

Lessons From the Past

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She wrung her hands in anguish, and exclaimed, "Gone! All gone! Why don't God kill me?" I had no words wherewith to comfort her. (Lament of a mother who watched all seven of her children sold.)

- Mary Lyons, In *Letters From a Slave Girl*

INTRODUCTION

The subject of slavery often brings diverse responses from individuals. Most often the view is that of chained Africans brought to this country humiliated and brutalized. The story has been told countless times in stories, books, and films. These tales of anguish are often the writings and interpretations of those educated solely in the school of western thought and context with often little or no creditable experience with first hand accounts of those enslaved. The story of slavery has been well documented for the evil institution it was. I do not wish to concentrate solely in this unit on the obvious immorality of the practice. Rather, I want the class to experience the thoughts and feelings of the enslaved from their perspective. Slavery will be studied from the writings and oral history of these courageous people.

This unit will focus on two topics. The daily life of the enslaved will be one subject area that will be examined. The origins of slavery in the Americas will be reviewed, and how the peoples of Africa became the unfortunate bounty of this wicked institution. Point of view can color the version of many events in history. This is the major reason the class will examine readings primarily done by African-American authors who lived in that period and narratives of slaves as told to other writers. There are many narratives that exist that pertain to particular subject matters that the slaves have experienced themselves. This would offer the perspective of someone who has first hand knowledge of life of the enslaved. This would not automatically exclude other writings from authors who do not meet the criteria. Excerpts from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* are an example of how a non-African American work could be included in the list of readings to provide an adequate perspective for class discussion.

The second topic examines the emotional fortitude that empowered the slaves to strive to survive under inhuman and brutal circumstances. This latter point is the one I deem more important for my students to understand and embrace. The high school student lives in a world that is centered in the here and now. Many of them come from very difficult situations. Relevancy of the curriculum to them always becomes a topic of discussion in itself. I hope to use many interactive strategies to get them involved emotionally and academically. Most of my students are minorities with the majority being African American. There are those who may feel hopeless, and they think the

present state of affairs is as good as it gets. Also, they carry an extra burden in being a special education student. In high school the social and peer pressures are enormous. They go through extreme measures to hide their status from their peers or exhibit acting out behavior to cover their perceived inadequacies. These students are very self-conscious about that label. They are also aware of their own limitations and often feel the world has little to offer them but more chances to fail. I will try to help them to see how necessary courage is as a key to survival and endurance in everyday life. It is very important for them to understand that many have overcome obstacles that are seemingly insurmountable. Using this unit to reach that special student is the key to the success of my teaching. Any instance where I can impress on my classes examples of continual endurance, of not giving up, has a better and more powerful effect than the assignment or the lesson *du jour*.

For many students the slaves we will study are representative of their own families generations ago. I have personal stories to relate with real names and real incidents that hopefully will make this curriculum unit more meaningful to them. I hope the students will also be able to share some of their families' experiences with the class in the form of an oral presentation or in a journal. If photos could be brought to class of the time period, a better historical presentation would be available for discussion. I teach reading to special education students. The abilities of the students span over a wide range of reading levels. It is always critical that I present material that is age appropriate as well as curriculum appropriate. It is often challenging to find material that will hold their interest and will encourage them to think beyond the storyline. This topic is one I feel that they can relate to and can be useful to them in their social studies curriculum as well. The inspiration that can be gleaned from experiencing such writings and testimonials can be encouraging as well as educational.

There are several texts I plan to use in teaching this unit. I envision taking several weeks to cover the materials. I will concentrate on excerpts from specific books instead of using complete novels or extensive writings. I do not want to discourage the students by making them feel they will have to complete multiple lengthy readings. The reading level of most students is between second and fourth grade. The students do have significant problems in decoding words. However, their ability to comprehend the material when presented to them incorporating their specific modifications is excellent.

BACKGROUND

Slavery has existed in various forms for thousands of years. Many times the enslaved were the spoils of war. The Hebrews felt justified in enslaving their own people. A social structure that included slavery was accepted in the cultures of those times. The views of some of the European people of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were also amenable to such a concept when it came to providing the much needed labor force in the new world. However, the enslavement of the West African peoples did not follow the pattern of former forced labor systems. It was not an arbitrary event or a random circumstance

that led the slave catchers to the African shore. A series of events in Western Europe and in the newly colonized Americas were catalysts for this new type of enslavement.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the African people had been the subject of multiple negative characterizations that were passed on to the European people like an official doctrine of the Church, Protestant or Catholic. This would be appropriate since the leading religions of Western Europe condoned the enslavement of the African citing biblical sources as well. The characterizations revolved around several factors including skin color and the perceived notion that religion and adequate social structure were nonexistent or primitive in African society. The lack of understanding of the West African culture was convenient and was typical of the euro-centric mentality of the time period and of the population. The negative connotations that the English had long attached to the color black were to deeply prejudice their assessments of West Africans. If, as the English believed, the color black epitomized sin and evil, then presumably those same defects must attach to the black-skinned person (Wood). The arrogance of some of the English surfaced as they proceeded to classify the Africans as not human, only property or chattel. The rubric by which the European culture measured the West African civilization was flawed and ultimately destructive to both sides.

Because England was a religious country with firm beliefs in the Bible, the need for moral justification for slavery was important for the social system that was in place at the time. The main biblical source revolved around the story of Noah, his son and grandson. Ham, Noah's son, who was reported to be black, had seen him naked, a grave offense at the time. The descendants of the son of Ham, whose name was Canaan, were cursed by Noah. "A curse on Canaan! He will be slave to his brothers" (Genesis 9:25-27). This biblical quote was all the rationale needed to condone slavery of the African people. As time progressed the slave owners saw themselves as redeemers who were introducing salvation to the heathens from West Africa. This missionary work served as another excuse to rationalize slavery.

With the moral obstacle settled for the moment, the focus was on getting these workers to the Americas. The sugarcane fields in the Caribbean Islands and South America were a source of great wealth to the plantation owners. It was difficult work, and the lure of free land, an inducement to the indentured servants, was not practical in such a limited space. The environment also proved hostile to the English. Following the lead of the Spanish, Portuguese, and the Dutch, the English began to use the Africans as the labor force procuring them through the Dutch. The enslaved's lifespan was very short once they reached the islands, a year or two, and it was economically prudent for the owners to import more workers as needed. There was an ample supply of Africans across the waters. Most of those brought to the islands were men. The need for procreation would come later. The indigenous populations of these islands had disappeared through epidemics and other reasons. The islands' population of enslaved grew to outnumber the slave owners which caused their own set of problems. This warped population trend would continue also in some areas of North America.

The Indians were considered as an option to be used as workers, but several factors would prevent this from occurring on a large or permanent scale. While the Indians, like the Africans, were regarded as inferior and uncivilized, the early settlers found they were useful in the areas of trading and exploring. Their skin color, though dark, was not black. Their hair and facial features were more European than African. The idea of Christianizing these heathens seemed more plausible than the West Africans. It was almost considered obligatory to carry out this missionary work for the Indians, who were deemed worthy of the effort. Biblical sources were once again cited as a moral matter to save those who through no fault of their own were not exposed to Christianity. The Indians, however, were to remain an inferior people never to be equal to the elite English society or even the common people.

The institution of slavery was not identical throughout the country. There were, however, some characteristics that were basic to slavery. Housing, religious practices, food eaten, and the plantation system all shared certain similarities. How slaves were treated from one plantation to another varied but the consensus was they were not treated well. The use of anthropology in studying slavery is shedding much needed light on the subject. By reviewing some of the findings of these methodologies a new view of the enslaved is emerging.

Plantation System

With the colonization of America in the 17th century, land ownership became an important part of the new way of life. The system of private land ownership was important in growing and maintaining crops thereby keeping the landowner wealthy. Virginia began the use of plantations and from there other states followed. The main crops grown on plantations were cotton, rice, sugarcane and tobacco. The work was difficult, and the European servants and laborers, some of them convicts, did not fare well in the hot humid conditions of the land. Native American Indians did not, would not, and could not succumb to the lifestyle of plantation life in most instances. As stated above, they were more useful in other capacities. Slaves that were used were initially bought from the West Indies. The slave trade was well underway in the Caribbean Islands and South America before the British became brokers. Soon slaves were exported directly from Africa. Although many thousands or perhaps millions died during the middle passage, the arduous trip from Africa to America, there was no stopping the sad export of human cargo. A passage from Henry Clay Bruce recounts life on the plantation.

During the crop season in Virginia, slave men and women worked in the fields daily, and such females as had sucklings were allowed to come to them three times a day . . . An old woman who was assigned to the care of these children because she was too old or too feeble for field work. Such old women usually had to care for and prepare meals of all children under working age (Walvin).

The Africans were deemed better suited for the work in the fields although they too had a high rate of mortality. Unlike the indentured servants, no contractual agreement was necessary. It was unnecessary to offer land or other inducements for them to come to the Americas. This segment of the population had been singled out to be enslaved because they were considered inferior. With the widely held belief of the inferiority of the African peoples by the dominant culture, slavery became an acceptable fixture of plantation life. The technology of growing rice was unique to the people of Sierra Leone. This methodology was transferred to North America and was used for the cultivation of rice in the low Carolinas. This knowledge of growing rice was invaluable to the survival of the plantation. The physical ability of these people to endure such hot and wretched conditions was also a contributing factor to the success of these entities. The women were encouraged to have many children to replenish the supply of the labor force. This would be a means of avoiding importing more slaves, and a way to have better control of the plantation.

There were two systems utilized for division of labor of the enslaved. The gang and task systems were commonly used depending on the job involved. The task system was in effect when a particular duty needed to be accomplished. One would be assigned a specific task to be done such as cooking, cleaning, sewing, etc. The task system was used in the Gullah area for rice growing. The gang system was considered to be the most efficient method for work in the fields. Seven to eleven slaves would be working directly under an overseer. This was documented as such by writers of that period. Interdependence of labor was critical ...organization of slaves into highly disciplined interdependent teams capable of maintaining a steady and intense rhythm of work (Fogel and Engerman). Their view seemed to mirror that of Grayson that the enslaved were much better off than their northern counterparts, and they actually developed a sense of pride in their labors. With this system in place the idea of the modern assembly line was developed (Dixon). It was considered highly successful and economical for the plantation owner to continue this type of gang system.

Slave Housing

The deplorable conditions in which the slaves were kept are further examples of the difficulties faced in this situation. Reverend Joseph Henson wrote of beds consisting of a collection of straw or old rags and sleeping on tilted blanks. A former slave, Mary Ellen Grandberry of Colbert County Alabama recalls leaky roofs, dirt floors and walls with gaping holes. She also added that despite the crude circumstances, efforts were made to keep the home in good condition and to make the surroundings as comfortable as possible. Jacob Stroyer, a slave, described the housing in *My Life in the South* as follows:

They were built to house two families. Some had partitions, while others had none. When there no partitions each family would fit up its own part as it could;

sometimes they get old boards and nailed them up, stuffing the cracks with rags; when they could not get boards they hung old clothes (Walvin).

Another description of the wretched conditions comes from the autobiography of Frederick Douglass

There were no beds given the slaves, unless one coarse blanket be considered such, and none but the men and women had these . . . They find less difficulty from the want of beds than from the want of time to sleep. Their sleeping hours are consumed in preparing for the field the coming day; and when this is done, old and young, male and female, married and single, drop down side by side on one common bed – the cold, damp floor each covering himself or herself with their miserable blankets; and here they sleep till they are summoned to the field by the driver's horn (Walvin).

I find the use of the actual words to be extremely important and necessary because the impact of these statements is not an interpretation of my thoughts and analysis. These are for the most part the genuine account of an eyewitness to history. Putting a name to the narrative takes it from the realm of a story to a personal experience with real people who have a name.

Food and Clothing

The type of food the slaves ate was dependent on the part of the country they were residing in. Cornmeal was a usual staple regardless of where the enslaved lived. Some enslaved were able to hunt and fish depending on the whims of their masters and on the availability of such game. Sometimes a small plot land was allocated for the growing of vegetables by the enslaved. There were never enough rations for the workers to feel satiated. Of course to work in the fields they had to eat, but portions were never adequate. The house slaves were generally considered to have been better fed than the field slaves because they would be allowed to have leftovers from the main meal of the owners in some instances. Jacobs does mention in her book *Letters From a Slave Girl* that the mistress would regularly spit in the pots of leftovers to discourage the enslaved from partaking of what was left. Herring was a staple given the slaves, but this was dependent on geographic location.

We had however but two meals a day, of cornmeal bread, and soup, of meat of the poorest kind. Very often so little care had been taken to cure and preserve the bacon, that when it came to us, though it had been fairly killed once, it was more alive than dead. Occasionally we had some refreshment over and above the two meals, but this was extra. . . balance this gratuity we were also frequently deprived of food as a punishment. We suffered greatly for want of water. . . slave drivers had the notion that slaves are more healthy if allowed to drink but little . . .
(*Narrative of Suffering of Lewis Clarke*, Walvin).

The slaves had an allotment for clothes. This too was a function of where the enslaved lived. Some were able to make their own clothes from scraps of material, and others were rationed clothing strictly by their masters. Clothing was often distributed during the Christmas season. Douglass speaks of receiving “coarse linen shirts one pair of trousers for winter, made of coarse negro cloth, one jacket, one pair of stockings and shoes” (Walvin).

The enslaved were given as little as possible when it came to clothing, and surely this lack of adequate garments led to illness and death for many. Some enslaved children went without clothes on a daily basis.

Education and Religion

For the majority of the enslaved, the prospect of a formal education let alone learning in an informal setting was not only almost nonexistent but also illegal. Teaching the enslaved to read in the South carried with it severe penalties. This threat did not prevent some from trying to teach reading especially the reading of the Bible. The slave owners knew the danger of having a population that was educated and able to interpret the Bible for themselves and even the Constitution. In the North there was also stiff opposition to educating the people of color. When Prudence Crandall in the 1830s attempted to open a school in Canterbury, Connecticut for African-American girls, she was met with harsh and dangerous repercussions from the townspeople, and she eventually had to close the school down. Despite all of the fierce opposition to education the will to learn did not stop the enslaved from becoming literate. Slaves would teach each other to read. Some of the slave owners did educate their slaves despite the dangers. Frederick Douglass had corresponded with Harriet Beecher Stowe to help establish an industrial college. He wrote a letter to her in 1853 to her expressing just this sentiment.

The banning of religious practices of the enslaved was just one more method used to dehumanize and to degrade that population. The only organized religion in America that spoke against slavery was the Quakers or the Society of Friends. In the 1830s the owners began to have a change of heart where teaching religion to the enslaved was concern. It was a self-serving mission at best. The goal was to blunt any possible criticism from the Quakers (Brown). This would pose another problem. The premise that the enslaved had a soul and therefore could be saved contradicts some of the beliefs that these Africans were not fully human. Eventually, slaves were allowed some latitude to practice religion in line with what the slave owner thought appropriate. The enslaved were often taught a convoluted version of Christianity highlighting the texts that stressed slaves being obedient to their masters. This practice for the most part was unsuccessful.

Slaveholders hide themselves behind the church. A more praying, preaching, psalm-singing people cannot be found than the slaveholders in the South. The religion of the South is referred to every day, to prove that slaveholders are good

pious men, but with their pretensions, and all of the aid which they get from the Northern church, they cannot succeed in deceiving the Christian portion of the world. Their child-robbing, man-stealing, woman-whipping, chain-forging, marriage-destroying, slave-manufacturing, man-slaying religion, will not be received as genuine; and the people of the free states cannot expect to live in union with slaveholders, without becoming contaminated with slavery (Walvin *Narrative of William W. Brown, A Fugitive Slave*).

The version of Christianity brought to the enslaved focused on biblical teachings that sufferings here (on earth) would lead to rewards in the afterlife and also that subjugation to the master was what God intended. Slaveholders forbade Africans to call on our gods—Oshun, Shango, Chukwu, and Olurun—outlawed the drums that called my people together and infused them with courage and spirit to fight (Thomas). Christianity was not initially accepted by these captured peoples. The enslaved did, however, come to embrace Christianity since the god of the Europeans had conquered their African god(s). Heaven did become something the enslaved eventually accepted as something to look forward to. The sustaining belief in the afterlife included the certainty that there would be no slave masters there. The inconsistencies of what the enslaved were taught about Christianity and the actions of the slave owners did not go unnoticed. After all, they did not subscribe to true meaning of Christianity in the eyes of the enslaved, and they would most assuredly have to pay for their unrighteousness.

LITERATURE OF SLAVERY

The primary text I will use is *Letters from a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs. This account was written by a woman who was actually enslaved in North Carolina in the 1830s. She was born in Edenton, North Carolina in 1813. The original text was entitled *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Her writings were turned into letters by the author, Mary E. Lyons. Harriet Jacobs began writing events from her life after her escape, and she was able to get her papers published in the *New York Tribune*. Her autobiography included accounts of sexual abuse that she suffered. These episodes caused disbelief in the reading public, and she encountered difficulty in getting her work published as the veracity of her statements was questioned.

She hid for seven years under the eaves of her grandmother's home because she would not abandon her two children who were still held in slavery. Even when she escaped to New York she was still pursued by her owner. The students can learn about the *Fugitive Slave Law*, and how important it was not only for the enslaved to get to the North but also on to Canada. The songs that are discussed later allude to this reference. Integrating social studies material into a curriculum that is designed for a reading class reinforces the multiplicity of ways the unit can be utilized. She worked as a nurse during the Civil War. Her story is one of both survival and courage. She eventually became an abolitionist and published articles in newspapers that culminated in the final book.

Harriet Jacobs' writings cover her early childhood that she remarkably termed "happy" to her later years of dealing with a difficult mistress. She writes of her brother's failed attempt to escape, her eyewitness and heartbreaking account of watching a woman's agony as her seven children are sold away, and her anguish of being sexually abused. She used her writings as a platform to speak against slavery and against those who practiced it. The accounts are vivid as she recalls specific events with specific slave owners or others whose names had been changed of course. The details provide a helpful insight into one's person's journey from enslavement to freedom and then to action.

I also find particular interest in writings done by women of that period. Many young teenage girls have serious self-esteem problems. The media portrayal of what is fashionable, hip and cool leaves many on the fringe without hope or encouragement. Physical beauty overrides any attempt to highlight a value system that encourages abstract notions of courage or honesty. The legacy that survived had little to do with looks but with the personal sacrifices of those involved in the struggle for justice. The courage of women like Harriet Jacobs, Harriet Tubman and even Harriet Beecher Stowe speaks louder than my voice as a teacher. The difficulty encountered is that the past seems so foreign and so unreal to the typical modern teenager. I think reviewing some of the episodes of Harriet Jacobs' troubled life may remind them of their own difficulties and frustrations. I feel that any opportunity to explore courage in face of insurmountable circumstances is a lesson worth teaching and more importantly worth learning.

There is a website (see Lesson Plan V) that gives the student the ability to print a view of the home where she hid under the garret, a recipe for crackers made by Harriet Jacob's grandmother who was a baker, and an opportunity to write a letter to Harriet that will be answered. These interactive exercises will aid in making the slavery experience more meaningful. I will use activities such as journal writing and interviewing older relatives and friends to get the student involved in the unit. To compensate for the reading deficits that many students have, these hands on activities can provide meaningful learning experiences.

The story of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* opened the eyes of many to the horrors of the institution of slavery. The story of Tom and the evil Simon Legree is known for being a catalyst for the war. Even Lincoln attributed the Civil War's beginning to this book. Stowe's intention was to publicize and to inspire action to combat this perceived injustice. Her book's mission was to instigate action against slavery either through education or guilt. The character of the long-suffering Tom is the representation of all the slaves who have been exploited by the slavery system. Many characters in the book are representatives of either good or evil. Christianity is also a theme of the book, which could be problematic if not addressed correctly. The discussion of slavery in the classroom could focus more on ethical considerations than religious ones. It should not be overlooked the importance religion played in this era in history since religious beliefs were used to justify slavery as well.

The *Hireling and the Slave*, a rebuttal to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* will also be analyzed. This oratory written was a response to the Stowe book. The intention of this soliloquy was to refute the supposed horrors of slavery and to justify the positive aspects of this institution. William J. Grayson was a slaveholder who resided in Beaufort, South Carolina in the 1830s to 1850s. He rationalized in his writings that the slave fared much better than the "hireling" of Northern industrial factories. He contrasts the grim lot of city-dwelling factory workers in the New England industrial towns with the healthful, carefree lives of slaves toiling out of doors It is Grayson's image that is the root of the deceptive, but famous, opening scene of the film *Gone With the Wind*. It is a testament to the power of words that such inaccuracies and rationalizations persisted for so long and found their way into the film studios in 1939 America.

There are other sources of information on the Internet where the students can go to gather information. These activities will teach the student research skills and will aid them in becoming more computer literate. The student will compile articles, letters written to fictitious slaves, interviews granted, drawings done along with other assignments to create a folder. A finished product of the students' own creation will be invaluable to the pupil who has met many obstacles in school because of their reading disability. A sense of real accomplishment is essential for these students as they learn success can be measured in a variety of ways in the classroom.

Coded Enslaved Songs

I would like to also explore the music and songs of the enslaved. Many of the students are deeply in tune with music and would feel more at ease in participating in a medium where they can excel. The job of every teacher, special education or not, is to find the key that opens the student's creativity and curiosity. Such songs as *Wading in the Water* and *Follow the Drinking Gourd* were codes for slaves to facilitate their escapes. Part of the lesson will involve studying songs of the period, in particular, encoded songs that were used as a means of escape. It is suggested that the roots of these songs served as a foundation for contemporary African American music, which in itself also does encompass a variety of styles. By tying the two together I will provide another link to the past for the student to connect with. One possible lesson would be for the student to compose an original rap song that would be in a present day code for the enslaved to flee. They would also perform the song for the class. Relevancy of the curriculum to the student is always a necessity if the lesson is to be successful. Studying these encoded songs will allow the students to see how some of their music may have their roots in the slave songs of the past.

Music was very important to the enslaved for many reasons. It was a medium of expression when most other outlets of showing emotions were banned. The arriving Africans did not necessarily share a common language. The use of drums was also not allowed because the slave owners were fully aware of the potential for problems if this one system of communication was allowed. This was one means of communication that

was universal throughout the African continent. The movie *Drumline* could be a source of discussion of how drums are such an integral part of the bands at African American high schools and universities by considering the history of drums in Africa. Singing in some instances was even encouraged by the slave owners since it provided a type of entertainment for them.

Wade in the Water is known for being a blueprint for the enslaved to run. The second verse of the song gives some insight into what to expect on the journey north.

If you don't believe I've been redeemed
God's gonna trouble the water
I want you to follow him on down to Jordan stream
My God's gonna trouble the water
You know chilly water is dark and cold
My God's gonna trouble the water
You know it chills my body, but not my soul
God's gonna trouble the water.

-Author unknown

The reference to traveling through water is important because of the obvious difficulty the dogs, usually bloodhounds would present if the runaways traveled by land. There was also the opportunity to catch fish that would be a source of food if near the water. Jordan has long been ascribed as being the promise land for the enslaved. Canada to the enslaved population became this promised land. The reference to chills my body can also be a reference to the time of year that one would need to travel. In the next song *Follow the Drinking Gourd* timing was critical for the success of the journey.

The river ends between two hills
Follow the drinking gourd
There's another river on the other side
Follow the drinking gourd
Where the big river meets the little river
Follow the drinking gourd
For the old man is a-waiting for to carry
You to freedom.

-Author unknown

This popular song refers to the big dipper also known as the drinking gourd. Because it was sometimes difficult for the runaways to locate the North Star, the big dipper was selected as the guiding point. This constellation provided a clear means for them to follow the escape route. An abolitionist known as Peg Leg Joe traveled from plantation teaching the slaves to interpret the song's lyrics. The song would instruct the slaves to time their escape during winter (when the sun comes up and the first quail calls). The quail sings in the winter months. The other verses refer to the Tombigbee River.

Directions were given on how to travel from the Tennessee River to the north side of the Ohio River. There would be a representative of the Underground Railroad there to meet the runaways. The only way to cross the Ohio River is when it was frozen solid. That is the reason the trek had to begin in the winter months.

The story of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* highlighted the travel over the Ohio River by Eliza .

In desperation as her pursuers closed in, Eliza darted into the river, holding her child in her arms. Springing from one floe to another, she lost her shoes in the icy waters but struggled on with bleeding feet to the opposite shore and the safety of the Ohio River (Stowe).

Eliza's journey over the Ohio River is based on a true story of a woman who braved the river to gain her freedom (Ponomarenko).

Another coded song used to relay information was *Let us Break Bread Together*. "The traditional spiritual *Let Us Break Together* was a coded call for secret meeting in the morning (at or before sunrise) to discuss issues of concern, plans for escape, or a time for prayer" (Harris).

Let us break bread together,
On our knees, On our knees
When I fall on my knees, with my face to the rising sun,
Oh Lord, have mercy on me.

-Author unknown

The song is still sung in churches today. This is an illustration of the longevity of the influence of a people who were supposedly without an African culture. The song, usually sung during communion time, has lost the original meaning, but it still is a poignant reminder of the struggles of an enslaved people.

There is some irony in recognizing how the very teachings that were used to justify the bondage of the African people became a source of strength to them and much more. The Old Testament includes stories of the captured Jews trying to escape from the Pharaoh of Egypt. The Jews were trying to uphold the tenets of their faith despite the oppression they faced. Moses became their savior as he repeatedly warned the Pharaoh of his wickedness to God's chosen people. The similarity of the stories to the enslaved was obvious. They saw themselves as the righteous ones held captive by the sinful oppressors. In time, using this story a song evolved that was used by those in the Underground Railroad, especially Harriet Tubman. This brave woman led many to freedom. She became known as the Moses of the enslaved, and she gave hope to many.

Go down, Moses
Go down, Moses

Way down in Egypt land,
Tell ole Pharoah
To let my people go.

-Author unknown

There are several phrases that were common vernacular to those familiar with the Underground Railroad system. Some of the expressions used and interpretations listed on the *Code Words* web site are as follows:

- The wind blows from the south today ~ warning of slave bounty hunters nearby
- A friend with friends ~ used to signal arrival of fugitives with underground railroad conductor
- The friend of a friend sent me ~ used by fugitives traveling alone to indicate they were sent by the network.
- Load of potatoes, parcel, or bundles of wood ~ fugitives to be expected
- Shepherds ~ people escorting slaves
- Station Master ~ keeper of safe house
- Station ~ place of safety or temporary refuge
- Heaven or Promised Land ~ Canada

The use of quilts as a means of coded communication was also very critical in the Underground Railroad system. A quilt is a collection of cloth pieces stitched together with padding on the inside that serves as means of keeping warm while sleeping. Because quilts needed to be aired out or washed and dried occasionally the enslaved devised a means to relay messages by using the designs on the various squares. The emblem or design would give a coded message, and the direction the quilt was hung was also significant because it would direct someone in the right direction for escape or refuge.

The quilts made by African-Americans often followed African textile designs. The influence of several cultures, including American Indian and European are visible in the finished products. The making of quilts was a common activity. All these techniques—piercing, appliqué, and quilting—were known in Africa, Europe, Asia, and the United States; yet some African-American quilts are profoundly different from European or Anglo-American quilts. The differences lie in historically dissimilar aesthetic principles, with both technical and religious dimensions (Wahlman). Wahlman continues to explain that the use of large shapes and strong contrasting colors was necessary to be certain that the pattern would be recognizable from a distance as a way of giving a proper greeting. These very visible patterns would become very critical to those traveling the Underground Railroad.

One exercise I would like to do with the students is to make a quilt. By using precut squares of cloth and a portable sewing machine, the class should be able to construct a

quilt. It would be noted that most of these quilts were hand-stitched. I would let them hand sew some the patches together. This would hopefully also familiarize them with some of the routines of the people at the time.

Artifacts

I will also try to discuss some of the archaeological considerations in studying the history of the enslaved. Some of the more concrete points will be included such as the items left behind at places such as the Jordan Plantation. The Jordan Plantation is located in Brazoria County Texas and is the site of excavations over the last two decades. What was found and where some of the relics of the past were found can affirm or disprove some of the beliefs on how the enslaved lived and survived. I will highlight the fact to the students that there is a plantation an hour's drive from where we live. It would be interesting to find out if some of the students' ancestors originated from that part of Texas. Realizing that we are not that far from an actual plantation should emphasize how integral our location is to history.

The connection of various African customs still practiced such as the use of a cosmogram would illustrate that leaving the homeland did not automatically mean a loss of their culture. A cosmogram was a fixture of the Kongo culture. The cosmogram is described by Leone on his web site *Century-Old Symbol of West African Culture Discovered in Annapolis* as an oval 50 feet long and 30 feet wide that is made up of objects beneath floors. It is a symbolic space over which a dance was performed and directed spirits to keep away harm and ensure safety.

Dr. Ken Brown, a distinguished anthropology professor at the University of Houston, has done extensive research at the Jordan Plantation in Brazoria County Texas and in the Gullah area of the Carolinas. His findings show the existence of these African symbols in both areas of the country. The implications of discovering cosmograms in these areas show that distance from Africa did not translate into cultural distance. The mixture of various African cultures in America is reflected in the many artifacts found.

Another method of looking at the history of the enslaved is by studying the tradition of seeking in the religious context. Seeking was unique to the African peoples, and was another tradition that illustrated the legitimacy of this culture. Religious doctrine would not be discussed as a practical matter, but as a custom or rite of passage used on both continents. One exercise the students could do would be to do a mini dig in the area around the school campus. By getting a little dirty and sifting through a small amount of dirt, an appreciation can be gained on how difficult and tedious the work of excavation is. Some may even find it fascinating and want to learn more about it. The school campus area is certain to contain many interesting objects since students tend to miss the garbage cans on a regular basis.

Another exercise I would like for the students to engage in is to view an HBO documentary on the slave narratives entitled *Unchained Memories*. The interviews were conducted in the 1930s by writers who needed work during the Depression. Those interviewed numbered in the thousands. The federal government provided funding for this project. As the class views the film and reads excerpts from the narratives, a cautionary note must also be included. Some of the stories may have been embellished or exaggerated. This is an opportunity for the students to learn how historical events can be colored by those doing the recording. The overall veracity of the narratives should not be discounted while studying them. When stories are told with the same descriptive elements from different people from various locations in similar circumstances, the validity of the statements become more credible.

As stated earlier, the students could also do another lesson where they do the interviewing of older relatives or neighbors. Much of the culture of African Americans is that of oral tradition. Stories have been passed down from generation to generation about the past. I have had many stories told to me by my parents dating back to the slavery era. These would be the same ones that their parents told them etc. Stories that I can share about real people who were my ancestors hold a special meaning to me. I would hope that my students would be able to gain some of those same feelings that will give them encouragement as my family stories have certainly done for me. For those who have no one to interview I will be the interviewee living on the Jordan Plantation in Brazoria County, Texas as an enslaved person.

After reading the slave narratives and learning about the lifestyles of the enslaved, the students should accumulate sufficient knowledge to keep a journal. They will pick the role they will assume on the plantation, and they will keep a daily journal of what life would be like for them. The student will read aloud their writings at the end of the exercise. For those who are artistic, I will encourage them to illustrate their work. Special education students express themselves in a variety of ways. Art is a medium that many students can use to express themselves in a positive manner. Many of them are in fact quite talented in that particular area. A cosmogram project may be one that a group of students could undertake. They would do the research to learn more about this tradition thereby making it a more meaningful project than if the teacher provided the majority of the information. In doing research on the Internet, the students will learn about search engines as well as about documenting web sites for bibliographical purposes.

This unit contains many ideas that the classroom teacher can use. This is not specific for the special education student. There are many ways to study slavery. Viewing enslavement not only from a purely historical perspective but also from an anthropological one enriches the curriculum for the student and teacher. Studying the past, especially studying the issue of slavery, should be done with sensitivity and care. Using a different viewpoint could help make the subject matter more interesting and encourage the students to do research on their own on specific topics that interest them.

In conclusion, what activities did the enslaved do on a daily basis to keep them going in spite of oppressive conditions? How did the communal gatherings and singing of songs or spiritual worship provide them the will to continue? What celebrations of life events gave them joy or even hope? What can we learn from the determination and courage of these people? We are in search of the lessons from the past.

LESSON PLANS

Lesson 1: Quilt Making

Student Objective

Replicate quilt making as practiced by the enslaved. The quilt will represent a coded message of the classes' choosing

Activities

By using precut pieces of cloth with designs and a sewing machine the students will piece together a quilt. Some portions of the quilt will be hand sewn. Certain patterns will have a pre-designated meaning. A glossary of meanings will be kept for each class to interpret. The student will keep a journal of their experiences.

Materials

Sewing machine, precut fabric squares

The students will present the quilt in the annual art fair as a project.

Lesson 2: Journal Writing

Student Objective

Each student will assume the role of an enslaved person on the plantation to research.

Activities

The students will give themselves names and chronicle their experiences on a daily basis including Sunday. By reading the slave narratives and doing individualized research the student will complete one week of the enslaved experience. It would be permissible if nonstandard English is used.

Materials

Journal tablet

Lesson 3: Song Writing

Student Objective

Using the coded slave songs as a guide, student groups will translate or compose an original work in rap style that gives a coded message on escaping.

Activities

This is best done in a group because some sing better or write better than others. They have the option of changing a song into a rap version or composing a new work.

Materials Needed

Tape recorder

Lesson 4: The Interview

Student Objective

The student will select an older relative or neighbor to talk to about their knowledge of enslavement. The teacher can also be a source if necessary.

Activities

Using older relatives, friends, or neighbors the student will seek to gain firsthand knowledge of information about enslavement. The student can record conversations or use a word processor to collect conversations. Information will be shared in class and may be used in the annual Black History Program.

Lesson 5: Letters from a Slave Girl

You will be directed to a website which offers several activities that coincide with the reading of the book. <<http://www.lyonsdenbooks.com/html/jacobs.htm>>.

Activities

- 1) Imagining Harriet's Hidey Hole
- 2) Using a recipe from Harriet's grandmother
- 3) Writing a letter to Harriet . . . A reply will be sent

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The film explores the trials and tribulations of training and performing for an African American college band.

Unchained Memories. Reading from the Slave Narratives. Directed by Ed Bell and Thomas Lennon. HBO, 2003. (75 minutes)

Readings from slave narratives written during the 1930s by modern actors and actresses.