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“The Rest of the Story” by Tom Wagner

One of the pleasures of winter is that I get to read by the woodstove for significant stretches of time without feeling guilty about neglecting other responsibilities. Recently I finished reading *The 1619 Project: A New Origin Story*. The book expands on the original *The New York Times Magazine* project created by Nikole Hannah-Jones. 1619 refers to the year the first enslaved Africans were brought to Jamestown, Virginia. An anthology of essays, poetry and even a few short pieces of fiction, it reminds us how the legacy of slavery remains central to our national narrative, in spite of long standing attempts to deny and minimize its role.

Truth telling often provokes criticism, especially when it contradicts dominant story lines and long held beliefs. Though complaints about the project come as no surprise, the vitriol expressed has been extreme even for the usual culture warriors. Reading the book, I found very little new historical material. Much of it has been told before, but the text brings a fresh focus on the topic by bringing together the work of so many authors and examining various facets of history. The references will be a valuable asset for future students. Three terms were new to me, and quite fitting to understanding better chattel slavery in the United States. One was that the editors preferred replacing slave with *enslaved person(s)*, with a few exceptions. It is a way to describe accurately a person's circumstances while maintaining the person's humanity. Two, slave owners or masters are called *enslavers*, rightly describing the way these people imposed their will on others. Third, plantations are renamed *forced labor camps*. The brutal truth about “the peculiar institution”, the Jim Crow Era and more recent white supremacist backlash must be told.

It has been easy to present African American history as a parallel storyline or an add-on to mainstream history. That approach often trivializes the experience, but may be more palatable to some segments of our society. That's not even taking into account critics who fear mainstream American history as we have known it somehow will be replaced. However, I see works like *The 1619 Project* as telling, in the words of one time radio broadcaster Paul Harvey, "...the rest of the story." It helps complete the national epic. Creating a more complete and true narrative is not like adding ethnic patches to some grand American quilt. Rather, it is more like recognizing how threads of all of our stories weave together into a total fabric.

I've long had an interest in how the black experience has shaped the larger American narrative. Growing up in one of the Historic Peace Churches made me a bit skeptical about the way U.S. history was taught in public school. While all parties agree that American history has been violent, the dominate narrative has often justified or even glorified that violence. The values of my faith community and particularly my parents challenged this common attitude and opened my ears to the voices of the victims of that violence.

My other pathway into African American history was the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Though my parents weren't the type to march in the streets, they and many of our co-religionists greatly admired the disciplined nonviolent actions of the movement. While Quakers for centuries had been at the forefront of social issues, Dunkers and Mennonites traditionally had been rather passive. Some Historic Peace Church folk had watched the work of Mohandas K. Gandhi's movement in early 20th Century India with great interest. I recall reading an editorial in a Brethren publication from 1931 praising the Salt March. However, it would take the leadership of Bayard Rustin, Martin Luther King, Jr. and many others to introduce an American audience to nonviolence as an effective strategy for social change. It is clear to me that the American Civil Rights Movement injected a new energy into the peace witness of my faith community. Indeed the peace studies programs I participated in during my college and seminary education were greatly indebted to the ideas of Gandhi and King. As with so many topics, I have sought to understand these movements better by digging into the

deeper context of their history. *The 1619 Project* is good tool for that ongoing study.
“...[Y]ou shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” (John 8:32)

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Welcome to the Monthly Peace and Justice Blog brought to by Muskegon County Cooperating Churches. MCCC intends to explore issues around love, humanity, tolerance, peace, freedom and justice on a monthly basis and how these issues impact our larger community, our faith, and our lives. If you would like to contribute to this blog, please send your written essay to MCCC for consideration. We would love it if you would share this with your faith community.