



# **The Underground Railroad of Self-Determination Beyond Victimization**

**Robert L. Woodson, Sr.**

**Founder and President, National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise  
Prepared for the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions  
Princeton University  
February 9, 2006**

My message today is only for those who have a heart for the truth and are willing to follow the evidence. The rest of you will find my speech abominable. Let me quickly say that my opinions do not reflect on the individual who invited me. So please leave him alone!

If you were doing research about the economic health of a group of people, and the only information you asked about was their credit card debt, their mortgages or car loans, you would report that those people might be in bad shape. But debt would be just one part of someone's net worth. The information you received might not be inaccurate, but it would be inadequate. We cannot determine net worth by just looking at a person's liabilities. We must also look at that person's assets.

Looking back at black history, many have chosen to only look at the deficits blacks have experienced. Slavery, plantations, ghettos, family breakup, economic inequities, injustice, incarceration rates. All true, but these are all liabilities. We have been limited in getting a true picture even of the history of black America because so much emphasis and scholarly discourse has focused on its deficits.

I hold that you cannot learn very much by studying failure except how to fail. If you want to learn how to play the violin, you would not seek out nine people who had failed. You would seek out the one who succeeded and learn from that person.

Let me offer another way of looking at the world. If I asked you to give me the square footage of a field that was 100 yards by 100 yards that had a three-foot fence, and you spent time trying to figure out the answer, you would never arrive at the correct answer if you focus on trying to include the height of the fence in your calculations. And precious time would be lost in discovering the correct answer. Race is like that. If race has to be always an element in determining the problem, we may never get the correct answers to many of our questions. And that is a major problem we face today.

Unfortunately, we have now developed a whole class of people that are problem oriented. They can get paid handsomely by writing about the problem, lecturing about the problem, consulting about it, debating about it, demonstrating about it. They can make a fine living without ever having been required to solve the problem.

We at the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise believe that people are motivated to change when they are inspired by victories that are possible and examples that have proven to be effective. And we believe at the National Center that people armed with experience

will prevail against those only armed with an argument. What I will present here is an analysis of the problem as I see it, but conclude this talk with examples of how these principles of self-sufficiency that were pioneered by our black forbearers have led to successful triumphs over some of the most intractable social problems facing this nation today. Those problems--like crime, violence, drug addiction, homelessness, and teen pregnancies--have all led to declining communities and fallen cities. I will be giving some examples that will exemplify what happens when you take these old principles and apply them to this new vision.

This is what I hope you will go away with. I am not answering an argument with another argument, but answering with an example. What we ought to be debating, it seems to me, is not which person or institution has the superior argument, but which individual or institution has the superior agenda so that when that agenda is implemented, the results measurably improve conditions for those that are most in need. That should be the new standard for today--not who can present the most flamboyant argument in defense of their position, but who can offer the clearest example of real remedies.

I chose the title The Second Underground Railroad for a purpose. In my view, there are two Underground Railroads—one physical, the other mental and moral. The first Underground Railroad was the historic physical collaboration among people who were willing to risk their lives to free the bondsmen. It involved hiding runaway slaves in barns and haywagons, creating way stations to provide food and shelter along the way, and then finding places for them to go where they could resettle, get jobs, and establish their lives in freedom.

The Second Underground Railroad is the mental, moral, and spiritual framework that gives people courage and frees them from the psychological and emotional chains that would keep them in bondage. Mental slavery exists when a slave doesn't believe that he or she deserves to be free. For people like that, just having the physical means to escape is insufficient.

This fact was demonstrated in the story of Moses leading the Israelites. It took Moses only a few weeks to get the Israelites out of Egypt. It took 40 years to get Egypt out of the Israelites. And until that was accomplished, they were not allowed into the Promised Land.

People respond to repression in three ways; 1) some resist. 2) some become passive, and 3) some become collaborators with the enemy and are sometimes more brutal than their oppressors. This morality play was enacted in the death camps of Germany. Victor Frankel, in *Man's Search for Meaning*, wrote that some Jews simply gave up to despair. Others resisted as he did and maintained their sense of self esteem. And some became capos, placed in charge of others. They identified with their Nazi oppressors and became more brutal to their own people than their captors. The same thing happened in America before Emancipation. Some slaves became slave drivers. Some 3000 blacks were slave owners. Some fought on side of the Confederacy against the liberation of slaves.

Just as Moses realized that the physical underground railroad was insufficient to liberate the Israelites, we have to be willing to look objectively at the strategies that were employed to achieve real freedom for black America. Our black forbearers understood these things. How did those blacks who resisted—who refused to bow to despair, or refused to become collaborators—how did they succeed? We must look for the second underground railroad to find the answers. What was done on the battlefield of mental liberation? Our forbearers engaged in a spirited debate over the nature of social change. What we must do is to retrospectively find out how they persevered by asking what was that second underground railroad of self-sufficiency and independence and moral and spiritual liberation. That is what I want to examine.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that we must reach down into the deep dark regions of our souls and sign our own Emancipation Proclamation. In looking back, we need to rediscover the standards and institutions that blacks historically established to address this mental liberation movement.

Economics were a strong element of that successful flight from slavery. We understood that blacks needed thrift, temperance, steadfastness, and economic enterprise. Any group's participation in the economy depends upon its small business formation rate. In a healthy economy, entrepreneurs that represent less than 3% of any group generate 80% of all the new jobs. The healthy enterprise formation rate for any group is 2.5 businesses per thousand per year. There are outstanding examples of blacks succeeding in businesses that thrived for many decades. In 1917, in the Bronzeville area of Chicago, there were 731 black-owned businesses. Blacks owned \$100 million in real estate in 1929. And there were 192 churches that provided social services.<sup>1</sup>

In Philadelphia, blacks dominated the catering business until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, making Philadelphia catering famous across the country. James Forten, one of the city's principal sailmakers, employed more than 40 white and black workers and had a fortune of \$100,000 in the 1830s.<sup>2</sup> The Chesapeake and Marine Railroad and DryDock Company was formed by black Baltimore dockworkers after 1,000 black workers lost their jobs in 1863. In St. Louis, Madam C. J. Walker made a million dollars with the invention of the first commercially successful hairstraightening process.<sup>3</sup>

In the first 50 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, black Americans had accumulated a personal wealth of \$700 million. They owned more than 40,000 businesses, 40,000 churches, and 937,999 farms. The literacy rate had climbed from five to 70%. Black commercial enclaves in Durham, North Carolina and the Greenwood Avenue section of Tulsa, Oklahoma were together know as the Negro Wall Street, until urban renewal destroyed most of Durham's black business district.

The second major element was the strong moral and spiritual tenets that guided much of the behavior of early American and post-Civil War blacks. There were mutual aid societies in America called the National Negro movement. In every one of these self-help associations, moral competence was a requirement. Mother Bethel Church in Philadelphia had one of the first recorded welfare systems. It taxed its members a shilling a week. But individuals could not qualify for aid if their poverty was due to their own slothfulness or immorality. In 1850 when 20 blacks were arrested in Washington, DC and accused of planning an insurrection following the Nat Turner rebellion, what the authorities found in their possession was some Bibles, the plans to purchase the freedom of a slave in North Carolina, and a book on ethics. This was the worst the authorities could find, and yet they were beaten, imprisoned, and some impressed back into slavery.

What was the consequence of this combination of moral and spiritual competence and thrift and enterprise? It served as a shield against the horrors of slavery, Jim Crow, and racism, and it constructed a wall of protection. Even in the face of lynching, segregation, and racism, from the early days through the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, cultural decay did not occur. For instance, in the city of Chicago, it was considered alarming that the out of wedlock birth was 15% in 1920s. But by the late 70's, a whole generation had grown up in neighborhoods where it was strange if a baby was born to a married couple.<sup>4</sup> During the 10 years of the depression, 1930-1940, the black marriage rate exceeded the marriage formation rates of whites. The cumulative effect of all of this is that up until 1960, 82% of

---

<sup>1</sup> McWhorter, John, *Winning the Race*, p. xvii

<sup>2</sup> August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *From Plantation to Ghetto*, p. 115.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 217.

<sup>4</sup> McWhorter, *Op cit*, p. xvii

all black families had a man and woman raising children. The percentage of prisoners who were black was 30%. Today almost 50% of the incarcerated population is black.

Those that formed the Second Underground Railroad of morality and self-sufficiency did not call themselves victims. When slaves had little else, they learned the lessons that came from the Bible. They realized that there were many stories of broken people who were mistreated, like Joseph and Nehemiah. Nehemiah was comfortably ensconced in a castle as cupbearer to a king. He had a good job. He had a comfortable life. But when word came about his fellow Israelites in Jerusalem, he gave up that comfort to go back for the rebuilding of that wall. Joseph was called from the prisons, where he was unjustly imprisoned and abandoned and abused by his blood family. Pharaoh recognized his wisdom and put him in charge of all of Egypt's harvest, second in command only to himself. And then there was the anonymous 13-year old slave girl in the story of Namem in Second Kings. Syria had occupied Israel, when Namem, General to the Syrian king, developed leprosy. The Israeli slave girl told her mistress to advise Namem to go to Israel and present himself to the prophet Elijah. And Namem went, and was delivered from leprosy. As a consequence he converted to the God of Israel and abandoned the pagan gods of Syria, and was instrumental in stopping future raids which served to save thousands of the slave girls people. But if Nehemiah and Joseph and the unknown girl had defined themselves as victims and become bitter and plotted to seek vengeance against their captors, then history would never have known about them.

It is my belief that slaves reading and understanding and embracing the values of their Christian ancestry learn from these experiences and applied it within the American context and as a consequence were not only able to survive but thrive in the presence of the most oppressive, vile, system of slavery and discrimination to exist on the face of the earth. The troubling question we must ask is why--precisely at a time that blacks had achieved success against those physical barriers--why did we abandon those values?

All of these institutions of social and economic protection that constituted the constellation of economic, social and moral and spiritual health that kept the black community thriving, have all been decimated over the past 40 years. A great deal of what took three centuries to accumulate has all but been lost in the last 40 years. Today there are no black-owned railroads. From Maine to the Carolinas, there is not a single large office building owned by blacks.

We abandoned the second underground railroad and went back to the first. We shut ourselves off and began to treat our escape from slavery as if it was all physical and that morals and values were not important. Religious content is dismissed as being naïve. Most of what passes for intellectual discourse about the state of black America is all about victimization.

It is interesting and ironic that Moses spent 40 years in the wilderness before the Israelites could reach the Promised Land. It has been 40 years since the launching of the War on Poverty and Voting Rights. We must ask some troubling questions. Why are our children failing in institutions run by our own people? Why did some of these institutions dramatically decline?

For years, we believed that social injustice, economic disparity, and lack of political power explained the societal decay and spiral of decline in our nation's inner cities. On that assumption, our public policies targeted these issues through the vehicles of the Civil Rights laws, the War on Poverty, and Voting Rights. We have invested more than \$9 trillion in programs intended to aid the poor, spawning a mammoth social service industry that has consumed the lion's share of expenditures.

Yet now, after investing trillions of dollars, after the passage of landmark civil rights laws, and with minorities in control of the infrastructure and leadership of most of our nation's largest cities, conditions have continued to deteriorate and societal dissolution is now expanding to our suburban and rural communities. In our nation's capital, governed by black leadership throughout the last 25 years, where social welfare expenditures are the highest in the nation and with the highest median income for blacks, we are told that the life expectancy of a black male is the lowest in the Western Hemisphere, second only to Haiti.

If race and the lack of money, and power were the problems, why is there a growing roster of affluent, white, powerful celebrities who have been destroyed or have lost a loved one in self-destruction or addition—like Carroll O'Connor, Mary Tyler Moore, Gloria Vanderbilt, John Belushi, River Phoenix, or Robert Downey, Jr.?

Yet slaves with no protections, no money, nor power, were able to preserve their children more effectively than wealthy white celebrities of today. We have much to learn from what they used to sustain themselves.

We cannot continue to apply the bankrupt strategies of the past. We must elevate our thinking beyond the policy debate of the Left (which defines progress in terms of the amount of money spent on professionally designed programs parachuted into distressed neighborhoods) and the Right, (which believes that we have only to open the doors of opportunity to the free enterprise system and let meritocracy run its course.)

As Bill Bennett said, the Left looks at blacks and sees a sea of victims. The Right looks at blacks and sees a sea of aliens. We must go beyond the bipolar debate. There is an old African proverb that says when the elephants fight, the grass always loses.

Racial prejudice continues to be a problem in the United States. However, it is not the most important problem facing even the black community. Continuing to focus on race and supporting those who profit from maintaining and grievance industry is keeping this nation from addressing some fundamental problems. If racial reconciliation were immediately possible, it still would not answer the high rates of black on black crime and out of wedlock pregnancy.

Today we seem preoccupied with "stuff." Our forbearers understood that it wasn't stuff. It isn't money. It isn't political power. It isn't economic development that determines the survival of a people. It is the moral foundation that defines their social and mental health. Any strategy to uplift people that does not include this as a seminal foundational principle is doomed to failure.

Let me read you a quote and ask you if you can identify the right-wing author:

"Our children are living in depressed neighborhoods and are on the verge of ethical collapse. Morally weak people not only inhibit their own personal growth, but finally contribute to the politics of decadence. A generation of people lacking the moral and physical stamina necessary to fight a protracted civilization crisis is dangerous to itself, its neighbors, and to future generations." That right-wing author was Jesse L. Jackson.<sup>5</sup>

Who can lead change? The prerequisite for the real heroes of social change are people who have embraced grace as a foundation of their character. Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for 26 years, and a white guard was assigned to work him to death. But the guard was transformed by Mandela and they became close friends. When Mandela was liberated and became President of South Africa, he invited his former captor to sit in the Presidential box.

---

<sup>5</sup> Jesse L. Jackson, "A Challenge to the New Generation," Ebony Magazine, August, 1978.

Mandela was a modern-day Joseph, unjustly imprisoned, but who went on to lead a nation, and demonstrated the quality of his grace.

Grace transcends antagonisms. It allows people to look beyond their circumstances and see a larger vision that allows great things to happen. The good news is that solutions do exist. Today, among the ruins of inner-city neighborhoods, there are embers of health and restoration. Like the Biblical Joseph whose faithfulness and wisdom inspired the Good Pharaoh to seek him out to save Egypt, there are grassroots Josephs in the inner cities whose wisdom and grace are solving some of society's worst problems. In five cities across this country, there are young men and women from inner city neighborhoods who once were predators but have been transformed into ambassadors of peace. They are working in 26 schools, stopping youth violence, and motivating young people away from gangs and into education and positive activities. In Dallas, Texas, for instance, in one of the city's most violence-plagued high schools, gang incidents went from 134 to NONE as a result of the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise's Violence-Free Zone initiative. In Washington, DC, in an area known as Benning Terrace where there had been 65 homicides because of warring youth crews, the National Center helped effect a truce and a program of support that has turned around the lives of hundreds of young people. There have been no crew-related deaths in Benning Terrace in the nine years since we had the truce.

I can give you hundreds of other examples where grace has solved a major societal problem that everyone said was intractable. At the base of every success has been a moral and spiritual foundation—the Second Underground Railroad.

*Robert L. Woodson, Sr., is founder and president of the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise (NCNE), an empowerment organization that helps low-income self-help groups. Since its founding in 1981, NCNE has provided training and technical assistance to more than 2000 faith-based and community organizations in 39 states, as they work to reduce crime and violence, restore families, create economic enterprise and revitalize low-income communities. Often referred to as the godfather of the movement to empower neighborhood-based organizations, Bob Woodson's social activism dates back to the 1960's, when as a young civil rights activist, he developed and coordinated national and local community development programs. During the 70's he directed the National Urban League's Administration of Justice division and then served as a Resident Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute. For more than 30 years Woodson has been a source of guidance and support for grassroots organizations around the world. He was instrumental in paving the way for resident management and ownership of public housing, and brought together task forces of grassroots groups to advise the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress, the Pennsylvania Legislature, and the Wisconsin Assembly. He is consulted by numerous governors, members of Congress, business leaders, and the news media. He has worked with youth intervention and violence prevention programs since the 1960's and has written several books on the subject. Among the many awards he has received is the prestigious John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellowship, often referred to as the "genius" award. He is the author of hundreds of articles and several books, including *The Triumphs of Joseph: How Community Healers are Reviving Our Streets and Neighborhoods*, published by The Free Press in January, 1998, and available in bookstores around the country.*