

Foreword to *Gather at the Table*

Written by Joy Angela DeGruy, author of *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*

The Akan people of Ghana, in West Africa, have long used Adinkra symbols to communicate important philosophical ideas and beliefs. The Sankofa icon is a mythical bird flying forward but looking backward. In its mouth is an egg. The image embodies a dual meaning. The egg represents knowledge of the past, on which wisdom is based, and signifies as well the benefit of that wisdom to future generations. The Sankofa urges us to “go back and get it.”

This is precisely what Thomas Norman DeWolf (a white man who is the descendant of traders and owners of enslaved Africans) and Sharon Leslie Morgan (a black woman who is the descendant of enslaved Africans) committed themselves to doing. Over the course of an epic journey, they physically traveled thousands of miles. Emotionally, they traversed oceans and centuries.

Gather at the Table is the experience of two unique and courageous individuals, seen through their particular lenses and shared from their distinct vantage points. Using genealogical records, historical references, and gut instincts, they ventured to places, thoughts, and emotions few of us would be willing to explore or experience. Inspired by a healing model, they sought to understand their history and to try and make sense of it. Their end goal was to make the connections necessary to healing themselves and, they ultimately hoped, others from the intractable wounds caused by slavery, racism, and the traumas of oppression.

In writing about their journey, they neatly weave their individual perspectives of events and experiences; these are sometimes in such sharp contrast that it is difficult to believe they were in the same place at the same time. But this is the stuff of real life; the nitty-gritty that both diametrically separates us and brings us together as human beings. Neither Tom nor Sharon shies away from the tough moments when emotions run high and opinions clash. They both recognize that the terrain is rough and not suited for the faint of heart. This is no fairytale. There are no magical remedies or mythical characters that rush forth to save the day. Like any good story, there is adventure and excitement, juxtaposed against amazing moments of personal realization and clarity.

For Sharon, race is a “real” place where she has lived her whole life. At times, she is overcome with grief and anger: “Stolen land! Stolen people! Murder! If there is a God and he condones retribution, the white race owes a sh*tload!” Yet it was a white man—Lawson Mabry, with whom Sharon had only corresponded regarding her genealogy work—who, in her words, “offered emotional solace to an angry black woman who needed answers.”

For Tom, race is a place he has only recently *chosen* to visit. Still, he was undaunted by the unknown and sometimes frightening and racially charged alleyways he would venture down. He experiences strong emotions that are equally intense: “What has come as a surprise is that I feel more pessimistic than when we began. I recognize more than ever just how deeply embedded systems of oppression remain.” Unwilling to give in to futility, Tom shares, “What gives me hope are individual relationships. I don’t care so much about laws changing if people’s hearts aren’t going to change.”

Together, Tom and Sharon allow us to be spectators of their story—witnesses to their discomfort, humiliation, and fear—in order to educate us and thus contribute to healing a nation in the throes of racial upheaval.

Theirs was an endeavor I found myself envying. I imagined walking in the footsteps of my own ancestors, learning about their lives, seeing the environments in which they lived, toiled, laughed, and cried. What would it have been like to travel with Tom and Sharon, I wondered, to be on a plantation and sleep in the “Big House”; to hear the stories, true and untrue, about the lives of the enslaved and enslavers; and to compare these stories with what they knew and had studied?

This is a true story about two people who defied the odds and shattered the myth that unity between black and white is not possible. Tom and Sharon offer a gift to posterity with this rich recounting of their personal histories, as well as an important piece of America’s history told through the eyes of two of slavery’s children. They offer hope and encouragement to all of us who aspire to engage in a process of “change”—to right the wrongs of the past and forge a more just and peaceful future.

Although their journey was fraught with hardship and complexity, Tom and Sharon conclude that, in the end, it was all worth it: “We began as two disconnected people. We learned. We argued. We struggled. We grew. We laughed. We cried. We changed. Along the way, we became friends.”

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