

“Still Time”

A Sermon by Jan Carlsson-Bull
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The place is Virginia. The time is the late 18th century. It's the antebellum South, and the ink is barely dry on the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Washington, Jefferson, and Lee were among the luminaries of the day. Each of them enjoyed influence and wealth and played a premier role in shaping the profile of this country as we know it.

Then there was Robert Carter III. Carter is described by scholar Andrew Levy as “probably the richest, most powerful, most literate man in the rich, powerful, enlightened colony of Virginia.” His land holdings exceeded that of Jefferson or Washington, and he owned more slaves than either. Nomini Hall, the Carter plantation, stood assuredly tall and white-pillared as was the style of homes designed to impress. But something stirred within the soul of Carter that led him to commit a radical act. In 1791 he wrote what was termed a “Deed of Gift.” It ran on in a string of detail that would glaze the eyes of any attorney, but at its core was Carter's intent to free over five hundred slaves. No one, but no one had freed that many slaves. But Carter did.

Why did he do it? Why did this southern gentleman move against his cultural grain? Why did this father give up what his children counted on as their inheritance? And why has history almost succeeded in burying this act and all possible residue of Robert Carter III? These are the questions that lured Andrew Levy into his scholarly quest for details.

In his worldly accumulation of wealth, Carter was simply a Southern white antebellum American, but early on he strayed from the norm. Rather than choosing a wife from the ranks of his neighbors' daughters, he found a mate in Baltimore society. While his peers attended staid Anglican churches, Carter was drawn to a small Baptist church where he took Communion with his slaves. While his illustrious friends sent their sons to the College of William and Mary, Carter sent his to the abolitionist leaning schools in the north.

Yet Carter was still a slaveholder. Like so many of his peers, including the rhetorically progressive Thomas Jefferson, he clung to the notion that slavery was wrong, but emancipation was impractical.

It wasn't until the 1780s that Carter's correspondence and journals reveal a growing intolerance for slavery. In 1782, the state of Virginia opened a window for his impulses, unexpectedly legislating a means whereby a private slaveholder might free his slaves under certain conditions. It was a political quirk serving emancipation. Several small slaveholders, Quakers and Baptists especially, used that loophole. Even Martha Washington chose to counter her husband's will and freed his slaves two years after his death rather than after hers, as the will had stipulated. Carter's act of emancipation, eight full years before Washington's death, stood out because he had the most to lose in the circles that already looked askance at him.

What makes his act even more compelling is that, in Levy's words, Carter didn't "look, act, or write like a man who possessed a single egalitarian impulse." All the while his writings reveal a white man becoming ever more trusting of the blacks he knew and ever more suspicious of the impulses of his peers whose reality of practice belied their rhetoric of liberty.

"Ultimately," contends Levy, "the reasons that Robert Carter disappeared—and remains disappeared—have less to do with what he did than with what others failed to do." (Levy, 208)

Robert Carter makes us squirm, so we ignore him. History hurts, so we bend it. Or worse, we deny it. We do so, because, as Levy concludes, to do otherwise "forces us to consider whether there now exist similar men and women, whose plain solutions to our national problems we find similarly boring, and whom we gladly ignore in exchange for the livelier fantasy of our heroic ambivalence." (Levy, 212)

And so to our own time and our own choices, inundated by rhetoric no less captivating than that known to Robert Carter. We are amid the aftermath of the United States' war on Iraq. Saddam Hussein has been overthrown. A new regime is possible. The threat of weapons of mass destruction from one tyranny has been removed. Yet the power exerted by Hussein is still playing out. Transition to a new regime is more than shaky. There is no evidence that the former Iraqi powers were developing weapons of mass destruction. There is no evidence of a link between Hussein and Al Qaeda. Post-war casualties are mounting. Anti-American sentiment is high throughout Iraq.

How convinced we were that the principles infusing our democratic rhetoric would match the invasion that was to come. How deadly the consequences of accepting without questioning, though thousands of us did question. How the events of 9/11 were used to fuel our penchant for war.

What can we learn from the bold act of Robert Carter? What can we learn from the abject refusal of historians to acknowledge his deed as we move through a time in which the voices of those who called foul months ago are beyond embarrassing for our aspiring democracy?

Once again, the dissonance rises from the ashes, the dissonance that threatens to silence the better angels of our national nature. Does it hurt too much to learn the truth, to concede that there were alternatives, that it didn't have to be this way?

It's the disconnect between principles and practice, between public image and private reality that has a way of catching up with us.

So we're back. We're back to those bone-chilling, spirit-sapping contradictions raised by the radical act of Robert Carter III, who was sent off to history's attic because he didn't lean in the memorably principled direction of his neighbors. He just did what they said they really wanted to do.

Imagine. It's 1782, that year of legislative loopholes, and there's still time to use whatever windows remain open, to advance alternatives to the oppression that is a lie when called by any other name. It's the day after the 11th of September 2001. Our spirits are fragile. Our minds are pliable, and the Constitutional promise of liberty for all is already being compromised in the practice of liberty for some as defined by a not completely new brand of racial and ethnic profiling. It's 2003, and we're in the rhetoric-sapping aftermath of a war on Iraq.

But there's time, there's still time for truth, for truth telling, for reconciliation, for peace making. There's still time.

If only we will digest the dissonance. If only we will affirm that the resurrection of historical truth is worth it, because falsehood has a way of catching up with us, and taking a hard look at what's going on and what went on can prevent us from further folly.

Among us there may be men and women, whose plain and forthright solutions to our national and international problems we find boring or naïve. How tempted we are to write them off for the myth of having our rhetoric and our principles too. But even in this unsettling aftermath of war, there's still time to hear the dissonance. There's still time to find our principles in our practice, to discover our creeds in our deeds.

On this gentle day of August, may Robert Carter III and all five hundred of those free women and men, whose names we have yet to discover, rest in peace. And may all of us, as free and faithful spirits, resolve to live for it. Amen.

Sources:

Wendell Berry, "History," from *Collected Poems of Wendell Berry, 1957-1982*, North Point Press, 1987.

Andrew Levy, "The Anti-Jefferson," from *The American Scholar*, reprinted in *The Best American Essays 2002*, edited by Stephen Jay Gould, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002.