

# “Don’t Be Uneasy, My Children” Finding Strength in Stories of the Enslaved

Lisa Gilbert

Tackling challenging topics in history can be difficult, and sometimes we struggle to find age-appropriate ways to help students confront painful stories from the past. About four years ago, I spearheaded a focus group with the purpose of taking on such a challenge. In our initial meetings, members of the group (four educators from schools, nonprofits, and museums in the St. Louis, Missouri region) recalled feeling uncomfortable when the topic of slavery arose in the curriculum. Our initial wish had been to protect our youngest students from the whole topic. We know, however, that at some point, our young students encounter the story of enslavement in America through movies, video games, television programs, and other media. This exposure likely happens before any official curriculum provides historical context or space and time for thoughtful discussion.

Realizing our discomfort, members of the group shared stories from their teaching experiences. We discussed constructive approaches to teaching about slavery, as well as ways to transmit these ideas to other teachers in settings large (conferences) and small (workshops or roundtables). Our conversations helped us find ways to teach while minimizing harm, even while acknowledging the painful nature of this history.

## A Welcoming Roundtable

At that time (2010), I was the K-12 Programs Manager at Missouri History Museum in St. Louis, Missouri. Over the following years, I found the most useful venue for teachers to be the monthly roundtable. A group of about 20 teachers would meet at the museum from 4:00 to 6:00PM on a Tuesday afternoon, once a month for four months, to discuss issues related to teaching about slavery. This professional development work was unsupported by any grant, and teachers’ participation was voluntary.

At a roundtable meeting, there is no prepared lecture, but rather an agreed upon theme and an open-ended agenda. To spark the conversation, I invited teachers to share their classroom experiences, as well as their concerns, hopes, and plans for interacting with their students. We practiced offering each other new resources and historical evidence, rather than “slam-

ming” anyone for a narrow historical view or for suggesting a problematic approach to teaching about slavery. Early in the process, we practiced listening to each other’s perspectives and experiences through diversity training with an outside facilitator.

For six years, I also administered programs that served thousands of elementary school students through field trips. For staff, I chose preservice teachers, interns who also participated in discussions and training on this topic. This article provides a summary of what we learned over a four-year period, with advice born out of these roundtable conversations (as well as workshops and conferences) and interactions with young students.

## Nurturing Ourselves as Educators

In many of the initial focus group meetings, we realized that our first step was to acknowledge that we had been mis-educated, to some extent, about the history of slavery.<sup>1</sup> Many of us had internalized an understanding of slavery that came from a sepia-toned image in a textbook long ago. We found that we needed to overcome any shame or guilt, to nurture our own strength, so that we could help our young students.

Being a courageous teacher does not mean being “perfect” or all knowing; instead, it means teaching with our eyes wide open to all of the resources we have at hand, as well as to how our young students are responding. One way to begin is to seek out better information—accurate history that refers to enslaved people by their names, allows their voices to be heard, and reveals the variety of experiences among the enslaved. There are as many individual stories as there were individual people, but there are also understandings about the institution of slavery that hold up as generalizations.<sup>2</sup>

Elementary students can relate to history if they can make connections to individual humans and specific stories. Teachers can present authentic stories of enslaved Americans. We can present real people (rather than generalizations) and lived experiences (rather than summations). In fact, using the terms “enslavement” and “enslaved Americans” is part of the process, as it is important for students and teachers, alike, to recognize

that slaves are made and not born. Even those born during the time of American slavery were born as human beings. Then they were enslaved.”<sup>3</sup>

Another way of opening our eyes is to consider the ways in which our life experiences and our identities today affect how we relate to this history. For example, some of us may have grown up hearing stories of an ancestor who was enslaved. Others might not be aware that they have ancestors who were enslaved, or enslaved other people, or both, until they delve into a family genealogy project. (See sidebar on President Obama’s genealogy).

How differently do we hear the same stories, when filtered through our own disparate histories, or when considered in light of the racism that is still present in our society today? Realizing that our experiences and identities influence the teaching and learning that happens in our classrooms is a key step to learning to communicate effectively with all our students.<sup>4</sup>

Below, we distinguish between “problematic” and “constructive” approaches to teaching the topic of slavery, and we suggest some specific activities that can broaden students’ understanding of what it was like to live—to endure, resist, and survive—under a system of slavery.

### Approaches to Avoid

Over several years, we identified several approaches to teaching about slavery that can be destructive to students’ understandings of history and personal identities. For example, some teachers seemed to assert that slavery was a “necessary evil that moved the country forward,” perhaps trying to seek a “silver lining” to the tragic story. But such a statement legitimizes slavery by saying that the ends justify the means—a logic that can “justify” any atrocity. That statement also does not hold up to historical scrutiny: If slavery is illegal, then a society and its economy “move forward” without it. For example, the British found

slavery quite “unnecessary” in 1833, when it was abolished throughout the British Empire, which did not then wither.

It would also be very problematic to tell students “slaves were treated as members of the family.” Were enslaved people given birthday presents? What other “members of the family” could be sold away to pay a debt? The statement props up a “happy slave” myth that slaveholders perpetuated in the Antebellum South. The myth implies that enslaved people were generally humanely treated, or that exceptional cases were actually the normal case. These claims are not supported by the weight of historical evidence.<sup>5</sup>

Other destructive approaches stem from a lack of awareness of how painful this history can be. Some teachers described themselves as being “proud” of being “brutally honest” with their students about the violence of slavery. Others said that slavery was “in the past” and so they “just teach the facts.” Such approaches disregard students’ emotions (which may be unspoken), instead of recognizing feelings as evidence of a living connection between students and the history they are learning.<sup>6</sup>

### Agency and Cultural Resistance

To combat the idea that enslaved people were passive victims, we focus our teaching on stories of agency—of survival, empowerment, and resistance. The most common examples of agency in the elementary classroom tend to be stories from the Underground Railroad. These are heroic stories, and we applaud their use.<sup>7</sup> Individuals like Harriet Tubman deserve to be celebrated, as she provides students with a shining example of heroism.<sup>8</sup>

But most slaves were not able to contemplate escape with any real chance of survival. We might ask our young students: “What might have motivated enslaved people to choose to stay where they were? What if you were a parent, and you knew

### President Obama has an Enslaved Ancestor—on His (White) Mother’s Side

“President Obama...is most likely a descendant of one of the first documented African slaves in this country. The link to slavery, which scholars of genealogy and race in the United States called remarkable, was found to have existed approximately 400 years back in the lineage of Obama’s mother, Stanley Ann Dunham.” Four genealogists from **Ancestry.com** used property and tax records to uncover “a lot of context and circumstantial evidence” that points to an enslaved black man named John Punch being Obama’s ancestor, said Joseph Shumway, one of the genealogists who worked on the report.

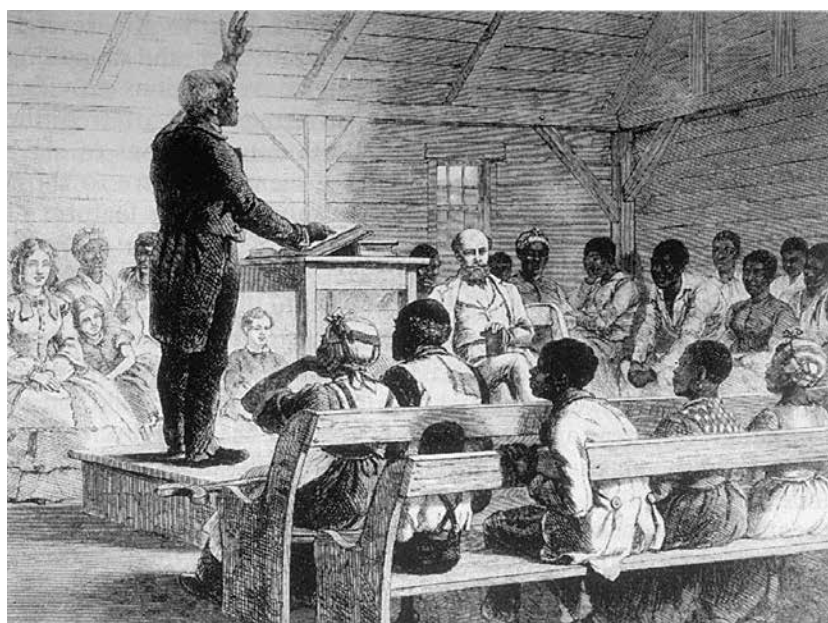
—Krissah Thompson, “Obama’s Purported Link to Early American Slave,” *Washington Post* (July 30, 2012)

### Harriet “Nightwalks”

Harriet Bailey was the Mother of Frederick Douglass

I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and at night. She was hired by a Mr. Stewart, who lived about twelve miles from my home. She made her journeys to see me in the night, travelling the whole distance on foot, after the performance of her day’s work...I do not recollect of ever seeing my mother by the light of day. She was with me in the night. She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone.

—From *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), [antislavery.eserver.org/narratives/narrativeofthelife/narrativeofthelife.pdf](http://antislavery.eserver.org/narratives/narrativeofthelife/narrativeofthelife.pdf)



A slave preaching to a congregation of slaves and the plantation owner and his family. The preacher was a house slave who could read but not write. This illustration is from a "sketch made in a rude chapel erected for the slaves" on this cotton plantation, near Port Royal, South Carolina. "The Methodist persuasion is the one which finds most favour among the slaves in the Southern as well as among the free Negroes in the Northern States."

From *The Illustrated London News* (Dec. 5, 1863), vol. 43, p. 561, as shown on [www.slaveryimages.org](http://www.slaveryimages.org), compiled by Jerome Handler and Michael Tuite, and sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia Library.

that running away meant never seeing your child again? For example, what if your mother knew that, if she ran away, she would have to leave you behind?"

Emphasizing family in this way helps students to envision themselves in this story in a meaningful way. As our students begin to realize the complexity of the choice not to attempt escape, we tell them that the story of slavery is a terribly sad story, yes, but it is also a story about courage, love, and everyday heroism. Agency and resistance can take on many forms. We ask them: "What would you do for the people whom you love? I bet you'd do anything. And it turns out, people did."

Using primary sources helps deepen students' understandings. As part of museum field trips, we held brainstorming sessions with students that included the use of a series of images from various sources that were created before or just after the Civil War. We asked: "How many ways can we think of for enslaved

people to be strong, whether or not they ran away?" The illustrations (mostly etchings) show enslaved individuals taking care of children, teaching each other to read (which was illegal in many places), and passing down traditions in story, music, dance, art, and worship.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, it was in family life that resistance was quietly sustained, that hope was kept alive through song, oral tradition, language, dance, worship, celebration and ceremony, and bonds of human affection.<sup>10</sup>

Discussing the illustrations helped students perceive a wider range of acts of resistance (beyond rebellion and escape), and thus better connect with the humanity of people trapped in bondage.

### Love and Anger: The Spotswood Rice Letters

Providing a specific story is a powerful way to counter general ideas and stereotypes. A set of letters housed by the National Archives provides an opportunity for young learners to engage with this story.<sup>11</sup>

Spotswood Rice was enslaved with his wife and daughters just outside of St. Louis, Missouri. During the Civil War, Rice was one of thousands of enslaved men who ran away to join the Union Army. Once at the front, he wrote back two letters, one to his daughters, and one to the woman who held his daughters in slavery. These letters provide a powerful witness of a father whose motivation to take up arms is love of his family.

The story of the Rice family also provides an all-too-rare happy ending, as we know from a daughter's interview in the WPA Slave Narratives (interviews with elderly Americans who had been enslaved, 1936–38) that Spotswood Rice was, indeed, reunited with his family, and his daughters were able to seek an education in the years following the war.<sup>12</sup>

We recommend reading excerpts from these two letters out loud, or playing an audiorecording,<sup>13</sup> as the 19th century writing style has peculiarities of spelling and grammar that were typical for the time, but which pose a stumbling-block for the reading

### Missouri Black Soldier to His Daughters, and to the Owner of One of the Daughters

[Spotswood Rice, writing in Benton Barracks Hospital, St. Louis, Mo. September 3, 1864]

My Children, "I take my pen in hand to rite you A few lines to let you know that I have not forgot you and that I want to see you as bad as ever "now my Dear Children I want you to be contented with whatever may be your lots "be assured that I will have you if it cost me my life "on the 28th of the mounth. 8 hundred White and 8 hundred blacke solders expects to start up the rivore to Glasgow and above there thats to be jeneraled by a jeneral that will give me both of you "when they Come I expect to be with, them and expect to get you both in return. Dont be uneasy my children.

Source: [www.freedmen.umd.edu/rice.htm](http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/rice.htm)

comprehension of adults, let alone elementary school students.

After reading each letter, we asked students many questions—tying goals in English Language Arts (reading comprehension, identifying qualities such as tone, etc.) and social studies (about identity and personal agency) with their historical imaginations. Time and again, we observed students give voice to their own keen sense of injustice and the strengths of family bonds.

## Constructive Approaches

Constructive approaches to teaching about slavery appear to have common elements:

- Teachers learn to balance stories of oppression with stories of agency (or strength)
- They draw from authentic historical sources for lesson material
- They invite students to comment on these materials, citing evidence as well as using their imaginations
- They are sensitive to the emotional resonance of this material, and are able to adjust their messages to meet the affective needs of the students

The more that teachers grow through their engagement with this aspect of history education, the more they tend to realize that, while this material has to be painful, it does not have to be harmful.

Elementary teachers described the way their approaches changed as a result of their participation in the roundtable. One teacher wrote, “I will use more storytelling, more narrative from the voice of the slaves. I will learn the names of the slaves whose stories I share.” Another wrote, “I will still be careful how I present the material to fourth graders. What I present will be more accurate in the future.”

Spark a roundtable discussion with questions such as, “What do teachers need to be able to engage with this material? What do elementary students need in order to be able to learn about this history without internalizing feelings of shame or guilt? How do our contemporary identities play into our reactions to this content?” These conversations can happen between grade-level teachers, within a building, or even as part of a district-wide professional development initiative. The impact of even one person initiating these conversations can be significant; one teacher told us that she shared what she learned in each roundtable session with her fellow teachers, and this sparked their own ideas. The key to success is emphasizing that this process is a journey, and it’s one that never ends. 🌍

## Notes

1. Our language here deliberately references Carter G. Woodson’s classic work, *The Miseducation of the Negro* (Chicago, IL: African American Images, 1933). In 2010, researchers conducted a broad survey of American history textbooks K-12 and found that the mention of violence against African Americans was often absent or incomplete, and even conscientious teachers were limited by the incomplete narratives they’d been taught as students. See Anthony L. Brown and K. D. Brown, “Strange Fruit Indeed: Interrogating Contemporary Textbook Representations of Racial Violence Toward African Americans,” *Teachers College Record* 112:1 (2010).
2. Two resources, helpful for teachers who are learning a more complex story about slavery:

- Charles Johnson and Patricia Smith, *Africans in America: America’s Journey through Slavery* (New York: Harcourt, 1998). Companion website, [www.pbs.org/wggbh/aia/home.html](http://www.pbs.org/wggbh/aia/home.html);
  - David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
3. “Enslave” defined, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enslave](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/enslave).
  4. Terrie Epstein, *Interpreting National History: Race, Identity, and Pedagogy in Classrooms and Communities* (New York: Routledge, 2009).
  5. Initially, the institution of slavery took many forms. For an overview, see Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1998). A teacher who wanted to discuss an exception to the usual enslavement could present the picture book *Molly Bannakey* by Alice McGill; Chris Sponpiet, illust. (HMH Books, 2009) about the grandmother of Benjamin Banneker, who in Colonial America fell in love with the man she purchased, freed him, and married him. The slave system in America, however, relied on destroying black families, on tearing apart familial bonds, as could be witnessed at slave markets.
  6. For more on the importance of students’ emotional connections to this material, see Michele Israel and Adrienne van der Valk, “Tongue Tied,” *Teaching Tolerance* no. 46 (Spring 2014): 32-35.
  7. Stories about the Underground Railroad (e.g., “quilt codes”), unsupported by historical evidence, are too often taught in classrooms as fact. See the lesson “Myths of the Underground Railroad,” free at [www.scholastic.com/teacher](http://www.scholastic.com/teacher); David Blight, *Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2001); and [www.followthedrinkinggourd.org](http://www.followthedrinkinggourd.org).
  8. Steven S. Lapham and Peter Hanes, “Harriet Tubman: Emancipate Yourself!” *Middle Level Learning* no. 47 (May/June 2013), [www.socialstudies.org/publications/archives/ml](http://www.socialstudies.org/publications/archives/ml).
  9. Primary source images (such as drawings from *Harper’s Weekly*) can be found online at: “The Slave Heritage Resource Center,” (Son of the South), [www.sonofthesouth.net/slavery](http://www.sonofthesouth.net/slavery). See also Notable Social Studies Trade Books such as *Henry’s Box* and *Dave the Potter*, which are about resistance and creativity in the face of enslavement.
  10. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Many Rivers to Cross* (PBS video series 2013), Segment 4: “Creative Resistance: Despite the efforts of Europeans to erase the identities of slaves, they created a new culture”; Segment 5: “Haitian Carnival: Culture and ideas passed throughout the Black Atlantic and continue to inflect our traditions.” At [www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/classroom/resistance-to-slavery-lesson-plan](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/classroom/resistance-to-slavery-lesson-plan); Herbert H. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750–1925* (New York: Vintage, 1977).
  11. The full text of these letters is available at: “Missouri Black Soldier to His Daughters, and to the Owner of One of the Daughters,” (Freedmen & Southern Society Project), [www.freedmen.umd.edu/rice.htm](http://www.freedmen.umd.edu/rice.htm). Teachers should be aware that Rice describes the slaveowner holding his daughters thus, “And as for her cristiananty I expect the Devil has Such in hell.”
  12. “Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers’ Project, 1936–1938,” (Library of Congress), [memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/snhtml/snhome.html). Spotswood Rice’s daughter is Mary A. Bell. Teachers should be aware that these narratives utilize racial slurs and expressions common in those times. See “The WPA Slave Narratives,” *Middle Level Learning* (January/February 2002) at [www.socialstudies.org/publications/ml](http://www.socialstudies.org/publications/ml).
  13. “Teaching About Slavery: Spotswood Rice Letters,” audio files (an actor reading aloud, at History Happens Here: The Missouri History Museum’s Blog), [www.historyhappenshere.org/node/7430](http://www.historyhappenshere.org/node/7430).

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