

When I was young, I enjoyed reading collected biographies – chapter readings usually arranged around a similar topic – ocean explorers, young musicians, women of the west. Then, as now, I was interested in the story, the plot, what happened rather than why.

I did not read the “lives of the saints” or “heroes of the Bible”, although I now know there were such books. Perhaps young children today choose to read about Desmond Tutu or Barbara Harris or Martin Luther King or Mother Teresa – in print or electronically. However, despite the ease of electronic publishing and reading, there is nothing like a good hand-held personal story to give you knowledge and wake up your imaginations. Here are a few “stories” for today – about William Wilberforce, Katrina Browne, and Jonathan Daniels.

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The first is that of William Wilberforce, a man of extreme passion for justice and a leader in the anti-slavery movement in England. Today, in fact yesterday, Wilberforce is commemorated by the Episcopal Church for his untiring commitment to the abolition of slavery and the slave trade in eighteenth-century England. While more and more slave ships left Africa with their human cargo, more and more money was returned to the owners, financiers, and manipulators of this business.

Captured men and women were brutally placed upon slave ships, and sent off to the West Indies and America, set up on a public slave block, and bought at auction to work for others. Families were split up, many died during the journey. In a new country thousands of miles from their African home, there was no way to return and resume lives that were interrupted by the entrepreneurs who used the labor of their bodies to make money.

As a member of Parliament for 45 years, William Wilberforce used his passion, knowledge, and influence to correct this injustice. He steadfastly presented bill upon bill every year from his initial anti-slavery motion in 1788, until the slave trade was abolished in England in 1806 and all slavery in British Territories was abolished in 1833. What an enormous victory!

Why did he care and feel and act so strongly? Probably initially because of first-hand reports he heard about the loaded ships where many died at the oar and thrown overboard, inhumane conditions found in the British sugar colonies of the West Indies, shackled men and women place on the auction block in places like Charleston and Newport. Wilberforce was encouraged by like-minded friends and also found a way to put his Christian principles into action and serve God in public life.

In 1785, Wilberforce underwent a conversion experience and became an Evangelical Christian, resulting in major changes to his lifestyle and a lifelong concern for reform. Subsequently, he was engaged in a life-long program of setting aside Sundays and an interval each morning for prayer and religious reading. He decided that his calling was to serve God through politics.

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Almost two hundred years later, in Bristol, Rhode Island, a young woman named Katrina Browne discovered a family secret – namely that her family, the deWolf’s, despite their prominent place in civic and cultural affairs of the community and state, had been deeply involved in the slave trade in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Here’s the secret. Along the Rhode Island coast, especially in Bristol and Newport and Warren, an illegal but accepted practice, was pervasive. This was the “slave trade”, a voyage that made a triangle going from the New England, to West Africa, to Cuba, and back to the mainland - often to Charleston, South Carolina, then home to New England. Rum and other goods were exchanged for human “commodities”, who were, in turn, sold on the auction block, often to plantation owners in the south. The nation’s economy, not just the south’s, depended on this trade, and, in a small town like Bristol or Warren, most of the people were directly or indirectly involved in it.. The livelihood of ship builders and chandlers, blacksmiths, sail-makers, bankers, insurance agents depended on it - even though it was illegal. Everyone knew the secret. And the DeWolf’s were the largest slave-trading family in United States history.

What should Katrina do – keep the secret and story hidden, perhaps not even shared with all of the extended family? No - she bravely decides to keep talking, investigating, and sharing. She tells the story to numerous family members who now live in all parts of the country. Then she decides to make a film about her family’s role in the slave trade.

Many of you have seen “Traces of the Trade”, her film that tells the story of the DeWolf family. (New England’s largest slave trading family in US history.) We follow Katrina and nine other family members as they retrace the journey from Bristol to Ghana to Cuba and back to Bristol. This trip was more than a physical re-enactment of the trade but also a spiritual journey – to try to understand the “why” of this family secret and to make amends for the more than the 10,000 Africans who were kidnapped, beaten chained, and brought to America in the holds of DeWolf owned ships. .

The film was widely distributed on PBS and shown several times in the state and Diocese. Family members often attended the showings and moderated the ensuing discussions.

Katrina did not stop there. She noted that the DeWolf family included several Episcopal priests, Bishops, and even the Presiding Bishop of the United States – James DeWolf Perry III, who served from 1930 to 1937. The trade was accepted and often sanctioned by the Church, another part of the secret and the story.

Katrina asked - what should the church do – as individuals, as parishes, and diocese? As a result of a Resolution passed at the General Convention in 2006, the work began to 1) apologize for the Church’s complicity in the slave trade and the injury done by the institution of slavery and it’s aftermath 2) recognize that slavery is a fundamental betrayal of the humanity of all persons and a “sin that continues to plague our common life in the church and our culture”. The resolution called for Congress and the American people to support legislation initiating study and dialogue about the history and legacy of slavery Also, to collect, document, and disseminate detailed information on the complicity of the Episcopal Church in the institution of slavery and in the subsequent history of segregation and discrimination as well as the economic benefits gained.

Katrina, a small quiet woman found a secret she needed to share – with family, with neighbors and the community, with the church whose story it also was. Many in the family were energized and joined with her to educate and press for justice. The church responded and apologized for their role and silence about the slave trade, many states arranged public ceremonies of reconciliation. Today, Katrina and others continue their work at “The Tracing Center on the Histories and Legacies of Slavery”, working on programming on a more systematic level in the fields of education and public history.

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There’s another story – not for today, but please look in Wikipedia to find out about [Jonathan Myrick Daniels](#) whose life and martyrdom are also commemorated and celebrated in August by the Episcopal Church. Daniels was a divinity student at the Episcopal Theological Seminary in Cambridge and, in fact, did his field work at Christ Church on Eddy Street in Providence. In August 1965, Daniels, along with 3 other college students, traveled to Alabama to work on voter registration. There, he was arrested, jailed, and killed with a shotgun blast as he protected a young woman protestor. (Read more about it)

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And finally, an unfinished story – one of our own. What about the young people from St. Luke’s who travel to the Dominican Republic. We share in their initial excitement upon their return and catch a glimmer of changed lives. In the long run, we have seen some truly changed lives; perhaps a seed has been planted.

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What makes a person struggle with issues of justice? How does one learn to care, to care enough to forget self and try to make a difference? Wilberforce’s friends offered graphic descriptions of the brutal and often short lives working on cotton and sugar cane plantations. The more Katrina looked into her own family roots and geneology, the more immoral and illegal activity she discovered about the slave trade, right in her own family and home town. I care because I have friends whose recent ancestors were slaves and whose own lived have been ones of lost opportunity. Our DR missionaries care because they can see themselves in the eyes and wide smile of a young child, whose future will be distorted by lack of education and real economic opportunity.

Justice is an issue for us in our church community – as we continually work with our children and hold up the light of Christ – and – as we look to a new future with new leadership.

(How) Will we find a William Wilberforce, Katrina Brown, or Jonathan Daniels among us to nurture, engage in community, teach about justice, and help share and transform what we already have into nourishment for the world?

AMEN