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*National Underground Railroad Freedom Center*

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## FROM FREEDOM NARRATIVE TO FREEDOM LEADERSHIP NARRATIVE

*Dr. Michael A. Battle* †

The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center enters its second decade excited about the opportunities and challenges of balancing the focus on the historical realities of the antebellum freedom narratives and the modern day freedom narratives unfolding in the stories of millions of people worldwide whom seek to be free. The freedom narratives must be told and celebrated because they are the remarkable glimmers of light against the backdrop of the dismal inhumane history of people and nations that, for greed and material gain, placed other humans in bondage and captivity. From its inception, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center understood the need to focus on the continuum of the freedom narratives that emerged in the horrible days of America's enslavement of people of African descent and the equally horrible days of the twenty-first century, when millions of people from many nations and ethnicities are trafficked and exploited for free labor, sex trade, as child soldiers, and domestic servitude. While these narratives are not parallel in an historical sense, they are parallel in an experiential sense because of the remarkable sameness in the existential dynamic of brave people struggling against tremendous odds to embrace their inherent and God-given right to be free. The freedom narratives are the stories of the persons who sought, some successfully and others unsuccessfully, to escape from bondage. They are the stories of the brave people who risked their lives in the bold process of assisting others to find safe havens in the pursuit of freedom.

The mission statement of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center is "We reveal stories about freedom heroes, from the era of the Underground Railroad to contemporary times, challenging and inspiring everyone to take courageous steps for freedom today."<sup>1</sup> It is the progressive sequential timeline, *from the era of the Underground Railroad to contemporary times*, that sets the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center apart from other organizations and institutions that either

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<sup>1</sup> *Our Mission*, National Underground Railroad Freedom Center (April 13, 2016, 3:57 PM), <http://freedomcenter.org/what-were-doing>.

focus exclusively on the freedom narratives that emerged from the American slavery experience or on the freedom narratives that are continually emerging from the modern day slavery experience. The *Freedom Center* designation is as essential as the *Underground Railroad* designation in the naming of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. Each part of the name is descriptive of the philosophical and the functional frame, which both defines and describes the conceptualization and the work of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. The wisdom inherent in the name is that it shows the symmetry in revealing that at the core of all freedom narratives is the inextricable desire of all people everywhere and at all times to be free. The freedom narratives also reveal that there have always been persons of goodwill willing to risk their own lives and possessions in the courageous process of assisting others in the pursuit of freedom. Through exhibitions, town hall discussions, community dialogues, lectures, the development of freedom educational material, collaboration with other Underground Railroad organizations and movements, and Modern Day Abolition organizations and movements the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center shall challenge and inspire individuals, groups and nations to take courageous steps for freedom today.

The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center is a center of conscience. As such, it seeks to encourage deep reflection by all who enter its facility and who engage in its programs. As a center of conscience, the Freedom Center convenes and educates. With intentionality, it is our aim to be a safe space for community, national, and international discussions about the critical issues that are laden with freedom implications. This means that the exhibitions, educational materials, and engagements in the public debate seek to encourage the revelation of the threats to freedom to the extent that such revelations help to understand and appreciate the rewards of freedom. In terms of the threats to freedom, we unveil the elements of un-freedom demonstrated on the full spectrum from the discovery of hidden or implicit biases to the overt explicit exploitative activities that result in the denial of freedom and the denial of full human and civil rights. Freedom is a universal right and the denial of freedom is an affront to universal human dignity. Therefore, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center will continue to be a space for intergenerational, interracial, interreligious, and interethnic dialogue around discussions and exhibitions about slavery, the holocaust, human trafficking, neighborhood and community violence, racism,

sexism, disparities, and discrimination. The celebration of freedoms' story is most fully understood and appreciated against the backdrop of a reality-based analysis of the horrors of the forms and expressions of un-freedom.

In terms of the rewards of freedom, The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center focuses on the development of freedom leadership which seeks to empower emerging freedom heroes to fully understand the meaning and application of freedom. Dr. Clarence G. Newsome, President of the Freedom Center, defines freedom leadership in terms of the following five foundational principles:

1. Self-Determination
2. Financial Self-Sufficiency
3. Responsible Exercise of Human Rights
4. Building Inclusive Democracies
5. Building Inclusive Free-Market Economies.

Freedom Leadership expands the freedom narrative beyond the processes of seeking freedom from external bondage to include a focus on the appreciation of what it means to be free from an internal sense; creating a society of holistically free persons who understand the importance and who exercise the principles of self-determination, financial self-sufficiency, responsible exercise of human rights, building inclusive democracies, and building inclusive free-market economies.

The focus expands from freedom narratives to include freedom leadership narratives that seek to demonstrate the responsibility of free people to create a free society in which all people are free from external bondage and are free to exercise their inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Freedom Leadership narratives seek to elucidate the importance of the distributive meaning of the quantifier *all people*, to truly mean that each and every person, without regard to race, ethnicity, gender, preference, religion or the choice to be non-religious, is entitled to the inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Until all people worldwide are free, the freedom leadership narratives must be continually developed and the role of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center must be continually embraced.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his statement about how the freedom of others is inextricably bound to our freedom, reminds us that none of us are free until all are free. In concluding his legendary "I Have A Dream" speech, Dr. King reaches an amazing crescendo with a rhythmic

flow in his hope filled proclamation “Free at last, free at last, thank God almighty we are free at last.” The freedom to which King referred was both the freedom from external bondage and the freedom internally to pursue all of the rights and privileges of the choices of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. In his book, *Martin Luther King Jr. and the Image of God*, King affirmed that the wonder of being created in the image of God assumed the freedom to make choices in ways that allowed human life to become governed by a series of personal choices in the sense that humanity could freely exercise its will in accord with its conscience.<sup>2</sup> King believed that the full exercise of freedom would inevitably lead to racial reconciliation. For King, the image of the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners sitting down together at the table of brotherhood was firmly rooted in his theology of hope and his understanding of the implications of freedom. It is clear that there will be a continued need for freedom leadership narratives until all people everywhere are equally beneficiaries of freedom’s hope and promise.

Entering its second decade of presence and purpose, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center sees freedom leadership narrative development as foundational to its mission of challenging and inspiring everyone to take courage steps for freedom today. It is the duty of free people to desire freedom for others and to make freedom the reality of all. Dr. Newsome has repeatedly stated that The Freedom Center is more than a building rooted in the lessons of the Underground Railroad, it is a movement around one of the most American ideals around the globe – freedom. He goes on to say that from the shores of the Ohio River *the Freedom Center is a trusted voice in the fight for freedom around the world. In the era of the Underground Railroad, the courageous escaping captives and the bold persons who assisted them were motivated by the spirit of the American ideal of freedom which was in clear distinction from the American practice of slavery. It was this same American ideal, while contradicted by American practice, which motivated the civil rights movement. In the words of Martin Luther King Jr., to see its dream deeply rooted in the American dream. King asserted “even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold*

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<sup>2</sup> RICHARD WILLS, *MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. AND THE IMAGE OF GOD*, 97 (2009).

these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” The freedom leadership narrative reflects the American ideal with intentional emphasis on inclusive democracies and inclusive free-market economies.

While firmly rooted in the American ideal, freedom leadership narratives have international implications as evidence in the so-called Arab Spring when Tunisia emerged from a restrictive government with limited access and engagement of its people in the exercise of freedom to become a democracy with the most active citizen participation in political engagement in North Africa. It is the freedom leadership narrative that inspired the winds of change to be stirred in other parts of North Africa, the Arab World, Asia, South America, and Central America. It is also the freedom leadership narratives that are inspiring a renewed movement for more full inclusion in the shaping of the democracies in the United States and Western Europe. It is the freedom leadership narratives that are leading the necessary critique of the incongruity between the American ideal and the American practice evident by the stark and shameful racial and economic disparities that exist in almost every area of American life.

As a center of conscience, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center must collect and reveal the historical and modern freedom narratives while providing a safe space for open, honest, and painful dialogue and education about current existential threats to freedom. The aim of the freedom center is not only to inform. Its aim is to challenge and inspire people to take action, to get involved in the living story of freedom’s struggle. The freedom center seeks to assist modern day abolitionists to find their voice and to discover the vast network of people and organizations that are serving as modern-day Underground Railroad conductors and agents.

In the past, the corridors of the Underground Railroad were pathways and trails, waterways and streams through which and across which people traveled to freedom. Today, the corridors to freedom consist of airways, seaways, railways, highways and road systems. In this world of modern and rapidly growing technology, the corridors also consist of electronic means of communication via websites, social media platforms and a host of blogging, tweeting, and emailing freedom heroes. Because of its expertise and its reputation as a safe space for conscience, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center developed and manages the Trafficking In Persons digital platform for the United States’ Department of State Trafficking In Persons Heroes. The Freedom Center also manages and operates the End Slavery Now digital platform. Given

the rapid pace of the ever changing modalities of social media and the way social media is often used by traffickers to ensnare its victims, it is essential that the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center find ways to stay ahead of the traffickers in its capacity to use digital and media platforms as corridors of freedom. To do its job well, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center needs continued and consistent financial support. Freedom's story is a living story and creating freedom leadership narratives is a never-ending process. Until all people everywhere are free, there will be an urgent need for the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center.