



Taking America Beyond the Legacy Of Enslavement

CTTT Vision, Mission, and Values

Vision

Our vision for the United States is of a just and truthful society that acknowledges and seeks to heal from the racial wounds of the past—from slavery and the many forms of racism it spawned.

Mission

Coming to the Table provides leadership, resources, and a supportive environment for all who wish to acknowledge and heal wounds from racism that is rooted in the United States' history of slavery.

Our approach to achieving our vision and mission involves four interrelated practices:

1. **Uncovering History:** researching, acknowledging, and sharing personal, family and community histories of race with openness and honesty
2. **Making Connections:** connecting to others within and across racial lines in order to develop and deepen relationships
3. **Working Toward Healing:** exploring how we can heal together through dialogue, reunion, ritual, ceremony, the arts, apology and other methods
4. **Taking Action:** actively seeking to heal the wounds of racial inequality and injustice and to support racial reconciliation between individuals, within families, and in communities.

CTTT Values

- **Inclusion.** We welcome all who wish to join the Coming to the Table conversation and who join us in honoring and committing to these principles.
- **Respect and Tolerance.** We respect the integrity and value of all people as they seek to understand and respond to their experience of the world and the history and impact of slavery, even if we might disagree with them. To this end, we listen respectfully to each other, practice non-judgmental listening, and refrain from personal attack.
- **Honesty, Truthfulness and Transparency.** We strive to uncover truth and to speak it with openness and transparency.
- **Justice.** We accept that there has been significant harm as a result of the legacies and aftermaths of slavery. We strive to identify those harms and to take responsibility for making things right.
- **Compassion, Mercy, and Forgiveness.** Through compassion and love we strive to show mercy and to forgive ourselves, those who may have done us harm and those who have harmed others.
- **Love.** Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called his followers to love even those who would do them harm. This love transformed both victim and offender and created a powerful foundation for doing justice and building a beloved community. We strive to do likewise.



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- **Peace and Nonviolence.** We seek to transform conflict through non-violent, non-coercive means so as to achieve a peaceful community.
- **Reconciliation.** We strive for racial reconciliation through a journey of seeking peace, justice, mercy and truth.

Addressing the Legacies and Aftermaths of Slavery Through...

1. **Facing History**
2. **Making Connections**
3. **Healing Wounds**
4. **Taking Action**

Overview

In spite of slavery becoming illegal over 150 years ago, our society still experiences many of the dynamics created during that time. Segregation, unequal distribution of resources, unequal educational opportunities and beliefs in superiority and inferiority based on skin color can be traced to the institution of US slavery and the beliefs that supported its creation and legalization. Laws were passed and beliefs about inequality were supported through “scientific” research and from church pulpits to support an economic system that privileged people of European descent over people of African descent. Learning about the institution of slavery and ways its principles and practices were perpetuated after the end of legalization helps us understand our current reality and clarifies why many people of European and African descent have and are having a different American experience.

Although differently, people from both groups experience the traumatic impact of the legacies and aftermaths of slavery through attitudes, beliefs and experiences passed down between generations. Even though some intentional efforts have been made that have diminished the negative impacts such as Civil Rights legislation, time has not healed and untold and unfinished business continues to manifest in our society. Traumatic impacts, attitudes, beliefs and structures must all be examined to better understand how we can face our history and current situation in order to create a new reality for our descendants. It’s not enough to just better understand the problems; we need to create a strategy for addressing these issues without creating additional harm. The strategy must include uncovering underexposed history (and broadening knowledge and awareness of history that is already known), building connections between those with different experiences, healing harmful effects and taking action to stop perpetuating damaging beliefs and structures.

Current Impact

The United States is still very much divided along racial lines. Although there are some exceptions, churches, neighborhoods and schools are highly or mainly segregated. Many schools have been steadily re-segregating since the late 1980’s and early 1990’s after initial gains after the passage and enforcement of desegregation laws. There are significant health disparities between people who self identify as white and African American .



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African Americans are over-represented in prisons and under-represented in colleges and universities . These disparities result in lack of trust and cohesion; isolation and estrangement; laws that account for distrust, guilt and threats –real and perceived – of reprisal; a sense of superiority and entitlement that results in racial tension and animosity and failure to fully benefit from diversified cultural heritages.

One way to look at these current manifestations is to identify the legacies and aftermaths and related traumatic impacts of US enslavement. In looking at history and its current manifestations, it's important to make a distinction between the beliefs and practices that are passed down and the mechanisms that enforce the beliefs. To make the distinction, they are separated into the concepts of “legacies” and “aftermaths.” The principles, beliefs and unchallenged assumptions that were formed in support of the principles and practices of enslavement and are passed from one generation to the next (“white” privilege and superiority, African inferiority, notions of “American” culture) are what we call “legacies.” The institutions, systems, and practices that became embedded in US society as an outgrowth of the system of enslavement are what we refer to as “aftermaths” . The impact of both legacies and aftermaths need to be addressed in order to make changes for our future. In order to do that the traumatic impact (that perpetuates both) needs to be addressed, beliefs need to be examined, and actions taken that modify and dismantle structures.

Why address the legacies, aftermaths, and traumatic impacts and why now? In addition to the direct harm that people are experiencing, these current impacts affect the country's overall well-being, safety and sustainability. The Fund for Peace, which publishes its “failed states index” every year identifies categories that lead to stability and instability . Although two categories away from what they consider the “alert” nations, the US misses the list of “sustainable” countries and instead is located on the “moderate” list due to one category –“uneven economic development along group lines.” Globally, economic disparities along group lines and unresolved historical injustices diminish safety and stability for all groups. It's in the interest of all Americans to understand and face the past in order to create a sustainable future for the next generations.

The Coming to the Table Approach: History, Healing, Connecting and Action

Although the task can seem daunting, there are a number of ways people and communities can stand together to effectively deal with the negative outcomes of years of systematic inequality. People have an immense capacity to courageously face the past, compassionately listen to those with different perspectives, carefully heal their own wounds and creatively think of ways to right past injustices. The CTTT framework is based upon theory, principles and practice in four distinct arenas. While it is valuable and appropriate to work in any one arena, we highlight the importance of working in all four and/or working in alliance with others working within the dimensions that you are not working in. The four arenas for addressing the legacy and aftermath of the lingering historical injustice first established in support of the institution of US slavery are: Facing History; Healing Wounds; Making Connection and Taking Action. Without all of them, the process will be incomplete. The order in which they are engaged can be different, but none can be omitted. These could be applied to many different situations throughout the world. Here they are specifically applied to the legacies of slavery in the U.S.



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Facing History

Learning/understanding what actually happened is a vital step in dealing with the ramifications of what happened. The legalized institution of slavery that gave rights to people of European heritage and took away the rights of people of African heritage officially ended close to 150 years ago. However, the color system that was first sanctioned by slave laws was then supported by formal and informal measures to maintain the structural, social and political relationships among African descendants and European descendants in the United States. A few examples of these measures include Jim Crow laws, re-enslavement practices, extra-judicial enforcement of alleged crimes, racial discrimination within the judicial system and sundown town practices (enforced segregation in communities after sundown). These examples, among others, inform discriminatory laws, attitudes and practices that we still deal with today. To make sense of today, we must learn the histories of our families, communities, regions and nation.

The [hi]story that gets passed down is a mixture of facts, personal experience, beliefs and feelings. The depth of hurt it caused and who tells or writes history determines the parts that get passed down and those that remain untold. In some cases, the feelings and beliefs get passed down without the facts. Sometimes facts alone are relayed. In other instances facts are changed – intentionally and unintentionally – based on people’s experience.

History can be passed down in writing, orally, codified through law or represented in art. However, due to the traumatic nature of slavery and its other manifestations post-1864, either things have been left unsaid and unwritten or lack channels through which they are communicated. For example, there are many books on library shelves that are left unread because school curriculum, popular media and family stories do not indicate that the content in those books exists or should be explored. Information is also promulgated that is untrue or misconstrued. For example, the films “Gone with the Wind” and “The Birth of a Nation” depicted slavery in a way that was not accurate, but their popularity among European American audiences formed or strengthened erroneous beliefs about history. Lack of information or erroneous information has a cost. When people don’t learn about the contributions of African Americans during the time of enslavement and post-enslavement, they believe that black people are less entitled to be here and are less likely to make current contributions. These expectations influence teachers, potential employers and most important, people themselves. When people only learn about good things white people have done, white people gain un-entitled superiority and are blinded to their past and on-going discriminatory behavior. When only negative things are told about black or white people, fear and distrust get passed down.

In many people’s families, there is a direct connection to slavery through an ancestor’s involvement in enslaving (whether through direct ownership, leasing, overseeing, investments or enforcement) or experience of enslavement. These family histories reveal insights about family patterns and beliefs. However, even recent immigrants’ lives are touched by the history of enslavement. They navigate segregated communities, face barriers related to skin color, and enjoy an economy that gained its initial strength and first became a player in the global economy through cotton exports and other wealth related to slavery – not to mention the slave labor responsible for creating the initial infrastructure –that also contributed to the economy we have today.



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Both the economic benefits and the real on-going costs must be examined by all citizens to better understand the United States. Although in the “past”, history is not irrelevant, it created the foundation upon which we stand, walk and build on a daily basis.

Facing History Practices:

There are a number of practices/strategies that help us face history. There are already many volumes that include aspects of the history of slavery and the period after emancipation when so many laws, structures and institutions were established to maintain the disenfranchisement or impede the progress of development of African Americans. Reading and encouraging others to read a range of these works is an important start in understanding the mixture of facts and experiences. There are also a number of areas related to slavery and its aftermath that have been underexposed. The impact on slave-holders of accepting an inhumane practice for material gain, re-enslavement practices, exclusionary practices of African Americans, “revitalization” projects that destroyed African American communities, business and home-ownership are a few of the areas that have been under-examined. Additional primary research is needed that includes examining original documents and oral history (which get’s more difficult as each generation passes on). Academic institutions and foundations can support this work through fellow-ships and dedicated funding to these areas of research. Elementary and secondary schools can also support oral history projects and interview projects with family members. Work on mechanisms for the telling of the history also need to be created in order to provide access to important historical information. Conferences and print and visual media’s commitment to sharing history, television programming, funding for writing and documentary film production and showings, inclusion of new information in school curriculums, museums, displays in museums, public markers in communities, plays, poetry readings, and re-enactments are some of the mechanisms that will convey the history.

Making Connections

History alone can be presented in a way that continues to hurt and divide. Part of re-exploring history is understanding the impact of events on the people then and now and developing relationships with people who have been the “other.”

An integral aspect of the CTTT approach is connecting. Connecting can happen first through connecting with one’s own story. If someone hasn’t reflected on their own story, they don’t have a story to share, and interaction can only occur on a superficial level. Being able to excavate ones own story and examine it is an important first step. One needs to move beyond “that’s the way it was” or “that’s just the way it is” thinking. What has been the impact of living in a society that was developed through labor exploited by people who were enslaved without sufficient efforts to make the situation right? What is it like to be associated with the oppressors if your family was or wasn’t here during the time of enslavement? What is it like to be associated with the “oppressed” if your family was or wasn’t here during the time of enslavement? What has this meant for you if don’t self-identify as African American or European American? Are there other historical and current injustices that have affected your life? How did you learn about race and racial divisions? How has that affected your life and how you see people?



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When sufficient reflection has gone into one's story, there is more possibility of being understood by others and for people to find a common sense of humanity even if their lives and histories are different. To help with understanding, it is critical that everyone tell their stories and not assume that some people have stories to share and others do not. If people don't tell their stories, there isn't the possibility of a mutual relationship. It's also important that an environment is created that supports listening. If people don't listen, it's not possible for them to hear the other side of the story and to learn about what happened and its impact.

The kind of reflection and listening required, especially when the issues are emotional, difficult and history has been mis-taught or covered up, there is a need for dialogue processes. It's rare for people to reflect deeply on issues that have been avoided and for people to listen to each other respectfully without fear of being interrupted, belittled, condemned, or discounted. It's critical to create processes for story-telling and connecting that get people out of their usual patterns of communication. After all, it's new patterns in society that we're trying to create.

Through the process of sharing stories about slavery, its legacies and aftermaths, we can create a "collective" story. In order to create a collective identity as a nation, we need to include the history of all of the groups that make up the nation. When one groups' role is highlighted more than others, it perpetuates disconnection between the groups and gives people an inaccurate view of history upon which to base future decisions. Many countries have created truth telling processes after wars in order to get an accurate view of what happened and create a basis for how to talk about and understand what happened. This can't happen without a process to bring the different stories out and to help people hear each other's stories.

Through listening to each other, people can develop authentic, healthy relationships that can provide a solid basis for planning activities that bridge communities and address issues of concern. In order to address the legacies and aftermaths of historical events, there is a need for collective action. Trying to make amends for the past should not happen without the input of those who have been most affected, and working at changing structures can ultimately only happen with those who are maintaining those structures.

Making Connections Practices:

An important step in connecting is self-reflection. Giving oneself the time and space to think about ones own experience, compare it to others, articulate the impact of events on ones life is a necessary step in connecting with others. Reaching out to someone on the "other" side with the intention of learning new information and understanding another's experience is another important practice. Reaching out can happen on a personal basis as well as getting involved in an activity that intentionally brings people who have different backgrounds together. It requires courage and often some discomfort at the beginning as is usually the case with a new and unknown experience. Listening is something many people take for granted, assuming it happens naturally. This is often not the case. Listening skills need to be developed that teach one how to hear someone else without internal judgment and the inclination to interrupt important storytelling with observations, other topics or ones own issues. If someone doesn't have good listening skills, someone else will be reluctant to expose their story, especially if it is difficult, and in order to deal with historical harms, room must be created



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for the difficult stories. Creating processes for dialogue between individuals and in groups is a skill set that enables storytelling on a wider basis. Learning formats for dialogue, such as a circle process, timed sharing, or storytelling panels that represent different perspectives are a few of the processes one can learn that facilitate storytelling. Interviewing with prepared questions is another way to initiate storytelling that leads to connecting. The information gathered in the interviews can then be presented with other interviews that hold different stories and perspectives. These can be presented in a written format, quotes can be displayed with photographs or a number of other creative options. The key will then be to have a diverse group read the presentation of interviews and respond with their own stories and impressions. It is also possible to engage people in collective writing projects, plays and films. Sometimes people are not ready to share stories with someone from the “other” side in the room. These stories can be gathered separately and shared with the other group through reading and hearing their stories on film. Eventually for connection to happen, the groups will need to come together. Films and plays depicting different sides of stories related to history that already exist can be viewed by diverse audiences with opportunities for people to tell their own stories. These tools can help people reflect on their own stories and then dialogue processes can be created that help people feel safe telling their own stories. Activities that work towards a common purpose can also help people connect. For some people, doing something together rather than just talking is a more powerful and effective way to connect.

Healing Wounds

The impact of slavery and of unequal treatment based on skin color or ancestry was and continues to be painful. It caused trauma to those who were treated badly, those who participated in hurting others directly or through exclusionary practices, and those who witnessed people being hurt. If left unhealed, trauma is destructive to both the individual and the community. It impacts people on emotional, cognitive, behavioral, physical, and spiritual levels. Finding ways to face trauma and work toward healing is important. Otherwise, trigger reactions, including acting out or retreating, will continue to get in the way of building a healthy community and instead the hurt will get passed to the next generation.

Trauma, historical trauma and trauma healing are all key concepts to understand when referring to healing from historical harms. Traumatic events are those that overwhelm the rational brain’s ability to respond. When the rational brain is overwhelmed, the brainstem or reptilian brain takes over. Humans are designed this way to respond to threat. When in a dangerous situation, the time it takes to reason, reflect and consider take up valuable time when there’s a need to flee, freeze or fight back in order to survive. Under ideal circumstances, when the person is out of danger, there is an opportunity for the body to shake, sweat, or sob out the trauma energy that was required for the quick response. In these cases, people go back to normal functioning. However, when there are not opportunities to get to safety and shake off the energy or when the threat is on-going, people can become what is called “traumatized.” This is when normal trauma responses become habitual and reminders of the incident inhibit rational brain functioning. There are even times when small events lead up to an event that can become overwhelming – the proverbial straw that breaks the camels back. What further complicates the situation is that humans are meaning making beings and physical release is



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not always all that's needed in a healing process. There are often needs for understanding what happened and why as well as needs for justice and vindication that are an important part of the healing process.

A different kind of response, but with similar traumatic impact, is when someone engages in hurting other human beings. It damages one's sense of what it means to be human and humane. It diminishes one's ability to feel and connect with other human beings. Similar trauma responses for victims of trauma are experienced by people who perpetrate trauma. Those who witness overwhelming incidents and participate in systems that are unjust and harmful to people can also experience trauma responses. In some cases, those who witness traumatic events can also feel overwhelmed in their inability to respond in a helpful way.

Historic trauma is defined by Marie Yellow Horse Brave Heart as the "cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the life span and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma." The system of enslavement was a massive group trauma, and everyone who was touched by it was affected in some way. The movement across generations happens in a number of ways. One way people experience unhealed trauma is in their bodies. A number of health problems can be passed between generations. Studies of epigenetics identify a companion structure to the genome that passes information to the genome. It is the epigenome that is influenced by environmental factors and like genes is also passed from generation to generation. Illness related to the stress of trauma can be passed from generation to generation. Attitudes and emotions are also passed from generation to generation. This transfer happens through direct communication of words and actions. Even if parents don't talk with their children about these attitudes or fears, they are evident through body language, tension and unwillingness to talk about certain topics. Many of the fears and attitudes that are being passed down don't even relate to the carrier's lived experience. What was once a rational response to an overwhelming situation may no longer be a rational response, but the overwhelm or trauma remains. Physical and emotional abuse are other ways that trauma is passed down. The abuse is someone's trauma reaction that they act out on someone else. Although the initial cause may be gone (the original abuser may be gone), the harm is renewed from generation to generation. This can be described as cycles of victimhood and violence, when those who are victimized turn to violence and victimize someone else. What exacerbates historical trauma is on-going trauma and stress that exist in communities where discrimination and disparities make everyday life difficult.

Healing Wounds Practices:

In order to address the legacies and aftermaths of historical harm, gaining awareness about trauma is important. Education can help people identify patterns of trauma and responses to trauma in their own lives and the lives of family members and the community. Without understanding it, it is difficult to address. Support groups (both same-identity and multi-identity) can help people begin to tell their stories about traumatic experiences and trauma responses that have been passed down. Through telling one's own story and hearing others, people are able to acknowledge what is wrong. This is a key first step in healing. Rituals related to acknowledgement of the past can be important in making the connections between past and present and understanding where some of the harms originated. There are different ways to grieve that people find helpful in working through trauma – writing, painting, drawing and sharing feelings with someone



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who is trusted are all possibilities. Physical activity is helpful especially right after a traumatic incident – dance, running and other forms of physical expression that engage the right and left side of the brain can be help. Personal experience connecting with someone from the other side of a difficult history can be healing if the interaction supports mutual expression of humanity. Creating new narratives of triumph over trauma can help in the healing process as long as acknowledgement has taken place. Finally, taking action in the present to deal with on-going harms so they do not continue to hurt people is one of the most important aspects of healing from historical harm.

Taking Action

Although there have been major strides in providing equal access to the nation’s resources and institutions, there is still more to do in eliminating the artificial stigmas that exist within a nation founded on racial inequality. An important stage in the process of healing and making things right is acknowledging harm and doing things differently. Through understanding the history and impact of slavery and its legacy and aftermath, we identify current manifestations of that institution. Inequality in health-care, education, housing, and the criminal justice system are a few of the major areas that have a direct relationship to the legacies and aftermaths of slavery. Through facing history, listening to people who have been affected by it differently, and working through related hurts, taking action is the final and most important stage in the process. Without action, harmful patterns, behaviors and structures will remain the same and will continue to negatively impact future generations.

In order to take action, there are a number of important steps. As stated earlier, if doing activities to right the wrongs of the past and address current harmful systems, participation of representatives of the stakeholders is a key building block to a process that will lead to effective action. Identifying those people, building trust and identifying barriers to working together are all part of building a team that can take action. With representation from different groups and honest conversation, the group can avoid pitfalls common to people who have grown up in divided societies. When issues do come up that threaten to get in the way of the groups’ ability to work together and progress, reflection about unhealed trauma is helpful and can often identify that the problem is not the other person or people in the room but on-going patterns that have been passed down for generations.

When a small group has been convened, an assessment of current legacies and aftermaths in the community needs to occur in order to determine what kind of action to take and the ultimate goal of the action. This process can be accompanied by an assessment of the other organizations in the community doing related work. There are aspects of healing action being taken in many communities, however, it’s rare that there’s coordination between the groups. Identifying potential partners can lighten the burden. It can also create new challenges in that some groups will not see their work as connected with others’ work. This also takes time and relationship building. Finding key individuals or representatives of organizations in communities can also help solidify action. If media coverage is an important aspect of the action identified, are there media people who can be invited into the work?



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The aspect of on-going organization must be considered when taking action. Taking action to address historical harms can be a long, on-going process. Are there individuals in your group or organizations that can play the role of leadership in organizing meetings, finding space, identifying financial resources, and figuring out the steps it will take to move to completion? Action, especially substantial action requires organization and resource.

Taking Action Practices:

In addition to the important contextual analysis, there are a number of actions that can be taken to address legacies and aftermaths of historical injustices. Memorializing historical incidents is one way to acknowledge the harm publically. This can happen through re-enactments and/or creating and then unveiling memorials or plaques that represent the incident. Conducting historic trials that exonerate those who were unjustly accused or that bring justice to those who were responsible (if they are alive) are important ways to act against injustices that occurred due to legacies of historic discrimination. Public acknowledgement and apology can be powerful steps in helping a community revisit a historical injustice. Correcting historical records, introducing more representative curriculum in schools and historic education in communities are also ways to make structural changes as well as change attitudes and beliefs formed by lack of information or incorrect information. When a current law or policy is identified as a remnant from historic or on-going discrimination, changing the law or policy, is a significant step in making changes for the future.

Pulling It All Together

The stages of the approach, although not an ordered formula, lead from one to another. This does not mean that they cannot happen simultaneously or circle back, but they can complement each other's momentum. Many of the practices include several "stages" of the approach. Storytelling can include all of them. Storytelling can include recounting history. It can be part of someone's healing process to speak truth – especially if it's been suppressed. If told to others who are listening and supportive, it can be an experience that builds connections between people and finally, if done publically with the intention of follow-up, can be a powerful form of taking action. Conversely all of these stages can happen in a way that does not lead to healing and positive change. Selectively shared history can be used to shame and amplify part of the larger story without recognizing the bigger picture; connecting can be an excuse to build a personal relationship and ignore the structural injustices that still exist; healing can make one feel better without taking responsibility for addressing on-going harm; and action can be taken that further shames, blames and alienates. The "how" of the approach is just as important as the stages. It requires courage, persistence, openness, partnership and recognition that there are no quick fixes. Demonstrating the approach also requires contextual awareness and creativity in determining which parts of the approach are needed first and which practices will be most effective. However, it is possible, and groups of people across the country have engaged in work that demonstrates all or significant parts of the approach which provide hope for many communities with similar opportunities for change.