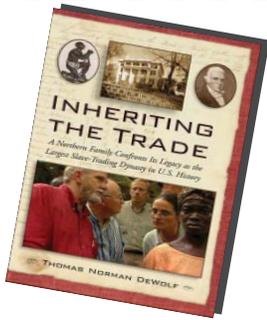




# A Privileged Perspective



Katrina Browne was a normal woman living blithely in White America until she discovered her ancestors had earned millions in the slave trade – from a base in New England, of all places! She took a life-changing journey with nine relatives to discover what that meant to each of them personally, a journey chronicled in the award winning documentary *Traces of the Trade*.

Thomas Norman DeWolf was one of those family members and the revelation of his family's historic involvement in the ugliest period of American history set him on his own journey – a journey of healing. DeWolf went on to write an accompanying novel – *Inheriting the Trade* – and visited Rochester recently to conduct a seminar at Nazareth College.

Minority Reporter editor Jahaka Mindstorm sat down with DeWolf last week to discuss the author's work and how he hopes to help heal a nation that remains divided along racial lines.

**If I remember the film correctly this entire story started with one of your relatives who found your grandmother's journal or something?**

She's actually a 7<sup>th</sup> cousin (Katrina Browne). The common ancestor was born in 1695. He had two sons and the youngest son was the first slave trader in the family. She's descended from that individual. Her grandmother wrote a little booklet to give to all of her grandchildren. And it talked about all the writers and the ministers and the philanthropists in the family. Then there's like a line or two in it that says: "I don't have the stomach to talk about the ensuing slave trade."

(Katrina) is a very progressive kind of person and considers herself non-racist, yet she's got this background and she realized she had known about it all her life and just suppressed it. So the guilt that washes over immediately turned into passion to talk about - not just this family history - but New England's history; and all of this country's involvement with, and perpetuation of, enslavement; and the racism and the discrimination that took place afterwards.

**Generally, when one thinks of New England, one doesn't really consider the slave trade.**

Whenever I go to a new classroom, I ask the kids: "Can somebody guess which state was the biggest slave trading state in the Union?" I get answers like Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi – and when I drop in the name Rhode Island, it just blows them away. Yet, of the 2,000 voyages that originated from the colonies in the states, half of those voyages originated from Rhode. And 95 percent of all the trading was done out of the north.

**You must have done a lot of research after this came to light.**

Some research I did, but the vast majority was done by others. As we met other historians on our journey, we learned more and more. The first week that we spent in Rhode Island and it was like: *Why didn't I learn any of this in school as a kid?* When I grew – to me – slavery was the South. Plantations like *Gone With the Wind*. To find out that people were enslaved in the North for 200 years, that all of the slave trading was done out of the North, that parts of New York wanted to secede with the south because they were so dependent on the slave trade for their livelihood...

**You all called the family together for this first, right?**

(Katrina) wrote like 200 people that she knew. Her uncle was a genealogist, so she had addresses for a lot of family members. I was not among them. I mean – she's like a 7<sup>th</sup> cousin. Heck - *you and I* are probably 7<sup>th</sup> cousins.

**I suppose that's possible.**

It's very possible. She wrote to a friend who lives where I live and he came up to me one day and said, "I think we might be related; my dad's middle name is *DeWolf*." His dad was (Katrina's genealogist uncle) who figured all this out. David and I are 6<sup>th</sup> cousins, once-removed but he is much closer-related to Katrina, so he was the one invited. He said to me, "Hey, this lady is making a film about our family. You like movies – you should call her."

She was living in Berkeley at the time. My wife and I were going back to visit friends and we stopped and spent a couple of hours with her and that was it; I knew this was a journey that I wanted to participate in, so I was invited to come along.

**In the documentary, it seems some of your family was uncomfortable with this information, like they were in denial or just didn't want to deal with it. Can you speak on that?**

The ten of us who went all professed an interest in dealing with these issues and we *did*. Everybody was willing to go into some really deep, heavy places, as we met with ourselves and with people of color. There were times during the discussion when each of us wanted to walk away, but it wasn't from the subject – it was more from each other. Any group of people that's together 15 or 18 hours a day – sometimes you just need a little break. Everybody was willing to go there, but boy! - going there means different things. Like the scene (in the film documentary) around the table, where we talked about privilege and going to Harvard and all of that...

**Some members of your family really seemed to have the perception that is a regular way of life – "well you finish high school, go to Harvard, and then you join the bar..."**

Yeah.

**So initially, you thought you were doing a movie about the family, then found that it was a much deeper subject, one which obviously became very passionate for you. Can you describe some of your**

**personal feelings?**

Initially, I just felt this was something of import; important subject not just for me personally. From the beginning, I knew I wanted to write a book. Even if it was gonna be a book just for my kids. I also knew that since I'm a white guy and I'm privileged, I knew if I wrote a book I could probably get it published.

**Did you think it would have this great an impact?**

In a certain sense, but as a piece in a very large puzzle. There are white people who want to talk about these issues and explore them, and there are white historians willing to do this - but in the past that hasn't been the case. You don't have a long history of white people reading W.E.B. Dubois or Ralph Ellison. They'd rather wait for John Howard Griffin to write *Black Like Me*. If a white guy writes it, then it's okay.

There's a part of that which really bothers me, and another part which sees the normal human inclination to pay attention to people who come from your same tribe – your same background.

So with that, I can't get rid of this white skin, but I can use the privilege that comes with it to open up a conversation among white people that we have been socialized *not* to have. That's where I think it become a healthy thing, because I don't think my book or this film is having a worldwide impact, but the people who *do* find out about it – I think it opens up their minds.

For white folks it's like: "Holy smokes! Really? Rhode Island?" And for black folks, it's like "Wow, white folks are finally willing to talk about this stuff?" I think it opens the possibility for conversation in some additional ways, but not unique.

**It appears that the concept of healing is a big part of what you're doing now. Was that the original idea, or did it evolve as you encountered different peoples reaction to the story and to your family's role?**

I grew up in southern California during the sixties – the Watts riots. The assassinations that took place... I could tell you right where I was standing when I heard that Dr. King was killed; where I was when John Kennedy was killed... We had cops in full riot gear on our junior high school campus because of the battles between black kids and white kids. It was troubled times.

But I always wanted to get along with everybody. I had friends who were black. I felt like I could say: Tony is my friend. And Tony would say: Yes, Tom is my friend. I never spent the night at his house or him at mine. And then something would come up and I'd say: *I don't want to be near Tony. There's an anger that surrounds the people that he's with and I don't belong there.*

It's like you want to be friends, but I lived on the white side of Town Avenue and the black kids that I knew lived on the other side of Town Avenue.

**So there were social pressures that really had nothing to do with the younger people?**

I don't know. It's like two separate galaxies in one solar system. In elementary school, it was all white kids. Junior high school took in from both sides of the dividing street, so that's where the mix came in - white kids,

Mexican kids and black kids.

I'm a *kumbaya* guy. I want everybody to like me and I want to like them. So the reconciliation piece, the healing piece, has been there because I don't like fighting.

I mean, *Leave it to Beaver* solved problems in 30 minutes every week. So why can't we figure this stuff out?

The biggest question on this journey is: *what's next?* We learn the history; we talk to people about what ought to happen; but what's next? For me, it's become an organization called Coming to the Table ([comingtothetable.org](http://comingtothetable.org)), which started with the descendants of Thomas Jefferson and his wife Martha ...and Thomas Jefferson and Sally. "Coming to the Table" is in the spirit of Dr. King's dream: "The sons of former slaves and former slave owners will gather together at the table of brotherhood." It's to consider our unique connection with the history, but really to look at the model of healing. The historic drama did not end 200 or 100 years ago; it's something passed down generation after generation. Differently in black folks and white folks, but traumatic nonetheless.

**The world has changed a lot over the last 300 years. We now have a black president and a lot of people are saying we live in a "post-racial" society now. What's your take on that?**

I would guess that at least 99% of the people saying that are white. I don't know of any black folks that said that. It took me becoming an old guy before it became clear that every president we ever had looked like me. He may have had a beard – or not – but every one of them looked like me. Now, for the first time, we have a whole generation of black boys who can say "well now we have a president who looks like me." That's a game changer.

So there's definitely progress, but the systems that are in place – access to health care, education, jobs, the criminal justice system – there are inequities in all of the systems. I'm clearly in a position of privilege because of my white skin. Let's face it – I'm never gonna be stopped in a car for "Driving While Black." I'm never gonna be followed around in a department store for fear that I'm gonna steal something. It doesn't happen to me. We've made progress, but we're still on the *road* to freedom – we're not there.

**If there was anything specific as a message you could give our readers about your work or your hope for what will eventually come of it, what would you say?**

That's a great question. There's the part of me that would fall back on my socialization and say *I'm one of the good guys. I want to be brothers. I want the world to be a better place for all of us.*

Sort of that *Kumbaya* stuff. When I realize how deeply the system of white privilege, the system of racism, is imbedded in this country – I can't say *Trust me*. I can't say I'm doing my best. Well, I can say all those things, but I can't expect people to believe me.

We have hundreds of years of history that tell you can't trust me and tell me: "Stay away from this guy." My hope, my dream – is that we will recognize our shared humanity.