogue also personalizes educational theory and puts a face on the various the –isms experienced in the world that we may mistakenly assume are not apart of our social circles.

²⁵ Vella, 3.

²⁶ Jack Mezirow & Associates. *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood. A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1990, 367-368.

Conclusion

While this model incorporates aspects of other educational theories (dialogue, narrative), it does not build directly upon any other body of work in the field of Christian education today. It is, however, similar to the methodology of critical engagement advocated by others. N. Lynne Westfield, for example, suggests that Christian educators appropriate the spirit of hospitality as exhibited by African-American Christian women in concealed spaces. Her suggestion is based upon her experience with 15 black women in a book club in which she sought to answer the question, “What is it that keeps African American women resilient?”²⁷ According to Westfield, the women in these gatherings bantered, dialogued, healed and mended each other,²⁸ in ways that are applicable in Christian education settings in the church and in the academy. Similarly, Yolanda Smith proposes a model of Christian education that is based upon appropriation. In brief, Smith suggests that African-Americans reclaim the spirituals as part of a triple-heritage model of Christian education. The triple heritage reflects the African, African-American and Christian roots of black life in America. For her, since all three aspects of the triple-heritage have informed the spirituals, the spirituals can be used to explore the streams of the triple-heritage.²⁹ Anne Wimberly also advocates a Christian education paradigm that is rooted in and reflective of the black experience in this country. Her recommended method, called story linking, is rooted in the oral traditions of the African people, and embraces our African, African-American and Christian heritage. The education model proposed herein similarly embraces cultural and ancestral practices.

²⁷ N. Lynne Westfield. *Dear Sisters. A Womanist Practice of Hospitality*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001, 3.

²⁸ Westfield, 130

²⁹ Yolanda Y. Smith. *Reclaiming the Spirituals. New Possibilities for American Christian Education*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2004, 1.

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