

## Harriet Tubman: A First Responder Extraordinaire

**Janaé Moore, DMin, LCSW**

Founder/Facilitator

Taranga House Spiritual Retreat & Practice Center

Accokeek, Maryland

Tel: (301) 442-3713

Email: taranga4retreats@gmail.com

### Author Note

This article is written from the perspective of the author, an ordained clergywoman and a certified social worker who dedicatedly serves others in the areas of social justice and human rights. The insights or views expressed in this review represent those of the author herself. The author has no conflicts of interest.

### Abstract

Approximately 200 years after Harriet Tubman's birth--between 1820 and 1825--she remains today a heroine of both mythical and mystical legendary status. She was born into and traumatized by the unfathomable cruelties of slavery. She escaped alone in her early twenties as an illiterate woman prone to epileptic seizures at unpredictable times. She suffered the full weight of the South's slavocracy against her. Its bounty hunters were in constant pursuit to recapture her. Yet, she repeatedly jeopardized her own life and freedom by returning to help free others. With unshakable faith in her God, Harriet amassed many labels and accolades throughout her lifetime: famous Underground Railroad conductor, Union Army spy, nurse, root doctor, woman's suffragist, human rights advocate, provider for the elderly and homeless, and, most notably, the "Moses" of her people. Currently, in reflection on her remarkable life, in the midst of the twin pandemics of systemic racism and COVID-19, yet another title can be added: first responder extraordinaire. Harriet accomplished what appeared to be the impossible, despite all the odds against her, because she *first responded* to the Truth of Freedom, the Truth that Black Lives Matter and, ultimately, the Truth of the Beloved Community.

*Keywords:* first responder, servant leader, enslaver, enslaved, Truth, Freedom, systemic racism, Black Lives Matter, Beloved Community

### Introduction

*"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all . . . are created equal, that they are endowed, by their Creator, with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."*

Declaration of Independence

## Articles

---

Harriet Tubman was unable to read the above ideals excerpted from the Declaration of Independence. As an enslaved woman, she was intentionally kept illiterate. Yet despite her enforced illiteracy, she came to know the significance of these words both theologically and ontologically for herself and others. Thomas Jefferson, a member of the planter elite and, hypocritically, a slaveholder until his death, penned these lofty ideals. He, however, never intended these ideals to apply to Harriet or anyone he and others like him deemed to be of her status and kind. An interesting thing about Truth is that while it might not be intended for you, once you get it, no one can deny you access to, or claim sole ownership of it. “The Truth shall set us free” is the biblical version of this fact (John 8:32).

Harriet Tubman came to an inner reckoning about the ideals of the Declaration of Independence quite contrary to what her outer circumstances proclaimed. Like her parents, siblings, and millions of others like her, she was born enslaved and thereby excluded from partaking in the independence the Declaration proclaimed. To better appreciate Harriet’s unlikely journey within the context of the inhumane and pathological institution of chattel slavery, a few historical facts must first be mentioned.

### Historical Background

It is important to note that by the time Harriet Tubman was born about 1822 on Maryland’s Eastern Shore, the enslavement of Black women, men and children in the United States had been practiced for more than 200 years at near evil perfection. Thus, Harriet was born into a social, economic, political, geographical, and racialized structure that had predetermined her life. Even worse, her enslaver’s, and all enslavers’ expectation was that she and all others enslaved would docilely accept their assigned status and purpose with unwavering and unresentful obedience. Harriet was expected to forfeit her right to her own life, and, instead, bequeath all of who she was--her gifts, skills, talents, creativity, dreams, desires, aspirations, and imagination--to the service, benefit, and profit of her enslaver.

The relinquishment of one’s self demanded an expectation of full capitulation. This included absolute surrender to the enslaver’s unpredictable wills and whims, which too often resulted in sexual exploitation--rape and unwanted pregnancies, tyrannical outrages, severe beatings and/or floggings. The cruelties suffered also included the unannounced selling and breaking up of families and, sometimes, beating and/or working the man or woman to death. The enslaver neither recognized nor respected any rights of the enslaved.

How does one be, when others have ascribed non-being as your lot in life? This question is so imperative that it is worth shedding even more light on the conditions Harriet was born into that defined this country then and still defines it today. If we are to begin to experience and promote the presence of personhood, integrity, respect, and freedom that Harriet Tubman ultimately Self obtained, it is necessary to have a better appreciation for and to learn from what she had to overcome.

### Obscured Beginnings

It was within the racially exploited and existentially damning system of European chattel slavery that Harriet Tubman found herself at the very beginning of her life. She was born

to enslaved parents, Harriet Green and Benjamin Ross, on a plantation near Bucktown in Dorchester County, Maryland. They named her Araminta. The recounting of Harriet's birth, as well as references about her life by historian/ biographer Catherine Clinton, reveal just how crude slavery made what should have been a sacred birth and life journey into something with more unknowns than knowns:

...because she was born a slave, the exact year of her birth remains unknown, unrecorded in an owner's ledger--lost even to the parents and child themselves. Most accounts offer her birth year as 1820, 1822, or circa 1820, roughly two hundred years after the first boatload of Africans was sold off a Dutch slave ship in 1619 at Jamestown, Virginia. "Circa" affixed before a birth year is one of the most common legacies of slavery. Harriet believed that she was born in 1825, and testified to this fact on more than one occasion. When she died, her death certificate indicated her birth year was 1815. Her gravestone listed her year of birth at 1820. Whatever the year affixed, details of the earliest years of Araminta Ross are equally obscure" (Clinton, 2004, p. 4).

Not only is Harriet's exact birthdate and year obscure, so are her place of birth and her birth order. The number of Harriet's siblings shall forever be a mystery as will her family position in that lineup. Based on Clinton's reporting, Harriet "...was born somewhere in the middle of a string of children, perhaps nearly a dozen. She might have arrived near the end, as her mother was in her forties when she was born" (Clinton, 2004, p. 5).

Peter Kolchin begins the first chapter in *American Slavery: 1619-1877* as follows:

Although Americans like to think that the United States was "conceived in liberty," the reality is ... different. Almost from the beginning, America was heavily dependent on coerced labor ... Most of the [so-called] Founding Fathers were large-scale slave owners, including George Washington, "father of his country," Patrick Henry, author of the stirring cry, "Give me liberty or give me death," and Thomas Jefferson, who proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal." (Kolchin, 1993, p. 3).

Kolchin reveals how slavery represented a widespread false belief by the majority of Whites--North and South--that their value was greater than all other ethnic groups, most especially Blacks. He emphasizes how slavery spread like a cancer. From 1619 when 20 Blacks arrived in Jamestown to the beginning of the American Revolution in 1775, colonists "eager for material gain imported thousands of Africans to toil in their fields. . .slavery became entrenched as a pervasive--and in many colonies--the central component of the social order, the dark underside of the American dream (Kolchin, 1993, pp. 3-4).

As obscure as her beginnings were and as dark as slavery became, Harriet came to find certainty about her value as a human being, not as one forced to be enslaved. Her knowing of her Self was directly connected to and validated by her knowing of her God. Despite the attempts to condition her to believe and accept the ominous lies of slavery, Harriet found what came to be for her the liberating Light of Truth about her existence: she belonged to God. It was God who created her and it was God whom she came to totally trust to both protect and provide for her. Harriet went from obscurity and darkness to gaining popularity for her unquenchable thirst for freedom--a thirst that far exceeded the place and circumstances to which she was born, as well as the people who tried to selfishly and immorally keep her there.

### The Truth of Freedom: The Unalienable Right to Be

What is the unalienable right to be? It is the lone flower growing through a city sidewalk as it has pushed its way through concrete, affirming that, despite unanticipated and difficult circumstances, it still has the right *to be* and thus it is! It is the unjustly imprisoned body whose mind and heart refuse to relinquish its own truth and thereby remains internally free. It is the unyielding right of the soul to give expression to what it is, inclusive of all and despite all. It is the affirmation of one's existence as so inwardly determined and shared with others. It is the right to experience and express it, validating one's *I am*, I feel, I see, I think, I hear, I smell, I taste. This is true even without the consenting witness of the crowd and no matter when one's outer circumstances might seek to rail against the *I am that I am*, because in the Truth of Freedom, I still have the unalienable right to *be*.

Thomas Jefferson did get right the truth about our unalienable, equal right *to be* in the Declaration of Independence, that we are all created equal and endowed by the Creator with certain unalienable rights, one of which is the right to Liberty, as well as Life and the pursuit of Happiness. Even with death as a constant hound, the scoreless flights from slavery to freedom desperately dared by men, women, and children over centuries, like those of Harriet, unequivocally attest to these Creator-endowed rights. Mystic theologian Howard Thurman explains how "the spirit of man" attests to these unquelled, unalienable rights within us all:

The spirit of man is not easily vanquished. It is fragile and tough. You may fail again and again and yet something will not let you give up. Something keeps you from accepting "no" as a final answer. It is this quality that makes for survival of values when the circumstances of one's life are most against decency, goodness, and right. Men tend to hold on when there seems to be no point in holding on, because they find that they must. It is often at such a point that the spirit in man and the spirit of God blend into one creative illumination. This is the great miracle. The body and the nervous system know (Thurman, 1984, p. 81).

Many of us who hear Harriet's great escape to freedom story consider it a miracle, especially given the time period and the multitude of forces against her. However, for years before her escape, Harriet reported she was visited by a recurring vision of a "flight" to freedom. Perhaps, her "body and [her nervous system kn[e]w" for she recounts in her dream that she was

...flying over fields and towns, rivers and mountains, looking down upon them 'like a bird' and reaching at last a great fence, or sometimes a river, over which she would try to fly... It 'peared like I would have the strength, and just as I was sinkin' down, there would be ladies all dressed in white over there, and they would put out their arms and pull me 'cross" (Clinton, 2004, p. 38).

To better understand what compelled Harriet to pursue freedom and succeed despite her own challenges, while a whole system and nation were aligned against her, one needs to explore her inner world. It was a world formed and shaped in her earliest years through the teachings and modeling of her parents, especially her mother. Rit Ross took seriously the responsibility of making sure all her children knew of a Power greater than the one that held them in bondage. Although both Rit and Ben, like the majority of the enslaved, were denied an education and thus were illiterate, they knew about the Bible and they knew God. They definitely knew of the biblical God who rescued the Israelites out of slavery from Egypt, and trusted that God would

one day do the same for them. Through these teachings, Harriet came to know what became for her an Ultimate Reality that transcended even the brutal slave system that sought to perpetually enslave her and, ultimately, to break her. For her, this Ultimate Reality was God.

Not only was Harriet taught about God, but also that God's Son, Jesus, was her Savior, and he died for her freedom. As she grew into a young woman, she "experienced an intensification of her Christian faith, a deep and abiding spiritual foundation that remained with her throughout her life" (Clinton, 2004, p. 20). Thus, for her, Christianity was a source of revolutionary hope, faith, and power that the physical world of slavery could never provide, nor ever alter. Additionally, once Harriet became age-conscious of the realities of slavery, she came to an immediate and unwavering conclusion for the rest of her life that slavery was an evil that must be destroyed. She knew that the enslavement of human beings was immoral and ungodly, no matter how many "non-Christian Christians" tried to justify it by invoking the idea that God condoned what could only be attributed to evil.

Harriet, having now grasped the true nature of slavery and wanting her God-endowed right to be free, could no longer accept bondage. As she continued to witness the direness of the situation for the enslaved and the godlessness of the enslaver, Harriet likened her decision to an epiphany and became clear about her own fate: "I had reasoned this out in my mind; there was one of two things I had a right to, liberty or death; if I could not have one, I would have the other" (Clinton, 2004, p. 32). With this reasoning Harriet came to a realization: to claim her unalienable right to her God-endowed freedom and to depend totally on God to assist her to help free others.

It was her unshakeable faith in the righteousness of God's creation and the evil of the man-created slave system, that gave Harriet the inner freedom to act, enabled her to survive all dangers, and accomplish all that she did. Many of us may rightly marvel at Harriet's against-all-odds accomplishments and affix mythical, miraculous, and even mystical hashtags to them. Yet for Harriet, it all boils down to what her character in the film *Harriet* tells her Underground Railroad abolitionist friend William Still after she successfully and safely returns from one of her many perilous slave-freeing trips: "God showed me how!"

On more than one occasion, Still and other abolitionists attempted to dissuade Harriet from returning to the South, especially as the fervor increased for her capture after the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law was enacted. She, however, was undeterred. God had issued her the summons *to be*; and only God had the right to terminate this inner command. Nothing and no one could ever deter her from her theo-centric position, nor from her unalienable right to freedom, a position and right she claimed not just for herself, but for others as well.

### **The Truth that Black Lives Matter**

Once Harriet obtained her freedom, she found it to be a lonely freedom without her family. "Despite the concrete daily benefits of her new environment, within a year of her arrival Tubman experienced an increasing sense of deprivation. She suffered the constant ache of loneliness during her time in the North." (Clinton, 2004, p. 60). Her loneliness and desire that her enslaved family and all enslaved should be set free, along with her faith in God to guide and protect her, inspired her to keep returning to the South. Every trip she made back to free others was a testament that BLACK LIVES MATTER.

## Articles

---

Thus, centuries before today's Black Lives Matter (BLM) began in July 2013 as a critical call for racial justice, the spirit that helped to create it had long been unleashed. From the African shores of humanity's first beginnings to the equally horrifying and traumatizing voyages of the Atlantic slave trade, the disbursement of captured Africans throughout the Diaspora immediately resulted in a counter-resistant spirit by those held in bondage. It is a spirit that has been relentless in its quest and demand for freedom. For more than four centuries, it is a spirit that has been carried forth from generation to generation by millions vehemently taking a moral stand against those who have sought to decry and deny the ontological rights of Blacks to *just be*.

While the roll call is extensive of those who have carried forth this indefatigable spirit, most names remain unknown and unsung. Still, one only needs to look back through history to learn about the audacious acts of those who have long sought to make the ideals this nation ironically proclaimed a lived reality. Harriet is indeed one such notable spirit-warrior who still stands out today among the many. It is indeed understandable why she came to be called the "Moses" of her people.

The spirit that created chattel slavery and all its devastating and deadly consequences is the same spirit that brought segregation, miseducation, disenfranchisement, chain gangs, lynching, Jim Crow, redlining, gentrification, ghettos, mass incarceration, and many other injustices against Blacks. It is the same spirit that caused the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Stephon Clark, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, Alton Sterling, Philando Castille, Sandra Bland, Elijah McClain, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, and George Floyd--to name only a few. Those eight minutes and forty-six seconds that police officer Derek Chauvin mercilessly used to keep his knee on the neck of Mr. Floyd despite repeated pleas that he could not breathe was the breaking point. After the video of this public lynching went viral, it evoked worldwide protests inspired by Black Lives Matter. These protests have affirmed what Harriet Tubman and millions like her have always affirmed: BLACK LIVES MATTER!

### The Truth of the Beloved Community

Every trip Harriet made back to the slave-holding South was deeply symbolic of who she was and her purpose: Being a Christian committed to the cause of freedom and justice for all, i.e., the Beloved Community. Her ventures South evidenced a faith in her God and her commitment to her fellow sisters and brothers in bondage that far exceeded any fears or concerns she may have had. Harriet knew that justice is not possible without freedom, and freedom without liberating others is not true freedom but selfishness.

One of the most hideous barriers for those seeking freedom were the Fugitive Slave Laws. The first was passed in 1793 prior to Harriet's birth. The second, in 1850, was far more menacing and personal. "On September 18, 1850, Congress approved the Fugitive Slave Law as part of the Compromise of 1850, an omnibus bill designed to settle differences between North and South over the issue of slavery. Blacks and abolitionists nicknamed it the "Bloodhound Law" (Clinton, 2004, p. 55).

Harriet knew and trusted a Power that, although invisible to the naked eye and the unbeliever, was very reliable and real to her throughout her spiritually-conscious lifetime. It was this Power, i.e., her God, that emboldened her to be a first responder for the causes of freedom and justice. Harriet knew without ever needing to question that it was her God who provided

for her and kept her safe from the numerous dangers awaiting her. She made approximately 13 trips to and from the South and never lost any of the passengers. She personally guided many to freedom from slavery and into the arms of the Beloved Community where she knew they, and all beings equally created by the Creator truly belong.

### **Conclusion**

In times of conflict, crisis, challenge, and pandemic such as those we are currently facing, we need such exemplars as Harriet Tubman to emulate for they are our servant leaders--our true first responders because they do not lead or respond solely for themselves. They respond and lead knowing the intricate and sacred interconnectedness of all life. The beauty of these evolved beings, like Harriet, is that what they show and teach us never dies for they are ever summoning us to higher heights and deeper depths within ourselves for the good of all humankind, i.e., the Beloved Community.

On March 10, 1913, Harriet “Moses” Tubman made her life-transition and “was buried with military honors in Auburn, [New York]’s Fort Hill Cemetery” (Clinton, 2004, p. 215). Harriet’s definition of herself, as well as the purpose she came to see for her life, was not based on the limitations dictated by the oppressive conditions and circumstances she faced. Rather, she was constantly summoned to be in accordance with a call of Freedom that, for her, was unalienable. Despite everything her eyes saw and her heart, body, and soul too often felt from slavery’s hierarchical structure of oppression and evil, Harriet knew that life could never have meaning for her if she did not first respond to what she inwardly knew, namely that God meant for her to be free and meant for her to assist others to be free as well. It is because of her selfless servanthood as a first responder that her legacy lives on.

The perpetual blessing of Harriet’s legacy is that her commitment to freedom includes us and requires us to work for the same. Today, we must face with action the 401 years of health and economic disparities that cause the COVID-19 pandemic to infect and kill people of color—African, Hispanic, and Native Americans—at alarmingly higher rates than whites. Many of these deaths should be preventable. We can no longer deny nor do nothing about infections and deaths whose causes are a direct result of systemic racism, a lingering legacy of chattel slavery. The divide between the wealthy and the poor; educational disparities; police brutality; the injustices of mass incarceration; poisonous partisan politics; discrimination based on preferences, such as those for religion, sexuality, gender, racial identities, age, physical abilities or disabilities. keep us from becoming the Beloved Community for which Harriet risked her life.

To help us meet our own reckoning moment, everything about Harriet Tubman’s life is worthy of study and respect. Born into a system intentionally structured and inhumanely implemented against her very Being, she was able to give personal meaning to the unalienable rights endowed to her by her Creator God and obtain her freedom. We are ever grateful that freedom for her was not enough without assuring that her family and others received this same precious, sacred gift. Even her last words, “I go and prepare a place for you,” bespeak her embodiment of being a servant leader, a first responder extraordinaire, one whom we will do well to follow. The universal invitation ever awaits our answering.



### *“Take My Hand”*

A mural of Harriet Tubman by Michael Rosato

## References

- Clinton, C. (2004). *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom*. New York: Little, Brown and Company.
- Feagin, J. R., Vera, H., & Batur, P. (2001). *White Racism*. New York: Routledge.
- Glaude Jr., E. S. (2020). *Begin Again: James Baldwin’s America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own*. New York: Crown.
- Kolchin, P. (1993). *American Slavery: 1619-1877*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- King, Jr., Martin Luther. (1963). *Why We Can’t Wait*. New York: New American Library.
- Montagu, A. (1964). *Man’s Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*. Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company.
- Thurman, H. (1984). *For the Inward Journey*. Richmond: Friends United Meeting.
- Zinn, H. (1995). *A People’s History of the United States: 1492-Present*. New York: Harper Perennial.

## Special Notation

Permission for one-time free usage of the mural photograph at this article’s conclusion was provided by the mural’s artist, Mr. Michael Rosato. Its reuse is not permitted. The mural is located in Dorchester County, Maryland. It has been visited by innumerable individuals since its completion in 2019. Mr. Rosato’s expansive artistic works can be found at his studio’s website: <http://michaelrosato.com>.